

The Blockbuster Superhero

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From **Superman** and **Batman** to **Spider-Man**, **Iron Man**, and **X-Men**, Bart Beaty provides a comprehensive look at superheroes – their comic book origins and the many film franchises they have inspired. He argues that, “it is not the pedigree of the superhero that determines a film’s success, nor the absolute fidelity of the adaptation to the source material, but the ability of a filmmaker to capture the tone of the contemporary comic book onscreen.” Locating the birth of the superhero in 1938, with the appearance of Superman in *Action Comics* #1, Beaty traces the history and growth of such key publishers as **DC Comics** and **Marvel Comics** as they expanded into film production. He uses the **Batman franchise**,

spanning six decades, as a case study of evolving **synergy** among the print, broadcast, and film industries; the impact of advancing **film technology**; and shifting inscriptions of **ideology**, as mediated by story, characterization, casting, production design, and tone. Beyond **Batman**, Beaty examines other superhero films through issues of authorship and occasionally divergent critical and box office reception. Beaty’s essay shares ground with J. D. Connor on independent blockbusters and with Kristen Whissel on CGI in this volume.

Additional terms, names, and concepts: “summer event,” second wave superhero, reboot, retcon

In a post-credit scene included at the end of *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008), the titular hero (Robert Downey, Jr) returns to the home of his alter ego and is confronted by an intruder, S.H.I.E.L.D. director Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson). Fury asks him: “You think you’re the only superhero in the world? Mr Stark you’ve become part of a bigger universe. You just don’t know it yet.” While Tony Stark lacks a

sense of the bigger picture, the same can hardly be said of the filmgoers who came to this film armed with a background in the superhero comics produced by Marvel Comics. The audience of knowledgeable comic book fans anticipates key relationships, character developments, and actions that cannot possibly be encompassed by a feature-length film. These spectators are alert to such things as the foreshadowing

of the emergence of War Machine, the rival to Iron Man that will be taken on by his friend James Rhodes (Terrence Howard, replaced for the sequels by Don Cheadle), or the background shots of Captain America's partially assembled shield on Stark's workbench, an allusion to Iron Man's partner and sometime rival in Marvel's *Avengers* comic book series. Thus, when Fury, with the last line of the film, informs Stark that he would like to speak to him "about the Avenger Initiative," it not only serves to anticipate Fury's role in the *Iron Man* sequel scheduled to be released two years later, but also begins the process of advertising the *Avengers* film scheduled for release for the first weekend in May 2012. In the world of Marvel Comics, The Avengers is the superhero team that originally featured Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, the Hulk, Ant-Man and the Wasp. In the world of Marvel Studios, *Iron Man* was the second Avengers-related film, following *Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003) and preceding, by one month, *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008); it was followed by *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011) and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011), with the casts of those four franchises combining for the mega-event film *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012). Significantly, Fury's specific use of the term "universe" directly alludes to the lexicon already in place in the comics world referring to the fictional worlds inhabited by characters across different titles and series. This quick scene informs the audience that Iron Man exists in the same world as the heroes of previous films based on Marvel characters, including *Spider-Man*, the Hulk, the Fantastic Four, and the X-Men, and it also anticipates future films.

The short post-credits scene in *Iron Man* brings to cinema a narrative sensibility developed in the American comic book industry in the 1980s, uniting a chain of seemingly stand-alone blockbuster films into a rich and varied matrix. In other words, *Iron Man* is not simply a film based on a popular character from another medium. Rather, it is the cinematic version of a particular narrative tradition that seeks to transform the superhero film from its origins in serial fiction and stories for young children into the kind of contemporary blockbuster that can attain both critical and box office success. The rise to prominence of the superhero as the dominant generic basis for summer blockbuster films in the 1990s and 2000s is the result of a diverse array of causes and influences ranging from

developments in computer generated special effects and the synergistic business opportunities stemming from the conglomeration of media industries. Yet, at the same time, the wave of superhero films that was initiated by the record-shattering \$115 million opening weekend of *Spider-Man* (Raimi, 2002)¹ has been organized with attention to the particularities of what I have elsewhere called the "comics world," a unique cultural field that has evolved since the rise of the Silver Age of Comics (1954–1970) and the later Underground movement (1968–1976). The socioeconomic components that subtended the emergence of this world included the establishment of organized comic book fandom in the United States with its major conventions and cultural events, such as the annual Comic-Con International in San Diego. But it also brought about formal advances such as heightened levels of psychological realism, intensified narrative syntheses (termed "crossovers"), and the integration of disparate characters into a single diegetic world. From this perspective, the storytelling style adopted by Marvel Studios in the 2000s sought to replicate the editorial vision introduced into Marvel Comics in the 1960s, focusing on the creation of a realistic and shared "Marvel Universe" inhabited by characters of all types who could selectively interact depending on storytelling needs. By adopting this strategy, Marvel Studios, in partnership with young filmmakers like Jon Favreau and Sam Raimi who grew up during the Marvel Comics era, sought to transform the superhero genre into a potent creative and economic force. Thus, Marvel Studios is currently creating nothing less than a new storytelling and business model aimed at leveraging the history of almost 50 years of Marvel Comics production for a new cinematic audience constructed in the image of comics fandom.

The contribution of the Marvel style to the history of American comic books is generally attributed to Stan Lee, editor of Marvel's superhero titles and the primary writer associated with the Marvel line during the 1960s.² Along with artists Jack Kirby, Steve Ditko, and others, Lee helped create many of the best-known characters of the second wave of superhero comic books in that decade. The costumed comic book superhero had its origins with the first appearance of Superman in *Action Comics* #1 (1938), published by what is now DC Comics, Marvel's chief rival. This debut was cemented into a genre by a

wave of copy-cat heroes seeking to capitalize on DC's sudden success. Nonetheless, while the superhero comic book was the force that initially crystallized and stabilized the nascent American comic book industry, enthusiasm for the genre was burned out by the end of World War II and many superhero comic book series were cancelled due to poor sales. Only comics featuring Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman, all properties of DC Comics, continued long past the end of the war.³

The superhero wouldn't reemerge as the dominant force in the American comic book industry until the early 1960s. In the mid-1950s the industry was challenged by a number of setbacks, including the rise of television, a distribution crisis, and a public backlash against the industry that linked comic books to juvenile delinquency (see Beaty 2005; Hajdu 2008; Nyberg 1998). To combat these assertions, in 1954 the industry adopted a self-regulating code that was akin to the Hayes Code, thereby all but eliminating the production of the horror and crime comic books that were among the best-selling magazines of the period. The resulting Code strictures, with their emphasis on wholesome values and child-friendly entertainment, laid the foundation for the return of the superhero. In the early 1960s, Lee challenged the staid output of DC Comics by introducing a new line of superhero characters featuring *The Fantastic Four* (1961), *Spider-Man* (1962), *the Hulk* (1962), *Thor* (1962), *Iron Man* (1963), and *the X-Men* (1963). Lee thereby reinvigorated the genre, attracting a new generation of young readers as well as an older generation nostalgic for the kinds of heroic adventures that they themselves had read as children who were attracted to the more sophisticated Marvel style. While DC's superheroes had long occupied a shared universe and appeared in each other's stories and titles, Marvel took the universe concept much more seriously and made guest appearances of popular characters a commonplace in their publications, carefully maintaining narrative and character continuity so that events in one character's title would have effects in the titles of other characters in the shared universe. DC's superhero comics focused on stand-alone stories that could be logically deciphered by any first-time reader to the extent that any new appearance of the villainous Joker in a Batman comic book bore little or no relationship to previous appearances by the same character. By contrast, Marvel adopted the storytelling conventions

of the televised soap opera, with its vast open-ended continuity, allowing its characters to gradually age and develop as personalities. Significantly, upon reintroducing a villain in a Marvel superhero comic book, the company would directly refer to the previous encounters, even going so far as to footnote the issues and dates of the earlier stories for readers.⁴

Thus, while the comic book industry's two leading publishers of superhero stories, DC and Marvel, targeted similar audiences within the same genre, their products had notably distinctive narrative styles. Marvel tended to knit stories together into one coherent universe, but DC maintained a fuller separation between series and even issues from the same series. Over time, the popularity of the Marvel model caused DC to emulate their strategies, and, by the 1970s, both companies had begun to lay out extremely elaborate models of internal continuity. This tendency was heightened by the emergence of a new generation of artists and writers who had grown up reading earlier superhero comics and who now sought to find ways to reconcile heretofore contradictory plot points in an effort to bring complete coherence to the fictional worlds. By the 1980s, each company was engaged in the creation of universe-wide mega-events known as crossovers that would have ramifications for all or most of the company's titles. By having events in one character's title directly impact those in another, the concept of the integrated diegetic world was reinforced and, importantly, readers were obliged to purchase comics they might not have otherwise in order to read the whole story.

The success of Marvel's *Marvel Super Heroes Secret Wars* (1984) and DC's *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985) introduced a "summer event" sensibility into the comics industry that was directly imported from Hollywood blockbuster filmmaking of the same era. Moreover, each new blockbuster offered the opportunity to reset the fictional universe in new ways, thereby overcoming some of the burden of continuity that had, over the course of time, become overly convoluted and contradictory as successive writers sought to reconcile one plot point against another. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* was marketed as an attempt to clarify DC's extraordinarily complicated diegetic history by consolidating material into a canon. This attempt is one of the most significant examples of the retroactive continuity change (retcon), a deliberate narrative strategy in the field of superhero comic

books that would later be adopted in such films as *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006). The 1990s saw the acceleration of universe-wide event comics, and the 2000s even more so. For example, DC's *Crisis on Infinite Earths* spawned a sequel, *Zero Hour: Crisis in Time* (1994) that was intended to address the continuity problems that had been created by the first correction. A decade later, DC would launch six additional company-wide crossover events in successive years: *Identity Crisis* (2004), *Countdown to Infinite Crisis* (2005), *Infinite Crisis* (2005–2006), *52* (2006–2007), *Countdown to Final Crisis* (2007–2008) and *Final Crisis* (2008), suggesting that adjustments to company-wide continuity had become a permanent concern for creators.

The Evolution of Batman from the 1940s to the 2000s

As Batman has been the subject of films in four distinct historical periods, the franchise provides an excellent opportunity to assess the historical development of storytelling in the superhero film genre. Batman debuted as one of a dozen feature stories in the twenty-seventh issue of the anthology title *Detective Comics* (May 1939).⁵ Following the successful launch of the Superman character in 1938, DC Comics, and many of its competitors, quickly flooded the comic book market with new superhero concepts. Batman, whose creation is credited to artist Bob Kane and writer Bill Finger, was one of the most successful superhero characters to have been launched in the early period of the first superhero comic book boom. Batman was so popular that, by the spring of 1940, he was the star of his own comic book, as well as the primary feature in *Detective Comics*. In 1943, a Batman comic strip by Kane and collaborators began appearing in American newspapers, running until 1946. While the character was never featured in his own radio series, he did appear occasionally in *The Adventures of Superman* starting in 1945, where he was voiced by actors including Matt Crowley, Stacy Harris, and Gary Merrill.

On 16 July, 1943, a 15-part Columbia Pictures serial debuted *The Batman* as a cinematic character. Starring Lewis Wilson and featuring Douglas Croft as his sidekick, Robin, the serial followed Batman's attempts to thwart the villainous plots hatched by

Prince Daka (J. Carrol Naish), a Japanese spy who turned his adversaries into pseudo-zombies. More than Universal or Republic, Columbia was interested in capitalizing on the success of newspaper comic strips in serial form, adapting no fewer than 14, including fellow superheroes Superman and *The Phantom*. *The Batman* serial was the most lavish of Columbia's productions up to that point in time, and was marketed like a stand-alone feature (Cline 1997, 25). While the serial introduced the concept of the Bat's Cave to the Batman mythology (changed to Batcave in the comics), it tended to ignore the obligations of the comic book genre. Notably, no attempt was made to present a Batmobile, and Batman and Robin were simply chauffeured about town by their butler, Alfred, in a black Cadillac. Similarly, very little was made of the idea that the character was a "super" hero. In the film, Bruce Wayne is a government agent battling fifth columnists during World War II, and the fact that he dresses in a superhero costume is barely addressed. In this way, the character had much more in common with traditional detective and secret agent characters than with someone like Superman, and the trappings of the superhero genre fit uneasily in the serial. In *The New Adventures of Batman and Robin*, a second serial released in 1949, the characters again battled a traditional serial villain in the form of a mad scientist (Leonard Penn) bent on world domination, rather than a villain from the comic book. In this film Robert Lowery and Johnny Duncan played the respective lead roles. The two *Batman* serials produced in the 1940s evinced very little connection with the comic books that were being presented during the same era, and there was little connection between the individual films.

With the decline of serial filmmaking in the 1950s, Batman remained dormant on the screen until the debut of ABC's *Batman* television show in January 1966 (see Spigel & Jenkins 1991). The show ran on two consecutive nights in primetime. On Wednesdays, the episode would end with Batman (Adam West) and Robin (Burt Ward) in a dire predicament that would be resolved at the opening of Thursday's program. The show featured various well-known character actors as supervillains, including Burgess Meredith (the Penguin), Cesar Romero (the Joker), Frank Gorshin and John Astin (the Riddler), Vincent Price (Egghead), and Julie Newmar and Eartha Kitt (Catwoman). The show was initially a hit, with both

nights' airings ranking among the top 10 programs of the 1965–1966 season, but it quickly burned out and saw a precipitous decline in interest in 1967, and was cancelled in 1968. The producer, William Dozier, also brought the property to the cinema for a feature-length film between the first and second season. In *Batman: The Movie* (Leslie Martinson, 1966), four supervillains (Penguin, the Joker, the Riddler, and Catwoman (this time played by Lee Meriwether)) combine forces to challenge Batman and Robin, seeking world domination by dehydrating world leaders at the United World Security Council. Like the television series that spawned it, *Batman: The Movie* was knowingly and joyfully campy. The rising interest in the Pop Art of painters Roy Lichtenstein and Andy Warhol in the early 1960s served as the visual inspiration for the television series and film, which featured explosive, brightly colored “Pow,” “Bang,” and “Thud” effects during fight sequences. Robin’s constant punning (“Holy heart failure, Batman!”), and the ridiculousness of the plots, sets, and acting in the film and series contributed to the idea that the 1960s version of Batman was children’s fare, with the serial-derived plot elements and comic book background highlighting the lack of seriousness with which the character was presented. The idea of a serious superhero film would have to wait until the children raised on Bat-camp grew up.

In many ways, the Tim Burton-directed *Batman* feature in 1989 opened the door for the current superhero movie boom. While Richard Donner’s *Superman* (1978) initiated the trend toward superheroes on the silver screen, its three sequels (1980, 1983, 1987) had reduced the luster of that particular franchise, and, particularly by the third and fourth installment in the series, reiterated the campy-comical approach to the genre. Burton’s film was notable for the dramatic shift in tone that aligned the character more closely with its contemporary comic book counterpart than with his cinematic predecessors. In the mid-1980s, two milestone comics dramatically transformed the Batman character. Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) depicted Batman as an aging crime-fighter emerging from retirement to renew his war on crime, and Alan Moore and Brian Bolland’s *The Killing Joke* (1988) added a layer of psychological complexity to the Batman/Joker relationship. Each of these works, which featured grimly adult psychosexual themes rarely found in the superhero comic

books up to that period in time, contributed to a remasculinization of the Batman mythos in the wake of the feminizing effects of the 1960s camp version. In short, each of these works reconceptualized Batman within a tough-guy pulp/noir tradition that was then taken up by Burton in the film version.

Batman tells the story of the crime-fighter’s (Michael Keaton) war with the psychotic mass killer known as the Joker (Jack Nicholson). Shot at Pinewood Studios in England, the film is largely defined by Anton Furst and Peter Young’s Academy Award-winning set designs, which employed a post-modern Gothic sensibility emphasizing darkness, shadows, and the verticality of Gotham City’s decaying skyline. This dark vision of *Batman* was an overwhelming success with filmgoers in a way that the two previous incarnations of Batman on film had not been. The film opened in 2,194 theatres on June 23, 1989, establishing a new record for largest initial weekend box office gross at \$43.6 million. The film would eventually gross \$411 million worldwide in 1989, and spawned a “Batglut” of merchandise totaling more than \$750 million worth of T-shirts, toys, soundtrack albums, and assorted tie-ins. Importantly, *Batman* was the first superhero franchise film to generate significant synergies horizontally across a single media empire, as the film was released by Warner Brothers, based on a comic book series from DC Comics – which had been part of Time Warner since 1971 – with a soundtrack on Warner Bros. Records featuring the work of contract recording artist Prince, and so on (Meehan 1991). From this standpoint, it, and its sequels, solidified the superhero template previously established by the *Superman* franchise but with a far more serious tone and a more comprehensive marketing approach.

Keaton and Burton returned to Batman for a sequel in 1992: *Batman Returns*. This film featured Batman combating a trio of villains: the Penguin (Danny DeVito), Catwoman (Michelle Pfeiffer) and politician Max Shreck (Christopher Walken). The film opened strongly on the weekend of June 19, earning \$45.7 million, but was ultimately less successful than its predecessor, grossing only \$266 million worldwide. The film’s reduced financial performance was largely attributed to a conservative backlash against the film’s darkness, violence, and sexual situations that led to McDonald’s discontinuing their Happy Meal cross-promotion with the movie. While the film was



Figure 26.1 Heath Ledger's Academy Award-winning performance as the Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008, director and producer Christopher Nolan).

better critically appreciated than *Batman*, Warner Brothers opted to move in a more family-friendly direction with the next installment in the series. *Batman Forever* (1995) was directed by Joel Schumacher and introduced Val Kilmer in the role of Batman when Keaton turned down the part. In this film, the caped crusader takes on the twinned villains of the Riddler (Jim Carrey) and Two-Face (Tommy Lee Jones), and Robin (Chris O'Donnell) is introduced into the series for the first time as Batman's sidekick. The lighter touch found success at the box office, as the film had the highest grossing opening weekend of 1995, and outperformed *Batman Returns*, but not Burton's first film. Schumacher returned for a fourth Batman film, *Batman & Robin*, in 1997 with George Clooney taking on the lead role. In the final installment of the third Batman cycle, the hero confronted two major new villains (Mr Freeze (Arnold Schwarzenegger) and Poison Ivy (Uma Thurman)) and was joined by a second sidekick, Batgirl (Alicia Silverstone). Schumacher's second film

broke markedly from the tone established by Burton, returning to the camp sensibility of 1966's *Batman: The Movie* in an effort to appeal to families and generate toy sales. The strategy turned out to be a mistake. *Batman & Robin* grossed only \$238 million worldwide, making it the least successful film in its cycle, and was criticized for its bloated style. While Schumacher, Clooney, and O'Donnell had been expecting to make a fifth Batman film, *Batman Triumphant*, for release in 1999, Warners discontinued the film cycle and began exploring the possibility of a live-action version of the futuristic *Batman Beyond* animated television series, as well as a film based on the highly acclaimed 1987 Frank Miller/David Mazzucchelli origin comic book series, *Batman: Year One*, neither of which came to fruition.

After an eight-year hiatus, and the explosion of interest in the superhero genre that the Batman franchise largely spawned, Batman returned to the screen in 2005 in *Batman Begins*, the character's fourth cinematic iteration. Directed by Christopher Nolan,

and starring Christian Bale, two stalwarts of the independent cinema movement of the 1990s, *Batman Begins* bears no relationship to any of its predecessors. Nolan's vision of the *Batman* franchise was largely influenced by, although not straightforwardly adapted from, the Miller/Mazzucchelli story *Batman: Year One*, and by the *Batman* comics that Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale produced in the late 1990s. This *Batman* was the most realistic within the limitations of the genre, and the vision of Gotham City was of a modern metropolis. Significantly, this was the first *Batman* film to make extensive use of computer-generated special effects. While the opening weekend grosses of *Batman Begins* were below expectations, its final tally of \$372 million worldwide meant that it surpassed the performance of every other *Batman* film except for Burton's original 1989 *Batman*, thus ensuring a sequel.

The Dark Knight in 2008, also directed by Nolan and retaining much of the same cast from *Batman Begins*, is, in many ways, the high-water mark for the superhero film genre, in terms of both global audience appeal and critical esteem. The film, which is the third-highest grossing movie of all time (behind James Cameron's 1997 *Titanic* and 2009 *Avatar*), at more than \$1 billion in receipts, was nominated for eight Academy Awards, and won two: a technical award for Best Sound Editing (Richard King) and the first acting award ever given to a superhero film, Best Supporting Actor (Heath Ledger). In returning to the story of the *Batman/Joker* relationship established in the first of Burton's films, Nolan highlighted certain post-9/11 cultural themes, including the war on terror and the deployment of extralegal strategies in combating irrational violence, earning it comparisons with the foreign policy of the Bush administration (Klavan 2008). At the very least, *The Dark Knight* sought to bring moral complexity into a film franchise that had previously abjured it, with the result being a summer blockbuster with broad yet very adult appeal. The idea that a superhero film could attract a mature audience with no prior investment in the genre or characters now firmly had its grip on Hollywood.

The road that the *Batman* character traveled from the subject of low-budget serial films in the 1940s to critical and box office success was far from a direct one, and it raises a number of important issues about the history and the development of the genre. What best explains the phenomenal success of *The Dark Knight* and the rise to prominence of the superhero

film genre? Certainly, striking advances in the area of special effects were a major factor. The *Batman* films of the 1940s and 1966 lacked elaborate special effects, and featured heroes in mundane action sequences while dressed in ridiculous costumes. The centrality of visual spectacle in recent decades, and the transition from optical to digital processes, have made it possible for the superhero to be represented cinematically in as spectacular a fashion as on the printed comic book page, while still maintaining a certain realist aesthetic. There is no doubt that, for movie studios, superhero films are attractive franchises: They arrive with built-in audiences, they have a large number of potential characters and storylines, and they can be used to generate significant corporate synergies across horizontally integrated media companies. Nonetheless, the appeal of the franchise concept does very little to explain the attraction of (some) superhero films to the public, nor does it explain why some superhero films that hew closely to the formula fail.

It is certainly possible to read, as many have, the success of a film like *The Dark Knight* as resulting from an ideological alignment of the individual vigilante hero acting outside society with contemporary norms and beliefs. However, suggestions that the success of *The Dark Knight* stems from its ideological correspondence with the Bush administration seem inadequate insofar as the film's success was essentially coterminous with the resounding repudiation of the Bush presidency by the American electorate. Moreover, while comic book superheroes had once constituted a short-lived fad for the public in the infancy of the genre (1938–1945), a significant level of sustained interest in the genre has existed in North America since at least the early 1960s with little abatement. Further, the interest in superhero movies generally has done very little to drive interest in superhero comic books, whose overall sales have remained relatively flat since the superhero movie boom began in the 2000s.⁶

Another argument for the success of these films is the presence of A-list stars and critically acclaimed directors attached to the project. Following the lead of Marlon Brando in *Superman* (1978) and Jack Nicholson in *Batman* (1989), the most popular of contemporary superhero films are awash with well-regarded actors. *The Dark Knight*, for example, cast two Academy Award winners, Michael Caine and Morgan Freeman, in supporting roles. It also marked Heath Ledger's first appearance in a major

studio release after his Oscar-nominated performance as a gay cowboy in the critically acclaimed *Brokeback Mountain*. Similarly, 2008's other superhero blockbuster, *Iron Man*, included three Oscar nominees, Robert Downey, Jr, Jeff Bridges, and Terrence Howard, and one winner, Gwyneth Paltrow, as its lead characters. Moreover, the films themselves are increasingly overseen by directors with a great deal of artistic credibility particularly in independent and film festivals circles. When Tim Burton was hired to direct *Batman* (1989) he had only two features (*Pee Wee's Big Adventure*, 1985, and *Beetlejuice*, 1988) to his name. It was the success of his version of *Batman* that cemented his reputation as an idiosyncratic A-list director and demonstrated to filmmakers how the genre could be successfully used to generate cultural capital within Hollywood. Similarly, Sam Raimi had cultivated a dedicated following for both his horror films, the *Evil Dead* series (1981, 1987, 1992), and smaller dramatic films such as *A Simple Plan* (1998) before taking on *Spider-Man* in 2002. In recent years, even higher profile young filmmakers with an indie-auteur reputation have been entrusted with major superhero franchises. Thus Bryan Singer (*X-Men*, 2000; *Superman Returns*, 2006) moved to superheroes from high-end thrillers such as *The Usual Suspects* (1995) and *Apt Pupil* (1998). Jon Favreau took on *Iron Man* after finding success as a writer and actor and sometimes director in a series of independent films, most notably *Swingers* (Doug Liman, 1996). Christopher Nolan came to the *Batman* series after his Oscar-nominated small budget crime films *Memento* (2000) and *Insomnia* (2002). The trend toward A-list participants says something about the shifting hierarchies of genre, as superhero films are no longer considered merely lucrative but also prestigious.

Narrative, Seriality, and Superhero Auteursm

The transition from superhero narratives of the 1980s and 1990s, such as *Batman* and *Superman*, which are loosely connected by the lead figure but which stand alone narratively, to the principle of serial continuity can be seen clearly in the respective differences between the first and second *Spider-Man* films (Sam Raimi, 2002 and 2004), and the first and second *X-Men* films (Bryan Singer, 2000 and 2003). Despite the fact that both of these franchises took great

liberties with the storylines presented by their source comic books, significantly altering the established superhero canon, they were nonetheless well received by comic book fans for their respectful treatment of the characters and ability to strike the proper tone. Among the significant changes made to *Spider-Man* in the first film are his web-slinging powers, which, in the film, are biological while they are mechanical in the comic book, and his relationship with Mary Jane Watson (Kirsten Dunst), a character who was not introduced until the forty-second issue of the *Spider-Man* comic book (November 1966) and did not go to high school with Peter Parker (played by Toby Maguire in the film).

X-Men makes an even greater number of changes from comic book to film. Stories featuring the X-Men, more than any other comic book superhero team, have been structured in a manner reminiscent of televised soap operas. At various times, literally dozens of Marvel mutant characters have been members of the team led by Professor X (Patrick Stewart), although the founding members from the 1963 version of the series were Cyclops, Marvel Girl, Iceman, Beast, and Angel. Of these, only Cyclops (James Marsden), Marvel Girl (Famke Janssen, who does not use the name Marvel Girl in the film), and Iceman (Shawn Ashmore) appear in the first film. In 1975, Marvel Comics relaunched the X-Men series with both a new creative team (Len Wein and Dave Cockrum) and a new cast of mutant superheroes. Initially, only Cyclops remained from the original team, and he was joined by Colossus, Nightcrawler, Storm, Thunderbird, Banshee, Sunfire, and, the most popular new character, Wolverine. The X-Men film opts for a mixture of these two teams, composed of Professor X, Cyclops, Jean Grey/Marvel Girl, Storm (Halle Berry), and Wolverine (Hugh Jackman) as the primary team, and Iceman and Rogue (Anna Paquin), a character introduced to the Marvel universe in 1981, as newly recruited students. Other important X-Men characters, including Kitty Pryde (Sumela Kay), Jubilee (Katrina Florece) and Pyro (Alex Burton), are included in what are essentially cameo roles as students at Professor Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters.

Unlike their sequels, both *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* are largely self-contained films. Although each was intended to be the basis of an ongoing franchise when it was created, the films build to conclusions that would be satisfactory had no sequels been

forthcoming. While *X-Men* concludes with the vanquished Magneto (Ian McKellen) vowing to continue his fight, which suggests the possibility of a sequel, the ending is strikingly different from the conclusion of *X2*, which signals the rebirth of Jean Grey as the Phoenix, one of the pivotal characters in the X-Men mythology. The birth of the Phoenix at the end of *X2* virtually necessitates a third film in the series, much as, for example, the capture of Han Solo in *The Empire Strikes Back* (Irvin Kershner, 1980) served as prelude to a third film in that series. Similarly, *Spider-Man* ends in a fashion that is largely self-contained, though also unsatisfactory. Peter Parker's decision to spare Mary Jane the knowledge that he is Spider-Man means that the film ends on a somber note of disappointment. While this ending stresses the probability of a sequel to resolve the romantic tension aroused by the first film, that is hardly enough to satisfy continuity-hungry superhero fans. At the end of *Spider-Man 2*, however, the film returns to the story of the first film. Harry Osborne (James Franco), whose role was diminished for the sequel, is haunted by visions of his dead father, the Green Goblin (Willem Dafoe), who was the vanquished villain from the first film but had no role in the second. Then, after the denouement of Spider-Man's showdown with the second film's villain, Doctor Octopus (Alfred Molina), and an apparent narrative closure of the film, Harry unwittingly discovers his father's weapons cache. The stage is set for a confrontation that will open the third film in the sequel. The transition, therefore, represented by these films results from developing a situation that lends itself to forming the base of a sequel to one that virtually commands one, as continuity increasingly takes central stage in the world of the filmic superhero.

While continuity-based cross-referencing is fast becoming a hallmark of a "good" superhero film, it can also be troubling for the genre on a number of levels. Continuity problems arose in American superhero comic books for several reasons. Among these is the fact that, in the mid-century period in particular, comic books were widely denigrated as mass cultural children's fare. One result of this was that comics were one of the least prestigious parts of the culture industry, and often attracted creators who could not be bothered to adhere to anything resembling a character bible, but were simply churning out material to meet a monthly deadline. Related to this, a high degree of creator turnover was a natural function of the business cycle because superhero

characters were owned by their publishers and not by the people who initially created them. As new writers and artists came to a title, they often had decidedly different visions of the characters than their predecessors and would shift the direction of the title, emphasizing only those aspects of the continuity that particularly suited their needs. The resulting contradictions often generated heated debates within the superhero comic book fandom over what constituted the canon of the superhero universe. *Superman Returns* brought this issue squarely to the world of the superhero film. Warner and director Bryan Singer sought to position the film as a continuation of the previous *Superman* films that had starred Christopher Reeve. However, Singer, along with many fans of the character, felt that only the first two of those four films were canonical, and so opted to situate *Superman Returns* after the events of *Superman II* (1980), proceeding, therefore, as if the events of *Superman III* (Richard Lester, 1983) and *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (Sidney J. Furie, 1987) had never taken place. This is a quintessential retcon, or a change to established character continuity made after the fact, and is generally accepted among superhero comic fans when it is perceived that the change makes for a better story. At the same time, Singer's film jettisoned key elements and characters from the first two canonical *Superman* films, including the characters of Lex Luthor's sidekick Otis (Ned Beatty) and companion Eve Teschmacher (Valerie Perrine). This selective use of past works, while typical of strategies employed within the field of comic books, created an awkward chronology for the character completely divorced from the comic book version of Superman, and at odds with significant portions of the film series.

A similarly awkward relationship exists between the two movies featuring the Hulk. Ang Lee's 2003 *Hulk* opened to a strong box office total of more than \$62 million, but it was the first movie in history to open with more than \$20 million in its first weekend, only to decline by at least 65 percent the following week. Its cumulative worldwide gross of \$245 million was considered a disappointment, and it has the dubious distinction of being the best opening film not to gross at least \$150 million in the domestic box office. Nonetheless, Marvel had invested heavily in the concept and the character, not just as a stand-alone franchise but as the buildup to a larger integrated media strategy, and the film had succeeded in boosting merchandising sales, so a sequel was ordered with a

new director (Louis Leterrier) and an entirely new cast. Eric Bana was replaced by Edward Norton as Bruce Banner/The Hulk, while Liv Tyler replaced Jennifer Connelly as his ex-girlfriend, Betty Ross. While the recasting of lead roles in superhero films is not novel or even extraordinary (consider the range of actors who have portrayed Batman, or, in another genre, James Bond), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) went much further, acting essentially to negate everything established in *Hulk*. Alongside the completely overhauled cast was the decision to act as if the first film, released only five years earlier, had never happened. Thus, *The Incredible Hulk* is not a sequel to *Hulk*, but an entirely new venture, complete with a different origin story, new villains, and a much different tone and visual style. Importantly, the film also contained a cameo appearance by Robert Downey, Jr as Tony Stark immediately before the credits in which he indicates to General Ross (William Hurt) that "we are putting a team together." This second nod to the forthcoming *Avengers* film, coming, as it did, in a film that opened only a week after *Iron Man*, helped to cement the concept of the shared superhero universe, even for viewers who might have missed the implications of the more subtle Nick Fury appearance after the credits in *Iron Man*. With *The Incredible Hulk*, which only barely outgrossed the Lee version, Marvel Studios adopted a strategy lifted directly from the Marvel Comics: rebooting a character in order to bring it more closely into line with what is perceived as a more elaborate and canonically significant undertaking (see J. D. Connor's essay in this volume). Importantly, however, neither the reboot nor the retcon can guarantee audience success even among curiosity-driven superhero fans.

The reboot and the retcon are important strategies by which a superhero franchise can be maintained, and they have been used with great frequency since the 1990s in the American comic book industry, where, for instance, a character such as Captain America has been the subject of nearly continuous reconceptualization by changing creative teams. Interestingly, while Batman has been successfully rebooted on several occasions, both *The Incredible Hulk* and *Superman Returns* were failures in this regard. Plans for a sequel to *The Incredible Hulk* were put on hold by Marvel Studios until after the release of *The Avengers*, and Warner has decided to reboot *Superman*, thereby retconning the *Superman Returns* retcon for any films

in the series moving forward. Both of these decisions foreground the issue of failed superhero films. From the standpoint of the movie studio, a failure in the superhero genre is not only costly, given the tremendous expenses that are associated with special-effects driven action films, but potentially damaging over the long term insofar as superhero films are envisioned as the basis for long-running franchises that will multiply audiences. The question of why some superhero films fail helps to assert the primacy of certain tendencies in the contemporary superhero genre. Failed properties tend to share specific characteristics: an overreliance or unwarranted faith in the lead actor's drawing power at the box office, the selection of a lesser known superhero as the basis for a film, and the adoption of the action-adventure blockbuster formula with little attention to quality writing and direction.

The Fallen Superhero

There can be several stumbling blocks for the superhero film at the box office, including the wrong director, the wrong cast, the wrong character, or the wrong take on the character. In many ways, the reasons for the failure of a superhero film are self-evident in that it does not present a vision that resonates with an audience. It is worth noting, however, that underperforming films based on less well-known superheroes, like *Daredevil* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2003), *Elektra* (Rob Bowman, 2005), and *Ghost Rider* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2007), all involved A-list stars (Ben Affleck, Jennifer Garner, and Nicolas Cage respectively) working with little-known or inexperienced directors. By way of contrast, the *Hellboy* films directed by Guillermo del Toro (2004, 2008) feature an Oscar-nominated filmmaker working with a cast of virtually unknown or character actors. Based on a relatively little-known superhero, the films haven't enjoyed blockbuster status but are well regarded critically and financially and enjoy a certain cult following more akin to a sleeper indie hit. The superhero film that is synonymous with failure, however, is *Catwoman* (Pitof, 2004), which fared poorly at the box office despite its Batman-derived pedigree and Academy Award-winning star (Halle Berry). The failure of *Catwoman* is attributable to a number of factors, including an inexperienced director, a star with no real track record of box office

success outside the ensemble *X-Men* films and the James Bond franchise, and a take on the character that was largely at odds with the characterization from the comic books. *Catwoman*, which won the Golden Raspberry awards for Worst Film, Worst Actress, Worst Director, and Worst Screenplay in advance of the Oscars, demonstrated better than most films that it is not the superhero genre itself that generates strong results, but individual works within it. Specifically, it is those works that take seriously the visual and narrative complexity of the genre and develop a formula more in keeping with the production of independent filmmaking than with star-driven vanity projects. Determining the right formula is a risky proposition but one with enormous long-term benefits to studios and their parent media conglomerates.

While actors may not be the primary drivers of superhero success, the characters themselves do seem to bring a certain cachet. In this sense, superhero films diverge from other forms of genre filmmaking such as the Western or science fiction. As the mixed success of many superhero films has demonstrated, one problem inherent in the genre is the relatively small number of well-known superheroes in American culture. While a genre like the Western might be endlessly open to new characters and narrative possibilities, the superhero film is limited by the range of characters that have dominated the field in their original comics form; names like Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman from DC Comics, and Spider-Man, the X-Men, Captain America, and the Hulk from Marvel remain the gold standard within the field. While a few non-Marvel and non-DC superheroes have served as the basis for successful series (*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, 1990, 1991, 1993, 2007) and unsuccessful films (*Spawn*, Mark Dippé, 1997; *Barb Wire*, David Hogan, 1996), the quest to turn second-tier heroes into top-tier franchises has proved challenging. While *Iron Man* made a tremendous success of a character that was only marginally popular in comic book form, the examples of *Daredevil* and *Ghost Rider* indicate the challenge that is involved with relying predominantly on the ability of a lead actor to bring audiences to little-known superhero properties.

Increasingly, the successful superhero franchise is not merely a career-making vehicle for movie stars, but a credibility-building forum for aspiring auteurs. As the superhero film becomes legitimated as an important outlet for serious filmmaking, and not just

fodder for popcorn sales, it has become an attractive venue for directors who might not otherwise have been conceived as the makers of special-effects driven action movies. The decision by Marvel Studios to hire four-time Academy Award nominee Kenneth Branagh, best known for his Shakespearean work, to direct *Thor* (2011) highlights the way that commercial and critical interests have intersected to elevate filmmaking within the genre. Significantly, by 2009, the narrow range of A-list superhero characters available to Hollywood had some directors frustrated about being shut out of the boom, as Brett Ratner, director of *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), publicly bemoaned the fact that he did not have a superhero franchise to call his own (Seijas 2009).

One outcome of the limited pool of superhero resources has been Hollywood's effort to create new superhero stories from scratch. For example, Pixar's animated superhero film *The Incredibles* (Brad Bird, 2004) offered an elaboration of many of the melodramatic themes found in the Lee/Kirby *Fantastic Four* comic books, and, significantly, featured a cast of four characters whose powers were analogous to those found in that comic book, presenting superheroism as a form of social exceptionalism privileged over the mundane qualities of everyday life. The film was both a critical and commercial smash, the fifth-highest grossing film of 2004 and the winner of two Academy Awards (Best Animated Feature, and Best Achievement in Sound Editing), and it ushered in a tidal wave of tie-in merchandising. One of the important attributes of *The Incredibles* was the creation of a fully fleshed out superhero universe, including subsidiary heroes like Frozone (Samuel L. Jackson) that allowed the family of heroes to function within an entire superhero universe. The opposite tack was taken by the makers of the film *Hancock* (Peter Berg, 2008), starring Hollywood mega-star Will Smith, who challenged his image as the likeable leading man of summer blockbusters by playing a despised alcoholic superhero in contemporary Los Angeles.

Only two superpowered beings exist in *Hancock*, the titular character and his ex-wife Angel (Charlize Theron), one of the smallest conceivable superhero universes. Nonetheless, this proved to be of little consequence for moviegoers, as the film was the fourth-highest grossing film in 2008 (behind *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man* and the fourth Indiana Jones film), and made



Figure 26.2 Will Smith's Hancock rescues an injured police officer in Peter Berg's *Hancock* (2008, producers Michael Mann, Akiva Goldsman, James Lassiter, and Will Smith).

more than \$624 million at the worldwide box office. The success of *The Incredibles* and *Hancock* is suggestive of the way that superhero films have the possibility of becoming divorced from their comic book origins, if they remain true to the spirit of superhero canonicity: fully fleshed out characters inhabiting a complex moral universe, with innovatively rendered worlds and realist narratives, well-crafted dialogue and character development. A-list stars and eye-popping special effects are no longer sufficient for the discerning, and increasingly sophisticated, superhero audience.

Conclusion: From Market Synergies to Aesthetic Synergies

The ability of the contemporary superhero film to capitalize on the core elements of the superhero comic book has been dependent upon the ability of filmmakers to create the superhero film as a genre distinct from, albeit related to, the traditional science fiction

or action blockbuster. In turn, this directorial freedom is intimately related to the changing business models in the production of superhero movies, particularly at Marvel Studios. For many years, even while the Superman and Batman franchises were generating significant revenue for DC Comics, Warner Brothers and parent company Time Warner, the rights to popular Marvel Comics characters were tied up in a complicated contractual situation with independent producers, including Carolco and the Cannon Group, who were unable to raise the capital to finance blockbuster films.⁷ In 1986, Marvel was sold to New World Entertainment, and then, in 1989, to junk bond trader Ronald Perelman's MacAndrews & Forbes Holdings. Perelman took the company public in 1991 and also founded Marvel Studios in 1993 as a subsidiary company to license characters for films. A series of poor business decisions led to the bankruptcy of Marvel Entertainment in 1996. Control of the company eventually landed with the owner of Toy Biz, Isaac Perlmutter, and Avi Arad, the head of Marvel

Studios. Following the bankruptcies of Marvel, Cannon, and Carolco, Marvel was able to reacquire the rights to their most popular characters, and licensed them to various studios, including Twentieth Century Fox (X-Men) and Columbia Pictures/Sony (Spider-Man). In 2004, following the success of the initial films coproduced by Marvel Studios, the company opted to move into production directly and raised \$525 million to produce 10 films for which they would then outsource the distribution. *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk* in 2008 were the first of the films produced by Marvel Studios, and, not surprisingly, are the ones that most clearly reproduce the storytelling styles of Marvel Comics.

It may be argued that superhero films may not have risen to such prominence in Hollywood were it not for the rapid conglomeration of media companies and new corporate models of synergy. Yet, the success of the genre is not only tied to these corporate developments but is intricately bound to the evolution of the cultural status of the American comic book. In 1986, just a few years before the explosion of interest in superhero-based films was launched by Burton's *Batman*, three comic books were widely heralded in the press as exemplifying the new seriousness of the comic book form. These were Art Spiegelman's Holocaust memoir *Maus*, Frank Miller's dystopic futuristic Batman series *The Dark Knight Returns*, and Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's intricately plotted critique of fascist tendencies within the superhero genre, *Watchmen*. Significantly, the latter two books are firmly rooted in, if critical of, the superhero genre that has dominated the American comic book industry, and the history of the superhero film would be deeply structured by the creators of these works.

Frank Miller is a well-regarded comic book writer and artist who first came to fame in the early 1980s as the creative force on Marvel's *Daredevil* (both the films *Daredevil* and *Elektra* are based on his particular plots and his vision of those characters). By 1986, he was a star in the comic book field, and DC entrusted him to radically overhaul one of their most popular characters. The resulting hyperviolent vision of Batman contributed to Burton's vision of the character and made Miller a sought-after talent. Miller broke with DC Comics at the end of the 1980s in a dispute over a proposed ratings system for comics and began working with smaller, independent comic book companies where he would maintain an

ownership stake in characters and work that he created. Miller also worked briefly in Hollywood, penning the sequels *Robocop 2* (Irvin Kershner, 1990) and *Robocop 3* (Fred Dekker, 1993), an experience he found extremely unfulfilling.⁸ At the same time, he began publishing the black-and-white neo-noir comics set in the fictional town of Sin City for Dark Horse Comics, and, in 1998, serialized *300*, about the Battle of Thermopylae, for the same publisher. In the 2000s he returned to work at DC, creating a *Dark Knight* sequel, *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, and a new Batman series with artist Jim Lee. In 2005, Miller returned to the film industry, working with director Robert Rodriguez on a filmic adaptation of *Sin City* and, in 2008, he wrote and directed his first film, *The Spirit*, an adaptation of Will Eisner's celebrated newspaper superhero comic strip.

Including *Daredevil* and *Elektra*, four of Miller's comics have been directly adapted for the screen, his treatments of Batman have influenced both Burton and Nolan, and he himself has made a film based on the comics work of another creator. Neither *Daredevil* nor *Elektra* were well received by comic book fans, although each film fared reasonably well at the box office. *Sin City* and *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006), on the other hand, while not strictly superhero films, are notable for their slavish fidelity to their source material. Each of the films was produced on a digital backlot with computer-generated sets and effects. Moreover, each film pays close attention to the original source material, replicating individual panels from the comics on the screen as moving images and adhering closely to Miller's dialogue. Each of the films fared well at the box office. *Sin City* grossed more than \$158 million worldwide and received generally positive reviews, while *300*, which received mostly poor reviews and was widely attacked as racist, imperialist, and homophobic, grossed more than \$456 million worldwide. Both films are anticipated to produce theatrical sequels but, in the meantime, have spawned their own TV series. Nonetheless, Miller's success in the film industry was diminished somewhat at the end of 2008 when he released his version of *The Spirit*, one of the worst reviewed of all superhero films and also one of the biggest money losers with a worldwide gross of only \$38 million. The film was roundly condemned within comics fandom for taking unnecessary liberties with Eisner's creation, altering its tone in order to bring it more in line with Miller's own

right-wing political leanings. Interestingly, of all the film projects based on comics that Miller has been involved with, the most successful, by far, are those that maintain the greatest level of fidelity to the original comics, the digital backlot films that enable filmmakers like Rodriguez and Snyder to replicate the visual elements of the comics with near exactitude, while the works that take the greatest liberties, *Elektra* and *The Spirit*, have fared the worst with critics and the public. Thus, it seems that it is not Frank Miller himself who inspires cinema-going audiences but the attraction of his particular comic book style. This logic flies in the face of Hollywood's tendency to rely on well-known names rather than well-established styles to sell an intended blockbuster. Arguably, a Miller-created version of the iconic Eisner property *The Spirit* should have been a recipe for a smash hit, despite the fact that the character was not widely known outside comic book fandom. Yet, by failing to adhere to the canonical narrative and tone of the original comic, Miller faced a hostile backlash from fans aghast by his hubris, and his work found very little traction.

In contrast to Miller's embrace of Hollywood, Alan Moore remains an idiosyncratic outsider. For that he has earned a devoted following within comics but is little known or valued beyond this subculture. The British writer entered the comic book industry through the music press in the 1970s, eventually coming to work for the British comics magazines *2000 A.D.* and *Warrior*, where he initially launched *V for Vendetta* as a critique of Thatcherism in the 1980s. He entered the American comic book industry working for DC on the low-selling monster title *Swamp Thing*, which he reenvisioned as a more serious and adult work filled with commentaries on environmental issues. It was in the pages of *Swamp Thing* that he made his name as a serious and experimental writer in the comic book form and where he introduced the character of John Constantine. In 1986 and 1987, he wrote the 12-part miniseries *Watchmen* (with art by Dave Gibbons), a dark and dense novelistic treatment about the political and philosophical ramifications of superheroes in American culture that is widely credited with beginning a trend toward the deconstruction of superheroes in the American comic book industry. Like Miller, Moore had a falling out with DC Comics at the end of the 1980s over issues including royalty payments and the proposed ratings system, and stopped working with the company.

At the time he turned his attention away from superhero comics, launching *Big Numbers* (with Bill Sienkiewicz), a comic book series about fractal mathematics, *From Hell* (with Eddie Campbell), about Jack the Ripper, and *Lost Girls* (with Melinda Gebbie), a pornographic comic with literary overtones. In the 1990s, he returned to superhero comics, working with Image comics on a number of titles, and launching his own line of comics, America's Best Comics, which included his *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* with artist Kevin O'Neill.

Alan Moore's comics have been adapted for the screen with even greater frequency than have Miller's, including *From Hell* (Albert and Allen Hughes, 2001), *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (Stephen Norrington, 2003), *Constantine* (Francis Lawrence, 2005), *V for Vendetta* (Andy and Larry Wachowski, 2005), and *Watchmen* (Zack Snyder, 2009). Unlike Miller, however, Moore has openly shunned Hollywood. He was involved with the sale of his rights for the films *From Hell* and *League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, but was so unhappy with the resulting works that he turned his back on the film industry, vowing never to watch a film based on one of his comic books. On subsequent films, including *V for Vendetta* and *Watchmen*, he has asked that his name be removed from the credits, and has sought to distance his own work from the films that are based upon it. In this way, Miller and Moore, the two most influential superhero comic book creators of the 1980s, have come to occupy opposite positions within the field. Miller is the quintessential comics industry celebrity who has been embraced by Hollywood and who has, in turn, embraced it, while Moore retains a reputation as a controversial outsider untainted by the film industry. Interestingly, and despite their renown within comics fandom, Hollywood has had trouble selling films based on their contributions alone, as, for instance, both *V for Vendetta* and *Watchmen* have been high-profile box office disappointments despite the fact that they are adaptations of works frequently held to represent the aesthetic pinnacle of the superhero comic book genre. Ultimately, it seems that it is not the pedigree of the superhero that determines a film's success, nor the absolute fidelity of the adaptation to the source material, but the ability of a filmmaker to capture the tone of the contemporary superhero comic book on screen. The comics work of Miller, Moore, and dozens of other comic book creators since

the mid-1980s has been oriented toward elevating the superhero story by encumbering it with greater narrative and moral complexity so as to strip it of its pulpish roots. So, too, with superhero movies, which increasingly look to superhero comics as an important forerunner of the turn away from simple-minded action movie tropes and toward more realist-inspired character development, art direction, and special effects in the superhero blockbuster. Just as superhero comic book creators in the 1980s were inspired by the psychological complexity of underground and independent comic books to raise the level of their genre, so too in the world of film have superhero filmmakers borrowed from the lessons of independent filmmaking to transform the adventure blockbuster into a respectable cinematic genre.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all data on box office receipts are taken from BoxOfficeMojo.com.
2. For a history of Stan Lee and the Marvel style, see Raphael and Spurgeon 2003.
3. For an overview of the development of the American comic book industry see Gabilliet 2009.
4. For example, when a line of dialogue on the second page of *Fantastic Four #6* (September 1962) indicates that "the [Human] Torch has been scouting for signs of Doctor Doom," a footnote directs readers back to *Fantastic Four #5* (July 1962) for the reasons why. Further, the events of *Fantastic Four #6* are footnoted when Dr Doom returns in *Fantastic Four #10* (January 1963).
5. For detailed readings of the history and significance of Batman, see Brooker 2001 and Pearson & Uricchio 1991.
6. A notable exception would be sales of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons's *Watchmen*, whose sales surged tremendously in 2008 in advance of the 2009 film release.
7. For a history of Marvel Entertainment see Raviv 2002.
8. Miller delivered a scathingly anti-Hollywood speech at the 2000 Harvey Awards presentation.

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