BOX OFFICE BACK ISSUES: HISTORICIZING THE LIMINAL SUPERHERO FILMS, 1989–2008

by

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Although the superhero film became a dominant force in Hollywood early in the 21st century, the formation of the superhero genre can be attributed to a relatively small temporal window beginning in 1989 and ending in 2008. This dissertation argues that a specific group of superhero films that I call the liminal superhero films (LSF) collectively served as the industrial body that organized and created a fully formed superhero genre. The LSF codified the superhero genre, but that was only possible due to several industrial elements at play before they arrived. An increasing industrial appetite for blockbusters coming out of the 1970s, the rise of proprietary intellectual property after the corporate conglomeration that occurred at the end of the 20th century, and finally, the ability of the LSF to mitigate risk (both real and perceived) all led to this cinematic confluence.

The LSF streamlined the superhero genre through a mechanism I characterize as "generic pruning." This is a process that indexes the modes, tropes, and production decisions that came to form the genre through years of formal, representational, and narrative trials. Although many LSF were critically panned, the experimentation that occurred in the liminal era aided Hollywood by informing it about the types of superhero films that would be produced and replicated, while also inculcating audiences as to the normed contours around a superhero film genre that had previously been illegible.

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I. INTRODUCTION

"Don't you understand that after *Batman* went off the air on TV, the brand became as dead as a Dodo? Nobody's interested in Batman anymore" (Burton).

—Sol Harrison, former DC Comics President

The film rights were considered toxic. The casting of the film's star elicited a passionate fan backlash (Hughes). The director was relatively inexperienced and described the film as "a very interesting, surprising, action story with a bunch of weird characters running around" (Warner Bros. Electronic Press Kit [EPK]). Hollywood had not seen a hit film based on a superhero in nearly a decade, and early market research even described the likely reception of the film in unambiguous terms: "Flop" (Rossen). These are the challenging conditions in which *Batman* (dir. Tim Burton, 1989) was developed and produced.

Batman producer Michael Uslan recalls that the difficulties in realizing a contemporary screen version of Batman originated in DC Comics' parent company's disdain for their own corporate asset.[1] In a 30th-anniversary retrospective on the making of *Batman*, Uslan told *The Hollywood Reporter* that, "The Warner Publishing brass, generally speaking, were not a bunch of happy campers that they owned a comic book company...They only saw value in Superman" (Burton). Warner did indeed capitalize

[1] Uslan is often credited as having taught "the first-ever college accredited course on comic books," at Indiana University in the early 1970s (Burton). This credit garnered the attention of then-DC Comics President, Carmine Infantino. Uslan secured a DC staff position before using his connections in the comics industry as a springboard into a producing career in Hollywood.

significantly on the Superman license at multiplexes, starting in 1978 with Richard Donner's *Superman*. However, even if Uslan's assessment of Warner's view toward comics is somewhat subjective, his own place within the larger industrial timeline is telling: Uslan arrived at DC Comics in the early 1970s, and *Batman* (largely actualized through Uslan's devotion to the IP) did not hit movie screens until the last year of the 1980s. The shortsighted appraisal of solely finding "value in Superman" is not merely an example of one myopic executive passing on a project that they later regretted, it is a larger illustration into the relationship that the culture industries (particularly the cinematic arm) had toward comic books a generation ago. In other words, by the early 1970s, even Batman's parent company was not interested in him.

The industrial milieu of that era underscores just how uninformed and apathetic the overall Hollywood apparatus was for superhero media and mythologies in general at the time. Speaking with *Back Issue* in July 2019, Uslan described how an executive at Columbia felt that a Batman film was likely to fail because *Annie* (dir. John Huston, 1982) had produced disappointing results. " 'Oh come on, Michael, they're both out of the funny pages!' " (Stuber 8). Another executive, this time at United Artists, assumed that because the 1976 action/adventure film *Robin and Marian* (dir. Richard Lester) performed poorly, a film based on Batman was likely to suffer the same fate (Stuber 8). Similarly, legendary Batman writer and comic book editor Denny O'Neil remembered a parallel obtuseness when it came to industrial decision-making surrounding the choice for the director of *Batman*. For O'Neil, the overarching lack of appreciation for anything beyond the broadest conceptions of famous superheroes such as Batman was painfully clear: "I think [Burton's] *Beetlejuice*, with the slight horror angle, probably did it. That's

very Hollywood for you. The movies were very, very different, but 'Oh, they're both about spooky stuff!' " (Trumbull 27). Ultimately, none of these impediments mattered: *Batman* proved to be a commercial juggernaut.

As part of her larger deconstruction of the political economy of *Batman* in her 1991 essay, " 'Holy Commodity Fetish, Batman!': The Political Economy of a Commercial Intertext," Eileen Meehan outlines how, in the summer of 1989, "Batmania" was in full bloom. Warner Bros. released director Tim Burton's big-screen adaptation of *Batman* on June 23rd of that year, and the cultural suffusion bled boldly for weeks after moviegoers got their first look at a "serious" and contemporary Hollywood iteration of the Dark Knight. *Batman* was the first film to earn $100 million in 10 days, ultimately yielding $411,348,924 worldwide ("Batman"). It was also the top-grossing domestic film of 1989, beating the likes *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (dir. Steven Spielberg); *Rain Man* (dir. Barry Levinson); *Ghostbusters II* (dir. Ivan Reitman); and *Back to the Future Part II* (dir. Robert Zemeckis) among other notable titles. Just a few months prior to the film's premier, *The Wall Street Journal* had published a story alluding to the possibility of an inauspicious reception: "Batman Fans Fear the Joke's on Them in Hollywood Epic" (Hughes). However, those fears proved unfounded; both Warner Bros. *and* Batman fans were pleasantly surprised by what Burton had created.

The mania did not stop at the theater doors, however. Meehan points out how Time Warner (having been recently formed through the merger of Time Inc. and Warner Communications Inc.) was able to combine its now considerably deep bench of entertainment licenses to engineer *Batman* with paratextual and extra-cinematic products as a major component. The ubiquity of this campaign served the marketing of the film

text itself, but this commercial extension was also pre-engineered in a more coordinated manner than had been typically seen before—even in tie-in-savvy Hollywood:

> Tee shirts, posters, keychains, jewelry, buttons, books, watches, magazines, trading cards, audiotaped books, videogames, records, cups, and numerous other items flooded malls across America with images of Batman, his new logo, and his old enemy the Joker... *Batman*'s premier on the big screen was matched by appearances on the small screen. Film clips were packaged as advertisements and free promotional materials for the interview and movie review circuits on both broadcast and cable television; Prince's "Batdance" video played in heavy rotation on MTV. Over radio, "Batdance" and other cuts from Prince's Batman album got strong play on rock stations and "crossed over" to black radio stations. (Meehan 47)

The cultural potency of 1989's *Batman* was deep enough that it revealed itself in the most unlikely of places. For example, in the introduction to his 2005 analysis of Batman-as-cultural-icon, Will Brooker includes a photograph (circa 1992) of two people in Sarajevo running through an intersection that is under sniper fire (2). It seems a jarring addition to the text until, upon taking a more detailed review of the photo, one sees the "Batman" t-shirt peeking out from under the jacket of one of the photo's subjects.[2] The underlying

[2] The "Batmania" marketing and merchandising strategy was so suffused throughout the production of both of Burton's Batman films that the 1992 sequel, *Batman Returns*, featured a scene in which Keaton's Batman battle with the Red Triangle Gang spills into a store that sold one thing: Batman toys (Sawyer). A set was built despite ultimately never making the final cut.

semiotic meaning indexes the magnitude and ubiquity of Burton's *Batman,* which had reverberated across the globe.

However, this dissertation is not the story of the Dark Knight's nebulous journey to the big screen in 1989; it is an examination of the era of superhero cinema that immediately followed in its industrially significant wake. Despite *Batman*'s enormous success, its superhero movie offspring experienced many of the same trials and difficulties that *Batman* faced in its development—and few enjoyed the economic spoils that approached *Batman*'s final figures. Yet, as I argue throughout this text, it is this group of films that are *the* foundational element in the larger scaffolding that became the superhero movie genre.

In a 2017 article for *The Ringer*, entitled "Marvel Has What Everyone Else Wants," journalist Steven Kearse distills the essence of Marvel Studios' interconnected cinematic approach—the notion of a so-called "universe(s)" that comprises the company's industrial strategy. He observes, "A franchise hopes you'll come back; a universe hopes you'll never leave." Thus, this dissertation examines an understudied, transitional period of cinema history in which superhero films existed—even thrived—but did so in a much less streamlined, prioritized, or episodic way. My intervention positions a specific group of superhero films as the progenitors of the larger superhero genre through a curation of industrial and generic traits that were identified and organized in and around their existence. It is a historiography of a genre and an era that existed well before studios and producers created a movie-going space that the audience would "never leave"; this is the superhero cinema that existed in the 1990s and early 2000s. My argument is an articulation of how of a particular group of superhero films that were

released in the era just prior to the genre's current hegemonic state codified and created the current superhero genre. This cinematic object represents a liminal era for the superhero films, so my intervention begins with the aggregation of the collection itself, which I refer to as the "liminal superhero films."

The Liminal Superhero Films

Although *Batman* was a boon to Hollywood (and Warner Communications Inc. specifically), it did not incite an immediate sea change in the production of superhero films or radically alter the industrial appreciation about them. The genre was still unformed in earnest. What *did* fundamentally change the genre was the larger galaxy that is the LSF. Despite Hollywood intersecting with superheroes for decades, the mechanism through which they could be understood and refined occurred during that liminal period I identify between 1989 and 2008.

Examples of superhero films date back to at least the 1940s with Columbia's serials based on characters such as Batman and The Phantom. Characters such as The Scarlet Pimpernel, Zorro, and The Shadow all occupied space in early cinematic history, but to argue that they are true entries into the "superhero" genre is precarious, as some predate the explicit invention of superheroes themselves. Cinema scholar Blair Davis points out that "film and comics share roughly contemporaneous origins, with both the public projection of the Lumière Brothers Cinematograph and the appearance of the first newspaper comic strip *Hogan's Alley* converging in 1895" (3). The detective character Dick Tracy saw several screen entries during the late 1940s, but as with The Shadow films of that era, Dick Tracy hews much closer to pulp detective rather than a superhero.

As an archetype, superheroes have broadly shared characteristics, such as an origin story, new powers, morality play, a rogues gallery, etc. However, some scholars have argued that they are a distinctly American cultural construct. In their 2002 text, *The Myth of the American Superhero*, Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence argue that:

> ...the American monomyth derives from tales of redemption that have arisen on American soil, combining elements of the selfless servant who impassively gives his life for others and the zealous crusader who destroys evil. The supersaviors in pop culture function as replacements for the Christ figure, whose credibility was eroded by scientific rationalism. (6)

While the authors' rather archaic gender description dates their book, I agree with their description of superheroes as a decidedly American product. However, the authors' thesis is clear—they believe superheroes propagate "antidemocratic" narratives that effectively coerce fierce followings (Jewett and Lawrence 8). The creation of the superhero was one produced in large part by Jewish American cartoonists and storytellers as a response to Nazi authoritarianism, which is outlined in detail in works such as Gerard Jones' *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* and Larry Tye's *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero*.[3] Although there are many ways to define a superhero, they typically contain the following characteristics: an origin story (if it is a character's first screen introduction); a character who possesses fantastic abilities (flight and strength are common); the superhero classically fights for

[3] Michael Chabon's text, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay: a Novel* (2002) is a more commercial example of this history communicated through the lens of historical fiction.

good (and often hegemonic norms); and usually must overcome impossible odds to defeat a sinister villain. My intervention intersects with these definitions to note occasional instances in which some LSF de-center this conception to expand the genre. The heroic element of a given film (despite vast differences in the iteration of the hero) is more important than the derived-from-comics element for the parameters of this study. Many comics are not superhero comics. Scholarship focused on cinema that is adapted from non-superhero comics is just as essential (and perhaps more so) than scholarly work done in the genre more typically associated with that medium. As a matter of clarifying the parameters of this dissertation, however, I limit the scope to adaptations of superhero comics—even if some LSF (such as *Tank Girl* [dir. Rachel Talalay, 1995]) were marketed more as science fiction or action films. Moreover, that particular generic obfuscation is something of a thread that runs throughout the LSF as a body, as I detail in further in Chapter 2.

The period of the LSF reflects a Hollywood that was producing superhero films, yet because of the variance in their quality and relative paucity of titles, its place in cultural memory is underappreciated. My overarching argument regarding this area of genre and media studies is that the LSF codified generic expectations, and then replicated them—creating a fully formed superhero film genre. Since the 1990s and early 2000s are so specifically influential to the genre, I have established a chronological framework that focuses the scope of this investigation: the corpus begins directly after Tim Burton's

1989 *Batman* film and ends with 2008's *Iron Man*.[4] I consider each of these films to be LSF—but insofar that they are bookends, not the books. This is only to say that *Batman* and *Iron Man* are the two films that connect this "liminal" time period that I conceptualize. Just as bookends are required to maintain the integrity of a collection of books, so too are these two films needed as binding agents for this corpus.

Literature Review

This dissertation is a historiography of how superhero cinema began to return more robustly to theaters, and how the superhero film was formed through the generic pruning and processes that the LSF afforded and facilitated. This dissertation requires a foundation of scholarship that is grounded both within text and industry, so I organize the following literature review in two sections: first, scholarship on genre theory and genre history, followed by a review of media industry studies literature that informed the deeper, structural antecedents of the LSF and created an environment that propelled them.

Genre Theory

My intervention builds upon the work of foundational genre scholars whose own work makes this type of scholarship possible. I have historicized a body that is a relatively novel media entity; one that required time to be generated. Rick Altman acknowledges that the term "genre" can be malleable in the most seemingly straightforward of circumstances, and perhaps even problematic in more complex

[4] For clarity, the table of LSF I include (see appendix) is nearly exhaustive, but, for example, I deliberately avoided TV movies set within the superhero genre. The utility of the table is that of an at-a-glance repository of the bulk of LSF as a corpus; both as a research tool for myself and to serve as a resource for readers.

scenarios. He explores the nature of fluidity in genre scholarship, noting that:

> Genres were always—and continue to be—treated as if they spring full-blown from the head of Zeus... however, as scholars come to know the full range of individual Hollywood genres, we are finding that genres are far from exhibiting the homogeneity that this synchronic approach posits. Whereas one Hollywood genre may be borrowed with little change from another medium, a second genre may develop slowly, change constantly, and surge recognizably before settling into a familiar pattern, while a third may go through an extended series of paradigms, one of which may be claimed as dominant. As long as Hollywood genres are conceived as Platonic categories, existing outside the flow of time, it will be impossible to reconcile *genre theory*, which has always accepted as given the timelessness of a characteristic structure, and *genre history*, which has concentrated on chronicling the development, deployment and disappearance of this same structure. (*Film/Genre* 218)

I consider the examination of the LSF to be a novel contribution within genre theory. Altman's description of the possibility of a genre as something to "be borrowed... develop slowly, change constantly, and surge recognizably before settling into a familiar pattern" (*Film/Genre*, 218) is a generic Rosetta Stone from which I considered the LSF with a wide lens as a historically based, collective corpus. Repetition and sameness are only codified through a large corpus. Difference and change also help remind us what genre is when we see a difference within a given genre. Those generic differences and

changes within the realm of the superhero film were made legible and marketable to audiences through the LSF.

Industrial trends are particularly fluid within the era of the LSF. A concept I refer to throughout this dissertation as "generic pruning," and it is a chief driver regarding the evolution of the superhero genre through the corpus and industrial environment of the LSF. The term is essentially my linguistic device for all the trial-and-error heuristics that the industry was working through during the time of the LSF. I refer to it as pruning because although the industry may lean on discourses that speak to the triumphs of the genre, that which was less successful (or perhaps even simply under-promoted) is often just as crucial from a historical perspective. My notion of generic pruning builds upon a conceit originated in Steve Neal's 1990 essay, "Questions of Genre." Neale notes that genre is a "process" ("Questions of Genre" 171). He outlines this process in three ways: generic "expectation"; the "generic corpus"; and finally, the "rules and 'norms' that govern the genre" (Neal, "Questions of Genre" 171). Post-2000 movie-going audiences are well trained in the expectation realm of Neale's criteria. In fact, much of the criticism that the superhero genre faces is purely based upon fatigue from its ubiquity and predictability. However, in the era that this project investigates, I trace how these expectations were much less galvanized—or at least were significantly less organized.

Generic pruning buttresses Neale's "process" assertion and marries well with John Ellis' notion of a "narrative image," which he argues is chief to Hollywood's discourse-making agenda. Essentially, the narrative image is a tacit shorthand for "what is this film like?" (qtd. in Neale, "Questions of Genre" 163). The ways in which genres are constructed and promoted abet this formation of a "narrative image" to enhance

marketing capabilities, but also to establish expectations. Thus, part of this study is an exploration of the various ways in which aesthetics and generic trends coalesce into a larger kind of "narrative image."

The LSF arrived at a time when Hollywood was interweaving elements of commercial intertextuality at an accelerated pace. In conglomerated Hollywood, this process is often considered part and parcel of the cinematic apparatus, but it is a direct link to the corporatizing of the movies. Prior to the early 1970s, TV advertising for movies effectively did not exist. The marketing potential of the LSF began to become apparent with *Batman*'s impressive web of commercial tentacles. However, as time evolved, producers and marketers came to recognize the inherent commercial value in the superhero film. Avi Santo observes how characters like Batman lend themselves to more merchandizing than archetypes from other genres through the use of superhero tropes such as gadgets, vehicles, weapons, and other iconographic items attached to their mythologies (81). Mediated superhero stories (TV in Santo's case, the LSF in mine) become engineered toward commercial exploitation (Santo 70). Superhero cinema also often partners well as "high concept" vehicles for Hollywood (Wyatt 8). Though the formula for a superhero genre was being synthesized as it went along during the LSF era, the superhero cinema that became codified reflects Wyatt's description of high concept narratives that can be sold "as a narrative which is very straightforward, easily communicated, and easily comprehended" (8). Characters with names such as "Wonder Woman"; "Spider-Man"; and the "Fantastic Four" even have high concept monikers pre-installed. High concept marketing—in addition to all of the paratextual development that Meehan describes with *Batman*—aligned especially well with the LSF due to superhero

cinema's timing in Hollywood history. Although the superhero genre had not yet been formally established until the LSF completed their industrial cycle, as I argue throughout, the industry was at once learning how to market superheroes as something both excitingly new yet undergirded with notions of cinematic familiarity.

For example, if audiences in 1997 knew nothing about the superhero film *Steel* (dir. Kenneth Johnson) outside of its promotional one-sheet, they could still ascertain certain generic information from this paratext. The poster for *Steel* depicts its lead in metallic armor with an imposing look on his face. Even the font is a very masculine, rust-colored metal design. The tagline tells us that "Heroes Don't Come Any Bigger," and, just in case there was any confusion, a few inches below that, another line of text presents a *second* tagline: "Man - Metal - Hero." *Steel*'s star, NBA great Shaquille O'Neal, also contributes to generic expectations. O'Neal's star text (especially in the 1990s) implicitly communicated action and power, but all under a playful patina. He was a novice actor, but the trade-off was that his persona could counterbalance his lack of experience as a thespian, as well as luring in fans who knew him as the lovable, larger-than-life dunk exhibitionist from the world of sports. As Richard Dyer notes, stars-as-images can index a great deal of semiotic meaning simply by existing as the person that the star is or is popularly understood (15-16). These images are often highly curated by studio stakeholders, but Dyer also posits that the amount of weight a moviegoer might attach to a star "will in the end depend on how much you believe in 'great unique individuals' as opposed to famous people being 'the right type in the right place at the right time' (always remembering that type, place and time are shaped by the same society)" (16). Since the LSF were still defining the general contours of what the superhero genre would

be, O'Neal's casting represents a moment within the LSF when names and personas were valued over stories built with fidelity to the comic book source's mythology, the strength in the character IP itself, or even much implicit trust in the superhero genre. Indeed, O'Neal was "the right type in the right place at the right time" regarding his involvement with the LSF; or, as Dyer might characterize O'Neal's casting, his star text channeled the "emotional affinity" that his well-known "Shaq" persona pre-installed. However, part of what also makes the LSF so complex is that, at the end of its continuum, that same corpus that considered superhero cinema a low-stakes vehicle for a professional athlete goes on to define, to a large extent, what Hollywood and its consumers come to expect in a newly codified genre.

The LSF situate the epistemology of the superhero film in a new way when they are considered as a coherent corpus. The LSF's relationship to each other sometimes bear striking similarities and, at other times, appear quite different in nature. However, I illustrate that these variances are indeed the essential ingredients for understanding them as a corpus. That individual examples of LSF are, sometimes, quite different from each other is illustrative of the generic pruning that defined the genre by the end of the LSF timeline; the genre was in a state of liminality, still to be defined. Prior to 1989, superhero films were ephemeral and disconnected from any larger narrative architecture, such as the concept of an interconnected movie universe. In one respect, there are no "rules" for genre. In his piece, "Genre," Andrew Tudor points out that, in the broadest sense, "genre is what we collectively believe it to be" (7). However, Tudor does not seem to think this is a tenable definition in earnest, especially when considering how often repeated motifs, tropes, symbols, and aesthetics tend to mark a particular genre. He notes

that, "this is not to suggest that genre terms are totally useless but merely that to employ them requires a much more methodological understanding of the working of film. And this in turn requires that we specify a set of sociological and psychological context assumptions and construct explicit genre models within them" (Tudor 8). The LSF could be viewed as a "genre model," but I would separate them out from such a characterization because they serve much more as a longitudinal process as opposed to a more one-dimensional model. Furthermore, as I argue in the following chapters, the LSF were too diverse to be condensed down to a lone model. I illustrate how their very essence of exhibiting so many different approaches to the superhero film over time was the overarching crucible that formed the superhero genre at large.

As I demonstrate throughout this dissertation, my concept of generic pruning provides a lens through which the transformational nature of LSF can be better understood. Although a slow burn, the period from 1989 to 2008 is a crucial one for the superhero genre, in part because the movie-going public was inculcated into the language of not only the superhero film, but also a reinscription/reformation of the concept of the pulp hero in popular culture. Along these lines, part of the work of my analysis is describing what superhero audiences could anticipate from a superhero film around 1989—that is, whether specific expectations could even have been said to exist. Though I employ post-LSF examples of superhero cinema sparingly in this dissertation, James Mangold's 2017 film *Logan* serves as a useful heuristic device for understanding the dynamics that generic pruning produced. By 2017, the superhero genre had become much more organized in terms of its general generic contours. Through the LSF, Hollywood had been adding and editing generic rules and expectations for many years. It is apropos

that Tudor mentions *Shane* (dir. George Stevens, 1953) as one of the more "classically heroic" (6) Western archetypes because, in *Logan*, Hugh Jackman's role as an aging-Wolverine-turned-reluctant-savior operates in a parallel (albeit coarser) mode to Alan Ladd's famous starring role as the mysterious, yet principled, gunfighter Shane. This homage is so extensive within the film that Mangold included a scene from *Shane* that conspicuously plays on a hotel television set, as if to say, "here's a retelling of *Shane*" with, to use Neale's language, the *expectation* that those who appreciate genre will understand the interplay.[5]

The LSF stabilized the genre, largely through these newly forged expectations. My argument about the change that the LSF fomented is nominally informed by the simple paucity of superhero films being produced before 1989. However, the more industrially complex factors lie in the conception of genre. Hollywood itself breeds and abets these conceptions—once it becomes clear those patterns and pathways that come to define a particular genre (both for producers and consumers) are commercially viable. In "Dimensions of Genre," Steve Neale notes that, "a genre's history...is as much a history of the consequently shifting boundaries of a corpus of texts as it is the texts themselves" (*Genre and Hollywood* 43). These generic boundaries are made increasingly clear by time and familiarity, or as Colin McArthur characterizes them, "repeated patterns might be called the iconography of the genre" (23). I build on each of these notions to illustrate how these repeated patterns are largely being codified in this era through the LSF. The distinction within my argument is that the superhero genre would not exist in earnest if it

[5] I acknowledge that we could extend this logic to the generic rules that Westerns, samurai films, melodrama, and other action-oriented pictures have been introducing essentially since the dawn of cinema, or possibly even fiction in general. I only specify that the LSF were particularly influential due to the shared generic link.

were not for the *specific corpus* of the LSF, rather than about how a corpus of texts can shift the composition of a given genre. I argue that the LSF organized and subsequently formed a genre.

This is not to say that the contours of what makes superheroes ontologically recognizable did not exist prior to 1989; comic book continuity and mythology is a longitudinal cultivation and has "been woven over the decades, by hundreds of hands" (Howe 431–432). Different media with their own histories and tensions, and even early, non-LSF superhero films (such as the serials based on Batman), typically integrated at least some elements from a character's comic book existence into the filmic version, even if the final version is rendered quite differently onscreen. To exclude at least an adjacent gesture of what makes a superhero recognizable in the first place is rather antithetical in pursuing an adaptation in the first palace. Nevertheless, cases such as Donner's *Superman* and Richard Lester's *Superman II* (1980) affirm that, from 1989 to 2008, Hollywood studios were still deciding what the particular tapestry of the superhero film would look like. The boundaries were still shifting to mirror Neale's articulation. For the LSF era, elements such as costumes, props, aesthetic design, editing style, and even performance techniques (e.g. how superheroes' voices typically sound) were all experimented upon and refined. This point, as I underscore throughout this dissertation, is but one example of how generic pruning was applied to superhero cinema in the liminal era.

Aesthetic design and style are conspicuous markers of the evolution of superhero cinema, and understanding the phenomenological differences between superheroes on the page and superheroes onscreen is also helpful for understanding the development of the LSF. Some comic book tropes can work deftly for film, while others were either too

difficult to reproduce, became awkward when translated to cinema, or were pruned away at some point in the liminal era. A drawing not only has an inherent style (that which is ingrained within the way an artist renders the world) but also is arguably a more subjective depiction of reality when compared with cinema. Although not strictly a cinema genre piece, Pascal LeFevre's "Incompatible Visual Ontologies: The Problematic Adaptation of Drawn Images" (2007) is important for understanding how the superhero genre traverses and translates between media forms. LeFevre argues that, despite film and comic books both being visually based media, they differ in significant ways. This difference is not limited to the form in which they are consumed, but also in the ways that narratives are conveyed and how viewers read them. LeFevre notes that the most basic difference is one based upon disparate ontologies. In effect, Hollywood was experimenting with how to present the superhero film ontologically through the LSF. As I highlight throughout the following chapters, the LSF do not present superhero cinema for the first time in Hollywood history, but the generic pruning that occurs throughout the liminal period was, in part, an endeavor to determine and distill what the superhero genre would come to be, and how it appeared once codified.

Media Industry Studies

If genre is "what we collectively believe it to be," as Tudor suggests, then it is necessary for me to interrogate how the industry determines such denotative elements. Moreover, the "we" in Tudor's assertion is really what *the industry* makes us believe collectively how genre is to be understood. Hollywood is the entity that creates the rules and expectations, as Neale (*Genre and Hollywood*) has posited, and it is through the LSF

that the rules and expectations for superhero cinema were organized. As such, a framework for understanding the years-long and sometimes-Byzantine Hollywood infrastructure is necessary for genre work of this nature.

The evolution of the LSF is fully appreciated via an understanding of how both the comic book and film industries came to be more fully intertwined. Hollywood's interest in adapting more and more of the comic book industry's creations is one element of this, but the eventual marriage between the two biggest comic book companies[6] and Hollywood studios also signaled an industrial shift regarding how superheroes would be integrated into production schedules and marketed to audiences.

By the time the LSF arrived, the comic book and film industries moved throughout the culture industries with a different relationship to each other. In American media history, comic books have always had Lilliputian returns compared with the Hollywood box office; however, the momentum of the LSF added value to their conglomerated owners and licensees. There are several LSF that can be considered as blockbusters, but understanding the industrial scaffolding and film history that created this form of cinematic fecundity is necessary to appreciate fully the LSF body and the generic metamorphosis it induced. The lineage of how blockbuster filmmaking came, eventually, to see a viable partner in superhero IP aids in illuminating how the LSF gained traction as this dynamic more clearly came into view. Thomas Schatz's 2009 essay "Film Industry Studies and Hollywood History" is especially helpful in this sphere.

[6] DC was acquired by Warner Bros. in the early 1970s when DC Comics' then-parent company (Kinney National) purchased Warner Bros. Seven-Arts, Inc., though that relationship is sometimes incorrectly attributed to the 1989 merger between Time Inc. and Warner Communications. The Walt Disney Company purchased Marvel Entertainment in 2009.

His chapter in Jennifer Hold and Alisa Perren's anthology *Media Industries: History, Theory, and Practice* provides an economical tracing of "the general development of the film industry," and extends this history to include an assessment of Hollywood's "current configuration, indicating how and why an industry studies approach is both fundamental and necessary to the analysis of American films and filmmaking" (Schatz 45). The rise of the blockbuster evolved to be a Hollywood mainstay after it became clear that these media events mitigated risk, and the timing was a key ingredient in the LSF becoming codified once sufficient generic pruning had been applied. Schatz argues that blockbusters also led to an environment in which the industry reclaimed increased creative control and reverted to a structure more reminiscent of the bygone studio system of Hollywood's Golden Age, which he refers to as "resurgent classicism" (53). The control that studios once possessed decades ago was mirrored through the LSF by the ways that the increasingly conglomerated Hollywood studios were able to develop and control superhero material that dovetailed with the industrial contours of the blockbuster. This relationship paved the way for a time of experimentation with the LSF, and through that corpus, eventual generic codification.

For example, Marvel Comics' financial troubles in the late 1990s "forced" the company to "license out some of their most popular characters to different film studios" (Brown 18). As I detail in Chapter 4, *Spider-Man* did much to amplify the industrial possibilities of superhero cinema, but even a film such as *Daredevil* (dir. Mark Steven Johnson, 2003) demonstrated that the licensed-out subset of Marvel LSF (Ang Lee's *Hulk* [2003] and Fox's series of X-Men films, etc.) had been profitable enough and resonated enough with audiences to provide more guidance regarding decisions of

generic pruning, and also to beget more superhero films in general.

Although *Batman* is over 30 years old at the time of this writing, this dissertation focuses on cinema that is relatively new in the spectrum of Hollywood history. However, the work of interrogating cinema that is much more modern than the likes of which Griffith or Edison first put forth, an understanding of superhero cinema that preceded the LSF is required. To be clear, I do not consider individual superhero movies, or even the few superhero sequels (such as the Christopher Reeve Superman films), to be the dawn of the superhero genre—I theorize that only occurred through the LSF. Nevertheless, these early examples of superhero films were the industrial antecedents and created the trade pathways that formed the environment for the LSF years later. An essential text for illuminating this particular history is Blair Davis's 2017 book, *Movie Comics: Page to Screen/Screen to Page*. Davis does deft work in examining early iterations of comic book/strip characters that eventually made their way into the cinema. While Davis' timeframe does not intersect with mine (his study ends in the 1960s), he does couch his arguments about comic-to-screen adaptations in ways that are similar to my own intervention. He asserts that his book "presents a historical narrative by which the industrial connections and adaptive processes between comics and film/television may clearly emerge" (Davis 9). It is the "industrial connections and adaptive processes" that I apply to my intervention via the LSF. Understanding both the political–economic orientation of industrial elements in tandem with exactly *how* the industry approached adapting superhero material is an imperative dynamic in this work. Davis and I align closely with what I consider to be the industry studies "planks" in his platform—where we differ is related to our chosen theoretical tools. Davis's text emphasizes adaptation.

He then appropriately privileges a medium theory approach, while I utilize more of a genre theory approach due to my interest in how the LSF changed the trajectory and created the superhero genre, rather than a broad history of comics onscreen.

Though I stop my parameter of study in 2008, in many ways the latter end of the LSF is quite different from those premiering closer to 1989. Near the end of the span of the LSF, the blockbuster patina was much more attached to a forming genre that, through increasing studio confidence and investment, was racing toward codification. A number of trends started to become tropes nearer to 2008; for example, superheroes rendered with increasing nationalistic throughlines or the ways in which industrial orientations (such as an increase in franchises) became integrated (if not nearly requisite) in the last stages of the LSF. Liam Burke defines comic book films as a "movie genre [that] follows a vigilante or outsider character engaged in a form of revenge narrative, and is pitched at a heightened reality with a visual style marked by distinctly comic book imagery" (106). This definition is a pithy and effective kind of elevator-pitch description of the genre. I mention this only to differentiate further our perspectives. Burke advances his own scope regarding entries into the genre since 2000, or what he characterizes as "the golden age of comic book filmmaking" (23).[7] While Burke's objects of study align with the LSF much more closely to the films I examine (and in some cases overlap), he is more interested in the adaptation element and refers to his work as a project of "adaptation studies" (12) throughout. One intersection that was useful for contextualizing those final LSF concerns what he calls "the conglomerate argument," in which Burke attributes the corporate impetus for an increased influx of comic book adaptations as inherently profitable due to

[7] Burke actually borrows this description from an interview he conducted with *Batman* (1989) producer Michael Uslan, so there is a layer of "industry speak" to navigate.

their franchising and merchandising possibilities. Burke's work and my work do intersect via some of his timeline texts, but as is discussed further in Chapter 4, scholars such as Derek Johnson, Eileen Meehan, and Janet Wasko have already performed deeper analyses of this aspect of the industry.

As previously mentioned, I consider "comic book" cinema and "superhero cinema" to be two different entities. This dissertation offers an argument about *superhero* cinema—not modern "comics" in all forms. My conceptualization of the LSF is not an investigation of a sub-genre, it is a history of how the superhero genre itself was formed *through* the LSF. Before the LSF period, Hollywood not only discounted superhero IP, but also was largely uncertain of what to do with superhero material in general. Superhero source material was, too often, reflectively considered as only meant for children, which increased the perception of risk among investors and producers. The development (economic investment, but also critical success) of the LSF cast the superhero film as a viable—and eventually dependable—genre in the eyes of Hollywood stakeholders.

To conceptualize generic codification and pruning, it is helpful to examine the industrial foundations and machinations that helped actuate LSF, as well as to understand the interconnected existence that some LSF possess. Industrial tensions are always at play in a Hollywood that frequently attempts to balance disparate interests (i.e. art vs. commerce) in ways that are important to understand better the complexities of such an enormous (and ever-expanding) cultural text that is the LSF. The work of Derek Johnson, aids in offering a platform into the media industry area of the LSF more specifically. In his 2012 essay, "Cinematic Destiny: Marvel Studios and the Trade Stories of Industrial

Convergence," Johnson traces how, well before Marvel Studios was purchased by Disney in 2009, the company "launched a model for cinema production in the age of convergence: an independent company with expertise in a different media industry drove blockbuster filmmaking" (19). Several of those Marvel-licensed LSF blockbusters to which Johnson refers (despite uneven critical and fan reception) were profitable. Furthermore, as Johnson posits, those blockbusters were increasingly informed by stakeholders outside of traditional Hollywood, such as Marvel producer Avi Arad, who championed Marvel's licensed characters in Hollywood and slowly managed to apply "some influence" (Brown 19) in a Hollywood climate that was only starting to fully appreciate superhero cinema near the end of the liminal period.

As I trace throughout this dissertation, superhero cinema required time to develop into a genre. Part of that development lies in the cultivation and occupation of character licensing and franchising as a key to conjuring (through pruning) the iteration of the superhero film that the industry privileged. In *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries*, Johnson interrogates the notion of franchise logic in today's conglomerated media landscape (*Media Franchising*). Johnson provides valuable grounding in how this trajectory came about—much of it spawning from the industrial decisions stemming from the LSF. His second chapter, entitled "From Ownership to Partnership: The Institutionalization of Franchise Relations," is especially informative to my work here. In it, Johnson asserts that although franchising may have initially been conceived as a more modest corporate action, the media franchise has "shaped and reshaped" (*Media Franchising* 69) the ways in which things such as synergy,

intellectual property,[8] and horizontal integration have come to operate within the culture industries.

Johnson uses Marvel's X-Men as a case study to demonstrate how their place within "comics, television, video games, toys, and film reveals a complicated, nuanced, and imperfect relationship between franchising and media power structures" (*Media Franchising* 69). The X-Men are the exemplar (though there are many others) through which Johnson traces the notion that "popular culture has historically propagated not from tidy, bounded institutions and stable corporate logics, but the collision of multiple, competing structures and business models" *(Media Franchising* 70). Johnson's throughline is largely an industrial synopsis concerning why Hollywood franchising strategies historically developed as they did, such as the multivariate underpinnings as to why Marvel's cinematic existence required such a long approach. For example, during a time when the "*X-Men* conquered the comics industry," Marvel still struggled with inter-media crossover partly due to the fact that the company "held neither the institutional power to move its property out of the comics marker, nor the right type of content to forge a strategic partnership with dominant film and television markets" *(Media Franchising* 85). Johnson outlines how the late 1980s and 1990s were a transitional time for the culture industries, and that the relationship between franchisors and licensors would come more clearly into focus by the turn of the 21st century. Importantly, Johnson also argues that Burton's *Batman* was less novel "in form and practice" than it was in serving as a new example of "emerging trade mythologies to institutionalize franchising as corporate logic" *(Media Franchising* 87). Overall, Johnson demonstrates that,

[8] Recently, Thomas Schatz also reinforced this notion of intellectual property now existing as the new "stars" of franchise filmmaking (Palotta 2017).

"franchising can best be historicized...as a process that has depended upon and facilitated institutional relations among markets, firms, and sites of productive labor" *(Media Franchising* 70).

Character-based licenses have been a financial force in Hollywood for decades, particularly among genres (such as science fiction, action, superhero, etc.) that naturally lend themselves to the development of paratexts such as games and toys.

The dynamics and financial possibilities that licensing deals afford are also something that intersect with both the logic and the history of the LSF. Mark Rogers' essay, "Manipulating Demand and 'The Death of Superman' " highlights an important point of confluence between the comic book and movie industries. He outlines an increasing trend in today's conglomerated Hollywood:

> Comics publishers serve as 'license farms' for the larger media industries. Disney's acquisition of Marvel and Time-Warner's continued development of its DC licenses demonstrate the value to the media conglomerates of owning the intellectual property of companies that have essentially been character and concept factories for more than 50 years. (Rogers 147)

Rogers points out that this internal "farming" practice has wider ramifications as well, noting that this relationship "reflects larger changes in the nature of mass culture" (149). My first chapter begins by using *Superman* (dir. Richard Donner, 1978) as an exemplar of how the publisher-as-superhero-licenser period transitioned into the "all under one roof" media conglomerate era. Firms that owned comic book companies began to

appreciate the inherent advantages of in-house "farming" as comics slowly became more of a production interest heading into the LSF era.

Although the LSF were a new amorphous Hollywood construct, the antecedents for their existential rise had actually been germinating for years. Thomas Schatz's piece "The New Hollywood" aids in situating the rise of the blockbuster and presents an industry studies perspective on film studies. In the piece, Schatz posits that, for better or worse, a post-1975 Hollywood is a blockbuster-driven Hollywood. This factor is key for understanding why the aesthetic and narrative trends in Hollywood exist as they do. Schatz notes that *Jaws* was the first blockbuster, but it did not earn such a label simply because it premiered in the summer and contained the elements of a crowd-pleasing box office smash. For example, *American Graffiti* contained similar masses-pleasing elements, such as nostalgia, its use of popular music, and coming-of-age stories that all helped to cast the formulaic mold. After this model proved to be endlessly successful and profitable, a new hegemony began to dominate the industry. Many of those same elements that were endemic to successful blockbusters subsequently became laundered into the fiber of the LSF. The long tail of those blockbuster antecedents (particularly via action/adventure blockbusters) became something of generic chimera that allowed Hollywood to approach superhero material as something less alien than it might have been without this industrial intersection.

Schatz also cites Meehan as he notes that the modern blockbuster is now engineered to market other properties based on a given cinematic property. Product placement abounds and, as previously mentioned, the ancillary and paratextual items are now just as salient as the actual film. These tools provided a salient roadmap for me to

investigate the LSF as a collective entity—one that Schatz might say the industry had been building toward for years.

Methods

I employed textual analysis to analyze the LSF to identify thematic, stylistic, and general generic trends of the era. To begin, I created a table listing the sixty-nine films that were either superhero films or comic book adaptations from 1989 to 2008 (see appendix). The document is helpful for seeing a listing of the films within my study at a glance, but it was also a necessary exercise in determining that, for this dissertation, culling the list to reflect the superhero genre only was the most streamlined and prudent strategy.

The Table of LSF also tells a story in itself. By merely looking broadly at the LSF titles and the respective year of release, it is apparent how the Burton Batman films incited a renewed Hollywood interest in superhero cinema, then entered an experimental phase buttressed by lesser-known characters, before placing increased faith in superhero films that featured more famous superheroes and produced with bigger budgets. As important as films such as *Ghost World* (dir. Terry Zwigoff, 2001) and *American Splendor* (dirs. Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, 2003) are, my suspicion was that to include films solely based on the fact that they were adapted from the medium of comic books would obfuscate the object/focus of this study more than enrich it. This dissertation is a historiography of how the LSF codified the *superhero* genre specifically.

The LSF are media entities that contain many types of underlying cultural and commercial suppositions. Therefore, the methodological guidelines of textual analysis

provided a lens to investigate issues such as ideology and power on levels that might sometimes be veiled or tacitly promote notions of the dominant ideology. Alan McKee's 2003 unambiguously titled *Textual Analysis* was useful in this regard. McKee emphasizes notions of representations of reality, reflexivity, and social construction in particular. In this regard, McKee's work aided in guarding against the narratives/interpretations/ cultural inscriptions that Hollywood has ascribed to these texts, rather than adhering to readings that I derive through a critical eye. McKee's guidelines for researchers assisted in maintaining a healthy radar for identifying instances when Hollywood positions its products to be a certain way or a certain thing when there may be alternate readings or ontologies to be uncovered.

Taking that which is familiar (I have seen several of these films scores of times) and making it strange was critical in this sphere. McKee posits that, "no text is the *only* accurate, true, unbiased, realistic representation of any part of the world; there are always alternative representations that are equally accurate, true, unbiased, and realistic" (29). While this dissertation is more concerned with industrial and generic questions, issues of representation and plot must also be considered. Textual analysis is not only a tool for understanding changes within a nascent genre longitudinally, but also to track the various trends that either disappeared or were reinforced during the pruning of the LSF.

Much of media industry studies interrogates power structures to disrupt classical hierarchies and to ask critical questions through a lens that can often be situated within a cultural studies perspective. Industry studies avails itself as an interlocutor between individual text, consumers, and the society in which these texts and audiences are consumed. It is in this vein that Alisa Perren's 2016 essay "The Trick of the Trades" is

especially useful as a tool for disseminating trade publications. Perren notes that one of the most valuable elements of the trades is that, in addition to being significantly more thorough than other mainstream publications, researchers can "see how discussions about [a particular] issue have developed over time" (228). She also provides sound guidance on how to identify dominant discourses,[9] and mentions that these repeated patterns of discourse form a "snap shot of the mindset of 'the industry' in the broadest sense—the anxieties, priorities, and achievements of those in power" (Perren 228). Perren's assertions of "anxieties" and "priorities" are two items of particular interest vis-à-vis the LSF. The anxiety piece is informative regarding problematic trends the industry thought could be lurking ahead (and which the LSF could possibly remedy), and also how superhero cinema increasingly became a priority. Identifying priorities and the antecedents of priorities via the trades is fundamental for understanding industrial thinking and discourses through the years of the LSF

Trades also have their own economic interests that must be impeached. Hollywood trade publications are "dependent on advertising revenue from the specific industries they cover, and will do what they can to curry favor from the biggest players" (Perren 229). Though Perren clearly endorses trade publications as valuable tools for media scholars, she also reminds researchers that the trades can also serve as what John Caldwell often describes as "the public relations arm" for Hollywood and the culture industries writ large (*Production Culture* 229). While trades were truly essential to this research, the continual auditing of "industry speak" is an essential practice for work of this nature.

[9] Perren notes that *Variety* even refers to this industrial argot as "slanguage" (228).

Just as I use media industry studies methodologically, I also rely on political economy analysis to more fully understand Hollywood financial ideology and corporate structures. Political economy concerns interconnections among economic interests, political power, and how that power is used. Through the lens of the LSF, political economy informs industrial decisions via production, marketing, and even casting decisions. Political economy also concerns structural control—something that the LSF increased at the end of their period. Though there are overlapping elements of both media industry studies and political economy, each offers utilities that enhance the overall grounding and contextualization of this project. Political economy also aided in my understanding of how, in the budding franchise era of Hollywood, superhero IP lent itself particularly well to sites of corporate synergy and diversification. Eileen Meehan's work in this field, particularly her 1989 piece "Holy Commodity Fetish Batman!", was particularly helpful in mapping the changing corporate thinking of late-1980s/early 1990s Hollywood, as well as an understating of how corporations manipulate and recycle a licensed commodity's aura, image, and profitability. Political economy is an excellent scholarly tool for investigating power and control. Vincent Mosco provides a detailed description of how the approach can apply to a wide section of study: "Political economy is the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources, including communication resources" (2). The LSF arose, in part, as a response to a loss (both real and perceived) of power by the studios emerging out of the more auteur-driven cinema of the 1970s. Hollywood, and the LSF it produced, are my "communication resources," and understanding how studios acted synergistically (such as with comic book companies) or

even in certain casting decisions aids in clarifying modes of decision-making that emanated from the studios and stakeholders during this liminal era.

Trade Publications

Industry trades publications were invaluable to this study, though as I mention above, are not without various biases that need to be critiqued throughout the research process. *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter* were each particularly useful. I used both to find historical information that greatly assisted the contextualization of many of the LSF. Moreover, I also used these trade magazines to learn about production decisions, legal items, development provenance, the exchange of rights, and other esotera relating to the LSF.

The trades also provide a real-time account of a particular movie's progress in production (or lack thereof), and a general sense of how the discourse around the LSF is framed by studios and producers (rife with Perren's "slanguage"). However, this project also called for examining trades related to the comic book side as well. In this respect, comic trade publications such as *Wizard, Comics Journal, Hero Illustrated, Comics Retailer,* and *Comics Buyers Guide* were all valuable sources as to how the industry framed and presented superhero movies via both the popular and trade press, though I consulted them more informally than those covering Hollywood.

Overview of Chapters

I have organized this project into four chapters that follow a chronological order in terms of the dates when the films I utilize as case studies premiered. However, this

device has a convenient parallel: the industry is also pruning as it moves through time. The evolution of the LSF is often as instructive from a film history perspective as the texts themselves. My first task was to consider the antecedents of comic book cinema, and to consider drivers of change. Once the inciting incident occurs (which I identify in Chapter 1 as Burton's *Batman)*, I move onto an examination of significant experimentation (and even the occasional generic spasm) and expanded (though sometimes problematic) representation before a consideration of the overarching meaning of the LSF as a scholarly body.

Chapter 1: Seeding the Superhero Film: the Pre-History of the Liminal Superhero Films

I begin Chapter 1 with an analysis of the cultural-industrial implications of Richard Donner's 1978 film, *Superman*. While the film does not belong to my corpus of LSF, it is a superhero film of such historical significance that an understanding of the LSF is incomplete without at least a brief discussion of the industrial and budgetary conditions under which the film was made, as well as how it subsequently affected the cinematic superhero genre. *Superman* also serves a secondary purpose for this dissertation: the film carries the traditional employment of camp as a repeated element in early superhero media. The television channel ABC's *Batman* (1966–1968) crafted the characterization and tone of that series in a way that left a campy stamp on the character in American popular culture going into the 1970s. Since the superhero film was still in a relatively primordial stage, Pauline Kael even refers to Reeve playing a "windup hero" (Kael), an artful yet tellingly oblique depiction of a genre still in a state of ongoing

development.

I then move to an investigation of the evolution of the styling of superheroes on the screen. The earliest days of superheroes began life with various mixes of melodrama, camp, and pop. These pre-LSF superhero texts outline not only the antecedents of the LSF that ultimately form the genre, but also highlight the type of content that was deemed passé or undesirable for what the superhero film would start to become in the years leading up to Tim Burton's *Batman*, the first LSF. As I explain in this chapter, the superhero film became more appealing for studios with the decline of the more auteur-based brand of film-school-generation filmmaking of the 1970s and the rise of studio conglomeration and blockbusters as agents of industrial risk reduction.

Chapter 2: Indies, Riot Grrrls & Animation: Experimentation and the Liminal Superhero Films

Chapter 2 examines how the somewhat insouciant view toward superhero cinema actually freed up early LSF to experiment and begin honing a budding genre. By the mid to late 1990s, superhero films began to take a more demonstrative turn toward a mode of experimentation via production. Within a few years of the sea-changing *Batman* in 1989, Hollywood shifted wildly from dark, authoritarian-laden superhero stories to superhero films that had more in common with broad comedies, animation, and indie films. The LSF represent a time in superhero film history when even hits such as *Batman* were largely produced and consumed as a one-time success. Though several LSF launched sequels, Hollywood was not doing much in the way of long-term planning around superhero IP. This industrial climate afforded space for many LSF to experiment with

exhibiting varied approaches to what a superhero could be. In doing so, the industry was also seizing upon what seemed to connect most with audience, as well as creative elements that producers deemed worthy of pruning.

For example, unlike high-profile cinematic superheroes such as Superman or Batman, 1994's *The Mask* (dir. Chuck Russell) presented itself much more as an extension of its star Jim Carrey than it did of its comic book beginnings from which the film was adapted. At that time, Carrey was only five months removed from the premier of his wildly successful role as the maniacal, slapstick-suffused protagonist Ace Ventura in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* (1994). In *The Mask*, once again Carrey plays a maniacal, slapstick-suffused hero but through the filter of the superhero. Carrey's Stanley Ipkiss (who is characterized as a sadder, more working-class version of Clark Kent) acquires an enchanted mask that imbues him with impossibly fantastic abilities.

The Mask's hybridic nature makes it especially salient for a study of this generic nature. The film is simultaneously a superhero film and a comedy, and action film meets animation. While Neale posits that, "it is more common than not for a film to" participate in several genres at once (*Genre and Hollywood* 25), *The Mask* problematizes what we might think of as the requisite elements of a "superhero film." It is more goofy than glorious—more hijinks than heroics. Furthermore, although *The Mask* is not a film that is generally revered by critics or superhero cinema fans, its generic existence is essential for understanding the industry's long struggle in determining the types of superhero films that would ultimately be favored and produced, and then often reproduced.

I then examine 1995's cyber/post-punk film *Tank Girl* (dir. Rachel Talalay, 1995) as a case study within this early era of experimentation within the superhero genre.

Although the characterization of Tank Girl (aka Rebecca Buck) is certainly heroic and also originated from a comic book, Tank Girl is not an archetypical or traditional superhero. The character is counter-hegemonic, yet Hollywood chose this rather obscure property years before the likes of Spider-Man, Thor, Iron Man, Wonder Woman, Harley Quinn, the X-Men, etc. debuted onscreen. That *Tank Girl* was produced at all speaks to the experimental quality of the early LSF. Moreover, the film's deep visual relationship to its comic book source is a particularly striking example of how Hollywood was balancing a slow but steady interest in comic book cinema, but was at once still unsure of how to orient and present such cinema.

Of course, the other salient motivation for investigating *Tank Girl* is one of representation. In an era in which Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Bruce Willis were still the paragons of bankable action stars, *Tank Girl*—an obscure comic book IP—made its way to Hollywood.[10] Talalay's film not only challenged hegemonic norms, but also challenged the genre to some extent. I employ this section of Chapter 2 as an example of not only generic experimentation, but also how an arguably progressive superhero film appeared fairly early within the evolving genre, only to be the lone representative of this style (both in its politics and in its aesthetics) of superhero film for years to come.

[10] *Barb Wire* (dir. David Hogan, 1996) is a film that shares some common bonds with *Tank Girl* (ties to Dark Horse Comics, female hero, futuristic setting, etc.); however, I chose to focus on *Tank Girl* due to its more complex politics, diverse crew, and overall reflection of the mid-1990s aesthetic.

Chapter 3: Hip Hop and Hybridity: The New Jack Superheroes of the Liminal Superhero Films

As Chapter 2 investigates the somewhat gonzo examples of *Tank Girl* and *The Mask*, Chapter 3 extends my interrogation by focusing on how Hollywood slowly continued its momentum in building and shaping the contours of the superhero film. This chapter explores what I refer to as the "New Jack Superheroes" of the LSF. Although New Jack Cinema is rich and complex enough to be characterized in a number of ways, it is typically cinema that tends to be defined as "Black-directed action films depicting urban life in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, and elsewhere (Reid 13). Given that genre is an intrinsically nebulous construct, New Jack Cinema also made its way into superhero films of the era. However, Hollywood also situates these particular LSF as the progeny of a cultural moment that receded after Hollywood deemed that they had reached their peak extraction value. Several New Jack LSF offer representational complexity in part because, just as Hollywood increases representation for Black characters, such as Spawn and Blade, stereotypical biases and tropes based on New Jack's cultural moment (particularly in 1995's *Spawn* [dir. Mark A.Z. Dippé]) are evident in the production and the texts themselves. Other New Jack LSF that had prominent comedic motifs were mostly pruned away altogether.

I analyze two examples. The first is *Blade*, which premiered in 1998 and integrated a visual palate that reflected the aesthetic of the zeitgeist—such as the work of Hype Williams, the influential director of many popular music videos of the late 1990s. The film also stars Wesley Snipes (a lead in the genre's namesake *New Jack City* [dir. Mario Van Peebles, 1991]) who served as a co-producer on the film. Robert Townsend's

The Meteor Man (1993) adds complexity to this dynamic by existing at once as a superhero film that is primarily driven by comedy, aimed more specifically at a Black audience, and engaged with broader social issues more pointedly than most other LSF. These two films extended experimentation and exemplify the variety of LSF, presenting two very tonal orientations with the superhero film: lighthearted with *The Meteor Man*—drama and horror with *Blade*. Chapter 3 aids in understanding how the LSF varied regarding how superheroes could be represented onscreen, both formally and politically.

Chapter 4: Superstar Superheroes and Generic Stabilization

The big-budget, big-brands period that I examine in Chapter 4 effectively arrived simultaneously with the 21st century. As I first introduce in Chapter 3, the genre gains significant traction in the wake of 1998's *Blade*, and then begins to shift into a more forceful industrial gear with the arrival of Fox's *X-Men* in 2000 (dir. Bryan Singer). The most peculiar thing about *X-Men* (and one of its more intriguing attributes for this study) is that although Fox released a cinematic *X-Men* that bears some referential elements, the film explicitly distances itself from its Marvel Comics source material. This is to say that, despite *X-Men* arguably serving as the film that re-introduced big-budget studio superhero cinema (post *Batman* of course), the industry was still wrestling with what the genre would look like aesthetically and how much comic book lore would be acceptable for a commercial blockbuster.[11] *X-Men* is also important for what it meant as a franchise. Years before the existence of Marvel Studios and the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Marvel

[11] Deep comic book lore is commonplace today but was much less defined during the era of the LSF. For example, the MCU's devotion to cultivating the Infinity Stones across several films is but one example of this contrast.

was still dependent upon other studios to create cinematic versions of their characters.[12] Therefore, the film is an important marker during a transitional time, not only for Marvel as a producer of IP, but also how it would evolve from movie licensor to its eventual role as a powerful player in the key production wellspring for Marvel LSF. Furthermore, this change in role undergirded the superhero film as an object of increasing interest within a Hollywood that was progressively gaining an appetitive for film franchises and license-based characters with pre-built mythologies and narrative schematics.

The story of the development of *Spider-Man* also is important industrially. The path from Cannon films to Sony was long and torturous, but also informs the history of the genre. *Spider-Man* lays bare just how complicated, intertwined, and contentious the development of superhero characters could be during the time of the LSF. For example, though James Cameron had not quite yet reached *Titanic* (1997) levels of success, he was on a meteoric rise when he began development of a Spider-Man project in the early 1990s. The project hit a turning point when Fox made the business decision to pass on acquiring the rights to the character for well under a million dollars. Cameron then went on to become "king of the world," and when Sony eventually presented a completed *Spider-Man* film in 2002, it made over $821 million worldwide.

Both these case studies aid in understanding how generic pruning was done and how those decisions shaped narrative and aesthetics trends. This final chapter extends the tracing of steady industrial aversion to risk—and a rising investment in a developing superhero genre—yet the industry continues to embrace the superhero while distancing

[12] However, Derek Johnson points out that it was this very dependency that "may have been partially responsible for Marvel's continued interest in purchasing its own motion picture production company" ("Inviting Audiences" 73), and later its own studio.

itself from superhero comics.

Conclusion: Leaving Liminality

I conclude this project with an investigation of the layers of meaning that the legacy of the LSF has imprinted upon the industry and the superhero genre. I end my analysis of the final period of the LSF by contextualizing the cumulating effects that generic pruning had on the superhero genre, before discussing the genre's relationship to parody as it serves as a way of identifying generic features and characteristics that eventually become so codified and repeated that they became generic tropes.

Superhero Movie (dir. Craig Mazin, 2008) is an LSF, but it is the last entry of the corpus released prior to *Iron Man*'s premier two months later in 2008. That fact is particularly salient when considering *Superhero Movie*'s unique standing as both an LSF and a parody of the superhero genre. Not only does *Superhero Movie* offer a novel level of hybridity in the superhero genre (superhero film meets spoof film), but more important for this study, it speaks to the greater cultural and industrial saturation of superhero films than had existed in the years prior to 2008.

All these points necessarily beg a crucial question: Why study the LSF at all? While this dissertation is not a prologue for the MCU or any other studio's current activities in Hollywood, the logic that created them is a natural extension of the LSF. The LSF represent the industrial space in which Hollywood experimented and experienced uneven attempts to define the genre before discovering a mostly standardized formula for establishing a more stable and codified era for the superhero film genre by the end of the liminal period. Hollywood often wants to be first to be second, or in other words, they

want the results but fear the experiment. The story of the LSF is the story of that industrial experiment.

The scope and nature of this research might be best contextualized by considering Roger Ebert's closing remark in his 1998 review of *Blade*: "This is the kind of movie that gets better the more you know about the genre." It was during this time that audiences were being inculcated into "knowing about" the superhero genre *through* the LSF—while studios were generically pruning them almost simultaneously. The studios too were getting to "know" the superhero film better through decisions surrounding the industrial adolescence of the LSF, and by the end of their time, the LSF left a legible genre in its wake.

II. CHAPTER I:

SEEDING THE SUPERHERO FILM: THE PRE-HISTORY OF THE LIMINAL SUPERHERO FILMS

"We were lucky the movie was made before there was any superhero shit going on. It felt like kinda new territory at the time" ("The Eighties").

--Tim Burton on *Batman*

The shot is inconspicuously conspicuous. As the film fades in, a set of black stage curtains appears within the frame. They slowly retract to reveal text onscreen behind them reading "June 1938." That orienting graphic then quickly fades to a single image: a comic book. A young boy narrates fictitious newsreel footage that provides exposition championing the virtues of the fourth estate in the Depression-era American city of "Metropolis." As the boy concludes, the camera tilts up from a rotating "Daily Planet" sculpture, high into the night sky. The previously square, within-the-curtains frame of the newsreel idiom expands into the modern 2.39:1 size, before a jet-like sound effect accompanies the words "Alexander Salkind Presents" in electric blue text that flies toward the audience. The low-toned ostinato of orchestral strings begins to rumble before a familiar red "S" forms in the center of the frame and the text onscreen quickly changes, revealing the title of "Superman" as the John Williams score reaches its crescendo.

The first thing that those inky-black curtains reveal is a non-specific issue of an *Action Comics* comic book. In essence, director Richard Donner literally pulled the curtain back and gestured toward what superhero cinema could be. He was rendering

(and to some extent, inventing) how the pop-grandeur and general spectacle that existed on the page might somehow be more vibrantly translated to the screen for a modern movie audience. That *Superman* (1978) begins in such a specific manner speaks not only to an *early* industrial appreciation of the comic book medium (something later eschewed before being largely naturalized), but the cold opening also exists as an apt avatar of the dawn of the modern superhero film and the industry still to come. The newsreel narration is a quiet rumination of the past before an inundation of the new (even the aspect ratio changes) supplants it, or, as Pauline Kael referred to it in her *New Yorker* review of *Superman*, before "the package" fully engulfs the moviegoer (Kael).

The creative decision to open *Superman* in the manner that Donner and Salkind do is layered with meaning. To begin, the shot privileges an *Action Comics* comic book—injecting a kind of meta-sensibility (as it references the extra-diegetic comic book). This shot makes the film feel as if it is guided by a lack of historical placement: the vaudevillian stage aesthetics of the curtains drawn in anticipation of "the show," the black and white footage, the "June 1938" text on screen, and the primer of the story introduced through the pages of a non-specific issue of the by-then defunct *Action Comics*, etc.

However, when the faux newsreel footage stops, swapped out for the sensory-overloading credits accompanied by Williams' epic score, it feels entirely new. As Kael states, much of the novelty lies in the film's aesthetics. She describes her experience as follows: "The sound piercing your head tells you that you should remember each name in the euphoric opening credits. That's where the peak emotion in the film is: in the package." Outside of Reeve's performance, Kael found Donner's film to be "cheesy-

looking" and generally vapid. Despite Kael's less than sanguine review, *Superman* was a hit. The film made over $300 million worldwide and had a salient cultural impact even before it premiered.

A sample of *Superman*-based ads that ran in *Variety* alone aids in historicizing this moment in American cinema. Three years before the film even premiered, producer Alexander Salkind bought a full-page ad in the March 26, 1975 edition of *Variety,* touting that the executive was "...proud to announce the engagement of Mario Puzo to write the screenplay of Superman" ("Alexander Salkind"). On the poster, the word "Superman" appears in its block letter design born out of the comic books, which was subsequently used in the marketing of the 1978 film. Of course, Salkind was exploiting the popularity of Puzo's recent work on *The Godfather* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), *The Godfather II* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), and *Earthquake* (dir. Mark Robson, 1974).[13] However, from a historical/generic standpoint, the ad is evidence that Donner's *Superman* was being anticipated as early as 1975.

The entire page in *Variety* is dedicated not to the promotion of the film, nor its cast, nor even the director; the promotional momentum about *Superman* was so prolific that one if its first advertisements underscored its *writer*. Granted, Puzo was near the peak of his professional powers, but it is a rare occasion when a film places that kind of emphasis for a role that is typically faceless. This point is even truer for a genre that was not associated with high art—if it was associated with much at all at that time. But Salkind was not really speaking to a general audience in 1975. That the ad was in *Variety* signaled a change in industrial expectations to Hollywood at large, and also was meant to

[13] Ironically, all the fanfare about Puzo would be for naught as the majority of his turgid script was ultimately scrapped.

manufacture, at least partially, new expectations as well.[14] In other words, at least for Alexander Salkind, *Superman* was being introduced in Hollywood (and at once *by* Hollywood) as a very different kind of superhero film than had ever previously been produced.

Salkind was so enthusiastic about the early promotion of *Superman* that, several months later, he purchased another full-page ad in the November 12, 1975 issue of *Variety* stating: "Alexander Salkind Announces That Guy Hamilton Will Direct the $20,000,000 Production of 'Superman.' " Hamilton never guided a single moment of action.[15] Richard Donner quickly replaced him, but this example of premature promotion demonstrates that a superhero film was approaching its engagement with Hollywood in a new way. Slow-burn marketing and Salkind's clear effort to inject of an aura of cultural magnitude helped to differentiate *Superman* not only from the typical movie, but also from the typical experience of movie consumption. If the marketing department wanted audiences to "believe a man can fly" in 1978, they had been suggesting it in one form or another for the three years leading up to this new kind of spectacle in genre filmmaking.

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[14] It is also noteworthy that the bottom of this ad features the following text: "Based upon the character 'Superman' appearing in comic magazines published by National Periodical Publications, Inc." National Periodical owned DC Comics until it was purchased by holding company Kinney National in 1967. It is unclear as to why the "National Periodical Publications Inc." remained on the advertisement (presumably legal arcana), but the complete lack of DC branding outlines the paucity of cultural gravitas the comic book industry (or simply the medium itself) had in America during the mid-1970s.

[15] According to an interview with Tom Mankiewicz, an uncredited screenwriter on *Superman*, Hamilton had to exit the production after international complications: "It was a complete accident that Guy didn't direct the picture when they decided to move it from Italy to England. Guy couldn't go because he was a tax exile. A lot of people back then were. The British rate was up to 90%" (Chauhan).

A two-page advertisement in Variety even promoted the film as "The Super-Film of the Seventies!" (Variety August 18, 1978), and in the December 20, 1978 issue of *Variety*, there is yet another two-page spread: on the left page, a version of the streak-through-clouds movie poster, and on the right page, text atop the page reading "They Believe a Man Can Fly!" Below, the number $7,465,343 is prominently cropped. Finally, the bottom of the page lists 34 North American cities in which "Theatre Boxoffice [sic] Records Were Broken," citing New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Toronto, and Vancouver among them. Then, finally, two years later, a *four-page* spread in the May 7, 1980 issue of *Variety* as follows: The first page depicts the "Superman: The Movie" title with the iconic Superman symbol below; the second page reads only "Number I," with the year 1979 at the bottom of the page; the third page reads "you believed a man could fly...that was just the beginning," with a large "II" centered in the page with the words "just completed" below; and finally, the fourth page reads "Alexander Salkind announces..." then the numeral "III" prominently centered, with the text "in preparation" concluding this promotional sequence.

The promotional history of *Superman* is a salient reminder that in the 1970s, media adapted from comic books were still in a culturally nebulous place. The film was added to the Library of Congress' National Film Registry in 2017, yet Kael opines that despite existing as "one of the two or three most expensive movies ever made and with the biggest event promotion yet," she found *Superman* to be "a cheesy-looking film, with a John Williams 'epic' score that transcends self-parody—cosmic fanfares keep coming when there's nothing to celebrate" (Kael). Of course, Kael's summation is subjective, but it reads more as if she had been absorbing the kind of suffused, often repetitive,

superhero stories Hollywood is prodigiously producing several decades into the 21st century, as opposed to a novel entry into a genre that, to that point, had largely languished. This view is due in part to the way that the source material was treated from the dawn of cinema itself. *Movie Comics* author Blair Davis notes that since the early days of the industry, "Hollywood generally saw comics as juvenile fodder...with superhero movies left to the serial factories to be produced for presumably youthful viewers" (97).[16] Continuing to trace the trajectory of *comic book* adaptations (as opposed to solely superhero adaptations), Davis observes how:

> As B-movies, serials, and comic books increasingly became entwined in the 1930s and 1940s, film audiences continued to enjoy live-action adaptations along with numerous animated shorts starring popular comics characters. While comics adaptations were not as prolific in movie theaters in the 1950s, an abundant amount of television programs was based on comic books and strips throughout the decade. As the 1960s began, comics characters had largely faded from both television screens and movie theaters... Comics adaptations had thrived for

[16] These "serial factories" were emblematic of smaller studios, such as Republic, whose legacy in this sphere is explicitly conjured in Alan Moore's influential comic book series, *Watchmen* (DC Comics, 1986–1987). Near the climax, the megalomaniacal Adrian Veidt tells the Batman-like Nite Owl, "...I'm not a Republic serial villain. Do you seriously think I would explain my master stroke if there remained the slightest change of you affecting its outcome?" The line underscores the clichéd tropes that these low-budgeted, low-expectation series often employed. Moore used the reference to redirect readers' thinking about how the complexities of a villain could exist in comics. Though in Zack Snyder's 2009 big screen adaptation, there is a salient change in dialogue: the line is switched to a more culturally legible "comic book villain," decades after the Republic brand became defunct.

> decades on screens both large and small as low-budget productions, but they would not endure once television emerged out of its infancy. (243–244)

Davis' corpus ends in the 1960s, and in several ways, this study is a historical continuation of where his closes. The parameters of his work in this area are part of why the history of the LSF is needed among media scholars. It would be decades after the 1960s before the two forms of media would work together in the highly synergistic manner in which they currently co-exist.

What came next for superhero cinema was a significant industrial lacuna. That lacuna is precisely what director Tim Burton was referencing when he told CNN in 2019 that, "We were lucky the movie was made before there was any superhero shit going on. It felt like kinda new territory at the time" ("The Eighties"). Indeed, it felt "kinda new at the time" not because superhero cinema had never been done at that point, but because it had been so meaningfully absent from American movie theaters. Hollywood had produced some singular outliers during this time, such as *Condorman* (dir. Charles Jarrott, 1981), *Swamp Thing* (dir. Wes Craven, 1982), and *Howard the Duck* (dir. Willard Huyck, 1986), but these examples were (and remain) B–C-list superhero properties that were not granted significant budgets and were produced with profit expectations aligned with similar genre pictures of the day. Thus, the lacuna was not filled in a way that mirrored the mass cultural appeal of *Superman* until Burton premiered *Batman* 11 years later.

Early Superhero Television and Stylistic Evolution

A 1995 episode of *The Simpsons* called "Radioactive Man" is built around the central conceit of a Hollywood studio deciding to shoot a big-screen adaptation of the show's eponymous, intratextual superhero in the show's intentionally non-descript suburban setting of "Springfield, USA." In an early casting session, executives debate introducing the Arnold Schwarzenegger-like "Rainier Wolfcastle" vs. the Adam West proxy from a fictitious *Radioactive Man* television show, which is a clear homage to the William Dozier-produced *Batman* television show of the late 1960s. "We want to stay as far away from the campy 1970s version as possible," a young, hip producer injects. Just then, the signature, brassy transitional music cue of the *Batman* TV show chimes in, before cutting to a flashback from a scene from the faux *Radioactive Man* television show. In it, Radioactive Man (a kind of Atomic Age-themed superhero who is referenced throughout the series) and his Robin-like sidekick, Fallout Boy, battle the "worst villain of them all," the fay, Paul Lynde-inspired "Scoutmaster." The villain unleashes his Boy Scout-themed henchman while adding, "Don't be afraid to use your nails boys!" The aesthetic imitates the canted angles, onomatopoeia interstitials, and the pop-based color palate of the *Batman* series—all while a just-barely-altered version of the show's famous theme song plays along. The flashback ends with the heroes thwarting the crooks, before the music changes to a surf guitar riff and Radioactive Man and Fallout Boy breakout into a "Batusi"-like dance with women who appear out of nowhere. Snapping back to the present, the camera cuts to the cynical producer who visibly shudders at the memory.

While the humor of the scene was likely directed at Baby Boomers and early Gen-Xers, the deeper satirical comment was squarely referencing the industrial moment.

Hollywood was slowly gaining more interest in superhero comics as sources of IP, but they largely wanted to extract and discard the residue of stylistic tropes and archetypes considered to be both culturally dated and, sometimes, even culturally loaded. This example from *The Simpsons* serves as a helpful heuristic device for understanding not only the changing complexion via the types of superhero movies that were being offered to the public, but, critically, a as a larger comment on the industrial shift (the pruning) occurring at the same time.

Batmania II author, James Van Hise, outlines how some of that show's aesthetics were reflected in the pop-inspired aesthetic:

> *Batman* was very colorful and very visual for its day. ABC had only had television shows for about three years at that point, so it was still very experimental. *Batman* exploited color to its fullest advantage ... the approach to color on the *Batman* series, which was decidedly different from many other color shows at the time, also helped give it a comic book appearance. They used tilted angles and the bubbles with the POW! and WHAM! signs because that was something that made you think of a comic book. On *The Lone Ranger* or some of the superhero shows which preceded *Batman* you didn't consciously think of it as a comic book. When you watched it, you watched it like a regular TV drama. (Van Hise)

Hero-A-Go-Go author and comics industry veteran, Michael Eury, also points out that the aesthetic sensibilities of pop and camp informed the ABC *Batman* show and how they had been expressed in comics before the series ever came along:

> A year before *Batman* hit the airwaves, you could find the Caped Crusader hoisting a suicide-bombing gorilla ("The Living Beast-Bomb") over his head à la Atlas. Such unconventional frolics weren't the sole domain of Batman. Around the same time, DC comics published preposterous stories such as children tossing a weakling Superman around like a beanbag, Lois Lane being wooed by a grotesque interdimensional monster, Jimmy Olsen making Superman beg for mercy in a wrestling ring, the Flash being outraced by a tricycle-peddling Trickster, Wonder Girl battling a creature that looked as if it were made out of pancake batter, and a man on trial in front of an insect jury.
>
> Elsewhere on the comics racks... freckle-faced high-schooler Archie Andrews was a jungle hero rescuing Betty Cooper from a hungry lion, and teenybopper Ponytail was Twisting with the Frankenstein Monster. (4)

The stylistic novelty with *Batman* '66 was that it explicitly embedded this idiom into the genre. Both Dozier's series and *Batman: The Movie* (dir. Leslie H. Martinson, 1966) are so self-consciously satirical that most superhero media that followed wanted to eschew it. For example, *The Six Million Dollar Man* (NBC, 1973–1978) wanted to look earnest—even if it did not succeed. The Aquaman-esque *The Man from Atlantis* (NBC 1977–1978) was also rendered as an earnest action-drama.

Back in theaters, these increasingly antiquated visual modes were becoming more of an agent of obstruction, hindering the industrial thinking regarding the realm of superheroes onscreen. Industrial fear of what was then thought to be a rather inextricable

relationship between superheroes and a form that was considered stylistically passé mitigated the appeal for more ambitious plans for the genre during the epoch of the LSF.[17] For example, Gene Hackman is the constant reminder that Hollywood *itself* thinks the genre is a bit silly. Pauline Kael's describes his performative mien in the film:

> You can see that Hackman likes the idea of dressing up in what must be Liberace's castoffs and playing a funny maniac, and when he has a halfway good line he scores his laugh. But he's strenuously frivolous, like a guest villain on a late-sixties 'Batman' show. Most of the time, he and Beatty are doing deliberately corny material—a kiddies' version of the kind of burlesque routines that Roy Kinnear does in Richard Lester movies—and the director can't seem to get the timing right. (Kael)

Salkind realized the production needed a heavyweight performer, but also that in the early days of the modern cinematic superhero genre, the only way to get said heavyweight talent was to privilege stars over the IP.[18] Often, this type of privileging was accompanied by a campy performance largely *because* of the generic expectations that had previously shaped the above-the-line preconceptions regarding what a superhero film needed to contain and how character archetypes were to be played. In the liminal era, part

[17] James Cameron's work on an early version of *Spider-Man* exemplifies this lack of alacrity by studios vis-à-vis investment in superhero IP, and this is explored further in Chapter 4.

[18] Cinema scholar Thomas Schatz notes how this practice is actually now reversed with something like the MCU (Palotta). Schatz points out how studios now realize that, ultimately, sound financial investment is found within their increasingly valuable IP, rather than in an especially costly, high-profile casting move (Palotta).

of the re-imagination and pruning of what a superhero film could be can be understood via the contrast of depictions and performances that occur within a singular character.

Consider the screen iterations of the Joker in any number of Batman films. In Burton's *Batman*, pranks and zingers are clearly part of the character's DNA. He is as quick to crack a joke as he is to electrocute a rival. He sings and dances, seemingly is a fan of Prince (whose music appears diegetically in several scenes), and playfully douses priceless art with brightly colored paint. Nicholson's Joker is unhinged but rendered though a playful, postmodern prism. *The Hollywood Reporter*'s Simi Horwitz characterizes the complicated nature of Nicholson's presence:

> He is at once a psychopath, a prankster, an anti-heroic romantic and a great comic showman, with a touch of the self-referential. The actor plays Jack Nicholson playing the Joker; the line between the star's scenery-chewing screen persona (think *The Shining*) and the Joker himself is wonderfully blurred.

Horwitz's mention of "the self-referential" indexes how conspicuously the element of text-recognizing-itself-as-text is in the film, which ensconces it firmly in the realm of the postmodern—lubricating the path for Nicholson to play the character in a campier idiom. There are shades of Romero's TV Joker—as well as a medley of traits from various iterations from the comic books. However, as Horwitz observes, the postmodernism is most pointedly expressed in Nicholson referencing *himself* as well as the multitude of mad, maniacal, or misunderstood parts he had played throughout his career to that point. When compared with the more recent and deadly serious iterations brought to life by

actors such as Heath Ledger in *The Dark Knight Rises* (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2008) or Joaquin Phoenix in 2019's *Joker* (dir. Todd Phillips), the pruning becomes all the more illuminated.

Superman, on the other hand, resides in that sweet spot of humor and earnestness, but the danger of following that formula is that it unintentionally leads back to the formal relics from which Hollywood was beginning to separate. "...Richard Donner, must have been afraid even of style—afraid that it would function satirically, as a point of view (as it does in the James Bond pictures). Style, to them, probably meant the risk of camp, which might endanger the film's appeal to the widest audience," wrote Pauline Kael in her 1978 *New Yorker* review. The Superman movie sequels do indeed "devolve" back into the style Batman TV show. By 1983's *Superman III* (dir. Richard Lester), the "villain" is a bumbling computer genius (an against-type Richard Pryor) chewing the scenery just like the villains in the *Batman* TV show. Despite existing as arguably the most recognizable American superhero, Superman-as-IP did not become the generic driver it seemed it might be at the beginning of the 1980s.

The Melodramatic Monster: *The Incredible Hulk*

Though the superhero lacuna was most noticeably apparent at the box office, it was less affected when it came to the realm of television. By the late 1970s, Stan Lee had relocated to Hollywood to sell himself and Marvel properties. Marvel historian Sean Howe outlines some of the Marvel projects in development in Hollywood during the early 1980s:

> By the time *Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends* hit Saturday morning TV in the fall, it seemed like it was going to be leading a parade of shows and movies. *Thor* had joined *Silver Surfer* in development at Universal Pictures; *Ghost Rider* and *Man-Wolf* were optioned by Dino De Laurentiis, *Daredevil* and *Howard the Duck* by Selluloid Productions. A *Fantastic Four* movie was in talks, as were *Black Widow* and *X-Men* television series. Now that *Urban Cowboy* had replaced *Saturday Night Fever* as the zeitgeist soundtrack of choice, Marvel Productions was trying to sell Hollywood on a country singer named "Denim Blue" (Howe 244). Lee's secretary Mary McPherran recalled this shift in the Marvel publisher's media priorities: 'Stan had this thing—'God damn it, we're publishers! We'll stay on Madison Avenue as long as I live and breathe...Then he got lured to California, and he didn't care where we were'. (Howe 249)

Lee had become "as dedicated as ever to getting Marvel Comics onto the big screen" (Howe 254).[19] Other superhero properties in development at the time (that decades later would enjoy great theatrical success) include a Tom Selleck Doctor Strange movie and Luke Cage/Power Man starring Carl Weathers (Howe 261).

Though not an LSF, CBS's *The Incredible Hulk* was a superhero onscreen that informed some of what was pruned away from the LSF by the time they arrived.

[19] Despite Lee's obsession with film and television, it was his longtime collaborator (and eventual rival) Jack Kirby who first made a Hollywood cameo. Jack Kirby appears in a 1979 episode of *The Incredible Hulk* in which the legendary comic book artist fittingly played a police sketch artist. It is also worth noting that, although Lee gained "King of the Cameo" status at the end of his life, it was Kirby (often the more critically lauded of the two) who beat Lee to the screen in this capacity. Lee would later make his first cameo in 1989's TV movie spin-off, *The Trial of the Incredible Hulk* (dir. Bill Bixby).

Premiering in 1979, the series brought the Jekyll and Hyde of Marvel Comics onto the small screen. Writer/producer Kenneth Johnson saw the inherent conflict of the story and thought that it would adapt well to television. The focus was on the element of tragedy and duality, with a dose of murder mystery to enhance the sense of melodrama. Using this formula, *The Incredible Hulk* garnered solid ratings. The June 4–10, 1978 issue of "Chicago Tribune TV Week" even featured an article called "The Hulk's Ratings are Incredible," touting the relatively impressive Neilson scores of the series. The series had a significant run (especially in an era when network ratings ruled), airing from 1977 to 1982, with TV movie adaptations coming in 1988, 1989, and 1990.

The Incredible Hulk was not attempting to be melodramatic. Johnson likely saw the Marvel source material as a somewhat novel way of introducing a high concept juxtaposition of Frankenstein's monster meets *The Fugitive.* Johnson, Bixby, and Ferrigno play it earnestly, channeling the Shakespearean in the age of the sitcom. Unlike the pop-inspired zaniness of *Batman* 1966, *The Incredible Hulk* most notably expresses its place in the superhero media zeitgeist by channeling melodrama as a throughline. Its iconic end credits theme, "The Lonely Man Theme," is itself a reminder that the series is imbued with a kind of Sirkian emotional struggle—only rendered through the prism of the superhero. Yet, it is exactly this earnestness that marks the series as a *form* of melodrama, at least when compared with the post-LSF superhero genre. By the time the LSF begin to gain traction after *Batman* in 1989, the melodramatic mode of superheroes onscreen had been largely excised. The authoritarian, hypermasculine characterization that influential comic book creators, such Frank Miller, introduced to the culture industries were integrated, leaving little space for superheroes who dwelled within a life-

of-the-interior. Punches and gadgets largely supplanted contemplation and emotional struggle once the LSF became established.

Goofy Meets Gallant: *The Greatest American Hero*

ABC's *The Greatest American Hero* is even more of a stylistic marker of the time for superheroes onscreen—and of the pruning of comedy that Hollywood excised from the superhero genre. The series ran for three seasons (1981–1983) and was created by prolific television producer Stephen Cannell. The set up for the show revolved around a high school teacher named Ralph Hinkley (William Katt) who becomes the unlikely recipient of a powerful suit bestowed upon him by a group of extraterrestrials, granting him classic superhero abilities such as flight, invisibility, telekinesis, super speed, etc. The trajectory of the series predictably features Hinkley's adventures (often through the comic patina of misadventure) aiding humanity in everything from stopping World War III to thwarting gamblers who beat up a star baseball player—all while performing the comparatively mundane duties of lead field trips and producing Shakespeare.

However, unlike the maudlin melodrama of CBS's *The Incredible Hulk*, *The Greatest American Hero* was built upon a foundation of humor and camp. In a 2005 retrospective of the show, *The Hollywood Reporter*'s Josef Adalian describes the series' thematic core:

> At its heart, 'Hero' was a comedy: Katt's Mr. Hinkley loses the instruction book for his superhero suit right from the start, resulting in dozens of pratfalls and comic misunderstandings throughout the show's entire 45-episode run. He's also

> paired with a paranoid Cold Warrior/ FBI agent (Robert Culp) giving the show the same sort of Greatest Generation vs. Baby Boom conflict seen in countless sitcoms of the age, from 'All in the Family' to 'Three's Company.' (Adalian)

Though the show made a clear decision about Hinkley's characterization (i.e. Superman-as-klutz), the choice to include Robert Culp's character as part of the throughline also reinforces the industrial thinking at the time. Despite epic sci-fi conceits such as defeating mega weapons and communing with alien beings, superhero media were predominantly considered to be lighter fare. While the sidekick tradition is certainly inherent to superheroes, they are typically the antithesis of a middle-aged government agent.

Writing in *The English Journal* in 1986, scholar Neil Anderson points to an episode called "My Heroes Have Always Been Cowboys," in which Hinkley begins to feel "uncomfortable as a hero and is afraid his powers may lead to harm rather than good, especially in an episode where he almost kills a by-stander and then refuses to wear the suit for fear of doing further harm. His faith is restored when he meets his own hero: the actor who played the Lone Ranger" (34). Here, too, is a gesture back to an anachronistic aesthetic (1950s, early TV, the Western trend, etc.). I point out in greater detail in Chapter 2 how several of these dated modes continued to be interrogated and pruned specifically via the LSF.

The inclusion of the Lone Ranger indexes a distant idiom of cool—even for children in the 1980s. Though dietetically fitting for the age of Katt/Hinkley (himself a young-Boomer in the early 1980s), the Lone Ranger had little cultural currency in American life, with one exception: an association with camp. The character's nostalgic

connections might add some fun retro moments for older viewers, but his inclusion also reinforces an era in which heroes and campiness were much more fluid. The Lone Ranger also signals a tone of conservative values and problem solving, in addition to existing as a media artifact that channeled a raft of the cultural passé. In other words, he's square. In terms of zeitgeist, it is also informative that for an "original" superhero series, Cannell and company made the decision to integrate a pre-existing media hero. The contrast between superhero and Western hero can be stark, but in this pre-historical moment for the LSF, it was something of a natural fit. The campiness was still assumed to be part of the genre.

Just as I examine in further depth *The Mask* in Chapter 2, *The Greatest American Hero* heavily draws on the logic and sensibilities of cartoons—which is something that the industry clearly was not conflicted about at the time. The violent and bleaker, re-envisioned world of superhero comics largely introduced by Frank Miller and Alan Moore was still three years away[20] after *The Greatest American Hero* went off the air in 1983. Therefore, the source material was still either somewhat reinforcing these tropes or simply not yet differentiating itself from the more antiquated iterations that lingered in the popular imagination of American media consumers.

Cannell himself seemed conflicted about the ontological nature of source material. Years later, he recalled the series' early development:

> Here I am—I'm a successful television executive—I've got three shows on the air. And now I gotta go put on a spandex suit with little jockey underwear and a

[20] Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* was first published in 1986 by DC Comics, as was Moore's *Watchmen*.

> cape, and run around in public, I'm dead! It's over! I'll never sell another show, they're gonna lock me up! I thought, "That is funny." So I thought, if I just hit this with hard reality—if I just take this whole genre and hold it up to the light, like I did the private eye genre with *Rockford*, and just say "what would a real guy do?" Would he quit when he was threatened? I mean, what would a real guy do, if you had to wear this suit in public? What happens when your girlfriend catches you in it? What do you tell her? That's a funny scene to write. So I didn't know whether it was a one-joke premise or not, but I had to write that two hours. ("Creating The Greatest American Hero")

Three elements are especially salient here. One is that, at the start of the 1980s, Cannell initially felt that to wade into the superhero genre was to wade into career suicide in Hollywood. What is especially telling is that Cannell does not seem to be wincing at the notion of camp or slapstick in relationship to the superhero genre, but he is anxious about working within the genre at all. The second is Cannell's assertion that he "held the genre up to the light." While his phrasing is sufficiently nebulous to contain a multitude of meanings, the expression points to a kind of hard-edged, reality-based thesis that would later be expressed in a completely different prism in superhero films such as *Kick-Ass* (dir. Matthew Vaughn, 2010) and *Chronicle* (dir. Josh Trank, 2012).

It is certainly arguable that Cannell's superhero-as-everyman was *more* novel if not completely novel at the time. However, for Cannell to imply that he somehow reformed the genre is folly. By the time *The Greatest American* Hero debuted in 1981, Marvel Comics had already been publishing the title *What If...?* for nearly four years.

That title was a kind of postmodern thought experiment in which characters from the Marvel Universe would be given alternative powers or possibly stripped of powers, or had never perished, or switched alliances, etc. In other words, the superheroes had been examined from many novel perspectives by the time Cannell created the series. He was able to inscribe this narrative about the show's creation, however, in large part due to the paucity of superhero properties outside of comics. Moreover, comic book creators have dreamed up all sorts of backstories for superheroes (Plastic Man, for example, began life as a small time criminal), and the alien-object-as-power source had already been employed with a character such as Green Lantern. Finally, Cannell explicitly and repeatedly refers back to the comedic potential of the show's conceit. This conceit was not about building a fantastic mythology or dazzling audiences with impressive effects (the technology was clearly not sophisticated yet); it was about finding a seasons-long "funny scene to write." At the dawn of the 1980s, the vestiges and norms of 1970s sitcoms (again, more camp) were more of a lodestar than anything churned out by DC or Marvel.

Furthermore, though the theme music to *The Greatest American Hero* may be more "yacht rock" than camp, its tone buttresses squarely against it. Contemporary superhero films employ composers to create muscular and intimidating scores (i.e. Hans Zimmer on Nolan's Batman trilogy) or to inject pop/rock songs that underscore an energetic, epic, and typically hypermasculine mood (i.e. "Iron Man" over the end credits in *Iron Man*; "Immigrant Song" during a moment of epic battle in *Thor: Ragnarok*). Conversely, "Believe It or Not," is waiting-room fare. It is so antithetical to the tone that music in contemporary superhero cinema has that director Judd Apatow featured the song

in 2005's *The 40-Year-Old Virgin* in a montage underscoring the beneficence of that film's gentle protagonist. Brown points out an important aspect of the history of superheroes in any media that helps us to understand why the more playful and silly elements of superheroes onscreen were pruned away: "Superheroes have always represented the pinnacle of our cultural ideas about masculinity, and have served for generations as a key power fantasy for adolescent males" (132). Superhero texts that were built upon campy humor (as opposed to a more sarcastic or parodic version of humor) undermine traditional notions about the inscription of hegemonic masculinity. Moreover, Scott Bukatman posits that, more often than not, "superhero films seem to stake out the safest and most familiar version of their eponymous characters" ("Why I Hate Superhero Movies" 119). Though Bukatman was writing three years after the LSF ended in 2008, the elements, norms, tropes, and characterizations that the LSF organized and embedded into the genre reinforce his observation. The LSF evolved in a way that that abetted entryways to the masculine—experimentation with feminine, campy, or queer characters was an element that increasingly vanished as the superhero film became more ensconced within hegemonic mass culture.

Conclusion

The LSF were the more codified expression of what *Superman* suggested the genre might be. As a corpus, they resituated a waning genre in ways that not only reflected the zeitgeist, but also aligned with a changing Hollywood and cultural conception of what superheroes were. The LSF experimented, honed, and repeated what Kael was only beginning to see via the "package" of *Superman*. The LSF were powerful

instructors to both the moviegoers, who became more accustomed to the generic codes and pathways that were increasingly made clear, and to the industry that was producing them.

Prior to the LSF, the historical lack of respect toward superheroes (and other comic book source material) within Hollywood lingered for years. Even after successful examples of superhero adaptations (such ABC's *Batman*) had achieved cultural penetration, they still remained largely absent from production slates. Those that were produced (TV included) were crafted with the threads of camp; a sensibility that seeped into the few superhero films of the time as well. It is possible that technological deficiencies prevented these texts from vaulting the genre into a more prominent position in the industry writ large, but the genre was also simply in a nascent state of development.

Histories of cultural dominance are important for understanding how a given entity became so powerful. The social milieu, political climate, and, of course, industrial environment all must be considered when performing an inquiry into such questions. Superhero cinema had some remarkable (though uneven) representation in Hollywood dating as far back as the early days of the sound era. The key difference between eras concerns magnitude and approach: post-LSF superhero films are ubiquitous, extremely organized, and highly valued as intellectual property. This dissertation traces the winding generic path that broke out in earnest from *Superman* and then led to *Batman,* before undergoing something of an ontological shift, and ultimately delivering an industrially reimagined superhero genre; one that was created in the image of that which the LSF revealed. The chapters that follow tell the story of how the LSF created something new in

this generically liminal and experimental time. Perhaps *Superman* presented a novel cinematic "package," but it was only the wrapper of a new kind of Hollywood package.

III. CHAPTER II:

INDIES, RIOT GRRRLS, AND ANIMATION: EXPERIMENTATION & THE LIMINAL SUPERHERO FILMS

A Cole Porter-inspired dance number. Action depicted in low frame rates. Kaleidoscopic Busby Berkeley choreography. Rapid-fire dialogue. All these cinematic tropes would likely be a fitting description of films from a bygone era of Hollywood. Yet, all these same elements are present—even featured—in two LSF of the mid-1990s. In Chapter 1, I traced the origins of the genre and established how superhero cinema existed in American culture prior to Burton's *Batman*. Chapter 2 is a linear continuation of this liminal era within the genre—as the industry began to add the superhero film to its larger generic tapestry more frequently. By 1995, the industrial environment for superheroes operated in a unique space: an increased volume of superhero movies was being produced, yet the broad generic formula from which producers and directors would later draw was still rather illegible.

This chapter uses two case studies of LSF from the mid-1990s to aid in understanding how the corpus was particularly open to new directions, devices, references, mixing of genres, etc. due to the generic pruning occurring at that time. 1994's *The Mask* (dir. Charles Russell) leans heavily on the power of a comedic persona and cartoonish slapstick, new effects technologies, and homages to films from the classical Hollywood era. 1995's *Tank Girl* (dir. Rachel Talalay) is an LSF that drew upon

rather obscure source material and experimented with both story and form. Both films help demonstrate how, even within the LSF, significant variances are exhibited. A more stereotypically understood superhero film type, such as 1989's *Batman,* appeared before *The Mask* and *Tank Girl*. However, these two films help demonstrate that despite a risk-averse Hollywood, the process of generic pruning and experimentation helped more obscure kinds of superhero IP come into existence. Yet, despite the LSF gradually provoking an increase in the production of new superhero films, films based on these same types of more arcane or "indy" characters subsequently fell away in the wake of a more structured genre that largely pruned film projects not based on superheroes born out of DC or Marvel Comics.

Tinkering with Tone: *The Mask*

In an interview with Kyle McGovern of the entertainment and culture website *The Ringer*, Dark Horse Comics founder and creator of The Mask, Mike Richardson, recalled some of Hollywood's increasingly distorted approaches to what would eventually become 1994's cinematic adaptation of *The Mask*: "In the early days, it was definitely hardcore horror being pitched at me, and I was saying no...I think one of the early versions was that a mask maker on the edge of town was putting masks on teenagers and turning them into mindless zombies, which had nothing to do with the character that I brought to New Line" (McGovern). Despite this rocky start adapting Richardson's creation, McGovern poses salient questions regarding this particular LSF:

> How many other niche, ultraviolent comics would survive being overhauled for a

> big-screen adaptation, being turned from a mostly nihilistic character study about a superpowered psychopath into a PG-13 comedy where a good number of the gags rely on a cute dog? And how many of those adaptations would clear hundreds of millions of dollars at the box office?

The Mask is a superhero film. It contains an origin story, a hero who gains fantastically impossible abilities, a signature look, the hero fights crime, the villain is vanquished, the hero winds up with the love interest, etc., yet it is largely unrecognizable as such. So, McGovern's rhetoric is in service of not only of unlikely success, but also about how far the genre has evolved.

The Mask began life as "Masque" in the pages of *Dark Horse Presents* (an anthology title that also published Frank Miller's first *Sin City* story) in 1987. Eventually, the character gained commercial traction and moved to another of Dark Horse's anthology books, *Mayhem*. It is in *Mayhem* that the name changes to the more familiar "Mask," and it is here that the longer, "ultraviolent" origin is first introduced. In the story, Stanley Ipkiss fully embraces his ID—going on a violent revenge tour of those who have wronged him. As the title continued to expand and refine, those hip to comics in Hollywood began took notice, though it was not a smooth path to the adaptation:

> Richardson, who served as a producer on the film remembers that "Comic people weren't treated very well by film companies at the time... One of the directors [that fellow producer Michael De Luca] and I met with, we sat there through the lunch and he never looked at me. And, finally, De Luca said, 'You oughta talk to

> Mike over here.' And he turned to me and said, 'Well, here's what you should do: Movie people should do movies, and comic book people should stay in Portland and do comics. Needless to say, he didn't direct the movie." (McGovern)

Writer Mark Verheiden, who has a story credit on the film and had also written comics for Dark Horse, had similar experiences: "I absolutely had those meetings with very important producers...where they kind of rolled their eyes: 'Only idiots want this garbage' " (McGovern).

New Line Cinema has a significant throughline within the history of the LSF. The company provided a training ground for Rachel Talalay, the director of this chapter's second case study, and it was the studio behind *The Mask*. McGovern's piece traces the film's early development:

> At some point in the late '80s—it was so long ago that none of the principals involved can remember exactly when—Dark Horse got word that New Line Cinema was interested in developing *The Mask* as a feature. The studio previously made a decent bundle by rereleasing the antimarijuana propaganda piece *Reefer Madness and* had distributed several films by John Waters, but was most closely associated with the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise. The connection to Freddy Krueger—so strong that the company was known as 'The House That Freddy Built'—partly explains why some of the initial discussions about a *Mask* adaptation focused on it being a horror film. (McGovern)

Charles "Chuck" Russell[21] eventually was hired to direct. His vision helped shape the tone: "I just felt it should be Jim putting the mask on, and if Jim's putting the mask on, it shouldn't be a horror film" (McGovern). Russell had recently become familiar with Carrey's stand-up, and the effect was something of an epiphany. "I just knew he was going to blow up. I'd seen his stand-up, and it blew my mind" (McGovern).

The Mask was financially successful despite its superhero/antihero antecedents being outright *masked,* or at least not promoted. In is *Ringer* piece, McGovern offers a helpful heuristic context:

> What's more impressive is that all of this success came long before superhero movies were regularly setting and smashing box office records. In fact, many of them were duds. It may sound bizarre, but *The Mask* became a sensation in spite of its association with comics, not because of it. Today, the movie is a relic of a completely unrecognizable time in Hollywood, when a comic book adaptation was better off divorced from its source material and not linked to any larger continuity—especially a comic book movie based on a cult title about a Travis Bickle type who dons a magic mask. (McGovern)

McGovern's assessment of *The Mask*'s cultural traction occurring "in spite" of its comic book ancestry, as opposed to that connection being a positive, serves as a salient and remarkable distinction. Stanley Ipkiss' alter ego did not have the same kind of cultural head start that characters such as Superman, Batman, or Spider-Man did. Later, in

[21] Russell directed films such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street 3: Dream Warriors* (1987), *Eraser* (1996), and *The Scorpion King* (2002).

Chapter 4, I examine how director Bryan Singer similarly downplayed conspicuous comic book references and identifiers. However, what makes this micro-era of the mid-1990s so experimental is the same element that renders McGovern's observation partially inaccurate.

Though it is true that *The Mask* premiered in a Hollywood in which superhero films were generally "better off divorced from its source material," the statement is a hasty generalization of the genre at that time. For example, later in this chapter, I underscore how *Tank Girl* deeply embraces its comic book roots—creating a text that championed its multimedia DNA as opposed to obscuring it. McGovern's misunderstanding is not only part of what makes the LSF such a rich corpus for investigation, but also is a clear indicator that the generic experimentation during this time was random enough, and occurred within films that were just obscure enough, that the formal and generic experimentation within them is scarcely remembered—even by some cultural observers. Furthermore, although *The Mask* is not a film typically revered by critics or superhero cinema fans, its generic existence is essential for understanding the industry's long struggle to determine the types of superhero films that would ultimately be favored and produced... and often reproduced.

Super-Toon

In a New Line promotional EPK,[22] Jim Carrey describes the effect of the mask on Stanley Ipkiss not in any terms of superheroism, but as a "love-crazed, wild, Fred Astaire character that's just unstoppable" (Harry). Moreover, there is a series of cuts in quick succession between talking head interviews between Jim Carrey and Cameron Diaz that describe the kind of film *The Mask* is as "an action movie"—*cut* "it's a comedy"—*cut* "it's a love story"—*cut* "it's romantic"—*cut* "it's animated"—*cut* "it's action-packed"—*cut* "incredible special effects"—*cut* "it's everything." In 1994, the film was apparently everything *except* a superhero film. As the rest of this dissertation demonstrates, the superhero genre sometimes was not even on the minds of those who were in them. *The Mask* is an important installment of the LSF, not only due to Carrey's star power, novel visual effects (VFX) and homages to classical Hollywood, but in the fact that it is all those things—yet the formulaic antecedents for making it a superhero film are clearly still present. *The Mask* was successful *despite* its comic book ties.

Later, I outline how *Tank Girl* is a film obsessed with comic books. *The Mask,* however, is a film obsessed with cartoons. The morning after Ipkiss' first dalliance using the mask, he wakes up thinking it was a dream: "Gotta lay off the cartoons," he tells himself. Much of the hyperbolic sight gags and action set-pieces were rendered through the still-novel technology of computer-generated imagery (CGI), not only due to the freedom that the tool grants filmmakers, but also precisely *because* Russell and New Line

[22] Electronic press kits (EPKs) are an element of industry studies that Caldwell (refers to as a "semi-embedded text" (*Cultures of Production* 202) that "function *between media professionals*..." that "spur and stimulate ancillary discussion and eventual awareness in the public sphere of the consumer as well" (203). Although *The Mask*'s EPK obfuscated notions of a superhero, the EPKs of other LSF worked to make the budding genre more legible.

wanted to exploit the character's cartoonish nature at every turn possible.

Screenwriter Mike Werb remembers that the studio tested model Anna Nicole Smith extensively before deciding on unknown Cameron Diaz as Tina Carlyle because New Line "justifiably wanted a live action Jessica Rabbit for a movie about someone who turns into a cartoon character" (New Line Cinema). The Mask occasionally appears in a Tasmanian Devil-like tornado during several moments of action. There is even a throw pillow with a graphic print of the Tasmanian Devil prominently displayed on a chair in Ipkiss' apartment. The visual effects, goofy action, and fast motion via low frame rates all reinforce a text that is much more interested in Looney Tunes than it is superheroes. Even the way The Mask dispatches Dorian—the film's mafia villain—is conspicuously cartoonish. During the final showdown, The Mask conjures an art palette, painting a cartoon flush lever onto the side of a nightclub water feature after Dorian enters it in pursuit of The Mask and Diaz's Tina Carlyle. The Mask simply activates the lever, and Dorian immediately finds himself in a swirling whirlpool before being violently, and impossibly, sucked down the drain.[23]

Carrey's character, often CGI-rendered as The Mask, was an early illumination that success could be had with a frequently CGI-enhanced lead within the superhero genre. Digital effects were looking increasingly professional, and *The Mask* helped affirm that medium-changing trend.[24] Moreover, CGI found a comfortable partnership with the superhero film in large part due the increasing ease with which the utility of VFX

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[23] Carrey's iteration of The Mask was so inherently cartoonish that it was subsequently adapted into a literal cartoon. *The Mask: The Animated* Series aired for three seasons from 1995 to 1997 on Saturday mornings on CBS.

[24] *The Mask* received an Academy Award nomination for Best Achievement in Visual Effects in 1994.

technologies could complement the many fantastic and impossible feats and physical action that superheroes inherently display. However, the decision to tie the superhero film to CGI in a significant way was also an industrial decision to shape the LSF (and by extension, the eventual codified superhero genre) in a particular mode. The reliance on computer-based technology to enhance or color a superhero film can reinforce the notion that superhero films default to a place of film-as-spectacle as opposed to film-as-narrative, human/cultural expression, etc. Darley even refers to the confluence of CGI-driven characters and films as "the antithesis of narrative" (104). Moreover, Brown points out that the increasing reliance on CGI changes the crux of what a filmic text is:

> CGI characters are both special effect and the core of the narrative. On a technical level, computer animators are striving for the perfect mimesis of a real world referent, but the commercial principles of big-budget cinema require that the mimetic skill must be recognizable. Computer generated characters are first and foremost promoted as special effects that will 'astound and amaze' audiences (29).

Though the LSF galvanized the superhero genre, it was such an experimental time for a then-forming genre that superhero films could have evolved to be an overarching idiom that relied more on practical effects, or even moody, life-of-the-interior tableaux—as genre is a construct. However, characters with CGI special effects were being woven into blockbusters of other genres, such as Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993), so the simultaneous convergence of the superhero film with blockbusters made the CGI turn one that was an industrial inevitability.

For *The Mask* more specifically, new animation technologies afforded digital artists with exactly the kind of tool they needed to present The Mask as a surreal human cartoon. However, the film's goofiness undermines any "cool factor" that most superhero films based on American comic books tend to possess. In this vein, another element that made *The Mask* seem antiquated is the film's channeling of older forms of entertainment. Screwball comedy undertones, swing music, and *two* separate dance numbers all populate what, at its core, is still a superhero film. The dance productions are a swing between The Mask and Tina in a nightclub, and the other is the more well-known "Cuban Pete" sequence that The Mask employs to distract a massive police presence after seemingly being cornered.

The dance numbers carry the film even farther away from what contemporary audiences think of as "a superhero film," yet their inclusion is a salient example of generic pruning within the superhero film. In the mid-1990s, CGI was used but was a costly and time-consuming process, which meant the film had to rely on other devices to fill that void. One workaround was simply to take the mask away from Ipkiss for a large section of the film. The second plot point of the film (typically the moment when a protagonist is at their lowest) does just that. Carrey is actually out of the mask for significantly more time than a first viewing may register. It was a sign of the times that animating even somewhat modest sequences was often a tall order. Dancing was another of those devices. This is also a clever move because it dovetails neatly into the zoot suit/big band sensibilities that the film generally reflects. It is also another instance of generic fluidity insofar that it directly recalls the classical Hollywood period.

Indy Superheroes & Riot Grrrl Politics in the Liminal Superhero Films: *Tank Girl*

"We were definitely ahead of our time and scared the studio to death" (Ohanesian).

—*Tank Girl* director Rachael Talalay

The mid-1990s was an era in which Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Bruce Willis were still the paragons of bankable action stars,[25] yet *Tank Girl*—an obscure British comic book IP— also made its way onto the screen.[26] Hollywood manifested this superhero property years before the likes of Wonder Woman, Spider-Man, Harley Quinn, Thor, Iron Man, the X-Men, or any number of other high-profile superheroes. Although the characterization of Tank Girl (aka Rebecca Buck) is heroic and originated from a comic book, the character is not the classic mold of traditional (and largely male) superheroes. I include *Tank Girl* as a case study as an LSF for several reasons. Formally, the film integrates its comic book host form with an unusual amount of fidelity (visually more so than narratively). Additionally, the film also reflects much of the mid-1990s Gen-X cultural context in which many LSF were produced. Frank Wynne (who was an editor at the British comic book/culture magazine *Deadline*) describes some of the character's markers of the zeitgeist in his "Making of" companion book that accompanied the film upon release: "Tank Girl was not a sign of the times, she was the

[25] I refer to these types of male, muscle-bound, high-profile action stars as "pseudo superheroes" in this chapter, as they share some similarities with superheroes but lack a number of defining characteristics of the superhero.

[26] Certainly *Barb Wire* (dir. David Hogan, 1996) is a film that shares some common bonds with *Tank Girl* (ties to Dark Horse Comics, female hero, futuristic setting, etc.); however, I chose to focus on *Tank Girl* due to the film's political orientation and its integration of mixed media.

way forward. She was Thelma and Louise before the fact; she was Mad Max designed by Vivienne Westwood, Action Man knitted out by Jean Paul Gaultier" (15).[27] The comic book/cinematic mixture that is *Tank Girl* challenged preconceived notions about what Hollywood considered a superhero to be. The film introduced a largely reimagined incarnation of the superhero archetype into a genre that was still forming—still pruning.

Tank Girl is an original character created by writer Alan Martin and artist Jamie Hewlett.[28] The character first appeared in the pages of the British art/comics/culture magazine *Deadline* in 1988. The character quickly gained cultural traction, resonating with a wide array of fans. Before long, *Deadline* publisher Tom Astor began to see larger horizons for her: "The boys love her, the girls love her. In London, there are even weekly lesbian gatherings called 'Tank Girl nights' " (J.K. Bates). In the United States, Dark Horse Comics (publisher of *The Mask*) "approached *Deadline* for the rights to reprint the strips in the US. In fact, they were so enamoured that they published Tank Girl in her own comic series and also published *Deadline U.S.A.*, featuring many of the other strips from the original" (Wynne 13). Soon afterwards, Tank Girl's exploits were being published in countries from Argentina to Japan (Wynne 13).

While the buzz around the character was growing, director Rachel Talalay faced a challenging reality: Hollywood did not yet fully trust the source material. Conversely, Talalay had great admiration and faith in the material. As a measure to ensure

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[27] Wynne's reference to Vivienne Westwood is not mere metaphor. Costume designer Arianne Phillips worked with other well-known designers. "Vivienne Westwood—she is *the* premier English designer—the early punk designs, early Culture Club and Bow Wow Wow and The Clash. We got some vintage T-shirts from her. I also worked with Helmut Lang...He agreed to lend us about seventy-two pieces for the movie" (Wynne 73).

[28] Hewlett would later go on to become a co-founder of the "virtual" band Gorillaz, with the group using Hewlett's art for many representations of the band's members.

authenticity, she took what would have been an ultramodern way to access what Henry Jenkins might refer to as an early form of convergence culture: she set up an AOL email address to gain a sense of the fan discourse surrounding Tank Girl (J.K. Bates). Her most frequent feedback cited "the fear of Tank Girl's 'Hollywood-ization' " (J.K. Bates). These fears would be somewhat founded: "MGM had second thoughts right up to the day we released and maybe after. They were excited and they were nervous. If we'd spent ten million dollars less on it, they might be 50% less scared, but sure, they were scared. There was no big star to hang their hat on" (Wynne 20). Nevertheless, Talalay managed to maintain a grasp on some of the more experimental and stylistic elements crucial to the character, with some assistance from studio stakeholders who skewed more toward her generational cohort. "Then they discovered that they were getting so much early press coverage, and so much interest from hip places and hip people. There was a lot of excitement from the younger people at the studio" (Wynne 20). Given that Tank Girl spoke so directly to a counter-cultural (or perhaps at least open-minded) audience, it is not a surprise that there was something of a generational divide at MGM. "Sometimes the guys are threatened by it—the older agents. Like, 'What is this? Why are the only good guys in the script mutant kangaroos?' 'Yeah,' I go, 'isn't that cool?' " Talalay recalled (J.K. Bates). Talalay's "isn't that cool?" approach to material that was rather alien to Hollywood underscores her role in accepting new material and new cultural forms as fodder for big-screen superhero adaptations. The film added complexity to the generic possibilities of what audiences might expect from future superhero films in the liminal period and de-centered historical conceptions about how a lead in a superhero could appear and exist onscreen.

Embracing Comic Book Roots

Just as *The Mask* experimented with Carrey's comedic/star text and injected more antiquated generic tropes, such as slapstick and melodrama, *Tank Girl* too experimented with the superhero genre in similar ways. One of the most immediately remarkable aspects of *Tank Girl* is its integration of—even devotion to—the comic book medium. From the opening title sequence, viewers are not only given tonal and aesthetic orientation, but also an indisputable acknowledgment that this is a *comic book* movie; it wears its status as an adaptation proudly. Talalay described the ontological differences in comic book elements used in the film as: "...three things, really. There's the title sequence, which are the graphics from the comics. There's the still panels, which Jamie designed and drew. And then there are the actual animation sequences which were done completely separately" (Landekic).

The alloying of a comic book idiom into the fiber of the film also creates meaning in novel and unexpected ways. The conspicuous nature of comic book imagery in the film is not by chance; Talalay and other creative stakeholders earnestly endorsed the film's comic books origins. On the subject of the film's opening title sequence (featuring a montage of stills from Hewlett's art from the comic book, see Figure 1), Talalay's vision for the film compelled her to "use images from the comic book!" "I wanted to make it very clear what you were getting into. I wanted to do as much as I could to advertise Jamie's art and what we were trying to do with that title sequence" (Landekic). There are even comic book interstitials used in *Tank Girl* that are quite reminiscent of the onomatopoeia cards that the *Batman* 1966 series famously employed. *Deadline's* Tom Astor also recalled that, "Rachel was determined to keep strong links with *Deadline*

throughout the production. Although we had no experience in film-making, she recognized that it was the freshness of Tank Girl which was exciting and felt that needed a fresh perspective, which she felt like she might not get from people Hollywood reared and bred" (Wynne 24). Talalay saw Hewlett's original art as an integral piece of her version of the character: "I think because you're coming into this post-apocalyptic world, I wanted to make sure that you completely had fun before that. Hence using 'Girl U Want', that Devo song but re-recorded with a punk female voice. I wanted you to feel the characters, I wanted you to feel the style — Jamie's style" (Landekic). "Jamie's style" is very much revered (and materially present) throughout the film. This type of devotion to a creator's aesthetic is mostly absent in both later LSF (with something like Robert Rodriguez's *Sin City* [2005] being an exception) and for the majority of post-*Iron Man* superhero cinema as well.

While the importance regarding the involvement/reverence of a given character's creator is rather subjective, Talalay's infusion of Hewlett and Martin's "zine"-like sensibility from their original comic to her film version was not something that Hollywood deemed especially valuable in this time of experimentation in this LSF. An example such as *Tank Girl* utilized much of Hewlett and Martin's textual material largely *because* United Artists was implicitly suspicious of the project in general. However, it was an element that was quickly pruned away. In contrast, Stan Lee's long filmography of cameos began during LSF period, but his long-cultivated "company man" persona is a cleaner comics-based trade story to include—particularly via adaptations based on more recognizable properties, such as the X-Men and Spider-Man. Moreover, unlike Hewlett and Martin's professional station at the time of *Tank Girl*'s release, Lee was much more

of a brand ambassador at the turn of the 21st century than he was a comic book creative. That said, Lee's cameos in the LSF era do signal an acknowledgment of fan service/interest in comic lore that had mostly been absent previously. None of Lee's appearances or involvement with LSF ever carried much production or narrative weight, as opposed to how Hewlett and Marin markedly shaped *Tank Girl*'s final rendering.

While Talalay truly was a champion of Hewlett and Martin's graphic additions to the text, some of these items exist as budgetary workarounds or script fixes. For example, Talalay mentioned that, "The reason I put animation in the film was because we couldn't afford to do the action sequences. We couldn't afford the tank. It wouldn't even run, let alone run backwards or with any kind of speed!" (Landekic). In these sequences, actors Lori Petty and Naomi Watts still provide their voices, whereas their characters switch to an animated idiom. This method is a way to inject the title's literal cartoonish hyperbolic style into a film that is inherently more limited due to the physical restrictions of live action. There are also some clear cyberpunk aesthetics. For example, when Tank Girl is imprisoned in a confinement tube, she has traumatic flashbacks that are rendered as if projected by low-res computer screens. The entire tableau aids in reinforcing a kind of grungy, post-punk, 1990s aesthetic of spectacle. Hewlett's "anti-fashion" sense also inscribes this aspect of the zeitgeist throughout the film (Wynne 72). Nevertheless, there is a somewhat jarring effect when we come out of animated cards or sequences. While the animated action sequences and Hewlett-drawn interstitials add to the effect and power that the film has overall, those aspects exist in a complicated space industrially. Talalay recalled some of this pointed criticism, observing a common reaction from those who disliked the mixed-media aspect: 'What a mess! You can't do that — you can't put

animation in the middle of it. You can't put these still panels in the middle of it.' You wouldn't say that now. You can do anything you want now! But in those days, they would say, 'You can't do this, you can't do that.' And any time anybody said to me 'you can't', then it was like, well, I'm going to do it anyway!' " (Landekic). Talalay's adherence to her vison for the film underscores two elements of this particular phase of the LSF. First, it highlights that, because the genre was still being developed (and also somewhat discounted) by Hollywood, Talalay possessed the freedom to make these very experimental choices that shaped *Tank Girl*. The second element that her choices illuminate is that, as the LSF became a more powerful and trusted genre in Hollywood, that creative freedom to make these kinds of experimental choices would also be pruned away. As the LSF grew as a body, the majority of creative control landed back in the boardroom.

"More Screwball and More Wacky"

The prominence and importance of the comic stills and animated sequences are the most obvious elements of *Tank Girl*'s experimental nature. However, in addition to *Tank Girl*'s media mixing, the film employs several other tropes uncharacteristically linked to the superhero genre. One of these devices is the film's use of humor, and, when rendered through Talalay's viewfinder, the result frequently resembled a screwball comedy. She remembered, "No one questioned how I was going to handle the comedy. I don't think we knew how much this was going to be a screwball comedy. Deep down, I knew it, but what I was selling was the fact that I could do action and I could do special effects on a budget. As time went on it got more screwball and more wacky every day—

then the studio [sic] were really worried" (Wynne 21). That Talalay knew "deep down" that *Tank Girl* would be constructed as a screwball comedy is further evidence that the project was clearly conceived and produced as something other than a superhero film. It also underscores the obfuscation between "action film" versus "superhero film," that the LSF ultimately codified. An "action film" provides more room for generic digressions without losing the essence of the action. If a superhero film loses too many elements of what make it recognizable as such in the first place, it risks falling into those more undefined categories of "action," "thriller," or "drama."

The generic blurring that *Tank Girl* reflects is exhibited in a number of ways. Throughout the film, there are one-liners, sight gags, and also formal elements such as using a lower frame rate to depict a fast-moving montage of Tank Girl trying on a variety of outfits. That formal decision certainly calls to mind much older forms of technology reflected in the medium—such as a Chaplin film—but the playful tone is also very much of the era. For example, the scene would fit much more naturally in a contemporaneous film of the era, such as *Clueless*, than it would even with most other LSF. The humor is so thoroughly ensconced in both *The Mask* and *Tank Girl* that they serve as important historical markers for indicating generic pruning and transition within the superhero genre

Strikingly, like *The Mask*, *Tank Girl* also undergirds its polygeneric, risk-taking nature by including a dance number. In the film, Tank Girl goes on a rescue mission, infiltrating an enormous brothel called "Liquid Silver" that is designed in a Caligula-meets-DeLorean aesthetic. Once there, she makes her way onto a theatrically sized stage, demanding that the madam sing Cole Porter's standard, "Let's Do It." Within moments, a

dance production materializes out of the ether. Dance numbers are not a hallmark of the superhero genre, but strangely, during this time, they were a micro-trend in the LSF. This aspect was largely due to the generic pruning that was slowly developing throughout the industry. Moreover, the dancing also marked an overall femininity and/or the recollection of camp. Both those elements were pruned away as the LSF steered steadily toward more heteronormative and masculine storylines, action pieces, and casts.

During the time of the LSF, the formula for superhero cinema was still being synthesized. Despite a fear of risks by executives during this period, they had to take *some* risks to see what new approaches might be successful. Dancing was one example of a trope that was characteristic of the generic slippage occurring during this experimental phase of the LSF but subsequently pruned away. Despite the success of *The Mask*, *Tank Girl* failed to live up to expectations at the box office and was skewered by critics. That residue, in conjunction with the success of a more-gritty superhero films, such as 1998's *Blade* (expanded on in Chapter 3), may have been sufficient to suppress dance in superhero films.[29] "Cuban Pete" and "Let's Do It" are featured in movies that, even in 1994 and 1995, were referencing significantly older forms of entertainment and entertainment personas. The primary audience for these films would have been one that was more unfamiliar with these particular forms of dance, music, or even dance productions in cinema in general. Another indicator that this was a time of experimentation is that the randomness of each of these dance numbers in these two films almost seems to indicate that studios did not care much what was in them, so long as it

[29] An exception is one particular LSF that was released at the tail end of the corpus: 2007's *Spider-Man 3* (dir. Sam Raimi). That film also was poorly reviewed, which likely served as an indirect demerit against the case for dance in superhero cinema.

remained mild enough. Clearly, MGM had editorial concerns, but most of those were anxieties about widening the audience and staving off a difficult rating. In a more creative sense, the obsessive quality control that exists today with extensive continuity and fan-impresarios such as Kevin Feige did not markedly exist regarding superhero films in the 1990s.

"This is for the Post-Punk Warrior Feminists"

In addition to *Tank Girl*'s media-fluid, experimental ontological nature, it is also remarkable for how thoroughly feminist it is. Director Rachel Talalay even observed:

> You either love it or you hate it. People who hate it, just hate it. If you think that it's weird she has different hairdos in this future with no water, then you're never gonna get this film! I didn't make *Tank Girl* for people who are literal. This is for the post-punk warrior feminists. (Landekic)

As an LSF, the film stands apart as a political outlier as a superhero film. It experiments with the kinds of stories that are typically presented within the LSF and even with who gets to tell them. *Tank Girl*'s politically progressive throughline begins behind the camera. Rachael Talalay, whose career took a circuitous route to the director's chair, directed the film. After working for a short time doing "computer work at Johns Hopkins" (Wynne 17), Talalay seized upon a uniquely Baltimore-based opportunity within the industry when she became a production assistant for John Waters on his 1981 film, *Polyester* (Ohanesian). After working her way through the production hierarchy of

Waters' crew, Talalay went on to produce multiple films for New Line Cinema, including several Waters' projects, such as *Hairspray* (1988) and *Cry-Baby* (1990).

She developed her relationship with New Line into opportunities to direct, and it was during her first film, *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (1991), that Talalay first encountered *Tank Girl*'s source material. "I received a copy of *Tank Girl* from Zoë, my stepdaughter, while I was in the middle of shooting *Freddy's Dead*. I had it on set and was reading in between takes. I thought, 'Oh my god! I *have* to direct this! I just thought this was the coolest thing and would make a great movie...' " (Wynne 17). That intense interest in the project aided in shaping the unique product that in part made *Tank Girl* exceptional as an LSF. Talalay might have been relatively unknown, but her passionate approach toward shepherding the indy book to the screen was a significant part of what makes *Tank Girl* an outlier in ways that more regressive approaches to adaptations, such as *Spawn* (see Chapter 3), surrendered more readily.

The film's soundtrack was also built around a kind of anti-authoritarian, feminist ethos. It stands out from less-specifically curated musical choices of other LSF, further reifying its experimental nature. Though removed from the crux of the production, notorious alt-rocker Courtney Love was involved in compiling the soundtrack, which featured female artists such as Hole, Björk, Belly, L7, Joan Jett, and Veruca Salt. Love's connection to alternative rock/grunge (in part through her marriage to Nirvana's Kurt Cobain) adds a meta-ethos of sedition to the production. Notably, however, Love/Hole was seen as a commercial friendly option by some of the more politically explicit Riot Grrrl bands of the time, such as Bikini Kill, Jack Off Jill, or Sleater-Kinney. The

soundtrack's curation neatly reflects the *120 Minutes*[30] milieu of the day; *Vice*'s Elizabeth Sankey even draws a direct line between a pre-*Tank Girl* Gwen Stefani vs. a post-*Tank Girl* Gwen Stefani regarding Stefani's signature look that often calls to mind Tank Girl's gonzo gestalt (2015). Justine Frischmann of the band Elastica was also a contemporary musician influenced by Tank Girl:

> She is not a feminist—I think most women who call themselves feminists are missing the point. Tank Girl is too cool to be a feminist. She represents women in the nineties. She's dead sexy, but I think men would find her difficult to deal with. It must be so confusing to be a man in the nineties. Your dick is telling you one thing and your brain is telling you another. She's anti-PC, which is cool. (Wynne 15)

While Frischmann's blunt assessment of "she's not a feminist" is reductionist—or at least a hasty generalization[31]—her larger point is an important one. In her opinion, Tank Girl is "too cool" to embrace feminism—but seemingly not in any kind of conservative or adversarial way. Frischmann's point seems to be anchored more in a characteristically Gen-X mode: political apathy. Young women of the day—such as cultural influencers like Stefani and Frischmann—viewed Tank Girl as an anti-establishment cultural avatar that they could embrace. In other words, the political connections between a character such as Tank Girl were significantly more present than other LSF of the era, such as

[30] The show featured alternative rock videos on MTV from 1986 to 2003.

[31] This is especially debatable given that Talalay claims to have made the film for "post-punk warrior feminists."

Timecop (dir. Peter Hyams, 1994) or *Judge Dredd* (dir. Danny Cannon, 1995). That dynamic was a double-edged sword: the protagonist represented the evolution of how superheroes could be considered. However, as Talalay complained, the films corporatized production undercut some of those very subversive messages that Tank Girl carried from the page.

Young men also championed Tank Girl. The band Teenage Fanclub utilized the character on their merchandise; during their 1993 tour, they sold a t-shirt with an image of Tank Girl wearing a Teenage Fanclub shirt (Wynne 15). The Senseless Things featured Tank Girl on several album covers, with drummer Cass Browne stating:

> What attracted us to her was her unashamed drinking and the big guns. She was violent but fair. Some people see her as a prime mover in fashion or in feminism; I see her as an individual. It's her attitude that makes her attractive. She manages to be sexual and asexual, androgynous and hermaphrodite. I liked the fact that with Booga, Jamie and Alan were blurring the bounds of sexuality. (Wynne 15)

Thematically, the film reinforces third-wave feminism. Prior to the film, the character had been something of a sub-cultural hero—particularly in the UK. Wynne recalls that, "Lesbians and gay men used her as an icon on a T-shirt against Clause 28, a series of reactionary, right-wing homophobic legislation" (13).

Tank Girl/Rebecca has an agentive mode of sexuality throughout the film. Despite fans such as Browne endorsing the character's exploration with "the bounds of sexuality," her sexual liberation is somewhat muted through several mandated edits in the film. For

example, a love scene with one of the members of a group of mutant kangaroos known as "the Rippers" is left to a vague fade-out. This editorial edict was passed along from MGM, despite the production's construction of a $5000 prosthetic penis (Sankey). Not only was the decision a deviation from Tank Girl's characterization, it also created a confusing narrative moment. Given that Tank Girl's sexual orientation is somewhat ambiguous,[32] the pre-sex fade-out does not even include a kiss to indicate the stereotypical commencement of intercourse. More than mere characterization, the complete sanitization of this moment also obfuscates the relationship between Tank Girl and a Ripper named Booga. In the comics, their relationship is more codified, with Booga clearly a romantic partner. MGM "acted like it was bestiality rather than a man in a rubber suit and a surreal experiment," Talalay recalls. Other mandated cuts included a shot inside Tank Girl's bedroom decorated with dildos and an "instance where Tank Girl put a condom on a banana before throwing it at a villain—gone" (Ohanesian).

Tank Girl's "post-punk" feminist sensibility is made explicit in the film's narrative. Foundationally, the film passes the "Bechdel test," a three-criteria measurement regarding the depiction of women in fiction. The "test" was first presented in cartoonist Allison Bechdel's comic strip *Dykes to Watch Out For* in 1985, with one of the characters saying that they will only see a film if it has at least two women in it; who talk to each other; about something other than a man (Selisker). Tank Girl and Naomi Watts' Jet Girl are givens names in the scripts and have conversations that involve escaping imprisonment, rescuing friends, and battling the enemy to save the world—not

[32] For example, we see a romantic moment early in the film with a male ally, but also later a kiss with Naomi Watts' Jet Girl.

just about the men in the film. There are several explicit moments in the script that also reflect the overall feminist message. In one of the first scenes of the movie, Petty's Tank Girl play-acts that she has discovered a man stealing water in her hideout and forces him to strip off his clothes at gunpoint. The scene is meant to be something of a reveal, and the ruse is dropped when two children run into the room and remark "they're being weird again." Tank Girl tells the man, "Damn! I was just getting into that..." before pulling him in for a passionate kiss. The way Petty plays the scene (complete with an exaggerated German accent) inculcates viewers into the overall ethos of the film. Tank Girl's gaze is the one that is privileged in this scene—and metaphorically—throughout the rest of the film.

Part of why *Tank Girl* has a complicated legacy is that it is a comic book property that is distinctly critical of power structures, yet the LSF version of the character was processed through some of these very same constructs. For example, an important theme within this sphere was the film's anti-harassment message. Near the end of the film, Jet Girl finally obtains vengeance on Sgt. Small, a henchman for the movie's evil organization known as "Water and Power" who sexually harasses a captive Jet Girl earlier in Act II. After Jet Girl finally catches up to the sergeant late in the film, the camera cuts to a laser sight target on his body; a defeated Small meekly utters, "Fuck me" upon the discovery. "How many times do I have to tell you? I don't want to," Watts' Jet Girl confidently replies—before shooting him in the head. This specific cultural currency that the character of Tank Girl adds to the unique aura of both textual experimentation in *Tank Girl* as an LSF and at least a degree of experimentation with how a character that challenges power would connect with the movie-going public.

Conclusion

Tank Girl stands as an example of not only generic experimentation, but also how ephemeral this kind of fiercely feminist superhero so quickly receded from Hollywood production schedules. A progressive superhero film appeared fairly early within the evolving genre, only to be the lone representative of this style of superhero film for years to come. Though *Tank Girl* has not been written about extensively, Elyce Rae Helford analyzes the film in her piece "Postfeminism and the Female Action-Adventure Hero: Positioning Tank Girl" (2000).[33] Though conflicted about some of its "contradictory" political frames, Helford lauds the film for its progressive representation: "Tank Girl is, in many ways, an excellent choice for a new female action-adventure hero for the 1990s. She displays the aggressive individualism and 'projected' sexuality of rock-me/postfeminism while kicking in some actual feminist rage at gender inequalities and oppression through words and actions" (Helford 300). In an era in which those aforementioned "pseudo superheroes" played by dependably bankable action stars such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, Wesley Snipes, Sylvester Stallone, and Bruce Willis were regularly residing (and earning) at the box office, Lori Petty's *Tank Girl* entered the fray. There is little doubt that, in 1995, the titular character's gender was at least a factor in the way the film was received. In a 2016 interview, Talalay addressed this dynamic:

> I really did believe that it was going to be a huge success. That everybody was going to have the same response, which was, "Wow! We can have a female action hero! And she's so outrageous and this is absolutely great!" And we went out

[33] The use of the description "action-adventure hero" is yet another example of how the term "superhero" was still not widely used generically at the turn of the century.

> there and I believed that that's what people wanted to see. If we'd made it five years later, you know… I mean, look at *Deadpool*! *Tank Girl*'s the precursor to *Deadpool*. It just took twenty years to get there, and it still had a male lead! But they made us cut it back so much. They were so frightened of it, so we had to cut it back a lot. If we had made it even five years later, by then there was South Park, you know? They'd be going, 'How far can you go with this?' (Landekic)

When asked by Liz Ohanesian of *Los Angeles Magazine* whether the film "would have been less shocking if Tank Girl had been Tank Guy?" Talaley replied, "Oh, yeah, definitely. Absolutely. Completely." "Even now when I talk to people who design for video games they say that there's never a pitch for a female character that doesn't include an image from *Tank Girl*. She's the tough, punk warrior woman. She's the icon of that. And every tough, interesting woman I know wants to be her" (Landekic).[34] Like the underrepresentation of Black superhero characters, women too were underrepresented in the LSF era. Hollywood offered a few titles, such as *Catwoman* (dir. Jean-Christophe "Pitof" Comar, 2004) or *Elektra* (dir. Rob Bowman, 2005), during the LSF era that featured leading parts for women, but like the New Jack superheroes, they were somewhat rare. Talalay's point is apt: the LSF too often adhered to patriarchal hegemonies that reproduced the regressive forms of masculinity that the comic books

[34] There are modern parallels to be drawn between the aesthetics, characterization, and politics of Tank Girl and the DC Comics character Harley Quinn. Margot Robbie has played the latter twice onscreen. So, it was apropos when news leaked in September 2019 (tweeted out by Tank Girl co-creator Alan Marin) that Robbie's production company had "optioned the rights" to Tank Girl from MGM and was already "several months into development" (Sneider).

from which the LSF were developed frequently communicated.

Industrially, *The Mask* and *Tank Girl* illustrate that the era of the LSF was perhaps less of an experimental time for studios (they mostly wanted to take the least risky path to finding a successful formula for superhero films) and more a time of experimentation among filmmakers. That particular freedom was wrought not by creative altruism by studio executives, but because the superhero film did not warrant the kind of granular oversight that films in other genres or with high-priced talent might have experienced. Talalay recalled the creative impediments she dealt with on the film as stemming "from different people's tastes, rather than what's going to make a good movie or what the audience is interested in... but it was tough that it was the movie that I was so passionate about wanting to push the envelope on' (Ohanseian). Charles Russell changed the entire tone of the mythology of *The Mask*—and the studio agreed because they saw the earnings potential imbued in Carrey and were not overly concerned with the content of superhero films at the time, especially those with modest budgets. Similarly, Talalay fully embraced Hewlett's comic art, tone, and style.

In truth, most of the body of the LSF could be considered experimental, or at least in a generically transitive phase. However, the period of the mid-1990s was a particularly experimental period due to the conspicuous ways that the LSF were selected, adapted, and rendered. *The Mask* altered much of what the Dark Horse source material offered as a generic guide as it was largely star-driven. Carrey's star text recalled an overabundance of comedy, and his performance in *The Mask* exhibits occasional modes of a kind of masculinity (i.e. the singing, dancing, and Bugs Bunny-esque genderplay) that Hollywood pruned away, veering increasingly toward a more heteronormative and

aggressive iteration of almost all superheroes it adapted. *Tank Girl* had few (if any) well-established stars and highlighted its source material. That mode receded too with the advent of digital technologies better able to create diegetic worlds onscreen and to avoid the markings of a comic book aesthetic that Hollywood was unsure it should accentuate. By the end of the LSF era, however, both approaches would be pruned away in favor of a superhero film that landed somewhere in the middle of those two paradigms.

IV. CHAPTER III:

HIP HOP & HYBRIDIZATON: THE NEW JACK SUPERHEROES OF THE LIMINAL SUPERHERO FILMS

White characters have historically been the group most predominantly represented in the comic books from which superhero films are derived. This is not to say that there have not been superheroes of color throughout the many decades of comic book publishing history, or that there has not been the occasional progressive outlier: two examples are EC Comics' 1953 story "Judgment Day," appearing in *Weird Fantasy* #18, as well as Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams' run on *Green Lantern* in the 1970s. Both featured stories that addressed social problems involving racism and other issues that communities of color faced at the time of publication and continue to face today. However, those instances were mostly exceptional. As Hollywood began to co-opt more comic book material, the industry mostly followed the contours of what was on the page. To be clear, LSF often look different after being translated to the screen, but if white characters dominated a comic book source, they were likely to remain that way onscreen.

Despite this representational regression, one way that diverse characters began to appear more in the superhero cinema came through LSF that tended to be more generically fluid or under-defined. Steve Neale observes that, "Any film (like any text utterance or instance of representation) can participate in several genres at once. In fact, it is more common than not for a film to do so" (*Genre and Hollywood* 25). Furthermore, as Andrew Tudor more bluntly explains—"Genre is what we collectively believe it to be"

(7). Given that genre is an intrinsically nebulous construct, New Jack Cinema also made its way into the superhero genre, yet this remains an understudied element of the sub-genre.

Debuting during the heart of the comic book industry's speculator boom[35] of the early 1990s, Todd McFarlane's *Spawn* significantly impacted the comics industry. The title has been called "the quintessential 90s comic book" (Parker and Couch). *Spawn* #1 sold 1.7 million copies[36]—the highest selling comic book of all time—when in hit shelves in May of 1992. Moreover, *Spawn*'s publisher, Image Comics, jumped competitor DC Comics to become the #2 selling comic book company within six months of Image's existence (Khoury 140). Thus, it is of little surprise that, with their perpetual adeptness at identifying trends in American popular culture, Hollywood produced a *Spawn* film a scant five years after the introduction of the character.

The prominence and buzz that the character of Spawn enjoyed during the speculator boom was likely a factor in the film's profitability[37] despite poor reviews. The complaints levied by critics mostly point to problems with the script. A brief scroll through the review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes bears descriptions such as "barely

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[35] From around 1990 to 1993, the comic book industry experienced a marked boom in sales. This was a product of a number of factors (e.g. "The Death of Superman" event, and the mania surrounding Burton's *Batman*), but chief among them was the belief among both fans and pure investors that many new books would one day be the next Action Comics #1. Due to a heavy surplus in supply, the exact opposite phenomenon occurred, and the bubble burst around 1993 (Wright 282).

[36] That figure is likely inflated due to the speculation boom.

[37] According to Box Office Mojo, the film earned a worldwide gross of $87,840,042 from a production budget of $40 million.

coherent hunk of junk" (Boyar); "hopelessly redundant" (Alspector); and "nonsensical" (Kemply). *Spawn* premiered in 1997 in the relatively nascent days of message boards, fan sites, etc., and years before the rise of social media. Thus, discourse about the film continued in the medium that spawned Spawn—the letters page of the character's eponymous comic book. Dubbed "The Spawning Ground," McFarlane himself would respond to fan letters, much in the vein of "Stan's Soapbox," the long-running letters column that appeared in Marvel Comics for years after Lee assumed the role of Editor-in-Chief. It was in "The Spawning Ground" that some of the most impactful discourse surrounding the then recently released *Spawn* film emerged. Letters sent in by readers comprised predictable fare: mysterious changes in character designs, interest in the HBO spin-off cartoon—even a 7½-year-old boy writing in to say that because his mother worried *Spawn*'s content was too intense, she now reads them by his side (*Spawn* #64). However, "The Spawning Ground" was also a kind of salon-in-print that occasionally broached more substantial topics. Pushback from readers included criticism for what one letter-writer regarded as gratuitous sexual content throughout the title, and, strikingly, several readers also remarked on issues of race and representation in the *Spawn* film.

Perhaps the most glaring problem was the whitewashing of the character of Terry Fitzgerald. In the Spawn mythos, Fitzgerald is Al Simmons' (Spawn's pre-"death" alter ego) best friend and CIA operator. In the comics, he is an African American man, just like the titular protagonist. When it came time to cast this role in the film, however, the part went to white actor D.B. Sweeny. In response to this change, creator Todd McFarlane asserted in *Spawn* #59 that the change:

> ...was somewhat based on the cold reality that if people perceive this as a black

> movie there would be no way would receive the 45 million we were after. Terry's skin color has not been a major issue but what Terry stands for is more important. Priest was put in because I don't legally own the rights to Chapel. Every decision that I was directly involved in was based upon what would appeal to the greatest number of people while at the same time not offending the core audience. (McFarlane)

While McFarlane (a white man) should be given some credit for adding diversity to the pantheon of superheroes, his opinion that "Terry's skin color has not been a major issue" is problematic. Even if the spirit of the character remained, it is a pointed reflection of a previous era in which even those in the culture industries who would likely identify as allies to oppressed groups might also insouciantly dismiss the importance of race and representation in media.

The reference to "Chapel" is yet another instance of whitewashing the cast. In the Spawn comic book, Al Simmons is betrayed and murdered by a subordinate special operations agent named Bruce Stinson, aka "Chapel." However, in the film, Simmons is similarly double crossed and killed by a white female named Jessica Priest (Melinda Clarke). Marked changes from a film adaptation's original source material is nothing new—and is especially true for the LSF. As noted in Chapter 2, the *Tank Girl* film eliminated characters such as Sub Girl and, despite an R rating, still toned down the more-pronounced elements of sex and violence of the comics. Similarly, the cinematic version of *The Mask* featured a Stanley Ipkiss adapted for its star Jim Carrey (and his mainstream audience) and hewed more closely to a character he might have portrayed on

In Living Color, rather than the Stanley Ipkiss of the Dark Horse comic book that featured a much darker antihero as its protagonist. While it is commonplace for fans to see jarringly different iterations of their favorite characters, these changes sometimes have more significance than a mere costume change or mitigation of a body count. Though not rampant, this whitewashing and/or erasure of characters was also an unfortunate part of the LSF.

Several issues later, in *Spawn* #62, a self-identified African American fan named Jason Williams wrote that he was "disturbed" by McFarlane's response to the earlier letter, and implored, "don't you see how you are selling out?" Williams then challenged McFarlane "to give a valid, concrete reason that doesn't center around you selling out to please these executives who funded the project." McFarlane's response took a defensive posture:

> Here's the dilemma you're faced with given that there is some weird rationale as to who should be in the movie and why. If I stuck by my guns and put in Chapel, Spawn, Terry, and Wanda and it were perceived as a black movie, the movie still gets made but they would probably only give us $20 million to make this movie. It can be argued from your point, is it better to have four black actors and a $20 million movie or a $47 million movie with only the lead actor being black? The last time I checked, the only one in the world who can say that is Denzel Washington. So, given that we had to make some concessions, the up side [sic] is that we've got a $47 million movie that's promoting the lead as a man of color instead of throwing in a guy who's white. To me, I feel that it's far more

> advantageous to have a better movie, a bigger budget, something that's going to get more attention because of the success of the movie and its budget that stars a black man as the hero instead of being one of twenty movies with $20 million budgets that will come and go and disappear. To me it was more important to do a big budget movie with one big lead than do a smaller one with five average people. In terms of selling out, somewhere along the line you have to play to the strengths and attitudes of the people you are dealing with and give them a product and at the same time still get what you want. Other than getting Denzel Washington or Wesley Snipes in the role, I have now created a character that could potentially appeal to the Denzel Washington's of the world coming up instead of going down to a level where it's just going to be one of fifty movies. You can agree with the decision or not, but it's been made and in the long run, I think we'll get far more media attention because of what it is than if we'd done it the way you wanted. Not that any way is better than the other, but unfortunately in terms of getting the press and people's attention, I think this was the best way to do it and I don't consider that to be a sell out. Quite the opposite.

Taken in tandem, the two responses in the letters page are telling. The most generous appraisal of McFarlane's position is that he is an artist who, in the tradition of late capitalism, concedes his own artistic vision in favor of neoliberal directives whenever they are in conflict. While it is true that McFarlane did not have the Hollywood cachet to demand whatever casting decisions he pleased, his responses read as defensive, and that he actually was rather sanguine about the final rendering. There is also a more insidious

narrative slightly buried among his prose: the consistent framing of "a black movie" as a pejorative. There is palpable fear of what *Spawn* being viewed as "a black movie" might mean.[38]

This chapter explores what I refer to as the "New Jack Superhero" films within the LSF. Chapter 2 investigated the experimental, semi-gonzo examples of *Tank Girl* and *The Mask*, and this chapter extends that interrogation of the growing genre after Hollywood slowly continued its momentum in building and shaping the broad tropes and skeletal contours of superhero films. At the same time, however, the industry continued grappling with decisions regarding what types of superheroes would make it to theaters and how those texts would ontologically exist (both aesthetically and structurally) when they arrived.

I also examine a conspicuous paradox of the 1990s media landscape: on the one hand, that landscape was a golden age for Black media creators to feature their work on both the silver and small screen; but on the other, the industry remained regressive in some of its developmental and representational conventions and overall production decisions. As evidenced in the 1997 letter from McFarlane, superhero films were not immune in this milieu. Nevertheless, Black superhero films were being produced (with the majority yielding a profit) during the period prior to the superhero genre's era of Hollywood dominance. In addition to being a generally understudied corpus, the existence and small sample size of the New Jack superhero films aid in understanding the

[38] McFarlane's bias-laden views traverse gender as well. In a section of *Spawn* #62 called "Image Info" (a one-page update of the company), he describes the results of a screen test of *Spawn* for an audience of mostly adolescents and young adults: "The movie tested really well, except for the category of girls under 16. I guess it was too dark and action packed for them."

direction in which the genre was moving, and how the fickle nature of Hollywood preemptively curtailed this burgeoning element of the superhero movie in the midst of a broader media climate that suggests they might have thrived.

The Influence of the "Class of '91"

The 1990s saw a movement within Hollywood known as "New Jack" cinema. Mark A. Reid describes this phenomenon as "a representative group of black-oriented 1990s fiction films that are distributed by major film companies" (13).[39] Reid refers to film workers (both above and below the line) in aggregate as "Black Hollywood" (13), which is characterized by that particular space within the industry being marked by more than only the diversity that was reflected onscreen. In general, there is scholarly agreement that many (if not most) films contain some level of generic hybridity.

New Jack Cinema rose out of what Reid describes as a "second wave of historically and thematically important" (14) films produced by Black filmmakers in the 1970s. Among this cohort were filmmakers such as Gordon Parks and Melvin Van Peebles, working within what would later be known as Blaxploitation. It is a genre largely marked by Black protagonists containing a throughline of characters engaged with broader issues of sociality and policy. Novotny Lawrence notes that the genre goes beyond mere representation by positioning African American protagonists in a number of social stations and vocations. She posits, "the characters are strong because they possess

[39] The collection in which Reid's essay appears is *Film Genre 2000: New Critical Essays* (State University of New York Press, 2000). The text is divided up into essays that each accompany a corresponding film genre, but while the book does explicitly address action films, martial arts films, and science fiction films, there is no chapter devoted to superhero films—an omission that is quite informative for this dissertation.

the ability to survive in and navigate the establishment while maintaining their blackness. Characters like John Shaft may work for or within the system; however, they do so on their own terms and for the betterment of the black community" (Lawrence 18–19). However, some observers also saw Blaxploitation as more complex—even problematic. In a 1975 piece for *Jump Cut*, Michael Washington and Marvin J. Berlowitz take a more Marxist approach to the genre, claiming that, due to their ontological existence as capitalistic products controlled by mostly white executives, Blaxploitation films,

> ...feature the most lumpen, degenerate, criminal elements of the black community to the total exclusion of the black proletarian majority...The films present any semblance of revolutionary struggle in terms of adventurism, tactics of revolutionary suicide, one dimensional machismo, and violence. They obfuscate black-white unity and questions of class struggle by posing all conflicts on exclusively racial lines. The street hustler and the more respectable social climber alike represent the most petty bourgeois individualism. Blacks involved in organized political struggle are denigrated as buffoons. (23)

Despite one's particular reading of Blaxploitation, these films did impact both genre films and popular culture more generally. Blaxploitation films were also populating movie screens at a time when a group of filmmakers were just coming of age, those making their first marks in the industry just as the emergence of New Jack Cinema

arose.[40]

This superhero offshoot of New Jack Cinema might have seemed like a chance coincidence in Hollywood, as superheroes and superhero cinema experienced a fraction of the general pop culture exposure they would in the coming years. Additionally, comic books and superheroes were much more socially maligned at the beginning of the LSF era. They were markers of a certain kind of media subculture. For example, in a 2010 column for *Wired,* actor/comedian/professional geek Patton Oswalt famously observed "Wake Up, Geek Culture. Time to Die." In the piece, Oswalt posits that modernity's technological reach and ubiquitous niche programming have undermined what it means to participate in geek culture due to the now indistinguishable blurring with popular culture at large:

> ...Boba Fett's helmet emblazoned on sleeveless T-shirts worn by gym douches hefting dumbbells. The *Glee* kids performing the songs from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. And Toad the Wet Sprocket, a band that took its name from a *Monty Python* riff, joining the permanent soundtrack of a night out at Bennigan's. Our below-the-topsoil passions have been rudely dug up and displayed in the

[40] One difference between the young New Jack directors, also known as the "Class of '91" (Ugwu), and the second wave of Black filmmakers was their increased attendance of film schools (Grigsby Bates). While this distinction does not mystically imbue some kind of unique cinematic purchase over skilled directors such as Gordon Parks, it was a novel element in terms of providing increased access to the infrastructure of the film industry, both via interpersonal connections and materially through impressive student reels. For example, when John Singleton graduated from USC in 1990, he had already been signed by the talent agency C.A.A. By July of 1991, *Boyz N the Hood* (dir. John Singleton) was already in theaters (Grigsby Bates). Following an undergraduate education from Morehouse, Spike Lee then attended NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, where he earned an MFA in film production (Tisch Directory).

> noonday sun. *The Lord of the Rings* used to be ours and *only ours* simply because of the sheer goddamn thickness of the books. Twenty years later, the entire cast and crew would be trooping onstage at the Oscars to collect their statuettes, and replicas of the One Ring would be sold as bling. (Oswalt)

Oswalt is lamenting the loss of his own connection to this "geek" media subculture. However, his position underscores how much of an uphill cultural climb the LSF faced at the beginning of their time. Burton's *Batman* had enough historical media cachet (through the comics, serials, Adam West TV iteration, etc.) and sufficient Hollywood capital suffused throughout to negotiate some of this cultural dismissal of the superhero. The film also had a significant degree of generic novelty on its side. However, many of the LSF that immediately followed were adapted from characters that were obscure (such as *The Crow* [dir. Alex Proyas, 1994] and *Judge Dredd*) and were explicitly marketed toward children and young adults, such as the films based on The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, or were based on characters whose popularity peaked decades earlier, such as *The Shadow* (dir. Russell Mulcahy, 1994) and *The Phantom* (dir. Simon Wincer, 1996).

Moreover, the prospect of films featuring a Black superhero (especially made by a Black filmmaker who would have faced significant structural barriers to entry) faced harrowing odds in Hollywood. However, this sub-genre is less surprising when considering the larger cultural moment. At the movies, *Boyz N the Hood* (1992), *Poetic Justice* (dir. John Singleton, 1993), *Menace II Society* (dirs. Allen Hughes & Albert Hughes, 1993), *Above the Rim* (dir. Jeff Pollack, 1994), *Friday* (dir. F. Gary Gray,1995), and, of course, *New Jack City* (1991) were all examples of films from the 1990s that

featured a predominantly Black cast and were often written and/or directed by an African American director.[41] The New Jack genre was so culturally pervasive that by 1996 the parody *Don't Be a Menace to South Central While Drinking Your Juice in the Hood* was released. Just as I discuss later with 2008's *Superhero Movie*, *Don't Be a Menace...* only existed because of the popular saturation of the previous, dramatic New Jack movies that served as the film's inspiration.

New Jack Cinema/ "Black Hollywood" was so prominent in a post-*Do the Right Thing*/*Boyz N the Hood* world, that a 1991 *New York Times Magazine* story graced the publication's cover with the headline, "They've Gotta Have Us: Hollywood's Black Directors," referencing Spike Lee's 1986 debut, *She's Gotta Have It*. The piece outlines not only the prolific work that Black filmmakers were producing at the time, but also the industrial thinking that accompanied it:

> 'The Singleton thing,' as it's referred to in current Hollywood parlance, is the latest bold-relief example of Hollywood's sudden open-door policy toward black film makers, particularly those telling black stories. Several studios -- among them Warner Brothers, Columbia, Goldwyn, New Line and Island World (which is releasing "Juice," the first feature by Ernest Dickerson, Spike Lee's longtime friend and cinematographer) -- have black films in the pipeline. By year's end 19 will have been released, more than in all of the previous decade. The frenzy for black product that allowed Singleton, who has no previous professional credits, to direct his own film has become so great that black film

[41] These films were also sometimes comprised of production crews that were predominately Black, such as Singleton's crew on *Boyz N the Hood* (K. G. Bates).

> properties may be to the 90's what the car phone was to the 80's: every studio executive has to have one. (K. G. Bates)

The 1990s political mode is reflected here. There is acknowledgment of a space for Black filmmakers telling stories of their own experiences and observations, but Grigsby Bates also refers to one of the more deplorable elements of the culture industries: diversity is a thing to be possessed and an entity from which profits can be extracted. This dynamic was nothing new in Hollywood, with studios in the 1970s almost always making Blaxploitation films directed by white men (K. G. Bates); however, the novel change was that people of color were now increasingly behind the camera of these projects as well. The stories they told were politically and culturally challenging to the same hegemonically constructed pillars that had supported popular entertainment for decades. The piece points to studio executives identifying shifts in American demographics as one factor in their renewed interest in Black cinema in the 1990s (calculatingly foreseeing the minority-majority future). However, the article also cites a former Universal production executive who points to a dynamic in Hollywood that, unlike today, was still very much in question at the time: "studios continue not to know what the next big 'It' is, which is to the advantage of as-yet-untested people who want to make movies" (K. G. Bates).

Black creators were flourishing in other media as well. Rap and hip-hop music served as a conduit for the promotion of—and for suburban America—an introduction to artistic expressions of Black culture and, at least through the prism of commercial media,

the Black experience as well.[42] Ethnomusicologist Eric Charry outlines the linear progression that rap/hip-hop's cultural presence and influence had in an era that largely overlapped with the LSF:

> *Yo MTV Raps!* debuted on the seven-year-old private cable channel in 1988. In 1990, a major network (NBC) debuted the show *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*, starring rapper Will Smith. But perhaps a more definitive moment came shortly thereafter when the Fab Five, an astonishing group of five freshman starters on the University of Michigan's basketball team, went all the way to the final round of the national collegiate basketball championship during the winter 1991-1992 season. Their new-styled oversized baggy uniforms (a sharp contrast to the tight shorts of the 1980s), youth, and generally brash demeanor announced to a mass television audience that a hip hop generation was a national phenomenon. (17)

In addition to featuring hip-hop stars such as Tupac Shakur, The Notorious B.I.G., Salt-N-Peppa, Ice Cube, and many others, *Yo MTV Raps!* also helped develop the career of the Wu Tang Clan. The group took its sobriquet from grindhouse-era Kung Fu films, and many of their songs contain both references to martial arts and audio cuts from various other Kung Fu films spliced into a number of tracks. Though the group mostly referenced Shaw Brothers' films of the 1970s, they were also likely influenced by another film that

[42] Early work by groups such as Public Enemy and N.W.A. was sometimes referred to as "reality rap." In an essay exploring the former group's "Fear of a Black Planet," Anne Danielsen notes that the term applied because this particular sub-genre "attempts to portray the soundscapes and difficult sociopolitical realities of North American inner cities" (405).

served as a foundational text within this sub-genre: 1985's *The Last Dragon* (dir. Michael Schultz).

One of the film's producers was legendary record impresario Berry Gordy, and TCM's Sean Axmaker describes the film as a "Motown martial arts film" (tcm.com). As such, *The Last Dragon* features a predominately Black cast led by a Black director. Axmaker's description of the now cult favorite film helps to understand how this text might have been especially resonant with members of the Wu Tang Clan's cohort, describing the film as a,

> ...rogue's gallery of thugs who could have come out of a comic book. And the inspiration of Bruce Lee is celebrated all through the film. There's a scene in a grindhouse theater where a raucous audience cheers on a screening of *Enter the Dragon*, clips from *Fists of Fury* and *The Chinese Connection*, a Bruce Lee poster in Leroy's room, a scene with Leroy in a yellow jumpsuit with black stripes right out of *Game of Death*, and of course the nickname: Bruce Lee-roy. (tcm.com)[43]

So, in addition to serving as a film that, in retrospect, was more culturally significant than its box office returns or reviews would indicate,[44] *The Last Dragon* is a film that helped pave the way for later LSF. This is particularly true of *Blade*—with its emphasis on hard-

[43] *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (dir. Ang Lee, 2000) producer James Seamus even observed that, "Bruce Lee was probably the greatest African-American star of the '70s. And that culture persists" (Young).

[44] *The Last Dragon* integrated many elements of rap culture (music and music videos, video games, action, mythology, etc.) that scholars such as Eric Charry point to when examining how rap/hip hop shaped contemporary American popular culture (Charry).

hitting martial arts action, gritty New York City setting, and diverse cast.

Kristal Brent Zook (1999) traced the shift that took place on television in a post-*The Cosby Show* American media landscape, particularly at Fox. Zook points out that by the 1980s, white audiences were increasingly becoming cable viewers as opposed to devoted consumers of more traditional over-the-air networks, and that this trend created a significant yet traditionally undervalued demographic:

> Since working-class African American and Latino audiences in general did not yet have access to these new technologies, they continued to rely on the 'free' networks—NBC, CBS, and ABC. Consequently, 'urban' audiences suddenly became a key demographic in the overall network viewership. During this period, black audiences watched 44 percent more network television than nonblacks. What's more, they clearly preferred black shows. (3)

Zook also recounts a time when Keenan Ivory Wayans set up a private screening of his 1988 film, *I'm Gonna Get You Sucka,* for Fox film executives in the hope of securing funding for his next movie project. "Although no film people showed up at the screening, Fox's TV people did, offering Wayans a weekly half-hour series in which he could 'do whatever he wanted' " (qtd. in Zook 4). This series, of course, became Fox's influential sketch show *In Living Color,* which ran on the network from 1990 to 1994. Zook also notes that there is a key difference between shows featuring Black casts versus those that were entirely Black productions. She writes that the latter tend to be more impactful: "The shows that black audiences have been most passionate about, historically, are those

presenting African American characters as multilayered, historical subjects who are ever-conscious of the collective" (Zook 104). This dynamic is reflected in the LSF as well. As I discuss later in this chapter, some New Jack superhero films are very aware of "the collective," while others simply star a Black thespian(s) but are divorced from wider societal issues.

Although Zook traces the history of a time of fecundity in Black casts and producers on television, Kristen Warner cautions against the dangers within the soft bigotry of *any* increased representation in the media as positive representation (78). Warner offers a warning regarding thinking "that television representation alone can change preconceived notions about racialized groups. The problem of course is that because these characters are divorced from their cultural specificities, they are reduced to stereotypically shallow characterizations devoid of context from their marginalized group of origin" (Warner 78). When New Jack, superheroes included, is at its fullest expression, the films draw on these cultural specificities and avoid cheap clichés or stereotypes—almost always played for a laugh. New Jack often conjures violent content, but in many cases, the violence is a reflection of what filmmakers were seeing in Black communities too often suffering from the crime that illegal markets yield due to larger structural inequalities. Violence unto itself is not problematic in cinema, but the context is. The New Jack films created by the Class of '91 nearly always had a larger social or moral argument.

However, despite these clear markers of influence and success across media, the era remained one marred by roadblocks of bias. In a 2019 retrospective roundtable interview with *The New York Times*' Reggie Ugwu, six Black filmmakers who worked in

the 1990s revisited some of these structural and industrial impediments. Ernest Dickerson recalled that, "There used to be a time where you go after an agency, and they would always tell the story, 'We already got our black filmmakers.' " Darnell Martin added, "...you had to do what they wanted you to do, too, because you were their black filmmaker. It was like, 'This is the film, you've got to do it.' I was like, 'I'm not feeling it.' But you had to do it." Dickerson even outlined how studio meddling on his film *Bulletproof* (1996) and nebulous notions of personal aura affected his career in detrimental ways:

> ...I got the worst reviews of my career. I was criticized for not having everything I was told to take out. I had several projects lined up—I had been developing 'Blade,' with Wesley Snipes. The whole idea of where 'Blade' went was mine. But the producers looked to 'Bulletproof' and thought I had completely lost my street cred. After that, nobody would touch me. I think I'm still in jail, in a way, because I'm doing television.

In addition to offering a bit of industrial backstory for a key text of the LSF, Dickerson's revelation also speaks to the implicit bias that at least some producers had. White directors rarely, if ever, are required to demonstrate a requisite level of "street cred," for example. The tableau that these filmmakers begin to illuminate is that during the late 1980s and 1990s, studios had a kind of unofficial quota of Black filmmakers, and that those working within the studio system had to adhere to a particular idiom of what the studios had in mind for a "black director," just as McFarlane had feared about the

implications of making a "black movie." Director Theodore Witcher characterizes these types of racial disparities in Hollywood decision-making as follows: "White people get more bites at the apple. That's just true. You can fail three, four times and still have a career. But if you're black, you really can only fail once" (Ugwu). Matty Rich offered some enlightenment as to why this unfortunate pattern persisted by noting the importance of exactly who were making above-the-line hiring decisions. In the roundtable with Ugwu, he expressed some optimism in the increased representation of Black people who hold "power positions" within the industry, noting, "That didn't really exist in the '90s."

Music video aesthetics and style also served as an important extension of the New Jack era. On the work of influential rap director Hype Williams, Racquel Gates observed that he "became famous by creating distinctive, polished, and artistic hip-hop music videos with signature flourishes that made his work readily identifiable. Williams would be deemed an auteur if that cinematic term were ever applied to creators in a nonfilm medium" (41). Williams' signature aesthetic was characterized by consistently employing photographic techniques, such as the use of fisheye lenses, and De Palma-esque split-screens (Corry par 2). The first video Williams directed, was, fittingly, for the Wu Tang Clan's "Can It All Be So Simple?" in 1994 (Corry par 2). Williams' skill and vision as a director aligned harmoniously with the New Jack era; popular taste in music had skewed away from the arena rock of the 1970s and 1980s and moved increasingly toward rap and hip hop, opening a forum in which Williams could exhibit his then-novel filmmaking sensibilities.

Directors David Fincher and Francis Lawrence also indirectly contributed to what was then a protean and evolving style within the superhero genre. Given that music

videos were most dominant in the 1980s and 1990s, they offer a salient form to investigate the LSF. Fincher referred to the vehicle of music videos as "the most terrific sandbox, where I could try anything" (Vernallis 404), and, as detailed in Chapter 2, this experimentation complemented a similar kind of experimentation (only on a generic scale) that was simultaneously occurring within the LSF. Carol Vernallis (2008) posits that Fincher and Lawrence share a style that "reward[s] our efforts to follow the lines of the camera and the music as they trace across bodies and through space. They are more concerned with the relations among characters than with beguiling the viewer. During heightened moments these videos create the illusion that we can directly perceive the rhythms of the bodies before us" (Vernallis 413). For the LSF, the perception of movement is key, as action and kineticism are inherent to the nature of superheroes (even in print)—especially superhero cinema.

Lawrence, who directed the 2005 LSF *Constantine*, also helped inscribe an editing style that calls to mind compositions similar to some comic book layouts. His style frequently utilizes techniques to which some of the more-skilled pencilers would graphically match objects or items to portray a transition, passage of time, or other worldly phenomena. Carol Vernallis describes this stylistic employment via Lawrence's work in The Goo Goo Dolls' video for "Here is Gone":

> The gum that the girl stretches from her mouth relates to the caterpillar's thread. The crow's flight connects with the outstretched arm of the woman in a cart. Numerous windows appear, and as their appearances accrue, their presence raises questions about perception, and about the boundaries between the worldly and the

spiritual. Such connections keep us in the moment, but also focused on the past and future of the tape. (411)

A Prescient 30 Seconds

In addition to television opening up new opportunities for Black creators, television advertising also created a brief but salient intersection between the Class of '91 filmmakers and the comic book world. In 1990, Levi Strauss began airing a series of documentary-style television commercials for their "Button Your Fly" jeans campaign directed by Spike Lee. The ads featured an Errol Morris-like menagerie of interview subjects including a man who served as a cemetery tour guide, a spelunker, and even two fish-throwing employees of Seattle's famous Pike Place Fish Market ("Levi's 501"). The thematic commonality among them all is championing the spirit of quirky individualism—though of course sanitized through Madison Avenue's filter of neoliberal consumption. Most important for this study, however, is that included among the profiles of these Gen-X eccentrics was a "Button Your Fly" ad with comic book artist/writer Rob Liefeld.

The 1991 spot opens with a then 24-year-old Liefeld working at a drawing table—comic book illustrations adorning the walls—with the Levis tagline "Button Your Fly" superimposed onto the image, with the lower third identification noting that the location is "Fullerton, CA." So, before viewers learn anything else about the commercial, the first shot alone presents the audience with a cool figure of youth culture (Liefeld looks like a stereotypical Golden State surfer, wears a bright yellow t-shirt, red Converse sneakers, and, of course, Levis jeans); brightly colored comic book art as part of the

mise-en-scène; the revelation that the location is Hollywood adjacent, and finally, the disembodied voice of director Spike Lee asking, "So how long have you been drawing comic books?" Two shots later, Lee queries, "What'd your parents think about it?" Liefeld chuckles as he responds with, "They hated it" (VintageTVCommercials).

The next few shots depict Liefeld explaining how cartooning became a more serious endeavor, and while he never was formally trained, he found success through "a lot of creativity," all while Lee flashes dynamic images of Liefeld's original work superimposed onto the back wall of the workspace. The spot closes with Liefeld creating an impromptu sketch of "Spikeman"—a hero who bears Lee's distinctive spectacles and facial hair, donning a baseball cap (also a Lee staple) with a movie camera attached that will, as Liefeld describes, "record the wrongdoings of others" (see Figure 2). Though Liefeld's creation of X-Force had debuted at Marvel several months before the Levis ad did, perhaps the most striking aspect of the commercial is that it aired the year *prior* to the launch of Image Comics, and decades before the cultural ubiquity of Liefeld's most noteworthy co-creation—Deadpool.

Although the Levis ad likely served as the first rung on Liefeld's long ladder of self-promotion (Levis advertised an 800 number that served as an open casting line) and in the myopic view is, of course, a whimsical, pop-culture-centric way to sell jeans, the ad is also an avatar of a time when Hollywood was just beginning to think more seriously about the comics world for its own appropriative and generic purposes. As Liefeld remembered in a September 2019 Instagram post, because of the saturation of the ad, the mere presence of comic book art on broadcast television meant that "Comic books were on tv all the time!" (Liefeld). This unexpected pairing of a well-known (though up-and-

coming) representative of Hollywood joining with a well-known (though up-and-coming) figure from comics proved to be a prescient partnership among branches of the culture industries. Although Lee has yet to direct a superhero movie, I argue that he had a more profound effect on laying the foundation for non-comics superhero media than may be remembered. Liefeld was right that, during the run of the ad, superhero content was on TV—even through the coarser and briefer mode of a 30-second TV spot. Lee's compositions, as well as his use of color and intensity via Liefeld's art, began to connect the two industries in a way that would prove to be more meaningful than an otherwise forgettable commercial might be.[45] Moreover, Lee himself is a character in the ad, just as he is in several of his films, so we are ultimately left with a media artifact that is product of a Class of '91 filmmaker that retrospectively gestures toward what Hollywood would eventually become both in the short term (with Lee) and the longer term (with Liefeld).

This early confluence of the Class of '91 and the comic book world was not isolated to the Levis ad. When John Singleton died in 2019, Liefeld, McFarlane, and Kevin Smith (who exists as something of a crossover figure between movies and comics) and others not only felt compelled to relate warm memories of the man, but each included a picture of them *with* Singleton in their public tributes. Singleton's superhero fandom was deep enough that on multiple occasions he was in person with each of these figures from the comic book world. Though Singleton died before we ever experienced his take on the genre in cinematic form, he championed comics as both an art form and mode of storytelling. Despite primarily engaging with comic books as a fan, it is this very fandom

[45] The portrayal of comics, comics creators, and a buzzworthy director all in a single text—that was not a blockbuster movie—is one such subtle influence.

that aided in comic books being taken more "seriously"[46] as source material by Hollywood. This point was borne out by the impassioned tributes that figures from the comics community posted upon Singleton's death. Artist/executive Jim Lee offered one such example on his Instagram account:

> Way, way back before superheroes and comic book mythology took over pop culture and the box office, there was the amazing, insanely talented @johnsingleton coming to Image Comics book signings at @gapplecomics. Having the support and recognition of true comic book fans like John was gamechanging [sic] at a time when Hollywood really didn't know what to make of these heroes in capes and cowls and the creators who told their tales. (Lee)

Lee's assertion that Singleton supported comic book work "at a time when Hollywood really didn't know what to make of these heroes in capes and cowls" is apt. As a founding member of Image Comics, Lee would have been at least adjacent, if not privy, to the discourse surrounding the development of the Spawn movie, in addition to smaller development deals (see Chapter 2) occurring among other creators and titles at the company. Moreover, Lee's opinion is not merely that of an artist; he currently serves as a co-publisher at DC Entertainment, a nebulous title whose reach now extends past comics-only and into a post-rebranding from "DC Comics" to "DC Entertainment," and he understands the contrast of how comic books were viewed by the industry near the

[46] Comics were taken more seriously at least from a business perspective, if not artistically.

beginning of the LSF, and how they are seen now. Singleton essentially seized the cinema/comics torch first held by Lee with the Levis ad and, in his own quiet way, helped to spread the comics gospel throughout Hollywood.

Comedy and Social Issues in the Liminal Superhero Films: *The Meteor Man*

"When I started to create Meteor Man, I was looking to say, 'Hey, I want to be the first African-American superhero on screen'... When I look at *Black Lightning* and *Luke Cage*, they're like my cinematic sons" (Spry).

—Robert Townsend

While scholars can certainly debate the primacy of the "first African American superhero" to debut on screen,[47] filmmaker Robert Townsend has a compelling case of earning that title via his 1993 film, *The Meteor Man*. Adhering to the rather confined formula of superhero films consisting of capes, cowls, origin stories, the vanquishing of a nemesis, etc., *The Meteor Man* is the first superhero film produced by Hollywood, and is the first LSF with an African American superhero as its protagonist. Townsend directs and stars as Jefferson Reed, an altruistic but milquetoast schoolteacher living in Washington D.C. After attempting to assist a woman under attack by the film's antagonists, a gang of bleach blonde drug dealers known as the "Golden Lords," Reed is

[47] For example, when the Brooklyn Academy of Music programmed their 2018 film series entitled "Fight the Power: Black Superheroes on Film," curators included texts such as: *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (dir. Melvin Van Peebles, 1971); *Shaft* (dir. Gordon Parks, 1971); *Buck and the Preacher* (dir. Sidney Poitier, 1972); and *Foxy Brown* (dir. Jack Hill, 1974), in addition to more stereotypically recognizable entries into the corpus, such as *Spawn* (dir. Mark A.Z. Dippé, 1997) and *Blade* (dir. Stephen Norrington, 1998).

struck by a mysterious glowing meteorite that imbues him with fantastic abilities. He gains the powers of flight, super speed and strength, laser vision, a healing factor, communication with animals, and even the ability to absorb a book's contents—gaining the text's expertise for 30 seconds at a time. For example, just as we see Bruce Lee's influence within Black culture in films such as *The Last Dragon*, at one point in *The Meteor Man,* Townsend's character grabs a Bruce Lee self-defense book, rendering him a martial arts master for the next half minute. Emboldened by these new powers, he adopts the superhero alter ego of the crime-fighting "Meteor Man."

The Meteor Man features a number of tropes closely associated with the superhero genre, such as the aforementioned origin of powers, a hyperbolic villain, and a fumbling, played-for-laughs training sequence. Though the film's visual effects have not aged particularly well, some of these moments were less clichéd at the time, despite having existed in superhero comics for decades. Of course, a final battle between Meteor Man and the Golden Lords ensues, including moments played for laughs and something of a morally complex ending involving Meteor Man receiving back up from members of the Crips and Bloods before neutralizing his nemesis.

Despite goofy gags and schlocky effects, *The Meteor Man* is an important example of not only an LSF, but also of a New Jack film. The movie might bear the trappings of a "soft" film compared with entries such as *New Jack City* or *Juice* (dir. Ernest Dickerson, 1992), but the film's production and celebratory portrayal of a majority Black community in Washington D.C. reframes it. Townsend uses a lighter take on the superhero genre to tell a story of the general sociality and political issues facing the residents of a low-income neighborhood beset by drug trafficking and violence. In a 2018

interview with “Shondaland,” Townsend explained his choice for the setting by noting that he,

> “...wanted to tie it into the inner city. I wanted to say that there were drug dealers that need to be cleaned out of the neighborhood, I wanted to put a message of empowerment [in the film that said]: if we all work together we can make our community better, and the community needs to stand for something. I created this mystical, magical superhero world, but I put in also real values of what's going on in the community.” (James)

In other words, Townsend was attentive and interested in a number of social issues facing some Black communities. Instead of exploiting those ills, he uses *The Meteor Man* to confront them. Despite New Jack films such as *Boyz N the Hood* and *Menace II Society* containing significant amounts of violence, they serve as morality plays as well. Despite the difference in genre or tone, *The Meteor Man* casts a similar thesis in its reflection.

The New Jack nature of *The Meteor* Man is also apparent via its predominantly African American cast. Townsend recalled, “What I was getting everybody to sign up for was creating the first African-American superhero [film],” adding that the cast represented artists and entertainers representing several generations, “from Luther Vandross to James Earl Jones to Nancy Wilson, and Another Bad Creation to Naughty By Nature to Cypress Hill” (Spry). “I put together this incredible cast that I think, in my mind, it would draw on different audiences that would say, ‘Hey, here's a family film. It's mystical, magical, but it's about community.’ That's how I kind of put it together in my

head" (James). As Reid reminds us, "Black Hollywood" of the 1990s (which includes New Jack) extended to areas other than that of writer, director, or producer. Artisans and cast members were also key elements, and Townsend demonstrated this inclusionary practice in his casting decisions.

Townsend's ambition was clear via the development of *The Meteor Man*, noting in a 2018 Instagram post that he "called on every favor in Hollywood" to get the film produced. His difficulty in securing a partnering studio for the film demonstrates both the relative lack of interest in superhero cinema in the early 1990s and reflects the barriers that Black filmmakers in Hollywood faced for decades. "A lot of studios said no and no and no. It wasn't until Alan Ladd Jr. said, 'Wow. I went on a dance with a man called George Lucas with 'Star Wars.' I think Robert [could do this].' I went in there talking about Golden Lords and Baby Lords, and that the meteor is going to melt into me, and then I can talk to animals ... I went through this whole thing! ... I think after that he said, 'Let me roll the dice.' A lot of people didn't see the vision" (James). Ultimately, the picture was greenlit with a budget of $30 million (Spry), but unfortunately for Townsend and company, the film only earned back $8,016,708 ("The Meteor Man"). Despite lauding Townsend's 1987 film *Hollywood Shuffle, Variety* described the filmmaker as seeming "strangely out of place in this milieu. His characters are obvious stereotypes culled from two decades of television viewing. This provides a kind of safety net, which removes any sense of danger, immediacy or semblance of reality from the proceedings" (Klady).

Despite most critics' concurrence regarding the overall quality of the film, Klady's use of the phrase "this milieu" is salient. The implication is that the superhero

genre had been inscribed, and that Townsend was simply rendering too silly a product for its imagined parameters. However, *The Meteor Man* premiered only four years after Burton's *Batman*, so the genre was not only still forming, but it is also likely that moviegoers in 1993 would have connected to decades of television viewing that *Variety* (Klady) obliquely disparaged. Darker, more intense versions of superheroes were on their way, but the intertextual nature of *The Meteor Man* alone might have been a boon to the film. Some of the script elements that critics chastise (such as lackluster jokes, clichéd beats, etc.) are mostly fair, but are of little consequence regarding its place in film history. For example, *The Adams Family* (dir. Barry Sonnenfeld, 1991) and *The Brady Bunch* (dir. Betty Thomas, 1995) were both successful at the box office, and, in addition to parodying those two specific TV shows, they also parodied and referenced a multitude of popular culture items from the late 20th century, just as Townsend did.

Much like Singleton did through more informal industrial means, Townsend also championed an early love of superheroes and channeled it into *The Meteor Man*:

> You know, when I was a kid I was into 'Superman,' the original that was in black and white. 'Faster than a speeding bullet,' and all that stuff. I remember that was one of my favorites and then 'Batman,' the one in the '60s with Frank Gorshin [who was also in 'The Meteor Man'] as the Riddler, 'Riddle me this, Batman.' I used to watch that show and study it. I loved everything but there was a fondness for superheroes. (James)

However, Townsend did not simply wish to participate in a genre for which he had affection, he also wanted to use it as a conduit for increased representation:

> I had finished 'The Five Heartbeats' and I was trying to think about what I wanted to do next. I went to Chicago [and] my nephew Greg Jr. had to be around 5 or 6. It was around Halloween time, and I was asking him like the uncle, 'What are you going to be for Halloween? Spider-Man? Batman? Superman?' He [said to me], 'I can't be them because they're white.'... I was like, 'Oh, no. You could be anything.' Then it clicked in my brain. I said, 'You know what? I'll be the first African-American superhero. I'll create a world that nobody has ever seen before. I'll create bad guys you've never seen before' " (James).

This line is illustrative of two dynamics: Townsend is consistent about the need to promote a community and space that too often falls into a kind of popular erasure. Second, with all his thoughts of mythology and world-building, Townsend was also thinking about franchise potential for *The Meteor Man*, despite that goal never reaching fruition. "I thought this could be a billion-dollar franchise (laughs), and even though we didn't hit the mark, I was planting a seed that one day would be possible. Now that I see the *Black Panther* movie, I see that day came" (Spry).

In addition to creating an original (despite the derivative powers) superhero, Townsend also injected a nod to more ardent comic book fans. In the film, Marla Gibbs (who plays Townsend's mother) reads a copy of *Iron Man* to obtain a sense of how to design a superhero costume. Though it is rather inconspicuous in the film, the presence of

an authentic comic book serves as a semiotic reminder that Townsend is a fan and cares about superheroes—no matter the medium. It is a small moment that ties the diegetic world of *The Meteor Man* into our larger non-diegetic one, and also conjures Bordwell's "knowing" sense of narration through a kind of retrospective industrial lens. Modern viewers know that the character of Iron Man eventually launched a generic juggernaut that radically reshaped Hollywood, but at the time, it would have been seen more prosaically, even forgettably.

Though not considered a classic superhero film, *The Meteor Man* is an important example of an LSF, and also one that reflected the hardships Black directors faced in their dealings with the managerial class of the industry. "As I pitched it people would say, 'Oh, there's no audience for a superhero of color.' Then even there were certain black folks that were like, 'Why would you do a movie for kids?' " (James). History has proven that there is more than an audience for a superhero of color. It is also informative from a historical standpoint that in the early 1990s when Townsend was developing *The Meteor Man*, some felt that to make a superhero film was tantamount to making a children's movie. Granted, there is a wide spectrum in tone regarding superhero films, but even those that explicitly play up the humor element are still most often intended for adults, such as the Deadpool films. The superhero films that are more inclusive of children may cut down on the violence, but still are written and rendered in a way that can be appreciated by adults, such as 2018's *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (dirs.Peter Ramsey, Bob Persichetti, and Rodney Rothman). In the early 1990s, however, the genre had clearly not yet been codified, nor was it prolific enough to inculcate the movie-going public as to what a superhero film exactly was or who its audience tends to

be. Other examples of LSF may have had a greater cachet-of-cool via characters such as Batman or The X-Men, but Townsend offered an original superhero in a setting that superheroes do not typically reside in, and he did so with a story and a production that always kept the ideal of Zook's notion of "the collective" at the forefront.

Developmental Frustration and Unexpected Fortune: *Blade*

In some ways, the story of *Blade*'s production is a microcosm of the era of the LSF. An abbreviated version of this story is that actor Wesley Snipes' failed attempts to get an early cinematic version of Black Panther ultimately, though tortuous, led to the greenlighting of *Blade*. The more detailed version of the tale helps to reveal some of the industrial dynamics and decisions made at that time that would all contribute to how the LSF evolved, and to what the superhero genre would become.

According to *The Hollywood Reporter*'s Ryan Parker, Snipes' interest and vision for the potential Black Panther project was quite similar to the progressive screen iteration that emerged from the then-thriving MCU in 2018. Looking back upon the experience, Snipes remarked, "I think Black Panther spoke to me because he was noble, and he was the antithesis of the stereotypes presented and portrayed about Africans, African history and the great kingdoms of Africa," adding that the characterization and mythology of Black Panther "…had cultural significance, social significance. It was something that the black community and the white community hadn't seen before" (Parker X). Snipes went on to exalt the reflections of "glorious periods of African empires and African royalty" while particularly expressing affection for the "idea of advanced technology" that Black Panther's fictional African nation of Wakanda effuses.

Perhaps Snipes attended an early screening, and as an aging action star, wanted to connect himself to a hot, culturally relevant movie. That scenario seems unlikely, however, due to the level of logistics and lack of payoff that equation would yield. What is more likely is that the intellectual property that is Black Panther is so rich that Snipes really was something of a visionary during this time. Participating in yet another interview around the time of *Black Panther*'s debut, Snipes told *Slate*:

> I feel no sense of loss whatsoever, none. I'm happy, 'cause I know what's going to happen after this. I know where it's going. Remember, I was 20 years ahead of the game then, I'm already 20 years ahead of the game now. It ain't got worse, it got better. I know where this is going. (Harris)

That Snipes' attempts to launch a 1990s Black Panther film were repeatedly delayed and ultimately denied is emblematic of risk-averse Hollywood—especially when the superhero genre was still under formation.[48] However, it is folly to assert that the entire gambit was a failure. For one, the character happened to be revitalized around this time via a relaunch under the pen of writer Christopher Priest as part of the "Marvel Knights" imprint Marvel was introducing in 1998 (Parker and Couch). Perhaps more important in the long view, however, is that Snipes' failure to obtain a greenlight for his version of

[48] Snipes' difficulties with his Black Panther project also underscore both a more regressive time politically combined with a more general dearth of fluency via comic book lore and mythology. "They think you want to come out with a black beret and clothing and then there's a movie" (Parker and Couch), Snipes remarked on the taxing task of disabusing executives that it was not a film about the civil rights group of the same name.

Black Panther ultimately circuitously led to the production of what I refer to as the MCU's zygote moment—1998's *Blade*.

Blade, the Van Helsing of the Marvel Universe, first appeared in a July 1973 issue of Marvel Comics' *The Tomb of Dracula* and was created by writer Marv Wolfman and penciled by Gene Colan. In a 2001 interview with TwoMorrows's Tom Field, Colan described the development of Blade's look:

> Field: Did you base the character visually on anybody?
>
> Colan: A composite of black actors. (ex-NFL running back) Jim Brown was one of them.
>
> Field: Did you have a sense that he was going to be a popular character?
>
> Colan: Oh, I knew it was good, this character. Blacks were not portrayed in comics up to that time, not really. So I wanted to be one of the first to portray blacks in comics. There were black people in this world, they buy comic books, why shouldn't we make them feel good? Why shouldn't I have the opportunity to be one of the first to draw them? I enjoyed it! (Knutson)

Despite Colan's antiquated use of the term "Blacks" and ethnocentric approach toward telling the stories of groups one does not belong to, he does shed light on the character modeling for the original Blade, as well as a least a modicum of industrial thinking about Black comic book consumers.

Helmed by effects-specialist-turned-director Stephen Norrington, *Blade* tells the story of Blade, a half human, half vampire man who fights other vampires in pursuit of

revenge upon them due to the death of his mother at their hands. Blade's ancestry enables him to operate both at night *and* during the day, making him an even more effective hunter. The film revolves around Blade fighting a young vampire jockeying for power among a cabal of vampires that are less sanguine about Frost's plot to foment a war between vampires and humans. Near the end of the film, Frost summons an ancient blood god to confront Blade, but, of course, through his impressive fighting prowess and the assistance of allies, Blade wins the day, though the battle with the vampires will continue.[49]

One of the factors that associates *Blade* with New Jack is that it was not perceived or produced as a *conspicuous* superhero film. The character of Blade exhibits many traits of other New Jack characters: he is played by Wesley Snipes, who famously starred as Nino Brown in *New Jack City*; he is a character of action; he uses violence to solve problems; he lives by a code; he wears all black, masculine clothing; he is unsympathetic toward his enemies; and he is proficient with a variety of weapons. *The Hollywood Reporter*'s Richard Newby (2018) elaborates on the street-level nature of the film:

> It's too easy to remove Stephen Norrington's *Blade* from the conversation of superhero movies, perhaps because it feels like it was originally intended to be that way, distinct from capes, cowls and tights. *Blade* had been in development at New Line since 1992, with LL Cool J, Laurence Fishburne and Denzel Washington all on the studio's list before Snipes was cast as the human-vampire

[49] *Blade*'s narrative indicates that the fight will go on, and industrially it does as well, as the film launched two sequels: *Blade II* (dir. Guillermo del Toro, 2002) and *Blade: Trinity* (dir. David S. Goyer, 2004).

> hybrid. ... The world of *Blade* feels realistically seedy, its streets grimy — lacking the Gothicism of the films that preceded it and the sheen superhero movies would later take on. (Newby)

Newby notes how the aforementioned "Marvel Knights" imprint that had revived Black Panther in the comics was a kind of tonal roadmap for what director Stephen Norrington and writer David S. Goyer[50] wanted to render in *Blade*. The film was the first produced by Marvel Studios,[51] and its distributor, New Line Cinema, already had experience with genre films, having released the Nightmare on Elm Street series, as well as *The Mask*. Though it seems like something out of a Hollywood script today, at the time Marvel was in dire financial straits, was liquidating assets, and there was concern it could have folded (Parker and Couch). Though the studio originally was considering something of a campier version, New Line allowed Norrington and Goyer to adhere to their darker vision (Newby). That Snipes served as a producer likely assisted in fulfilling the "street cred" that Ernest Dickerson felt the studios thought he lacked when he was organically involved as a producer (Ugwu).

Blade was a significant influence on superhero films moving forward. The movie is unofficially considered Marvel's "first hit film" (Parker and Couch). After *Blade's* release in 1998, Marvel's movie momentum began in earnest: two years later, *X-Men* was

[50] Goyer is often Hollywood's go-to writer/story advisor for all things superhero—especially during the era of the LSF. He wrote all three installments of the Blade trilogy in addition to many others, such as DC's *The Dark Knight* and *Man of Steel* (dir. Zack Snyder, 2013).

[51] Though in the late 1990s, "Marvel Studios" was much more of a production company/licensor than the large studio it is today.

released in 2000, then a sequel to *Blade* in March 2002, followed by *Spider-Man* in May 2002. After 2002, there is not a year in which Marvel does not have at least one film that licenses one of their characters. The late film critic Roger Ebert was intrigued by the affordances that superheroes onscreen could provide, and opened his review of *Blade* review by noting:

> At a time when too many movies are built from flat, TV-style visuals of people standing around talking, movies based on comic books represent one of the last best hopes for visionary filmmaking. It's ironic that the comics, which borrowed their early visual style from movies, should now be returning the favor. (Ebert)

What is particularly striking is that, in 1998, a seasoned movie critic advocated for "movies based on comic books" to be a kind of cinematic savior. Many critics today decry the glut of superhero films, making the context of Ebert's assertion all the more important for historicizing not only *Blade,* but also the LSF and the superhero genre in general. The film also advanced cinema technology and tropes. Though the "bullet time" effect is most closely linked to The Wachowskis and *The Matrix* films, the effect "appeared earlier in *Blade*" (Newby).

Though both *The Meteor Man* and *Blade* bear strong characteristics of New Jack (*The Meteor Man* especially), *Blade* moved the proverbial needle in more significant ways for the genre as an LSF. The movie has more of an aura with fans, is based on a Marvel Comics character, and most important for the genre, it spawned two sequels in addition to a short-lived television series (a single season in 2006). Industrially, *Blade*

can be viewed as a fulcrum point: the genre changed after it premiered and was absorbed into the culture. As I have outlined, before *Blade*, the superhero film was a genre in which few titles were being released, and everything from character selection to tone was a mercurial experiment for what audiences might like best. With *Blade*, New Line—and importantly—Marvel Studios were beginning to hone these characteristics. Though the world never saw Snipes' version of Black Panther, he did aid in providing an important piece of the blueprint on how to get there.

Conclusion

By comparing the art house film *Moonlight* (dir. Barry Jenkins, 2016) with that of Hype Williams' more popular *Belly*, Raquel Gates observes that, "It was as if merely mentioning Belly in the same breath as Moonlight would downgrade Jenkins's critical darling from 'a film that happens to be black' to the industry's pejorative category, 'black film' " (41). Gates' 2017 piece in *Film Quarterly* has a clear takeaway: fears (both industrially and more informally) over the implications of what existing as a "black film" might be are as problematic as ever. Mark A. Reid underscores this type of issue when he mentions the prevalence of "black action 'drug' films" (21) of the era, such as *New Jack City*: "Black folks on coke are interesting if you view them from a nice suburban distance" (21), and he posits that this form of cinematic segregation recalls regressive strictures of the Hays Code from an earlier epoch in the history of Hollywood. It is especially telling that if *Belly* is still being chastised some twenty years after its debut for being a "black film," the backstory as to why there are so few New Jack superhero films becomes clearer.

Returning to McFarlane and the *Spawn* film helps elucidate industrial thinking and decision-making, which all seem to have an inescapable tinge of racism—even when they might manifest themselves in less than conspicuous ways. Despite appearing in the Brooklyn Academy of Music's (BAM) aforementioned "Black Superheroes on Film" series,[52] I argue that the film is almost the antithesis of how New Jack superheroes such as *The Meteor Man* and *Blade* exist. Interestingly, the script was written by Alan B. McElroy, an African American man—yet there are no explicit identifiable moments or even gestures of Zook's notion of "the collective." McFarlane's letters are informative because it is clear that, as the creator, he was the most involved in the creative process with executives, not McElroy or the film's director, Mark A.Z. Dippé. Furthermore, as someone without any clear connections to the Black community, McFarlane was never going to fight for elements such as racial changes to characters—he says as much in a response to a letter in *Spawn* #59.

Chapter 3 highlighted an important but understudied body within the LSF. The industry at this point was coming out of its experimentation phase (though some of that is still clear in *The Meteor Man*) and slowly beginning to produce more superhero cinema on a consistent basis. In "Questions of Genre," Steve Neale writes that, "Genres do not consist of only of films: the consist also, and equally, of specific systems of expectation and hypothesis that spectators bring with them to the cinema [or other media] and that intersect with films themselves during the course of the viewing process" (161). What makes the New Jack superhero films so remarkable is that they are at once asking

[52] BAM's website for the event contains a brief synopsis for each film in the series, and for *Spawn*, the only tie to the program's theme is that the star, Michael Jai White, is "...among the first black actors to play a leading role in a blockbuster comic book movie."

viewers to marry the generic expectations of both the New Jack and the superhero genres, despite New Jack being fairly novel and the superhero genre still evolving. This aspect is part of what makes this corpus such a crucial element of the LSF. Townsend saw the franchising future but could not fight industrial barriers, and while *Blade* was conceived as a one-off, it may have had more influence than any other LSF. If *Blade* had failed, especially after New Line abdicated creative decisions to the filmmakers, the superheroes' future in Hollywood would have likely been more uncertain.

Chapter 4 builds on this era of experimentation and slow codification through the industry's expanding corpus of superhero cinema. The successes of films such as *Blade* attracted the attention of all the major studios as they began to accelerate their interest and acquisition of superhero properties. If genre is a process, then that process becomes highly refined in the next epoch: what I refer to as the "superstar" era of the LSF.

V. CHAPTER IV:

SUPERSTAR SUPERHEROES AND GENERIC STABILIZATION

Dusk in a Manhattan bank. A manager wearily tells a security guard to "shut 'er down," before viewers are presented with a quick sequence of a closed circuit video monitor of the bank's front door, a "Columbia Pictures" title card, followed by the guard holding the front door slightly ajar for an exiting manager. Almost simultaneously, an unknown figure slips past the guard, stepping inside. The next several shots are a chaotic sequence of explosives detonating, panicked customers fleeing, and grainy security footage that gives a brief wide shot of the crime as it unfolds. Gas begins to fill the space, and the lead assailant tells the crowd to "please remain calm" as he rests a rifle on his shoulder and additional members of his crew begin to file into the lobby. The quick cutting continues to sell the frenzied event as we see a vault being breeched, the ringleader explaining that the ordeal "will all be over in about thirty seconds," before an insert shot of an outgoing text message on a cell phone screen reads, "PICK UP NOW!"

Racks of cash are hastily loaded into duffle bags before a grappling gun is fired onto a railing several floors above, enabling a direct path to the roof of the building, and ostensibly, a speedy getaway. The next shot features the besuited crew boarding an awaiting helicopter, followed by a mini-montage of the chopper making its escape through the concrete corridors of New York City. After a few beats, the pilot senses providence, telling the others to "sit back and enjoy the ride." Then suddenly, the

helicopter comes to an abrupt halt. The thieves are confused and distraught—with one crook nearly falling out. The helicopter then begins to "fly" backward. A wide shot reveals a long, tensile material is acting as a rope attached to the helicopter, but like the diegetic criminals, the audience is not given much evidence as to what is occurring until the next shot. The helicopter finally comes to a fixed stop, as the camera pulls back to reveal that the aircraft has been suspended between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, caught in a gigantic spider web.

It is at that point that the generic ruse is dropped on this teaser trailer for Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002). After the Twin Towers shot lingers for several beats, text onscreen is intercut with footage of an in-suit Spider-Man using his web-shooters and swinging from skyscrapers before a "May 2002" card closes the spot. Shortly after the teaser began to appear in theaters in late summer/early fall of 2001, those very buildings so prominently featured would be gone; demolished in the events of September 11, just weeks after the teaser's debut. This paratext that playfully incorporated what would subsequently exist in the collective American consciousness as big image iconography (i.e. the Twin Towers themselves),[53] quickly gained new semiotic meaning through its association with terror, vulnerability, and loss. Yet this image was one of the first glimpses the movie-going audience had of a big-screen Spider-Man (an LSF that had one of the longest gestations and most fraught journeys to the screen) and would later take on greater industrial meaning and influence in the future era of Hollywood. Ultimately, the teaser was pulled from theaters in the aftermath of the attacks (Ford and Mitchell 174),

[53] In "The Ontology of the Photographic Image" (1960), André Bazin cites the author André Malraux, who felt that cinema possesses a kind of "plastic realism" that blurs lines between realism and mediated realism. The trauma surrounding the attacks of 9/11 further compounds this dynamic.

symbolically snuffing out the cinematic reflection of what had then become materially non-existent outside of the realm of the screen. The story of the teaser is apropos. Just as the content in the teaser had to be industrially reconsidered in the destabilizing aftershock of 9/11, in many ways the superhero genre, like the world itself, began to be appreciated differently.

Chapter 4 is an examination of what I categorize as the final stage of the LSF. It is a story of successes, but it is even more of a story about evolution, expansion, and risk—both real and perceived. This last phase of the LSF operated at a time when superhero cinema became increasingly ensconced within highly corporatized ownership, meaning both films discussed passed through many gatekeepers. This chapter builds on the work that scholars such as Davis have done on the more-primordial eras of superhero cinema. I focus on two significant LSF examples—*X-Men* and *Spider-Man*—to illustrate how generic pruning was becoming increasingly refined following the first phases of the LSF I discussed in the previous chapters. Chapter 4 illuminates how this final stage of the LSF transitions the genre from one of industrial anxiety and experimentation to one of stabilization. It is a time when Hollywood begins to heap a more-consistent kind of new attention upon the genre. The LSF begin to transition from devalued "genre" picture filler to glossy stalwarts of Hollywood production schedules that explicitly touted the concept of the superhero itself.

This "superstar" period of the LSF served as the flashpoint for a novel stream of high-profile character-based films that operate with a better understanding of the cinematic grammar that years of pruning had begun to form into an industrial consensus. These pathways and syntaxes became elucidated for Hollywood through a stout

aggregation of the LSF that preceded films such as *Spider-Man* and *Batman Begins*, in addition to the industrial lessons gleaned from previous failures in the genre (either real or perceived). In this era, aesthetic and narrative production decisions regarding superheroes were evolving more closely to reflect the American socio-political zeitgeist. The industrial aversion to risk that informed the LSF overall continued, but the general architecture of these last—but imperative—representatives of the LSF begins to become more predictable and profitable.

It is also a time of novel cinematic affordances through new technology. As explored in Chapter 2, the effects work that began most conspicuously in *The Mask* continue to rapidly alter the level of verisimilitude and invisibility of such effects due to the Moore's Law-esque pace of technical advancement within the industry. The marketers behind 1978's *Superman* (dir. Richard Donner) might have told moviegoers that they would believe a man could fly. By the 2000s, however, visual effects had advanced to the point that flying was to be expected; audiences now were being dazzled by the seamless pop of Wolverine's Adamantium claws through skin, Nightcrawler's ethereal teleportation talents, and even films such as *Sin City* (dirs. Robert Rodriguez and Frank Miller, 2005) and *300* (dir. Zack Snyder, 2007), which used CGI to realistically transpose the general idiom and aesthetic of an entire stylized comic book world onto the screen. In a 2012 essay, Rama Venkatasawmy provides an overview of how visual effects (VFX) at the end of the 20th century were increasingly being laundered into the trade practices of Hollywood:

> ...digital convergence within the Hollywood cinema industry would encourage the

> more frequent production of expensive 'event movies' and VFX-intensive films – the kind that would fully exploit the synergies fostered by conglomeration and promise massive long-term return to investment. Simultaneously, Hollywood cinema's fast evolving visual aesthetic, production, distribution and exhibition practices would also become a lot more sophisticated. The digitisation of most aspects of filmmaking and of the visual effects domain in particular would enable the production of increasingly larger amounts of complex digital effects, as illustrated by such 'ultra-high-budget' VFX-intensive movies like: Batman Returns (1992), Jurassic Park (1993), Star Trek: Generations (1994), Jumanji (1995), Batman Forever (1995), Apollo 13 (1995), Dragonheart (1996)... (25)

It is fitting that Venkatasawmy's partial list of exemplars includes two early LSF. The industrial ease with which superhero films can be "packaged" (to return to Pauline Kael's description of Donner's *Superman*) lends itself to event cinema, as does the action and often-fantastic iconography that accompanies superhero content in general. Although *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* (dir. George Lucas, 1999) is not a superhero film,[54] Balio notes that, "Taking special effects cinematography to a new level, *The Phantom Menace* contained almost 2,000 effects shots that took up sixty minutes of screen time. Lucas reportedly aimed his picture at a new crop of children who were familiar with the series via video rather than the original audience, which was now in its thirties" (59). As these improvements in VFX began to take root more firmly, the trade press took notice. For

[54] However, the entire overarching Star Wars mythology is at least a kind of generic first cousin to what populates the world of superheroes—particularly via cosmic-based characters, such as Captain Marvel, Green Lantern, or The Guardians of the Galaxy.

example, Balio points to *Variety*'s Todd McCarthy's review of Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man 2* (2004), who opined that the film "...improves every way on its predecessor and is arguably about as good a live-action picture as anyone's ever made using comic book characters ... [T]he action sequences are more exciting, the visual effects – particularly Spider-Man's swings though the canyons of Manhattan – are more natural and compelling..." (qtd. in Balio 51).

Although this chapter is not an isolated exploration into the larger cultural influences and fallout of the events of 9/11 as reflected onscreen, contextualizing and historicizing the cultural/political/economic extensions of that moment is crucial for this dissertation. Scholars such as Dan Hassler-Forest and Jeffery A. Brown have done extensive work into the semiotics, significance, and meaning-making that 9/11 steadily laundered into the superhero genre, but for this project, it must be addressed in order to understand a critical part of the genre's cultural acclimation or appropriation. As such, 2002's *Spider-Man* (dir. Sam Raimi) is the ground zero of the post-9/11 superhero film. The first teaser trailer for that film was pulled from theaters (Ford and Mitchell 174) early in its exhibition due to its depiction of Spider-Man catching escaping thieves by using his webbing to restrain the helicopter in which they were riding between the iconic Twin Towers of the World Trade Center (see Figure 3). The materiality of 9/11 had started to take shape in American cinema, and the superhero genre essentially served as the unwitting (at least at first) herald.

Since the LSF began over a decade before 9/11, but also continue to be pruned *through* 9/11, notions of heroism (and the sometimes nationalistic) endemic to the superhero became more deliberately laundered into the generic formula that was in the

midst of synthesis whether 9/11 had occurred or not. Superheroes tend to solve their problems through physical strength or resources. Brown even refers to one function of post-9/11 superhero cinema to be that of "remasculinizing America" (63). In the years after the LSF, this notion has become somewhat more complex, but for those LSF produced after *Spider-Man* in 2002, their narratives still predominantly frame good and evil as Manichean, with a facile hero always just within range to avenge our collective grievances. Hassler-Forest argues that superheroes exist as a neoliberal fantasy—as terrifying avatars of late capitalism. He feels that these onscreen heroes are "Disnified" versions of neoliberal favoring and the military industrial complex. One of Hassler-Forest's greatest contentions is how 21st-century superhero films have both exploited and colonized 9/11. This is done through an appropriation of images (e.g. the twisted metal and burning wreckage of *The Dark Knight*, or the cloud of dust that quickly blankets city streets in *Batman Vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice* [dir. Zack Snyder, 2016]), but also though the need to protect the world (though often coded as white America) from the invading "other." The societal sea change that 9/11 created, in addition to the profits that superheroes were beginning to represent, made the pairing of superheroes and the culture industries all the easier at the dawn of the 21st century. Starker notions of heroism and villainy became increasingly vivid in the ether of American culture, and superhero films often co-opted and underscored these tensions and anxieties.

Separating from the Source: *X-Men* (2000)

A project of this nature cannot exist without a deep analysis of Bryan Singer's *X-Men* (2000). The movie is a critically important LSF for a multitude of reasons. It was the

first live-action cinematic iteration of a superhero team that had been popular with comic book readers for decades. The title dates to the early 1960s but had come to greater prominence with comic book readers in the 1980s and 1990s under creative talent such as Chris Claremont, Grant Morrison, and Jim Lee. The X-Men were also on television in an animated series that ran on the Fox Kids programming block from 1992 to 1997. Therefore, unlike several characters in other LSF, the X-Men were vibrant in cultural memory, and there was significant buzz and anticipation around *X-Men*'s premier in July 2000. As an LSF, *X-Men* is a peculiar object. It is at once an important success story that aided in fueling the LSF's forward momentum in Hollywood, yet it also eschewed textual elements that would return as the LSF neared the end of their time. As such, *X-Men* is also important for what it meant industrially. Years before the existence of Marvel Studios and the MCU, Marvel depended upon other studios to create cinematic versions of its characters.[55]

Singer's film is an important marker during a transitional time, not only for Marvel as a producer of IP, but also for how the company would evolve from movie licensor to its eventual place as Hollywood hegemon. Fox's choice of director, Bryan Singer—then an up-and-coming director, also added buzz to the project.[56] Unlike a hired

[55] Though Johnson (Will the Real Wolverine Please Stand Up?) points out that it was this very dependency that "may have been partially responsible for Marvel's continued interest in purchasing its own motion picture production company" (73), and later its own studio.

[56] Singer's addition to the project was something of a directorial coup for Fox when he signed onto *X-Men*. *The Usual Suspects* (1995) had recently earned over $23 million on a $6 million budget ("Spawn"), and his follow-up, *Apt Pupil* (1998), indicated the creative sensibilities of a young filmmaker whose career was to be watched. However, he has recently been the figure of extra-cinematic scandal. A 2019 article in *The Atlantic* chronicled the publication's 12-month investigation into allegations that Singer had

gun, such as Joel Schumacher or Stephen Norrington, Singer had both indie credibility matched with financial success. Singer was riding a wave of professional goodwill having won the 1993 Grand Jury Prize at Sundance for his film *Public Access*, before directing the critically acclaimed *The Usual Suspects* (1995), as well as adapting Stephen King's *Apt Pupil* in 1998. However, he balked when originally approached about directing the film, *precisely* due to its comic book origins (*The Secret Origin of X-Men*). Nevertheless, Singer was able to find enough in the "human condition" of the X-Men mythology to become interested, but story/executive producer, Tom DeSanto, explained that the director essentially had to cut through the "baggage" of the more conspicuous comic book elements (*The Secret Origin of X-Men*). In the same interview, DeSanto offered an anecdote that is especially telling over fifteen years later: "I remember approaching him [Singer] with the concept, and I think his first reaction is the way most people react at first, 'A comic book movie—I'm not interested in that, or seeing that, or working on that' " (*The Secret Origin of X-Men*) Producer Lauren Shuler Donner even stressed the "story is not overly fantastic, not overly comic booky—it is easy for the audience to relate to" (*The Secret Origin of X-Men*). Though Singer's career appears tenuous years after the film's premier, his directorial cachet at the time added much needed credibility for a franchise/IP that had last existed in the minds of most American consumers as a Saturday morning cartoon—a residue that Singer and Fox all but expurgated.

Perhaps the brightest line that underscores the rather wildly different approaches to the genre at the turn of the century is the way the source material—the comic books

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sexual relationships with underage boys, with accusations range from molestation to rape (French and Potter).

themselves—was viewed by producers and directors. For Bryan Singer's *X-Men*, the changes were significant. Singer wanted his X-Men to be ciphers of a lived-in world; he wanted to portray a grounded version of what mutants living in contemporary America would look like, and how the world would react to them. Apart from Fox executives' and Singer's own taste, this was a choice made in part due to what was then a recent and major critical flop—*Batman & Robin* (dir. Joel Schumacher, 1997). Schumacher's foray into the Dark Knight mythos was profitable (earning $238,235,915 worldwide on a budget of $125 million) but was harshly panned by critics and fans alike. The *Philadelphia Inquirer*'s Steven Rea called it "loud, long and pointless spectacle," and in a 2017 retrospective in *The Atlantic*, culture reporter David Sims even goes as far as to state that:

> ...20 years ago today, the superhero film died a seemingly irreversible death. *Batman & Robin* was supposed to be one of the biggest tentpoles of the summer: It was the continuation of an enormously successful Warner Bros. franchise that had begun in 1989 with *Batman*, which starred one of the most expensive movie stars alive (Arnold Schwarzenegger, paid a handsome $25 million for his trouble). A follow-up, *Batman Unchained*, was already in development. A spinoff focused on sidekick Robin (Chris O'Donnell) was on the books. Then the movie came out." (Sims)

In addition to the poor reviews and negative fan reaction, the industry too reacted strongly. As referenced in the Sims excerpt, Schumacher et al. had even been planning a

sequel, tentatively called *Batman Unchained,* which was subsequently killed after the reception of *Batman & Robin*. After the premier, Schumacher "...tried pitching the studio on a darker take, based on Frank Miller's iconic comic *Year One* (which rebooted Batman's origins), but the studio wasn't interested in keeping him on board" (Sims). This is a clear signal that Warner Bros. executives had lost confidence in Schumacher as a director, but more important, it also signals that they had begun to lose faith in superhero cinema as well. They had spent big and largely lost. Arnold Schwarzenegger's fee of $25 million was for about 25 days of work (Sims). It did not matter that Schumacher was willing to pivot. In June 1997, the genre now seemed too risky.

There is no question that in the lacuna between 1997 and 2000, the genre experienced an ebb in production. *Batman & Robin* was arguably the nadir within the LSF, considering the high expectations regarding its big-budget, famous and expensive cast, and Warner Bros. previous success producing Batman films. Despite its scathing reception, *Batman & Robin* was profitable in the end, and *X-Men* premiered only three years later—and in between, *Blade* was released in 1998, which, as discussed in Chapter 3, was an important text in advancing the genre at the end of the 20th century. Moreover, Sims' sentiment serves as a kind of thumbnail to my argument on how the LSF are regarded overall. As a collective object, critics and fans alike dismissed them and, as Sims' piece illustrates, they have become an all-too-easy target for the vague and impulsive distinctions that are often drawn regarding the health of the genre. What Sims misinterprets is how the tonal rejection of the Schumacher film served to advance the genre. The effect that *Batman & Robin* materially had on the next several LSF served as an infamous criterion: it warned Hollywood stakeholders to approach new LSF projects

through a less-postmodern and less-lighthearted filter to create as much of an intra-generic contrast as possible. Furthermore, largely due to the sticky lineage of inert executive thinking, superhero comic book source material was also viewed with increasing suspicion.

However, it was not only the influence from C-level concerns that suppressed comic book mythology onscreen; those from the creative side also smothered it. This deemphasizing of comic book aesthetics and continuity in *X-Men* is perhaps best encapsulated in an anecdote actor Hugh Jackman told *MTV News* in 2018:

> By the way, comic books were banned on the set. Because Bryan Singer had this thing that people would think—he really wanted to take comic book characters seriously as real, three-dimensional characters. And he'd go, 'People who don't understand these comics might think they're two-dimensional.' So no one was allowed. It was like contraband. (Horowitz)

That particular tenor and on-set environment cultivated by Singer only reinforced similar choices that had been made in the script. The most conspicuous of these decisions was the eschewing of classic outfits for individual members (Wolverine's yellow and black jumpsuit with its distinctive headpiece, Cyclops's royal blue and yellow singlet, Rogue's green and yellow spandex accented by a leather jacket, etc.) in favor of muted versions (such as Magneto's distinctive bright red and purple outfit), or, as they rendered most characters, abandoning the original visual idiom altogether. At this time, even figures from the comics world defended this course. In the behind-the-scenes documentary, *The*

Secret Origin of X-Men (2003), X-Men writer Chris Claremont asserted that, "You have a whole different set of opportunities. And you have to redefine it in terms that make sense for the movie. Brightly colored spandex, skin-tight costumes in a comic book—great—because they're pictures. You put them on real people and it's like ugh."

Instead, Singer chose to outfit the team in unremarkable, matching black leather uniforms.[57] If Singer's objective was to suppress the more conspicuous markers of the X-Men's comic book heritage, then snuffing out the most visible elements of said heritage was a logical choice. Doing so, however, was also a strong rejection of perhaps the most recognizable part of what made the source material attractive to adaptation to begin with. In a 1998 *Comics Buyers Guide* post on the so-called "illusion of change" phenomenon in superhero comics, creator Peter David asserted that applying too many alterations to a classic can lead to "finding oneself stuck with a character who has lost those elements that made him appealing in the first place" (David).

Though David was referring to changes to characters in comic books, the same logic applies to superhero cinema. I am not asserting that Fox and Singer bled all appeal out of their screen version of the X-Men; however, Singer's near obsession with stripping away many essential elements of these characters did somewhat shift their ontological existence. If they all have to be so grounded—they at once become decidedly less "uncanny." Nevertheless, with the sting of *Batman & Robin*'s failure (at least in its reception and cultural legacy) still fresh, the final screen idiom for Singer's *X-Men* is at least logical, if not laudable. The costume redesign was a way to introduce a famous

[57] Ironically, these matching uniforms somewhat echo the matching navy and yellow outfits in which the team appeared during their earliest iterations in the Stan Lee/Jack Kirby years of the *Uncanny X-Men* comic book.

superhero team to a mass audience while still hedging against what was seen as additional risk. The muted uniforms still present the X-Men as recognizable enough for fans to grasp something familiar (such as including the white streak in Rogue's hair) while allaying the anxiety of Fox executives about turning off potential moviegoers through what they might have considered to be a kind of alienating goofiness.

Another conspicuous change involves character names. While *X-Men* did reference many of the team members' code names, their birth names are more commonly used in the film. One early exchange even uses Logan (aka Wolverine)—always one of the more cynical members— as something of a fourth-wall-breaking conduit to disparage the idea of code names in general:

> **PROFESSOR XAVIER:** Ah, Logan. I'd like you to meet Ororo Monroe, also called Storm. This is Scott Summers, also called Cyclops. They saved your life. I believe you already know Dr. Jean Grey. You are in my School for the Gifted for Mutants. You'll be safe here from Magneto.
> **LOGAN:** What's a Magneto?
> **PROFESSOR XAVIER:** A very powerful mutant. He believes that a war is brewing between mutants and the rest of humanity. I've been following his activities for some time. The man who attacked you is an associate of his called Sabretooth.
> **LOGAN:** Sabretooth? [*Looks at Storm]*
> **LOGAN:** Storm. [*Looks at Professor Xavier]*
> **LOGAN** [chuckling]**:** What do they call you? "Wheels?" This is the stupidest thing I've ever heard.

Singer and co. could make an argument that at this point in the script, Logan is still an outsider to Xavier's school, so the line is meant to express his particularly brusque

characterization early in the arc of the story, which later softens somewhat. However, an alternative (and more likely) reading is that, in this moment, Logan is a proxy for Singer. While the director may be interested in exploring the human condition through the lens of mutant outsiders, he consistently reminds viewers (both explicitly and implicitly) that the more hyperbolic elements within the comic book source material are too silly for this new form and are better relegated to the dusty long boxes of back issues that are a fixture in most comic shops than as a part of this modern version for the screen. Though the "Wheels" line is intended to get laughs, it is one of the few moments of levity inside a text that communicates a rather earnest and serious tone.

In a 2020 retrospective (both on the film and its troubled director), former Fox head Tom Rothman recalled that, "*X-Men* was a truly pioneering film. You have to remember, this was before *Spider-Man*. It was the first major Marvel adaptation to reach mainstream audiences," ... "The seriousness with which it treated its themes of otherness, discrimination and alienation gave commercial action filmmaking a jolt of emotion and purpose" (Siegel). Rothman's memory seems to be selective, as he is forgetting that *Blade*, also a Marvel property, beat *X-Men* to the theaters by two years. On the other hand, perhaps he simply does not consider *Blade* to be a "major" adaptation, which also is industrially telling. Rothman extends this antiquated thinking through his broad description of genre. In 2020, he referred to the "jolt of emotion and purpose" that *X-Men* wrought as beneficial for "action filmmaking," not "superhero filmmaking." Rothman (born in 1954) represents the old guard/old executive decision-making regarding superheroes, whereas someone such as producer Thomas Tull (born in 1970) absorbed the earliest LSF himself as a young man (Balio 27). Producers and stakeholders who

came of age consuming the LSF had a sharper appreciation of superhero cinema versus the more catch-all term from a more bygone Hollywood of "action" cinema.

Consider *X-Men*'s opening scene. After a brief bit of voice-over exposition from Patrick Stewart's Professor Xavier (who explains the concept of mutation), a flashback follows immediately. The film could have easily begun at that point, but the exposition serves as further evidence that the LSF were in a mode of generic instruction for the audience and generic pruning for the industry. While Singer, writer/producer Tom DeSanto, and screenwriter David Hayter could have chosen any number of scenarios to open the cinematic debut of Marvel's premier team-based book, the film maintains its grounded, deadly serious roots by opening with a scene that is set at a concentration camp in the pouring rain, depicting action that ultimately elicits sympathy for the film's antagonist. In other words, the opening is about as far from *Batman & Robin* as Singer could get.

This scene establishes a stark, dour tone that extends into something of a throughline in the film and also inscribes it with an indie film ethos. One of the promotional posters for the film contains the following tagline: "Trust a Few. Fear the Rest." The line is a clever one, as it raises a question as to whose perspective it refers to (i.e. humans or mutants), but also contains another layer—though paratextually—in creating the lived-in, dire, no-yellow-outfit world of the LSF at the turn of the century. Since *X-Men* exists in the pre-universe model, there was no cinematic shorthand available that could refer to previous installments—no adjacent films within a shared universe on

which to draw.[58]

Singer's *X-Men* is much more of an action film allegory than love letter to comic fans. Ramzi Fawaz points out this relationship clearly in his text *The New Mutants*:

> In the same period that Marvel and DC have recovered from financial loss, made exceptional gains in film, television, and licensing and upped the stakes of their most popular superhero stories with countless crisis events, both companies have found their previous investment in left-wing political imaginaries dovetailing with contemporary rights-based discourses and the politics of representation, most notably in the form of gay rights advocacy. Unsurprisingly they have unabashedly capitalized on this fortuitous alliance. (277)

Fawaz goes on to note that both Marvel and DC have invested capital and effort specifically into marketing comic books to "a wide array" of historically vulnerable and marginalized groups (277). That same "outsider" ethos that was foundational to the *X-Men* comics is also championed in the 2000 film, particularly through some of the depictions and exchanges of children revealing (i.e. coming out) their identity as a person who is a mutant. As this chapter has traced however, both Singer, his approach, and Fox's aversion to risk all contributed to shaping not only that particular film, but also a genre in a state of constant evolution—constant pruning. The financial and (largely) critical success of *X-Men* launched a lucrative franchise for Fox, and its industrial

[58] As a contrast, in 2020, it is much less common to find a superhero who is completely *disconnected* from any other narrative continuity than those that have at least some ties to other superheroes, continuities, or mythologies.

momentum also aided in the realization of perhaps the most highly anticipated LSF to that point—Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man*.

In addition to the nearly $300 million the film made worldwide, Derek Johnson notes the overall power that marketable IP such as X-Men now wield as loci of valuable franchising sources:

> Individual franchises like Marvel Comics' *X-Men* evinced these evolutionary shifts, mutating from an intra-industrial franchise with limited cross-platform appeal in the 1980s, to an inter-industrial franchise behemoth that drove excessive conglomerate expansion and corporate reorganization in the 1990s, and finally to a license-supporting partnership between economically and culturally distinct corporate entities. (104)

X-Men-as-LSF became all the more important as a scholarly object for understanding not only the changing corporate media landscape at the end of the 20th century, as Johnson underscores, but also as a key pillar in the formation of the new commercial constellations that licensed-based franchises largely propel.

Tonal Chaos, Legal Battles, and Post-9/11 Politics: *Spider-Man* (2002)

Though Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* debuted in 2002, the film's development dates back much further and offers salient insights into industrial decision-making and the overall zeitgeist in Hollywood in the mid to late 1990s. As was the case for several other LSF texts (e.g. *The Meteor Man*), the path to getting Raimi's *Spider-Man* to the big

screen in 2002 took a rather circuitous route. In 1979, Israeli cousins Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus acquired Cannon Films—a studio that specialized in mostly low-budget genre/exploitation pictures (Gross).[59] Having previously produced superhero-adjacent genre films (with action/fantasy titles such as *Enter the Ninja* [dir. Menahem Golan, 1981] and *Avenging Force* [dir. Sam Firstenberg, 1986]), Golan and Globus negotiated the film rights to one of Marvel Comics' mostly highly recognizable characters, Spider-Man. An early treatment was both on-brand for Cannon and illustrative of how comic book adaptations were sometimes seen in 1985. Director Joe Zito was hired to direct, having helmed 1985's *Invasion USA* for Cannon.[60] Approximately $1.5 million had been put into the film's development to that point (Gross), and a promotional poster had even been produced (see Figure 4). *Empire*'s Ed Gross outlines how this version would have been jarringly reimagined, in which the origins of Spider-Man's powers stem from an evil corporate scientist engulfing Peter Parker in radioactive waves: "The result is not the acquisition of spider-like powers, but, instead, a transformation into an eight-legged human-tarantula hybrid. For the rest of the story, Parker had to battle one mutant after another" (Gross).

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[59] Cannon Films also produced 1987's *Superman: The Quest for Peace* (dir. Sidney J. Furie). That film's budget was cut in half the day before production began (Gross), was universally panned as the worst entry in that series and failed to even break even on its $17 million budget. The aggregate effect resulted in an absence of a cinematic version of Superman until over a quarter century later in 2013's *Man of Steel* (dir. Zack Snyder).

[60] In a 2017 interview, Zito offered an appraisal of how Cannon's version of a Spider-Man film may have changed the industrial trajectory both of Cannon and the history of the genre: "...it was going to be their *Batman* — it was the film that was going to change the value of the company. Unfortunately, it came at a time when they could not afford to make it. Had we gotten the thing off the ground six months earlier, we would have made the film and it would have changed Cannon. The film we had in mind was a film that would have worked" (Gross).

What is particularly striking about this (albeit short-lived) treatment is that despite superheroes and superhero cinema existing and operating in disparate spaces within American culture and the culture of Hollywood, Spider-Man was still a well-known figure from popular culture. The comic had existed for years at that point, and both animated and live-action Spider-Man television series had previously been absorbed into the marrow of the American media experience. Yet, with rights firmly in hand to be the first to develop Spider-Man for the big screen, Cannon cultivated the material with an unorthodox and completely novel approach, extracting much of what made the character appealing in the first place. As Howe points out, superhero mythologies and storylines have been cultivated for years in the pages of their panel-based media ancestors—but the industry needed the LSF and years of generic pruning to make that apparent.

After a series of leadership changes at Cannon and other industrial deal-making, the rights to Spider-Man eventually landed at Carolco, which had produced the early Rambo films, in addition to James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgment Day* (1992) (Howe 381). By 1993, a significant amount of buzz was gathering around the development of the first live-action Spider-Man film ever to arrive in theaters.[61] A *Variety* article from September 1 of that year entitled "Cameron Delivers Spider-Man

[61] A live-action, low-budget TV version of the character starring Nicholas Hammond appeared on CBS from 1977 to 1979. In 1978, *Spider-Man: Strikes Back* (dir. Ron Satlof) appeared as a TV movie in America and was released theatrically outside of the United States. However, the film was merely a longer edit of several episodes of the CBS series (timeout.com). This same paradigm was used once again for 1979's *Spider-Man: The Dragon's Challenge* (dir. Ron Satlof).

Script,"[62] reports that "Marvel Comics' webslinger has gotten an important boost in his film career. 'Terminator 2: Judgment Day' and 'Aliens' helmer James Cameron last week handed in a script for the live-action 'Spider-Man' pic currently in early production stages at Carolco" (Moerk). The piece cites an unnamed Hollywood agent who felt that Cameron's Spider-Man film would "...be as big as the 'Batman' movie," referring to Tim Burton's highly successful adaptation, which had been released four years earlier.

Just as both script issues and executive infighting had bogged down Cannon's Spider-Man film, this trend continued at Carolco under Cameron. A seemingly small issue that eventually incited legal chaos among nearly anyone with a modicum of financial interest in the film stemmed from an onscreen producer credit. Having never achieved marked success outside of low-budget exploitation, Menahem Golan became determined to maintain a producer credit, having developed the film for years prior to Cameron's involvement, as he believed "that this was his last shot at legitimacy" in Hollywood (Gross). Instead of reaching an agreement, Cameron consistently refused, and Golan sued, leading to a raft of lawsuits:

> At that moment, the legal floodgates opened, with anyone who had ever signed a contract pertaining to the Spider-Man movie hitting the courtroom. In early 1994, Carolco sued Viacom and Tri-Star in an effort to do away with the Cannon-agreed-upon deals pertaining to television and home video rights. Tri-Star and Viacom, naturally, launched a countersuit

[62] Sean Howe notes that Cameron was paid "$3 million for a forty-seven page treatment that included pages of dialogue" (356). Gross characterized that figure as more of an early development deal, earning that particular sum for "coming on board" (Gross).

> against not only Carolco, but 21st Century Films and Marvel as well. Due to the fact that MGM was owned by the Pathe Group, it was their corporate belief that the rights to *Spider-Man*, especially since they had begun with Cannon (plus the deal with Carolco), sued Menahem Golan, Yoram Globus, 21st Century Films, Paretti, Tri-Star, Viacom and Marvel. Things almost got laughable when, within the next twelve months, 21st Century Films, Marvel and Carolco all filed for bankruptcy. (Gross)[63]

A 1999 piece in *Variety* sums up the path to the rights finally arriving at Sony:

> Litigation began in 1993 between 21st Century, Carolco, Sony and Viacom. MGM entered the fray in 1994, having purchased the rights from 21st Century and Carolco, both now bankrupt. Last year, Marvel, emerging from its own bankruptcy, came roaring back into the rights dispute, claiming that it had the exclusive right to make a Spider-Man film and that all the rights that had been granted had long since expired. With the case headed for a trial set to start Tuesday in LA Superior Court, a round of frenzied activity began. Last month, Judge Aurelio Munoz granted Marvel's motions for summary judgment against MGM. (Shiprintz)

[63] This legal fiasco is also emblematic of the era of the LSF. Despite continued rights issues surrounding the character of Spider-Man, few, if any, superhero licenses with the magnitude of such a high level of popularity still face these hurdles to production. For most, their parent company already owns the rights. Marvel's sale to Disney, and the recent merger of much of 21st Century Fox and Disney underscore this change.

With MGM cleared as the final legal hurdle, Marvel quickly made a deal with Sony, with whom the film would ultimately be produced. In the interim, James Cameron had struck historic success with 1997's *Titanic* and no longer had involvement with the project.[64]

However, a look into what Cameron's iteration of Spider-Man would have become continues to indicate how comic book material in Hollywood was at once evolving and yet very much a product of its time. Rob Liefeld's style is characterized by visual hyperbole: particularly when it came to the exaggerated depiction of weapons (particularly guns) and human anatomy. In that Levi's 501 advertisement from 1991, Spike Lee even pointedly asks, "So Rob, have you had any formal art training?" Looking down at the sketch before him, Liefeld responds, "No, just a lot of imagination, I think." That imagination helped shape the artistic modeling for many titles of the era. Liefeld began at Marvel on titles such as *X*-Force and The *New Mutants*, and before moving to the creator-owned upstart Image Comics—with titles such as *Youngblood*, *Spawn*, and *The Savage Dragon*. The LSF were not immune to absorbing some of these media markers of the zeitgeist—especially with a growing symbiosis between comic book companies and Hollywood studios.

Comic book stories that subverted historical-standard comic book hegemonies

[64] In an interview for her Cameron hagiography, *The Futurist*: *The Life and Films of James Cameron The Hollywood Reporter*'s Rebecca Keegan cites Cameron's lamentation at Fox's intractability in negotiating for the exclusive rights to Spider-Man: "They're so risk-averse...For a couple hundred thousand dollars in legal fees they could have had a $2 billion franchise. They blew it" (Keegan ch. 1). Whether or not Cameron had a grand franchise in mind at the time of his work developing the Spider-Man film is ultimately inconsequential; what remains an important point vis-à-vis the LSF is that, in the early 1990s, spending "a couple hundred thousand dollars in legal fees" was seen as too great a gambit—especially for a character that would prove to be so highly profitable a little more than a decade later.

and expectations in the 1980s (such as *Watchmen*) had proven successful for the comic book industry. Jason Sacks, author of *American Comic Book Chronicles: The 1990s*, told *The Hollywood Reporter* that comic books of that decade (the 1980s) saw "a rise of vigilante-type characters — all those stereotypical heroes with the words 'dead,' 'death' and 'blood' in their names — at around the same time the crime rate in America was surging to historical levels" (McMillan "Comic Book Industry"). That trend continued into the 1990s (though somewhat sanitized, and less critically celebrated) with violent storylines appearing more frequently in ongoing titles such as *Batman* and *The Punisher,* for example.

This tonal shift in comic books supported Cameron's vision for his potential Spider-Man film. It also dramatically moved the character away from the unrecognizable man-spider treatment that Cannon first conceived. Several panels from developmental story boards reflect the idiom of a classic Spider-Man, including the inciting spider bite on Parker's hand, a wide shot of Spider-Man hanging upside down above the Manhattan skyline, and at the dinner table with his Aunt May and Uncle Ben (Lamar). However, there were some strange—even regressive—elements included in Cameron's "scriptment" as well (McMillan, "What if James Cameron Made a Spider-Man Movie?"). Cameron's treatment carries a tone that seemingly plays on the popularity of the darker, grittier version of Batman that director Tim Burton had imbued into his screen version of that character just a few years prior to Cameron's work with the typically much more lighthearted Spider-Man. In that vein, Cameron's treatment is generally more violent, and features a Peter Parker with a harder edge, with *Empire* noting that, "Peter has a tendency

to break into serious profanity when he's pissed off" (Gross).[65] During a climactic battle with the film's antagonists Peter even tells an Electro-esque villain named Strand, "I'll kill you motherfucker! You hear me! You're dead, you sick bastard!" after the villain shocks a captured Mary Jane.

The more conspicuously regressive moments, however, deal with the nature of Peter's interactions with his long-running love interest, Mary Jane. One scene early in Cameron's treatment reflects this in particular:

> We will hear Peter's thoughts (the equivalent of thought-bubble word balloons) as a voice over. He is tripping on the power of being able to come and go like a wraith... to watch without being seen. The ability to go anywhere he wants without asking permission. He feels like an adult for the first time. A man. He goes to Mary Jane's house. Drop down from the roof and looks in her window. She turns off the light, and thinking she is unobserved, strips off her clothes. She slips into bed in just her panties and a T-shirt. But even this forbidden glimpse is too much for Peter. He loses his concentration and with it his palm grip on the wall and crashes into the rose bushes. (qtd. in Tomasi, Figure 3)

Later in the treatment, Cameron sets a sex scene between a fully realized Spider-Man and Mary Jane high atop a tower of the Brooklyn Bridge:

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[65] Cameron's wildly different characterization of Peter Parker seems to channel not only Burton's sensibilities with Batman, but also comic book creator Frank Miller, who famously reconfigured the character as a cryptofascist in 1986's *The Dark Knight Returns*, and later included the much derided dialogue, "What, are you dense? Are you retarded or something? Who the hell do you think I am? I'm the goddamed Batman," as a response to Robin in *All Star Batman and Robin* #2 (2005).

She stands with her back against a girder, needing to feel something solid. Spider Man stands before her, a perfectly formed male silhouette with a soothing low voice.

SPIDER MAN: Courtship among the spiders is highly ritualized. It varies from species to species. The male spider may circle the female, or wave his front legs... to signal that he is not prey.

Spider Man moves in a hypnotic arc around her. He raises his hands in a dance-like movement. Lowers them.

SPIDER MAN: The female usually signals her willingness by an uncharacteristic passivity.

MJ takes a deep breath. Her lip trembles. Her knees are weak. Her eyes, though, are steady, gazing at the silhouette before her. She doesn't move or speak. He moves closer.

SPIDER MAN: In certain crab spiders, such as Xysticus, the male will attach strands of silk to the female... tying her limbs...

Spider Man moves his hand gracefully across her, and she sees the sheerest silk webbing glinting in the moonlight. First one wrist. Then the other. Hypnotic movement in the moonlight. Her arms are bound to the wall. Her breathing gets more rapid.

SPIDER MAN: Since the female can break free at any time, the bonds have only symbolic significance.

MARY JANE: The male must be very bold... to take such liberties with the predatory female.

SPIDER MAN: Yes. He is very bold. But he must also trust her. (he moves very close) Close your eyes.

He removes his mask and kisses her. Their mouths very slowly and very sensuously devour each other. Peter and MJ are locked together. He is mesmerizing, gentle, powerful. He pushes up her skirt. They make love, high above the world. She doesn't look .

These script choices from such a famous figure in commercial cinema certainly date the

project.[66] Moreover, Cameron's characterizations mark a culture in which the #MeToo movement was decades away, and physical invasions toward women (be it voyeurism or body contact) were often played as perfectly acceptable, or even for a laugh. Over a quarter century later, the scene reads as a particularly cringeworthy moment—it unoriginally conjures more famous versions of male scopophilia, such as a near direct lift of a scene from *Revenge of the Nerds* (dir. Jeff Kanew, 1984), as well as the shower scene in *Porky's* (dir. Bob Clark, 1981). However, the description of the action is strikingly even more disturbing. The specific word choice of "...tripping on the power" and learning that his new abilities seem to abet feelings of acting on his Id "without asking permission" is troubling. That this behavior leads to Parker feeling "...like an adult for the first time. A man," is especially problematic.

The second example on the bridge seemingly includes consent from Mary Jane, but even that is somewhat murky. A generous reading of this scene is that Cameron is indelicate in depicting romance, and that the scene is framed by a ham-fisted heteronormative male point of view regarding sex and intimacy. A harsher appraisal is that, by this point in the script, Spider-Man has shed the anxiety of stealing those first glances into Mary Jane's bedroom while maintaining the power trip that Cameron references in that scene. While it is clear she is willing to explore sexuality atop the bridge, it is decidedly less apparent that the inclusion of Spider-Man's webs-as-bondage

[66] Even the stylistic choice of writing "SPIDER MAN" without the characteristic hyphen is telling of an era in which writers and producers either had no fear of fan reprisal over formal matters long settled in the source material such as this, or that getting these types of specificities correct was not something on the minds of screenwriters of the era. In this sense, the omission of the hyphen is a microcosm of progress toward the treatment of superhero IP in Hollywood: the character goes from a kind of man-spider monster in the earliest drafts to much more of a version created by Steve Ditko and Stan Lee in Cameron's. Yet the industry is essentially still spelling the character's name incorrectly.

was something in which she was interested. That the double-entendre-laden bonds are referred to as "symbolic" lands like a facile scriptwriting cover to make the act appear less intrusive and frightening.[67]

Despite Cameron's take on Spider-Man containing both regressive and clichéd moments, his involvement in developing his Spider-Man project was an important moment within the corpus of the LSF. Historically, it is helpful to understand how a Cameron Spider-Man film was on the path to what might have been a major thematic driver for years to come in the genre (i.e. a cynical Spider-Man). However, despite never being produced, the historiography of this episode of LSF is informative. Peter Parker's seemingly requisite happy-go-lucky characterization was not requisite for one of Hollywood's biggest players, nor was it for Fox. The ultimate sticking point was that superheroes—even as famous characters such as Spider-Man—were considered a dubious investment by corporate managers. Cameron's embrace of the comics (at least in part) advanced the genre in ways that would continue to have a lasting impact for years going forward. His attachment alone led credence to the source material and to the genre, and though his hard-edge webslinger never hit theaters, there are flickers of Cameron's influence in versions that subsequently did. For instance, Spider-Man's biologically based web-shooters (originally mechanical devices in the comics) were a relic of the scriptment. Cameron approached the source material with much more alacrity than Bryan Singer did years later. Finally, though Cameron's treatment embodied a kind of Gen-X

[67] Though more evolved politically than Cameron's version, Raimi's first Spider-Man film is not without it a few of its own regressive warts. For example, in the cage match wrestling scene, Parker sarcastically refers to his opponent's (played by professional wrestling star "Macho Man" Randy Savage) outfit as "cute," before asking, "Did your husband give it to you?"

cynicism, that tone was ultimately shifted by the man who would eventually see this long-gestating project to theaters.

In many ways, Sam Raimi was the ideal director to helm the first original theatrical film based on the character of Spider-Man. Raimi grew up as a comic book reader, and this connection contributed to him seeking out comic book source material as he was establishing himself in the industry (Morales). This factor is especially critical because, as outlined in Chapter 3, geek culture (i.e. comics and their related extensions) were not popular on a mass scale in the 1970s of Raimi's youth. Comic book readership that lasted past grade school was still largely interpreted as a semiotic (though stereotypical) marker of the socially undesirable. During the years in which comics were still mostly received within the culture as square, Raimi emerged as not only a fan, but also an artist *seeking* this material. Raimi's resumé contains significant evidence that he was not merely a hired gun hot off of genre pictures such as *The Evil Dead* films or *The Quick and The Dead* (1995). He had a clear interest and a proven track record with this kind of material.

After failing to secure the rights to several comic book properties, Raimi eventually turned to his own imagination, creating a treatment for what would be his first involvement with the superhero genre, albeit an unexpected idiom: *Darkman* (1990). As previously addressed in Chapter 2, Raimi's vision for *Darkman* was something of a gothic hero turned superhero. In the film, scientist Peyton Westlake (Liam Neeson) is disfigured and left for dead by gangsters. In the process of healing himself, Westlake gains superpowers but struggles to repair his badly damaged face. Using his advanced technology, Westlake (now "Darkman," though he is never referred to that way) uses

photorealistic skin-like masks to infiltrate criminal enterprises, tactically inciting mass confusion. That Raimi was already working within the superhero genre (*Darkman* was even an original superhero story) also led to additional prestige and additional work for Raimi, which would ultimately earn him a reputation as a formidable filmmaker with a rather unimpeachable cinematic CV[68] regarding being a candidate to direct one of the biggest films of the first decade of the 21st century. *Variety*'s December 31, 1989 review of *Darkman* is brief, yet telling: "Despite occasional silliness, Sam Raimi's Darkman has more wit, pathos and visual flamboyance than is usual in contemporary shockers. Universal, the studio that first brought the Phantom of the Opera to the screen, returns to its hallowed horror-film traditions with this tale of a hideously disfigured scientist (Liam Neeson) seeking revenge on LA mobsters." There is indisputable textual evidence that *Darkman* has "horror-film traditions"—the film even has "dark" as part of its title. However, there is another term used in this review that is even more informative, "shocker." This is not an inaccurate description, but it is an incomplete one. Contemporary viewers and reviewers would recognize many more connections to the superhero genre, but in 1989, *Darkman* was easier to classify as horror. The LSF simply had not suffused enough of the industrial infrastructure to be understood (or sold) more clearly as a superhero film.

As of the late 1980s, just as Cannon had wanted to make Spider-Man a mutated monster and Cameron dropped the hyphen from his name, it is clear that Hollywood was not collectively thinking much about the superhero genre. In his text *Film/Genre,* Rick Altman describes the concept of genre as follows:

[68] As referenced in Chapter 2, Raimi was also a producer on the 1994 film *Timecop*, based on the Dark Horse comic of the same name.

> ...genres provide the formulas that drive production; genres constitute the structures that define individual texts; programming decisions are based primarily on generic criteria; the interpretation of generic films depends on the audience's generic expectations. All of these aspects are covered by the single term of genre. (*Film/Genre*, 14)

In 2020, I read *Darkman* as every bit the superhero film because it contains an origin story; a masked hero who has gained new abilities and perspective; a love interest; Manichean villains, etc. However, in 1989, the superhero film had not yet become culturally and industrially saturated enough to trigger a different generic recognition in not only late 20th-century moviegoers, but also late 20th-century critics and trade publications. Thus, as mentioned previously, *Variety*'s description of *Darkman* as a "shocker"[69] is not inaccurate, but it is incomplete. Tim Burton's *Batman* debuted earlier that very year, yet with all of its cultural salience, no one saw its shadow reflected in a film that shares many common generic elements. This is but one illustration of the critical role the LSF played in pruning and shaping the contours of the superhero film in the liminal era.

In 2002, even within the industry's crown jewel of superhero films, there were stylistic facets to be polished. Compared with where Raimi's *Spider-Man* began its cinematic life at Cannon, his version gets much of the character's mythology right, yet pruning is still evident in the wake of several LSF that followed. The character's screen

[69] For context, *Variety* applied similar descriptions (i.e. derivations of "shock") to more explicit examples of horror films, such as in their review of *Candyman* (dir. Bernard Rose, 1992), which described the film as one that "delivers the requisite shocks" (Variety Staff).

idiom mirrors that pop-inspired red and blue outfit that Steve Ditko first manifested in the 1962; VFX technology was finally approaching the sophistication needed to render the balletic action of such an agile protagonist in a more seamless way; and the film also maintains its fidelity to the characterization of salt-of-the-earth teen-savant Peter Parker. The script underscores his altruism and largely eliminates most of the toxic creepiness found in earlier versions, such as in Cameron's "scriptment." Nevertheless. there is one bright line stylistic marker that makes the liminal element of the LSF particularly remarkable: the aesthetic and performance choices surrounding the character of Norman Osborn/Green Goblin.

Dafoe is the only member of the cast who seems as if he had been inserted from an entirely different film, and his presentation of the character is an outlier in the movie. It is a performance much more aligned with the Schumacher Batman films than Raimi's noir-adjacent take on superhero action. The Green Goblin's costume itself even reflects not only pruning in superhero aesthetic choices in adapting looks that long existed only on the page, but also another technical limitation of this moment of the LSF, dialogue exchanges through masks. Superheroes are inherently action-oriented, and the method of exhibiting superhero dialogue and/or exposition was an approach that was quickly pruned away for characters whose faces were partially obscured or completely shrouded. *Slate*'s David Edelstein described Dafoe's glider-riding rogue as one who surfed "...around skyscrapers with his elongated reptilian helmet-head, he's like H.R. Giger's alien hanging ten, and Raimi delights in putting Goblin's and Spider-Man's heads together for protracted dialogues: Neither has a mouth that moves, so these are amusingly akin to comic-book frames" (2002). The issue of mouths in masks is something of an ontological

impediment most notably negotiated within the LSF and is unlikely to be cleanly squared—even with the most advanced digital tools.

On the page, word balloons succeed largely because of what Scott McCloud describes as "closure" (63) (i.e. the work our brains do to fill in that which is seen, from that which is implied, in the act of processing comic books), but the depiction of superheroes in the midst of speaking can sometimes be less effective when brought to cinema. Therefore, subsequent superhero film directors needed to reconsider certain formal conventions in this expanding genre, even with regard to techniques that had been foundational to the language of cinema. For example, superheroes such as Batman, Superman, Daredevil, or The Punisher all avoid this issue by having outfits that leave their mouths exposed, but in 2002, determining how masked stars would talk to each other was something to be honed. Raimi and screenwriter David Koepp engineered an explosive device to blow away half of Maguire's Spider-Man mask, revealing most of his human visage, and Dafoe removes his helmet in the last seconds before his character's death, but neither correct the awkwardness that the masks present onscreen. However, the visual awkwardness (and remnants of campiness) was, even in 2002, still being pruned from the superhero film. As I described in Chapter 2, CGI technology was improving rapidly, as was the link between superhero cinema and VFX as a major structural marker and support.

9/11-as-Ghostwriter

That playful exuberance that Spider-Man shows off in the aforementioned teaser—bounding through the concrete jungles of Manhattan—takes on a completely new

semiotic reading on September 12, 2001. Scott Bukatman notes that, "Superheroes are physically graceful, but they are also graced through their freedom, their power and mobility" (*Matters of Gravity*, 188). He adds that superheroes "...embody the grace of the city; superheroes are graced by the city" (*Matters of Gravity*, 188). This notion is embedded within the generic DNA of all superheroes who primarily dwell in urban spaces, rendering the destruction of the World Trade Center a direct blow to a portion of what makes them so unlike the rest of us, yet they are constantly adjacent to us and that which we inhabit. The fall of the Twin Towers siphoned a modicum of power from the collective mystiques and psyches of both superheroes and the American demos.

The degree of freedom and innocence that Spider-Man (as well as the largely NYC-based Marvel Universe of characters) previously had was forever altered—morphing the complexion of the LSF as well. The closing shot of Raimi's *Spider-Man* depicts the titular character swinging through the New York skyline before finally landing atop a skyscraper prominently flying a large American flag. This jingoistic choice is a conspicuous and important one. The first major studio, big-screen adaptation of Spider-Man ends with a nod to the collective American imaginary—and it is a conservative tableau. That Sony and Raimi agreed (or perhaps compromised) on this image as the film's final shot points to Hollywood's expanding understanding of the symbolic aura of the superhero film.

The same filmic product that began with a teaser eerily bathed in national tragedy ends with the protagonist of that film essentially draping himself in perhaps the most essential artifact of American iconography. On the one hand, the image can be read as an inspirational gesture toward unity and resilience. However, it is also a strong indication

by the culture industries of their decision to present cinematic superheroes as more likely to be protectors of hegemonic norms than critical resisters. Hassler-Forest focuses on one set piece in the film as an especially hegemonic tableau. The film's "World Unity Festival" takes place in Times Square, where a made-for-the-movie event has brought a hive of activity and conviviality to the space. Hassler-Forest notes that the scene is a "Disneyfied" one (128), with corporate iconography (semiotically reifying the neoliberal ethos of the high corporatized product in which they appear) clearly and prominently populating much of the mis en scene. He argues that Spider-Man, like most other corporate-owned superheroes "represents in many ways the kind of 'stable mythology' that expresses fundamental beliefs of neoliberal capitalism," adding that "...this genre of popular fantasy articulates, sustains, and—occasionally—critiques the cultures of 21st-century capitalism" (Hassler-Forest 4). Raimi's film does not end on an image of Spider-Man, or even a vista of New York, but rather the most foundational (and fraught) piece of American iconography. That decision was a vivid reminder that while superheroes of the LSF may face the most terrifying screen villains with exuberance, they would be less willing to fight the machinery of power.

Fredric Jameson argues that, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism" ("Future City" 76). By extension, the last shot in *Spider-Man* at the very least communicates a clear message of how most other superheroes likely would be framed moving forward. This image essentially serves as a paraphrased version of Jameson's thesis. The stakes of the world's fate seem plausible, but the hegemonic undertones that many superhero films carry will not be undermined. Questioning the dominant answers seems to be the only Kryptonite that Hollywood and

the larger, interlinked structures of culture industries might face. In *Hollywood in the New Millennium* (2013), Tino Balio points to Spider-Man as a character franchise that "became a mother lode of profits" for Sony in the early part of the 21st century. He observes how,

> responding to mandates from their corporate parents and stockholders to increase revenue, Hollywood fled to the safety of tentpoles and franchises ... Although the costs of producing and marketing such pictures were enormous, they were the only types that could perform on a global scale and generate significant returns. (65)

Spider-Man ultimately grossed more than $1 billion worldwide. Its profits pushed Sony into first place "in market share for 2002 and posted a profit for the second time since Sony bought Columbia Pictures in 1989" (Balio 51), and each of the Raimi-directed Spider-Man films "ranked no. 1 in ticket sales on Sony's roster each year they were released" (Balio 52). Those figures alone begin to tell the story of this final stage of the LSF, but it is Balio's assertion that "Hollywood fled to the safety of tentpoles and franchises" that is so salient here. Of course, there had been many previously successful film franchises (*Star Wars*, *Batman*, and the-then-budding *Harry Potter* series), but Raimi's *Spider-Man*, like Singer's *X-Men* before, began to command the attention of executives planning future production slates—they were now just too profitable and culturally salient to engage with them any other way. Or, as Balio surmises, tentpole movies and franchises increasingly revealed themselves to be a "good hedge against a dying DVD business, the fragmentation of the audience and the unknown impact of the

internet and social media on Hollywood marketing practices" (65). My intervention throughout has underscored how the generic pruning performed by studio stakeholders and creatives *led* to superhero texts being "a good hedge," but Balio's identification of other factors that created an industrial environment that, in turn, created logical inroads into franchise-age Hollywood also aids in understanding the overarching historical milieu at a point of change at the dawn of a new century. That the LSF bridged a largely analog world to a largely digitized one makes them a unique body. There are few, if any, other generic objects that were still forming over a new century that was experiencing rapid technological growth, while also integrating so well with the changing politics of the day. An understanding of how these film's individual pluralities and complexions (both that which was favored textually and that which was pruned away) helps in the larger recognition of what the superhero genre is at large, and starkly, how it came to exist.

Conclusion

This chapter presented two case studies on how the superhero-as-superstar-era LSF both created new heights for how the object of the superhero film would be viewed in Hollywood, as well as highlighting the textual and industrial changes at work in forever reinscribing the superhero genre. As the previous chapters illuminated, the superhero genre itself was occupying a kind of "liminal" position. It had existed before but was in a sort of chrysalis state. It was expanding and was starting to be understood as a different phenomenon than it had previously. The U.S. movie-going audience was also increasingly familiar with superheroes as part of the history of American popular culture in ways that had not previously existed; with famous examples such as Dozier's *Batman*,

Donner's *Superman*—even Burton's *Batman*—having all been ensconced into cultural memory for some time.

Near the end of the aforementioned DVD extra, *The Secret Origin of X-Men*, producer Tom DeSanto insouciantly expresses a prescient thought: "The great thing about *X-Men*, and I think Fox realizes this, is that it's a franchise; 100 different stories you can tell..." The line gestures to the kind of thinking that studio executives were beginning to adopt; however, the promotional documentary presents it as something of a vague afterthought. In 2003, Hollywood was still wary of the source material, but the franchising potential of superheroes was becoming more codified with each successful entry into the genre—which is what DeSanto is signaling. Film scholar Thomas Schatz also notes in his piece "The New Hollywood" that "...it's much more likely that the New Hollywood and its characteristic blockbuster product will endure, given the social and economic development in the major overseas markets, the survival instincts and overall economic stability of the Hollywood studios, and the established global appeal of its products" (36). Writing in 1992, Schatz mostly does not discuss superhero cinema outside of *Batman* for reasons that I hope are abundantly clear; there were not many to analyze at that time. However, Schatz's observation that Hollywood studios have sharp "survival instincts" is the enduring element for this study. This explains both why executives were tentative about producing superhero cinema at the start of the LSF era, and why they were so enthusiastic about fueling the genre at the end of it.

In the late 1970s, when DC Comics' Sol Harrison tried to convince *Batman* producer Michael Uslan that pursuing the film rights to that character was essentially a fool's errand, Uslan responded with a striking remark. He told Harrison that his vision of

what a superhero on screen could be was "almost going to be like almost a new form of entertainment" (Burton). Though the existence of *a* relationship between comic books and cinema is certainly nothing new, this budding era of superstar superheroes within the LSF represented *a new* relationship between the two media. The value of studios investing in securing superhero rights and investing in expensive productions within the superhero genre began to become apparent. The success of big-ticket IP such as Spider-Man and the X-Men set the stage for future change, not only because they were profitable, but also, as Hassler-Forest points out, because their ideologies neatly dovetail with the type of stories that often reflect (either tacitly or explicitly) hegemonic norms.

The proprietary value of films such as *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* also reflects a changing media landscape. These movies were different—even in their own time. As Derek Johnson notes, after emerging from the rocky aftermath of speculation boom of the early 1990s, "Marvel found itself in a position where it could not expand yet its primary output—comic books—offered little hope for a recovery. Not only was the company in danger, but the comic industry as a whole also seemed to need a translation to a new media" ("Will the Real Wolverine Please Stand Up?" 71). The success of *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* was helpful to Marvel publishing, but Johnson's point also signals that that the comics side of superhero media was steeply waning in prominence. Johnson's point signals also a non-Marvel-specific move by comic book publishers (who were increasingly being absorbed by conglomerates such as Time Warner and Disney) away from comic books as their first priority and toward the modern corporate conception of comics as progenitors of branded content and licenses. The LSF had a distinct pattern of existence: They arrived in Hollywood with significant cultural impact via *Batman* in

1989, but then entered a state of generic liminality. During that period of cinematic metamorphosis, the industry pruned out the experimental elements perceived to be cumbersome, confusing, or generically deleterious —all before a presenting a new refinement of form. All of that merged *after* the superstar superheroes debuted in the earliest years of the 2000s, providing a more fully legible industrial map of not only what superhero IP was lying strangely fallow, but also how a changing American media landscape and popular imaginary at the end of the 20th century also birthed a more fertile path forward for the future of the superhero film in Hollywood.

VI. CONCLUSION:

LEAVING LIMINALITY

In December 1988, Marvel writer and editor Carol Potts told *The Washington Post* that, "The future rests with the first heroes out the gate... Keep your fingers crossed. A bunch of bad movies could come out and kill off [the trend] for the next 20 years" (Broeske). This dissertation has traced the history of a corpus that (for nearly exactly the length of time that Potts cited) was instrumental in demarcating norms and expectations for the superhero genre. As a body, the LSF was the primary driver of what made the genre legible as a collective (and commercial) ontological entity. However, too often, the LSF glibly remain considered "a bunch of bad movies." For example, in researching *Spawn*, I noticed one retrospective critique from a reviewer named Tim Brayton from the fan site "Alternative Ending." Brayton writes:

> ...the 1997 market for comic book adaptations was starting to soften. It's tough to remember in the second decade of the 21st Century, but there was a time when superhero movies were generally held to be laughable second-tier garbage, outside of Warner's Batman movies. They were for the most part junky genre fare, based on minor characters that nobody had heard about - *Spawn* being a singular exception - and they had the whiff of the gutter; nobody looked upon *Judge Dredd* or *Barb Wire* with anything remotely like respect.

Brayton is a blogger, so it is apropos that his assessment is hyperbolic. What was much

more useful for me as a heuristic device for research was his glib assessment of the larger superhero genre of the time. His retrospective review exists as a piece of cultural discourse indicative of a larger perspective directed toward the LSF in their own time, and in Brayton's case, continues to this day. That he defends LSF based on Batman IP is part of a myth that, post-1989, Batman is always "better." This is a myth forged in large part because Batman-as-commodity has been most thoroughly and longitudinally laundered into the fabric of American commercial culture; so, it is a myth fueled by capitalism.

I cite this amateur review of *Spawn* as evidence of the misunderstood position that the LSF occupied. Brayton asserts that by 1997 the "market for comic book adaptations was starting to soften." Though there are some leaner years on the release slate, there is not a single year within the corpus of the LSF in which there is not at least one film based on a superhero comic or about a superhero. The core of Brayton's complaint is not that the market had turned on the genre, but that the genre was not presenting offerings to his (and likely the wider fan culture's) liking. *Spawn* is an imperfect film, but the vitriol directed toward it in this review is partially informed by the contemporary landscape of the superhero genre. At the time of *Spawn*'s release in 1997, it was still simply a genre that was evolving. Tom Ryall (1975) defines genre "as patterns/forms/styles/structures which transcend individual firms, and which supervise both their construction by the filmmaker, and their reading by an audience" (28). It is the latter half of his definition regarding a genre's ability to "supervise" a film's construction and how a film is read that is so germane to the LSF. Since these films occupied the superhero film's liminal period, they logically fit as the texts in which the "patterns/forms/styles/structures" that Ryall

refers to are organized. The "supervision" informed what would be pruned via the pre-production and production phases, and the inculcation of audience expectations grew deeper as new superhero texts began to become characteristically streamlined, having passed through an increasingly sophisticated industrial filter.

The Cinematic Fruits of Generic Pruning

I mark the move out of liminality with the arrival of *Iron Man* in 2008. However, this shift should not be viewed as some sort of goal to be attained; it was a process. It was an era in which Mike Richardson was told that, "comic book people should stay in Portland"; in which Rachael Talalay recalls MGM having "second thoughts..." about *Tank Girl* "...right up until the day we released and maybe after" (qtd. in Wynne 20); and even a time in which James Cameron could not convince Sony to invest a few hundred thousand dollars to secure the exclusive rights to Spider-Man. Yet, the industry continued to produce superhero films despite these challenges.

The previous chapters traced how, while superhero cinema is nearly as old as cinema itself, the LSF represents a pivotal moment of experimentation for the genre. Though often disparaged retrospectively, my view of the corpus is similar to Justin Wyatt's connection with the "high concept" Hollywood films of the late 20th century: "I hope that this period would not be dismissed as unproductive or stale" (202). I include Wyatt's assertion here as it mirrors my own academic relationship with the LSF. I am uninterested in debates regarding the level of quality (which themselves are largely informed by industry discourses, such as reviews), but, like Wyatt, I approach this corpus as one that was in need of deeper historical investigation the light of the industrial

decisions, trade narratives, and production trends of the day. *Spawn*, *Judge Dredd*, and *Barb Wire* might exist largely as punchlines in our collective mediated memory, but no matter the pre-release buzz or box office receipts, each LSF contributed to the generic pruning that I argue ultimately formed the genre. From an industrial perspective, these films are much more than the one-star reviews that dogged so many would indicate. I have elucidated how Hollywood's aversion to risk (in this case investment in IP) led the industry first to exhaust more esoteric properties with little brand equity attached. Through generic pruning, Hollywood experienced its growing pains with the genre. For example, *The Mask* was billed as everything *but* a superhero film. *Judge Dredd* was built around an action star. A Black Panther film never made it out of development, and *Mystery Men* (dir. Kinka Usher, 1999) was *The Avengers* before *The Avengers*—but also a comedy.

The advent of Christopher Nolan's Batman films largely incited internal industrial thinking about the genre as an increasingly viable capitalistic opportunity. One obvious aspect is that Nolan reignited and reinvigorated Batman's cinematic presence after nearly a decade's absence. For the LSF, his work is unique in that his Batman films begin in the LSF era in 2005 but conclude after the liminal period, in 2012. Nolan's Batman trilogy is consequential for this study because of that historical distinction. The final pruning of the LSF occurred during the last three years of the liminal superhero period from 2005 to 2008. Nolan also solidified the idea of an interconnected movie universe, albeit one limited to Batman IP. In his films, characters appear and reappear, and references from

past installments carry narrative weight in later ones, etc.[70] This paradigm proved to be successful. Audiences were able to see the development of a Bruce Wayne who starts out in *Batman Begins* as a determined but inexperienced crime fighter, to a Batman disposing of nuclear weapons and saving a city under siege by the end of *The Dark Knight Rises* in 2012. That long-term development (both in the diegesis and in the production of the film) was something that Burton's Batman films reflected somewhat, but 1992's *Batman Returns* is much more of an isolated sequel than part of a larger narrative *gestalt* as Nolan's Batman trilogy is. At the end of the LSF, movie universes (which date back to Universal's interconnected monster films) were something that began to rekindle Hollywood's interest in that bygone cinematic design.

The success of Nolan's Batman trilogy also demonstrated an increased appetite for superhero content. Nolan's *Batman Begins* earned over $374 million in 2005. The very next year, *Fantastic Four* (dir. Tim Story) brought in over $330 million. Though The Fantastic Four are beloved by comic book fans, they have had less success as big-screen iterations, making the earnings of that particular film all the more indicative of a renewed era in superhero cinema. It was this tail end of the LSF that helped studios realize that investing in A-list IP (aided by advances in effects, expanded budgets, and stronger scripts) would lead the way to record profitability. Today, studios would be tripping over themselves to have the chance to pair James Cameron with a leading character such as Spider-Man. The road to the generic dominance of the superhero film was a long, and in many respects, torturous one. Nineteen years passed between *Batman*

[70] In contrast, Jack Nicholson's Joker was definitively killed off in 1989's *Batman*. This example is a further distinction of a changing approach to the superhero film. Like the comic books from which they sprang, "definitive" deaths tend to be much more impermanent later in the liminal era and beyond.

in 1989 and *Iron Man* in 2008. Overall, the studios needed years of someone else taking the initial risk of investing in the genre before nearly the entire industry enthusiastically followed suit.

The Superhero Film Post-Generic Codification

Through the many years and contortions of pruning, the LSF era ended with the superhero genre in a much more organized state than at its beginning. The LSF began with an entry that was a cultural phenomenon in *Batman*. However, despite the massive effect of Burton's darker take on the Dark Knight, the genre had yet to establish a generic consensus around the form, to say nothing of the lack of generic clout and developmental infrastructure needed for the superhero film to evolve in a more rapid fashion. Part of the legacy of the LSF is that they incited the notion of a generic body, but the process required time. I have argued throughout this thesis that the collective work (both via production and the industrial reading of bottom lines) of the LSF had to occur to even conceive of "the superhero genre," despite semi-consistent examples of individual superhero films throughout Hollywood's history. The LSF presented the formula for a codified superhero film to Hollywood *by* Hollywood. The industry itself had identified and streamlined the markers of what Rick Altman (1999) refers to as a "generic designator" (93); it simply required nearly two decades of pruning.

One sea change and "generic designator" that the LSF wrought near the end of their time is the notion of expanding superhero narratives across multiple films. Sometimes these are direct sequels, but often this industrial tactic can occur with

characters working throughout the so-called movie universes that, fittingly, mimic the comic book narrative universes from which many superhero films are derived.

In *A Theory of Narrative*, Altman describes the difference between a media text product possessing "some" narrative as opposed to "a" narrative, which is more complete. He uses the particular narrative space that soap operas occupy as an illustration:

> Daytime television soap operas offer a good example of "some" narrative. No matter when we tune in, we are rapidly convinced that we are dealing with a narrative text; yet no matter how long we watch, we never reach closure. Unlike most novels and films, soaps are all middle, we nearly always join them in media res and leave them before a satisfactory conclusion is reached. Yet we never doubt their narrativity. At every point we acknowledge that they are narrative in nature; that is, we recognize in them 'some' narrative. (*A Theory of Narrative* 17–18)

On the other hand, science fiction and fantasy are often much more abundant narratively, but often the narrative is not exactly the point. Experiencing a narrative world that increasingly becomes richer with each novel iteration not only creates more narrative texture (references at a glance, transmedia storylines, etc.), but also makes the world *itself* something to exploit. Is the aesthetic bliss of Tony Stark insouciantly cruising the world in his do-it-all super suit all that different than *The Kiss* (dir. William Heise. 1896) when approaching the two strictly from a spectacular perspective?

Narrative complexity and the general cinematic form have changed dramatically, but as Tom Gunning importantly laid bare, the singular power of spectacle remains timeless within the realm of cinema (Gunning). The modern novelty is the ability to return to not only a single spectacle or spectacular moment, but to an entire spectacular world. Furthermore, these worlds are ubiquitous. However, the map for finding metaphorical roads to superheroes on the big screen was curated, revised, and then repeated through the LSF. In the age of the universe model, even when we find ourselves at the end, there is always more "middle."

Avengers: Endgame is the highest grossing film of all time and is also a helpful heuristic device for understanding just how much generic pruning was at work during the epoch of the LSF. While some examples (particularly films based on Batman and Blade IP) did spawn several sequels, most existed as a cinematic "one shot," and none were conceived under the paradigm of interconnected stories that comic books themselves had been working under for decades. *Iron Man* has something of a mythic status because of its unexpected success and an almost metaphysical, from-on-high sort of popular reverence, but director Jon Favreau remembered just how uncertain the production was in an April 2019 article in *Variety*: "'We were on very shaky ground," recalls Favreau. 'That first film could not have felt smaller or more handmade. I was constantly being reminded that if we screwed up and we couldn't pay back the loan, the bank was going to take all of the catalog'" (Lang). Though the LSF were on a much more generically stabilized course by the time *Iron Man* entered production, Favre's recollection of being "on shaky ground" is a marker of the LSF that echoes fears that LSF filmmakers such as Rachel Talalay had with *Tank Girl* over a decade earlier.

Moreover, the more overarching meaning of superhero cinema lies in the dynamic that these quintessentially American products (mass produced, heavily marketed, exploiting sex and violence, repetitious, etc.) have on American culture. During a conversation with the sportswriter Howard Bryant about the popular nature of the Super Bowl, political/cultural observer Chris Hayes claimed that the game was the last mass culture event in modern American life (*Why Is This Happening?*). He then provided one possible competitor: Marvel movies. While the parameters of that assertion might be overly narrow, Hayes' rhetoric is correct. Through 24 films and many more on the way, Marvel Studios are a current Hollywood hegemon. The nearly $23 billion that the MCU has earned since 2008 alone is evidence of that. The fact that, at least for now, audiences are still required to see Marvel films on the big screen before they are available through other forms of exhibition—and that they do so with great alacrity—also speaks of their mass impact. However, the notion of mass impact and appeal is also a trade narrative that Marvel itself perpetuates, as Derek Johnson has described ("Cinematic Destiny"). Consider the marketing done around Marvel Studios' 10-year anniversary, for example: in addition to a publicity "class photo" displaying all the key actors and creatives involved with the firm, Marvel also released a series of stylized posters marking the occasion and adding the tagline, "The First Ten Years." The industrial implication of course (explicitly through the use of "First") is that Marvel wants consumers to conceptualize that their mass appeal is so great they are just getting started. The Mercury Theater's radio broadcast of "War of The Worlds," the moon landing, the MASH finale, and Luke and Laura's wedding all drew huge numbers as collective media milestones. Today, however, our niche-programmed and media-siloed lives have greatly reduced

those shared media opportunities. It is not Westerns, comedies, science fiction, or even less generically specific action films that draw people together en masse on a consistent basis—it is the superhero film.

The LSF then become a crucial historical body for understanding not only how we arrived at this particular cultural moment, but also for how American moviemakers and moviegoers were understanding superheroes as a generic cohort. The few showpieces of the Netflix catalog, such Martin Scorsese's *The Irishman* (2019) or the Sandra Bullock vehicle *Bird Box* (dir. Susanne Bier, 2018), might draw similarly large numbers of viewers, but that is the approximate effect for nearly every big-budget superhero film today. Returning to Hayes' example of the NFL, Disney can count on many of those same football fans, in addition to many non-football fans, to patronize their films. The box office numbers are simply too astronomical for consumers of superhero media, or even consumers of broader action films, to be the only patrons of modern superhero cinema. Just compare the profits: In 2018 alone, the North American comic book market, defined as the "total sales of graphic novels and periodical comics in the U.S. and Canada" (and includes all genres, formats, and imports), was approximately $1.09 billion (Reid). Conversely, the same sales figure for the North American box office was $11.4 billion (McClintock). While my example is not precise, its veracity becomes evident considering that in 2018 *Aquaman* made $199 million; *Venom* made $213 million; *Ant-Man and The Wasp* made $216 million; *Deadpool 2* made $318 million; *The Incredibles 2* made $608 million; and *Avengers: Infinity War* made $678 million at the domestic box office alone. Therefore, when Michael Uslan told the industry faithless in the 1970s that his new conception of what a superhero film could be was "almost going to be like

almost a new form of entertainment" (Burton), there is an increasing element of truth to that notion—or at least a germ for further study for future scholars.

Marvel may be the best example of this phenomenon, but it applies well beyond their bounds. Time Warner is also heavily involved in the universe approach with the DC Extended Universe (DCEU) and the growing *Harry Potter* franchise. Legendary Pictures has made this paradigm shift especially transparent with the budding *Pacific Rim* franchise. Promoting *Pacific Rim: Uprising* (2018) at the 2017 New York Comic Con, writer/director Steven DeKnight laid this aspect out explicitly:

> The plan was always to use this movie as a launching pad. If enough people show up to this, we've already talked about the plot of the third movie, and how the end of the third movie would expand the universe to a Star Wars, Star Trek style—where you can go in many, many different directions. You can go main canon, you can do spin offs, you can do one offs. That's the plan" (Ratcliffe).

Universal has also embraced this model with the *Fast and the Furious* series. The remarkable element of the *Fast* franchise is that, unlike newer movie universes that are conceived of as universes, the *Fast* films evolved into one. It is also not surprising given the timing of *Fast*'s existence: The first film, *The Fast and the Furious* (dir. Rob Cohen), premiered in 2001—in the heart of the LSF timeline. The universe model is based on comic book continuity; thus, making a movie universe with similar traits is fairly simple. The term "Marvel Universe" referred to comics for decades before the realm of the cinematic overtook its semantic meaning. However, for the *Fast* universe, it was a case of

Universal identifying a successful formula, understanding their market, and then seeing the larger universe model succeed before finally integrating it as part of the broader approach to the *Fast* films.

My notion of brand-as-message operates similar to Derek Johnson's description of Oprah Winfrey's media empire. Johnson asserts that, as a form of franchise, Winfrey's empire "might not suggest just an array of different lifestyle products, and personalities aimed at specific niches, but a nexus of cultural production..." (*Media Franchising*, 241). The specific version of cultural production that these universes and properties offer is really the core of the appeal. Consumers want to be in that space with those characters more than any one particular narrative. For example, Marvel may like to consider *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (dirs. Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, 2014) their *Day of the Condor* (dir. Sydney Pollack, 1975), but *Winter Soldier* is built on a familiar and strong cast, explosions, shootouts, and lots of impossibly dynamic takedowns-by-shield—not the political intrigue. Consider that *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* earned nearly $300 million domestically, and that *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (dir. Tomas Alfredson, 2011) had no comic book ancestry and earned just over $25 million despite a similar thematic throughline. A universe is a roller coaster; a movie is but a single drop. The extensive apparatus that conglomerate Hollywood has now honed has shifted branding into a quasi-medium all on its own. Again, this is not exclusive to Marvel, but they were the first to perfect the universe model. Despite their current power, little to none of this infrastructure could have existed without the many narrative, textual, and overall industrial lessons that the LSF provided.

Although Hollywood has steadily engineered their products with inherent potential for spin-offs (as Justin Wyatt details in his 1994 text, *High Concept*), the LSF existed when cinema tended to have more contained, more definitive narratives. In today's landscape, it is true that fans steeped in esoteric lore understand recognizable big-screen adaptations of famous comic arcs such as the Infinity War storyline, Age of Ultron, or even a shoehorned version of the Death of Superman, but the majority of audiences are unlikely to even be aware of these allusions. However, the underlying logic in the age of the film franchise/universe model is simply to return to a given fictional realm, to the overarching mythology—that is the draw. This production decision was revealed through the LSF. Continuity (such as in Nolan's Batman trilogy), for example, was something to be marketed, and it sold well. In an interview for the "The 2000s" episode of CNN's 2019 anthology series *The Movies*, film historian Neal Gabler notes that, "The new stardom is the brand. Marvel is arguably the biggest star in the history of movies, and I would take that argument and say that nothing comes close. No movie star has ever come close to being as big as Marvel is in motion pictures today" ("The 2000s").

While Gabler's assessment flirts with the boundaries of corporate public relations speak, I find it to be apt. It is an amusing parlor game to debate whether the MCU's "stardom" is bigger than someone like Rudolph Valentino, Ingrid Bergman, or Charlie Chaplin; however, Gabler's assertion of "the new stardom is the brand" increasingly rings true. Schatz (qtd. in Palotta 2017) buttressed this point when he noted that studios are valuing IP over stars, and how several key characters were quickly recast. Schatz's work, particularly in his 1993 essay "The New Hollywood," also helps us understand this

one particular element the superhero genre had been germinating for years. He uses the blockbuster (and superhero adjacent) example of *Star Wars* to explicate:

> ...emphasis on plot over character marks a significant departure from classical Hollywood films, including *The Godfather* and even *Jaws,* wherein plot tended to emerge more organically as a function of the drives, desires, motivations, and goals of the central characters. In *Star Wars* and its myriad successors, however, particularly male action-adventure films, characters (even "the hero") are essentially plot functions. ... This is not to say that *Star Wars* does not "work" as a narrative, but that the way it works may indicate a shift in the nature of film narrative. (Schatz 23)

My interest is not so much whether superhero films are particularly plot driven (though they typically are), but rather in the way that Schatz traces a Hollywood that was changing well before the LSF (*Star Wars* premiered in 1977), and only continued in this direction with the rise of film franchises and tentpole/event movies. Hegemonies need to be understood, even if they are all to be eventually replaced by new ones. The story of the LSF is imperative to understand this current industrial hegemon. In 2017, Schatz reminded CNN that genres are not likely to remain evergreen—even powerful ones: "I think there's definitely an endgame. When that is? I don't know. Is it fifteen movies from now? Is it three movies from now? ... These characters have existed long before most of us were around and I think they'll exist long after most of us are around" (Palotta). Schatz's major implication here is that although superheroes might "exist long after most

of us are around," perhaps they will do so more commonly through non-cinematic media forms (as they first did). It will be the work of future scholars to determine if and when that time has come.

The Superhero Film and Postmodern Inevitability

This study traced how the generic pruning of the LSF was the chief driver of how the superhero film genre was curated and codified. However, that very codification spawns a companion sub-genre that can only take on meaning once norms and expectations become laundered into the fiber of what makes a genre recognizable in the first place. By the end of the LSF, superheroes had gained sufficient cinematic cultural solvency to become the subjects of an intra-industrial acknowledgment: the spoof. The quintessentially postmodern genre of cinema that parodies other genres, also known as a spoof film, is nothing new. The Zucker brothers shone one of the brightest lights in this realm, but many others even predate *Airplane!* (dirs. Jim Abrahams, David Zucker, and Jerry Zucker, 1980). John Landis' *The Kentucky Fried Movie* came out in 1977, and the legendary Mel Brooks made titles such as *Blazing Saddles* and *Young Frankenstein,* both premiering in 1974. This sub-genre even dates back to the dawn of cinema: Edwin S. Porter directed a parodic sequel to his famous 1903 silent film *The Great Train Robbery,* with 1905's *The Little Train Robbery*. Given all this precedent, there is seemingly little remarkable about the 2008 spoof film *Superhero Movie* (dir. Craig Mazin). The timing of that film's production, however, is salient for thinking about the overall complexion of the LSF and how that corpus informed the Hollywood superhero boom that was just ahead.

Superhero Movie is an LSF, but it is the last entry of the corpus to be released prior to *Iron Man*'s premier two months later in May 2008. That fact becomes particularly salient when considering *Superhero Movie*'s unique standing as both an LSF and a parody of the superhero genre. Not only does *Superhero Movie* offer a novel level of hybridity into the superhero genre (superhero film meets spoof film), but more important for this project, it speaks to a greater cultural and industrial saturation of superhero films than had existed in years prior to 2008. Though it directly parodies films such as *Batman, X-Men*, and *The Fantastic Four* (dir. Tim Story, 2005), the film's structure essentially follows the same narrative blueprint of Sam Raimi's first *Spider-Man* film. In his review of the film for the New York Times, the critic A.O. Scott made this prescient observation:

> "Superhero Movie" occupied two screens at the Times Square multiplex where I saw it with a select group of cinephiles at 10:45 on Friday morning, and I'm sure the crowds will be large as the weekend progresses. And then it will be forgotten until a few months from now, when the next gaggle of earnest, troubled, costumed crime fighters take over those screens and make me look back in sorrow at this missed opportunity to cut them all down to size.

Scott's implicit genre fatigue is on display here, and he's correct that *Superhero Movie* is uninterested in an earnest media critique and far more interested in packing as many zeitgeist-specific gags into the script as possible. However, the real evidentiary place of *Superhero Movie* in this dissertation is that it serves as an excellent illustration of how the

genre grew and changed *after* a period in which the rhetorical nature of spoofs and parody would suggest that the genre had reached its peak cultural moment. *Superhero Movie* would not exist in a world without the LSF. Big-budget LSF such as *Spider-Man* and *X-Men* specifically informed expectations and irony surrounding the genre, making *Superhero Movie* a significant moment for understanding the LSF as both a collection and also a moment in time. The spoof also serves as a chronological marker of how far the genre would still be expanded.

While *Superhero Movie* accurately parodies many tropes endemic to the LSF, there is an even stronger example of the effect their genre-codifying work had upon the superhero film at large. Years after it commented on the industrial casting-off of camp in the heart of the LSF era, *The Simpsons* would yet again provide a sketch of what a possible *Universe Movie* might satirize and deconstruct. A March 2020 episode called "Bart the Bad Guy" opens during a packed-house theatrical presentation of a faux film by "Marbel Studios" titled "*Vindicators: Crystal War,"* which of course parodies big "event" comic book movies such as *Avengers: Infinity War*. Just as with that film, "*Vindicators: Crystal War"* ends on a cliffhanger as "Chinnos" (a multi-chinned knock-off of Marvel's Thanos character, voiced by Marvel Studios President Kevin Feige) crystalizes the Vindicators using the "Doomsday App" on his golden mobile device.[71] The plot of the episode involves Bart threatening mass spoilers after seeing an early copy of the faux film's sequel "*Vindicators: Crystal War: Resurgence*," as well as an elaborate Hollywood virtual reality simulation to trick Bart into believing that spoiling the film would have dire consequences.

[71] The "Vindicators" are all knock-off Avengers, such as a proxy of Tony Stark called "Magnesium Man," whose persona is satirically described as "funny, but not too funny."

Though *Vindicators: Crystal War* references a specific universe, a monologue by one of the two of the "Marbel" executives (voiced by MCU directing stalwarts Joe and Anthony Russo) illustrates how the logic of the universe model is ubiquitously intertwined under conglomerate ownership in Hollywood. That dynamic is an industrial shift that occurred during the LSF era, particularly near its end, as I detailed in Chapter 4. In *The Simpsons*, after the ever-skeptical Lisa asks, "All this just to keep spoilers from leaking?", one of the executives provides a hyperbolic behind-the-scenes sketch of the possibilities of a lackluster performance by these highly synergistic corporate products: "Vindicators, colon, Crystal War, colon, Resurgence bombing at the box office would have devastating consequences. Failing theme parks, unsold Halloween costumes rotting on the docks, mass suicides by popcorn farmers...anything worse than a 55 percent hold on its second weekend—the global economy collapses like a house of cards!" The fictitious executive describes a media landscape that scholars such as Eileen Meehan were tracing decades ago. The gargantuan film franchises that now consume so much of modern production slates only exemplify an even fuller expression of what it means for the culture industries to fetishize a media product, and how that fetishization is realized.[72] To illustrate it another way, *The Simpsons* parodied Hollywood wrestling with forming the superhero genre in 1995, and then how massively popular and industrially influential they are in 2020. The LSF represent the genre-defining work in between.

[72] That "Bart the Bad Guy" utilizes MCU heavyweights such as Kevin Feige and the Russo brothers as guest stars makes for clever fan service. However, their appearance also complicates the depth of the episode's critique—as does Disney's current ownership of both *The Simpsons* and Marvel. The episode cracks a joke about this as well; however, it lands as gallows humor when an entity critiquing corporate power is owned by said power.

Deadpool 2 and the Burden of Back "Issues"

Though *Superhero Movie* indirectly beat it to the satirical punch ten years previously, a decade later, a film based on a wisecracking, fourth-wall-breaking superhero provided a more direct, internecine, and updated critique of the genre. A particular section in *Deadpool 2* (dir. David Leitch), a film that ontologically straddles the line between superhero parody and earnest superhero fare, provides an important case study regarding the overarching state of the contemporary superhero genre. After the first "ending" in *Deadpool 2*, audiences see a short scene with two supporting characters, Negasonic Teenage Warhead and Yukio, who are reconstructing the device that the antihero Cable uses to move about time in the diegesis. Deadpool soon enters the frame with a requisite quip. They toss him the device, before Yukio says, "That was probably a bad idea." A pensive Negasonic Teenage Warhead replies with a sardonically comedic "What have we done?" before the camera cuts to black and white credits, as Cher's "If I Could Turn Back Time" fades in. After a few more credits roll by, the film flashes back to an alternative outcome of a pivotal event in the film. We see an out-of-suit Wade Wilson return to the exact moment in which his fiancée Vanessa is murdered; this time, however, he prevents her death and kills her assailant.

As soon as Wilson dispatches Vanessa's attacker, he tells her that he will be right back and literally turns the time dial that he wears like a wristwatch. He then travels through time to prevent the death of a character named Peter, the naïve and middle-aged member of "X-Force" who was quickly killed at the beginning of the film. However, that is where the more traditional use of both stingers (extending the narrative, teasing upcoming installments, or even as a space to crack one final joke) ends in *Deadpool 2*.

The next few gags in this stinger sequence are complex. On the surface, they serve as a punchy, on-brand version of the kind of humor that is so critical to Deadpool as a character. Nevertheless, these last two scenes are even richer from an industrial perspective.

The next vignette in this overarching "If I Could Turn Back Time" stinger sequence starts on a pair of feet. The camera tilts up to reveal the shirtless, tattooed, mouthless, and generally unrecognizable version of Deadpool from his 2009 debut in the critically-skewered and financially disappointing, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (dir. Gavin Hood). Here, one of that film's more "dramatic" moments is reimagined. Just as Hugh Jackman's titular Wolverine pops his adamantium claws and is about to square off with Reynolds' "Weapon XI,"[73] as he does in *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, the red-suited Deadpool from the film viewers are currently watching (*Deadpool 2)* appears, shooting the Weapon XI version of Wade Wilson/Deadpool in the head, killing him instantly. "Hey, it's me," Deadpool tells Wolverine as he gives him a disarming wave. "Don't scratch... just cleaning up the timeline," he jokes before coldly putting several more bullets into the previous version's lifeless corpse (see Figure 6).

The final bit features Reynolds the actor in street clothes, sitting behind a desk in a well-appointed office, reading a script. "Welcome to the big leagues kid," he tells himself before the camera cuts to reveal the title of "GREEN LANTERN" on the cover. The shot lingers on the page for a beat before a jarring gunshot rings out, the script instantly splattered with blood. The perspective returns to the camera setup in front of

[73] In *X-Men Origins: Wolverine*, Reynolds' character is named Wade Wilson, is skilled with blades and is even briefly called "Deadpool" once. However, outside of some early characterization, the character is starkly different.

Reynolds, revealing that Deadpool is the shooter. He addresses the camera, and says, "You're welcome, Canada," before turning and walking off screen to close the film.

Both these stinger vignettes are most legibly presented as devices to communicate to fans that the creative stakeholders of *Deadpool 2* also felt their generic pain for these largely disparaged entries into the superhero genre. Additionally, the stingers are a hip way to gain fan equity through a kind of reflexive Hollywood mea culpa. However, the communicative core of the stingers reads as an implication that the industry now feels that it knows exactly how to craft superhero movies. Just as Hollywood can now reenlist camp without fears of generic self-destruction, the industry can now conspicuously mock itself for the most egregious missteps *precisely because* they know superhero films are the current hegemon. A film such as *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* would have been typical in the era of the LSF due to the overarching studio suspicion (i.e. a lower budget) and/or ignorance of the source material. Wolverine is arguably an A-list character, but most other elements about the film—the director, budget, effects, and script for example—are all less sterling than the IP itself. The proverbial studio-noted-to-death scripts (which are a byproduct of aversion to risk) were especially common in the pre-universe days of the LSF, and were part of what plagued LSF such as *Spawn* and early iterations in the development of *Spider-Man*.

While there are variations in the ways that LSF were developed, or even in their overall quality, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* is emblematic of the winnowing down of a type of superhero film in which comic book mythology was often an afterthought. The film is industrially problematic enough today, that an actor (Reynolds) playing the "same" role would appear in a different superhero film years later (now replacing

Wolverine as the headliner) for the sole reason of underscoring how different and poorly that particular film represented the genre acts as the new symbol of superhero cinema success arriving to erase the old. As the industry itself tells us, it is a "cleaning" of the timeline.

The stinger sequence not only criticizes that which occupies the textual of confines *X-Men: Origins: Wolverine,* but also the IP that was produced and controlled by a totally separate firm. The comment on *Green Lantern* is not subtle. It is certainly a shot at Warner Bros./DC, but industrially it indicates the fact that *everyone* is doing well now. Even Warner Bros. can share in the laugh because they are now seeing lucrative returns on IP such as Wonder Woman, Aquaman, Harley Quinn/Birds of Prey, etc. Moreover, films that were less critically lauded, such as *Justice League*, still turned a significant profit. *Superhero Movie* may have been commenting on a genre that was increasingly gaining a seat of power in Hollywood, but the lampooning in that film is largely done *through* the vehicle of the superhero film, not about the superhero film genre itself.

By contrast, the deeper commentary embedded within the *Deadpool 2* stingers are aimed directly at the perceived lack of quality/care of specific films. Though *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* and *Green Lantern* premiered several years prior to *Deadpool 2*, the generic milieu and box office success occurring at the time suggests that the stakeholders of *Deadpool 2* felt that those films could have been something greater. Of course, the concept of quality, especially within the realm of the cinematic, is quite subjective. For the purposes of this study, the saliency lies in the industrial reveal of identifying what at least one producing group views as a good or a bad superhero movie; perhaps that is the most powerful meaning of the *Green Lantern* stinger in particular.

During the peak of the LSF (say 2000), audiences likely would have experienced a different reaction to *Green Lantern*. For example, in a movie-going era in which Bryan Singer was banning comic books from the set of *X-Men*, *Green Lantern* opens with a voice-over prologue from actor Geoffrey Rush describing the somewhat dense backstory of the Green Lantern Corps. while psychedelic images of deep space and undulating emerald constructs flow through the frame. Still, the stinger critique is a clear comment on not only the ubiquity of the superhero film in American (and increasingly international) culture, but also of the quality. That *Deadpool 2* can make a joke about a big-budget, profitable superhero film that stars the same actor is remarkable. Audiences now can typically expect a certain level of quality via production design, effects, and story regarding superhero films. Therefore, the *Green Lantern* gag would be ineffective if there had not been such a pre-established expectation for that film.

Perhaps the creatives behind *Deadpool 2* were also sensitive to discourses such as that which appeared in an October 1, 2019 roundtable by three writers from *The Hollywood Reporter* (Rooney et al.). The occasion for the discussion was the recent release of Todd Phillips' 2019 film *Joker* (2019). Critic David Rooney concluded by adding,

> Todd, I'm with you in having pretty much lost all interest in comic-book movies, a sub-genre bloated by over-saturation into an inescapable cultural monolith. Even when there's a strong case to be made for individual films — like *Black Panther* or *Wonder Woman* for their representation of race and gender demographics too long shut out of the superhero echelons — they're still cogs in

> the same bombastic industrial machinery. I appreciated this movie simply for giving me something human-scale in a comic-book treatment. Sure, its social commentary might not run deep, but at least it's psychologically rooted in some semblance of our messed-up reality rather than in disposable escapism.

"Bloat." "Cultural monolith." "Fatigue." For non-fanatics, these are all descriptors that not only reflect the massive success that superhero movies have had in Hollywood, but also the genre's ubiquity and repetitive presence. I could include any number of additional quotes about how the filmic intelligentsia have grown weary of the glut of superhero films that the culture industries have privileged since 2008. The crucial element of Rooney's argument is that he felt they were "still cogs in the same bombastic industrial machinery." Again, much of the most contemporary discourse about superhero cinema is that of ubiquity and exhaustion, but the descriptor of "bombastic" feels almost personal. Seasoned reviewers likely saw most LSF as what Pauline Kael might have referred to as "great trash," but not something that needed their serious attention. Several decades later, perhaps the vitriol superhero films now elicit is that they are inescapable.

Since contemporary superhero cinema has considerably less risk involved today (especially in codified, well-established universes), many entries into the genre are now increasingly adopting some of the aesthetic sensibilities present in several early installments of the LSF. For example, 2020's *Birds of Prey (And the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)* [dir. Cathy Yan] begins with an animated prologue sequence in which Margo Robbie's titular Harley Quinn delivers an abbreviated character biography. This opening animated scene educates consumers who may be unfamiliar with

her backstory and reinforces the cartoonish characterization/tone of Harley Quinn while also providing something of an unusual element of the superhero genre: mixed media. Recall that *Tank Girl* employs an opening title sequence comprising comic book images and includes entire animated action scenes in similar ways. Talalay wanted to inject Jamie Hewlett's aesthetic style and Gen-X sensibilities right from the start of the film to transpose at least a modicum of the post-punk, indie aura that Tank Girl had— emanating from her ontological existence in comic books.

A quarter of a century later, parallel moments can now return to the genre in more liberated ways. Just as camp can now be implemented and experimented with in various ways within the superhero film *because* it is now so dominant, the use of comic book aesthetics, tropes, homages, and even comic book images themselves can similarly be integrated as part of the form without an underlying industrial fear of being associated with what for decades was too often treated as the intended-for-juveniles leper of the commercial cinema world. The end credits sequences in Jon Watts' *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) and *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019) also illuminate this trend. Both films conclude with animated music videos of Spider-Man and other characters from the films rendered as everything from folded-paper-based stop-motion animations of the characters, to a more "comix"-esque iteration of the hero—depicted as a spiral notebook sketch version—jumping across pages of intentionally banal composition paper. And, though entirely animated, 2019's *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (dirs. Peter Ramsey, Bob Persichetti, and Rodney Rothman) is as visually experimental as anything being produced by commercial Hollywood studios. Rachel Talalay's inclusion of so much comic book imagery near the beginning of the LSF was utilitarian as well as

creative. Though some early LSF problematized (which is to say they were pruned out) explicit comic book aesthetic references, latter LSF began to entertain, if not embrace, comic book elements. Some of the most genre-defining elements (whether they remained for long or not) occurred in the LSF. Their occupation of a unique and generically primordial time partially enabled all the experimentation and pruning that many LSF bear. When no codified formula exists, it is easier for genre to be made, and especially, as Andrew Tudor suggested, for genre to be made in a mold that is "what we collectively believe it to be" (7). The LSF formed that collective belief.

I have come to think of the superhero genre itself as the entity that possessed more liminal qualities than the individual texts themselves. Unlike a genre such as the Western, which had a longer history in popular culture before its cinematic arrival, the superhero genre had to experience a nebulous metamorphosis before the industry could even decide on how "a superhero film" would ontologically exist in a consistent way. In the conclusion to his 2013 text, *Media Franchising*, Derek Johnson offers almost something of an apology by expressing that his chosen topic probed an aspect of media studies "usually considered too culturally frivolous for examination in terms of creativity and too obviously industrialized to warrant more than a structural critique" (41). Johnson deconstructs all the nuanced ways that media franchises significantly affect realms of the industrial, the economic, and even the cultural. He also recognizes that while the scholarly work he did in this area is foundational and essential, it also scalable and able to be adjoined to other media histories, such as the LSF specifically. Through my examination of the LSF and the industrial "back issues" that have characterized their development, I hope to have elucidated how superhero films had been scattered

throughout the history of Hollywood, but that a larger superhero genre was in a chrysalis state, expanding and becoming a different phenomenon than it had previously. The new version of the superhero genre was born out of an industry fixated on mitigating risks.[74] Yet, risk is an ideological construct. It was the perception that the genre itself was volatile by nature—that it was not worth investing in much. The liminal period provided ideal industrial conditions for the LSF to develop: a few successful superhero films gathered the attention of what superhero material could be onscreen, coupled with the rise of blockbusters and VFX technology that facilitated the arrival of the genre-defining body that is the LSF.

This dissertation served not only to historicize an underappreciated object of cinema history, but importantly, it also traced how a genre that once considered Batman to be "as dead the Dodo" came to thrive because of the lessons gleaned through generically pruning the LSF. Hollywood was not only adapting superhero comics in the liminal era of 1989–2008, but it was also *adapting itself* through the realization of what pruning could exact upon a genre that was finally streamlined and made clear over years of industrial interventions and refinery. In Chapter 4, I referred to one of the many movie posters that were part of the marketing campaign for *X-Men*. The tagline of that particular poster reads, "Trust a Few, Fear the Rest." In many ways, I find that line to be an overall symbolic caption for the LSF and the process of generic pruning in general. Hollywood has been intermittently producing superhero cinema for decades, but for most of that

[74] Virgin Group founder Richard Branson distilled the risk-averse thinking that increasingly applied to the commercial film industry: "The moment you start working for big corporations, if people try something and it goes wrong, they're likely to lose their jobs. Therefore, they're far less likely to take risks—which is why Hollywood is so fear-driven (qtd. in Balio 65).

time, superheroes were underappreciated. Consequently, they were underdeveloped and took longer than some cultural forms to coalesce as a genre.

The LSF ushered in a new era of cautious faith in Hollywood. The industry "trusted" superhero films only after *Batman* ignited a more pointed interest in adapting comic books. However, even with the tremendous success of Burton's film, the genre was not yet coherent enough to gain a universal, almost reflexive, sense of trust in the superhero film. The LSF changed the expectations of a genre that began its life in a completely different medium (comic books) and then transformed how the superhero film would be framed and presented. The long associations and stereotypes of superheroes being intended for children, the years of campy media iterations, and the experimental weirdness of films such as *Tank Girl* prevented the industry from forging the superhero genre decades earlier than it did. Other genres, such as the Western or gangster film, were clarified much more quickly by contrast. Nevertheless, most LSF turned a profit. From a political–economic standpoint, that consistency alone began to attract more attention to superhero material. Once married to increasingly glossy effects work and marketed as budding blockbusters, the superhero film became codified through the trials and lessons (both for producers and consumers) that the LSF laid bare. Blair Davis notes that, "Comics and cinema have always been allies" (251), it was just that for most of Hollywood's history, the superhero film was the sidekick to most other genres. It needed its own origin story, and that industrial history lies in the partnership that developed during the era of the LSF.

FIGURES

Figure 1:

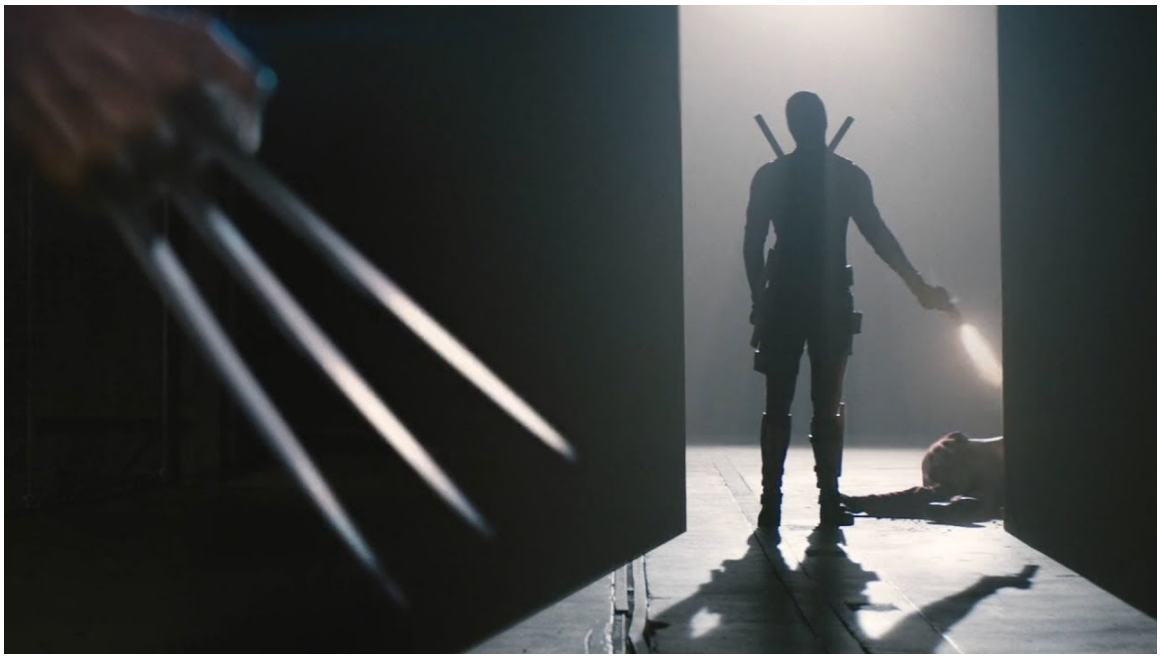
Figure 2:

Figure 3:

Figure 4:

Figure 5:

Figure 6:



APPENDIX:
TABLE OF LIMINAL SUPHERO FILMS

#	Year	Title	Box Office Gross (worldwide, unless indicated)
1	1989	Batman	$411, 348,924
2	1990	Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles	$201,965,914
3	1990	Darkman	$48,878,502
4	1990	Dick Tracy	$162,738,726
5	1991	Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles II	$78,656,813 (domestic)
6	1991	The Rocketeer	$46,704,056 (domestic)
7	1992	Batman Returns	$266,822,354
8	1992	Buffy the Vampire Slayer	$16,624,456 (domestic)
9	1993	Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles III	$42,273,609 (domestic)
10	1993	The Meteor Man	$8,016,708 (domestic)
11	1993	Batman: Mask of the Phantasm	$5,617,391 (domestic)
12	1994	The Crow	$50,693,129 (domestic)
13	1994	The Shadow	$48,063,435
14	1994	The Mask	$351,583,407
15	1994	Blankman	$7,941,977 (domestic)
16	1994	Timecop	$101,646,581
17	1994	The Fantastic Four (Corman)	$ N/A (unreleased)
18	1995	Tank Girl	$4,064,495 (domestic)
19	1995	Batman Forever	$336,529,144
20	1995	Judge Dredd	$113,493,481
21	1995	Mighty Morphin Power Rangers: The Movie	$66,433,194
22	1995	Barb Wire	$3,793,614
23	1995	The Phantom	$17,323,326
24	1996	The Crow: City of Angels	$17,917,287 (domestic)
25	1997	Turbo: A Power Rangers Movie	$9,615,840
26	1997	Batman and Robin	$238,207,122
27	1997	Men in Black	$589,390,539
28	1997	Spawn	$87,840,042
29	1997	Steel	$1,710,972 (domestic)
30	1998	Blade	$131,183,530
31	1998	Orgazmo	$602,302 (domestic)
32	1999	Virus	$30,652,005
33	1999	Black Mask	$12,504,289 (domestic)
34	1999	Mystery Men	$33,461,011
35	2000	X-Men	$296,339,527
36	2000	The Specials	$13,276
37	2000	Unbreakable	$248,118,121
38	2002	Blade II	$155,010,032
39	2002	Spider-Man	$821,708,551
40	2002	Men in Black II	$441,818,803
41	2003	Daredevil	$179,179,718
42	2003	X2:M-Men United	$407,711,549
43	2003	Hulk	$245,360,480
44	2003	The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen	$179,265,204
45	2004	Hellboy	$99,318,987
46	2004	The Punisher	$54,700,105
47	2004	Spider-Man 2	$788,976,453
48	2004	Catwoman	$82,102,379
49	2005	The Incredibles	$631,606,713
50	2005	Blade: Trinity	$128,905,366

#	Year	Title	Box Office Gross (worldwide, unless indicated)
51	2005	Electra	$56,681,566
52	2005	Constantine	$230,884,728
53	2005	Sin City	$158,753,820
54	2005	Batman Begins	$374,218,673
55	2005	Fantastic Four	$330,579,719
56	2005	Sky High	$86,369,815
57	2006	Legend of Zorro	$142,400,065
58	2006	V for Vendetta	$132,511,035
59	2006	X-Men: The Last Stand	$459,359,555
60	2006	Superman Returns	$391,081,192
61	2006	My Super Ex-Girlfriend	$60,984,192
62	2007	Zoom	$12,506,188
63	2007	Ghost Rider	$228,738,393
64	2007	300	$456,068,181
65	2007	TMNT	$95,608,995
66	2007	Spider-Man 3	$890,871,626
67	2007	Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer	$289,047,763
68	2008	Superhero Movie	$71,237,351
69	2008	Iron Man	$585,174,222

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