Between the Panels

How the interactions between commerce and art shape superhero comic book film adaptations

(2000-13)

Tim Stafford

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Acknowledgments

Contents

List of figures

Abstract

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This dissertation's principal contribution to knowledge lies in its demonstration of the thesis that while economic considerations are ultimately determinant, artistic considerations have a degree of influence in shaping contemporary superhero comic book film adaptations and, as a consequence, the genre as a whole. Specifically, the dissertation argues that while the description of economic considerations as determinant in the *last* instance is accurate in relation to the long term development of the genre, in terms of each individual superhero film, a more accurate description is that economic considerations are determinant in the *first* instance.

It focuses on the period 2000-13, at the beginning of which the superhero film genre was restarted by Bryan Singer's *X-Men* and during which franchises such as *The Dark Knight* and *Iron Man* achieved unprecedented box office success for studios such as Warner Bros. and the newly created Marvel Studios. The dissertation considers how the relationship between art and commerce has been theorised historically, with particular emphasis on Marx's mode of production and superstructure formulation and the subsequent modifications to it, including those of Louis Althusser.

The dissertation uses a multiple case study comprised of four significant film franchises: Fox's first *X-Men* trilogy, Universal and Marvel Studios' *Hulk* films, Marvel Studios' *Iron Man* trilogy and Warner Bros.' *Dark Knight* trilogy. Each case study identifies specific changes made to the comic book source material in adaptation and by combining readings of the films with a consideration of their commercial contexts, demonstrates the extent to which each adaptation change is symptomatic of commercial or artistic logic.

Introduction

This dissertation explores a period within the current dominant trend in mainstream American cinema for the adaptations of superhero comic book narratives. Bill Ryan notes in the introduction to *Making Capital From Culture* that 'it is impossible to divorce [his] research project from [his] biography' (1991, p 14) and similarly, my personal and professional interests have long been bound up with comic books and their adaptations. My fandom began not with the former but with the latter. As a lifelong cineaste, it was Bryan Singer's *X-Men* (2000), an adaptation of the Marvel comic book series, which showcased the potential of the superhero genre to me. Singer's intelligent film provided the requisite thrills and excitement I expected from a superhero narrative but also surprised me with its complex characterisation of both heroes and villains and its metaphorical social commentary. The film inspired me to delve into its source material, thereby starting a superhero comic reading journey which would eventually lead me not only to a part-time job in my local comic book shop, Chaos City Comics in St Albans, but also to study representations of masculinities in comic books for my MA dissertation.

Inevitably, my interest spilled into my professional life. With my background in teaching (initially primary and then later at university), I recognised the potential of comics as literacy tools to capture children's interest and develop their reading skills. My love of comics was reflected in my first publications: I contributed entries on Spider-Man and Superman to a literary history, *The Little Black Book: Books* (Daniel

2007) and two chapters on teaching comics to an educational book, *Teaching Children's Literature* (Duncan 2009). Prompted by these positive writing experiences, I spent two years researching and writing my monograph, *Teaching Visual Literacy in the Primary Classroom* (Stafford 2011), which explored the ways that film, comics, picture books and television can be used with children to help develop their literacy skills. By the time I decided to embark upon my PhD journey, my master's experience had proven to me that comic books were undoubtedly able to withstand sustained literary analysis. In addition, the superhero comic book adaptation was by then firmly established as a significant genre within mainstream cinema and therefore I felt that research in this area would be timely and culturally relevant. Another advantage of focusing my research primarily on the adaptations rather than on the comics alone and of approaching the films from a commercial perspective was that it would require me to expand my previous studies into new territory and ultimately prevent me from repeating myself. Indeed, it is this aspect of my PhD journey which has been the most transformative for me as a researcher, challenging me to move beyond the purely literary analyses of my previous studies in Literature in order to understand both text and context in a more holistic sense.

Yet personal and professional interests are only the initial justifications for research and it is therefore also necessary to demonstrate the wider relevance, interest and importance of my chosen subject area. The cultural visibility of Hollywood's current superhero obsession is undeniable. Superheroes were an intermittent, if somewhat inconsistent, presence in the latter years of twentieth century Western cinema but have been an ever-present and steadily growing force since 2000. Indeed, this research is bounded by the period 2000-13 (for reasons which will be articulated later), but it should be noted that mainstream American

cinema's love affair with the superhero comic book adaptation has transcended this period and shows no signs of waning anytime soon. Now audiences across the globe need only wait a few months between major superhero film releases. Worldwide box office statistics show that from 2008-16, the superhero films of Marvel Studios alone grossed over $10 billion (Thielman 2016)[1], with the studio announcing multiple releases up until at least 2019 (Couch 2016) while its rival Warner Bros. has promised regular superhero films every year until 2020 (McNary 2016).

Superheroes have exploded beyond the confines of the cinema screen and have become a cultural phenomenon that has expanded across a range of media platforms including television (more than ten live action series based on superhero comic characters were broadcast in 2017 alone[2]), apps and video games, not to mention the billions of dollars' worth of merchandise sold each year[3]. With financial and commercial rewards such as these, the attractions of the superhero film to studios is clear and it is little surprise that they are now able to lure some of the most successful and respected directors, writers and actors to work on them. In short, the superhero films of the twenty-first century have emerged as a distinct genre, one which has 'become firmly ensconced as the dominant Hollywood model' (Brown 2016, p 136). This research aims to illuminate the phenomenon of the superhero film and provide an interdisciplinary, more holistic account of how these films have transcended the panels of the printed page and filled the panel of the big screen.

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[1] Please note, all $ figures are in US dollars for the entirety of this dissertation, unless otherwise stated.

[2] These include the CW network's *The Flash*, *Arrow*, *Legends of Tomorrow* and *Supergirl*; Fox's *Gotham*; FX's *Legion*; NBC's *Powerless*; ABC's *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and *Inhumans* as well as Netflix's *Iron Fist*, *The Defenders* and *The Punisher*.

[3] In 2014, sales of merchandise based around the character of Spider-Man alone generated approximately $1.3 billion worldwide (Block 2014).

Research questions

This dissertation has been structured in response to a number of research questions which have been designed to explore superhero adaptations within the context of the relationship between commerce and artistry. As such, the overarching question is:

How can the superhero comic book adaptations released between 2000 and 2013 be theorised in a way which addresses both the artistic and commercial aspects of the production of cultural goods?

This primary question inevitably gives rise to a series of related sub-questions which are designed to divide the broader research goal into more specific areas. Two of these focus specifically on the comic to film adaptation process, exploring how it is reflective of commercial and artistic logic and what the consequences of this process are for the films, in both a commercial and an artistic sense:

To what extent are the changes made to the source material in the page to screen adaptation process reflective of commercial logic and to what extent are they reflective of artistic logic?

What are the implications of the changes made between page and screen for the films as commercial products and as artistic products?

The final sub-question encourages a contextual, genre-specific consideration of superhero films:

How has the superhero comic book film genre as a whole between 2000 and 2013 been shaped by the interactions between commerce and artistry?

Introduction to the conceptual framework and methodology

Broadly speaking, the dissertation adopts a cultural materialist approach in the sense that it uses as its foundation Marx's ideas about culture and its relationship to economics. Whilst its theoretical framework is borne out of, and developed in response to, some of Marx's ideas, it does not share the explicitly political nature of Marx's arguments; it is perhaps more helpful to consider this analysis as Marxian rather than Marxist[4]. Accordingly, I have drawn on the work of a number of writers who have followed in Marx's theoretical footsteps, specifically those who have attempted to wrestle with, and refine, Marx's theories of base and superstructure such as Louis Althusser and those who, like Marx, have theorised the economic aspects of the cultural industries and their artistic products, such as Pierre Bourdieu and Theodor Adorno.

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[4] There has for some time been much debate over the precise nature of Marxian schools of thought – such as those discussed at length by Resnick and Wolff (1987) and Smart (2014; originally 1976) – but my intention here is to draw a deliberately simple distinction between Marxist and Marxian approaches for the purpose of this work. I describe my perspective as broadly Marxian in order to stress that my adoption of Marx's work avoids 'situat[ing] the analysis in its explicit political context' (Smart 2014, p 116) and that I am making no attempt to reproduce the class-centric readings of traditional Marxist criticism. The reasons for this decision will become apparent over the course of the dissertation.

It is also essential that this theoretical foundation reflects the equally central role that textual analysis (in this case my readings of superhero films) plays in this piece of work. Consequently, the work of the linguist Frederic Jameson and the cultural materialist Raymond Williams have been incorporated into a theoretical trajectory which works towards the development of an appropriate analytical and methodological framework.

This methodological framework takes the form of four case studies, each based around a specific superhero film franchise: *X-Men*, *Hulk*, *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* (Batman). It is in these case studies that the interdisciplinary nature of the work manifests explicitly. For each film, a number of 'adaptation changes' – changes that the filmmakers have made to the comic book source material – have been identified and analysed in relation to what I argue is the essential dual nature of film: the film as an artistic product and the film as a commercial product. Accordingly, the case studies have been designed to draw on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data sources in an attempt to answer the research questions above.

It is helpful at this point to briefly identify some of the things that this research does *not* do. A study of the commercial and artistic aspects of contemporary filmmaking could potentially explore a multitude of elements, processes and products that are related, either directly or indirectly to the industry. This dissertation must work within boundaries however and therefore, in order to investigate its chosen foci in sufficient depth, other areas must inevitably remain largely unexplored. For example, although one of the case studies does feature a consideration of how a film's content is reflected in its trailers, this research is not intended to be an explicit investigation of how films are marketed and promoted. Similarly, the area of film

music is not touched upon herein. A film's soundtrack is certainly important in both a commercial and an artistic sense and can often have a life of its own, independent from the film it accompanies[5]. Whilst marketing and music are both important aspects of the film industry and constitute fruitful areas of research in their own right, neither are central components of this dissertation. Essentially, this is because the research is primarily concerned with textual analysis and adaptation and therefore focusing on areas which are not explicitly related to the adaptation process does not help to answer the research questions.

Methodologically speaking, it is also helpful to clarify that this dissertation is neither an audience study nor interview-based and thus the aforementioned qualitative and quantitative data sources are not derived from primary audience research or primary interviews with filmmakers and industry practitioners. While the methodology will be outlined and justified in Chapter Five, it should be noted here that, aside from the very real difficulties of obtaining useful access to industry professionals such as directors, producers and writers, this research is built around contextualised interpretative analyses of texts which do not require (and would not be enhanced by) primary audience-response data. Similarly, the data gathered from secondary interviews in the case studies sufficiently demonstrates that primary interviews would be unnecessary and provide no additional advantages.

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[5] Two notable examples of this are the soundtrack albums to Danny Boyle's *Trainspotting* (1996) and Michael Gracey's *The Greatest Showman* (2017) (Various artists, 1996 and 2017).

Thesis structure

The central thesis that I propose here is that while economic considerations are determinant in the last instance, artistic considerations also have a degree of effectivity in the shaping of superhero comic book adaptations. This proposition is developed in stages and the design of the dissertation reflects this. It begins by exploring the genre of the superhero adaptation (particularly its post-2000 renaissance) and considers some of the reasons for its current popularity with studios and audiences. This initial chapter also establishes those aspects of cinema and film studies which will be prominent in the case studies: theories of the process of adaptation and the idea of the director as auteur. Following this, I begin to lay the theoretical foundations of my dissertation by arguing that film is characterised by its dual nature: it is both an artistic and a commercial product.

Having theorised film, the relationship between art and commerce is then explored in a broader historical context including the work of the aforementioned Bourdieu and Adorno. From this consideration arises a central focus on Marx's useful, but arguably flawed, construction of the art-commerce relationship and the theoretical challenges it poses for this investigation. I argue that in order to begin to solve these problems it is necessary to develop a more nuanced refinement of Marx's theories such as the one which Althusser offers – indeed, it is Althusser's reformulation of Marx's model from which the thesis of this research is derived. The final element of the theoretical foundation is discussed in Chapter Four's consideration of the role of the text, which establishes the importance of the textual readings of the superhero films in this dissertation. Herein, I consider the ways that the work of cultural materialists and literary critics such as Jameson and Williams

has helped to shape this interdisciplinary research. This analysis concludes with an examination of the process of textual mediation and in particular, the specific form of it which will be central to the case studies: the ideologeme.

With the theoretical groundwork laid and the research questions subsequently formulated, the methodology design is explicated and justified in the subsequent chapter. The four aforementioned film franchise case studies comprise chapters six through nine and the tenth chapter constitutes the discussion of these case studies. I have subdivided this final chapter into several sections in order to achieve more clarity in my conclusions. It includes dedicated subsections for each research question and a two part thesis discussion which deconstructs the thesis in the light of my conclusions.

Chapter One

Up, up and away: Superheroes and their adaptations

In the first fifteen years of the twenty-first century, the superhero comic book film has risen to prominence as a mainstream Western film genre. Cinemas and television screens are populated with numerous costumed characters and the trend shows little sign of abating at present. Yet, comic book superheroes are by no means a recent phenomenon and neither is the adaptation of them. This chapter establishes the historical context of the superhero adaptation, placing it alongside a discussion of the recent resurgence of the superhero film and a consideration of why it is currently so successful. The final section considers the concept of adaptation itself from a theoretical perspective.

Origin story: A brief history of superhero adaptations

Somewhat appropriately, the corporate histories of the two dominant companies in the superhero film genre, Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment, possess all the ingredients that might be expected from a typical superhero narrative: both have undergone incredible transformations since their humble origins as comic book publishers, overcoming significant challenges and threats to become

muscular, industry-dominating behemoths, all whilst demonstrating fluid corporate identities through the adoption of numerous alter egos and shifting business models[6]. There are also structural similarities between the two, with both companies being situated within vast multimedia conglomerates that are able to fully exploit their extensive libraries of superhero characters or 'properties': Marvel was purchased by the Walt Disney Company for $4.24 billion in 2009 (Walt Disney Company 2009) and DC, which releases its films through Warner Bros., has long been a part of Time Warner, Inc. Their original function of comic book publishing is now only a small part of the two companies' outputs, with both committed to bringing their characters to audiences across a wide range of media platforms.

For Marvel, one of the central factors in its success (and one of the main justifications for Disney's purchase of the company) has been its feature film production strategy which was developed in response to the success of the film adaptations of Marvel characters such as *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* (2002). These superhero films were made and released by major Hollywood studios that had bought the cinematic rights to these characters years before when Marvel lacked the ability to produce its own films. Thus *Spider-Man* and its two sequels were made by Sony (Columbia) Pictures, the *X-Men* films, *Daredevil* (2003) and three *Fantastic Four* films (2005; 2007; 2015) by Fox and *Hulk* (2003) by Universal. Although the precise deals between Marvel and the film studios are confidential, it has been reported that Marvel earned approximately 5% of the box office takings for each film and split the merchandise revenues with each studio (Grover 2008). With the takings for the *Spider-Man* trilogy alone totalling over $2.4 billion worldwide, this would mean

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[6] These companies' corporate histories have been documented by Morgenson (1990), Wright (2001), Raviv (2002), Hammer (2006) and Flamm (2008).

that even by conservative estimates, Marvel lost billions by not producing its own films. The company showed signs of beginning to alter its approach to film in 2005 when it raised $525 million through a debt facility in order to finance films itself. The arrangement allowed Marvel to take a significant step towards retaining creative control of future adaptations by producing them in-house and, where possible, reducing the role of major studios such as Paramount and Universal from licensees to distributors (Bond 2005). Consequently, Marvel cleared the way legally for its highly successful phased release plan, establishing what is now known as the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) wherein characters such as Iron Man and Thor appear in their own (and each other's) film franchises[7] whilst also uniting every few years as a team in *The Avengers* films (2012, 2015, 2018, 2019).

Seemingly attempting to catch up with Marvel Studios, Warner Bros. announced in 2009 that it would be restructuring DC Comics, transforming it into DC Entertainment, Inc. According to the official statement, the new company was 'charged with strategically integrating the DC Comics business, brand and characters deeply into Warner Bros. Entertainment and all its content and distribution businesses' (Warner Bros. 2009). In other words, Warner has begun to make better use of its vertically integrated structure by granting DC the power to centrally co-ordinate its characters across a range of media formats including television, film and home video. This move, announced only weeks after the Disney buyout, strengthened DC's role within Time Warner significantly and echoed Marvel's key

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[7] The term franchise is here used according to its meaning in the cultural industries. A simple definition is that it is a series of films based around an intellectual property (a fictional world and its characters). Scott makes the valid point that, for studios and producers, a franchise is built around 'the exploitation of pre-sold or familiar characters' across more media than just film and extends into 'the selling of media or ancillary products based upon a proven property, with an established market, where the focus of advertising is on the name of the character' (2009, p 34). Two examples are Warner Bros.' *Harry Potter* franchise and Disney's *Star Wars* franchise.

position within Disney.

But the increased reliance on superhero properties by multimedia conglomerates is only the latest chapter in the history of the adaptation of comic book superheroes, the presentation of these characters across various media having been evident for almost as long as comic books themselves have existed. The first adaptation appeared when the comic book genre was still in its infancy in the form of the radio serial *The Adventures of Superman* which was originally broadcast in 1940, barely two years after the archetypal superhero had made his debut in print. The show proved to be extremely popular with listeners, running for over two thousand episodes over eleven years and was quickly followed by the cartoon series *Superman* (1941). This series constituted the first instance of a superhero being converted into animation, a format which seemed to be a natural fit for comic book adaptations due to its visual similarity to the original drawn texts. It was not a coincidence that the first two mediums of adaptation were radio and animation: both were pragmatic pecuniary responses to the problematic budgetary demands of superhero narratives which often require spectacular special effects to realise their fantastical storylines. Here, aural and animated versions were able to present Superman's incredible feats of heroism and superpowers with no significant increase in production costs.

In the years that followed however, not only did the range of media used for adaptations expand but so too did the number of superheroes portrayed. A range of DC adaptations were produced in various forms such as the cinematic serials *Batman* (1943) and *Superman* (1948)[8], the television series *Adventures of*

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[8] Short episodic twenty minute films which were shown before the main feature in cinemas.

Superman (1952) and *Batman* (1966) and even a Superman stage musical, *It's A Bird…It's A Plane…It's Superman* (1966). There are two points to be made here regarding the significance of these numerous versions of Batman's and Superman's stories. Firstly, they demonstrate just how versatile and replicable the characters are, with each successive adaptation reinventing the superheroes for a different audience and, often, a different generation. Secondly, the wide reach of the adaptations on radio, television and in cinemas suggests that, even at an early stage in the history of the comic book, the characters were familiar to many people outside of their source material and that to be a fan of such superheroes did not necessarily require detailed or, indeed, *any* knowledge of the original comic book texts.

Consequently, some of the most recognisable tropes of the characters have originated from the adaptations rather than the original texts. Catchphrases such as Superman's 'It's a bird!...It's a plane!' and the Hulk's 'You wouldn't like me when I'm angry', Batman's famous theme tune and even major elements of mythology such as the Batcave were often inventions of the adaptations themselves which were later subsumed into the accepted mythos of each superhero, becoming retrofitted parts of each character's archetype. With contemporary filmmakers and comic book writers drawing on these tropes and incorporating them into their own retellings of the stories[9], it becomes clear that the notion of the authority and primacy of a pure, uncontaminated original text is harder to establish for comic book narratives than it is for other repeatedly adapted works which have more easily identifiable textual

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[9] Louis Leterrier's 2008 film *The Incredible Hulk* draws heavily on the 1970s television programme: Banner humorously mistranslates his catchphrase into Spanish, claiming 'You wouldn't like it when I'm hungry' and the film's opening credits and score closely mimic those of the programme. Similarly, Marvel comics such as *Battle Scars* (Yost et al 2011) have incorporated the character Phil Coulson, who was created for the MCU adaptations, into the official comic book narrative canon. DC has published a new ongoing comic entitled *Batman '66* (Parker et al 2013) which, as its name suggests, is set in the universe created specifically by the 1966 television series rather than in official *Batman* continuity.

origins such as the novels of Jane Austen or the plays of Shakespeare.

The comic book film that forms a more specific starting point for the pre-history of this study is the 1978 adaptation of *Superman*. Richard Donner's film is not only notable for being the first attempt in modern mainstream cinema to produce a blockbuster based on a superhero comic, but it is of especial significance here because it connects this history of adaptation with the corporate histories discussed at the beginning of the chapter. The highly successful film (worldwide box office takings of nearly $270m[10]) was the first cinematic result of DC's merger with Warner Bros.-Seven Arts, a deal which automatically gave the studio the rights to all DC comic book adaptations. However it was Tim Burton's two Batman films *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992) which, released during the formative years of Time-Warner, could be said to be the first DC adaptations to fully exploit the transmedia 'internal markets' (Meehan 1991, p 53) of the vast Warner multimedia empire (detailed in Hardy 2010, pp18-19). Burton's films were also notable artistically for their dark Gothic presentation of the source material, placing them at the other end of the tonal spectrum from the comedic fantasy of *Superman*, their box office success proving that comics were also capable of being turned into more adult-oriented cinema.

What the *Superman* and *Batman* films demonstrated in commercial terms was that as sources of adaptation, comic books had the potential to spawn long running franchises (both series lasted for four films) which, through regular sequels, merchandising and licensing, could potentially provide ongoing revenue streams for film studios over a number of years. However, the comparatively poor box office

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[10] All box office figures can be found in Appendix I

performance of the final films in both franchises – *Superman IV* (1987) and *Batman and Robin* (1997) – also proved that the audiences for these characters were by no means guaranteed. This decline also suggested that, artistically speaking, significant variations in tone between the relatively serious earlier films and the lighter, more comedic later films of both franchises were unpopular with audiences.

The superhero film renaissance: 2000 to the present

While the release and success of superhero films were somewhat inconsistent in the late twentieth century, the genre has gradually achieved (and maintained) a significant cultural presence since 2000. Between 2000 and 2014, at least one superhero adaptation has appeared in the top ten biggest grossing films worldwide in every year except three. A further breakdown of this period indicates that the genre's popularity shows no sign of waning at present. From 2000-2011, just over 9% of the top ten biggest grossing films worldwide for each year were superhero adaptations but more recently, between 2012 and 2014, the genre has accounted for one third of the yearly top ten films (Box Office Mojo 2015a). The increased visibility of the genre is reflected in more than just box office statistics however. Between 2006 and 2014, 38% of the issues of *Empire* magazine (one of Britain's leading mainstream film monthlies) featured a superhero adaptation on the front cover as the lead article.

Furthermore, the genre's resurgence is now beginning to be felt outside of cinema. In addition to the numerous cartoon series which regularly appear on children's channels, superheroes have once again returned to television in live action form, a transition which has been made easier by DC and Marvel's parent

companies' ownership of various distribution platforms. Disney broadcast the Marvel

spin-offs *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* (2013-ongoing) and *Agent Carter* (2015-16) on its

ABC network, both of which cross over characters and storylines from the cinematic

universe and Warner Bros. has used its CW channel to establish a range of small

screen DC adaptations such as *Arrow* (2012-ongoing) and *The Flash* (2014-ongoing)

which are interconnected with one another but unrelated to the cinematic narratives.

Additionally, Marvel has begun to exploit the new ways in which audiences consume

content by distributing the serial adaptations of its characters Jessica Jones,

Daredevil, Iron Fist and Luke Cage through the digital on demand service Netflix

(Spangler 2013).

Although produced by rival studios and based on a range of disparate comic

books, it can be argued that the film adaptations which were at the forefront of the

current superhero renaissance are identifiable as a distinct group or movement

within cinema history, for reasons beyond their chronological proximity. Firstly, the

majority of them have enjoyed unprecedented box office success with the

consequence that Hollywood studios have increasingly come to view the superhero

film as a gold mine of potential blockbusters. What is particularly significant about the

superhero films released since 2000 is that (excepting a small minority) their

popularity has been sustained for nearly fifteen years, suggesting that the subject

matter is less of a short term narrative trend and has now become more of a semi-

permanent genre (see figures 1.1 and 1.2). As David S. Goyer, writer of *Man of Steel*

(2013) and *Batman Begins* (2005) notes: 'comic books have become a new genre…I

think they will ebb and flow like any other genre [but] I think it'll be a genre that will

stay' (cited in Otto 2004). It is this sustainability which defines the post-2000

superhero films and separates them from their predecessors. While, as Goyer

Between the Panels
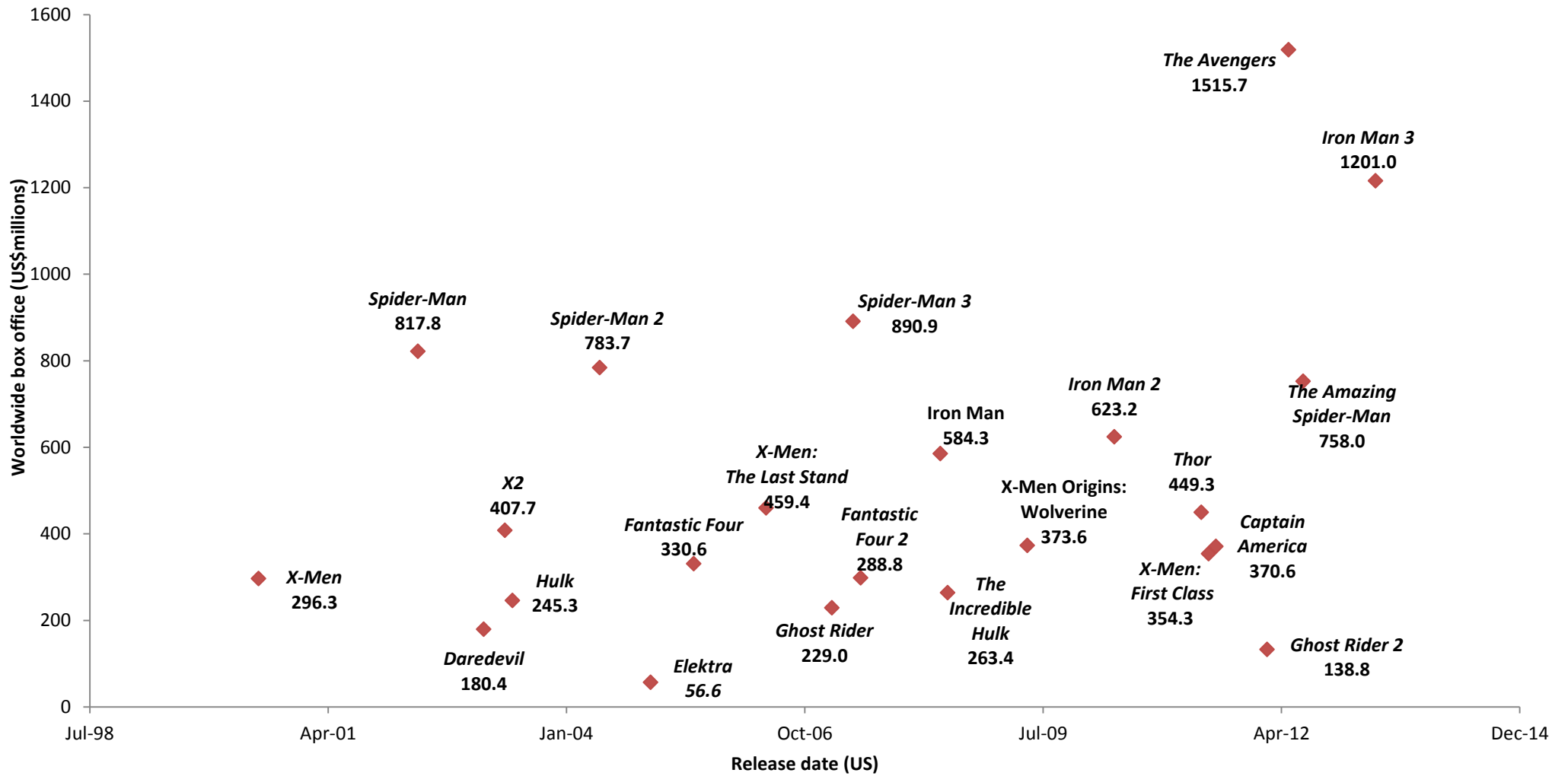
Figure 1.1 – Box office performance of film adaptations of Marvel superhero comics 2000-13

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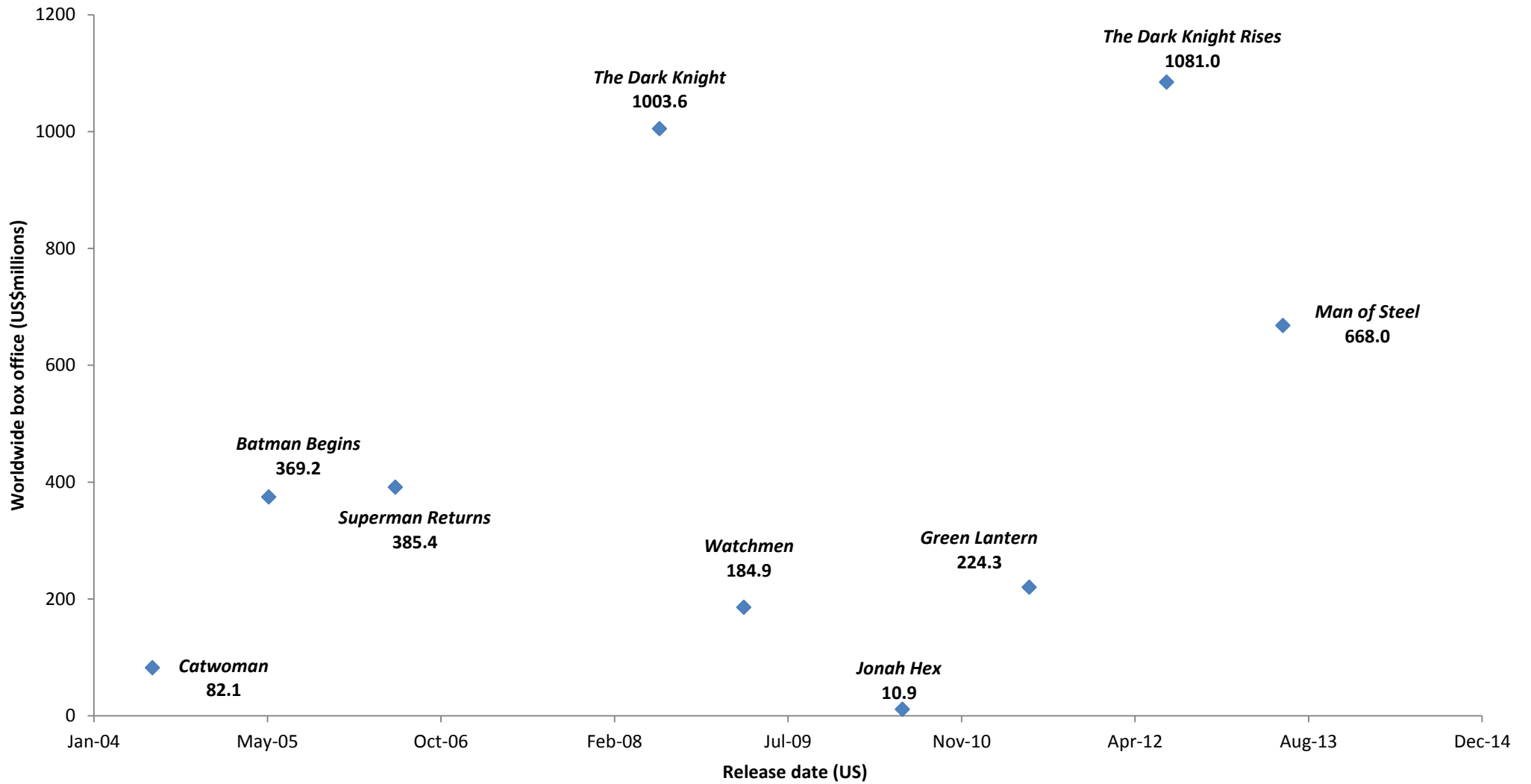
Figure 1.2 – Box office performance of film adaptations of DC superhero comics 2000-13 (no releases between 2000-4)

predicts, it is likely that audience demand will eventually wane, the relatively

consistent success of superhero films in the last fifteen years has allowed the genre

to become an established part of Hollywood's output in a way that it could not have

done based on the sporadic releases of previous decades.

A second distinguishing feature of the current superhero renaissance is that

many of the films are interconnected, forming part of larger fictional universes.

Replicating the model long established throughout comic book history by DC and

Marvel, studios such as Disney, Warner Bros. and Fox are keen to forge connections

between their own superhero films, firmly locating them in broad narrative webs

which allow for both individual films and 'crossovers' – a term borrowed from comics

to denote those issues in which a character from one comic book would appear in

another character's comic book. Thus, Marvel Studios released individual films for

Iron Man, Hulk, Captain America and Thor before uniting the characters in *The*

Avengers (2012), which was merely the first phase of a ten year fictional universe-

building plan (Graser 2014). Marvel's long term strategy has been replicated by

Warner Bros. whose release schedule is based around the super team The Justice

League which includes Wonder Woman, Batman and Superman (McMillan 2014)

and also by Fox which has made, or is making, a number of spin-off films from its

core *X-Men* franchise including solo films for the characters Wolverine, Deadpool

and Gambit (McNary 2014 and 2015)[11]. This relatively ambitious model of

filmmaking sets the superhero films of the current period apart from previous

adaptations wherein no real attempt was made to forge canonical links between

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[11] In 2017, and therefore outside of this dissertation's focus period, Disney purchased Twentieth Century Fox and its properties for $54 billion (Littleton and Steinberg 2017). As Disney own Marvel, the studio now has the potential to unite all of the major Marvel franchises, including X-Men, Deadpool and The Fantastic Four into their existing Marvel Cinematic Universe. It is yet to be revealed if, or how, they intend to do this however.

individual superheroes or to create a shared universe[12].

A third notable hallmark of these films is the significant creative talent involved both in front of and behind the camera, something which suggests that the genre is increasingly being viewed as more artistically credible. This phenomenon can be traced to *X-Men*, in which Bryan Singer, previously renowned for low-budget, independent dramas, directed a cast which included respected theatre actors such as Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellen. In the years since, a wealth of established directors and actors have been involved in superhero adaptations including Ang Lee and Jennifer Connelly (*Hulk*), Anthony Hopkins and Natalie Portman (*Thor*), Willem Dafoe (*Spider-Man*), Michael Douglas (*Ant Man*), Michael Caine, Christopher Nolan and Marion Cotillard (*The Dark Knight Rises*), Russell Crowe (*Man of Steel*) and Hugh Jackman (*X-Men*). Of course, it would be naïve to assume that all of the above have worked on these adaptations for purely artistic reasons and the presence of respected names in a cast does not necessarily mean that the films are viewed in the same way that the other projects for which they have won acclaim are. Glenn Close, for example, who appears in Marvel's *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), is proof that actors are just as likely to be motivated by financial reward as they are by artistic satisfaction when choosing films, stating that she signed up for the adaptation 'because it will then afford me to go do the other kind of movies that I really love…those smaller movies' (cited in Armitage 2013). However, the fact that the genre is even capable of attracting such prestigious actors is nonetheless a sign that the material is now a credible and fundamental part of Hollywood's output.

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[12] *Batman Forever* (1995) features a brief reference to the wider DC universe when Bruce Wayne tells Dick Grayson that his circus 'will be halfway to Metropolis by now', Metropolis being the city in which Superman resides, but there is no serious attempt to link the two characters.

Why are superhero films so popular?

i)   The studio perspective

As with any cultural phenomenon, it is impossible to wholly account for the alchemy of success, although it is certainly possible to speculate. To answer the question of why the superhero film has proved so popular in the last seventeen years, it is necessary to consider the question from two perspectives: the studios and the audience. The first, industry-based, perspective is somewhat more straightforward to explain: studios want to make superhero films because they fit the model of the ideal blockbuster almost perfectly.

In his analysis of Hollywood's mainstream films, *High Concept*, Justin Wyatt describes the major studio blockbuster as a 'high concept' film, one which is 'designed to maximise marketability and, consequently the economic potential at the box office'. He argues that these films, which have the potential to earn huge revenues, often share common features including being based on a 'pre-sold premise (such as a remake or adaptation of a best-selling novel)' and having 'a striking…reducible narrative which also offers a high degree of marketability'. Additionally he notes that the films can be easily represented visually by iconic images or logos, naturally lend themselves to merchandising opportunities and also provide audiences with 'a point of reference…due to their familiarity with other sources' (1994, pp 1-16). Even from a cursory glance, it is clear that the most well-known comic book superhero adaptations meet all of the above criteria and can even be described as exemplary high concept movies. Measurement against Wyatt's criteria demonstrates just how intrinsically malleable the superhero concept is – it

has the fluid potential to be adapted into a dark, violent science-fiction narrative, a colourful, fun cartoon for children, a realist television drama or an action-filled video game. In part because of the years of accumulated comic book mythology throughout which each superhero has been systematically re-invented and rewritten in a palimpsestic manner for each new generation, characters such as Spider-Man, Hulk and Superman are able to be simultaneously presented in forms as diverse as a child's toy and a psychologically complex two hour film. This potential for constant mutation makes superhero properties perfectly able to meet the multimedia demands of contemporary blockbuster filmmaking and merchandising. As Graser notes, 'studios are eager to produce more tent-poles[13] that...become franchises that generate considerable coin from TV shows, DVDs, websites, videogames...theme park attractions and other opportunities. Superheroes are simply more conducive to such goals' (2009, p 4). Additionally, the fact that most of these films are based on iconic characters who have enjoyed decades-long cultural visibility means that the all-important audience awareness which studios seek so desperately frequently comes as given – something acknowledged by the Warner Bros. chairman's observation that 'You don't have to explain to the consumer what a "Batman v. Superman" is' (cited in Lang 2015).

Another advantage of superhero films for studios is that they are easily able to deliver the requisite spectacle which is expected from the blockbuster. Narratives that provide opportunities for frequent demonstrations of super powers and phenomena, fantastical creatures and large scale destruction rendered through expensive visual effects make them a natural fit for the types of film which

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[13] 'Tent-pole' films are the biggest blockbusters released by studios once or twice each year which are designed to generate significant revenue and thereby, as the analogy suggests, 'prop up' the studios financially, compensating for the films which make a loss.

traditionally fill the screens of cinemas in the summer (and more recently the winter) months. As Walton suggests, it can even be argued that one of the reasons that superhero films have risen to prominence in the twenty-first century is because digital effects have finally caught up with the narratives and are now able to properly realise the fantastical physiologies and powers of characters such as Hulk and Thor, that the 'renewal' of the genre has 'occur[red] at a technological level' (2009, p 87). On a related note, the renaissance of such a visually spectacular genre is perfectly timed for studios to take advantage of recent advances in cinema technology such as 3D and IMAX. With exhibitors charging increased prices to view films in both these formats, it is unsurprising that Marvel Studios, Fox and Warner Bros. have embraced these technologies in regard to their superhero releases, in the hope that the films' dynamic content will persuade cinemagoers to pay more for the experience.

Another feature of comic book superhero narratives which makes them so attractive to studios is their in-built sequel or franchise potential. Heroes such as Superman, Batman and the X-Men come with over fifty years of ongoing storylines and characters that studios can cherry-pick for cinematic treatment. More importantly, large sections of the audiences for these films understand and accept that superhero narratives are ongoing and unending, that the superheroes will not die and that not only are sequels appropriate, they are expected. While comic book adaptations remain popular, studios are, as mentioned previously, able to plan long-term franchises consisting of regular tent-pole releases. The process of franchise establishment (Warner Bros.' *Harry Potter* series and Disney's acquisition of the Marvel and *Star Wars* universes are just three examples) has long term financial benefits, media analysts such as Michael Nathanson noting that as studios

increasingly channel their resources into blockbuster tent-poles and their sequels, they are 'making fewer films and controlling costs…[which has] stabilised the industry. This is appealing to Wall Street…[as] a coherent strategy that can be articulated to investors' (cited in Stewart 2013b). Of course, it is this last point which is the overall reason why superhero films are so popular with studios at present: they provide a degree of stability. For an industry defined by uncertainty in which, as Caves famously notes, 'nobody knows' (2000, p 3) how films will perform, the risk-minimising superhero film is currently the closest studios can get to the impossible dream of the guaranteed hit.

ii)   The audience perspective

Explaining why superhero films are so popular with cinemagoers is a less straightforward process and one which, admittedly, is more speculative. The unpredictability of audience tastes and trends is a recognisable, yet unquantifiable phenomenon which requires a consideration of broader cultural factors. It is not particularly useful to propose numerous possible theories for why audiences are currently so responsive to these adaptations, but there are two factors which are significant here.

A partial explanation for the current obsession with superheroes (in the West at least) could be that it is a long term cultural response of America's traumatised national psyche to the events of 9/11 and that the genre is an artistic recourse for growing fears of terrorism in an international climate which is perceived to be unstable. Admittedly, any possible explanations of cultural products as specific

responses to the events of September 11th are often trite oversimplifications and it should be remembered that *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* were in production long before the attacks of 2001, yet it is notable that in the years immediately following the terrorism of 9/11, audience demand for superhero narratives sharply rose. Heroes such as Batman, Superman and Captain America are, in their simplest forms, uncomplicated expressions of American justice who, through their strength, power and morality, offer a comforting sense of protection from the worldwide threats caused by mysterious 'others'. Bainbridge argues that, due to the 'way that the DC and Marvel superheroes were originally structured and conceived', the characters are an obvious fictional source of reassurance from – and even revenge against – terrorism for audiences, simply because they are personifications of 'the perfect revenge/control fantasy' and the idea of 'power without the constraint of law' (2009, p 65). Accordingly, it is hard not to draw visual and thematic parallels with real world acts of terrorism (and the responses to it) in scenes such as the alien destruction of New York in *The Avengers*, the infiltration of Gotham by the sinister Eastern army of The League of Shadows in *Batman Begins* and Iron Man's singlehanded destruction of a band of insurgents in Kunar province.

A second broader contextual reason for the popularity of such narratives lies in the rise of geek culture. 'Geek' is the term used to describe fans of (usually science fiction or fantasy) comics, films and television series. Just as the word itself has been reclaimed from being a somewhat derogatory term to one which is frequently used by fans themselves as an affectionate self-identifier, so too has geek culture evolved from an apologetic 'counterculture' to something which 'has gone mainstream' (Laurie 2014, p 21). As Jenkins argues, this phenomenon of passionate fandom is not necessarily something new, rather 'what has shifted is the visibility of fan culture'

(2006, p 131). Aided by both the internet, which has allowed fans to unite and form vocal communities online and by an increasingly widespread obsession with technology and 'gadgets' which were formerly considered the exclusive preserve of the geek, this new culture is now evident across a range of markets, media and industries (Feineman 2005; Caines 2010; Cohen 2014). Of course, the above cause and effect relationship of geek culture to superhero films could just as easily be inverted and it could be argued that the popularity of the latter actually gave rise to the former or, as is most likely, the development of the two is symbiotic rather than causal. It is not, however, the objective of this study to provide a sociocultural analysis of the popularity of superhero films – their popularity is accepted as given – and therefore the two factors above constitute sufficient contextual information for the audience perspective.

iii)   The role of comic book readers

One thing which is extremely clear is that the immense popularity of the adaptations cannot be explained by the existing readership of the comic books upon which they are based. While this study's research does not focus specifically on comic book readership, the data does indicate that the reading audience for comic books is significantly smaller than the audience for the adaptations, something which the following relatively brief review of comic sales and box office revenue demonstrates. In 2008, when the Batman adaptation *The Dark Knight* was released in cinemas, taking approximately $534m in the US, the top selling issue of the monthly Batman comic in America had estimated sales of just over 105,000 copies

(ICv2, 2008). Taking into account the average cinema ticket price for 2008[14] suggests that there were approximately 74 million admissions to Christopher Nolan's film in US cinemas alone – revealing that the film's audience was over 700 times bigger than the readership of the comic. While this is an admittedly simple interpretation of the available data for one adaptation, it does suggest a disproportionate difference in the popularity of superheroes across different media.
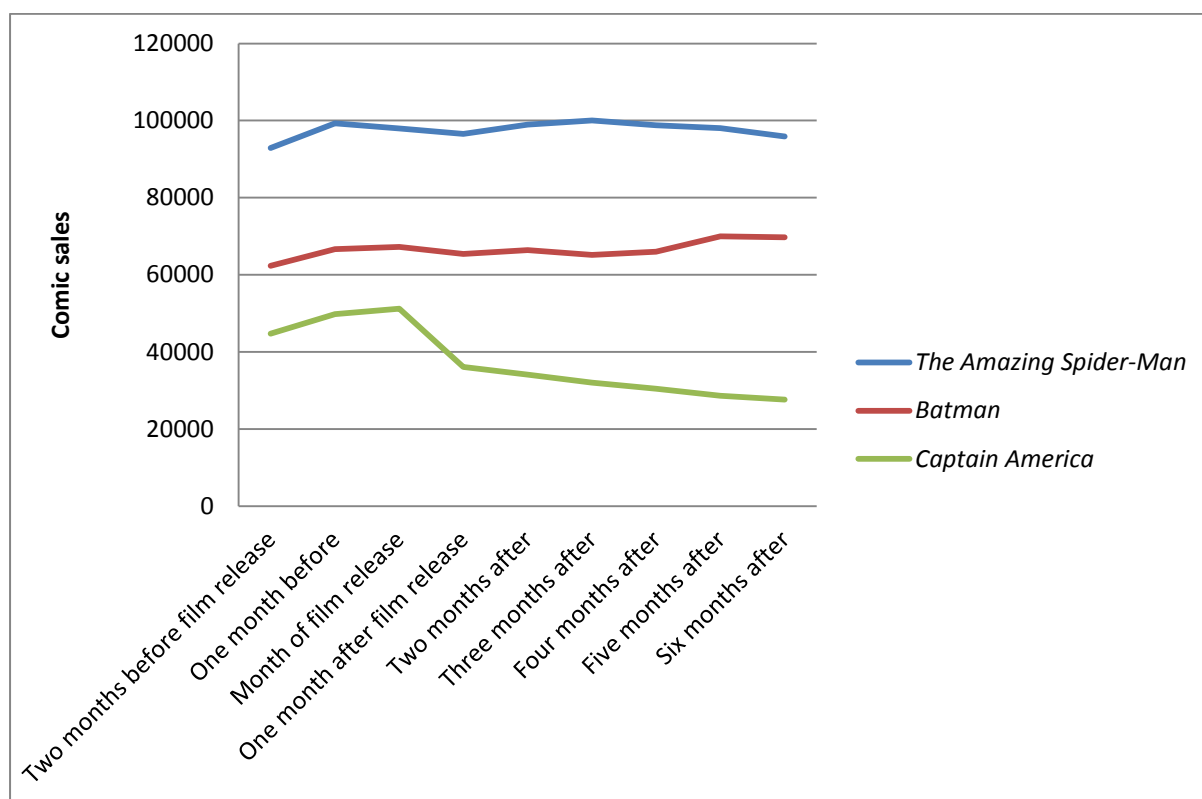
Figure 1.3 – Sales of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *Batman* and *Captain America* comics before, during and after the release of their respective film adaptations: *Spider-Man* (May 2002), *Batman Begins* (June 2005) and *Captain America* (July 2011). (Source: Icv2.com, 2015)

As figure 1.3 shows with its three examples of comics which were adapted into major films, there is a disproportionately small effect on monthly comic sales from the release of their adaptations. A comparison of the sales two months before each

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[14] $7.18 according to the National Association of Theatre Owners statistics (NATO 2015)

adaptation was released in cinemas with their sales six months after release shows either a slight rise – a 3.2% increase for *The Amazing Spider-Man* and 11.8% for *Batman* – or, in the case of *Captain America*, a decrease. It is important to note here that all three films were successful at the box office (*Spider-Man* $817m, *Batman Begins* $369m and *Captain America* $371m; all three generated sequels). There would therefore appear to be very little correlation between the success of the adaptation and its comic's sales. The small increase in *Batman*'s and *Captain America*'s sales is nowhere near as large as might reasonably be expected if even a small fraction of the film audience was transferring to the comics and *Captain America*'s decrease in sales could not logically be argued to be a consequence of the film because it was successful at the box office and it would be difficult to sustain an argument that it had damaged the brand's popularity (if anything, the reverse is more likely true).

Even in the long term, comic book readership has not significantly increased, or certainly not in any way which is proportionate to, or reflective of, the films' audiences. Comparison of US sales estimates for 2004 and 2014 reveals that there has only been a 20% increase in the average sales of each month's bestselling comics[15]. The data suggests that while the comic book readership may well feed into the audience for the adaptations, the relationship is not reciprocal. In short, the markets for comic books and their adaptations are somewhat discrete entities: comic readers may be viewers, but viewers are not likely to be comic readers.

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[15] Total sales of each month's bestselling comic in 2004 were 1,991,220 compared to 2,399,158 in 2014, which gives a mean average of 165,935 for 2004 and 199,930 for 2014. Percentage increase is 20.49% (Raw data from ICv2, 2015).

The theory of adaptation

Having established the broad historical and industrial contexts of comic book adaptation, it is now important to consider the process of adaptation in a theoretical sense. It is necessary to do this here because the next two chapters are concerned with reviewing the considerable amount of literature on the relationship between art and commerce and establishing the theoretical base for this study and therefore do not focus on adaptation specifically.

To begin with, the very concept of adaptation requires some consideration. I refer here, of course, to that specific form of adaptation which is book to film. Perhaps the primary concern over this process, critically speaking, is the notion of textual fidelity, wherein vocal sections of a film's audience (both layman and critical) focus almost exclusively on the differences and similarities between a film and its source material. The body of literature on this subject is exhaustive – McFarlane (1996), Naremore (2000) and Boozer (2008) to name but a few – and there is little to add here except to note that nearly all serious critics and theorists express concern that a focus on fidelity forms a barrier to any worthwhile analysis (as Vincendeau puts it, '"fidelity" becomes a negative yardstick with which to beat film'; 2001, p xii).

In his seminal text *Novels Into Film*, Bluestone notes that this comparative approach to adaptations is unhelpful because it is 'predicated on certain [erroneous] assumptions', for example 'that the extent of the deviation will vary directly with the "respect" one has for the original' or 'that such liberties are somehow a trick which must be concealed from the public'. These assumptions, he argues, fail to accord the necessary respect to both the book and the film as valid subjects of investigation and the fact that 'the end products of novel and film represent different aesthetic genera'

(1957, p 5). Similarly, Welsh posits that an adaptation which slavishly attempts to represent onscreen the format, content and structure of a novel could well be accused of a different form of infidelity – that of not 'being faithful to the potential of the medium' of film (2010, p 98). Furthermore, of especial relevance to this study, Boozer argues that a punitive attitude toward textual changes in any adaptation 'tends to constrain the discussion of each film's immersion in its own particular cultural and historical moment' (2008, p 10), severing any analytical ties between the adaptation and the social and economic forces which shaped it.

The fixation on textual fidelity is often symptomatic of deeply held cultural prejudices towards cinema as an art form. In the same way that the perceived split between commerce and art can be traced back to the Romantic era's dichotomous perceptions of the two, critiques which obsessively focus on how an adapted film has tampered with a text are often extensions of the conception of literature as noble and pure and film as a shabby and common attacker, hungry to debase it. Analogising the pejorative view of adaptations more dramatically, Leitch notes that film versions 'may be argued to feed like vampires off their source texts' (2011, p 6), highlighting a school of thought wherein, at best, film may represent a book well and not damage it (although its successes will always be claimed as those of the book) and at worst can act like a parasite, feeding off the creativity of the original piece of literature.

One possible explanation for such a view is the significant difference between the ages of the two mediums, film being portrayed as the enfant terrible of art forms in comparison to the written word's longstanding history. A second reason may be that film has more visible links to the commercial world (this criticism itself being a present day manifestation of the Romantic art/commerce conception). Due to the

way in which films are exhibited in cinemas where they are often preceded by obtrusive advertising, the widely reported vast amounts of money associated with box office earnings and A-list actors' salaries, as well as the attendant glamour and celebrity culture which surrounds mainstream film, the medium is often perceived as being more cynically and crassly commercial than literature. This is of course a fallacy; the publishing industry is as much a commercial enterprise as film only less visibly so due to the press's apparent disinterest in presenting all but a tiny minority of authors as celebrities worthy of wider attention.

Such perceptions of the primacy and integrity of literature as an art form over film echo a particular form of cultural snobbery which cites the supposed ease and passivity of watching a film as opposed to the increased intellectual challenge and harder work of reading a novel. These blanket prejudices refuse to accept the more positive view of adaptation, that it can 'make classical literature accessible to a large audience', and conveniently ignore the many sophisticated and subtle film adaptations which 'have led to illumination, not obliteration' of their source material (Sinyard 2013, p ix). Additionally, to dismiss film adaptations as signs of waning creativity is to ignore the fact that some of the most respected artistic works are themselves adaptations, including a number of Mozart's operas and several canonical plays by Shakespeare who, as Lehmann notes, often wrote '"legend play[s]"' – 'play[s] with a long history as another narrative form' (2010, p 3).

This defence of cinema's requisitioning of literature is justified even further by the claim that the relationship between the two mediums is not so much parasitic as symbiotic: novels need their adaptations. Cardwell baldly states that 'Books that are adapted for television will sell more copies' (2002, p 2) and, returning to the analogy

of vampirism, Leitch argues that just as the victim of a vampire's bite also becomes one of the undead, so too are texts granted a longer life span 'through the process of adaptation, which allows them to extend their life through a series of updated avatars' (2011, p 6). Admittedly, it has already been demonstrated that sales of Marvel's and DC's comic books have not necessarily reflected their adaptations' vast box office figures, but it is certainly true to say that the adaptations have revitalised the companies' properties – not to mention the companies themselves – and significantly increased their cultural visibility across a range of platforms such as live action television, animation, computer games and merchandising.

Despite this ever present prejudice, adaptation has played a significant role in the history of film. The industry has repeatedly relied on novels to sustain its output with some of the most famous and financially successful films in cinema history having been based on books, from classics such as *Gone With The Wind* (1939) and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) to more modern blockbuster franchises such as *Jaws* (1975) and *Jurassic Park* (1993). From a studio perspective, the benefits of adaptation are clear: it allows studios to tap into a proven success, bringing the all-important advantage of pre-existing audience awareness. In the last twenty five years alone, just over 40% of the top ten biggest-grossing films in each year in the US have been based on a book or comic book[16]. This figure includes direct adaptations of novels and comic books only and does not even begin to take into account indirect adaptations, for example film sequels to existing books such as the James Bond film *GoldenEye* (1995), *Shrek 2* (2004) and *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011), or films which take existing literary characters and retell their stories differently such as *Maleficent* (2014). In terms of plaudits, the results speak

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[16] 101 out of 250 films (40.4%) source: Box Office Mojo 2015b.

for themselves: of the 87 Best Picture Academy Award winners, 43 have been

adapted from a book and 13 from a stage play (a total of 64%).

For audiences however, the attractions of the adaptation are more complex. It

is impossible to ascertain individual audience member data for each film adaptation

but it can be safely assumed that, for the more high profile releases at least, the

audience is comprised of a combination of those who have read the book and those

who have not (although the exact percentages are unknown). For those who have

not read the book, the adaptation offers an opportunity to participate in the hype and

discussions surrounding books such as J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series or

Suzanne Collins's *The Hunger Games*, discovering the stories without having to

actually read them. For those who have read the source material however, the film

offers a chance to see how the film is interpreted in another medium by actors,

writers, directors and designers. As I have argued in my previous work on adaptation

(Stafford 2011), the act of reading automatically encourages readers to mentally

adapt the written word into their own imaginations, the film offering an 'official'

version for readers to compare 'their own mental images' with (McFarlane 1996, p

7).

But what is the process of adaptation? Boozer offers a useful three level

typology of literature adaptation categorising it into the 'literal or close reading', the

'general correspondence' and the 'distant referencing' (2008, p 9) depending on how

closely the film cleaves to its source material. Yet Boozer's model only really fits

literature and film and fails to cover the myriad forms which contemporary adaptation

may take, forms which reflect the ever evolving multimedia formats facilitated by new

technologies and the ever broadening range of 'texts' which are being used as

source materials. In contemporary culture, adaptation has become an umbrella term

for the reciprocal relationships between media platforms and the processes by which a film becomes a computer game (or vice versa), a comic book becomes a cartoon, and theme park attractions such as Tomorrowland and Pirates of the Caribbean become major films.

For comic books, the boundaries between text and adaptation are similarly blurred. In one sense, most of the comic book films that are the objects of study here are located somewhere between 'literal or close readings' and 'general correspondences' on Boozer's scale. But while the finite narratives of comic books such as *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons 1987) and *300* (Miller and Varley 1999)[17] can be transferred to the screen relatively easily as evidenced by Zack Snyder's highly faithful films of the same names, adaptations of characters such as Thor and Wolverine who have appeared in thousands of comic book issues published across numerous decades present a far greater challenge. Marvel's and DC's superheroes have passed through the hands of many different comic writers and artists since their creation and most have been subject to multiple redesigns, retellings, and reboots[18].

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[17] *Watchmen* and *300* are often referred to as 'graphic novels' rather than 'comic books', but I avoid using the former term in this dissertation. The main reason is for clarity and accuracy: I reserve the term graphic novel for those (less common) examples of complete visual narratives that were initially published as whole stories in the form of a longer book – I. N. J. Culbard's 192-page *Celeste* (2014), for example. Even seminal texts such as *Watchmen*, *300* and Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (2003)– which have for years been described as graphic novels because they can be purchased in book form and feature complete (rather than ongoing) narratives – are in fact simply the collected editions of individual, shorter comics which were first published in monthly instalments. In this sense, I would argue that the term graphic novel should exist only as a technical term to distinguish between the publishing formats of visual narratives. Another reason I avoid using the term where possible is because it is often used in a hierarchical sense to imply that a graphic novel is somehow superior in content, prestige and quality to a comic book (the latter term being used pejoratively in such cases). In this context, comic academic Bradford W. Wright considers the term 'pretentious' (2001, p 271) while Burke notes that 'the "graphic novel" is today, and perhaps always was, a marketing strategy' (2015, p 8).

[18] A reboot is when a film franchise is restarted from the beginning. This is usually a case of remaking an existing film or series of films with a new cast, director and even adopting a new tone. The continuity of the existing films is ignored and a new one begun. The process takes its name from a method of restarting a computer with a wiped clean memory, usually as a way of helping it recover from a serious error. Verevis describes it as 'a (legally sanctioned) version that attempts to disassociate itself textually from previous iterations while at the same time having to concede that it does not replace – but adds new associations to – an existing (serial) property…the category of the reboot thus re-imagines not simply a specific film (or films) but the concept of the remake' (2016, Z1)

This rewriting (or 'superscription' as Round calls it; 2005, p 363), 'alters details – sometimes minor, sometimes dramatic – about aspects of a character's mythology' and 'is freely acknowledged within the comic book community' (Ndalianis 2009, p 272). The consequence of this is that the concept of the monographic, single narrative becomes redundant and is replaced by 'a dynamic fictional universe…filled with intertextual exchanges and spatiotemporal paradoxes that confuse prior continuities…As such the story is never stable and closed' (ibid, pp 272-8).

Therefore, when adapting characters that have been subject to revision, filmmakers are faced with a multitude of questions that have many potential answers, all of which muddy the waters of adaptation. For example, which of the character's storylines are to be adapted – the original version, the most popular story or elements of many? Who are the authors of these characters – the creators, the publishers or the writers of the selected storylines? Can the comic book artist be considered as much the author of the text as the writer? Is it even possible to assume that there is such a thing as a monolithic, definitive version of the character?

This complex process of navigating through a multiplicity of comic book narratives that constantly reinvent characters, have been authored by disparate writers, drawn by different artists and published across decades characterised by often contradictory continuity is best illustrated through an example. The recent Avengers sequel *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) is based on a comic storyline from *Avengers* #54 (Thomas and Buscema 1968) which tells of the creation of a monstrous artificial intelligence named Ultron who attempts to destroy the superhero team. Whilst the film follows the basic storyline of the comic story, it takes its title (and the visual design for Ultron) from a much more recent comic book, *Age of*

Ultron (Bendis et al 2013). The film inevitably makes changes too: Ultron's creator is changed from Dr Hank Pym to Tony Stark (Robert Downey, Jr.) because the latter is an established member of the cinematic Avengers team whereas the former is not and the ensuing conflict is presented differently due to the substantial differences between the Avengers' rosters in the comic and the film. The film must primarily make sense as a sequel to the first *Avengers* film, drawing on the characters and relationships already established by its predecessor, meaning that there will need to be significant interpolations in the storyline of the original comic. The film therefore defies attribution to a single textual source and instead directly draws on the narratives and images of numerous Marvel comics, films and television series in its screenplay and visuals.

It is perhaps more useful to think about the process of adapting a comic book as 'the gradual development of a "meta-text"' as Cardwell puts it, in the sense that 'a later adaptation may draw upon any earlier adaptations, as well as upon the primary source text'. Here, each version of a superhero's narrative – be it film, comic book, cartoon series or video game – 'can be regarded as points on a continuum, as part of the extended development of a singular, infinite meta-text: a valuable story or myth that is constantly…being retold, reinterpreted and reassessed' (2002, p 25). One possible disadvantage of this view is that it risks dismantling the analytical framework of adaptation analysis: if each version is simply a slightly different take on a narrative or character that is in itself nothing more than a name ('Superman' or 'Batman' for example) that masks or attempts to unify a morass of variations on the character as a myth, then what is the point of attempting to track changes between versions? Is the search for the original source material of a comic book adaptation simply an endlessly deferral of version upon version?

The implications for this study are not so negative however. Whilst the above is true, especially for comic books, it is not true to say that all tracing of adapted material is fruitless. What separates comic book characters such as Superman and the Hulk from texts such as Shakespeare's legend plays or 'ur-text[s] that stand outside and before each retelling of the story' (Cardwell 2002, p 26) and cannot be traced to a single origin, is the corporate aspect. Here, identifying Marvel and DC as the authors of their characters forms a useful boundary of ownership for anyone studying the texts. Certainly, it can be argued without too much difficulty that superheroes as an archetype undoubtedly echo the more ancient narrative prototypes of gods, legends and myths which transcend the creation of these specific comic book characters but for ease of analysis it is logical to locate the origins of specific characters in texts which are the intellectual property of the comic book publishing houses for which they were created. Once this is accepted, it becomes a more straightforward task to begin to identify the specific comic book texts and storylines which each film is adapted from. By then comparing the changes between source material and film, it is possible to gain an insight into how adaptation works both commercially and artistically, something which will be more clearly outlined in the methodology chapter.

The role of the director as author/auteur

Any discussion of the potential multiplicity of authors of an adaptation must at least consider the role of the director who is not the author of the source material but takes on an equivalent role in relation to the film. In the context of directing an adaptation of something as iconic as a superhero narrative, the question of how far a

director's signature is identifiable on the work (and how far audiences want it to be identifiable) is pertinent. This is an especially relevant question considering some of the directors who have been hired by studios to bring their comics to the screen. Since Fox's rather surprising choice of Bryan Singer for *X-Men*, a filmmaker who had worked exclusively on low budget character dramas, studios have often been eager to employ less obvious directors for their comic book material. While there have been a number of more prosaic examples of the hiring of directors whose previous work has been in mainstream filmmaking such as Jon Favreau (*Iron Man*), Brett Ratner (*X-Men: The Last Stand*) and Louis Leterrier (*The Incredible Hulk*) there have also been several auteurs who could not be described as obvious choices. These include Tim Burton (*Batman*), Ang Lee (*Hulk*), Christopher Nolan (*The Dark Knight* trilogy) and Michel Gondry (*The Green Hornet*).

'Auteur' theory, translating literally as 'author', is a method of identifying directors who have strong and recognisable filmmaking styles, not only in terms of visuals but also in terms of their film's thematic concerns, writing and structure. The concept was first discussed in reference, appropriately, to the act of adaptation by Truffaut in 1954 when he used the term to denote a selection of directors of adaptations 'who…themselves invent the stories they direct' as opposed to simply filming the novel with little artistic interpretation (1976, p 232). Three years later, Bazin helped to clarify the concept when he noted that the auteur's 'personal stamp…however run-of-the-mill the scenario, can be perceived even minutely' when watching their films (1985, p 255). But it is Sarris who offers a more precise definition of the auteur as being a director whose 'body of…work…must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature'. By arguing that the American studio system of the time was more likely to create auteurs because so

many of the projects were 'commissioned, [meaning that] a director is forced to express his personality through the visual treatment of material rather than through the literary content' (2004, p 562), Sarris also supports Truffaut's assertion that the act of adaptation can be fertile ground for the potential auteur.

Warner Bros. was one of the first studios to employ an auteur for a comic book adaptation in 1989, when it hired one of the most distinctive filmmakers of contemporary cinema, Tim Burton. Even at this relatively early stage in his career, Burton's highly stylised films were easily identifiable through their repeated use of visual motifs, monotone colours and Gothic-Expressionist-influenced sets and costumes. Characteristically, Burton redesigned many elements of *Batman* and *Batman Returns* (which, thanks to their comic book origins, already had numerous visual referents) to fit his own personal aesthetic.

The hiring of auteurs for comic book films can be a sound commercial strategy. Sarris and Truffaut's linkage of auteurs and adaptation is pertinent here: more unique directors are potentially able to create a distinctive superhero film which will stand out in a saturated and often formulaic market. This has advantages even before the film has been released, with the attachment of an artistically respected name bringing kudos and creating anticipation for a project. Conversely, there are risks. Commercially speaking, the hiring of directors who are less practised at delivering a film which is expected to be among the biggest grossing and most marketable films of its year is fraught with danger. Artistically speaking, there are potential pitfalls inherent in selecting auteurs who have developed a unique and uncompromising style to work with material which is iconic, features characters and storylines that already have a strong sense of authorship in the figurative sense and which has a pre-existent and often possessive fanbase. This is something which

Leitch notes when discussing the work of Hitchcock, who was notorious for the 'obscurity of his cinematic sources' and eschewed 'films based on classic novels' because their 'authorship would leave no room for his own' (2007, p 239). How these directors navigate between their responsibility to fulfil the criteria of film as a commercial product and film as an artistic product, as well as between their own sense of style and that of the source material is something which will be returned to later in this study.

The history of superhero adaptations is therefore demonstrative of how a genre has been shaped by a combination of business and artistry. From its beginnings in radio and animation through to the billion dollar cinematic genre of the twenty-first century, the superhero adaptation has demonstrated its longevity and its ability to generate significant financial rewards. It is not risking hyperbole to state that as a cultural movement, the genre has never been as visible and dominant in Western culture as it is presently. This is true both commercially and artistically, demonstrated by the range of often prestigious directors and actors who are willing to work on superhero films. All of this suggests that not only is an analysis of it timely and relevant but also that it is has value as a subject of investigation on an artistic and commercial basis. With the historical and cultural context and significance established, it is now necessary to review the literature that will lay the foundations of this study's wider understanding of film and of the ways that art and commerce have been theorised.

Chapter Two

What is film?

The first stage in this investigation of how commerce and artistry interact in the adaptations of superhero comics is to clarify its terms. This chapter therefore seeks to identify the various elements and qualities of film itself. It begins with the argument that the view of film as an indefinable and enigmatic medium is not particularly helpful and uses Marx's description of commodities to illustrate film's commonalities with more prosaic, non-artistic products. This description is then qualified by a consideration of what makes film different from a traditional commodity – its mental dimension. Carchedi's definitions of mental and material knowledge production are also incorporated at this point in order to work towards this study's conception of film as having a double function as a commercial and an artistic product.

Whilst the answer to a question such as 'What is film?' may seem self-evident, a deconstruction of the medium is necessary for a number of reasons. Firstly, given that it is the primary subject of analysis in this dissertation, it is vital to clarify precisely how this research conceptualises film. No analysis should assume a universally agreed definition of its subject and therefore an attempt to explain and clarify the assumptions about film that this study works under is a necessary first

step. Secondly, the following discussion of film is a direct precursor to the sociocultural theory of later chapters. The conception of film that this chapter works towards – that it is a product characterised by a doubled identity as both artistic and commercial product – begins an ongoing theoretical conversation about the ways in which art and commerce interact in this medium which will be continued over the course of this dissertation. Consequently, the aforementioned discussion of Marx's ideas about commodities initiates a theoretical through-line that is identifiable in Chapter Three's exploration of Marx's sociocultural theories.

It is necessary to consider one further point here. The inclusion of a chapter such as this which considers the very nature of film may prompt the question of why there is no corresponding chapter for the other textual form explored in this research: comic books. As source material for the adaptations at the centre of this research, comic books inevitably play a vital part in the analysis, a fact which is reflected in their significant role in the case studies. However, it is important to reiterate here that the primary foci of the research are the film adaptations and as such the comics themselves are secondary. This is not, of course, to say that they are insignificant – were it not for the comics, the adaptations would not exist – but in this research, the methodological process begins with the films themselves and then works backwards to consider selected aspects of the source material that have influenced or inspired them. As the previous chapter's 'Theory of Adaptation' section argued, it is important to remember that comics are only one (albeit important) element of the source material of a superhero film and none of the films explored in this research are solely based on one single comic book text. In the context of this research into superhero adaptations therefore, the films and the comic books are not given equal weighting.

Film as a commodity

The assertion that film is, in essence, a product is the starting point for this analysis. Much has been made of the unquantifiable nature of film with even the most financially focused analysts noting that 'whereas the essential attributes of most commodities can be easily described and measured, this is not the case for movies' (Ravid 1999, p 464). Such a view assigns to film the same elusive qualities that Harold Becker assigns to works of art in general when he stresses their 'fundamental indeterminacy'. Of course, such a description is, as Becker himself acknowledges, 'a negative contribution' to understanding its nature (2006, pp 24-5). While it is certainly important to emphasise that film is a different type of product from, say, a freezer, and to understand that the former is created and used in a way that the latter is not, as a starting point it is not necessarily helpful to stress film's differences from non-artistic products or to suggest that as a product it is 'other', imbued with an ephemeral, mystical quality which cannot be understood.

Thus, to reiterate the initial assertion: a film is a product, the end result of a process of filming and other actions. Initially, it is necessary to use the widest definition of 'film' as any moving image that is recorded, from a family holiday documented on a camcorder, to a cinema release such as *Star Wars*. Regardless of its length, the size of its audience, the money spent on making it and the aesthetic and technical quality of its content, it is still true that any piece of recorded film is the end product of a labour process by an individual or a group of individuals either paid or unpaid (the term 'film' is of course used with full awareness of the irony that, due to the advent of digital technologies, most moving imagery is not even captured on physical film – celluloid or video tape – anymore, but the term is sufficient for ease of

use here).

For the purposes of this particular research's subject area, this definition can then be narrowed down to the less technical and more common use of the term film to describe a specific form of recorded material: some kind of story, either real or fictional, told through recorded moving imagery that is intended for viewing by audiences either in a cinema, on a television screen or on other devices via digital technology. A further descriptor may help here, namely that the above definition is closest to the notion of the *feature* film – a film of seventy minutes or more that tells a narrative of some sort and involves actors playing roles. This definition is of course not perfect. Films can be different lengths, made specifically for television broadcast or even feature no real people onscreen, however in these cases the word film would likely be prefaced by another descriptor of some kind, for example a *short* film, *television* film or *animated* film. What is important here is the concept of purpose: the film as it is defined here is one that is almost always made to be viewed by the widest audience possible, who will be expected to pay to see it (in whatever format) so that it can earn revenue and ideally make a profit.

One of the key features of this definition is the commercial element, meaning that here, film like any other traded good becomes, according to Marx's definition, a commodity, simply 'a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind' (1976, p 125). The film, as defined here, is now clearly differentiated from some of the examples listed earlier such as the family holiday film due to the fact that the latter is not intended to earn revenue. Marx's observation that 'a thing can be useful, and a product of human labour, without being a commodity' clarifies that the person who makes his own film for pleasure is an example of someone 'who

satisfies his own need with the product of his own labour' but whose labour product does not become a commodity (p 131).

Remembering that, initially at least, this is a consideration of the *similarities* between film and other commodities, it is also possible to broadly compare film's production process to that of other products. Inevitably, the earlier description of film as the end result of a labour process needs to be refined to allow for the scale of this process. Whether its budget is relatively small or large, almost every feature film will be the end product of a series of specialised labour processes. In this sense it is similar to the division of labour of any other manufacturing process described by Marx: 'the assembling together in one workshop, under the control of a single capitalist, of workers belonging to various independent handicrafts, through whose hands a given article must pass on its way to completion' (1976, p 455). Of course, the myriad production processes undertaken in the creation of a film (editing, sound work and design for example) are not bound together geographically speaking, but are in essence still 'independent' processes under the control of a 'single capitalist' – the film's producers.

A film, like any other commodity, could therefore be schematised in the form of a commodity chain, 'a network of labour and production processes' (Hopkins and Wallerstein 1986, p 159) that depicts the production of a commodity, in which 'specific processes [are represented]…as boxes or nodes linked together in networks', each of which 'involves the acquisition and/or organization of inputs' (Gereffi et al 1994, p 2). In fact, Coe and Johns do precisely this, with a commodity chain for film (2004, p 193). Their model is only a general outline of how a feature film can be put together and is in no way ideal. It fails, for example, to correctly

account for the latter stages of film production due to its subsuming of marketing, promotion and advertising under the umbrella heading of 'distribution'. The difficulty here is that the term distribution suggests more the logistical and contractual processes involved in getting the film to audiences and does not describe the often complex and creative ways in which films are promoted, marketed and merchandised (Coe and Johns do acknowledge that 'in the fifth phase, the finished project is promoted through various advertising media, and distributed…both domestically and abroad', but give no other explanation as to why these two disparate processes are conflated into one stage; p 194). Additionally, it is important to note that elements of the commodity chain will vary from film to film depending on the type of production, the film's size and even its subject matter. The commodity chain for a superhero film, for example, would differ in its early stages to allow for the fact that the process begins not with a writer selling an original idea for a screenplay, but more often with the studio's ownership of the comic book as intellectual property which they then seek to develop by hiring writers to adapt it. A modified version of their commodity chain, one which is more specific to an adaptation of a comic book, is therefore shown below in figure 2.1.

Thus far, the relatively straightforward argument has been proposed that in many ways a film (defined here as a feature film made to be released to, and viewed by, an audience in exchange for money) is a commodity like any other – a table, for example. It is made by a studio or company that provides the means of production and employs labour to make a product which it then releases into a market in order to make a profit. Even at this final stage, when the commodity is released to the consumer, film could be said to share broad similarities with other commodities. Much of the research into the film industry reiterates that 'nobody knows'

Figure 2.1 – A commodity chain for a comic book adaptation film (adapted from Coe and Johns, 2004)

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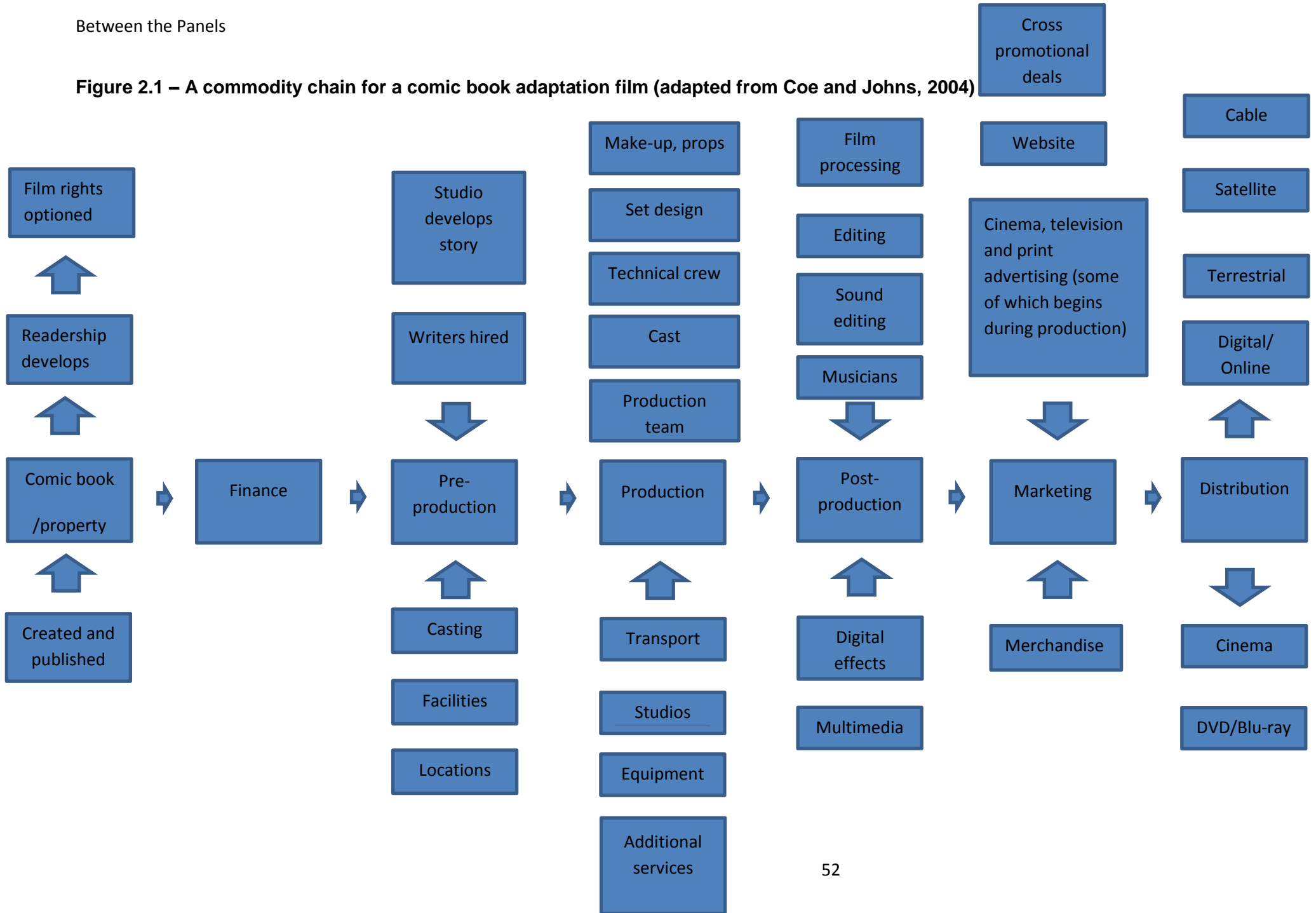
(Caves 2000, p 3) which films will be successful and stresses that the industry is 'characterised by high degrees of randomness and unpredictability' (Turner 2007, p 32). Vogel's cautionary statistics may warn that 'of any ten major theatrical films produced…six or seven may be broadly characterized as unprofitable' (2007, p 65) due to the unpredictability of audiences' tastes, but this is just as true of nearly all commodities in a capitalist economy. As Callinicos observes, the shift under capitalism from the production of goods for direct use to the production of goods for exchange means that 'individual producers do not know in advance whether their products meet a social need' (1983, p 110) and film is no different in this sense.

The material aspect of film

When considering how film differs from other commodities, questions of aesthetics and materiality may be argued to be categories which highlight its difference. Yet in terms of these notions, film can still be argued to be similar to other goods. If the term 'aesthetic' is used here in the 'ordinary language sense…as applied to everyday experience' (Duncum 2007, p 286), or as Raymond Williams puts it, something which is generally to do with 'visual appearance and effect' (1976, p 28), then it is true that almost every commodity has an aesthetic dimension and that a film differs from a table not because the former has an aesthetic element and the latter does not, but simply by degrees. The visual element of film is one of its defining elements but a table also has an aesthetic element, although the importance of aesthetics to its design will vary depending on the price, purpose and

manufacturer (aesthetics are less definitive for an inexpensive fold-out table than they would be for a designer coffee table, for instance). The point here is that almost all commodities have an aesthetic element (whether it is a minimal or dominant part of their design) and the central importance of this element to film does not necessarily separate it from other commodities even on this basis.

A second point which might be argued in order to prove that film is a radically different type of commodity is that of materiality. The term itself is far from uncontested and has been applied in a range of ways depending on the area of study and the writer (see Gilder 1998 and Harman 2011 for example). At this point in the analysis, the concept of materiality is limited to a very specific definition, meaning having a physical and observable existence, a 'real, objective' quality (Papadopoulos 2010) – a definition in line with a more traditional view of materiality as being the opposite of 'mental...substance' (Ladyman 2011, p 92)[19]. In short, it is 'anything that can be proven to exist' (Carchedi 2011, p 199). Just as the above example demonstrates that the aesthetic difference between a table and a film lies not in the misconception that the former lacks this dimension and the latter does not, it is similarly true to say that both a table and a film have materiality, and that it is only the degree and nature of that materiality which is different. Clearly, it is unarguable that film has a different material nature, or physicality, from a table. While a table's materiality is directly related to its function in the sense that its legs and top perform an obvious duty, film's materiality differs because the same film can appear in a variety of formats and also because its actual physical form (a DVD, Blu-ray or a hard drive) does not immediately reflect its use. Of course, these formats require other technology to play the film they contain, but this does not make them less

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[19] The notion of 'mental substance' is something which will be returned to later.

material.

Similarly, though it may be argued that the imagery of the film as viewed is immaterial (after all, it is not possible to physically sense beyond hearing and seeing the things which the film portrays) this does not mean it *is* immaterial. Film in its original form is an image created by projecting light through moving celluloid while, in its contemporary form, it is either contained on a disc whose encoded information is displayed on a screen or, alternatively, is stored and projected digitally. The celluloid, the discs, the memory sticks and even the memory space taken up inside a computer are all tangible and certainly material, yet obviously these physical items are not the actual film itself but merely the repositories or containers of it (the 'material shell[s]' which store 'knowledge' as Carchedi would have it; 2005, p 277). Yet the images that comprise the film – that *are* the film – despite being intangible, are certainly material also. Whilst it is not within this research's remit to debate the intricacies of light and matter – something which will be left to scientists (Jones-Bey 1997) – it is enough to state here that the film itself (the images and sounds projected or transmitted on to the screen) is considered material in the sense that it exists, that it is the result of material processes (it is created by and transmitted through electrically powered technology) and that it is formed of the same images every time it is viewed. In other words, the images which make up the finished film are not imaginary – they are real, observable and form a discrete unit of fixed length.

In addition to the physical materiality of film and its shells, those material inputs which contribute to the filmmaking process (as shown in figure 2.1) cannot be ignored. After all, a finished film is in one sense a representation of the totality of its material inputs. From the more obvious, onscreen aspects such as sets, costumes

and make-up, to the unseen aspects such as the on-set catering and the cameras themselves, a film is constructed from many material components and processes. Certainly, consumers of the commodity are removed from this materiality in a tactile sense when they watch the film as they are not able to touch the costumes or sets for themselves, but this does not negate the material status of the finished product (after all, consumers cannot see and touch all of the material inputs that have gone into the making of a table either). These material inputs, combined with the physicality of its various formats, are all indicators of film's materiality.

The mental aspect of film

Notions of aesthetics and materiality are therefore unable to convincingly prove that film is a wholly unique and radically different class of commodity from any other. The above analysis serves to illustrate the point that on one level, film shares many commonalities with other commodities. Yet it would be entirely disingenuous to imply that these arguments can provide a sufficient and full account of film. It is of course indisputable that film is not by its nature the same type of good as a pen or a cushion and that although it shares common features with them, its purpose and the needs it satisfies are entirely different from those which clothing, food or furniture satisfy. Any detailed analysis of film, therefore, must consider the nature of these differences. To identify film's real and unique differences, another notion must be considered: the mental aspect of film.

Returning to Marx's definition of a commodity as being something which satisfies a human need inevitably begs the question: What needs does a film satisfy?

Admittedly, the reasons why people might decide to watch a film will be as diverse as the people themselves, although it can be assumed that most people watch a film for one or more of the following reasons: to be entertained – as an enjoyable or relaxing leisure activity to move them on some emotional level when they are not engaged in labour; to be diverted – as a means of occupying their mind or 'switching off' from other, more stressful activities; to be educated – either as part of an official curriculum or as a non-compulsory method of education (watching a documentary to learn more about a subject for example); aesthetic, technical or cultural appreciation – when a film is watched not out of a genuine desire to experience the whole but rather as a way of appreciating its technical or aesthetic achievements or because it is highly regarded. A film may of course be watched for just one of these reasons or possibly a combination of them. For instance, a viewer might watch *Gone With The Wind* as a means of relaxing in her leisure time but also in order to educate herself about the Civil War, to appreciate its technical mastery or because it is frequently cited as a 'classic' that she feels she needs to see to better engage socially with those who have already seen it. The point here is that all of the above needs are primarily classified as mental needs. The viewing of the film may well be a physically sensory experience in terms of sight and sound but its visuals and soundtrack exist to transmit the ideas (the mental content) of the film. When what is seen on screen scares viewers, makes them laugh or cry or engages them (or even if it bores them) it is because of their mental interaction with the film.

It could of course be argued that if a film is watched purely for educational purposes, it is indirectly serving a material need in that by studying the film as a required component of a course, it is possibly being used to gain a qualification with, perhaps, the overall aim of getting employment. Alternatively, watching a film in

order to make socialising with others easier will lead to material benefits, but these material needs are secondary to the primary mental needs that are immediately satisfied by watching a film. Although it has been established that film is material in many senses including its shells, an individual would not go and see or buy a film for its physical properties because the experience of simply sitting in a cinema or looking at the packaging a film comes in is not the primary reason he is purchasing it. Admittedly, with a DVD or Blu-ray, he might find the physical packaging of the film attractive and something which he would want to display, but this is a secondary advantage and not the main reason he is buying the commodity (an exception here might be an enthusiast or collector who purchases discs for their limited edition packaging, but this does not apply to the average consumer of film).

The mental aspect is dramatically different from the aforementioned material dimension of film. Previously I argued that one of the ways in which it is possible to ascribe a materiality to film is because it forms a discrete unit of fixed length, comprised of the same images every time it is viewed. These images may not be tangible but they exist and the film itself is not an imaginary concept but something which is fixed and unchanging. After all, the content and running time of *Toy Story* (2005) is the same whether watched yesterday or five years ago[20]. For film as a mental product however, the opposite is true. Because film transmits ideas and carries content which satisfies mental needs, it is a commodity which is constantly

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[20] It should be acknowledged here that it is not unusual for there to be multiple versions of any given film. Cinema versions may vary slightly from country to country as a result of national censorship rules and a television broadcast of a film may be edited to fit scheduling constraints or to meet the requirements of its broadcast time (pre-watershed broadcasts in the United Kingdom for example). Additionally, a film may be re-released years after its cinema debut in the form of a 'Director's Cut' which claims to restore the filmmaker's original vision, pre-studio interference. One famous example is Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) which was re-released not just once, but twice: *Blade Runner: The Director's Cut* (1992) and *Blade Runner: The Final Cut* (2007). The fact that various iterations of each film exist, however, does not negate the point regarding the film as a material product: whichever version is watched – be it the director's cut or a television edit – the content of that specific version would remain the same were it to be rewatched at any point in the future.

unfixed and fluid, one which is different for every single person who consumes it. Indeed, not only is the film different for every viewer but it can also be different for each viewer every time they watch it.

This point perhaps requires further clarification: obviously, the real (material) content of the film does not change with each viewing – it is fixed – but in mental terms, the film that one viewer absorbs or understands upon watching is different from the one absorbed or understood by another. These differences are admittedly down to variations in highly subjective notions such as perception, intelligence, sense of humour and levels of empathy yet nevertheless they do not simply make for a different experience of the film, but actually create a different version, mentally speaking. Take, for example, Lars Von Trier's film *Melancholia* (2011), which tells the story of a young woman's breakdown and ultimate acceptance of the impending destruction of Earth by another planet. This could be viewed as, variously, a drama about sibling rivalry and love, a study of depression, a critique of marriage and patriarchy, a science-fiction film about the apocalypse, a character study of its protagonist, all of the above, none of them, or indeed any other interpretation which could possibly be imagined. Each of these ways of reading the film creates a different film depending on who has viewed it. To read *Melancholia* as a metaphor for depression is to highlight some aspects of it and to potentially ignore (or attach less importance to) others, interpreting dialogue, character and plot in a completely different way than if it is read purely as a science-fiction film. Even if a viewer recognises more than one way of reading the film and accepts that *Melancholia* is about several different things at once, this still only creates one overall way of reading it which is exclusive and unique to the individual concerned – albeit one which acknowledges that several possible readings exist.

My point here is not simply a reiteration of the longstanding literary theory that the individual figuratively remakes a text every time they read or watch it – as summed up by Barthes's statement that 'a text is not a line of words releasing a single…meaning…but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings…blend and clash' (2000, p 149) – but rather a recognition that every film text has two dimensions: material and mental. If a film is considered as a material product, it must be accepted that it exists as a fixed and unchangeable object, one which is only able to be fixed and unchangeable because in this material dimension, any meaning, reading or interpretation remains deliberately unattached to it. Indeed, if the logic of the material dimension is followed to its furthest point, it is true to say that any attempt to even describe what is seen onscreen is open to accusations of interpretation, that any attempt to express the film's content through language becomes an act of subjective reinterpretation that is biased and coloured by the words used. It is possible, however, to note the facts of the film – its cast and crew, production details and its running time – as long as this material description is devoid of any symbolism.

Alternatively, a consideration of film as a mental product must start from the conceptual understanding that any given film will constitute an entirely different mental product for each and every consumer. This is the case because if it is accepted that film is being interacted with on a mental level, this interaction can never be anything other than a subjective one because one person's subjective, mental experience is always at least slightly different from anyone else's. Here, the film is comparable to an idea, in that it can exist in a material form when it is translated into language through writing or speech (verbal statements are, after all, material and real – just not tangible), but in its mental sense, the sense in which it is

transmitted from the consciousness of one person and received by the consciousness of another, an idea has no defining materiality and is therefore different for every individual, who will interpret it in a unique way. Therefore the film exists in material form but can never exist in one definitive mental form.

Working towards a holistic definition

This relationship between the mental and the material can be examined through the lens of Carchedi's work on knowledge production. However, there are some caveats to the application of his ideas. Firstly it must be acknowledged that his work revolves not around film *per se*, but around the idea of knowledge production (those ideas created through labour of the 'mind' as Carchedi would have it; 2005, p 268). The two, of course, are not easily interchangeable, but Carchedi's work is useful because at the very least it provides a valuable opportunity to further consider where film stands in relation to the mental and material. Secondly, Carchedi's initial assertion that, in production terms, the distinction between the mental and the material is false and should be collapsed must be addressed. He argues that even the production of ideas and knowledge is reducible to the category of the material due to the simple fact that knowledge always starts from a material point – the human mind: 'the reason why knowledge is material is that thinking, the learning process, is an expenditure of human energy that causes a change in the nervous system…This is a material change…It is this synaptic modification that changes our perception of the world, that is, our knowledge of it'. From a biological standpoint, Carchedi's view is correct. He accurately acknowledges that 'to deny materiality to…knowledge means to ignore the results of neuroscience' (2011, p 194) and,

admittedly, I applied a similar principle when I argued that film's materiality can at least partly be demonstrated by the material processes which it originates from. Yet to subsume the idea of the mental under that of the material is to inevitably reduce any discussion of film to a simplistic analysis and prevents any useful or necessary distinctions being made between the (very different) components of film outlined earlier. The argument therefore is a theoretical one, not a scientific one. It is essential to acknowledge that Carchedi's biological argument remains true whilst also retaining the mental/material dichotomy which, as will be demonstrated later, is a crucial one for this research in both a theoretical and a methodological sense. Whilst this inevitably means that the hitherto established definition of the term 'mental' is perhaps less literal than Carchedi's, the earlier analysis of film as a commodity has hopefully demonstrated that extrapolating the mental and material dimensions of film from one another is a useful way of understanding how it operates as a product.

These reservations notwithstanding, Carchedi's work does assist the conceptual understanding of film here. This is primarily due to the way in which he compensates for his collapsing of the distinction between intellectual and manual labour (an argument borne out of the earlier scientific argument for removing the distinction between the mental and the material) by constructing a more nuanced analysis of labour and production that instead sees the production process for any given product as a 'transformation' created by combining, in various ways, labour power, knowledge, the means of transformation and the object of transformation. His process relates to this discussion of film because he identifies two types of transformation: material and mental. Crucially however – and necessarily, if he is not to contradict his earlier argument which stated that the mental is ultimately material –

Carchedi also makes clear that 'a labour process is always the combination of both types of transformations'. The only way to therefore decide whether the process has ultimately produced a material product or knowledge is to see 'which type of transformation is determinant', something which can only be done by exploring 'the social validation of the outcome…at the moment of exchange'. Carchedi gives examples of a concert, where the mental content is dominant or of chief importance, and a car, where the material content of the product is most important, reiterating that a product always has a double aspect ('the physical and the mental one') and it is simply a matter of which aspect is 'dominant' (2005, p 278-9).

Using Carchedi's formulation, film would be classed as the product of a mental labour process because, as argued earlier, the material dimension (the packaging or digital device that houses a film) is the less important aspect of the process and is almost irrelevant compared to the mental content. Thus Carchedi's formula (p 279) can be slightly adapted to show that:

FILM = DOMINANT MENTAL CONTENT + SECONDARY MATERIAL CONTENT
(knowledge)   (material processes)

'Material processes', of course, refers not only to the material shells that contain films but more importantly to those aforementioned material inputs (costumes, equipment, catering and others) that help to create the film. In terms of the epistemological aspect, it can safely be assumed that Carchedi is not referring to a limited definition of knowledge as meaning factual knowledge, but rather some broader kind of mental content. This mental content can be linked to the reasons that

a viewer might watch a feature film which have already been listed: for entertainment, distraction and education as well as for its aesthetic, technical and cultural significance.

The doubled logic of film

Although the ways in which film is uniquely different from more prosaic commodities cannot therefore be ignored, it is arguable that, even allowing for the complexity of its mental content, film is better served by Marx's definition of a commodity than it is by Becker's notion of 'fundamental indeterminacy' (2006, p 24). From the discussion thus far it can be concluded that film must fulfil two roles. It must function as a commodity according to the rules of capitalist production in that it must, put simply, make a profit – its total revenue must be more than its total cost. Yet it must also function as a piece of art in that it has to have mental content and be a means of producing knowledge, as Carchedi would have it. As a result of these joint functions, film operates within 'two circuits, one of commodity production proper, the other, the circulation and exchange of value forms' (Ryan, 1991, p 12). This latter circuit is representative of the aforementioned mental aspect of film, a subjective dimension which considers the film's artistic and aesthetic worth, rather than its monetary value. These two circuits are a fundamental part of film's DNA, evident in every aspect of filmmaking. For example, a costume designer will have to meet two basic demands: the costumes need to be as good as they possibly can be in terms of the materials used, their historical accuracy, their aesthetic design and their artistic and symbolic meaning, but they must also be made for a certain cost and within a given budget. Similarly, the sets for a film need to fulfil a plot function and an

aesthetic function but must also be produced for a cost which will be set as a result of the film's budget. This is what underscores Moeran's theory of creativity when he observes that creative products such as film are defined by the choices that are made by the workers, choices such as 'how to shoot a particular scene'. These choices, he argues, are determined in the first instance by the fact that they are responses to 'constraints…specifically the different kinds of material/technical, temporal, spatial, social, representational and economic conditions under which all industries…have to function' (2011, p 17-18).

It is possible to argue, therefore, that film as a product can be described as having two sets of elements: the commercial and the artistic. Defining these sets is not necessarily straightforward however. One method – theoretically speaking – is to define the two aspects negatively. For example, the artistic criteria of film can be defined through a consideration of all the features which are not explicitly related to its commercial function. These would be the direction of the piece, the storyline, the characters and the film's aesthetic elements. The commercial aspects of film can be identified as, conversely, the elements which, theoretically, would be the defining factors of the process if artistic and aesthetic issues were not present. These would be the desire to produce a film for the lowest possible cost, the need for the film to reach the largest audience possible and the need for the film to generate as much revenue as possible. Of course, such simple definitions present art and commerce in their purest, most extreme forms and in reality the process of making a film is often a series of nuanced and complex compromises and negotiations between all of these artistic and commercial considerations. However, as a theoretical starting point, it is necessary to attempt to separate them.

The above elements can be reframed in a more practical manner by following the assertion that film must reflect two types of logic: the logic of the commercial product and the logic of the artistic product. Logic here means the functions that the film must perform in order to work as a commercial and as an artistic product. To establish what the commercial and what the artistic logic of a film is, it is necessary to reduce both to their most basic elements, making as few assumptions as possible. For a film to be a successful commercial product, it needs to make a profit by ensuring the revenue it generates is more than the cost of producing it – 'the minimization of production cost and maximization of potential box office revenue' (Wyatt 1994, p 15) – something it can only do by reaching the widest audience possible. This, of course, is commercial logic at its most simple and could be cited as the blanket rule for any feature film. However, here the particular type of film which is the subject of this research must be taken into account – the superhero comic book adaptation. As the previous chapter noted, the superhero film is currently one of the most suitable fits for the studio blockbuster format and therefore the list of requirements must be modified accordingly because a tent-pole studio film is expected to perform differently from a smaller, more niche film, commercially speaking.

At this point then, Wyatt's aforementioned notion of the 'high concept' major studio release is useful, because, as previously shown, the superhero blockbuster is its contemporary expression. Wyatt notes that these types of films must have 'a striking, easily reducible narrative', which '[relies] heavily upon the replication and combination of previously successful narratives'. While this is, strictly speaking, less of an expectation and more of an interpretation of the blockbuster film, it is still listed as one of the criteria here on the basis that, as Wyatt observes, the formulaic

structure of the film stems from an economic imperative, namely that 'audiences

have a point of reference for…[a] film due to their familiarity with the other sources'[21].

Certainly, the formulaic structure of nearly all recent superhero films (and this is not a

pejorative observation) is evidence of the attempt to replicate their successful

predecessors wherever possible[22]. Another requirement of this type of film as a

commercial product is that it has 'a high degree of marketability' (1994, p 13). The

term marketability translates as a film being easy to market in terms of its

iconography, core concept and plot, which do not have to be simplistic but do need

to be able to be expressed easily. Additionally, the film needs to be merchandisable,

with the ability to generate 'licensed products constructed around the film and its

characters' (ibid, p 148). Here, Wyatt's model needs to be updated to take account of

contemporary blockbuster production which, as Marich notes, needs to create

opportunities for promotional tie-ins with other companies and include product

placement where possible, both of which reduce costs by 'providing some form of

compensation' and 'help to carry the marketing load' (Marich 2013, p 147). It is also

essential to identify another very specific commercial requirement of the

contemporary superhero film, one which is symptomatic of a Hollywood

phenomenon so recent that even Marich does not list it: the need to generate a

narrative universe. Whilst the idea of sequels is nothing new in filmmaking, studios

are currently attempting to ape comic book publishing and locate their properties

within a larger narrative network such as the Marvel or DC cinematic universes and

Warner Bros.' expansion of *Harry Potter*'s 'Wizarding World' with the prequels

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[21] Ryan calls this recourse to formula in cultural products 'formatting' and argues that it is 'based on corporate attempts to confront the uncertainties of the cultural marketplace [by]…'presuming that audience preferences can be known in advance by measuring what already exists'. In short, 'formatting is oriented towards echoing the past' (1991, pp 160-2). Formatting in Hollywood (and indeed in other regions of major film production such as Bollywood) explains why genres comprised of clusters of similar films tend to emerge and then fade in cycles historically (the Western or the vampire film for example).

[22] See Chapter Seven and Appendix V for a more detailed discussion of this point.

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them (2016) and *Fantastic Beasts: The Crimes of Grindelwald* (2018). As this trend is particularly applicable to the fantasy worlds of comic book superheroes (Cheney 2014; McMillan 2015), universe building must therefore also be considered part of the commercial logic of the contemporary superhero film.

The artistic criteria of film must, by necessity, be defined in a less specific way than the commercial ones. It is tempting, if unhelpful, to resist any definition, following the lead of Morris Weitz who famously proclaimed 'the very expansive, adventurous character of art, its ever-present changes and novel creations, makes it logically impossible to ensure any set of defining properties' (1987, p 149). However, in the same way that this chapter has demonstrated at length that film is not a mystical, unquantifiable product, it is possible to identify some of the features that are common to fiction generally, whether it takes the form of film, drama or prose.

Firstly, the film must have a plot of some kind, some expression of narrative. This is included as an essential criterion because it is unarguable that narrative predates film and that it is one of the central components of fiction – if a fiction film has no story it is not, after all, a fiction film. Cobley goes further, observing that the urge towards narrative is a universal one and that 'wherever there are humans there appear to be stories' whether they manifest through 'life history…psyches…musical notation' or even 'scientifically' (2001, p 2). Indeed, works by the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss (*The Raw and the Cooked*, 1964) and the narratologist Vladimir Propp (*Morphology of the Folktale*, 1968) have demonstrated that narrative is a timeless and mutable concept which manifests throughout world history.

A second criterion of fiction films which is linked to narrative is character.

Whether the concept of character is considered to be at the core of narrative, that 'the objects and the events of fiction exist…because of the character' (Ferrara 1974, p 252) or that 'characters come second' and are merely the instruments of the plot as Aristotle believed (cited in Brooks 1984, p 11), they are inextricably bound up with narrative, as Propp's formulations again demonstrate. This is even truer in relation to superhero films for which the character is often the defining element. For these films it is their superhero protagonists, rather than their plots, which are almost always the feature that distinguishes them from others in the genre and gives the films their titles and distinct visual identities.

To character and narrative, three more elements which define film as an artistic product can be added: theme, tone and symbolism. I have purposely grouped these three facets together because they are necessary, but less obvious, artistic elements of film and because they are quite different, conceptually speaking, from narrative and character. In the light of Carchedi's conception of film as having a mental and a material content, it is possible to split these five elements of the fiction film – narrative, character, theme, tone and symbolism – between the two aspects of film. Narrative and character are more predominantly 'material' aspects of film (or to put it another way, relatively easier to identify objectively) – although they are certainly mental aspects as well – whereas theme, tone and symbolism are more predominantly 'mental' aspects of the film (less easy to identify objectively). I make this distinction because narrative and character are less subjective elements of the film in the sense that, even allowing for differences in interpretation, most viewers could reach consensus on the facts of a film's plot and identify its characters (leaving aside their feelings about them). Theme, tone and symbolism, on the other hand, are more subject to individual interpretation – if, indeed, they are identified at all – and

therefore belong more firmly in the mental realm of film. A useful way to think about this is that the more material aspects of the film would be clear in the screenplay (plot points and characters) whereas the themes, tone and symbolism may be implied through dialogue and visuals but would not be explicitly stated. In fact, a film's themes, tone and symbolism might not even be conscious inclusions by the filmmaker in the way that narrative and character are, yet can still be discerned by a viewer and are therefore central elements of the film's artistic make up. Hawthorn makes this point in his distinction between two types of equally valid themes: overt, 'consciously intended…by the author' and covert 'discovered by the [viewer]' (2005, p 122). This is also what Strachan and Terry mean when they define tone as being determined by both the 'atmosphere' (audience interpretation) and by 'the stance taken' by the filmmakers (authorial intention) (2000, p 192). As with narrative and character, these three other artistic features can be argued to be distinct from commerce for the purposes of this taxonomical model because they predate the medium of film, Hawthorn noting that symbolism is particularly 'central to all known cultures' (2005, p 123).

Obviously, a task such as this which attempts to separate the commercial and artistic aspects of film can never be undertaken without making certain methodological assumptions. Here, the commercial features/logic have been specifically refined to fit the contemporary manifestation of the superhero genre whereas the artistic elements are far more archetypal and simplified, and this is deliberate (it is, for example, stated above that a superhero film must simply have a narrative and characters but not that it must particularly have a superhero origin story and contain stock character types such as the superpowered hero and villain). I have made the commercial elements genre-specific but the artistic elements more

broad and archetypal in the above formulation for two reasons. Firstly, doing so removes subjective expectations of what art should be and instead allows for an identification of its most basic elements. A superhero film could, after all, be told in a myriad of ways and does not have to have a list of required elements (even if many such films do feature those elements). Secondly, rejecting a genre-specific definition of artistic elements allows for a clearer separation of the commercial and artistic. Identifying more archetypal and universal artistic elements as opposed to listing how they 'normally' manifest within the films of a particular genre ensures that this definition of artistic logic predates the mediums of both film and comic books and thereby ensures as far as possible that the artistic elements are not a product of audience expectations or of the commercial requirements of the film industry.

While there are certainly many different ways to conceptualise film, the discussion in this chapter is intended to clarify and justify the assumptions about the medium that this study starts from. It is these ideas about the dual nature of film and the doubled logic which it must conform to that will form the foundation for the further theoretical discussions, literature reviews and case studies which are to follow. Having delineated this study's conception of film, the next stage of the investigation is to consider some of the ways in which the relationship between the realms of art and commerce have been theorised.

Chapter Three

Theories of the art/commerce relationship

Having clarified this research's conception of film and its functions, the next task is to consider how existing literature has theorised the interactions between art and commerce in order to lay the theoretical foundations of this analysis and thence develop a theoretical proposition. With the initial starting point for this work being the acknowledgment that film has a double function as both an artistic and commercial product, it is inevitably accepted that the only way to approach film theoretically is via an interdisciplinary route. Within any single discipline, there are numerous approaches to film and the question only becomes more daunting when an attempt is made to combine more than one discipline.

The interdisciplinary approach: an overview

In the academy, both Business Studies and Humanities have made significant but radically different contributions to the body of knowledge about cinema. The former discipline alone provides a wealth of ways to understand film. Seminal texts such as Caves's *Creative Industries* (2000) and Vogel's *Entertainment Industry Economics* (2007) offer solid foundations for any study of the business aspects of

film and Caves's oft-cited seven fundamental truths of creative industries (that demand is uncertain, that creative workers care for their products, that creative products require diverse skillsets, that these products are unique and different from one another, that artists' skills are vertically differentiated, that time is vital to the artistic process and that the durability of some artistic work requires copyright issues) should be kept in mind as a background to any study of this area (2000, pp 2-9). In addition to studies such as these which take a broad view of the way that the film industry is organised, there are a variety of other approaches covered by the umbrella term of Business. These focus on topics as diverse as industrial organisation (Morawetz et al 2007), government policy in relation to filmmaking (Dickinson et al 2005) and profitability (Pokorny and Sedgwick 2010) as well as more mathematical theories of revenue which seek to make links between factors such as stars, genre, certificate and box office performance (Ravid 1999; De Vany 2004).

What all of the aforementioned studies have in common is that they are almost totally unconcerned with reading the films as texts. This is only to be expected considering the discipline and sub-disciplines within which the work is located; their purpose is not, after all, to read the films as cultural texts but rather to explore the ways in which the industry works in various organisational, political and financial contexts. However, even a straightforward industry analysis such as Vogel's cannot ignore the fact that the experience of viewing a film involves being 'transported far away by your imagination as you watch' (2004, p 42) and, in a study such as this, which intends to explore in detail the way that a genre operates both behind and in front of the camera, the non-financial aspects of film must also be considered. Vogel's assertion that 'what is seen on the screen is there because of a remarkable history of tumultuous development that is still largely in process' (ibid, p

42), highlights the importance not only of 'development' and 'process', but also (perhaps inadvertently) of that other inescapable and equally necessary focus of film analysis: 'what is seen on the screen'. An economic perspective is just one part of the bigger picture.

The ways in which subjects such as Media and Film Studies have tended to read films have traditionally been derived and appropriated from the teachings of Literature and Art. The notion of close reading has long been a central tenet of literary studies and while the particular specificities of the approach may vary, consensus is generally reached within literary circles on the basic method. Peck and Coyle accurately state that close reading is 'the analysis, interpretation and evaluation' of a text and that it involves identifying 'the central themes of the work and then seeing how the text presents and develops these themes'. Commentary on technique and form are also crucial and they are careful to add that any 'critical account becomes something more substantial than a mere summary or description the moment you begin to highlight some of the distinctive ways in which a text develops and presents a theme' (2002, pp 177-8). Following Literature's lead, Film and Media Studies have widened the definition of a text to encompass the moving image in its various forms and adopted the idea of reading textual elements such as genre, narrative, structure, character, style, tone and theme. They have combined these features with elements of traditional art criticism, such as the study of colour and framing and the reading of visual symbolism. In addition, these disciplines have also developed their own unique critical tools to address the specificities of the art form. These include a focus on technical elements such as the use of sound, lighting and camera techniques alongside the central notion of 'mise-en-scène' (literally translated as 'putting on stage'), a catch-all term which describes 'all the elements of

film direction that overlap with the art of theatre…the director's choice of actors and how they are directed, the way the scene is lit, the choice of setting or set design, props, costumes, and make-up' (Fabe 2004, p 3).

Film theory has developed into a distinct and valid part of the critical culture in recent decades. In addition to work which acts as an overview of the study of film (Monaco 2000; Dix 2008), specific schools of thought have focused on theories of the auteur and film authorship (Caughie 1981), the ways in which genre is represented on screen (McArthur 1972), the social, philosophical and political aspects of film (Kracauer 1997) as well as the emergence of more journalistic film criticism as work in its own right (Kael 1996). By focusing solely on readings of the films as texts and deriving meaning from their imagery, these schools of thought could of course be accused of being, in their own way, as problematic as the economic analyses. In other words, privileging close reading prevents a fuller understanding of film by excluding the role of the commercial factors that ground any reading in an historical or social context.

The above summary of some of the various approaches to film is intended to be nothing more than a theoretical starting point, the briefest of sketches to help map out the boundaries of academia's artistic and commercial interpretations of film. It also goes some way towards illustrating the importance of gaining multiple perspectives on an industry which requires significant amounts of financial and artistic input. While elements of some of the above theories will be incorporated into parts of this research, it is essential to acknowledge that merely picking and choosing various economic and cultural approaches to film will not produce a sturdy enough framework for this study. The challenge here then is to develop a theoretical

method which will fuse differing approaches together in a compatible way whilst identifying the unique advantages and disadvantages of each. The ultimate goal is to develop a methodology which reflects Kellner's assertion that the 'study of the encoding of media texts is enhanced through study of the system of production in which they are generated' (2007, p 109).

As has been done for film, it is important to identify this study's starting points and acknowledge as accurately as possible the assumptions that it is based on. In the previous chapter it was established that film is comprised of both material and mental content and that it has a double function as a commercial and an artistic product. It should be clarified here that these are two separate points: mental and material are not synonyms for art and commerce. The former two are aspects of film whereas the latter two are functions of it. If there is any link to be made, it is only that both pairs are loosely related manifestations of film's inherent split identity.

The selection of the broad terms 'art' and 'commerce' is deliberate. While a desire for less specific, more general language may seem to run contrary to the requirements of a detailed analysis, it is necessary here because it is more appropriate for the overarching approach that this examination of cultural and socio-economic theories initially requires. This is not to say however that art and commerce cannot be usefully defined for the purposes of this chapter or that the relationship between the two will not be renegotiated in more specific language as the argument evolves. It is also necessary to clarify that the two spheres of art and commerce are not placed into any hierarchy. This reflects the need to move away from prejudiced assumptions that pure art possesses something noble and untainted and that pure commerce is crass and an anathema to it; for the purposes of this

research, objectivity must be maintained in regards to art and commerce.

But how can the relationship between art and commerce in the film industry begin to be characterised? Are they locked into an antagonistic, damaging relationship? Do they act as mutual antidotes, each one usefully checking the excesses of the other? Or are they in fact symbiotic, with the combination of both more often than not allowing the 'best' art works to become a successful reflection of commercial and artistic logic? While the answers to such questions may be highly subjective depending on who is asked and whether their position is within or outside the artistic industries, or on which artistic product or text is being examined, the debate is nevertheless still pertinent.

The interactions between art and commerce have been theorised and debated for decades. It is a relationship which reaches its most intense expression in Hollywood filmmaking, where the costs and potential rewards of making art are high. Even contemporary directors still debate the forces which drive their work. David O. Russell, director of *I Heart Huckabees* (2004) and *The Fighter* (2010), offers a pragmatic view of his role, claiming that alongside artistic concerns 'it's also great to be responsible, financially, about [making films]. I think that's how everyone gets their wish on a film' (cited in Giroux 2010). On the other hand, Francis Ford Coppola argues that historically 'Artists never got money…I would say, "Try to disconnect the idea of cinema with the idea of making a living and money." Because there are ways around it' (cited in Anderson 2011). Similarly, Quentin Tarantino asserts the importance of artistry and a belief that financial revenue is fundamentally irrelevant in his claim that 'The real test [of film] is not the Friday it opens [but]…how is the film thought of ten years from now?' (*Film 2013*, 2013).

The ways in which artistry negotiates with the creative industries have even been commented on by films themselves. The climax to Robert Altman's fictional satire *The Player* (1992) shows what happens when Hollywood executives adapt 'Habeas Corpus', a screenplay intended to be a gritty, bleak drama with no stars: the resulting film is a Bruce Willis-Julia Roberts action spectacle complete with a rewritten happy ending. More recently, a scene from The Coen brothers' *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013) shows the eponymous singer (Oscar Isaac) masterfully performing a beautiful song to a record company boss (F. Murray Abraham). As the last notes fade into silence, the businessman tells Llewyn bluntly: 'I don't see a lot of money here'. Whilst it may seem that there is nothing particularly original to contribute to this ongoing debate, it will help to review some of the established positions in order to expose any erroneous assumptions.

Renaissance and Romanticism: an historical perspective

Historians have argued that notions of the artist as a creative genius who possesses an almost mythical sense of inspiration that can only be alloyed by the forces of commerce are quite specific social and temporal constructs which are nothing more than received wisdom shaped by the artistic prejudices of the Romantic era (Drabble 1985; Wu 2012). The dichotomous relationship between the stereotypical figures of the divinely inspired artist and the mercenary businessman was the logical consequence of leading poets such as Wordsworth 'turning away from society' (Day 1996, p 65) and championing nature at 'the moment at which Britain industrialised itself', a commercial process which many believed threatened England's idyllic traditions and accentuated the 'squalor of the…working people' (Wu

2012, p xxxiii-xxxvii). As Banks observes, the inevitable result of this was that 'the artist was defined and became recognised as the antithesis to the rational and calculative subject of the modern age', even though such a construct was ironically a 'product of the very commercial society from which it claimed to stand apart' (2010, p 253).

Yet an even earlier historical context demonstrates that pragmatic economic considerations have often been as central to the creation of works of art as any artistic impulses. The notion of the ivory tower-sequestered prodigy separated from society by a pure and unknowable imaginative gift is disproved by the biographies of many of the most celebrated artists. Shakespeare's plays were written to be performed and produced by his company in order to make a profit from a ticket-purchasing audience and much of the work of near-legendary painters such as Leonardo and Michelangelo was produced as commissions for paying clients. Zell notes that Rembrandt worked 'at the centre of a complex and continually negotiated web of relations' (2011, p 3) and Welch argues that within the artistic professions of Renaissance Italy, art production took on a very real social dimension, with groups of artists 'working together for a common profit' and understanding that even an individual painter 'could only…flourish once he had gained a wider local network of patrons, suppliers and assistants' (1997, pp 83-4). Thus historical context demonstrates that even the greatest works of art are often firmly rooted in – and sometimes owe their very existences to – financial and commercial interests.

Indeed, the commercial organisation of art extended beyond Renaissance Italy both geographically and temporally, with Europe later using it as a template. DeMarchi posits that the history of European art production is characterised by

artists who were employed by dealers, collaborated frequently with one another, sold their work directly at markets, travelled in response to work offers and frequently had contracts which 'suggest that the real value of payments was roughly equalised by employers across contiguous markets for artists' skills' (2011, p 300).

Such a realistic acknowledgment of the role of commerce in the creation of art is just as prevalent among today's artists according to the interviews with art students and graduates conducted by Taylor and Littleton (2008) and Oakley (2009). Similarly, Angela McRobbie's research into contemporary artists' attitudes reveals that 'where in the past the business side of things was an often disregarded aspect of creative industries best looked after by the accountant, now it is perceived as integral and actively incorporated into the artistic identity', that there is a 'new relation between art and economics [which] marks a break with past anti-commercial notions of being creative' emerging across the arts industries (2002, pp 520-1)[23]. After all, as Hesmondhalgh notes, 'all creators have to find an audience, and in the modern world, no one can do this without the help of technological mediation and/or the support of large organisations' (2013, p 82).

It should also be remembered that the reason some works of art are still made available today is ultimately due to the involvement of selected financiers, businesses and organisations that privately purchase them and donate or lend them to the public. The fact that donors such as these are largely hidden from the view of the gallery-attending art lover effectively 'diminishes our ability to understand the interaction of art, institutions, and…the economics that make art acquisition and

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[23] In her earlier work, McRobbie also makes the point that the need for commercial partnership is more crucial for artists working in those artistic mediums and genres which are 'located at the bottom end of the cultural hierarchy where there are no grants or Arts Council funding'. She gives the example of 'dance culture musicians and DJs [who] have no alternative but to go for the best possible deal with a record company', but notes that this 'does not negate [these artists'] primary commitment to artistic values' (1999, p xi).

donation possible' (Freudenheim 2008, p 364).

Admittedly, the above examples do refer to art in the sense of painting, sculpture and architecture, rather than film. Whilst it is always vital to keep in mind the fact that each artistic medium interprets and navigates the relationship between art and commerce very differently and is organised in very specific ways, the above discussion does at least go some way toward demonstrating that the notion of art and commerce as sworn enemies is nothing more than a specific social construct, a product of an ideological moment rather than an accepted truth.

Art versus commerce: Bourdieu's theory of opposition

If the historical context opens up the debate on the relationship between art and economics, then it is Pierre Bourdieu's work which moves it from the empirical to the theoretical. Bourdieu's belief that 'the opposition between the "commercial" and the "non-commercial" reappears everywhere', that 'it is the generative principle of most of the judgments which in the theatre, cinema, painting or literature, claim to establish the frontier between what is and what is not art' (1980, p 268), suggests that this division is the artistic industries' central motor, shaping art's organisation, production, criticism and opposition. This, Bourdieu believes, is the inevitable result of 'a production based on denial of the "economy" and of profit…[but] which secures success and the corresponding profits by adjusting to a pre-existing demand' (ibid, p 268)[24].

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[24] Ryan describes a similar relationship to Bourdieu's when he notes that there are 'fundamental disjunctions created when the structures of capital are combined with the structures of art'. He argues that art and capital 'when combined…give rise to sets of contradictions' and that, historically speaking, 'artists exist in opposition

This opposition is also expressed in the form of the rewards, or capital, accrued by artists and creators as a result of their work which Bourdieu argues exists in two forms: economic and symbolic. Economic capital is the more straightforward concept of the two. Bourdieu presumably uses the term in accordance with Marx's famous definition of capital as 'money which has been changed into commodities, and reconverted into more money by the sale of these commodities' (1976, p 256) and thus the artists and/or producers who desire *economic* capital are producing artistic work for financial gain. Here Marx's formula of M-C-M (money converted to commodity and then back again to money; ibid, p 248) applies, with the artistic product being the commodity used in the process of accumulating wealth. Symbolic capital, on the other hand, is the artistic reputation and critical acknowledgment received when an artist rejects financial reward and incentives for their work, the 'prestige' earned when 'economic or political capital…is disavowed' (Bourdieu 1980, p 262).

Thus far Bourdieu seems to be echoing earlier arguments which suggest that the art industry offers a simple choice between money and kudos, but his theory of symbolic capital goes further. This latter form of capital, is after all, still a process of capital accumulation and Bourdieu's crucial argument is that the act of rejecting the economic rewards in artistic industries is, ultimately, a method of securing economic reward in the long run. This is achieved by the artist either feigning or genuinely expressing financial 'disinterestedness', an act which will then allow them to make a

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to capital and present capitalists with major difficulties in incorporating them in the production process as labour power' (1991, p 59; p 28). I am by no means suggesting that Ryan's argument is exactly synonymous with Bourdieu's or that they are interchangeable. However, I focus on Bourdieu's work here not simply because he predates Ryan but because I wish to outline an example of a theory of the art and commerce relationship which is somewhat oppositional and, for the purposes of this chapter, Bourdieu's is the more straightforward of the two. Ryan's contradiction theory is primarily interpreted in relation to a more explicitly political Marxist examination of labour relations, an area into which this dissertation does not go.

reputation and name for themselves, eventually imbuing them with the 'power to consecrate objects (with a trademark or signature)' so that they can 'give value [to their work] and…appropriate the profits' (ibid, p 262). Thus Bourdieu claims that artists working in cultural industries are always ultimately chasing economic reward (whether they realise it or not) and that the dichotomy of the industry is not, therefore, sharply demarcated between those who sell out (the businesspeople) and those who do not (the artists), but is rather structured around an opposition between 'ordinary entrepreneurs seeking immediate economic profit and cultural entrepreneurs struggling to accumulate specifically cultural capital, albeit at the cost of temporarily renouncing economic profit' (ibid, p 268). In Bourdieu's view, both groups are striving for the same economic goal, the only differences being the time frame in which it is achieved and, by implication, the honesty (or pragmatism) of those who admit it (or are able to see it) and those who do not.

An artist, therefore, who attempts to reject the mainstream and its stereotypical populist money-making strategies, does so by developing work which may be radical, marginal and rebellious (in terms of its content and/or its production and distribution methods) and which has the potential to earn symbolic capital. As a result of the artist garnering a reputation through an anti-establishment stance (whether this be a conscious statement or simply due to the fact that their work differs from the mainstream) this symbolic capital can, over time, be converted into economic ('real') capital and rewards, which manifest differently depending on the nature of the product. In terms of painting and sculpture, economic rewards come with the exchange value of the artist's work increasing, whereas for a product like film, which has a relatively inelastic exchange value that does not vary according to the 'names' involved in making it, the economic rewards come when directors,

writers and actors with established reputations are able to demand higher salaries and have greater choice and influence over the films they are involved in. Two of the more notable examples of creative workers whose careers have exemplified Bourdieu's theory are the enigmatic street artist Banksy, whose work was initially identified as guerrilla-style free public graffiti on the sides of buildings but which now sells for hundreds of thousands of pounds (Gleadell 2012) and the filmmaker Quentin Tarantino, who has progressed from making independent, low budget crime dramas to occupying a central role in Hollywood as an Oscar-winner whose work has been aped numerous times.

Interestingly, Bourdieu's theory does not assume that these artistic workers have 'sold out' by becoming part of the establishment (a view that echoes Oakley's interviewees' notion that 'selling out' occurs not when artists make money from their work but only when they abandon their art work completely; 2009, p 289) and instead suggests that this trajectory from margin to centre is simply the unalterable cycle of the artistic industries, one in which the 'revolutions' of independent, radical artists 'are only ever partial ones, which displace the censorships and transgress the conventions but do so in the name of the same underlying principles' (Bourdieu 1980, p 269)[25]. Bourdieu ultimately acknowledges that the economic side of the commerce/artistry divide is the more significant and two of his assertions support this. Firstly, his suggestion that all artists are inevitably working towards economic reward on some level unequivocally expresses his belief that artistic products are

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[25] In his wider discussion of Bourdieu, Hesmondhalgh notes that often 'major film studios and television channels sign production deals with independent production companies [and] major record companies sign distribution, licensing and/or financing deals with "independent" record companies' (2006a, p 222). Assuming that at least some of these partnerships are formed because the major companies recognise that the independent companies have particular films or artists which are artistically respected and have generated symbolic capital that can be converted into economic capital by bringing them to a wider audience, these deals arguably constitute corporate-level examples of Bourdieu's theory of the margins moving to the centre.

shaped and developed in response to what there is demand for. This is the logical conclusion to reach here because even if an artist's initial impulse is to work against the commercial mainstream, Bourdieu states that they are doing so on the understanding (either consciously or subconsciously) that their work will ultimately become popular precisely *because* it rebels against the mainstream. Therefore, the motivation for the production of art is either to conform to formulas and models which are currently commercially successful (in an attempt to make money) or, conversely, to produce work which reacts against these models (in an attempt to earn artistic kudos). Either way, in Bourdieu's articulation, the artistic product (or art as a whole) is still being defined, positively and negatively, by that which is commercially successful within each medium.

At production level, these differing motives manifest in each artistic industry through two organisational approaches: on the one hand, the production of artistic products that 'correspond to a pre-existent demand…in pre-established forms', characterised by 'a short production cycle…intended to ensure a rapid return of profits [from]…products with built-in obsolescence' and on the other, products with 'a long production cycle based on acceptance of the risk inherent in cultural investments', products that, it is hoped, will in the future 'rise to the status of cultural objects' (ibid, p 280). Clearly, Bourdieu's description of production is here better suited to the painting, sculpture and publishing industries than the film industry. In terms of film production, while it is certainly true that films which capitalise on current trends are often 'fast-tracked' for relatively speedy productions and releases, the nature of the industry, with its emphasis on theatrical distribution, means that it is not the case that any film – even a low budget production – would be made with the intention of sacrificing immediate profit for a long term increase in cultural status.

Although Hesmondhalgh is accurate in his observation that Bourdieu's comments really apply to 'the restricted production end of any field of cultural production' and that 'large-scale production is…largely unexamined' (2006a, p 223), Bourdieu's theory can still be applied to the contemporary film industry through the production strategy of diversification. Here, film studios and producers will invest not only in big budget, mainstream projects but also smaller projects which are less expensive and therefore carry less risk but which are still intended to reach a specific audience and make a profit. Therefore films such as *Manderlay* (2005) and *Melancholia* (2011), with budgets of approximately $14.2m and $9.4m respectively, are certainly intended by their makers to be profitable but are also made with a realistic understanding that their audiences will be more select than a blockbuster's. Films such as these are the industry's equivalent of products which are intended to accrue both economic and symbolic capital. Unlike an artist who might produce paintings that will ideally increase in value over successive years, companies do not produce these less mainstream films intending them to make the majority of their profit in years to come – the profit, like that of all films, must ideally come relatively soon after release. However, it is also the case that the success of many less mainstream films can also be measured in terms which go beyond the box office, such as through critical praise and industry awards.

Yet even in these terms, Bourdieu's theory is borne out in that the ultimate reward is inevitably financial: for actors and directors involved in critically successful and award-winning films, the rewards are more (as well as a broader choice of) work and a higher salary for future projects (successive films can be promoted as 'from the director of…'), whereas studios benefit by extending theatrical release windows for films with positive word of mouth, re-releasing award winning films post-success,

negotiating better broadcast deals and increasing DVD sales by emphasising awards won and critical praise in the films' marketing. Thus symbolic capital is finally 'cashed-in' and becomes an economic reward (albeit over a shorter period than Bourdieu describes for paintings and other works of art), proving that it is not equal to economic capital and that, as Loesberg observes, it is worthless unless what lies 'behind the symbolic power of symbolic capital is some real power…symbolic power must always be referred to some more "authentic" power' (1993, pp 1042-3).

The second of Bourdieu's assertions that supports the conclusion that economic motives are the driving forces of the artistic industries is more self-explanatory, namely his notion (discussed earlier) that the revolutions of the radical artists against the mainstream are only limited to revolutions of artistic content and that the real revolution against the system's structure as a whole – the structure which ensures that the mainstream always and inevitably absorbs the radical into itself, commandeering it by making it commercially viable – can never, and will never, take place. Bourdieu describes this localised revolution as a delusion of the artistic industries. In his articulation, new modes of expression may constantly arise within music, painting, sculpture, literature and film that claim to be radical responses to, and rebellions against, the formulaic and commercially populist models of each medium but the hegemonic system of economic control which determines that today's radical art is merely tomorrow's mainstream product remains unchallenged; any revolution or change is limited and fails to go beyond individual artworks or texts. Thus, the logical extension of Bourdieu's argument is that artistic revolutions against the mainstream are anything but threats to the commercial forces which supposedly strangle art – they are in fact its life blood and its fodder. The supposedly defiant movements that offer alternatives to commercially dominant models eventually

attract symbolic capital, then economic value, and finally come to form a 'new' (yet fundamentally unchanged) mainstream, perpetuating the very thing they set out to oppose. It would seem that the commercial/artistic dichotomy is therefore, according to Bourdieu, structured less along the lines of a balanced divide and is instead more of a hierarchical structure with artistry and artistic forms being subordinate to, or consequences of, commerce[26].

It is necessary to address a number of points in Bourdieu's argument. The most obvious difficulty with his theory from the perspective of this research is his notion of the split which he believes is manifested in every aspect of the artistic industries. Bourdieu argues that this dichotomy is apparent in the arts in relation to criticism, production (producers versus marketing) and types of text (classics versus bestsellers and also the texts which snub mainstream commercial formulas versus those which cleave to them). To accept this unquestioningly is to work from the initial assumption that art and commerce are in fact locked in opposition. As was established earlier in this chapter, this investigation of film does not commence under the prejudice that the two drivers of the industry are antagonistic; to do so mires any analysis in the defeatist Romantic and corporate myths that personify both art and commerce as archetypes. I use the word defeatist here because to accept the inaccurate construction of artists as ephemeral creative geniuses who are out of touch with the corporate world already implies submission to capitalist hegemony in the most negative sense. The idea that an artist can never understand the logic of

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[26] This is not to be disingenuous: it is unarguable that some of Bourdieu's later work presents a revised view of the above relationship in which artistry plays a subordinate role to commercial considerations. Loesberg notes that in *The Logic of Practice* (1990), Bourdieu presents 'a field reversal' by arguing that 'the greater extension of uneconomic practices of exchange [make] symbolic capital the larger category…symbolic capital, then, is not merely a symbol for economic capital but the capital that exists when economic interests are denied or negated' (Loesberg 1993, pp 1045-6). While Bourdieu's work in *The Logic of Practice* is interesting, his reengineering does not render the original formulation invalid in regards to the application of it here because the description above is still one possible explanation and a valid proposition in its own right.

commerce already enables a capitalist ethnocentrism to assign victory to the world of commerce on the grounds that artists' refusals to acknowledge or adapt to the 'realities' of the market makes them incompatible with the rules of capitalism. Certainly it is naïve to suggest that artistic motivation and commercial motivation *never* come into conflict, but it is also reductive to assume that they always do.

It is fairer to start instead from the assumption that it is in the interests of everyone involved in the making of a film to create what they believe to be the best film possible and that they therefore set out to do so (after all, it is reasonable to assume that any writer, producer, studio executive, actor or director does not set out to deliberately make a 'bad' film, even if they are doing the job purely for economic reward rather than because they want to tell a story that passionately matters to them). It is also realistic to acknowledge that along the way, there may be many clashes between those who believe that elements should or should not be changed for the sake of making a better piece of art and those who feel that these elements need to be altered in order to make the film more attractive to a wider audience and therefore maximise its potential to make money. But just as it is naïve to assume that there would be no conflict, it is equally naïve and clichéd to assume that such conflicts are necessary and unavoidable parts of the filmmaking process, even for major studio blockbusters such as superhero comic book adaptations. This research therefore starts from a more nuanced understanding of the process by not taking as given that filmmaking is characterised by a division between the studio executives (producers, marketers, accountants) and the artistic labour (directors, writers, actors). If commercial versus artistic conflicts do arise, it should be recognised that the two sides of the argument are not simply populated by businesspeople and artistic labour respectively – in any given conflict on any particular film, commercially

motivated decisions could just as easily be made by a writer or a director and artistic decisions supported by studio executives.

It is therefore important to emphasise that, if the conflict between art and commerce is not assumed to be a constant element of the filmmaking process, a methodological framework must be constructed that permits films to be analysed individually whilst still maintaining an awareness of the larger structures that they are part of. This individual analysis is something which Bourdieu's theory cannot engender. His notion of the split that is manifested in every aspect of the production and distribution of art encourages at best only a wide, industry level analysis of film because any investigation which has this as a central tenet surely has a foregone conclusion. This is the case because any discussions of specific films would not be able to investigate whether or not there is a conflict between artistic and commercial pressures or consider how they might perhaps work symbiotically but would instead merely be demonstrating in the most passive sense *how* the split is manifested.

Adorno: commerce as the destroyer of art

Bourdieu describes the art-commerce relationship as a split which is always being contested (regardless of the fact that his argument ultimately suggests the triumph of commerce) but Theodor Adorno's assessment of the relationship is even starker in its conclusion. Where Bourdieu characterises art and commerce's interactions as a conflict, Adorno declares that, in terms of mainstream culture at least, the battle is over and art is dead, having been robbed of all creativity and originality by relentless commercial forces. His basic argument is that 'the

commercial character of culture causes the difference between culture and practical life to disappear' (1991, p 53) and that art is trapped in a self-referential, self-contained realm wherein it is endlessly recycled and repeated over and over, conforming to the same formulas. Here, 'every product refers back to what has already been preformed, the mechanism of adjustment towards which business interest drives it anyway is imposed upon it once again' (ibid, p 58) by a culture industry which is, according to Adorno, literally an *industry*, with all Romanticism's negative connotations of that term.

Much of what Adorno says is accurate. His hyperbolic assertion that, artistically speaking, 'whatever is to pass muster must have already been handled, manipulated and approved by hundreds of thousands of people before anyone can enjoy it' (ibid, p 58) is an acute observation of the 'art by committee' approach to mainstream film and television which, over the course of the twentieth century has experienced increasing incursions from marketers, promoters, advertisers and focus group researchers. The numbers of people involved seem somewhat exaggerated but, assuming that Adorno is referring to the previous audiences of artistic products who (from the producers' points of view) supposedly create the demand for similar products in the future, his point is clear: the culture industry is devoid of creative originality and merely cynically re-presents previous successes. Similarly, it is hard to argue with his observation that the marketing for many new films frequently 'now boasts of [their] similarity with the successful prototype rather than trying to conceal the fact' (p 58) when film posters such as that for the crime drama *The Iceman* (2012) proudly proclaim that it is '*Zodiac* meets *Goodfellas*' (*The Iceman* poster, 2013). An appropriate analogy for the culture industry here would be a recycling plant which takes used materials (successful artistic formulas) and pulps them only

to produce products which, despite their claim to be new, are nothing more than the old material reconstituted. In this sense, Adorno's observations accord with Bourdieu's description of the culture industry's relentless process of absorbing the margins into the amorphous whole of the mainstream.

Adorno's argument has implications not just for the producers of mainstream cultural products but also for audiences. Here, the consumers of these products are both victims of, and complicit in, the process. If the industries produce artistic products which are ultimately 'baby food: permanent self-reflection based upon the infantile compulsion towards the repetition of needs which [the industry] creates in the first place' (Adorno 1991, p 58), then the implication is clear: the audience are the babies who perpetuate it through their continuing demand. Adorno's baby food analogy can be taken further in that he sees mass culture as sanitised, safe and utterly unprovocative in its content. In what could almost be interpreted as a direct retort to Bourdieu's theory of art versus commerce, Adorno claims the opposite – that the culture industry's output is actually defined by a complete *lack* of conflict. His argument that in film 'the technique of mechanical reproduction as such already betrays the aspect of resistancelessness' (ibid, p 62) may be something of a subjective response which cannot be proved empirically but does at least hint – albeit in a somewhat obscure manner – at his belief that any conflict in art, such as the Bourdieusian struggle between art and commerce, is crushed by the powerful commercial imperative. Adorno's theory that commerce has already utterly destroyed art, that 'monopoly is the executor, eliminating tension, [that] it abolishes art along with conflict' (1991, p 67) is a dramatized critique of the profit imperative, in which producers working in high risk industries such as film are forced to replicate the formulas which have proven to be successful in order to attempt to maximise

revenue.

As a counter argument to Bourdieu and a second perspective on how art and commerce interact (or not, as the case may be here), Adorno's work is interesting, if highly subjective. His central point is valid – indeed, the commercial logic derived from Wyatt's 'high concept' model has already shown that the replication of familiar material is a key feature. As a theoretical position to base an investigation on however, Adorno's work has limitations. Just as Bourdieu's conclusions form an investigative dead-end (through his assumption that art and commerce are stereotypically antagonistic), so too do Adorno's constitute a theoretical impasse. To adopt the view that culture and art are ideologically and creatively dead whenever they enter the mainstream in any artistic industry is to begin from a point of prejudice which is incompatible with any useful research into a mainstream genre such as the superhero comic book adaptation. This study does not adopt the view that mainstream film is completely original or beyond criticism – indeed, it can be argued that many of Adorno's points are accurate – but neither does it begin from a point of prejudice towards the material.

Instead, critical judgements must (at least initially) be set aside in favour of objective facts: the film text exists as a finished product, the result of particular factors and production processes and must be investigated accordingly. In addition, it is important to reiterate that this investigation is undertaken under the reasonable assumption (which, while it may not be a fact, constitutes a helpful starting point nonetheless) that all parties involved, be they responsible for artistic content or more baldly commercial aspects, are attempting to make the best film they can or, at the very least, are not setting out to make a deliberately poor product. Adorno's and

Bourdieu's cultural commentaries are useful for establishing broader theoretical perspectives and, indeed, ideas such as symbolic and economic capital and the repetition of narrative formula will be reconsidered in the light of the case studies (Chapters Six through Nine), but their work does not provide a framework for a specific method. The next task is to lay a theoretical foundation which combines a micro (text level) analysis with a macro (genre and industry level) analysis. Yet to undertake this is not simply a matter of deciding to. Instead, using the above assumptions about the non-antagonistic nature of commerce and art combined with an understanding of the central role of the text as guiding principles, the broader theoretical level must now be refined into a more nuanced approach.

Towards a theoretical framework: a Marxian approach[27]

The aforementioned perspectives on art and commerce are useful in that they expose the respective stereotypes and prejudices of this area and, to a large extent, reveal them to be socially constructed myths which are largely inapplicable to the reality of contemporary artistic work. This theoretical review will now be extended to consider some of the more complex ways that the art-commerce relationship has been theorised. This begins with Marx's attempts to present what he believed was an accurate articulation of the relationship between the economic organisation of a capitalist society and its social organisation (I deliberately avoid the erroneous yet

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[27] I reiterate at this point that I use the term Marxian, rather than Marxist, very deliberately here. In this dissertation, the Marxian approach signals an application of, and interaction with, some of Marx's specific ideas and theories but is also employed as a way of clarifying that the readings of the films which comprise this research's case studies are not Marxist in an explicitly political sense. In other words, they are not intended to be Marxist readings of film in the literary criticism sense of the word. This will be explained in more detail in the section 'The uses of cultural materialism' in Chapter Four.

common oversimplification here that Marx is simply exploring the relationship between economics and culture). Earlier I stated that when embarking upon a critique of theory it is essential to be aware of potential bias in the sense that the very act of selecting theorists and their work constitutes an inherent privileging of them, regardless of how they are to be critiqued. Accordingly, it is necessary to consider why such importance is given to Marx here. After all, it could be argued that because the bulk of Marx's thinking and writing is fundamentally economic in its concerns, to privilege it theoretically is already to weight the bias of interdisciplinary research toward economic rather than textual analysis.

The use of Marx as a central part of this study's theoretical foundation however is more an acknowledgment of the centrality of his work to both economic and cultural theory (in the same way that Freud's is to psychology). So much of the thinking in this area is either a development of, or reaction against, Marx's work that it is essential to consider its relevance. Indeed, Marx's work is used primarily as a starting point here and it is the theories developed from the responses to his writings which are equally, if not more, important in shaping the argument. Additionally, with the embracing of Marxist theory by many Humanities academics in the latter part of the twentieth century, its use as an analytical tool in areas beyond the economic has become widespread. In Literature for example, his work is not used as a blanket to smother any analysis of texts with economics, but rather constitutes an attempt 'to explain the literary work more fully…[and pay] a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings…[and to grasp] those forms, styles and meanings as the products of a particular history' (Eagleton 1990, p 207). Indeed, the view of Marx as simply an economist is reductive and erroneous. Certainly, his legacy-defining work *Capital* (1867) is a detailed and specific dissection of how the capitalist economic

system operates, yet much of his other work is characterised by a multidisciplinary approach. This is part of the reason why, despite significant critiquing in the intervening years, his ideas have endured and been adopted by many disciplines including Philosophy (Qu 2011), History (Plaw 2006), Religious Studies (Ling 1980) and even the sciences (Brown 2012). Marx, then, plays a vital part in establishing an historical and social context whilst a consideration of the ways in which his theories have been adapted by later authors will also help form the foundations of this interdisciplinary work.

A suitable starting point is therefore a consideration of Marx's formulation of the relationship between a capitalist mode of production and its superstructure[28], although it should be clarified here that this formulation is not being transposed directly on to the art/commerce debate. Rather, his theories are expressive of a wider social totality, certain parts of which are a manifestation or a translation of the relationship between art and commerce. An early version of one of Marx's central theories appears in the 1859 Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy* in which he proposes a model that would come to be known as the mode of production and superstructure:

> 'In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social

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[28] I, like Wayne (2003), avoid the oversimplified term 'base' and instead use 'mode of production', for reasons which will be made clear later.

consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general' (1977, p 389).

This is summarised neatly by Wright et al:

> 'Marx argues that the overall course of human history can be divided into a series of distinct epochs, each characterised by a distinctive set of relations of ownership and control of productive resources, *social relations of production*. These relations of production explain critical properties of the society's political and ideological institutions, its *superstructure*, and are themselves explained by the level of development of the society's technology and overall organization of the production process, its forces of production' (Wright et al 1992, p 13).

Marx's key idea is expressed in his final sentence: that it is the material needs of people and society which are in fact the engine of history and that it is these 'relations of production' which shape and define the 'intellectual life process[es]' including, but not limited to, cultural life and artistic output. His work was chiefly developed in response to the idealist theories of Hegel, one of whose central philosophical positions was the assertion that 'the substance of the universe is homogenous with and identical to that which composes ideas and mind', that 'cognition is not merely recognition; it is a creative act' (Walker 1978, p 68). Conversely, Marx's insistence that it is the material concerns of life which give rise to ideas (and other intellectual and social phenomena – the superstructure) effectively inverted Hegel's theory of the primacy of thought.

As early as a decade before the Preface was published, Marx, along with Friedrich Engels, was already acknowledging the fundamental importance of social

and economic factors in the genesis of artistic works and indeed entire movements. In *The German Ideology* they note 'how greatly Raphael's works of art depended on the flourishing of Rome at that time' and posited that his and other artists' development 'was determined by…the organization of society and the division of labour in his locality, and…by the division of labour in all the countries with which his locality had intercourse' (Marx and Engels 1977, p 189). Their assertion that the artistic and economic realms are not mutually exclusive but are, on the contrary, intricately related to one another, was the foundation upon which Marx built his more well-known thesis. This is not, of course, a radical suggestion, as has already been discussed. Engels and Marx's theory that 'the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men' (ibid, p164) finds its contemporary expression in Moeran's examination of creativity cited in the previous chapter, which argues that artistic ideas and creations arise in the first place as a response to the constraints and limitations imposed on artistic labour by finite material and economic resources.

It is clear even at this early stage that Marx's work has implications for my structural analysis of film that was refined over the course of the previous chapter. There, I argued that film as a product is defined by possessing a dominant mental content and secondary material content. In this formulation, and according to Carchedi's definition, the mental content is dominant due to the intellectual and emotional nature of the viewing experience, yet the material aspect is still an essential part of the product. This identification of mental as dominant and material as secondary is used for taxonomic purposes only. It is employed in order to establish a more detailed breakdown of film as a product and the analysis deliberately avoids placing the mental and material aspects of film into any kind of

hierarchy. In this conception, the mental dimension dominates purely at the reception stage in terms of the product's use from the consumer's perspective but the analysis makes no such claim for the actual production process or the initial stages of a film's creation, instead it simply acknowledges the material and mental as parallel inputs. Marx, however, places the two into a clear causal relationship wherein the material is the progenitor of the mental.

Updating the mode of production: refining Marx's theories

It is tempting here to simply apply what Marx says to the debate regarding the relationship between art and commerce established thus far, with the superstructure taking on the role of 'art' and the mode of production masquerading as 'commerce' but this is a gross oversimplification. This reductive view of the mode of production runs throughout Marxist literature, with even the common term for it – the 'base' – being itself a generic description implying passivity and inertia. In his essay 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', Raymond Williams suggests that:

> 'when we talk of "the base", we are [or rather should be] talking of a process and not a state…we have to revalue "the base" away from the notion of a fixed economic or technological abstraction, and towards the specific activities of men in real social and economic relationships, containing fundamental contradictions and variations and therefore always in a state of dynamic process' (2006, p 132).

It is Wayne who takes up this challenge and is quick to reiterate that the base is not '"the economy"' and needs to be considered not as 'an economic or technological

"thing"; fixed, inert, imposing itself on human beings as if it existed outside their activities and practices' but rather as a 'more dynamic, process-orientated and above all contradictory foundational concept – the mode of production' (2003, pp 118-9).

Wayne has two solutions to this, both of which help to make the theory more active and relevant to the real world. His first is to imbue the mode of production with a dynamic energy by situating a new category or analytical approach inside it – namely Castells's 'mode of development' which acknowledges both the central role that technology has played in enabling 'information itself to become the product of the production process' (Castells 2010, p 78) and also that, by doing so, it has reconfigured the mode of production. Wayne's and Castells's arguments are logical given that Marx himself ties the notion of capital (and by association capitalism) to physical machinery. His argument that 'machinery appears as the most adequate form of fixed capital; and fixed capital…as the most adequate form of capital in general' (Marx and Engels 1987, p 84) stresses the importance to capitalism not only of technology *per se* but also of the particular *form* of that technology (constituting the forces of production as Wright earlier summarised).

Marx also acknowledges however, that machinery is not (and from Marx's historical perspective, would not always be) the definitive form of capital when he states that 'capital as value is indifferent to every particular form of use value, and can with equal indifference adopt or shed any of them as its incarnation' (ibid, p 84). Here he opens the door for future analyses to show that the capitalist mode of production is not fixed and mired in the period of its creation but rather that it is a constantly evolving organism which changes as the technology which upholds it changes. Placing Castells's recognition of the growing centrality of information and

the technologies which have made its centrality possible (the forces of production) alongside the mode of production is a shrewd move, investing the static base – formerly viewed as an unchanging model of an economy – with an energy and life force which gives it the capability to constantly fluctuate, update, adapt and change as society's material needs and methods of production change. Additionally, it helps to create a more nuanced analytical tool for the specific application of film industry research as it encourages a more focused consideration of the ways in which the industry and its methods of production evolve and change.

Wayne's second solution lies in a more practical view of the base which involves thinking in terms of 'two levels in the…mode of production'. The first is 'a general category with no particular content…the social form which all or at any rate almost all production must take within a given society' (and this is certainly the way in which many analyses view Marx's idea of the mode of production – as a generalised, amorphous notion of how a capitalist society organises itself to produce). The crucial second level however is what Wayne describes as 'more concrete…referring to actual industries, actual companies, actual production and so forth'. The benefit of refining this second level of analysis in terms of particular companies within various industries is clear: it forges connections between 'the general social form and specific media' (Wayne 2003, pp 134-5). Through this simple act of anchoring the mode of production to the real world, Wayne provides a more dynamic and useful analytical tool for a focused dissection of actual media products by establishing a strong link between Marx's theoretical categories, real producers (the studios) and real texts (superhero films) themselves. Wayne's method also naturally lends itself to a micro-macro approach, with the micro analysis of film texts, companies and production strategies manifesting as a specific form of the macro

analysis of how meaning is created and texts are shaped.

Therefore, to clarify: this awareness that Marx's existing category of mode of production is insufficient for any contemporary analysis of a specific media industry is coupled with an understanding that Wayne's recommendations are to be followed if it is to be made sufficiently dynamic and complex. However the mode of production is defined, the original point is certainly clear: it is far more than simply 'commerce' or the economy (it is Althusser who gets closest to establishing the mode of production's relationship to the economy when he states that Marx 'understands abstract economic reality…as the effect of a deeper, more concrete reality: the mode of production of a determinate social formation'; 1977, p 110). Admittedly, if the mode of production were to represent either commerce or art for the purposes of this ongoing discussion, it would be more akin to the former in that the notion of commerce as a motive force can be viewed as part of (or a product of) the mode of production, providing it is acknowledged that the two are not synonymous.

Similarly, the superstructure is not a monolithic concept. The superstructure itself, in its most straightforward definition, 'comprises everything cultural – religion, politics, law, education, the arts' (Sim and Van Loon 2004, p 21), so an obvious but necessary qualification to Marx must be made here by saying that just as the base is not the economy, the superstructure is not simply 'art'. Art and its attendant concepts (aesthetics, criticism, art theory) are however, according to Marx, located within the superstructure so that, just as the mode of production is more akin to commerce (if it must be assigned to one or the other), art can be represented by the superstructure at this stage of the argument. Of course, this is an acknowledgement that the argument is somewhat broad at this point but this does not render it useless. Marx's

theory and the work of his subsequent detractors and supporters are cited here not to provide a specific framework for a methodology (which will be presented in a later chapter) but simply so that the various perspectives on the relationship between commerce and artistry may be examined and reviewed. To clarify then, using Lee and Murray's useful definition (which is neither too simplistic nor unnecessarily complicated), Marx's argument in his mode of production-superstructure theory is that 'the means and the social relations of production brought together in the wage relation…shape the nature of the state and popular culture' (1995, p 139).

Critical responses to the mode of production-superstructure model

Before the most significant responses to Marx's theories are considered, it is necessary to discuss the immediate reservations that this model prompts in terms of this study's aim to undertake an interdisciplinary approach to the analysis of film. These reservations naturally arise in answer to the question of whether or not Marx's work forms a suitable theoretical base for analysis. However, it must be reiterated that starting with Marx's theories neither signifies a passive acceptance of his ideas as correct nor introduces them as a straw target which will be deliberately destroyed. Rather, the starting point must be a recognition that his formulation has value as a metaphor, a model which facilitates an ongoing dialogue and is 'used to discuss the relationship [both historical and contemporaneous] between…general dimension[s] of society' (Lee and Murray 1995, p 139) – in this case, the relationship between film as an art form and socioeconomic aspects of society. The more sophisticated

discussions of this theory have refused to dismiss Marx's work completely and have demonstrated that it is relevant and useful as long as it is understood that it is 'just an analogy' and that 'in reality the structure is less absolute and less clear' (Hebblewhite 2012, p 206). Similarly, Smith's description of it as '"an intellectual Proteus" capable of a number of possibly conflicting constructions that pull in different directions' (Smith 1984, p 941, citing Wells 1946, p 91) suggests that it is less a prescriptive piece of determination and more a malleable framework which can be adapted and modified.

At this point, if the framework is to be useful to this particular study, some of its more problematic aspects need to be addressed and worked through. These conceptual difficulties are bound up with the design of Marx's original model, primarily its tendency to prioritise the mode of production at the expense of the superstructure and its related failure to provide a sufficiently detailed account of that superstructure. This research aims to begin from a neutral position in relation to commerce and artistry and therefore it is essential to interrogate the apparent disparity between the value that Marx's model attributes to the mode of production and the value it attributes to the superstructure. The following consideration of my own and others' chief reservations about the mode of production-superstructure model and discussion of some of the more helpful critical responses to it, will hopefully facilitate the development of a more specifically nuanced and appropriate theoretical basis for this study.

Admittedly, from a methodological point of view the model tends to fall short if it is expected to provide a nuanced analytic toolbox that can be used to dissect the contemporary film industry. Eagleton summarises the frequently repeated criticisms

when he asserts that 'however much the model may be refined and sophisticated…this whole binary opposition would seem to remain stubbornly reductive and mechanistic', a theoretical formulation through which 'the activity of material production becomes fetishized and the rest of social life relegated to secondary status' (1989, p 165). This view of the mode of production-superstructure relationship was particularly prevalent among many theorists working in traditionally unrelated (non-economic) subject areas such as Literature and Cultural Studies, subjects which had come into contact (or, perhaps, *conflict*) with Marxist theory in the latter half of the twentieth century and which sought to take Marx's ideas and appropriate them for their own disciplines. Whether or not these literary and cultural theorists viewed Marxism from a fundamentally prejudiced perspective and were therefore only too willing to dismantle a theory that placed economic factors centre stage whilst seeming to marginalise the cultural and artistic products which were their stock in trade, is open to debate. Certainly Stuart Hall, the renowned cultural critic, acknowledges the obvious incompatibilities between the two approaches, stating that 'There never was a prior moment when cultural studies and Marxism represented a perfect theoretical fit…there was always-already the question of…the things that Marx did not talk about or seem to understand which were our privileged object of study: culture, ideology, language, the symbolic' (1999, p 100). Here, Hall effectively articulates the fear that many literary and cultural critics have over fully embracing a theory which, at its worst, could be construed as a downward slope inevitably and ultimately leading to the seemingly alien territory of economic determinism.

This fear is only compounded by Marx and Engels's observation that 'we set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate

the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process' (1977, p 164). Admittedly this passage from *The German Ideology* was written some time before Marx's 1859 model, in which he presented a more tempered, less vitriolic response to idealist philosophy, yet it does expose some of the basic prejudices inherent in the materialist view. Descriptions of the superstructural elements as ephemeral 'echoes' and 'phantoms' which seemingly lack any substance alongside the constant, repetitive reiteration of the 'real' nature of the life-process with its attendant implication that artistic products are *not* 'real' (assumedly as a result of the fact that they cannot be considered as directly contributing to the material and physical maintenance of human life), suggest an intrinsic privileging of the material means of production. The implications for a potential art-commerce analysis are clear: even though Marx's definition of material life processes is not a straightforward equation with commerce or the economy, the fact that these elements arise from the material means of production means that his theory will inevitably be translated into a privileging of the economic over the cultural from the start. This is not, of course, to say that Marx renders art and culture completely worthless (far from it - as a social scientist, he actually gives detailed consideration to these topics) but they are certainly weakened by the emphasis on the robust materiality of the mode of production.

The difficulty here is not a conceptual or logical one but rather one of interpretation. There is nothing radical or overly problematic about Marx and Engels's basic assertion that thought and ideas (the products of thought) can only exist if there is a 'real' human conscious mind to produce them. To agree with this is surely to acknowledge a biological perspective, something which in no way

diminishes the importance of artistic products or privileges the economic. Accordingly, it is the literary theorist Eagleton who states that 'the fact that we are natural material objects is a necessary condition of anything more creative and less boring we might get up to' (2000, p 232). The problem comes, however, when this assertion is simplified erroneously into a statement that everything is determined solely by the economic. To start with an uncritical embracing of a theory which, to put it simply, repeatedly and inescapably returns to economic determinants, allows no room to explore the possibility that other, non-economic factors can also be determinants.

If Marx's attribution of primacy to the material life-processes is instead interpreted more as an example of scientific consequential logic, rather than as a claim that the superstructural elements lack agency or importance, it can be accepted that agreeing with the former does not have to mean agreeing with the latter. I suggest that to do this, there needs to be more emphasis on the 'life-processes' part of Marx's statement and less significance placed on the 'material' part which, as argued, carries implications of being real and substantial as opposed to an ephemeral alternative. It is Garnham's landmark essay 'Contribution to a Political Economy of Mass-communication' that articulates the relationship between the life-processes and the superstructural elements most effectively and without prejudice. He states that 'material production…is determinate in that it is only the surplus produced by…labour that enables other forms of human activity to be pursued…There still remain direct, narrow material constraints upon individuals…everyone has to eat and sleep…thus…every economy is an economy of time' (1979, p 126). What Garnham does here cannot be overestimated: his articulation of the mode of production-superstructure relationship is useful in that it

provides a logical pragmatism, recognising that *wants* such as art and leisure

activities must be secondary to *needs* or life processes such as eating and

sleeping[29]. As a consequence, the consumption and creation of artistic and cultural

products must also be defined overall by the amount of labour (in time) that people

must work to cover the cost of their material (here meaning physical) needs, with the

surplus (in terms of both time and income) determining the 'amount' and range of

artistic production. The conclusion of this is that 'the greater the surplus to immediate

physical reproductive needs the greater the autonomy of the superstructure and

indeed the greater the possible variation and diversity within superstructural

organization' (ibid, p 126).

A logical assumption flows from Garnham's work in reference to the

art/commerce analysis. If, as Garnham states, there is a positive correlation between

wealth and art production, it should logically follow that for the film industry, the

bigger and the more successful production companies are, the more diverse and

varied should be their output in terms of the films they make. An argument such as

this challenges Adorno's view of mainstream Hollywood as only producing formulaic,

repetitive films and suggests that commercial success will actually have a positive

effect on the variety of artistic work created. Garnham's work is therefore refreshingly

free from the defensiveness of those who attack Marx on the grounds of economic

determinism and, like Wayne's reconstitution of the mode of production, begins to

move the theory beyond the realms of pure analogy and apply it practically to the

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[29] John Howkins provides an effective analogy for this relationship, calling it 'the ladder of desires'. He argues that 'our first needs are air, water and food; then…shelter and safety…As each need is satisfied, so people become more conscious and desirous of the next one up. As they satisfy their physical needs, so some seek emotional pleasure and a few seek intellectual satisfaction'. Howkins posits that intellectual satisfaction is at the top of such a ladder and that 'we should not be surprised if people, whose material needs are largely satisfied and who have a high level of disposable income…put a premium on matters of the mind' (2001, pp xiv-xv).

real world.

Fundamentalism and overdetermination

The critical responses and modifications to Marx's theories demonstrate that, if it is adapted in a nuanced fashion, Marx's model holds the potential to constitute a relevant foundation for analysis. Whilst this discussion is not intended to be an exhaustive history of responses to Marx, a review of the main schools of thought that have been generated by his theories is helpful. Smith (1984) provides a breakdown of some of the ways in which the mode of production-superstructure theories have been interpreted. Two of these are particularly useful here: fundamentalism and overdetermination. These two responses by no means fully represent the numerous ways in which Marx has been read by successive theorists but do present differing arguments regarding the mode of production-superstructure theory, or rather present a theory (fundamentalist) and a detailed response to it (overdetermination). It is these two perspectives which constitute another step towards the development of an investigative approach for this research.

The first, fundamentalist, takes Marx's statement that 'the mode of production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life processes in general' (1977, p 389) at face value, asserting a determinist reading of the piece. If this is to be translated (and it has already been established that this is only a very loose translation) into the context of this investigation, the fundamentalist argument would essentially state that superhero comic book films are shaped purely according to commercial considerations and that every aspect of their content is the direct

result of commercial logic. Although this school of thought should not be dismissed out of hand before consideration, the previous discussion of Marx's theory will hopefully have already demonstrated the main contentions with this approach. The points addressed earlier, which included the difficulties caused by the need to develop an appropriately complex notion of the base and superstructure, the fact that the model as it stands is too basic a formulation to be considered as anything other than an analogous starting point and the concerns raised over its inbuilt privileging of economic factors, have already suggested that a literal interpretation of Marx's work is not only highly reductive but also utterly useless from a methodological point of view. As Wright notes, the orthodox school of thought in relation to this theory is flawed due to the fact that Marx's original brief argument 'became frozen into dogma, immune from the…often trenchant criticisms levelled against it' (Wright et al 1992, p 14). The consequence of this is that, in practical terms alone, the fundamentalist view that 'one factor "X" can be isolated from another factor "Y" that can be seen to follow from it sequentially or temporally' (Smith 1984, p 942) is barren ground for any investigation that intends to consider appropriately complex interactions between art and commerce. To begin from the assumption that such a theory is anything other than simplistic, is too narrow a starting point.

Almost inevitably, contemporary cultural theorists are quick to denounce as outmoded these fundamentalist interpretations of the early, relatively undeveloped form of Marx's theories. McRobbie warns against both the 'crude and mechanical' application of Marx's model and the 'rather old-fashioned notion of determination' (1994, p 39; p 29), Ryan likewise advises that any analysis should 'discard the common Marxist tendency to presume determinant conditions at a high level of abstraction' (1991, p 8), while Hesmondhalgh bluntly terms it 'the problem of

economic reductionism' (2013, p 61)[30]. Yet even Marx's contemporary Engels was wary of the fundamentalist interpretation and offered his own clarification of the theory in order to dispel any misunderstanding of the proposed relationship between the mode of production and superstructure. He wrote:

> 'the production and reproduction of real life constitutes in the last instance the determining factor of history…Now when someone comes along and distorts this to mean that the economic factor is the sole determining factor, he is converting the former proposition into a meaningless, abstract and absurd phrase. The economic situation is the base but the various factors of the superstructure…exercise an influence upon the course of historical struggles' (Engels, 1890a).

Engels argues that those who have taken the model literally have misunderstood the proposition. He instead acknowledges that there are, in reality, an 'endless array of contingences' (ibid) and interconnected factors that affect one another rather than just one economic determinant of the development of history and society. This view is expounded further and illustrated in a later letter to Conrad Schmidt, in which he

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[30] This is not to say that these contemporary cultural analysts have abandoned Marx entirely – far from it, in fact. In *Making Capital from Culture*, Ryan states that his 'theoretical and methodological framework is more or less Marxist' but that he is simultaneously careful not 'to canonise Marxist analysis' (1991, p 2). McRobbie similarly notes that while she wishes to avoid 'a reductionist Marxism[,]…the abandonment of what Marxist cultural theory has taught us about…the meaning and the modalities of the mass media, would be nonsensical' (1994, pp 38-9). Even Hesmondhalgh suggests that 'a good analysis will set processes of economic determination alongside other processes and pressures in culture and think about how they interact' (2013, p 61) rather than reject such ideas entirely. Broadly speaking, the work of Hesmondhalgh, McRobbie and Ryan demonstrates that while Marx's ideas are at the root of cultural analysis, it is the subsequent development of his ideas by later authors which ultimately proves to be more fruitful; a philosophy which this dissertation shares. Ultimately, these three authors take their cultural analyses in markedly different directions from this study: Hesmondhalgh's primary interest lies in the processes of media production and in providing an exhaustive account of the cultural industries as a whole (see also Hesmondhalgh 2006b) while Ryan explores the specific contradictions of culture and capitalism through a consideration of the production processes of cultural goods. Alternatively, McRobbie's work tends to focus on interrogations of the organisation and conditions of labour in specific cultural industries (primarily fashion and music) often in relation to gender. Perhaps the most obvious distinction between this dissertation and Ryan and McRobbie's work in particular is that their writing is more explicitly political in tone and content.

states that:

> 'The final supremacy of economic development even in these realms is now established but it takes place within the conditions which are set down by the particular realm: …e.g., through the effect of economic influences (which in turn exert influence through disguised…forms) upon the existing…material which our predecessors have handed down. Of itself *economics* produces no effects here directly; but it determines the *kind of change* and development the already existing intellectual material receives' (Engels, 1890b).

What Engels proposes then is a shifting of the object of study from the mode of production which Marx privileges, to the superstructure itself and its internal construction. He goes on to argue that:

> 'The economic situation is the basis, but the various factors of the superstructure [such as the]…political form of the class struggle…forms of law…philosophical and legal theories, religious views…also have a bearing…It is in the interaction of all these factors and amidst an unending multitude of fortuities (i.e. of things and events whose intrinsic interconnections are so remote or so incapable of proof that we can regard them as non-existent and ignore them) that the economic trend ultimately asserts itself as something inevitable' (Engels 2001, pp 34-5).

Engels's work immediately opens up the narrow analytical route suggested by economic determinism. By ascribing agency to the superstructure he creates a more promising theoretical alternative, positing that it is less a passive reflection of the mode of production and more a dynamic force with the ability to influence events. Those realms of the superstructure which were previously presented as separate

spheres (such as law, politics, religion, aesthetics) are now described not merely as active but as *interactive* with one another, each with the potential to be a part of a larger cumulative effect. Engels here attempts to do for the superstructure what Wayne and Castells do for the mode of production, regenerating its previously static nature with a dynamic social energy that gives it the power to adapt and evolve. Applying such thinking to this study suggests the more promising theory (from an investigative standpoint if nothing else) that superhero comic book films are shaped not just by economic considerations but also possibly by artistic ones.

Engels's explanation raises two important points. His statement that the 'multitude of fortuities…things and events whose intrinsic interconnections are…so incapable of proof that we can regard them as non-existent' is at once problematic and utterly honest but appears to be a red rag to the analytical bull. The notion that the web of determining factors that lies behind any one event or superstructural occurrence is so complex that it is virtually impossible to elucidate any of the strands clearly is certainly preferable to the notion that there is only one factor (economics), yet does appear to be an argument which cannot be proved. To state that there are so many factors that it is simply impossible to demonstrate them is to go from one extreme to the other and lays the concept of overdetermination open to attack, almost defeating his theory before it begins.

Secondly, the idea that economics 'ultimately asserts itself' is interesting. This phrase reminds us that Engels is really presenting more of a qualification to Marx's theory, rather than a radical overhaul. Louis Althusser notes that this gives the impression that 'the economy picks its sovereign way' between the myriad effects of the superstructural interactions (1977, p 118), yet it is unfair to accuse Engels of

merely regurgitating the fundamentalist message in a slightly different way. Critiques of Engels's formulation such as Smith's argue that 'if the economic is determinant even if only "in the last instance", then the autonomy of the superstructure automatically becomes vitiated' (1984, p 951), but such a reading is unnecessarily pessimistic and oversimplifies Engels's point. Callinicos's interpretation is more positive: Engels is simply saying that 'the forces and relations of production [merely] set limits to developments in the superstructure' (1983, p 97) as opposed to wholly determining it. Whilst the fundamentalist theory has been rejected on the basis that it is an insufficient starting point for analysis, this idea proves more promising in an investigative sense because it offers a better balance between economic and non-economic interpretations of artistic products.

What Engels's work (and that of his critics) accentuates chiefly is the fact that the account of the superstructure as Marx creates it is insufficiently complex and requires refinement. As shown, in the formulation's original description the mode of production constitutes the 'real foundation' or base which, in turn, creates the political, legal and cultural superstructures. Although Marx provides no visual representation, due to his choice of language and imagery which suggest a building ('foundation', 'on which rises'; 1977, p 389), he appears to be describing a vertical model similar to the simplified version depicted in figure 3.1 (Althusser confirms this with his observation that the upper levels of the superstructure 'could not "stay up" - in the air - alone, if they did not rest precisely on their base'; 1971, p 129).

When presented thus, the inherent weaknesses (or absences) become clear, Marx's original model as it stands seeming to constitute a curious dead end, with the mode of production producing a superstructure which appears to be the final stage.

What the model fails to account for sufficiently, however, is what happens *within* the superstructure. This has been noted by critics such as Balibar who claims that Marx is 'remarkably vague' about these concepts, concepts which 'have no other function than to indicate where provisionally, Marx is not going to go on this occasion' (1970, p 206).

Legal and political superstructure/forms of consciousness

Relations/mode of production or base
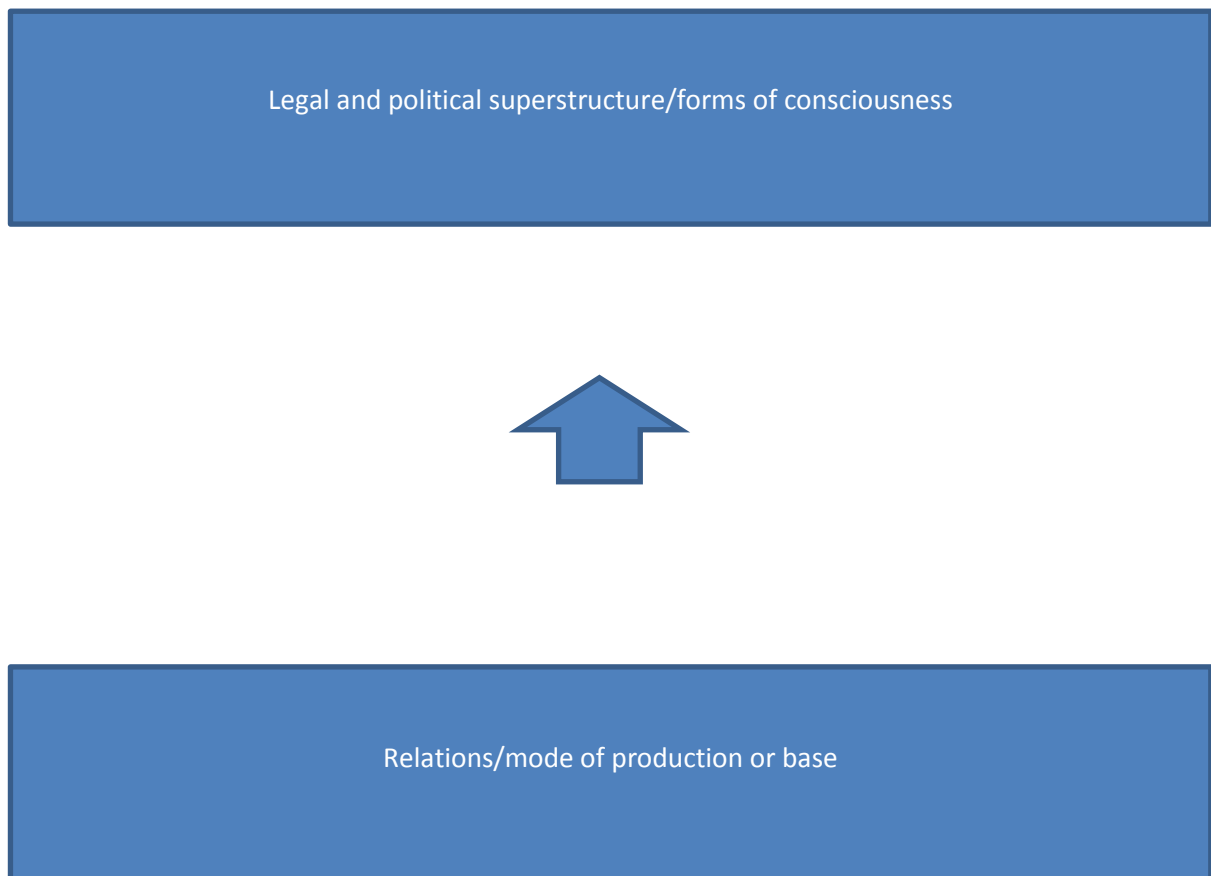
Figure 3.1 – Simplified visual representation of the mode of production-superstructure model

Certainly one of the central difficulties of Marx's work for this research is that it implies that the superstructural systems and products which originate from the base are a definite end in themselves, seemingly lacking any agency or capacity for further development. The model is therefore incapable of answering any questions regarding their effectiveness beyond this point, suggesting that they simply float off into the ether like radiation from the superstructure, without consequence. Even Engels provides no help here, with Althusser noting that his stresses on the superstructural effects' overall importance are significantly undermined by the aforementioned refusal to attempt to account for them: 'the effect of this infinitesimal dispersion is to dissipate the effectivity granted the superstructures in their macroscopic existence into a microscopic non-existence…How could Engels pass so rapidly over these forms…?' (Althusser 1977, pp 118-9). The choice is therefore between two unsatisfactory options: Marx's reduction of the superstructure to a simplistic dead end or Engels's version which is supposedly so active and multi-causal that it cannot even begun to be picked apart.

A potential way forward: an Althusserian solution

This inability to describe the superstructural processes adequately supports Frederic Jameson's claim that 'for the most part Marxism itself has…failed to provide a really systematic exploration of superstructures' (1972, p 102). To suggest that the process simply ends with their creation robs ideas, art and cultural products of both their very real power to transcend their origins as dependent offspring of the relations of production and of their potential to influence, transform and shape the genres and sometimes even the mediums which they belong to. Theories which claim either that

the superstructure does too little or too much cannot be used as a theoretical basis because they do not allow for sufficient investigation. It falls to Althusser then (some of whose ideas have already been cited here) to attempt to make some sense of the mode of production–superstructure relationship. Althusser's reconfiguring of Marx's theory (and only the parts relevant to this superstructure argument will be focused on here) eschews the latter's notion of beginning from a point of human, material needs and instead places the idea of practices at the centre of his argument. For Althusser, 'practices' are 'process[es] of transformation of a determinate given raw material into a determinate product', the 'determinate moment' of which is the point of the 'labour of transformation itself' (1977, p 166). Already, Althusser's thinking suggests a break with classic Marxist theory by highlighting the central process of transformation rather than tracing the creation of a product chronologically from need through to finished commodity (thereby rendering it nothing more than a satisfaction of the original need). Crucially, Althusser opens up Marx's notion that the base produces and controls superstructural elements such as law, politics and art, with the key idea that these elements or levels are not passive but are able to *interact* with one another. According to Althusser, these levels work alongside the economic level, which is not the *sole* determinant by any means but is the *ultimate* determinant because it establishes how the other levels relate to one another (which if anything is surely a more schematised version of Engels's previous assertion to Schmidt that 'economics determines the kind of change' within the superstructure).

It is necessary to clarify at this point that Althusser groups art with religion, politics, morality and the law, locating them within the level of ideology which 'transforms men's consciousnesses' (1977, pp 166-8). Althusser's theory of ideology is extensive and complex and I have avoided being drawn into an analysis of it in this

discussion (although not for these reasons). This is because an exhaustive survey of Althusser's concept of ideology is not helpful to either the overall context of this work or its specific research goals. As the methodology chapter will hopefully further demonstrate, Althusser's work is used here to help structure this study's conception of an art/commerce relationship that can then be investigated through a practical method of textual analysis. With this goal in mind, Althusser's more abstract conception of the ideological level would be something of a theoretical diversion. It is therefore sufficient and, indeed, necessary to limit the application of his work to the understanding that the artistic realm is one of the superstructural elements that make up the levels which Althusser identifies. In other words, this study is more concerned with how Althusser conceives the interaction *between* these elements rather than how he groups them. Benton summarises the aspects of Althusser's theory which are relevant here:

> 'economic relations...are always determinant (in the last instance) with respect to the other levels or 'instances' in a society, and with respect to the configuration of society as a whole, but …determination by the economic structure takes the rather indirect form of assigning to the other, non-economic levels, their place in a hierarchy of *dominance* with respect to one another' (1984, p 72).

Thus Althusser provides a more fertile argument by positing that the relationship between the relations of production (located in Marx's 'base') and the superstructure is not one way but rather more reciprocal. In fact he goes further, positing that the superstructural forms are in reality 'conditions of [the forces of productions'] own existence' (Althusser 1970, p 177). This radical restructuring of the

hitherto causal relationship between mode of production and superstructure is illustrated with an example of the way in which labour power is negotiated between the owners of the means of production and the workers – in other words, a relation of production. Althusser argues that this process is dependent on 'formal legal relations' and 'a whole political and ideological superstructure which maintains and contains the economic agents in the distribution of roles…[meaning that] the whole superstructure of the society considered is thus implicit and present in a specific way in the relations of production' (pp 177-8). His argument here is solid: whilst it might be the case that there was, theoretically speaking, a (very) early original point in the capitalist mode of development when Marx's separation of the mode of production and the superstructure held true – in other words, when humans' initial material needs first determined the earliest forms of social relations – Althusser posits that as the capitalist society has developed, the superstructural elements have fed back into, and are now inextricable from, the relations of production in many senses.

The application of Althusser: developing a central proposition

If Althusser's theoretical position is applied to the film industry, the logic of his ideas is borne out through illustration. Just as his example shows how superstructural elements have become key components of the labour relation, so too could the same be said of the film industry. It could be argued, for example, that labour relations are influenced and defined by legal and ideological issues in the film industry such as the acceptance of both extremely high wages for a tiny minority of above the line talent and of short-term contract-based employment for most workers

in the industry. It is at this point that Wayne must once again be called upon to assist with the argument. Earlier I discussed how Wayne re-presented the mode of production as a category by incorporating the analysis of specific (actual) companies and production alongside the understanding of production as an abstract concept (Wayne 2003, p 134). What Wayne does produces the same effect as Althusser's notion of identifying superstructural effects in the relations of production: it reveals a two-way relationship between mode of production and superstructure and provides a way to explore how the latter feeds back into, and influences, the former.

Althusser's theories have several important ramifications for this study's exploration of the way in which artistry and commerce interact to shape films. By restructuring Marx's original formulation into one which reflects Lee and Murray's notion that 'it is more useful to think of the relationship between the base and superstructure as reciprocal' (1995, p 140), Althusser bestows a sense of agency on the superstructure and, by association, on to one of its spheres, artistry. This act finally opens up the theoretical dead end that is Marxist fundamentalism. Althusser's argument that the relations and mode of production are influenced by, and thus become echoes of, the superstructural elements allows him to challenge a fundamental assertion about the primacy of economic forces. If, he argues, it is accepted that the relations of production constitute or 'define the economic' as the base proposition supposes (and I have already argued that the mode of production cannot simply be reduced to the 'economy', but is certainly a part of it) and if it is accepted that the superstructure is 'present in a specific way in the relations of production', then the very definition of the concept of economics and its claim to being the motive force behind history and society is questionable (Althusser 1970, p 178). Instead of beginning with a pure, unconstructed sense of an economic force

which causes every other phenomenon, Althusser suggests that in actual fact it is the superstructural elements which are the conditions of existence of the mode of production, forces of production and economic structures. In doing so, one of Althusser's overarching aims is clarified: the exposure of the constructed nature of the thinking which elevates the economic to a natural, definitive category and 'to reveal the site occupied in the structure of the whole by the region of the economic…to reveal the articulation[31] of this region with other regions…and the degree of presence (or effectivity) of the other regions in the economic region itself' (Althusser, 1970, p 179). In short, Althusser attempts to put economics 'in its place', challenging the omnipotence assigned to it by fundamentalists. His interpretation transforms Marx's original model from one which seems to imbue the economic with supreme power at the expense of everything else, into one where the economic 'region' instead 'cede[s] to the determined element [in this case, art] a whole region of effectivity, but subordinate effectivity' (Althusser 1972, p 53).

From these ideas, the theoretical proposition that underpins this research emerges, one which allows this study to take advantage of its interdisciplinary strengths and encourages investigation and analysis whilst reflecting the realities of the film industry. This proposition is that:

While economic considerations are determinant in the last instance, artistic considerations also have a degree of effectivity in the shaping of superhero comic book film adaptations.

There are two key parts to this statement which make it an appropriate

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[31] Bloch clarifies Althusser's use of the term articulation as meaning 'a type of connection where what is joined does not consequently form a whole (1983, p 154) and in doing so usefully reinforces Althusser's notion of a series of discrete social elements which are capable of interacting with one another.

reflection of this subject area. The first part is the understanding that 'economic considerations are determinant in the last instance'. This has been incorporated as an acknowledgment that Althusser's notion of ultimate determination appears to be an inescapable truth of the film industry (the latter word reinforcing the fact that it is an industry after all). It is extremely difficult to contest the fact that superhero films exist (as do nearly all films) as a result of studios deciding they should be made and allocating budgets to them. At this decisive level, the very existence of a film is undeniably dependent on and controlled by economic imperatives and this is something which is accepted here with no sense of defeat for this analysis.

This is not to say however that this truth must necessarily be accepted as a complete explanation for the production of film and this is where Althusser's work encourages a greater degree of theoretical and analytical exploration than Marx's original formulation does. His view that the economic sphere is not the sole determinant and that the superstructural elements have agency in that they 'are present in a specific way in the relations of production' (Althusser 1970, p 178) is clearly intended to be a theory about social structure, but one which is applicable to the chosen area of film production. This is why the second part of the statement, that 'artistic considerations have a degree of effectivity in the shaping of superhero comic book film adaptations', is so important. As a representation of the Althusserian idea that superstructural elements and their products are 'not mere epiphenomena of "primary" ones' (Jay 1984, p 406), it provides the impetus for this study's active investigation.

At the outset of this study, I argued that to fully account for film it is necessary to combine an analysis of film's commercial context with textual readings. With the

theoretical proposition having been established, it is now necessary to consider the

ways in which textual analysis can contribute to this research in both a theoretical

and a practical sense. Therefore, the final stage before the research questions are

identified and the methodology is outlined will be the next chapter's discussion of the

role of the text.

Chapter Four

The role of the text

The previous chapter established a theoretical basis and a central proposition for this study of how art and commerce shape a particular genre of film. The following chapter is an essential addition to the theoretical review because it helps to account for the role of textual analysis in a process such as this, which uses both close readings of films and the organisational and economic contexts of the film industry as equally valid evidence sources. In truth, this chapter is partly an addendum to the previous chapter's theoretical review and partly the beginning of the development of a methodology. I offer this description because, even though it conforms more to the former than the latter, the chapter does consider some of the potential ways in which an exploration of art and commerce can be structured around individual textual readings. Having established this, I should also clarify that the methodology chapter proper follows this one.

This chapter therefore begins by considering the role of textual analysis and some of the responses to the mode of production-superstructure theories by cultural theorists. It then goes on to demonstrate how the work of Marxist critics Raymond Williams and Frederic Jameson provides ways forward for a study such as this which attempts to situate textual readings within a broader socioeconomic context. The importance of the ideologeme as a method of uniting artistic and commercial

analyses is also discussed before the research questions which have arisen from the review of the theoretical literature are identified.

The textual approach

This study explores two types of text: the original comic book source material and the film adaptations of the source material. Of these two mediums, the readings of the film texts will be the primary focus of the study as it is the film industry which is the subject of enquiry here rather than the publishing industry although, as the process of adaptation is also central, both types of texts will be subject to analysis. Accordingly, Wilson notes that the exact definition of what a text is has altered to keep abreast of new technology and that 'originally confined within philological and bibliographic bounds', it later 'began to subsume the written-or-printed word as such, in all its manifold forms' (2012, p 341). Therefore, here the term is employed in line with its use in Media Studies, as a description of any media product which is subject to analysis or 'reading', be it book, film, music or painting – 'any cultural object of investigation' in other words (Payne 1996, p 530). This is arguably a wider interpretation of the term than that employed by most of the late twentieth century theorists cited in the following discussion and is not intended to imply that a film is read in the same way as a book is. Technical differences of each medium aside however, in reference to the broader argument, the application of the term 'text' does not have to presuppose any particular format.

Using the text as an object of study is of course a practice which is reflective of the analytical methods employed by Humanities subjects such as Literature, Art

and Film. Traditionally, these subjects have tended to prioritise the text as a freestanding object 'rather than bringing…extrinsic information into their criticism' such as the author's biographical information, the way the text was produced or the historical period (Hawthorn 2005, pp 170-1). This approach is perhaps most famously discussed in Roland Barthes's essay 'The Death of the Author' which criticises the notion that 'the *explanation* of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end…the voice of a single person'. The reason, as Barthes argues, that it is essential to avoid this is because a text should be 'that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost' (2000, pp 146-7). For Barthes, the text cannot be freely analysed unless the umbilical cord linking it to the conditions of its existence is cut.

As Foucault puts it, society's need to link the text with its author makes the creator of the work 'a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, [and] excludes…by which one impedes the free circulation…the free composition, decomposition, and recomposition of fiction' (2000, p 186). The advantage of the idea of focusing solely on the text is that it makes the reader a more active agent in the process and allows them to work at interpreting the text in a way that grants sovereignty to any subjective reading. The disadvantage however is that by imposing an unending series of readings on to the text the very concepts of meaning and analysis collapse and become meaningless themselves (the irony of the echoes of economic fundamentalism and overdetermination is not lost here). Whilst it may be limiting and elitist to suggest that there is a 'correct' way to interpret any text, how is it possible to avoid the disadvantages of the deceptively easy solution which proclaims any interpretation is correct if the reader/viewer wishes it to be, a solution

which renders any empirical research pointless?

It is at this point that literary theory can be of assistance. As the study of texts developed throughout history, academia witnessed a proliferation of ways of reading texts that grouped interpretations thematically as opposed to biographically. Various approaches have been established which focus on political and social theories such as feminism (gender), queer theory (sexuality) and postcolonialism (race) as well as more technical approaches like modernism and postmodernism (period and genre) and structuralism (form and language). These schools of criticism certainly broaden the frame of reference for a text beyond the narrow limits of biographical readings, yet it goes without saying that, methodologically, they do not necessarily solve the Foucauldian problem of textual limitation – they still impose limits, just less narrow ones. To read a text in the light of any theory is of course to bring a predetermined series of ideas to it – however flexible those ideas may be – and on some level requires the reader to 'impose meanings on it, or find what he or she wants to find in it' (Peck and Coyle 2002, p 179).

The uses of cultural materialism

Given the broadly social bent of the schools of criticism that emerged in the twentieth century and considering the common overarching objective of literary theory is to focus on the marginalised elements of society, it was almost inevitable that Marxist criticism with its emphasis on class and oppression would become a lens through which to read texts. Marx's ideas of class struggle and the ways in which social forces are repeatedly manifested in various forms provided the basis of

the critical approach known as cultural materialism, the very term itself signalling its intention to offer textual analyses which take account of the material production processes of artistic products. In the very broadest sense, cultural materialism, which was first championed by the critic Raymond Williams, has the intention of linking 'literary criticism and socialism' (Laing 1983, p 147), an aim which exposes its Marxist origins. Its more specific objective is to reflect the understanding that 'the literary text…is always part and parcel of a much wider cultural, political, social and economic dispensation' (Bertens 2001, pp 176-7). Williams's own more integrationist description of cultural materialism is that it is 'a theory of the specificities of material cultural and literary production within historical materialism' created out of a need to 'see different forms of Marxist thinking as interactive with other forms of thinking, rather than as a separated history' (1977, p 5).

At this point in the discussion of cultural materialism it should be reiterated that, just as I previously emphasised that my application of Marx's theories should be described as Marxian, rather than Marxist, the readings of film included in this research are, likewise, not politically Marxist in the sense that Williams's work is. Simply because the theoretical proposition is rooted in some of Marx's specific ideas, does not mean that a traditional Marxist approach to film reading would be appropriate. Typically, Marxist literary criticism is practised by those 'who…[seek] to transform hermeneutics into a vehicle for emancipatory critique' (Prasad 2002, p 21) and produces explicitly sociopolitical readings in which 'the idea of class struggle is central' and 'which raise political questions about the sense of order conveyed in a literary text' (Peck and Coyle, 2002, pp 191-3). In terms of genre, this form of criticism naturally lends itself to more realist social commentaries such as the films and novels of the 1950s and 60s (that which Dollimore terms 'the "angry" literature'

dealing with 'class and antagonism'; 1983, p 65). Whilst such an approach could be taken to superhero comic book adaptations if the aim was to produce a reading of how class and capitalist ideology manifest in the films, this is not the objective of this research and it would not, therefore, constitute an appropriate theoretical or methodological fit. A purely literary, political and class-based reading of the films would be too limited and result in a failure to achieve the research objective of exploring how these adaptations are shaped by commercial *and* artistic forces. Indeed, Bourdieu vehemently attacks this way of reading texts, branding 'the supposition that a group [in this case a social class] can act *directly*, as final cause (function), on the production of the work' as 'naïve' and asking: '[if] one manages to determine the social functions of the work, that is, the groups and the "interests" that it "serves" or expresses, would one have advanced the least bit an understanding of the structure of the work?' (1993, p 181).

This is not to say however that the work of the cultural materialists is not helpful in regard to this theoretical discussion. In fact, Williams's work is useful precisely because he challenges Marx's notions and in doing so prompts a consideration of the role of the text in the art/commerce debate. His concerns over Marx's more simple conception of the mode of production-superstructure relationship reflect those expressed in the previous chapter, raising warning flags over the way in which it diminishes the importance and power of culture and cultural products, thereby implying their inferiority to economic forces. He not only argues that 'cultural history…was made dependent, secondary, "superstructural": a realm of mere ideas…determined by the basic material history' (Williams 1977, p 19) but also usefully takes up Althusser's mission to repurpose Marx's work so that the passive role assigned to art in the superstructure can be rethought. An expanded quote from

a previously cited passage demonstrates how Williams refines Marx's usage of the terms 'determination', 'base' and 'superstructure':

> 'We have to revalue "determination" towards the setting of limits and the exertion of pressure, and away from a predicted, prefigured and controlled content. We have to revalue "superstructure" towards a related range of superstructural practices, and away from a reflected, reproduced or specifically dependent content. And…we have to revalue "the base" away from the notion of a fixed economic or technological abstraction, and towards the specific activities of men in real social and economic relationships, containing fundamental contradictions and variations and therefore always in a state of dynamic process' (Williams 2006, p 132).

Williams's dismantling of Marx's terminology is not merely an exercise in semantics. By reinterpreting each word, he gradually refines the model into a framework more conducive to investigation. Like Engels, he asserts that the effect of base on superstructure should not be seen as direct but rather as more of a general influence, with the latter corresponding less directly to the former. In practical terms, Williams's description of the superstructure, like Althusser's, offers hope for a more nuanced examination of how films are shaped not only by obvious economic factors such as cost and revenue, but also by artistic factors.

But how can Williams's points help develop a practical method of analysing texts? He provides the beginnings of an answer to this in the conclusion to his essay on base and superstructure where his central suggestion is that textual analysis of cultural products should move beyond traditional approaches such as that advocated by Barthes and 'look not for the components of a product but for the conditions of a

practice' (2006, p 143). What Williams suggests here is a move away from purist forms of close reading wherein the text is treated in isolation as a unique product and analysed for its constituent parts (he offers a vague definition of these 'components' as 'archetypes…myths and symbols' that are evident in any given piece of art and by this he assumedly means the historical, cultural and technical body of ideas, references and devices which the artist draws on when creating the work; p 142). Instead, he champions the technique of situating the text within a broader historical, social and economic context, the 'conditions of practice', which become the central notion and method of linking to other texts. In Williams's words, this type of analysis focuses on a text's 'active composition and its conditions of composition…what we are…seeking is the true practice which has been alienated to an object, and the true conditions of practice' (ibid, p 143). The emphasis here on 'conditions' and 'practice' suggest an approach which uses the text as its starting point, rooting it firmly in the historical, economic, cultural and social practices of the period of its creation, and then traces these roots to examine how these practices are transferred and represented in other texts. In this regard, his approach offers a useful model for this study in the sense that it extols the virtues of examining texts not in isolation but in relation to their social and historical contexts and encourages the researcher to look for 'resemblances within…genres' (ibid, p 143).

The text and its mediation

Williams expounds the importance of replacing the text within the wider context whence it was wrenched by traditional literary reading strategies. The benefits of this so-called 'mediation' process are emphasised by Wayne, who

stresses that it reveals why and how the text has been shaped into its final form: 'Mediation involves linkage; it reconstitutes the less immediate and visible relations that lie behind the appearance of the object…Like a brass rubbing, mediation makes visible the (social) patterns and connections that make up the complete picture' (2003, p 126). In its simplest form, mediation is an opportunity to solve the dilemma of how to unite the economic and the cultural by freeing the process of close reading from its self-contained boundaries and acknowledging other factors beyond the aesthetic in the creation of a text.

The Marxist linguist Jameson offers another useful definition of mediation, describing it as 'the establishment of relationships between…the formal analysis of a work of art and its social ground'. Crucially, he also stresses that there is flexibility in the method, labelling it 'a device of the analyst , whereby the fragmentation and autonomisation, the compartmentalisation and specialisation of the various regions of social life…is at least locally overcome, on the occasion of a particular analysis' (1983, p 40). Jameson's own examples of mediation in his work *The Political Unconscious* are less helpful as a model however, due in part both to his insistence that 'Marxist critical insights [are]…something like an ultimate *semantic* precondition for the intelligibility of literary and cultural texts' (ibid, p 75) and the fact that his textual reading techniques are oriented towards language and linguistics. His method of locating texts 'within three concentric frameworks' (ibid, p 75) will not be discussed here, suffice to say that the problem with this method is its degree of theoretical abstraction which limits the kind of practical analysis of real institutions such as the film industry that this study has set out to explore.

In fact this is the problem with both Williams's and Jameson's textual

methods. Rather than correcting the imbalance between the economic and the

cultural perpetuated by Marx's original model, they simply tip the scales in the other

direction, resulting in theoretical methods which are so linguistically and politically

saturated that they move too far away from real world contexts. Jameson's work is

undeniably rooted in a very real historical context, but in terms of providing a

framework for a close analysis of texts in the specific commercial context of their

production strategies, it fails to offer a sustainable model.

The ideologeme as a method of mediation

It is at this point that it is necessary to consider the value and importance of

the ideologeme as a theoretical tool – or bridge, perhaps – capable of forging a

methodological link between the commercial and the artistic interpretations of a text.

Certainly the ideologeme was, at its inception at least, a highly specific theoretical

concept which, like Jameson's mediation methods, would not appear to be

immediately applicable to any practical work outside of the disciplines which

generated it, linguistics and semiotics. However, any doubts that the ideologeme is

being misapplied in this research are somewhat allayed by returning to Bakhtin and

Medvedev's initial outlining of the concept. In 1928 the theorists developed the

ideologeme as a response to the problem of the 'gap', the 'shifting and hazy area' of

uncertainty which lies between Marx's theory and 'the study of [a] specific ideological

phenomenon' (1994, p 124).

Bakhtin and Medvedev are two of the earliest theorists to highlight the

problems inherent in the reconciliation of Marx's theoretical framework with any

analysis of specific superstructural elements, their identification of the difficulties

simply being a slightly more broad articulation (superstructurally speaking) of the

problematic commerce/art relationship which this study faced at its beginning. Taking

its name from existing linguistic notions of the phoneme and the morpheme (as

outlined in Chang 2005) which constitute the smallest units of sound and grammar in

a language, they define the ideologeme as the smallest unit of analysis of anything

that is 'ideological material', for example 'word…sound…gesture' (Bakhtin and

Medvedev 1994, p 126). For Bakhtin and Medvedev (and for this study) the

importance of the ideologeme lies in the fact that it is not simply a mental, subjective

concept existing in the 'inner world' of 'pure thoughts' but rather 'a part of the

material social reality surrounding man' (ibid, p 126). Accordingly, Dowling notes that

'the concept is not…meant to be rigorous and precise in the way that the "phoneme"

is' but rather a way of demonstrating 'that the ideological structure of class

discourses is analysable *as* a structure' (1984, p 133).

What the moment of the ideologeme's creation demonstrates then is that, at

its conceptual level, it is a way of uniting the analysis of ideas (and the artistic

products which reflect those ideas) that would typically be located within the

superstructure (textual analysis), with a more objectively measurable analysis

typically associated with the mode of production (extra-textual analysis). While it is

too simplistic to say that the ideologeme unites a subjective analysis with an

objective one, it is certainly helpful to initially picture it as a locus point at which an

artistic reading can be related *to*, and manifested *within*, a material context. The key

idea here is that the ideologeme is capable of being interpreted and analysed in two

different ways – as Chang notes, it is 'both ethical-philosophical or artistic,

depending on its location outside or inside the artistic text' (2005, p 179). Thus it

becomes a way of reversing the typical theoretical tendency to disconnect the 'separate ideological phenomenon' from 'conditions of the socioeconomic environment' (Bakhtin and Medvedev 1994, p 128).

It is important to clarify at this point that the notion of the 'separate ideological phenomenon' has here been replaced by the text (the comic book film), but this is not to say that the two are synonymous. Clearly the above definition of ideological phenomena as words, sounds and gestures – not to mention 'the combination of masses, lines [and] colours' visible in the real world (ibid, p 126) – illustrates that, for Bakhtin and Medvedev, the ideological phenomenon is something which is at once both much more all-encompassing and much more minute than a text. This study however does not aim to undertake a detailed exploration of the vastly complex area of ideology as either a theoretical or a political concept and therefore it is sufficient to note at this point that the comic book film is simply the particular superstructural product which is the object of study whilst recognising that the Bakhtinian argument is more directly concerned with a conceptual view of ideology and how it manifests in the world.

In the years since the first appearance of the ideologeme, the concept has been requisitioned by various writers to aid their own particular theoretical agendas. Whilst many of these stages in the ideologeme's evolution are not necessarily helpful to this study's quite specific application of it, they do at least demonstrate how malleable the ideologeme is as a methodological tool. Julie Kristeva's typically complex recasting of the ideologeme as 'the intersection of a given textual arrangement (a semiotic practice) with the utterances (sequences) that it either assimilates into its own space or to which it refers in the space of exterior texts'

(1980, p 36) for example, is not particularly useful here as it seemingly banishes Bakhtin and Medvedev's creation to a purely linguistic-literary realm. Whilst her specific interpretation of the ideologeme as 'an intertextual function' is too abstract compared to the way in which it is applied here, some of the more general principles of her work are helpful. Importantly, it is Kristeva who suggests that 'the concept of text as ideologeme' (ibid, p 37) is in fact workable as a method and, as Allen states, at its core, Kristeva's argument does in fact usefully assert that 'texts have no unity or unified meaning on their own, they are thoroughly connected to on-going cultural and social processes' (2011, p 36).

It is in fact Jameson whose work comes closest to the way in which this study will use the ideologeme. His description of it in *The Political Unconscious* as an analytical tool which can 'mediate between conceptions of ideology' and 'narrative materials', something which is 'susceptible to both a conceptual description and a narrative manifestation all at once' (1983, p 87) offers a promising form of linkage. It should be reiterated however that Jameson's (and indeed Bakhtin and Medvedev's) use of the ideologeme is not simply being replicated here without substantial qualification. This research, broadly speaking, uses the ideologeme as a practical method of mediation between the two earlier definitions of the commercial and the artistic aspects of film (as discussed in Chapter Two). Jameson makes clear that his rather more abstract mediation fosters a relationship between ideology and narrative; he is attempting to connect 'a pseudoidea – a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value' with its 'narrative manifestation' (ibid, p 87) in a text. As a consequence, Jameson's analysis remains firmly embedded in the realm of pure literary theory, whereas this study's consideration of both qualitative and quantitative data outside of the film texts demands that its analysis goes beyond those subject

boundaries.

Similarly, Wayne's description of Jameson's conception of the ideologeme as 'a sign that is to be analysed as the site and stake of class struggle' (2003, p 148) suggests that an unaltered application of his method would limit the analysis to an unhelpful class-centric reading (the kind of reading that Bourdieu so vehemently opposes)[32]. Additionally, it is worth clarifying here that the objective is not to explore the concept of ideology *per se*, and therefore the examination of the commercial and artistic ramifications of these ideologemes is not undertaken for the purpose of comparing a 'philosophical system' with its textual representation (1983, p 87) as Jameson would have it, but is instead a way of considering how elements of the text can be interpreted in two different contexts (see figure 4.1).

Of course, the question remains as to how the ideologemes for this research will be defined. As figure 4.1 reveals, the ideologemes used in this study will be the changes made to the comic book source material during the process of adapting it into film. The following chapter will provide a full explanation of, and justification for, this choice of ideologeme, but for now it is sufficient to conclude that the ideologeme is adopted here as a theoretical concept with a practical application that will constitute a solution to the question of how the process of mediation between the commercial and artistic contexts can be undertaken.

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[32] Wayne designs his own analytical process, adapting Jameson's ideologeme theory in order to mediate between producers and texts. His assignation of thematic concepts to ideologemes allows him to produce readings which tend to be more closely aligned with the interests of traditional Marxist literary criticism. One such example is his discussion of the television programme *Big Brother*, through which he argues that his chosen theme/ideologeme of surveillance becomes 'a sign being pulled in different directions by the conflicts and contradictions of class division and struggle' (2003, pp 148-54).

JAMESON'S APPLICATION OF THE IDEOLOGEME

CONCEPTUAL/ PHILOSOPHICAL:		NARRATIVE:
Pseudoidea (opinion or belief) developed into a wider philosophical system	IDEOLOGEME (a minimal unit of class discourse)	Proto-narrative (fantasy, anecdote, tale) developed into a cultural narrative (a text)
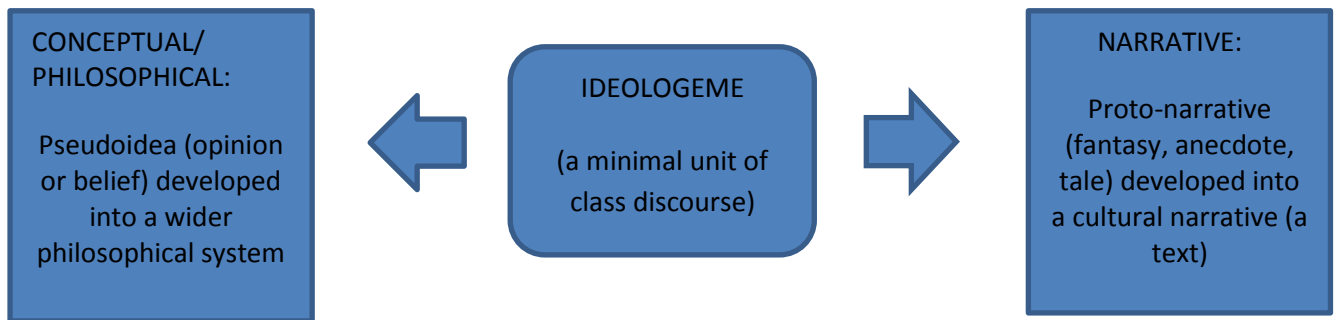
THIS RESEARCH'S APPLICATION OF THE IDEOLOGEME:

COMMERCE:		ARTISTIC:
Consequences of the change for the film as a commercial product	IDEOLOGEME (a change made in adaptation from page to screen)	Consequences of the change for the film as an artistic product
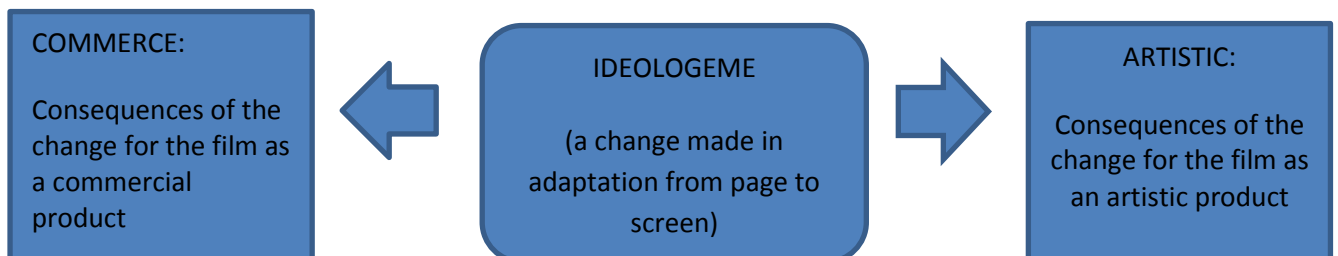
Figure 4.1 – Comparison of ideologeme application for Jameson and for this research. Summary of Jameson based on Dowling (1984)'s discussion.

From theory to practice: research questions

As this chapter brings to a conclusion the review of the theoretical literature as a whole, it is now time to consider the research questions which will inform the investigative and analytical aspects of this work. Examination of the literature on a topic as vast as the interactions between art and commerce and how they manifest within a specific cultural product has not been an insignificant task. Over the course

of the preceding chapters, the theoretical foundations of this research have been laid in three main areas: the nature of film as both commercial and artistic product, how the relationship between art and commerce has been theorised and, finally, how text-centric strategies can be incorporated into an investigation of this area. From these three areas and their application to the superhero film genre in the period in question, four questions logically arise. The primary question is theoretically and methodologically driven and one which this study as a whole seeks to answer:

> How can the superhero comic book adaptations released between 2000 and 2013 be theorised in a way which addresses both the artistic and commercial aspects of the production of cultural goods?

This question then prompts two more which reflect the study's more detailed exploration of the individual adaptations as texts situated within the context of the interactions between commerce and art:

> To what extent are the changes made to the source material in the page to screen adaptation process reflective of commercial logic and to what extent are they reflective of artistic logic?

> What are the implications of the changes made between page and screen for the films as commercial products and as artistic products?

The final question considers the effects of these same interactions in the wider context of the whole genre:

> How has the superhero comic book film genre as a whole between 2000 and 2013 been shaped by the interactions between commerce and artistry?

Chapter Five

Developing a methodology

As has been stated from the outset, this study adopts what could broadly be described as an interdisciplinary approach. The central assertion is that while economic considerations are determinant in the last instance, artistic considerations also have a degree of effectivity in the shaping of superhero comic book film adaptations. It is clear that even the most tentative initial responses to the research questions identified at the close of the previous chapter need to be constructed in a manner that allows for a full exploration of both the commercial and artistic aspects of the films. Thus far, a theoretical through-line has been established which argues that any study of film is predicated on a duality (but not necessarily a dichotomy) of identities in that it must function as a commercial product and as an artistic product. While there are, potentially, a bewildering variety of different approaches to researching each of these aspects individually, Wayne's warning of the 'danger…in simply bolting together methods' (2003, p 124) must be kept in mind. In other words, it is not possible to simply choose an existing method of commercial analysis and an existing method of artistic analysis and place them side by side in a methodological 'cut-and-shut'; a new strategy must be constructed which deploys the most useful elements of existing methodologies but also fits the nuances and specificities of this

topic.

Given that the subject of this research is a popular film genre and that it very much draws on textual readings of the films, the study immediately presents a challenge in regard to what will be considered suitable data for the research and how it might be collected. In order to provide a more complete account of how each film functions as both commercial and artistic product it is necessary to construct a mixed methods research design that is able to integrate both quantitative and qualitative data. In this context, the quantitative element is comprised largely of secondary financial data for the films' box office revenue and budgets while the qualitative aspects include my own and others' readings and critical analyses of the films alongside secondary interviews with the individuals involved in making the films. In this respect, the quantitative data is arguably the more straightforward element (although it must be noted that even secondary data regarding revenue and budget is not unproblematic, as will be discussed later). It is the significant role that qualitative, interpretive elements such as the close readings of the films play in this research that requires further consideration.

The role of textual interpretation

If, as one of the research questions asks, the artistic 'implications' for the films of the changes made in the adaptation process are to be considered, then this must be done through analysis of the film texts as artistic products. Of course, analysis of narrative texts is by no means a radical methodological tool; in text-centric disciplines such as Film and Literature it is de rigueur and, as Silverman notes, it is

simply another form of data interpretation in the sense that 'many qualitative data (interviews, documents, conversations) take a narrative form' (2006, p 166). The tradition of textual analysis notwithstanding, it is necessary to consider how such an approach fits not only into this dissertation's overall methodology but also with its conception of film.

In Chapter Two I argued that film is partly comprised of a mental aspect with the consequence that it is recreated as a different mental product each time it is viewed and interpreted by an individual. Such a conception may initially seem to present a challenge to a dissertation such as this, in the sense that the films which are its objects of study are open to a potentially limitless number of interpretations. While this concept remains a central part of the theory of film's mental aspect, it is an impractical starting point for an investigation. Translating the idea that any and every personal reading of a film is valid into a methodology would require ascertaining multiple audience interpretations via surveys, focus group questionnaires and interviews. Whilst this is not impossible, the data gathered would serve only to prove what has already been established: that film texts are polysemic and that a viewer's reading is based on factors such as taste, education, emotional intelligence and psychological make-up.

If, therefore, a multitude of readings proves unviable as a research method for artistic interpretation of the texts, the other option is to put forward my own reading of the text as the primary interpretative framework. Inevitably, having established the idea that all mental versions of a text are equally valid, it may appear to be somewhat contradictory to subsequently privilege my own reading of a text over others, but the distinction lies in the academic context of a dissertation such as this

and in the need to ground these analyses in an evidence-based method. In other words, it can be acknowledged simultaneously that individuals are entitled to their own interpretations of a film but also that such relativism is unhelpful in an investigative context which inevitably requires the application of a more formal, structured method of argument.

Accordingly, the textual readings herein are, by nature, acts of interpretation, a practice which is standard and indeed essential when studying film texts. As Dudley notes in *Concepts in Film Theory*, the images we see onscreen 'openly require the work of interpretation to complete them…From basic perception of images…to the fully elaborated functioning of genres and figures, interpretation plays an irreplaceable role'. Yet crucially, these acts of interpretation cannot merely be a series of idiosyncratic symbols whose significance is drawn from highly subjective personal experience. Dudley goes on to argue that 'any adaptation and every genre…must be considered in relation to cultural and film history…as an integral part of comprehending the phenomenon in the first instance' (1984, pp 172-3). This dissertation's readings are therefore attempts to produce reasoned interpretations of the films through observation and argument, substantiated by both textual and extra-textual evidence and grounded in disciplinary tradition and genre history[33].

The case study and multiple-case study approach

Whilst it may be true that 'the phenomenon being researched always dictates to some extent the terms of its own dissection and exploration' (Leonard-Barton

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[33]A more detailed methodological outline of the textual reading process can be found toward the end of this chapter.

1990, p 249), this does not mean that a methodology will simply suggest itself and therefore it is necessary to define the chosen approach. It should be acknowledged here that although an entire genre is being researched – albeit one bounded within a chronological period – it is of course impossible to cover every single film which comprises it in sufficient detail. The only workable solution to this is to focus on selected films or franchises[34] within this period, inevitably sacrificing breadth of coverage for more detailed individual analyses in an attempt to achieve a 'deep understanding' (Woodside 2010, p 6) of the subject.

In considering this need to focus on select films alongside the research questions it can be argued that a case study format is the most suitable framework for the research. Chiefly, there are three reasons why the case study offers the most effective design for this research. Firstly, the case study structure is advantageous when the objects of analysis are artistic products or texts – in this case film. As Gerring states, the very term 'case' study suggests that 'the unit under special focus is not perfectly representative of the population' and that, by extension, 'unit homogeneity…is not assured' (2007, p 20). While it could be argued that any individual film can be grouped with others – by genre, or even medium for example – each is unquestionably unique. A method which acknowledges, therefore, that its object of analysis is part of a larger group of similar, yet not identical, objects and which attempts 'at the same time, to illuminate features of a broader set of cases' (ibid, p 29) is one which fits well with a study of film. A second advantage of the case study is that it is able 'to deal with a major decision, its genesis and its apparent effect, or…the reasons for…an entire project' and that it 'tries to illuminate a decision

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[34] While, theoretically speaking, any of the superhero adaptations could be chosen for this study, there are specific films (or series of films) which are arguably more fruitful as subjects of analysis. The reasons for these selections will be discussed later in this chapter.

or a set of decisions: why they were taken, how they were implemented, and with what result' (Schramm 1971, pp 3-6). The key idea here is 'illuminate': it would be inaccurate to claim that this research's objective is to find definitive reasons for *why* adaptation changes were made yet it nevertheless explores the decisions made in the adaptation process and considers the consequences of these changes, something which the case study is able to facilitate. The third reason why the case study has been selected as the most suitable research method is because of its ability to incorporate disparate forms of evidence and combine them cohesively. Gerring suggests that case studies have 'characteristic flexibility' and 'may employ a great variety of techniques…for the gathering and analysis of evidence (2007, p 33). The diverse data forms and evidence that this research draws on are outlined in more detail later in this chapter, but it is sufficient to note at this point that, if designed suitably, the case study allows this diversity to be advantageous.

The case study would appear to be an appropriate method for this research but it should not be assumed that the very concept is so uncontested that it does not require a definition. Saunders et al provide a helpful description of the case study, noting that it 'explores a research topic or phenomenon within its context' and differs from 'the survey strategy where…the ability to explore and understand…context is limited by the number of variables for which data can be collected' (2012, p 179). Gillham elaborates by clarifying that 'a case can be an individual…a group…an institution' or even 'a community' (2000, p 1), his observation serving as a reminder of the importance of defining exactly what constitutes a 'case' for each piece of research. For this study, each case is a superhero film franchise comprised of two or more film texts (a film and its sequels such as the *Dark Knight* trilogy, for example). Additionally it is important to clarify that each case is not defined solely by the films

that it analyses but is also defined temporally in the sense that it may cover elements of the film's pre-production, production and post-production in addition to the period post-release. Ryan warns 'that there is a certain incompleteness about reading single texts' (1991, p 266) and reiterates the importance of situating the reading of cultural products within the network of related events and other texts in which they were produced. Therefore, each case study not only explores its designated film texts and interprets them in relation to the other films in their franchise, but also connects them to what could be termed the secondary texts that historically surround them – for example, their trailers, interviews with the filmmakers, the publicity materials that accompanied their releases as well as other films that preceded and succeeded them and/or were contemporaneous to their release[35]. The intention here is to create a deeper, contextualised understanding of the phenomenon being studied and to avoid producing a narrow reading of the text itself as a hermetically sealed repository of meaning which 'squeezes out of the picture all of the other complex relations which locate the text…and allow it to produce meaning' (McRobbie 1994, p 14).

Another useful definition of the case study is suggested by Leonard-Barton who describes it as 'a history of a past or current phenomenon, drawn from multiple sources of evidence' (1990, p 249), suggesting that this case study approach needs to be distinguished from that of a history. Yin posits that the difference between the two methods is dependent on 'the extent of the investigator's control over and access to actual…events'. According to his criteria, a study is a history if 'there is virtually no access or control', but is a case study if there is an examination of

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[35] The later section 'Data and Information Sources' provides more detail about these sources of contextual information.

'contemporary events…when the relevant behaviour cannot be manipulated' (2009, p 11). While the distinction between the two approaches is ambiguous in some respects, this research is closer to a case study because although, on an individual basis, the film texts being analysed are finished and the process of making them is in the past (and obviously one which I as the researcher had no direct access to or control over), both the superhero adaptation genre as a whole and the film studios' involvement with it are part of an ongoing contemporary phenomenon which is constantly evolving. In short, the films may well be historical subjects in the sense that they are complete and finished, but the genre which is being explored is extant. The fact that I am not, as Yin puts it, 'manipulating' the events of the filmmaking process, suggests that this research is best classified as a case study.

Yin encourages an even more specific classification of the research method through his description of the multiple-case study. At its most basic level, the multiple-case study is a series of 'comparative case studies within an overall piece of research' (Cohen et al 2011, p 291) – an apt description of this study's analyses of several superhero films. Yin notes that typically in this form 'each individual case study consists of a "whole" study, in which convergent evidence is sought regarding the facts and conclusions for each case; each case's conclusions are then considered to be the information needing replication by other individual cases' (2009, p 58). At its most basic level, therefore, this study employs a multiple-case study format – each individual case study analysing the adaptation changes made in selected films – to demonstrate whether the central assertion can be contested or supported by the texts and their production processes.

Indeed, much of the literature on research methods consistently reiterates the suitability of the case study as a way of applying (and thereby proving or disproving)

theoretical arguments. Yin posits that a case study 'benefits from the prior development of theoretical propositions to guide data collection and analysis' (ibid, p 18) and Stewart also emphasises that 'the researcher will have a proposition of interest (derived from the literature) whose operations are to be investigated' (2012, p 71). Additionally, he notes that the case study is a particularly effective design in 'a field where concepts are necessarily soft-edged, rather than hard-edged' because of its reliance on a wide array of differing forms of (frequently) qualitative evidence and 'the fact that [case studies] are not "stories" but [instead] reflect a theoretically shaped analytical framework' concerning the chosen phenomena (ibid, p 71). Stewart hereby acknowledges the benefits that the case study offers for research such as this which, while characterised by reasoned argument and supported by textual analysis and a range of other sources, does not draw on the more empirical forms of evidence traditionally associated with a purely positivist paradigm.

Selection of cases

In order to answer the research questions as effectively as possible, the selection of case studies is crucial. Stewart notes that 'unlike the single-case study, all multi-case studies are in essence comparative', meaning that 'cases are chosen for their similarities, rather than their differences', but that 'more commonly…multi-case researchers are interested in difference' (2012, p 70). As has already been established, this research reflects the understanding that, in terms of specific content, each film text is unique and therefore, any selection of comic book films automatically offers a study in difference from the outset.

In theory, any superhero adaptation could be selected in order to investigate

the assertion that it is not simply commercial considerations which shape mainstream film. However, Yin provides a specific typography of typical case selection strategies, observing that 'each case must be carefully selected so that it either (a) predicts similar results…or (b) predicts contrasting results but for anticipatable reasons', describing these two outcomes as 'literal replication' and 'theoretical replication' respectively (2009, p 54). Whilst it is intended that the cases in this study will demonstrate that superhero comic book adaptations are not solely reflective of commercial logic, it is also predicted that each of the films will reflect the interactions between commerce and artistry in very different ways; in other words, some of the adaptation changes may prove to be more reflective of commercial logic than artistic logic and vice versa. This therefore requires that the cases be chosen to represent what Yin describes as theoretical replication because even though the specific combinations of commercial and artistic factors which demonstrably shape the films may well be different in each case, these differences will ideally still demonstrate the theoretical proposition that comic book adaptations reflect the always varying interaction of commercial and artistic forces.

Accepting that the interactions between artistry and commerce will manifest differently within each text, it holds true that the research method (which is outlined below) can be applied to any comic book adaptation without prejudice. Purposive sampling has therefore been employed to form a multiple-case study which demonstrates the *differing* ways in which commerce and artistry interact, avoiding repetition. The case studies are as follows:

Case study one: Twentieth Century Fox's *X-Men* franchise:

X-Men (2000), *X2* (2003) and *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006)

Case study two: Universal's and Marvel Studios' *Hulk* franchise:

Hulk (2003) and *The Incredible Hulk* (2008)

Case study three: Marvel Studios' *Iron Man* franchise:

Iron Man (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010) and *Iron Man 3* (2013)

Case study four: Warner Bros.' *Dark Knight* franchise:

Batman Begins (2005), *The Dark Knight* (2008), *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012)

Although the introductions to each case study provide a detailed outline of the significance of each film for both the genre and this study, it is necessary to offer a very brief justification here as to why each of these franchises has been chosen. The *X-Men* franchise has been included because it marks the beginning of the resurgence of the superhero film genre and has proven to be influential in terms of both its serious tone and some of its production strategies. The second franchise includes Ang Lee's *Hulk* which provides a unique opportunity to explore the relationship between art and commerce through a mainstream adaptation which appears to deviate somewhat from the traditional blockbuster format. Made by Lee, an auteur who had little to no experience of making mainstream action films, the highly stylised film failed to match financial expectations, prompting Marvel and Universal to take the unusual decision to partially reboot the franchise only five years

later in an attempt to make the character more commercially successful[36]. The third case study explores Marvel Studios' *Iron Man* franchise, notable not only for the adaptation changes made to the source material but also because it is the first film in Marvel's long-term phased business plan to unite its various properties into one coherent cinematic universe (the Marvel Cinematic Universe). The final case study explores Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* (Batman) trilogy which is worthy of commercial analysis due to its unprecedented box office takings and of artistic analysis because of its dark tone and apparent realism and which, like *Hulk*, facilitates an exploration of how an auteur balances artistry and commerce in a major comic book adaptation.

Case study structure and design

Each case study is comprised of the following sections:

Historical Context – The history and development of the character in comics and in adaptation, including a summary of the major critical readings and interpretations of the comics and adaptations.

Adaptation analysis – A brief introduction to, and outline of, the particular film adaptations chosen as the object of study for the case study and of the points which the case study is making.

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[36] At that point in the genre's history, the decision to reboot a comic book franchise relatively quickly after the most recent film was radical, although it is no longer so unusual in Hollywood. The character of Spider-Man has recently undergone a second reboot in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), making Tom Holland the third actor, after Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield, to have played the part since 2002.

Adaptation Changes – A detailed identification and analysis of specific changes made to the source material in the chosen adaptation and discussion of the commercial and artistic implications of these changes. Each case study features two adaptation changes.

Conclusion and context – Although the Discussion chapter at the conclusion of this dissertation provides an in-depth consideration of how the case studies have contributed to this research's understanding of theory, this section briefly summarises what each case study has contributed to the investigation thus far.

The adaptation change as ideologeme

Each Adaptation Change section is built around the analysis of an ideologeme. In the previous chapter, the ideologeme was proposed as a suitable unit for analysing the commercial and artistic aspects of film. The focus for this research is of course the superhero comic book adaptation and thus it is appropriate that the changes made during the adaptation process from comic to film become this study's ideologemes, or minimal units of analysis.

It is necessary to justify here why the adaptation changes have been chosen as the minimal units of analysis. The research's central proposition is that 'While economic considerations are determinant in the last instance, artistic considerations

also have a degree of effectivity in the shaping of superhero comic book film adaptations' and the adaptation change ideologemes play a central role in building an argument to support this theory. Firstly, as discussed, by their very nature, they encourage an analysis which can be developed in two directions. This means that the consequences of each change can be considered in relation to the film as a commercial product and as an artistic product.

Secondly, the adaptation change is a useful tool because the changes made to the source material are a central part of the film and the adaptation process itself. If, for example, a comic book was adapted for the screen but there were absolutely no changes made to the source material (other than those inevitable technical changes that have to be made because of the difference in mediums) – in other words no changes to character, dialogue, plot or structure – it would be difficult to come to any conclusions regarding the type of logic that the adaptation reflected. But being able to identify the 'before' of the source material and the 'after' of the film version provides a unique opportunity to identify the changes made and then construct an argument for whether these changes reflect commercial or artistic logic. Where it is possible to argue for the latter, this study will be able to demonstrate that the artistic sphere is active rather than passive and has influence on these films. In short, the adaptation change ideologeme provides a very real and objective piece of evidence to build an analysis on. By identifying the changes made between film and comic book (without, of course, commenting on whether or not each change is for better or worse), the case studies take as their starting point a measurable phenomenon that anchors the commercial and artistic discussion.

Additionally, using the changes as a starting point for the analysis enables it

to focus very specifically on adaptation as a process. Were approaches such as Kristeva's or Jameson's being replicated, the subject of this research would solely be the text (either film or comic book), but one of the study's overall objectives is to explore what happens in the adaptation process itself. Thus the starting point is the completed film text, from which the study works backwards, identifying the differences between it and its source material, focusing on the changes made *during* adaptation and the ramifications of these changes. This allows the analysis to engage with the dynamism of the adaptation process and better reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the research by examining how commerce and artistry interact rather than becoming a more straightforward, but less original, discussion of the text as a static, finished product.

The ideologemes therefore reflect the notion of the adaptation process as a space where the interactions between art and commerce manifest and in which the film text is created. By showing how the changes reflect artistic and/or commercial logic, the ideologemes enable the case studies to explore and argue the central theoretical proposition of this research. They are able to do this precisely because the adaptation changes are nexus in both senses of the word: a means of linking artistic and commercial perspectives and a central, focal space between comic book and film, a space generated by the adaptation process itself.

The adaptation change analysis

The process begins by identifying what the actual source material is for the film. As noted previously, adaptation is not necessarily a straightforward concept in

comic book cinema. Yet this is not to say that it is impossible to identify which comic book storylines have been used as source material and, accordingly, each case study provides a list of the comics which each film is explicitly based on. For *Hulk*, *Iron Man* and to some extent *X-Men*, identification of the source texts is relatively straightforward as the filmmakers have drawn more on the original issues of the comics, possibly because these are the first major film adaptations of the characters and these stories have not been used previously. The films also include additional characters and storylines from later comics however and therefore, where appropriate, these issues have been identified as source material too. Alternatively, *Batman Begins* reboots a character that had appeared on film recently and therefore looks to later comic book retellings rather than the original issues to present a different take on the narrative. Even here however, the use of certain characters and storylines assists in identifying which comic books have been adapted.

The next stage of the analytical process involves identifying a way in which the adaptation has changed the source material. In theory, this could be something as small as a costume change or something as major as the removal of a character or an alteration to a storyline. Of course, it is the latter, more major changes which offer the most effective points for analysis. These include tonal alterations (the presentation of the *Hulk* comics as a psychodrama), thematic alterations (the addition of economic discourses to the *Dark Knight* trilogy) and structural alterations (an increased focus on character over action in *X-Men*).

Once the adaptation change is identified, the process of considering the significance of the change begins. This involves taking the ideologeme of the change in two directions, commercial and artistic. Inevitably, each analysis is unique and takes a different form depending on the particular change identified. However, as a

guide, it is helpful to return to Chapter Two's establishment of film's dual identity as a commercial product and an artistic product. There, I proposed the basic artistic and commercial elements of the superhero film or, to describe them another way, the commercial and artistic logics that the film must conform to. To reiterate, these elements are:

<u>Commercial</u>

The need to generate a profit (maximum revenue possible, minimum cost possible, appealing to the widest audience possible)

High marketability (easily expressed concept and iconography)

Potential for merchandise, tie-ins and product placement

Some degree of recourse to formula (replication and combination of narratives that are familiar to audiences)

Potential for franchise extension and universe building

<u>Artistic</u>

Narrative content and structure

Character

Thematic content

Tone

Symbolic dimension

This is not to say that this approach is attempting in any way to be an exact simulacrum of the filmmaking process; it is after all unlikely that writers or executives would be so mechanistic as to construct a film by plucking elements from the two lists above. Indeed, some may posit that the artistic and commercial aspects of the

film cannot be theorised as discrete spheres, that the very notion of incorporating elements such as characters and plot in a film is a response to commercial demands and that films require these elements to have even the slightest chance of succeeding as commercial products. Such an argument is unhelpful to this process however because as a conception of the industry and the medium it not only ignores the fact that artistic elements such as plot and character predate commercial filmmaking by millennia but also presupposes that commerce is the ultimate determinant before the analysis has begun. Any investigative process which starts from the perspective that all the artistic elements of film are simply expressions of commerce rather than being pre-existing notions (something which was argued in Chapter Two), is less an investigation and more of a foregone conclusion and therefore invalid as a starting point.

The benefit of a process which utilises the two lists of elements above is that, as far as possible, it establishes the commercial and artistic logic which each film must conform to and against which the effects of the adaptation changes can be measured. It also has two additional advantages: firstly, the two separated sets of features reflect the dual nature of film which has thus far been one of the central tenets of this study and secondly, this method avoids a potential difficulty of the commerce/artistry analysis – namely the inherent privileging of one aspect over the other – by ensuring that both are established as equal spheres from the beginning of the analysis.

With these criteria used to inform the analysis and discussion of the adaptation changes, the next stage in the process is to consider what the dominant consequence of each change is. As the research questions indicate, this study has not been designed to 'discover' the definitive reasons behind the adaptation change

decisions taken by those involved. Although the case studies do draw on secondary interviews with some of the filmmakers in order to support the arguments therein, they are not constructed around primary interviews and thus any attempt to identify the reasons why individuals made the adaptation changes would be speculation. Instead, this process of analysis exploits the dual nature of the ideologeme, with the consequence that each analysis is taken in two directions, allowing for, and indeed encouraging, a consideration of both the commercial and artistic consequences of each adaptation change. In its purest form then, the ideologeme framework is not designed to be a process which can reach an unarguable conclusion simply by working through it. This lack of a predetermined outcome has its advantages for a study such as this however; this chapter has already argued that the interdisciplinary area under scrutiny is one which resists strict, deterministic conclusions.

The ideologeme analysis's purpose is therefore to examine the evidence for both types of consequence in order to build an argument for whether each adaptation change can be defined as *primarily* commercial or artistic. In other words, whilst it is acknowledged that each change has both commercial and artistic consequences, the case studies constitute attempts to argue whether one consequence is more significant than the other and therefore can be identified as the *dominant* logic evident in each particular change. However it must also be stressed that the act of identifying a dominant logic for each adaptation change does not render the other logic invalid. One of the chief benefits of the ideologeme approach is that it is able to resist binary conclusions so that if, for example, the conclusion is reached that commercial logic is more evident in a particular adaptation change, it does not mean that there is no artistic logic evident: one conclusion does not negate the other. This method therefore constitutes an attempt to argue that specific films

are demonstrative of a combination of artistic and commercial influences as opposed to just the latter.

Data and information sources

The readings of the films themselves form the central components of each case study. As with all textual readings, these analyses of the films are supported by evidence from the texts themselves, whether that be linguistically (in the form of quotations from the screenplay) or visually. In regard to the latter, the mise-en-scène approach to analysis traditionally employed in Film studies offers a useful way to read film imagery in detail. Dix offers a list of elements which can be studied in mise-en-scène analysis including setting, props, costume, lighting and acting alongside cinematographic choices such as the height, angle, level and movement of the camera (2008, pp 12-30). This relatively microcosmic image and scene analysis is part of a wider consideration of the more macrocosmic aspects of each film such as editing, tone and narrative structure as a whole. Each individual element is not necessarily discussed in every case study but the list functions as an indicator of the aspects of film that traditionally signify meaning in academic readings. It should also be noted at this point that although the comic book medium is of course uniquely different from film, many of the above methods of analysis can be applied to both. Although the images are static, the panels on the comic book page can also sustain a similar mise-en-scène analysis. The positioning of figures, their facial expressions, the use of colour and even the 'camera' angle from which the panel has been drawn are all microcosmic analysis techniques which can be combined with the macrocosmic interpretation of the comic book as a whole in terms of its structure, narrative and tone. Citing elements such as these to support the arguments and

interpretations put forward in the readings is, as Hall puts it, 'the "work" required to enforce, win plausibility for and command as legitimate a decoding' of the text (1980, p 124). This type of interpretive reading is naturally at home within a case study, which is typically more welcoming to diverse forms of evidence; as Gillham notes: 'This doesn't mean that you ignore the objective…but that you are after the qualitative element…what lies behind the more objective evidence' (2000, p 7).

Alongside the readings of the films, which form the core of the case studies, secondary data is also used. This data is both quantitative – box office revenue and costs[37] – and more commonly, qualitative, in the form of reports on the making and reception of the films, interviews with directors, screenwriters and studio executives and reports on the studios' corporate organisation. A major obstacle for any discussion of the film industry is the lack of access to easily verifiable information and to financial data which is notoriously closely guarded (apart from box office revenue). Inevitably, in situations where acknowledged facts are admittedly sparse, rumour and hearsay tend to become dominant and therefore care has been taken to use trustworthy sources. Wherever possible, evidence has been sourced from interviews with the filmmakers and studio employees themselves and publications such as *Variety*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Empire* magazine have been used. What qualifies these sources over others is their reputation for avoidance of rumour and misreporting and their established factual reporting of industry developments, which is respected and cited by figures within the industry – many of *Empire* and *Entertainment Weekly*'s reports on films, for example, include exclusive interviews with the studios and the filmmakers themselves. Citing such secondary sources enhances the readings contained within this multiple-case

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[37] See below for a more detailed discussion of how box office figures and budget details have been compiled.

study and supports the arguments made by allowing a more diverse plurality of voices to be heard in the discussions of the adaptations. Whether the sources are members of the filmmaking teams working behind or in front of the camera, executives who work for studios or journalists and writers who report on the genre and the industry, all are able to help illuminate the adaptation process from their various specialist perspectives. As Fiss observes, this ability to create a more holistic picture of a process is a distinct advantage of the case study precisely because it 'is not limited to any particular form of evidence or data collection' (2009, p 427).

A note on box office and budgetary data

The box office figures used in this research have been calculated by triangulating the data of three of the most prominent film statistics companies: Box Office Mojo (www.boxofficemojo.com), BoxOffice (pro.boxoffice.com) and The Numbers (www.the-numbers.com). A fourth notable source, Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com), has been discounted from this process because it purchased Box Office Mojo in 2008 and therefore shares the same data. Of these three companies, the most popularly cited source is Box Office Mojo, described by the major US publication *Entertainment Weekly* as a 'well-respected' source of box office information (Labrecque 2013). However, comparison of statistics with the other two companies reveals some relatively small discrepancies in the final box office totals for a number of the films listed. These differences, usually in the tens of thousands of dollars, are relatively minor for films generating revenues of hundreds of millions of dollars (the difference between BoxOffice and Box Office Mojo's worldwide totals for *The Dark Knight* is 0.17% for example). However, in the interests of accuracy and to

avoid reliance on a single source, the totals for each film provided by each of the three sources have been added together and divided by three to calculate a mean figure. The raw box office data from the three sources and the mean totals are shown in Appendix I. All box office figures, whether worldwide or for specific countries, are presented as gross box office earnings in US dollars and are not inflation adjusted unless stated for the purposes of the discussion. Where a film's box office revenue is described as 'domestic', this refers to the United States and Canada.

Sourcing reliable data for a film's budget is a different matter altogether and is a far less accurate science considering costs are closely guarded by studios. It is important to clarify that any listed estimates for budgets are exactly that – *estimates* – however reliable their source. Further obfuscation is caused by taking into account that fact that, in addition to a film's production budget or 'negative cost' (the amount it costs to actually make the film, up to the point of producing the negative or digital copy), the studio must have a separate marketing and promotion budget to cover 'prints and advertising cost' (the amount it costs to manufacture prints of the film and promote it[38]) which, again, is almost impossible to estimate for any given release[39]. Additionally, The Numbers does note that the Motion Picture Association of America 'stopped tracking [the average cost of a major studio movie] in 2006' (The Numbers 2013). The implications of this are that, as a rule, budget figures and attempts to calculate a film's profits (the very definition of the term 'profit' in the film industry

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[38] 'Prints' has, of course, morphed into a figurative term in the contemporary film industry as films are now distributed digitally.

[39] When the budget breakdown for the notorious box office failure *Sahara* (2005) was released as part of a legal investigation, it provided a rare insight into the costing of a major studio release. In addition to the negative cost of $160m, the prints and advertising costs were listed as $61m (Bunting 2007). Additionally, *The Hollywood Reporter*'s research for the period 2003-10 showed that in the US, 'domestic [print and advertising cost] has accounted for 34-37% of combined production and domestic-releasing costs for movies released by the six largest studios' (Gerbrandt 2010).

being itself a subject of great debate) are so vague as to be largely unhelpful overall[40].

This study therefore utterly avoids speculation over films' profits and tends to also avoid budgetary speculation except at those points where the estimated cost of a film is a necessary part of a larger argument (for example in the *X-Men* case study where I discuss the ways in which the content of the film was specifically shaped and determined by its relatively restricted budget). Where the case studies do cite budgetary data, it is taken from Appendix II. Here, budget estimates provided by Box Office Mojo and The Numbers have been used and a mean budget derived. Data from the third company, BoxOffice, has not been included due to the fact that its budget figures include prints and advertising which skews the figures considerably.

Inevitably, a refusal to rely on misleading and inaccurate calculations of profit could mean that there is a corresponding lack of context for the box office figures and a consequent inability to prove exactly how financially successful a film is without knowing its costs. In order to mitigate this, it should be noted that, as the case studies will demonstrate, when analysing the performance of a film at the box office, this study does not aim to provide anything more than a general indication of a film's financial success or failure. Therefore, where a film is described as being a financial success or failure at the box office, the descriptors are justified by contextual factors such as its performance relative to the top ten grossing films of its release year, the performance of similar films in the same time period (other mainstream comic book adaptations released in the same, preceding or following year, for example) or, if a film is part of a franchise, the performance of its

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[40] Howkins states that the Hollywood rule for accounting is 'keep it complex', arguing that 'it is virtually impossible for anyone not intimately involved to know the real cost of a film', with deals and agreements varying from film to film (2001, p 169). *Movie Money* by Daniels et al (2006) is as comprehensive a guide as any to the complexities of the system.

predecessors or sequels.

Conclusion

With its need to situate its interpretation of film in two contexts, its emphasis on explanation and exploration rather than simple solutions and its reliance on multiple and varied sources of data and evidence, the multiple-case study approach is the most appropriate fit for this research. Accordingly, Saunders et al suggest that the case study is 'most often used in explanatory and exploratory research…and may use a mix of…[quantitative or qualitative] methods' such as interviews, observation [and] documentary analysis' (2012, p 179). The suitability of this method of research, which relies on disparate forms of evidence, is well documented, Gillham noting that a case study utilises 'multiple sources of evidence, each with its strengths and weaknesses' (2000, p 2). In recognising this, he implies that the advantage of a study such as this is that it takes various types of data which individually may only provide partial explanations and combines them with others to form a more complete picture of the object of study.

Chapter Six

Case Study One: The first *X-Men* trilogy

Historical context: X-Men in comics and on screen

Marvel Comics's X-Men first appeared in the eponymous comic book in September 1963. The ongoing series tells the story of a team of superpowered heroes led by their mentor, Professor Charles Xavier (Professor X). Created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, the X-Men differ somewhat from their superhero contemporaries – most of whom were transformed as a result of a chemical accident or disastrous scientific experiment – due to the fact that they are 'mutants', humans who are born with an additional 'X gene' that results in them developing strange physical or mental powers as they enter adulthood. In opposition to the pacifist Xavier stands the villainous Brotherhood of Evil Mutants led by Erik Lensherr – also known as Magneto – who believes that mutants are the evolutionary superiors of homo sapiens and as such seeks to destroy non-mutants.

The publishing history of the comics is characterised by three definitive narrative periods: the initial debut run (from Issue 1 in 1963 until its cancellation in 1970) wherein Professor X and his team including characters such as Beast, Angel, Cyclops, Jean Grey and Iceman were created; the relaunch in 1975, which saw the

introduction of characters who would become central to the X-Men such as Storm and Wolverine and the period from the mid-1980s onwards in which *X-Men*'s popularity had reached such a peak that it launched a number of spin-off titles which considerably expanded the *X-Men* universe.

In terms of adaptations of the comics, members of the X-Men first appeared in animated form as guest stars in a number of children's cartoon series including *The Marvel Super Heroes* (1966) and *Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends* (1981). It was not until 1992 that the characters were given their own animated series on American television, *X-Men*, which proved so popular that it ran for five seasons. The animated adaptations have continued on television to the present day, including series such as *Wolverine and the X-Men* (2008). In 2000, Twentieth Century Fox released *X-Men*, the first of several film adaptations of the comic book series (Fox had obtained the film rights in the mid-nineties). Directed by Bryan Singer, the film introduces several of the main characters from the comics including Professor X (Patrick Stewart), Magneto (Ian McKellen), Rogue (Anna Paquin), Storm (Halle Berry) and Jean Grey (Famke Janssen). Its plot is not based on a specific *X-Men* issue or storyline but instead interweaves a number of narrative elements from the comic's history with an original story detailing Wolverine (Hugh Jackman)'s joining of the X-Men to fight against the twin threats of Magneto's Brotherhood and the Mutant Registration Act, an attempt at political and social control of mutants led by Senator Robert Kelly. The sequel, *X2*, (again directed by Singer) was released in 2003 and forms a loose adaptation of the comic book *God Loves, Man Kills* (Claremont and Anderson 2003) featuring a storyline which sees the X-Men and Magneto having to team-up in order to prevent a military general William Stryker (Bryan Cox) from causing mutant genocide. *X2* was followed by *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), the

final film in the original trilogy, directed by Brett Ratner. The film adapted elements of

two storylines from the *X-Men* comics: the Dark Phoenix saga (which details Jean

Grey's loss of control of her telekinetic power and subsequent transformation into a

destructive force) and Joss Whedon and John Cassaday's *Astonishing X-Men*

narrative arc (which explores the consequences of the development of a cure for

mutation that turns mutants into 'normal' humans). Fox also released a prequel to

the trilogy in 2011: *X-Men: First Class* which tells the story of a young Xavier (James

McAvoy) and Magneto (Michael Fassbender)'s initial friendship and their founding of

the X-Men. In addition, there are canonical solo films revolving around the central

character of Wolverine, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009) and *The Wolverine* (2013).

A summary of the cinematic adaptations of the *X-Men* comics can be seen in figure

6.1 below[41].

     In terms of the way the comics themselves have been studied, much of the

textual analysis has been focused around thematic readings of the *X-Men* narratives

as representative of the struggle of disenfranchised groups to achieve civil rights.

The idea of mutation, which is genetically in-built from conception and which marks

out mutants as different from 'normal' human beings, thereby exposing them to

prejudice and discrimination, functions as an effective analogy for the experience of

belonging to a historically marginalised group – Fawaz (2011) for example identifies

the X-Men as representing, among other things, women as a social group.

Understandably, perhaps the most dominant focus of analysis has been that of race

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[41] The franchise has continued beyond 2013 (which marks the temporal boundary of this dissertation). Subsequent releases have been *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014), *X-Men: Apocalypse* (2016) and the forthcoming *X-Men: Dark Phoenix* (2018) and *New Mutants* (2018), all of which continue with the characters and cast established in the prequel *X-Men: First Class*. The original trilogy's ongoing narrative was seemingly concluded in the final Wolverine film *Logan* (2017).

Film (year of release)	Director/writer(s)	Adapted from	Budget estimate (in US$m)	Worldwide box office takings (in US$)	Position relative to other films in its year of release in terms of worldwide box office earnings
X-Men (2000)	Bryan Singer/David Hayter	Contains elements from *X-Men* #1 and *X-Men* #4 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby (1963b and 1964c), *Giant Size X-Men* # 1 by Len Wein and Dave Cockrum (1975) and *The Uncanny X-Men* #141 by Chris Claremont and John Byrne (1980).	75	296,339,527	9th
X2 (2003)	Bryan Singer/Michael Dougherty, Dan Harris and David Hayter	Contains elements from *God Loves, Man Kills* by Chris Claremont and Brent Anderson (2003; originally published 1982)	117.5	407,711,549	9th
X-Men: The Last Stand (2006)	Brett Ratner/Simon Kinberg and Zak Penn	Contains elements from *The Uncanny X-Men* # 134-8 by Chris Claremont and John Byrne (1979a, b, c, d and e) and *Astonishing X-Men Volume 1: Gifted* by Joss Whedon and John Cassaday (2004).	210	459,997,093	7th

X-Men Origins: Wolverine (2009)	Gavin Hood/David Benioff and Skip Woods	Contains elements from *Weapon X* by Barry Windsor Smith (2009; originally published 1991) and *God Loves, Man Kills*.	150	373,062,864	15th
X-Men: First Class (2011)	Matthew Vaughn/Ashley Miller, Zack Stentz, Jane Goldman and Matthew Vaughn	Original storyline developed by Bryan Singer based on the first trilogy	160	353,624,124	18th
The Wolverine (2013)	James Mangold/Mark Bomback and Scott Frank	Contains elements of *Wolverine* # 1-4 by Chris Claremont and Frank Miller (1982a, b, c and d).	117.5	416,101,542	15th

Figure 6.1 – Film adaptations featuring the X-Men, 2000-13

with Trushell (2004) noting that the opposing approaches to mutant rights represented by Professor X (pacifism and integration) and Magneto (violence and domination) parallel the approaches of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X to black civil rights. Similar readings by Baron (2003) and Dowling (2009) interpret the comics as a comment on Jewishness, the former noting that the 'story of the X-Men is overtly tied to the Holocaust: the persecution of mutants; the anti-mutant laws' (Dowling 2009, p 184) and the latter focusing on the Jewish identity of the X-Men's nemesis Magneto, who is revealed in the comic books and the films to be a Holocaust survivor. Subtexts such as these are highly visible in Fox's adaptations of the comic books. Magneto quotes Martin Luther King when announcing that he plans to obtain mutant rights 'by any means necessary' and brightly coloured mutants such as the blue Mystique and Nightcrawler and the red Azazel draw attention to skin colour as a marker of difference. The films also deal explicitly with Magneto's Jewishness: *X-Men*'s prologue depicts a young Erik being separated from his parents at Auschwitz, the stress of which provokes his mutation to surface and the prequel *X-Men: First Class* returns to this subject when Erik as a young adult hunts down the Nazi guards who detained him (Taylor (2011) provides a detailed reading of the Jewish subtext).

Yet a postcolonial reading of the comics is not the only interpretation able to be sustained. Bukatman observes that the *X-Men* comics 'present ethnically, sexually, generationally and genetically diverse companies of…mutants…taking their places within flexible structures of cooperation and tolerance' and that just as 'mutant bodies are explicitly analogized to Jewish bodies…Japanese- or Native- or African-American bodies', they can also represent 'gay bodies' (1994, p 121), a reading

which is especially relevant in a contemporary context. Mutations, like adult sexualities, manifest at puberty and, in line with informed scientific thinking regarding homosexuality, are depicted as innate, natural parts of the individual from birth, allowing the texts to implicitly engage with sexuality as a key theme also. In this light, the figures of Professor X and Magneto represent the differing 'gay/queer' (Newman 2000, p 28) approaches of the gay rights movement (quiet integration versus an explicitly political visibility). Indeed, the *X-Men* film franchise certainly justifies a sexuality-based reading, with Rogue's energy-sapping powers appearing during her first kiss (*X-Men*), characters such as Iceman and Angel being rejected by their parents for their mutations (*X2*, *X-Men: The Last Stand*), a discussion between the aforementioned blue-skinned mutants Mystique and Nightcrawler echoing notions of gay people being able to 'pass' as heterosexual in society (Nightcrawler asks the shapeshifter Mystique why she does not alter her appearance to look like a normal human, to which she replies 'Because we shouldn't have to'; *X2*) and the development of a cure for mutation which parallels the 'cure' for homosexuality offered by some extreme religious groups (*X-Men: The Last Stand*).

Over the decades since they were first published, the *X-Men* stories have therefore demonstrated that they constitute some of the best examples of a rare breed of narrative which manages to combine the action and fantasy elements required of a popular comic book in the superhero genre with analogous motifs and thematic subtexts that have sustained academic interrogation. It is these very qualities which are arguably central parts of their cinematic adaptations' success.

Adaptation Analysis

There are two adaptation changes analysed in this *X-Men* case study: the changes made to the comics in terms of the characters that have been selected to appear in the screen versions and the changes made to the comics in terms of the content and structure of the films' storylines. Both of these adaptation changes are analysed in order to discover how the changes made reflect commercial and artistic logic. The first adaptation change examines the characters that have been chosen for the adaptation from the comics and examines their storylines. The discussion notes that some of these characters, such as Wolverine and Jean Grey, have well known storylines in the comics which are hinted at, yet not fully developed in the early films in the *X-Men* series. The analysis argues that this decision reflects a dominant artistic logic. The second adaptation change focuses on the way in which the first film has reduced the action content of the comics and restructured the storyline to have fewer scenes of spectacle. After examining the consequences of this change for the films as a commercial product and as an artistic product, it goes on to examine further evidence which suggests this change is reflective of dominant commercial logic. The case study also discusses the significance of *X-Men* being one of the first of the current wave of superhero adaptations and examines some of the ways that the artistic consequences of the second adaptation change in *X-Men* influenced the development of the genre as a whole.

Adaptation change 1: Selection of *X-Men* comic book characters appearing in the film

As figure 6.1 reveals, the screenplay of the first X-Men film is a fusion of elements from the comic's history with an original story. The core ideas which have been lifted directly from the first run of issues of the comic are the notion of Xavier teaching and training a group of mutants at a school (a school which is already established at the start of both the film and the comic) who are pitted against Magneto, a mutant who wishes to subjugate humanity. In both the film and Issue One, a new member joins the X-Men and the narrative climaxes in a confrontation between the X-Men and Magneto. Yet there are significant changes to these early issues of the comic in the film version. Chief among these is the variation in the members of both Xavier's and Magneto's teams. In the comic, it is Jean Grey who joins the X-Men whereas the film follows Wolverine and Rogue as two new mutants who arrive at the mansion. Far from being a literal translation of the first issue, the film makes some major changes to the team of mutants, combining characters from the first run of the comic (1963-9) such as Cyclops, the Professor, Jean Grey, Magneto and Toad with a number of characters who were not created until much later in the comic's history (the second run of *X-Men* dated from 1975 which resurrected the series) such as Wolverine, Rogue, Storm, Mystique, Sabretooth and Senator Kelly.

This adaptation choice reflects a 'cherry picking' mentality to the source material, with the film's writers populating the superhero team with some of the most

popular and iconic characters from the comic's four decades of issues[42]. Such an approach to the adaptation process can be interpreted both commercially and artistically. In a commercial sense, the decision to incorporate the most well-known and high profile characters from the comic's history appeals to both the core of devoted comic book fans and, to a lesser extent, to a wider audience of filmgoers who may not be comic book readers but might possibly recognise some of the more culturally visible characters such as Wolverine or Professor X in the marketing for the film. Yet, the fact that the characters who have been selected for the film's line-up are of central importance to the comics mythology is also because they have been involved in some of the most important and dramatic storylines in the comic's history. Therefore, the choice to include Jean Grey in the first film is also an indication of the studio's commitment to develop her Dark Phoenix storyline (which comes to fruition in the third film wherein she is destroyed by her own power), just as the inclusion of Wolverine and Magneto, with their dark origins which are also explored over the course of the three films, lends dramatic weight to the adaptation.

The incorporation of characters such as Jean Grey and Wolverine and the fact that they are part of a deliberate narrative strategy which results in their comic book storylines not being explored fully in the first film but rather over the course of the trilogy as a whole, is reflective of an artistic, narrative logic rather than a commercial one. The foreshadowing of their narrative arcs and character

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[42] Although definitive empirical data on the popularity of specific characters with comic readers is unavailable, it is worth noting that characters such as Storm, Wolverine and Cyclops have retained their place at the centre of the *X-Men* comic book canon over successive decades. Out of a list on Marvel's website of characters deemed to be the most important in *X-Men* mythology (Morse 2008), five of the top six (Wolverine, Professor X, Cyclops, Storm and Jean Grey) appear in the first film and the sixth, Nightcrawler, makes his debut in the second. Six of the first film's characters appear on the comics website IGN.com's top ten list of the most important X-Men – based on 'their place in *X-Men* lore' – and the entire top ten feature in the film trilogy as a whole (Goldstein and George 2006). Additionally, Wolverine's importance was demonstrated by his number four position in the geek culture website IGN's top one hundred comic book heroes of all time, based on, among other factors, 'cultural impact…[and] social relevance' (IGN.com 2013).

development in the trilogy supports this assertion. Jean Grey, for example, is presented in the first film as a competent young doctor who is attempting to harness and control her mutant powers, telekinesis and telepathy. When Wolverine asks her if she is as powerful as the Professor, she replies that she is 'nowhere near that powerful, but he's teaching me to develop it'. Yet subtle nods are made to the comic book version of Jean in that her outfits are an identical shade of red to the comic book crimson of her destructive alter ego Dark Phoenix. This foreshadowing continues in *X2* wherein Jean's powers grow disproportionately, which clearly discomforts her, her eyes briefly flashing the same shade of red every time she uses her telekinesis. In the film's coda after Jean has drowned, sacrificing herself to save her friends, the faint outline of a phoenix is seen on the surface of the lake where she has died – the lake from which she will be resurrected in *X-Men: The Last Stand* as Dark Phoenix. Similarly, Wolverine's origin as a test subject for William Stryker's secret experiments is hinted at in the first film through flashbacks and in Cyclops's question when he reviews Wolverine's X-ray photographs: 'Who did this to him?'. The audience is, however, made to wait until *X2* for the answer to this question, when Stryker (Brian Cox) is placed at the forefront of the narrative as the antagonist.

The decision to choose characters that have overarching narratives which are only foreshadowed in the first *X-Men* film is ultimately symptomatic of artistic logic, as opposed to commercial. While the potential for franchise development is certainly one of the commercial criteria of a superhero film, the strategy of teasing future plot developments in potential sequels is not representative of commercial logic. The deciding factor here lies in the potentiality of those sequels. If, as rarely happens, an entire trilogy has been greenlit in advance (Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* or *The Hobbit* for example), reference to future storylines is both artistically and

commercially logical in that the filmmakers can weave future storylines into films which the audience knows will be addressed in sequels. These allusions, in turn, may function as cliffhangers which are both a narrative strategy, because they build a more complex and lengthy story, and also a commercial strategy because audiences will hopefully be curious enough to return for the sequels. When these sequels are only *potential* however, the strategy of teasing future storylines reflects artistic logic. This is because for the *X-Men* franchise, and for nearly all other major franchises, each of the sequels was greenlit only after the previous instalment had proven successful at the box office (Brown 2003; Murray 2004). Given this, it is not possible to argue that the foreshadowing of Wolverine and Jean Grey's storylines in *X-Men* and *X2* is a commercial strategy to guarantee a sequel because an audience's demand to see a teased storyline resolved in a future film is not in itself sufficient for a studio to greenlight[43] a sequel, it is the box office revenue which ultimately decides.

Further evidence for this assertion comes in the form of those comic book films which tease future storylines based on the comics' mythology but were not successful enough to guarantee sequels such as *Green Lantern* (2011), in which the hero's mentor, Sinestro, becomes a villain in a post-credit sequence and *The Incredible Hulk*, at the end of which one of the minor characters develops superpowers (Samuel Sterns, who is destined in comic lore to become the villain The Leader). Working on the assumption that audiences would not know the specific content of the film before watching it, it is difficult to argue that the inclusion of hints towards a deferred comic book storyline could be a factor in attracting them to the extent that enough revenue could be earned to guarantee a sequel – it is the

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[43] A studio 'greenlights' a screenplay when it approves the film for production.

storyline and content of the current film which must be perceived by audiences to be sufficiently interesting if a sequel is to be made. In this sense, the foreshadowing of certain storylines which only come to fruition in later films manifests as the very opposite of commercial logic. Whilst incorporating references to Wolverine's past and Jean's burgeoning powers certainly works according to narrative logic in that it creates mystery and allows multiple plot strands and characters to develop over the course of the trilogy, it is a decidedly non-commercial approach to adaptation as, considered on a film-by-film basis (which is how the films were greenlit by the studios), it at best creates plotlines for future sequels – which are by no means guaranteed – and at worst risks alienating or frustrating an audience by leaving plot strands unresolved and teasing developments which suggest that a degree of comic book knowledge is required. In extreme cases, such a consequence could inhibit the film from fulfilling one of its key commercial functions – the need to be seen by as wide an audience as possible.

Certainly, there may be sections of the audience who respond well to unresolved storylines within a film and for whom foreshadowing ensures that they will pay to see a potential sequel, but even in these cases *X-Men*'s foreshadowing does not reflect commercial logic because those audience members will have already paid to see the film in order to discover that it contains unresolved storylines; no film, after all, uses the promise of unresolved storylines as part of its promotional activity to attract audiences. These teases, therefore, do not aid the film in performing any of its commercial functions as it is revenue generated by the current film and not speculative interest in future instalments that ultimately guarantees a sequel. The choice of characters and their storylines in *X-Men* is therefore at least in part reflective of artistic logic.

Adaptation change 2: Comparison of content and structure in the *X-Men* comics and films

A noticeable difference between the *X-Men* comics and films is their relative action content. It is, of course, necessary to avoid being dogmatic in the comparison of comics and film here in the sense that it is understood that the structure of a twenty-four page comic can never literally be replicated onscreen due to the natures of the mediums involved (How can a comic with roughly one hundred static panels be represented with complete accuracy by a film which is comprised of thousands of shots?), considerations of length (the brief narrative of a twenty-four page comic can never be stretched to fit a one hundred minute running time) and structure (one issue of a comic might perhaps depict just one fight between superheroes but this would be underwhelming in an action film with a large budget). Even making allowance for these considerations however, it becomes quite clear that the *X-Men* films, and in particular the first, are radically different in their content from many of the comics which they are adapted from. At its broadest level this difference manifests in their varying structures.

Each of the comics from *X-Men*'s initial run follows an almost identical formula in which the team of heroes are sent by Professor X to fight a threat which they battle, and invariably defeat, using their powers. The nature of this threat may alter from issue to issue (Magneto and his mutants, the villainous Blob) but the structure and content – a fight between the X-Men and 'a villain-of-the-week' – remains unchanged, at least until the narratives evolved to some degree in successive decades. Whilst it is clear that the film does in fact repeat this basic narrative structure – Magneto and his team pose a threat to humanity which Professor X and

the X-Men ultimately resolve through a climactic physical confrontation – it is also inevitable that a full length feature film will never exactly mimic the structure of any single comic book issue (a mainstream blockbuster such as *X-Men* clearly requires a more elaborate plot and opportunities for spectacle than the comic book's formulaic storyline of the heroes training and then being called to a fight). Yet it is significant that, considering it is an adaptation of the comics, the film is less concerned with representing the amount of action in its source material and instead is defined more by character-driven scenes of dialogue.

A breakdown of the film's content[44] reveals that during its one hundred and five minutes, there are only four action sequences (defined here as sections of the film which have minimal dialogue and consist of extended physical acts such as fighting or running and/or scenes which detail vehicular action and/or explosions) that together form only approximately 20 minutes (19%) of running time. In terms of overall percentage, this can be compared to a panel-by-panel breakdown of the first five issues of the *X-Men* comic book (Lee and Kirby 1963b and c; 1964b, c and d) and the first issue of the relaunched *Giant Size X-Men* (Wein and Cockrum 1975) which are used as a comparison because they introduce many of the elements and characters seen in the first film[45]. For these six comics, the mean amount of panels per issue that depict action as a percentage of total panels is approximately 47%. The first *X-Men* film is not a literal adaptation of these six issues but the comparison serves to highlight the fact that the film version places much less emphasis on action in its narrative than its source material does.

In an artistic context, the decision to reduce the action content of the comic

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[44] See Appendix III
[45] See Appendix IV

books and emphasise instead the characters and themes of the source material by

increasing the proportion of dialogue-based scenes is understandable. As this case

study initially argued, the *X-Men* comics are one of the strongest examples of a

superhero narrative that can work effectively as an analogy for real historical and

social events. Credence is lent to the notion that Fox was attempting to reinvent the

**Figure 6.2 – Magneto fights Angel in an example of an action panel from *X-Men* #1
(Lee and Kirby 1963b, p 21).**

superhero film with *X-Men* by its choice of director, Bryan Singer. Significantly,

Singer had no experience of directing action blockbusters, but had made intelligent

thrillers and dramas such as *The Usual Suspects* (1995) and *Apt Pupil* (1998). By

hiring a filmmaker who had directed relatively low budget adult-oriented, character-

led ensembles which required few visual effects and almost no action sequences to

tell their narratives, Fox clearly signalled a desire to move the adaptation of the

comic away from a spectacle-driven action film and instead toward more of a

cerebral science-fiction drama with minimal elements of action. The fact that Singer was asked twice to direct the film before finally deciding that the project interested him due to 'the richness of the characters' and because the 'ongoing metaphor for discrimination and ostracism [was] something he could easily relate to' (Jensen 2000), indicates how much the studio wanted him. In addition, Singer's admission that he highlighted the material's analogous exploration of serious themes such as prejudice against homosexuality and race in response to his own biographical stance (Applebaum 2003) is indicative of his desire to move the adaptation away from the action genre and make it more of a thematic science fiction drama.

Yet artistic factors are only one form of contextualisation. If the reduced action content in the film is considered from a different perspective, one which takes into consideration the size of *X-Men*'s budget, an argument can be made for the role of commercial factors in the decision to limit the amount of action sequences in the film. To do so, the state of the superhero film genre at the time of *X-Men*'s release needs to be taken into account. During the period in which the film was being greenlit and made, the genre was almost non-existent, with the financial disappointment of the fourth film in Warner Bros.' Batman franchise, *Batman and Robin* (1997), suggesting that audience demand for the superhero narrative was waning (*Batman and Robin*'s worldwide box office of $238m compared unfavourably to the first and the third film's $411m and $336m respectively). It is therefore unsurprising that the estimated budget Fox allocated for its adaptation of *X-Men* was relatively low at $75m. Compared to $89.1m, which was the average estimated budget for the nine other films that, alongside *X-Men*, made up 2000's top ten highest earning films at the US box office, *X-Men*'s budget is significantly smaller. Three of these nine films (*Meet the Parents, What Women Want* and *Scary Movie*) can be discounted due to the fact

that they are comedies that required less visual effects and action sequences and therefore have lower budgets. Using as a comparison only the budgets of those films in the top ten which are broadly similar to *X-Men* in content and style – major action releases such as *Mission: Impossible II* (budget $122.5m) and the effects-driven shipwreck drama *The Perfect Storm* ($130m), the fantasy picture book adaptation *How The Grinch Stole Christmas* ($123m) and the supernatural horror *What Lies Beneath* ($95m) – *X-Men*'s budget is revealed to be extremely small for a major summer release by a mainstream studio.

Furthermore, two other types of budgetary comparison illustrate how constrained *X-Men*'s budget was for a superhero comic book adaptation. Firstly, comparing *X-Men* with its sequels reveals that its budget was relatively small, the two later films in the franchise, *X2* and *X-Men: The Last Stand*, having budgets of $117.5m and $210m respectively. Even after adjusting *X-Men*'s budget for inflation, it is still approximately $30m lower than the first sequel and $122m lower than the second sequel[46]. Additionally, an inflation adjusted budgetary comparison with two more recent superhero films, Marvel's *Iron Man 3* ($200m) and Warner Bros.' *Man of Steel* ($225m), which are both broadly comparable to *X-Men* in terms of their narrative requirement for action sequences, again shows *X-Men*'s budget to be substantially smaller, constituting approximately 44% of *Iron Man 3*'s budget and 39% of *Man of Steel*'s.

Inevitably, both the small budget of *X-Men* and the vastly increased budgets of later superhero adaptations are reflections of the difference in risk between making a film in a genre which was defunct in 2000 and dominant in 2013. However,

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[46] Inflation adjusted calculation carried out on *US Inflation Calculator* website.

reflections of the popularity of the genre aside, *X-Men*'s budget restrictions can be argued to have had a significant effect on the narrative content of the finished film. In the same way that Singer's direction and artistic input made the film more of a character-based thematic drama than an action spectacle, Fox's limited budget can also be an explanation for the relative lack of large-scale action sequences ('large-scale' action sequences are here defined as scenes involving vehicles or special effects such as explosions – the distinction is made because small scale action sequences such as fights or chases between individuals would not, aside from stunt work costs, necessarily be significantly more expensive to film than dialogue scenes). In the same way, the smaller budget provides a reason why *X-Men* is not overly reliant on both special and visual effects[47] to tell its story. In terms of the cost of effects, precise budget breakdowns are closely guarded by the film industry but a number of assumptions can be made which are supported by industry research. Hockley, for example, notes that effects 'threaten to subvert the economic rationalism of moviemaking' and that 'as a percentage of the total film budget…have a disproportionate significance' (2000, p 168). The budget breakdown for *Spider-Man 2* (2004) for example, as shown in figure 6.3, reveals the extent to which effects dominate production costs. While each film's budget is of course unique, *Spider-Man 2* is an appropriate comparison for *X-Men* in terms of genre because it is a mainstream summer release, is adapted from a superhero comic book and requires a significant amount of effects (particularly visual) to realise the story onscreen.

Industry data also shows that there is a predictably positive correlation between the number of visual effects shots and their cost, as well as between the

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[47] The distinction is made here between special effects (physical effects such as explosions) and visual effects (computer generated imagery).

quality of those effects and their cost. According to James (2006), when filmmakers are considering adding visual effects into a film or television programme, they need to take account of factors which increase cost such as the complexity of the shot, the degree of movement of the camera and whether or not the film is filmed in high definition (as nearly all mainstream films are now). Additionally, the high standard of,
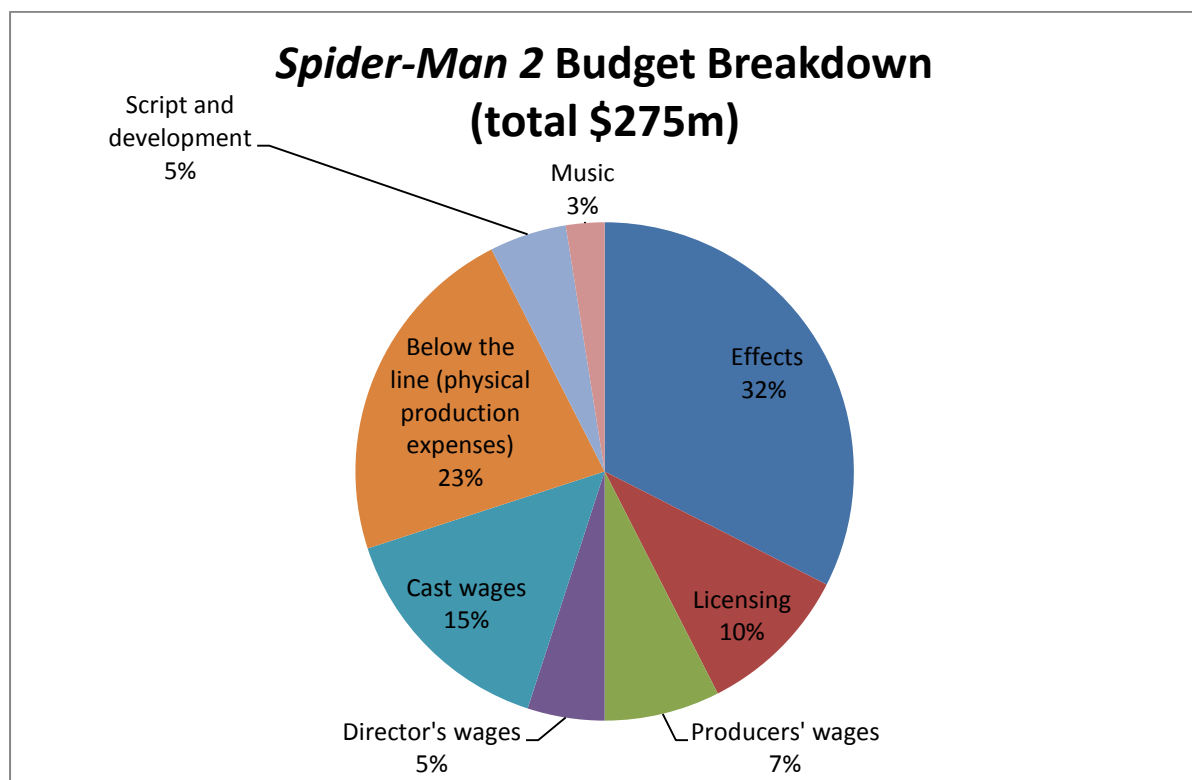
**Figure 6.3 – Budget breakdown for _Spider-Man 2_ based on Thomas (2004)**

and reliance on, visual effects for blockbuster releases means that audience expectations require studios to invest a large proportion of a film's budget in visual effects for summer releases such as superhero films particularly, as this is the time of year most obviously associated with spectacle-driven, visual effects-heavy films

for which 'movie-literate audiences don't make allowances for lower…budgets and won't be satisfied with [visual effects] shots that aren't keeping up with the times' (Televisual 2006, p 89). If the amount and complexity of visual effects are proportional to budget, it is therefore reasonable to assume that visual effects sequences will have been limited as a result of *X-Men*'s budget.

Situated in this context, *X-Men*'s use of effects is significant in that far from limiting the artistic content of the film in terms of style and tone, these budget restrictions actually result in the adaptation having more dramatic substance than its source material and being less reliant on action, combat and spectacle. In a drawn medium such as comics, narrative content is not limited by budget; to draw a vast battle scene costs no more than it does to draw a similar size panel depicting two people talking. This of course is not the case with film, for which extensive effects and action sequences cost significantly more than dialogue-driven scenes and therefore have to be employed more sparingly as part of a screenplay. Consequently, much of the visual effects work in *X-Men* is intimate and confined to small moments as opposed to large-scale sequences. Aside from the climax, which sees the thwarting of Magneto's plan to mutate world leaders on Ellis Island and a short but destructive fight in a train station, *X-Men*'s visual effects are restricted to subtle touches which depict the mutants' powers. Accordingly, the veins on a young teenager's face become visible as Rogue unwittingly drains his power, characters' eyes change shape and colour to denote when the shapeshifter Mystique has taken on their likeness and a small scar on Wolverine's forehead disappears as his healing factor reveals itself. In a response to budget constraints which is an exemplar of

Moeran's theory of creativity[48], *X-Men*'s minimal use of visual effects is an interesting consequence of the interaction between artistry and commerce. In Singer's film, effects are frequently employed to illustrate character and explore the relationship between superpowers and the ways in which they are used (Magneto's imperious control of metal, for example, which highlights his cruelty, or the close-up shot of Wolverine's adamantium claws emerging slowly from his skin in readiness for a fight, suggesting the character's violent past and constant wariness) rather than being used for scenes of large-scale spectacle.

It is therefore possible to identify two consequences of *X-Men*'s reduced use of action sequences and effects compared to its source material. This adaptation change reflects artistic logic in the sense that the film's more character-based, thematic approach strengthens the film as an artistic product through an increased focus on narrative, theme, symbolism and the establishment of a more serious tone. Whilst it is subjective to conclude whether or not these elements make the film better, it is certainly unarguable that these artistic elements of the film are given more screen time and attention as a result. From another perspective, the lack of expensive large-scale action sequences and extensive visual effects allows the film to fulfil its commercial function of being made for the lowest cost possible. The change is therefore symptomatic of both commercial and artistic logic.

As this analytical method is one which avoids speculation over motive for the adaptation changes, choosing instead to examine the commercial and artistic consequences of each change, this would be as far as this particular analysis could be taken yet there is further evidence in this case which suggests that the film

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[48] As cited in Chapter Two

contains less action and effects because of budget capping – that the primary factors were commercial. An *Entertainment Weekly* article written at the time of the film's release which included official input from the cast and crew claims that 'Fox…[was] non-negotiable' on its budget, that the production was almost shut down because of spiralling costs and that the studio 'wouldn't give the green light' to a draft of the screenplay budgeted at $80 million 'until [Singer and the writers] cut $5 million out of it'. In a rare insight, the article also lists several elements of *X-Men* mythology that were cut from the original adaptation: the blue furry mutant Beast who is a key character in the comic books, a fire manipulating villain called Pyro and an action sequence set in the X-Men's training simulator, the Danger Room. The article includes a comment from Tom Rothman, then president of Fox Studios, who claims that these elements 'were excised for storytelling purposes only' (Jensen 2000). This somewhat contradicts an answer given by Singer in an interview when asked which characters he would have liked to include in the first film: 'Gambit [another mutant] and Beast are two characters that I missed terribly. Beast was in the script for a while but then when you have Mystique that's nine hours make-up and all of these challenges, you have to choose your battles' (cited in JoBlo 2000). Singer's implication that Beast was cut due to limited resources (the cost of make-up design and the restrictions that the process would place on the shooting schedule presumably), suggests budget did indeed affect content in significant areas of the production. Whilst it should not necessarily be assumed that Rothman is being disingenuous, it is at the same time reasonable to argue that he is simplifying the reasons in his retelling and presenting an artistic motivation for the excisions in order to conceal the economic machinery behind such a decision, possibly because (as the above discussion of visual effects quality suggests) audiences – and especially

fans of the comic book – may be unsympathetic towards a studio interfering with a film's content for financial reasons. Whilst it is fruitless to attempt to reveal the exact truth behind the decision (and Rothman and Singer's different version of events are as good an illustration as any of the reasons why this study is wary of citing motive as explanations for adaptation changes) the fact that all three of the elements excised from the first *X-Men* film were later incorporated into the other films in the franchise[49], both of which had substantially larger budgets, suggests that Rothman may not be revealing all of the factors behind the decision.

Further analysis of the sequels to *X-Men* lends weight to the argument that the first film was limited in its use of effects and action sequences for financial reasons. Mike Fink, visual effects supervisor for the *X-Men* films, states that there are approximately 520 visual effects shots in *X-Men* as opposed to 820 in *X2* (Henault et al 2003), which, allowing for the different running times of the two films means an average of 4.8 effects shots per minute in *X-Men* in comparison to 6.4 per minute in *X2* (a 33% increase). Similarly, analysis of the second and third films in terms of their large-scale action sequence content (as listed in Appendix III) shows that *X2*'s five action sequences total approximately 39 minutes and form 30% of its running time and *X-Men: The Last Stand*'s nine action sequences total 32 minutes (32%) of its running time. Here, the correlations show that as budget increases, the amount of visual effects and action sequences also increase.

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[49] Pyro is a major character in *X2* while Beast is a central part of *X-Men: The Last Stand*, which also features an effects-heavy action sequence set in the Danger Room.

Implications of *X-Men*'s adaptation changes for the genre

As *X-Men* was at the forefront of the current superhero adaptation renaissance, it is important to consider the implications of the second adaptation change in the context of the genre as a whole. It is especially appropriate to do so at the conclusion of this first case study because *X-Men* has since become a highly influential model for other superhero adaptations. Placed in the historical context of its 2000 release, *X-Men* can be identified as a decisive break from the kind of superhero films which had immediately preceded it. At the time, the last high profile superhero comic book adaptation had been the aforementioned *Batman and Robin*[50]. Reviews were critical of the film's camp, child-friendly tone with one noting that 'the dispatching of various comic-book meanies is the least satisfying part of the deal, no matter how many disco scenes…are thrown onto the screen' (Schwarzbaum 2007) and another concluding that the 'Gothic pathos' of *Batman* and *Batman Returns* had been replaced by a jokey infantilised tone (Jeffries 2013).

The genre needed a new approach and it was *X-Men* which provided it. Whereas *Batman and Robin* had been aimed at a younger demographic with its colourful (both literally and figuratively) and comedic content and its deliberate insistence on setting its events in a fantastical world which was far removed from reality, *X-Men* eschewed the superficial artifice and childish associations of comic book literature. The film presented itself as a serious and adult treatment of its source material with a dark realism that manifested not only in its muted colour palette but also in its aforementioned themes and historical and social analogies.

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[50] New Line's film of the Marvel vampire comic *Blade* had also been released in 1998 but this cannot accurately be described as the first of the new model of superhero adaptations primarily because it is an adult horror – certified 18 in the UK – whose eponymous hero is a rather obscure Marvel character, meaning that the film was not identified or marketed as a superhero adaptation.

Nowhere is this intent more dramatically signalled than in the opening sequence which is set in a rain-sodden Auschwitz during World War II and details the harrowing separation of the Jewish Erik (later to be Magneto) from his parents. It is this specific moment which singlehandedly separates *X-Men* from those superhero narratives which had gone before by explicitly rooting the comic book adaptation in a real historical context and allowing it to engage with the issues and concerns of the contemporary world. As Lauren Shuler-Donner, the film's producer, describes it: 'The opening…really was a declaration of intent…It said to the audience, "This is a serious film, grounded in the realistic and the historic"' (cited in Boucher 2010). This intent is reflected in the film's choice of settings which rejects fictional locales such as *Superman*'s Metropolis or *Batman*'s Gotham City and instead employs a realist geography, using locations such as Mississippi, the US Congress and Ellis Island which are suffused with a social and historical significance that inevitably adds a layer of geopolitical subtext to any reading of the film. Singer's *X-Men* considers what would happen if there were people with strange powers in the world, how those powers would be exploited or abused and, more importantly, shows that these powers have the potential to alienate those who possess them and make them the victims of discrimination and prejudice. When *X-Men* proved to be a financial success, its utterly serious, real-world approach to the fantasy of the superhero offered a replicable model to studios for how to adapt comic book material that would hopefully avoid the commercial disappointment of some of the previous films. As Salisbury (2000) puts it: 'suddenly the words "comic book movie", a term hitherto guaranteed to strike dread into executives' hearts, had a far happier, far more profitable connotation'.

As discussed in this case study, the combination of economic elements (such

as *X-Men*'s budget being closer to that of a mainstream thriller or drama), artistic

elements (the hiring of a less-mainstream director) alongside the film's reception at

the box office meant that *X-Men* became a successful example of the fusion

between artistry and commerce. Here was a mainstream film made for a relatively

small amount of money which approached its source material in a way that was

artistically and commercially viable. Consequently, many of the elements which were

deemed to be integral to *X-Men*'s success formed the template for future superhero

adaptations, some of which will recur in the other case studies. One of the most

frequently replicated elements has proven to be choice of director. The hiring of

Singer ensured a different take on the superhero film and he became the first in a

relatively long line of less mainstream directors working on superhero films including

Ang Lee (*Hulk*) , Kenneth Branagh (*Thor*), Guillermo Del Toro (*Hellboy*), Christopher

Nolan (*The Dark Knight* trilogy) and Gavin Hood (*X-Men Origins: Wolverine*). As a

consequence, a number of superhero films from the last fourteen years have

avoided becoming bland, formulaic products and can instead be at least partly

identified as the work of auteurs operating in the mainstream (although the degree to

which directors have freedom with such large-scale productions is something which

will also be explored in later case studies).

Additionally, the twin factors of a limited budget and a director whose previous

films were intense dramas that utilised highly skilled actors such as Kevin Spacey

and Benicio Del Toro led to *X-Men*'s decision to resist casting major stars and

instead rely on actors such as Ian McKellen and Patrick Stewart who were less

established in cinematic terms but highly respected nonetheless and newcomers

such as Hugh Jackman who plays the lead, Wolverine. This approach to casting was

significant in two ways. Firstly, by attracting critically lauded theatre performers to

parts which were complex and had depth, much of the prejudice and stigma attached to comic book adaptations was dissipated, demonstrating that such films could potentially achieve the rare feat of being commercially successful but also artistically credible. This inevitably encouraged actors with distinguished careers to appear in similar projects (Willem Dafoe in *Spider-Man*, Gwyneth Paltrow in *Iron Man* and Anthony Hopkins in *Thor*, for example). But secondly, the fact that audiences would accept well known superheroes such as Wolverine, Cyclops and Jean Grey being played by less well-known actors – that it was the character who was the star, not the actor – signalled to studios that blockbuster superhero films could be made without the expense of A-list stars. Accordingly, many of the title roles in recent superhero films have been populated by actors who are established but are not necessarily the highest profile names in terms of box office such as Edward Norton (*The Incredible Hulk*), Eric Bana (*Hulk*), Chris Evans (*Captain America*) and Tobey Maguire (*Spider-Man*). As a result of this strategy, there are very few examples of comic book adaptations which have cast the biggest stars in Hollywood. Of the Forbes list of Hollywood's twenty 'Most Valuable Actors' in 2009[51], only four (George Clooney, Jack Nicholson, Jim Carrey and Russell Crowe) have starred in comic book adaptations. Of these four, only one, Clooney, has actually played a superhero lead (Batman) and, significantly, only one, Crowe, has starred in a superhero film between 2000 and 2013, the period in which the genre has achieved sustained success (*Man of Steel*, in which Crowe only plays a supporting role). While some of the stars in this list may have been prevented from taking on superhero roles for a variety of reasons (for example, the lack of female superheroes excludes most of the

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[51] The list was compiled from a survey of entertainment industry employees who were asked to rank actors based on, among other factors, the 'ability to attract significant financing for a project', whether or not 'the actor can guarantee theatrical distribution' and the extent to which 'his or her presence significantly drives box office performance' (Burman 2009).

women on the list and the age of some of the actors such as Clint Eastwood and Tom Hanks may also be a factor), the lack of representation of these actors in the genre does demonstrate that the superhero adaptation's popularity is not dependent on the casting of the biggest stars. Some productions have even proved that virtual unknowns are able to be cast in the lead roles in superhero adaptations, with relative newcomers such as the aforementioned Jackman, Chris Hemsworth (*Thor*) and Andrew Garfield (*The Amazing Spider-Man*) demonstrating that their casting has not affected revenue.

In terms of theme and tone, *X-Men*'s legacy is also identifiable in successive films within the genre. The focus on the heavy burden of heroism and the alienating effects of superpowers which prove to be problematic, double-edged swords are the tropes that separate twenty-first century superhero films from the vast majority of those that came before them. Modern adaptations place very human problems such as Peter Parker's bullying and heartbreak and Bruce Wayne's damaged psyche firmly at the forefront of their narratives. Following on from the model provided by *X-Men*, the contemporary superhero film tempers the awe and wonder of possessing incredible abilities with a more realist consideration of how these powers are markers of difference and causes of discrimination and marginalisation. *Man of Steel* updates the Superman narrative with an opening sequence in which Superman's parents fear that his powers will render him an outcast on Earth, a fear which is proved partly true when Clark Kent (Henry Cavill) spends his early adult years as an anonymous drifter, quietly trying to balance his desire to save people with his desperation to remain undiscovered. Similarly, Hellboy is hidden away from a populace who are seemingly terrified of him and Nolan's Batman flees from Gotham at the end of *The Dark Knight*. Additionally, the previously clearly demarcated lines between villains

and heroes are blurred. Replicating the way in which the viewer is encouraged to sympathise with Magneto's horrific origin story, the conclusion to both the *Iron Man* and *Dark Knight* trilogies depict the title characters facing foes who are complex and reveal morally ambiguous motivations, foes whose existence the heroes themselves are at least partly responsible for. Similarly, the climax to *The Avengers* questions the integrity of a US government that authorises a nuclear missile strike on New York while the superhero team are selflessly battling an alien threat.

Conclusion: Implications of the *X-Men* case study

The adaptation changes explored in this case study – the choice of characters and their storylines and the reduced action content – have been shown to have both artistic and commercial implications. The first change, the teasing of future storylines for *potential* sequels is reflective of artistic (narrative) logic and, in terms of this study's central proposition, supports the argument that artistic considerations do have some degree of effectivity and influence in shaping superhero films. This adaptation change, of course, does not provide a sufficiently strong argument to support the proposition alone, yet it constitutes an important first step towards demonstrating that commerce is not the sole determinant. In doing so, it begins to illustrate Althusser's theoretical reformulation of Marx's more basic model. In fact, the *X-Men* franchise's teasing of sequels (an example of artistic logic shaping the film) which could only be made if the first film made enough money (commercial logic) is a specific and clear demonstration of the theory that artistic considerations have influence but that commerce is the ultimate determinant.

The second change, the differences between the action content and spectacle of the source material and the films, has been shown to be demonstrative of both commercial and artistic logic, although further evidence which cannot be ignored, suggests almost categorically that it is the former which is the definitive logic in this case. This, of course, does not disprove this study's proposition – it simply suggests that some adaptation changes are ultimately demonstrative of commercial logic. What is particularly significant about this adaptation change – especially in relation to the research question that asks how the genre as a whole has been shaped by commerce and art's interactions – is that the commercial logic which dictated that the production costs must be significantly lower consequently helped to shape the content of successive films in the genre. Again, despite the conclusion that this adaptation change is demonstrative of commercial logic, it nevertheless still supports the notion that artistry is effective in shaping films. This is because, although commercial considerations ultimately determine that the film must be made at a reduced cost, they do not determine *how* the film shall do this. It was these specific artistic elements – the story, the increased focus on character and the strengthened thematic content and socio-political subtext – which defined and influenced *how X-Men* was shaped in response to commercial requirements and then led to it becoming the model for a number of subsequent superhero films. Even if it is argued that these artistic elements thereafter became commercial logic because they proved to be popular with audiences and were replicated, it must not be forgotten that they were initially borne from artistic logic to begin with. This adaptation change therefore certainly goes some way towards demonstrating that the superstructural elements do have influence and a degree of agency, something which will be explored further in the subsequent case studies.

Chapter Seven

Case Study Two: *Hulk* and *The Incredible Hulk*

Historical context: Hulk in comics and on screen

Hulk is one of the more recognisable Marvel characters, easily identifiable from his monstrous size, green skin and tattered clothing. The character first appeared in a six part series entitled *The Incredible Hulk* during the company's creative renaissance in the 1960s before the comic was cancelled, leaving the Hulk to intermittently reappear as a guest star in various comics such as *Fantastic Four* and *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Like Iron Man, Hulk appeared in Marvel's superhero team comic *The Avengers* before being given a regular slot in the anthology comic *Tales to Astonish*. Four years later, the publication changed its name to *The Incredible Hulk*, reflecting the growth in popularity of its lead character who has remained in print across a range of titles ever since.

Playing on late twentieth century fears of atomic warfare, the Hulk is the alter ego of Dr Bruce Banner, a military scientist who is caught in a gamma bomb explosion when he rescues a young man who has strayed onto the test range. The gamma radiation has a devastating effect on Banner, transforming him into the monster that is the Hulk (initially only when the sun goes down, but in later issues as

a response to stress). The early comics detail Banner's attempts to cure himself of

his unwanted alter ego whilst still having to utilise the Hulk's power to save the world

from superpowered villains. Later storylines see Banner becoming a fugitive and

fleeing from the military leader General Ross who is determined to destroy the Hulk

and who is also the father of Banner's girlfriend Betty Ross. Functioning as a modern

version of Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, the Hulk's status as a superhero is

somewhat questionable. While his phenomenal strength, near invincibility and ability

to jump miles in a single bound are certainly impressive superpowers, his ferocious

temper, destructive capabilities and the fact that Banner more often than not views

him as an affliction which he must cure himself of all mean that the Hulk is something

of an unpredictable anti-hero in the Marvel universe, a monster who can *usually* be

relied upon to do the right thing[52].

The Hulk, like the X-Men, first appeared onscreen as part of *The Marvel*

Super Heroes (1966) animation series on television. The character is unique among

Marvel creations however in that he eventually graduated to his own live action

television series, *The Incredible Hulk*. The series proved to be hugely popular,

running for five years from 1978 to 1982 although it largely ignored the comic book

mythology, reinventing Banner as a grieving scientist who is forced to go on the run

from a journalist after an accident results in the creation of the Hulk. This was

followed by a return to the comic book-based storylines in two animated series both

titled *The Incredible Hulk*, debuting in 1982 and 1996 and numerous appearances in

individual episodes of cartoons such as *Fantastic Four: World's Greatest Heroes*

(2006) and *Wolverine and the X-Men* (2008).

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[52] It is noteworthy that one of Hulk's early appearances in *The Avengers* (Lee and Kirby 1964a) saw him cast as the enemy of the group and Millar and Hitch's contemporary version, *The Ultimates* (2002), portrays him as an out of control monster who is responsible for the deaths of hundreds of people.

In 2003, following the success of *Spider-Man* and *X-Men*, Universal Pictures released a live action film adaptation entitled *Hulk*, directed by Ang Lee and co-written by his regular collaborator James Schamus. The film retold the origin of Hulk, again created through a gamma explosion, but with an additional element: Banner (Eric Bana)'s DNA was already mutated as a result of inheriting his father David (Nick Nolte)'s artificially altered genes thus allowing him to absorb the radiation and become the Hulk. Accordingly, the film uses the Hulk mythology to explore the relationship not only between Banner and Betty (Jennifer Connelly) but also between Banner and his father and Betty and her father General Ross (Sam Elliott). The film culminates in a confrontation between Hulk and Banner's father, who is able to absorb great amounts of power and convert it into strength (the film's version of the Marvel comic book villain Absorbing Man). The choice of Lee, a celebrated Taiwanese director famed for his small independent dramas and comedy films which typically examine human relationships – *The Wedding Banquet* (1993), *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1994), *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *The Ice Storm* (1997) – and his writing and producing partner Schamus was somewhat surprising based on their past collaborations and Lee's lack of experience with Hollywood blockbusters[53]. Universal's choice seems more logical however when placed in an historical and artistic context: Lee and Schamus's most recent film before *Hulk* was the popular Mandarin martial arts drama *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) which famously combined impressive fight sequences with character-based drama. In addition to this, as the first case study has shown, independent director Singer's success with *X-Men* had demonstrated that comic book material which privileged character and

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[53] Ironically, there is a 2001 episode of *The Simpsons* in which Bart Simpson joins a boy band and films a music video called 'Drop Da Bomb', an action-packed short film featuring fighter jets and explosions. A caption at the start of the video humorously reads 'Directed by Ang Lee', the joke being that at this point the subject material was the complete antithesis of Lee's style. Two years later, *Hulk* would feature an extended action sequence with fighter jets.

theme over action was popular with audiences. Lee and Schamus's mature and

cerebral take on the character proved divisive, with some critics describing it as

'richly mythopoeic and sophisticated' and 'the best Marvel adaptation so far' (White

2003, p 35) and praising its willingness to explore 'some surprisingly dark

psychological corners' (Braund 2003). Others argued that the film was too 'funereal'

in tone for a comic book film (De Semlyen 2008, p 66) and that it was weighed down

by a serious approach, Schwarzbaum writing that 'In this confused comic-book

parable about the cycle of godless destruction unleashed with the atom bomb…the

son's psychological struggles with his mad father are too dully heavy while the

monster's displays of magic destruction are too dully slight' (2003). Unlike the other

films which comprise the case studies in this research, *Hulk* was considered a failure

at the box office, financially speaking. While its take was certainly not disastrous

(approximately $132m domestically and $245m worldwide), considering the film was

based upon a highly recognisable character, it underperformed relative to its cost

($137m budget) and in comparison to the box office takings for preceding superhero

adaptations (*Spider-Man* made $404m domestically and $818m worldwide and *X-

Men* took $157m domestically and $296m worldwide).

In response to *Hulk*'s performance, Marvel and Universal made the somewhat

unexpected announcement that, only five years later, they would be making another

Hulk film, *The Incredible Hulk*. Had this film been a straight sequel, the news would

not have been particularly noteworthy, but the new film occupied a precarious

narrative position, defying categorisation as either a sequel to, or a reboot of, Lee's

film. The recasting of all the roles (Edward Norton, Liv Tyler and William Hurt

replacing Bana, Connelly and Elliott respectively), a new director (Louis Leterrier)

and a new backstory for the Hulk (created as a result of experimentation with the

same super soldier serum that created Captain America) all suggest that the film is a new remodelling of the Hulk story which is intended to overwrite the existing film. However, other elements of the film seemingly indicate that it is actually more of a sequel: the story opens with Banner already as the Hulk on the run in South America, the country he fled to at the end of Lee's film and the creation of the Hulk, something which would normally be an essential part of any first film in a superhero franchise, is relegated to a short montage at the film's opening, clearly hinting that the audience are expected to have existing knowledge of his origin. Even the creators of the film seemed to find it difficult to describe its status precisely, offering opaque and differing views. Marvel Studios' president of production Kevin Feige used a comic book analogy to describe the two films' relationship to one another: 'Walk into a comic book shop and you'll find "one shots", standalone stories that don't exactly exist within the continuity of the characters. I love the idea that that's what Ang Lee's *Hulk* was: a singular vision that explores specific elements of the mythos. But what we're doing now is *really* starting the Marvel Hulk franchise' (cited in DeSemelyn 2008, p 66). Additionally, producer Gale Ann Hurd claimed that she considered it a 're-quel' because 'we couldn't quite figure out how to term this…It's kind of a reboot and it's kind of a sequel' (cited in Kemp 2008).

Significantly, the narrative and backstory were altered to allow the new film to better fit the established Marvel Cinematic Universe – the aforementioned super serum linking it to the then forthcoming *Captain America* adaptation and the appearance of Tony Stark (Robert Downey, Jr.) at the end of the film linking it to *Iron Man*. Whereas Lee's version had existed separately from other superhero films narratively speaking, Marvel seized the opportunity to weave Banner's new story into its cinematic universe so that there was an option for Hulk to join *The Avengers*. As

the *Iron Man* case study will show, Marvel's phased plan for several crossovers

provides an explanatory context for the initially bizarre decision to reboot *Hulk* after

only five years[54].

After *The Incredible Hulk* barely improved upon its predecessor's box office

takings (approximately $135m domestically and $263m worldwide), Marvel decided

that Hulk would be best used as part of the superhero ensemble *The Avengers* and

the part of Banner was recast with Mark Ruffalo becoming the third actor to play him

in as many films[55]. The character was somewhat reinvented in this film, with

Ruffalo's performance emphasising Banner's more heroic qualities as a doctor whilst

detailing the character's reintegration into society by becoming involved with the

other members of the Avengers. The screenplay explores Banner's acceptance of

the Hulk's power and capacity for good by depicting the latter in a more humorous

manner than he had been portrayed in the other adaptations and having him fight the

villains alongside the rest of the team at the end of the film. Generally speaking, *The*

Avengers's take on the character appeared to prove popular with audiences with one

writer noting that '[he] has been the biggest talking point' of the film and that the

more humorous and active presentation of the character improved upon Lee's 'grim

study of existentialism' and Leterrier's lack of 'inventiveness or conviction'. In short,

Hulk seemed to work in this context because '[director Joss] Whedon knows that all

[audiences] want to see him do is smash things up…This is so effective in *Avengers*

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[54] A slightly different, yet still ultimately commercial explanation lies behind Sony Pictures' decision to reboot the *Spider-Man* franchise with *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) just five years after *Spider-Man 3* (2007). While narratively, the franchise could have simply produced a fourth instalment, Sony chose to retell the story again from the start with a new creative team in order to bring down the cost of the cast and director and because the film rights (bought by Sony in 1999) carry with them an agreement that studios must 'prove films are in active development [to] retain those rights in perpetuity' (Abrams 2012).

[55] The decision to recast Banner was seemingly made as a result of Edward Norton's difficult and controlling behaviour during *The Incredible Hulk.* After the second film, Feige baldly claimed that the studio's 'decision [was] definitely not one based on monetary factors, but [was] instead rooted in the need for an actor who embodies the creativity and collaborative spirit of our other talented cast members' (cited in Graser 2010).

because there's a lot more going on' (Heritage 2012). Heritage's assessment of why the character worked so effectively in Whedon's film is subjective yet persuasive: as one element of an ensemble, Hulk can take on much of the responsibility for the action scenes while other more nuanced characters can provide the emotional and intellectual drama. A summary of Hulk's appearances in cinematic adaptations can be seen in figure 7.1[56].

In terms of the ways in which the Hulk has been explored through literary readings and critical analysis, academics have offered a number of interpretations. Studies which focus on his status as an antihero (Mittman 2011) sit alongside those which view the character as an analogy for various issues such as alcoholism (Brown 2011) or nuclear anxiety (Capitanio 2010). The most obvious avenue tends to be a psychoanalytical one, the broadest level of which sees the Hulk as an expression of the 'anger and frustration [felt] at life's injustices', a manifestation in literature of 'the existential cry of humankind' (Fingeroth 2004, p 126). A more specific psychoanalytic link can be made with Freudian concepts of the personality, with Banner and the Hulk respectively representing the ego, which Freud describes as the part of the mind that argues for 'reason and common sense', and the id, 'which contains the passions' (Freud 1961, p 25)[57]. Rushton's reading, on the other hand, sees the character as a representation of Banner's flawed response to trauma (the death of his mother by his abusive father as depicted in Lee's adaptation), the Hulk becoming a personification of Banner's unhealthy inability to cope with

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[56] Additional cinematic appearances by Hulk/Banner post-2013 have included *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) and the upcoming *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018).
[57] An additional interesting interpretation of the Banner/Hulk dichotomy is that it can function as a representation of the two opposing elements needed for artistic creation according to Nietzsche: the Apollonian quality of 'sapient tranquillity' and the Dionysian characteristics of 'titanic and barbaric menace' (1956, p 35 and 21).

Film (year of release)	Director/writer	Adapted from	Budget estimate (in US$m)	Worldwide box office takings (US$)	Position relative to other films in its year of release in terms of worldwide box office earnings
Hulk (2003)	Ang Lee/James Schamus	Contains elements from *The Incredible Hulk* #1(Lee and Kirby 1962a), *Sub-Mariner and The Incredible Hulk Tales to Astonish* #78 (Lee and Everett 1966), *The Incredible Hulk* #209 (Wein and Buscema 1977) and *The Incredible Hulk* #312 (Mantlo and Mignola 1985).	137	245,316,278	15
The Incredible Hulk (2008)	Louis Leterrier/Zak Penn	Contains elements from *Incredible Hulk: Return of the Monster* (Jones and Romita, Jr. 2002), *Incredible Hulk: Abominable* (Jones and Deodato, Jr. 2003) and *Hulk: Gray* (Loeb and Sale 2005; originally published 2003).	143.75	263,424,338	21
The Avengers (2012)	Joss Whedon/Joss Whedon and Zak Penn	Contains elements from *The Avengers* #1 (Lee and Kirby 1963a) and *The Ultimates Volume 2: Homeland Security* (Millar and Hitch 2004)	222.5	1,515,744,124	1

Figure 7.1 – Film adaptations featuring the Hulk, 2003-12[58]

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[58] Mark Ruffalo's Banner also appears in a brief post-credits cameo in *Iron Man 3* (2013).

repressed memories in a positive way and of his subconscious decision to see them as 'a violence done to the self which necessitates and justifies a retributive response' (2004, p 371). Similarly, the texts can also be linked to concepts of masculinities, Hulk becoming a metaphor for the type of stereotypical, physical and aggressive hypermasculinity identified by sociologists such as Mosher and Tomkins (1988).

Adaptation analysis

The analysis of the adaptation changes for this character focus primarily on Ang Lee's 2003 film *Hulk* rather than *The Incredible Hulk* or *The Avengers*. The reasoning behind this is that Lee's film, in terms of content, style, tone and cast is significantly different from the other films in which Hulk appears and, as has already been established, is a film that Marvel has suggested lies outside the official Hulk canon (even if there has been some obfuscation on its part over the exact degree to which it is (un)related to the other films). It would therefore be disingenuous to analyse the three films as one franchise in the same way that the *X-Men* or *Iron Man* trilogies form continuous narratives.

The first adaptation change examines how Lee's film adds more complex thematic, character and symbolic dimensions to the source material and argues that the themes and narratives which manifest in *Hulk* are those same recurring concerns that are evident in many of Lee's other films. This prompts the conclusion that while there is evidence that commercial criteria are being met through this change – primarily because of the hiring of a respected director – the precise way in which the film is shaped is reflective of the dominant artistic logic of Lee's style. The second

adaptation change uses an exploration of the traditional superhero narrative formula to analyse the commercial and artistic consequences of *Hulk*'s decision to make its protagonist's father the villain of the film. Here, this aspect of the film is argued to be reflective of both commercial and artistic logic and, significantly, an expression of a clash between these two sets of criteria.

As with *X-Men*, this case study moves beyond the adaptation change framework towards the end in order to consider the ways in which the Hulk films can help to answer the research question 'How has the superhero comic book film genre as a whole between 2000 and 2013 been shaped by the interactions between commerce and artistry?'. Firstly, it explores a point raised earlier in this study: how the director's auteur status affects the degree to which the artistic criteria of the film are identifiable. Secondly, Lee's film is compared to Marvel's 2008 sequel *The Incredible Hulk* as an opportunity to analyse how the studio responded to the former's box office underperformance by attempting to make the latter film meet the commercial criteria for a superhero film more explicitly.

Adaptation change 1: Thematic, character and psychological enrichment of the source material

The first adaptation change to be analysed is one which encompasses several elements in an overarching change, namely the filmmakers' attempts to emotionally enrich the source material and make it more complex in terms of its themes, characterisation and tone. While the original texts do undoubtedly demonstrate a

degree of characterisation and thematic content, both of these are underdeveloped in comparison with Lee's version, due in part to the fact that the majority of the comic books (particularly the early issues from the 1960s) are primarily concerned with presenting action-based narratives (characterised by the character's catchphrase 'Hulk … smash!'; Lee and Kane 1967, p 1) and a lighter, more adventurous tone than the film's cerebral meditation on the character. This first adaptation change is therefore the addition of what is best described as a significantly more intellectual or thought-provoking perspective on the source material, particularly in terms of its tone, themes, symbolism and characters. Grouping these various changes to the artistic elements of the text under one adaptation change is not intended to signal that they are all changed in exactly the same way or, indeed, that they are insignificant individually, but that together they constitute a different approach to the narrative than that of the comic books.

This tonal shift between comic book and film may seem somewhat obvious and appear to require little analysis, after all it could be argued that a medium such as comics which uses a minimal amount of words to tell its story will naturally be less intellectually complex than a film which relies on dialogue to advance its narrative, but this is not necessarily true. There are many superhero comics such as *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller 1986), *Watchmen* (Moore and Gibbons 1987), *Batman: The Long Halloween* (Loeb and Sale 1997) and *The Ultimates* (Millar and Hitch 2002) to name but a few, which arguably display a level of character and thematic complexity equal to, or more than, that of many films and therefore, *Hulk*'s added thematic, emotional and character depth is a significant change to its more simplistic source material which cannot be taken for granted. Primarily, the *Hulk* film explores the central themes of rage, repression, desire versus duty and the father-child

relationship. While the source texts touch on two of these, rage and repression, their exploration of them lacks depth in the sense that they are only used as plot devices to facilitate the Hulk's appearance in the comics and are not part of the character's psychological development in the way that they are in the film. Lee's deeper exploration of these two themes in addition to those of desire versus duty and the father-child relationship constitutes a significant difference between source material and adaptation. An example of the two mediums' differing approaches can be seen in their treatment of the theme of rage: in the comics, Banner's anger and frustration stems from the immediate situations he finds himself in such as being pursued or attacked, whereas in Lee's adaptation, the source of Banner's long-repressed anger is psychoanalysed and traced to its root – his abusive and dysfunctional relationship with his psychotic father David.

Similarly, *Hulk* contains several scenes where characters articulate their emotional responses to events in a much more profound way than they do in the comic book. A prime example of this is a conversation between Bruce and Betty after she has witnessed Banner transform into the Hulk. In an attempt to explain Bruce's alter ego, Betty seeks reassurance in the security of her scientific knowledge citing terminology such as 'nanomeds' and 'gamma exposure' as the reason. Bruce, however, responds with his own theory: 'No – deeper. The gamma just unleashed what was already there: me.' The exchange epitomises this particular adaptation change between comic and film: Betty's seeking of a purely scientific cause echoes the original comics' science-fiction influenced obsession with technology and radiation (one comic declares it was simply 'the power of the gamma rays' which created the Hulk; Lee and Kirby 1962b, p 23), whereas Bruce's assertion that the Hulk was already inside him, borne from childhood abuse and repressed rage – that

207

he was merely unleashed by science, not created by it – is darker and raises questions over his character, reflecting Lee's less straightforward take on the source material. This difference is stressed once again in the film when Bruce attempts to articulate how it feels to be the Hulk, claiming that 'It was like a dream…[about] rage, power…and freedom' and that 'what scares me the most is that…when I totally lose control – I like it', compared to the source material's minimal description of Bruce's experience as his alter ego: 'As the Hulk…I can't think…can't reason!' (Lee and Ditko 1964, p 5). Lee's added emphasis on Banner's psyche and the effects of Hulk on his human alter ego can be demonstrated in a comparison between the points at which the Hulk first appears in the film and in the comic book. The first issue of *The Incredible Hulk* comic introduces the Hulk approximately one fifth of the way through the narrative whereas Lee delays his appearance until one third of the way (forty minutes) into his film, preferring instead to establish Bruce and Betty as characters and also their relationships with their fathers before introducing him. Additionally, the screenplay renders the Hulk silent, giving him only one line of dialogue ('Puny human') in a dream sequence, in comparison to the comic book which gifts Hulk a basic ability to articulate himself ('Have to reach home!...Must get formula!!...Human?? Why should I want to be human?!?'; Lee and Kirby 1962a, pp 8–9). This adaptation change also means that Banner must inevitably be onscreen for an increased amount of time as the Hulk's scenes are purely physical, his lack of speech making it difficult for him to advance the plot in the way that he can in the comic book.

As an adaptation change, Lee's deepening of the source material by means of more complex characterisation and themes has both artistic and commercial consequences. Artistically, as has been demonstrated, Lee's approach enriches the

more simplistic source material and strengthens the film as an artistic product which can be interpreted on a symbolic level. This is also connected to a commercial consequence, as Universal Pictures' greenlighting of the nuanced screenplay indicates a desire to provide a more cerebral take on the material from a director known for his subtlety and dramatic capability, presumably in the hope that audiences would respond to *Hulk* in the same way that they had to the intelligent model established by Singer's *X-Men* three years earlier.

Therefore, when viewed in the context of Lee's previous films and considering that he, in his own words, 'wasn't particularly taken with the existing script that Universal prepared' (Seiler 2001) and that he was instead convinced to take the project on after a pitch from his writing collaborator Schamus, who constructed a narrative approach which he believed would interest Lee (Lee and Schamus 2003), the extent to which source material can be re-authored to better fit the artistic interests of a director becomes clear, particularly an auteur such as Lee, whose films tend to be 'organically connected to…[his] creative concerns' (Lund 2011, pp 89-90). When viewed alongside the films which make up the director's body of work pre-*Hulk*, it is evident that this superhero adaptation is reflective of one of Lee's longstanding artistic concerns in particular: the theme of the struggle between the desire for freedom and the responsibilities of social duty. Critics have noted that Lee's films deal repeatedly with 'underlying forms of discontent and desire' (Thomson 1999, p 9)[59] and the director himself has stated that he returns to 'the hidden desires' repressed 'beneath the surface of regulations and social codes' time and time again (cited in Williams 2001, p 72). This theme manifests in the form of the conflict caused by children fighting against familial expectation in *The Wedding*

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[59] See also Dilley 2007.

Banquet and *Eat Drink, Man Woman* or in the attempts of individuals to express their

emotional and sexual needs in the face of repressive social codes in *Sense and*

Sensibility and his post-*Hulk* works *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and *Lust, Caution*

(2007), the latter title being the paradigmatic expression of this theme. Schamus too

observes this strand running throughout Lee's work and argues that it is perhaps

most explicitly represented in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*'s representation of

the 'tension…between the Daoist impulse towards freedom and the Confucian

imperatives towards indebtedness in relationships in the social order' (Teo 2001).

Considering *Hulk* in this thematic context explains Lee's interest in the material,

prompting a reading of the film in which Banner personifies a sense of duty and

behaviour that conforms to social expectation (the Confucian imperative) as opposed

to the Hulk's expression of the individual's true nature (the Daoist impulse). Lee's

artistic concerns also explain many of the scenes in the film which are not drawn

from the source material. One clear example of this is when the Hulk escapes from a

military base, soaring through the sky in great leaps across the desert. A close-up of

his face (figure 7.2) reveals the meditative peace that the Hulk finds in freedom from

entrapment, this single shot exemplifying the film's more complex and thoughtful

take on the character's inner desires as opposed to the comic book's limited

representation of his emotional state as consistently aggressive (figure 7.3).

Similarly, scenes such as the aforementioned conversation between Betty and Bruce

regarding power and loss of control and Bruce's articulation of his transformed state

are as much reflections of the director's ongoing body of work as they are reflections

of the source material.

Inevitably, in terms of this research's wider examination of how art and

commerce shape texts, the specific themes presented (and desire versus duty is

Figure 7.2 (top) – Hulk finds tranquillity as he leaps through the air in Ang Lee's *Hulk*

Figure 7.3 (bottom) – Example of a typically angry Hulk facial expression in *The Incredible Hulk* **#2 (Lee and Kirby 1962b, p 9)**

used only as one example here) are not as important as the point that they illustrate. This adaptation change in *Hulk* demonstrates that, for certain adaptations, especially those made by an established director who has (and was arguably hired because of) a recognisable style or an interest in recurring subject matter, the film as a text can be reshaped to better reflect the director's thematic interest, something which is reflective of artistic logic. In other words, theme is not just limited to the individual film (*Hulk*) but rather shaped, partly, at the very least, by trans-textual thematics which are present across Lee's oeuvre. Lee himself has identified this, observing that the desire and repression themes manifest in his films in differing ways: 'In [*Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*], the hidden dragon is what's inherent but also repressed in the culture...in [*Lust, Caution*] it was sex, in *Hulk*'s America the "hidden dragon" is anger' (cited in Kenny 2010).

Of course, at the widest level, it must be acknowledged that this particular adaptation change is also reflective of commercial logic – in other words, the studio's hiring of Lee and approval of the screenplay is evidence that it sanctioned a cerebral and subtle take on the material. However, to simply conclude that this means that the adaptation change is symptomatic of commercial logic at anything other than the broadest level is too simplistic because it does not allow for a consideration of the significant influence artistic concerns have in shaping *Hulk* into its *specific* form. This specific shaping of *Hulk* in terms of its thematic content and final form is determined through artistic forces (Lee's style and concerns as a filmmaker). The addition of Lee's own thematic interests demonstrates that even if his hiring by the studio reflects a commercial logic that is attempting to fulfil the function of replicating previously successful cerebral action films – C*rouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* or *X-Men* perhaps – the exact shaping of the film at text level reflects Lee and Schamus's

logic of wanting to make an artistic product which is as rich thematically, symbolically and in terms of its characters as any of their previous films.

Adaptation change 2: Banner's father as villain and the hero/villain relationship

A significant adaptation change made in *Hulk* is the decision to make Bruce's father David (Nick Nolte) the chief antagonist. David is an amalgamation of two separate characters from Marvel history: Bryan Banner, Bruce's abusive father who feared his son inherited the DNA which he wrongly believed was mutated as a result of an atomic accident in Bryan's youth (as revealed in a flashback issue of *The Incredible Hulk*; Mantlo and Mignola 1985) and Carl Creel, a villain known as the Absorbing Man[60], who has the ability to take on the properties of any material he touches. *Hulk*'s screenplay imbues the former character with the powers of the latter (renaming him David in a reference to the lead character of *The Incredible Hulk* television series) which are gained as a result of self-experimentation that alters his genetic make-up. Bruce's genes are therefore warped from conception, allowing him to survive the gamma explosion and become the Hulk, the cyclical transfer of power finally reaching completion when David replicates Bruce's gamma accident and gains the ability to transform into organic and inorganic matter. The two main adaptation changes in this regard are therefore David's presence in Bruce's adult life (in the comic books he was killed by a younger Bruce before he became the Hulk)

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[60] The Absorbing Man was not in fact an established enemy of the Hulk but first appeared as a villain for Thor in *Journey to Mystery* (Lee and Kirby 1965).

and his possession of superpowers to rival the Hulk's.

The character of David in *Hulk* is significant in that he can be seen as a figure that unites commercial and artistic logic. The commercial consequences of granting Bruce's father the powers of the Absorbing Man are that the film is able to cleave to the required formula of not only the action blockbuster but more specifically the superhero film. Almost every superhero film pits its protagonist against a threat in the form of an antagonist who possesses powers equal to, or greater than, the hero. By adapting the model of narrative structure identified by Propp (as referenced in Chapter Two's discussion of the artistic and commercial aspects of film) in which he delineates the elements, or 'functions', of the archetypal folk tale (1968, p 26), the functions of a traditional comic book film narrative structure can be similarly outlined:

1: HERO'S ORIGIN

The protagonist is born with, or already possesses, superpowers;

or

The protagonist is presented as an 'average' or 'less than average' person who then gains superpowers

2: VILLAIN'S ORIGIN

The antagonist (or the character that will become the antagonist) is born with, or already possesses, superpowers – often due to the same accident of birth or genetic trait as the protagonist;

or

The antagonist is presented as an 'average' or 'less than average' person who then gains superpowers – often via the same process as the protagonist

3: DEVELOPMENT OF POWERS (USE/EXPLOITATION)

The protagonist uses their powers for good whilst coming to an understanding of the nature of responsibility, while the antagonist uses theirs for selfish or destructive ends

4: RESOLUTION OF CONFLICT

The protagonist and antagonist resolve their conflict through a confrontation, usually physical

.

This formula is strictly adhered to in almost every superhero film. As my analysis in Appendix V shows, the vast majority of successful superhero comic book adaptations have followed this formula with all of the twenty highest earning superhero adaptations presenting a variation on it[61]. However there is of course no evidence to demonstrate that this set of narrative functions guarantees a strong box office performance and there are, after all, a number of adaptations such as *Green Lantern* and *Elektra* which incorporate the four functions yet were relatively unsuccessful in box office terms (Zeitchik 2006, Stewart 2013a). This might suggest that the formula is perhaps as much of an artistic decision – that it is simply the only workable structure for any superhero narrative – rather than a commercial decision. This argument, however, can be countered by considering the range of narrative structures evident in the superhero comic book medium as a whole across which there are a number of alternative plot structures shown in texts such as *The*

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[61] Even in narratives which seem to be the exception, the functions are usually borne out. For example, in films where the heroes do not have superpowers such as *Batman Begins* and *Iron Man*, the villains are still equally matched with them in strength because they too do not have superpowers and thus the threat posed to the hero is relative. Two apparent exceptions in the top twenty highest earning superhero adaptations, in which a superhero faces off against a non-powered villain, are *Superman Returns*, in which Superman is pitted against the human Lex Luthor and *X-Men 2*, wherein the superpowered mutants battle the human William Stryker. However, both films do follow the formula because Luthor gains possession of a shard of Kryptonite which renders Superman powerless and Stryker has powerful mutants in his army who possess superpowers that match the X-Men's.

Ultimates and *Watchmen*, both of which offer structurally different treatments of superpowers and the positioning of heroes and villains. Alternative narrative formulas for superhero plots do exist therefore but are very rarely, if ever, adopted for film adaptations. The indiscriminate blanket application of the above four function plot in film is thus commercial logic rather than a compulsory artistic option for studios because it is an example of the replication of a formula which has proven to be commercially successful and is therefore less risky than experimenting with different ways of telling a superhero story.

Additionally, the inclusion of an antagonist whose powers and strength matches the protagonist's own can also be viewed as an expression of commercial logic because it inevitably provides opportunities to incorporate many of the key features which audiences might expect to see in the superhero genre such as the use of superpowers depicted through spectacular visual effects, physical fights and confrontations and opportunities for the superhero to save innocent people from a significant threat. Such elements are what Hall and Neale label 'key narrative actions' which are 'prolonged…by spectacular treatment' on film (2010, p 5), the majority of which, crucially, are dependent on the presence of a superpowered villain, without whom there would be no narrative justification for such actions. Yet the inclusion of the villain is also, by the same argument, fulfilling a narrative requirement simply because a powerful superhero requires a convincingly powerful nemesis if the central physical and moral conflict is to be sufficiently exciting (an alternative option is for a superhero to face a threat from a natural disaster rather than a villain although it would be difficult to sustain this in a longer film – the finale of *Superman* (1978) presents him attempting to minimise the damage from an earthquake, but even this disaster has been caused by the film's antagonist Lex

Luthor).

Thus the presence of a villain who is an equal match for the hero is a necessary component both commercially and artistically, but the decision to make the villain and Bruce's father one and the same is symptomatic of artistic logic. Had the villain simply been Carl Creel/Absorbing Man (as written into early drafts of the screenplay; Ascher-Walsh 2000) the commercial requirement of having a superpowered villain would have been met, but the replacing of Creel with Bruce's father has significant additional artistic consequences for the film in terms of character, narrative and theme. By playing out the conflict between Bruce and his father on an emotional level through dialogue in their human forms as well as on a physical level through a fight between their monstrous alter egos, the film manages to imbue the traditional superhero formula with an added thematic layer which would not have existed had the villain been unconnected to Bruce. The familial bond between the opponents echoes the first adaptation change in that it repositions the source material to be more in line with Lee's interests as a storyteller by presenting yet another iteration of the parent-child relationship, a recurring trans-textual trope evident in much of Lee's work including *The Wedding Banquet*, *Eat Drink Man Woman* and *The Ice Storm*. Lee himself acknowledges that the Hulk and David's conflict is simply a 'more violent' depiction of his recurring thematic interest, observing that 'we had tried several drafts of the screenplay…and then…James [Schamus] brought to my attention that in one issue of *Hulk* they brought the father back…I thought, Oh no, not the father/son thing again! But I wouldn't have done it unless I felt that it was bringing something fresh' (cited in Lee 2003).

This dual commercial and artistic logic is evident in the film's climatic battle which sees Bruce transforming into the Hulk and fighting his father who has

absorbed lethal amounts of electricity and metamorphosed into a giant creature composed purely of energy. Their fight provides an opportunity for the film to deliver the spectacular conflict expected of a superhero film via a sequence where the two computer-generated creatures wrestle with one another by a lake. Here David's new superpowers are depicted through visual effects as he becomes a creature made of rock, electricity and water. Yet the artistic elements of the film also drive this scene, making it as much a conflict on a character and symbolic level as it is on a physical and visual level. The final part of the battle sees David attempting to drain Hulk of his energy and power and initially succeeding. Lee then changes the conflict from a physical one to a mental one, using a close up of the exhausted Hulk as the starting point for a zoom shot into the neural pathways of his brain. Rapid flashbacks depict a series of memories of Bruce's childhood while David's voice-over intones 'Sleep now Bruce…struggle no more and give me all of your power'. Bruce responds with 'You think you can live with it? Take it, take it all!' before sending his repressed memories and rage into David's energy cloud. As David realises that Bruce's childhood anger is uncontainable and his cloud expands into a mushroom-like maelstrom, images of the father and son play across its surface while the Hulk lies passive in the lake, implying that it is emotional strength and not physical, which has defeated the villain. One of the final shots of the sequence is a memory of Bruce smiling and being held lovingly by his father, suggesting that he has come to terms with his anger, revealing the entire final conflict to have been more of a psychological and emotional struggle rather than a need to physically dominate. At this point, the formulaic expectation of an effects-filled fight has been joined with Lee's thematic concerns of repression and parental relationships, demonstrating that the changes to the source material in terms of the villain are reflective of the commercial requirements of a superhero film

as well as of the artistic requirements.

This point, that *Hulk*'s choice of villain and climactic confrontation is reflective of both commercial and artistic logic, is not intended to imply that the film is unique in this respect. All of the choices of villains in any superhero film are a result of commercial and artistic logic and simply because the opponents do not have the intense familial relationships that those in *Hulk* do does not mean that they do not demonstrate artistic logic. After all, if films such as *The Avengers*, *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Man of Steel* contain climaxes that function as spectacular action sequences rather than explorations of the film's themes, it does not mean that they have not been shaped according to artistic logic. Indeed, the very decision to present a villain and a climax which are not intimately connected to the protagonist on an emotional or psychological level is in itself an artistic decision, perhaps taken as a consequence of wanting to present a more straightforward, uncomplicated action set-piece. Such a strategy is evident in the finale of Joss Whedon's *The Avengers*, in which, even though the villain Loki is the half-brother of one of the superheroes, Thor, the extended battle scene in New York avoids any emotional conflict by keeping the siblings apart and instead presenting a series of fights between the Avengers and Loki's alien army. The sequence is not demonstrative of a particularly strong metaphorical or symbolic subtext, being more appropriate to the lighter tone of *The Avengers* as a whole, but this does not suggest that it does not conform to artistic logic. Instead, the artistic element of theme is simply less explicit than in *Hulk*'s climax, reflecting the filmmaker's understanding that a darker tone is not appropriate in this case. How the more commercial, formulaic functions of the superhero adaptation (the need for spectacle, the use of visual effects and physical conflict) are enhanced or even disguised by the artistic elements (the ways in which

a film imbues the material with symbolic, thematic and character complexity) is, therefore, more a question of degree of visibility, with the extent to which the artistic elements are visible in comparison to the formulaic elements depending on the individual text and director. This is not to say that the better the director, the more artistic elements will be identifiable but rather that the style of the filmmaker will determine their level of visibility.

Ang Lee's *Hulk* as an expression of the economic/symbolic capital relationship

The second of Hulk's adaptation changes addresses an issue which requires further consideration in regards to this study's overall conclusions on how commerce and artistry shape superhero films. This case study has shown that *Hulk*, in comparison to the *X-Men* and *Iron Man* films, has a significantly different style and tone as a film adaptation. As I have argued above, this is primarily a result of Universal's choice of Ang Lee as director and at this point it is essential to acknowledge the role that the status and artistic reputation of the director plays in shaping the adaptation. In the first chapter, I considered how far superhero adaptations are authored by their directors and how those established auteurs that possess a strongly individuated sense of style and subject matter negotiate working with iconic source material that has significant commercial requirements. Lee is one such director and Christopher Nolan, director of *The Dark Knight* trilogy – the subject of Chapter Nine's case study – is another. Depending on the critical perspective adopted, Lee and Nolan may or may not be considered auteurs (although their visual

and tonal styles and recurring thematic and narrative interests provide strong evidence that they are) but both are undoubtedly directors who had already established notable reputations as filmmakers by the time they came to make their superhero adaptations. Singer too was certainly well-known by the time he came to direct *X-Men* thanks to *The Usual Suspects*, although it came much earlier in his career and it is more difficult to argue that his body of work showed the hallmarks of an auteur at this point.

There is, therefore, a distinction to be made between directors such as Lee, Nolan and Singer and directors such as Jon Favreau (*Iron Man* and *Iron Man 2*), Brett Ratner (*X-Men: The Last Stand*) and Shane Black (*Iron Man 3*) whose previous work and/or style is less distinctive and unique[62] and who arguably make less idiosyncratic superhero films. To put it another way, Lee's *Hulk* and Nolan's *Batman* films have as much in common with the other films in their directors' oeuvres as they do with their fellow superhero genre films. The decision to allow auteurs such as Lee a greater sense of freedom to deviate from the formula of a comic book adaptation constitutes an example of how Bourdieu's theory of symbolic capital manifests in the film industry. As discussed in Chapter Three, Bourdieu argues that creative workers/artists tend to pursue one of two routes, both of which hopefully lead to financial reward. The first, accruing economic capital, is to produce work which reflects what is popular (and therefore financially successful) at the present time whereas the accruing of symbolic capital requires a deliberate reaction against mainstream art in order to establish an avant-garde reputation which, Bourdieu notes, will likely result in financial success (and a move into the mainstream itself) in

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[62] This is not to use the term 'less distinctive' pejoratively, however it is certainly fair to say that while these directors have been successful, their previous films – Favreau's *Elf* (2003) and *Zathura* (2005), Black's *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (2005) and Ratner's *Rush Hour* (1998) and *Red Dragon* (2002) for example – are not in tone or content necessarily identifiable as the work of particular directors (and are arguably not intended to be).

the long term precisely *because* the artist has cultivated a reputation as alternative[63].

As I have shown earlier, Bourdieu's theory is not an ideal fit for the film industry for the simple reason that a film is unlike a painting because its monetary value does not increase over time – it is required to generate revenue immediately upon release, the concept of deferred earning potential being incompatible with the economic structure of the film industry. For a film then, Bourdieu's notions of symbolic and economic capital must be altered. The ultimate measure of a film's success as an investment lies in its accruing of economic capital and its ability to generate profit, but if it is to earn symbolic capital which can be converted into the economic capital of box office and home video revenue – in other words, be critically successful and perceived as a high quality artistic product so that a wider audience is enticed to view it – it must do so relatively quickly over a reduced time period. Of course, if a film is successful financially, the value of its symbolic capital becomes less relevant and for the superhero genre especially, the films of which are expected to generate vast revenues, symbolic capital is far less important than economic capital. *Hulk*, however, constitutes a riskier example of a superhero film as it reflects a filmmaking strategy that has placed equal emphasis on earning economic and symbolic capital, evidenced by its dark and serious take on what is, in essence, an action-based comic about a destructive monster and by the fact that the studio selected an auteur to direct it. In a genre in which the rigidly formulaic nature of the majority of adaptations suggests that it is more important that they are identifiable as superhero films rather than as films belonging to a particular director (in other words

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[63] Lee and Nolan's bodies of work are not of course examples of symbolic capital in the purest sense because neither has completely or radically rejected the mainstream. Prior to *Hulk*, Lee had made *Sense and Sensibility* which starred Emma Thompson and Alan Rickman and Nolan had made *Memento* starring Guy Pearce. However, both certainly conform to the definition of the term because their filmmaking style is their 'trademark or signature' (Bourdieu 1980, p 262) and their pre-superhero films were in no way summer action blockbusters. Also, both were assumedly hired because their critical reputations had 'the power to consecrate' (p 262) the films they were working on.

genre takes precedence over director), *Hulk* therefore stands out as unusual due to the high visibility of its more artistic elements. This concept will be further analysed in relation to the case studies and the genre as a whole in the Discussion chapter.

A comparative study of *Hulk* and *The Incredible Hulk*

Hulk and the reboot/sequel *The Incredible Hulk* which followed it/replaced it five years later provides a useful extension to this case study that can also help to answer the research question 'How has the superhero comic book film genre as a whole between 2000 and 2013 been shaped by the interactions between commerce and artistry?'. In this final part of the case study I present a brief comparison of the two films in order to demonstrate how commercial logic (represented, in this case, by the studio) responded to a film which (depending on the viewer's perspective) may well have met the criteria for an artistic product but did not function successfully as a commercial product.

As stated previously, Marvel's releasing of the 're-quel' *The Incredible Hulk* five years after Lee's version of the comic book, was a convoluted but determined attempt to erase *Hulk* from the official canon of Marvel adaptations. In fact, Marvel Studios' President Kevin Feige explicitly stated that 'we wanted to clear the slate and do it again' (cited in Quint 2008). This case study has shown that *Hulk* was in some significant ways demonstrably reflective of the artistic logic of a director who was an established auteur that wanted the film to be as representative of his own thematic concerns and filmmaking style as it was of its source material or of the superhero film formula. Gale Ann Hurd, producer of the film as well as of *The Incredible Hulk*,

supports this notion with her observation that 'Ang Lee had a story that he very much wanted to tell that fit in line with the origin story in the comic, in terms of the psychological backstory' (Quint 2008), suggesting that *Hulk* was Lee's personal take on the material. The existence of the re-quel does therefore provide a valuable opportunity for this case study to investigate how Marvel redressed the balance and, with *The Incredible Hulk*, made what it considered to be a more commercially appealing film. Feige's views on the two films provide a rare glimpse of the usually secretive studio decision-making process, with his admission that 'The biggest challenge on *The Incredible Hulk* was Ang Lee's *Hulk*' (cited in Horn 2008) in terms of interesting a potential audience. A brief comparison of the two films is therefore useful in that it can analyse both takes on the same character – *Hulk*, which is shaped more visibly by an auteur's artistry and *The Incredible Hulk*, which is a studio's attempt to make a film that would attract a wider audience.

Opinions of which film is 'better' notwithstanding, there are a number of significant ways in which the two films differ. The first is in their tones and content, Marvel Studios establishing that *The Incredible Hulk* (referred to as just *Incredible* forthwith) would be more of an uncomplicated action film even before it had been shot, by hiring Louis Leterrier as director and Zak Penn to script it, a writer who had worked on the stories and screenplays of a number of other comic book films[64]. In line with comments from the co-producing studio Universal's marketing chief Adam Fogelson who stated that 'We wanted to make sure that from the very beginning…this movie was different from the first' (cited in Horn 2008), Leterrier's previous experience lay in the frenetic action films *Unleashed* (2005) and *Transporter 2* (2005), both of which place significant emphasis on physical combat.

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[64] In addition to *The Incredible Hulk* Penn wrote the stories for *X-2* and *The Avengers* and the screenplays for *Elektra* and *X-Men: The Last Stand*.

Accordingly, *Incredible* quickly establishes a villain, Emil Blonsky (Tim Roth), who is experimented upon so that his strength may equal the Hulk's and who is accidentally transformed into The Abomination who the Hulk must stop. This plot device allows for three action sequences depicting the conflict between Blonsky and the Hulk that are spaced evenly throughout the film as opposed to Lee's film which only shows the Hulk fighting his father in the finale. As the pattern of conflict escalates over the course of *Incredible*, the film demonstrably cleaves to the four function formula for superhero movies outlined earlier in this case study in a far clearer way than *Hulk* does: 1) Banner's powers are explained in the credits sequence as his 'origin'; 2) Blonsky develops powers from the same process as Banner; 3) Hulk uses his power to protect, whereas Blonsky/Abomination uses his to harm; 4) The two enemies fight to destroy one another.

Additionally, the removal of any personal relationship between Banner and Blonsky means that the complex character dynamics of the first film are absent. This change is reinforced by a psychological simplification of the characters of Bruce and General Ross, with *Incredible*'s script almost completely avoiding the kind of emotional articulation and reflection expressed by Banner in *Hulk*. Significantly, the character of Betty is also simplified. In *Hulk*, Schamus's screenplay and Connelly's performance imbue Betty with a depth and complexity that make her an interesting character in her own right as a result of her torturous relationship with her father, her desire to save Bruce and her proficient scientific knowledge. *Incredible*'s construction of Betty arguably reduces her contribution to that of a traditional female role in a male-dominated action film. Here she more clearly serves as a love interest for Bruce – an aspect which was hinted at but not explicit in Lee's film – and is required to do little more than stand and scream. Her status as a scientist is nominal; a

photograph of her wearing a lab coat is shown but she is not required to actively use her skills as a physicist in the way that Connelly's version does because a colleague of Banner's, Dr Samuel Stearns, fulfils that role in the narrative. These changes mean that *Incredible* quite deliberately lacks any of its predecessor's deeper emotional subtext and that it is demonstrably careful to avoid the psychological introspection of *Hulk*. It has all of the necessary features of an artistic product but, whilst wishing to avoid subjectivity, these elements – character, narrative, tone, theme and symbolism – are demonstrably less developed than in Lee's film. The final battle between Hulk and the Abomination, in which they reduce a Harlem street to rubble whilst wrecking buildings and cars, is very much a physical one, rejecting the mental conflict and emotional resolution of *Hulk* and providing a more destructive spectacle.

In terms of the commerce/artistry analysis, it is significant to note that Marvel's changes to the second Hulk film are symptomatic of the logic that in order for a film to be more commercially appealing it must more closely follow a formula which has proven to be successful previously. Accordingly, in addition to *Incredible*'s uncomplicated adherence to the four superhero functions, it also goes to great lengths to replicate elements of the popular television series from the late 1970s. The narrative format of the film, which shows Banner on the run as a fugitive across America, mimics the episodic format of the television series, the opening credits that retrace how Banner developed his alter ego are almost a shot-for-shot reconstruction of the television version and the film's musical score even incorporates the programme's end theme. Here then, the content and structure of the re-quel safely cleaves to the commercial logic of formula replication in an attempt to redress the perceived imbalance of the dominant artistic logic of *Hulk*.

Conclusion: Implications of the *Hulk* case study

The *Hulk* case study provides the opportunity to analyse the central

theoretical proposition of this research from a different angle due to its director, the

auteur Ang Lee who, along with his writing partner James Schamus, uses the

superhero property to explore his own concerns and thematic interests rather than

simply retelling the story of the source material. The first adaptation change –

enrichment of the source material's characterisation, themes and psychological

dimension – is argued to be one which is reflective of a dominant artistic logic,

further supporting the argument that artistic concerns can be influential. Universal's

hiring of Lee is a demonstration of Althusser's theory that the economic 'cede[s] to

the determined element a whole region of effectivity, but subordinate effectivity'

(Althusser 1972, p 53). Here, it is commercial logic (replication of a successful

formula) that ultimately determined that Lee would direct the film because he is a

director who the studio presumably deemed capable of imbuing the comic book

material with the required dramatic weight that would allow it to replicate *X-Men*'s

more serious approach and tone. This economic logic then cedes effectivity to

artistic logic – here represented, for the purposes of simplicity, by Lee – granting

it/him agency to shape the film to a certain extent. This further supports the

Althusserian proposition that *X-Men* had initially demonstrated: that a superstructural

element such as art can have a reciprocal influence on the commercial aspects of

the film industry. This can be argued because the very model of the serious and

more dramatic superhero film that commercial logic required *Hulk* to replicate was a

model which had itself been defined by artistic elements (in this case *X-Men*'s more

serious tone and increased focus on character and theme). Artistic elements

therefore fed back into, and helped to define, if only temporarily, the commercial

logic.

However, this analysis of the Hulk films does not only confirm the previous case study's conclusions but also builds upon the existing theory, extending it into two different areas. Firstly, Lee's auteur status provides the opportunity to examine the ways in which the status of the artist involved affects the interaction between art and commerce. The extent to which Lee explores his own recurrent thematic concerns in *Hulk* suggests that, in Bourdieu's terms, the reward for the symbolic capital Lee has accrued from his reputation for being a high quality filmmaker who makes critically lauded films is increased artistic freedom to reshape even well-known source material to match his style and interests. Here symbolic capital is converted not just into economic capital but artistic freedom too, which, in terms of the superhero blockbuster, means the freedom to deviate from the commercially successful narrative formula. Of course, *Hulk* alone cannot demonstrate this, so this is something which will be returned to in the case study that focuses on the auteur Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy in Chapter Nine.

The second way in which the Hulk case study expands upon this research's theoretical basis is through its demonstration of how commercial logic responds when artistic logic is perceived to have failed financially. As a result of *Hulk*'s underperformance at the box office, its sequel adhered far more rigidly to commercial logic by replicating a more typical superhero narrative model and distancing itself in terms of content, style and tone from the first film. This constitutes an extension to the study's central proposition that artistic considerations have a degree of effectivity but that economic considerations are ultimately determinate. The case study demonstrates one of the possible next stages of this relationship by showing what happens when commerce 'permits' artistry to exert its influence but the

resulting superstructural product fails to generate the expected revenue. At this point, art is policed by commerce which rigidly reasserts itself as dominant, hence the *Incredible Hulk*'s recourse to a less risky and more commercially 'safe' and recognisable formula (that the sequel was no more successful than its predecessor does not, of course, prevent commercial logic from asserting itself in the first place). As this study's central proposition states, economic considerations are ultimately determinate and therefore commercial logic sets the boundaries within which art can have influence. This case study provides a demonstration of what happens when commerce takes explicit steps to check and 'correct' that artistic effectivity.

Chapter Eight

Case Study Three: The *Iron Man* trilogy

Historical context: Iron Man in comics and on screen

Iron Man first appeared in print in 1963. Like many Marvel superheroes of the time, he did not make his debut in his own title but rather in one of the publisher's anthology comics, *Tales of Suspense* (Lieber and Heck 1963), which was used as a testing and development ground for new characters that would be rewarded with their own comic series if they proved popular. Readers clearly responded to Iron Man who, despite not receiving his own series until five years later (1968's *The Invincible Iron Man*), became a central part of *Tales of Suspense*, demonstrated by the extension to the comic's name from issue 53 onwards, after which it became *Tales of Suspense featuring the Power of Iron Man* (Korok and Heck 1964). Soon after appearing in the anthology, Iron Man also featured in the original line-up for Marvel's superhero team comic *The Avengers* (1963). Since then, he has enjoyed a central role in the Marvel universe and appeared in numerous titles including the updated retelling of *The Avengers*, *The Ultimates* (Millar and Hitch 2002).

Unlike the mutants of *X-Men*, the serum-enhanced Captain America or the

supernatural Thor, Iron Man is not a superhero in the purest sense of the word as he has no innate superpowers or abilities. He is instead reliant on his phenomenal intelligence and engineering ability which enable him to construct an armoured suit in which he can fight threats. The character's origin story revolves around a wealthy playboy industrialist, Tony Stark, who is captured by guerrillas while working on weapons for the US army during the Vietnam conflict. Mortally injured in an explosion, Stark must initially construct the Iron Man suit to keep himself alive by using its electromagnetism to stop the shrapnel embedded in his chest from reaching his heart (upon returning to America, he manages to design a breast plate which performs this task). From this point onwards, Stark uses the Iron Man suit as a weaponised shell with which to fight crime, splitting his time between his superficial playboy lifestyle and his secret identity as a national hero. Engaging with US paranoia of the time regarding the Cold War and invasion from the forces of Communism (both external and internal), the comics pit Stark against a series of foreign villains including Soviet criminals the Black Widow and the Crimson Dynamo and Chinese despot the Mandarin. The xenophobia of the early comics gives way to more contemporary concerns however, with later storylines focusing on the relationship between the military and large corporations (embodied by Stark's business nemeses Obadiah Stane and Justin Hammer) and the fear and distrust of technology (articulated in the *Extremis* storyline; Ellis and Granov 2012). The supporting characters in the comics include Stark's secretary Pepper Potts, who stays true to the typically reductive female characters of 1960s Marvel by pining after Stark, standard utterances including '[Stark] doesn't know I'm alive, but someday he will…and I'll become Mrs Anthony Stark!' (Berns and Heck 1963a, p 8) and 'Why didn't you tell me you cared, you bashful dreamboat you!' (Lee, Ditko and Ayers

1963, p 12).

Like other high profile Marvel characters, Iron Man's first screen adaptation

came in the form of short televised cartoons. His debut in the 1966 animated series

The Marvel Super Heroes was eventually followed some years later by appearances

in series such as *Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends* (1981), *Iron Man* (1994) and

Iron Man: Armoured Adventures (2009). In 2008, the film adaptation of *Iron Man* was

released, notable for the fact that it was the first film solely produced by the newly

formed Marvel Studios (with Paramount Pictures acting only as distributor). *Iron Man*

was also significant because it was the first step in Marvel's long term plan to

recreate the notion of the shared Marvel universe on screen, something that the

comic books had been doing for decades.

Set in the present day, the first *Iron Man* film retells the origin of the character,

with Tony Stark (Robert Downey, Jr.) reinvented as a private weapons contractor

who is kidnapped by a separatist terrorist movement while on a business trip to

Afghanistan and who must forge the suit to keep himself alive and flee from his

captors. When he returns to America, he declares that Stark Industries will no longer

manufacture weapons, much to the surprise of his assistant Pepper Potts (Gwyneth

Paltrow) and the chagrin of the company's manager Obadiah Stane (Jeff Bridges).

Stark begins to use the suit for more heroic purposes such as defeating the terrorists

who kidnapped him, thereby incurring the wrath of the US military who believe him to

be a dangerous weapon. Later it is revealed that Stane is in league with the terrorists

and has not only been supplying them but had also hired them to kill Stark originally.

The film climaxes in a confrontation between Stark as Iron Man and Stane in the Iron

Monger suit, a huge weaponised creation that he has fashioned from the same

technology as Stark's suit. Significantly, the post-credits scene reveals that Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) has been monitoring Iron Man and wants to recruit him to join 'the Avengers Initiative'. In 2010, Marvel released its sequel *Iron Man 2* which centres around Stark's conflict with a Russian enemy, Ivan Vanko (Mickey Rourke), the son of a colleague of Howard Stark (Tony's father), who has developed a dangerous suit of his own in order to exact revenge on Stark for the misperceived betrayal of his father. Vanko (also known as Whiplash) teams up with Stark's business rival Justin Hammer (Sam Rockwell) to create an army of robots for the military to use as weapons after they requisition Stark's technology. In a subplot, Nick Fury and Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) continue to court Stark to join the Avengers. The third film, released in 2013, pits Stark and Pepper against the comic book villain the Mandarin (Ben Kingsley), who destroys Stark's house, making him a fugitive. Later the Mandarin is in fact revealed to be nothing more than an actor hired to be a decoy for the film's real villain, Aldrich Killian (Guy Pearce) who has developed a biotechnological virus, Extremis, which he plans to use to destroy Iron Man. *Iron Man 3* is set after Tony Stark's appearance in *The Avengers* film, in which Iron Man teams up with several other Marvel superheroes under the leadership of Nick Fury[65]. A summary of Iron Man's appearances in the Marvel Cinematic Universe is listed in figure 8.1[66].

Interpretation of the *Iron Man* comics has inevitably centred on the 'ways that man is dependent on technology' and the 'interaction between humanity and the mechanical' (Hogan 2009, p 201), with theorists such as Hogan focusing on the increasing ways that Stark defines himself against, and immerses himself in, the

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[65] In 2013, Downey, Jr. announced that he would return as Iron Man for future Avengers films (Goldberg and Kit 2013), one of which was 2016's *Captain America: Civil War*.

[66] Post-2013 appearances of the character on film have included *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) and the forthcoming *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018)

Film (year of release)	Director/writer(s)	Adapted from	Budget estimate (in US$m)	Worldwide box office takings (US$)	Position relative to other films in its year of release in terms of worldwide box office earnings
Iron Man (2008)	Jon Favreau/Mark Fergus, Hawk Ostby, Art Marcum and Matt Holloway	Contains elements from *Tales of Suspense* #39 (Lieber and Heck 1963) and *Iron Man* #200 (O'Neil and Bright 1985).	163	585,174,222	8
Iron Man 2 (2010)	Jon Favreau/Justin Theroux	Contains elements from Tales of Suspense #46 (Berns and Heck 1963b) and *Iron Man* #124 (Michelinie and Romita, Jr. 1979).	185	623,933,331	7
The Avengers (2012)	Joss Whedon/Zack Penn and Joss Whedon	Contains elements from *The Avengers* #1 (Lee and Kirby 1963a) and *The Ultimates Volume 2: Homeland Security* (Millar and Hitch 2004)	222.5	1,511,757,910	1

| *Iron Man 3* (2013) | Shane Black/Drew Pearce and Shane Black | Contains elements from *Tales of Suspense* #50 (Lee and Heck 1964) and *Iron Man Extremis* (Ellis and Granov 2012; originally published 2004). | 200 | 1,211,055,862 | 2 |

Figure 8.1 – Film adaptations featuring *Iron Man*, 2000-13 [67]

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[67] Tony Stark also appears briefly in a post-credits scene in *The Incredible Hulk*.

technology, culminating in *Extremis*, wherein he merges the technology with his own body (although Stark does not do this in the film version). Hogan's view that *Iron Man* texts are useful objects of study for 'media ecologists' (p 211) – those theorists who are principally interested in the ways in which technology influences society and perception – is taken up by Kuskin, who argues that the character represents 'an intertwining of human and machine processes that figure the individual less as an autonomous subject …than as a composite figure shaped by and dependent upon the technologies that define him'. His observation that 'Iron Man exists in a feedback loop with technology, and by extension…offers a way of understanding human consciousness as recursive, a process of return upon an internally networked memory structure rather than a self-directing subjectivity' (2012, p 198), reconfigures the texts as ominous warnings to society about the ways in which humans are enslaved by their cultural obsession with technology, viewing the material from an existential, philosophical perspective.

Yet the comic narratives are not solely limited to media ecologist interpretations. The key tropes of the comic – the corporate world, Stark's extreme wealth and his interaction with machinery – would seem to make *Iron Man* texts a natural fit with Marxist theory. Although there has so far been a lack of sustained Marxist analysis of *Iron Man*, the narratives can naturally be interpreted as meditations on Marx's theories of reification and the mystification of capital (Marx and Engels 1993). Additional Marxist readings could focus on Stark's role as a capitalist and his development, over the course of decades, from government puppet to selfless moral hero, reflecting the trajectory of the overall comic book narrative from anti-Communist propaganda to a more subtle questioning of militaristic and nationalistic might. On a more abstract level, Iron Man himself can be argued to be a

personification of capitalism, his fundamental physical weakness and his relationship with a suit which is being ever-upgraded to face new threats reflecting Jameson's view of capitalism as a 'structure [in] a process of perpetual breakdown…a machine which is necessarily and inevitably breaking down and which must therefore, to remain in existence, constantly [repair] itself by enlarging itself and its field of control' (2010, p 6). The comics can also sustain a traditional Marxist reading in the sense of class antagonism, Hogan's argument fostering links between class and technology when he notes that for the multimillionaire Stark, technology is linked 'to…status and power' and that his suit is 'the very symbol of his privilege', his victories in combat translated into an affirmation that 'his social status is once again restored' (2009, p 208).

Adaptation Analysis

This analysis of the *Iron Man* trilogy discusses two adaptation changes in an attempt to explore the consequences for the film as a commercial product and the film as an artistic product and consider how the changes are reflective of commercial and artistic logic. The first adaptation change examined is the difference between the comic book's 1960s period setting and the first film's contemporary setting. Here it is argued that the present day period has been selected in order to fit in with Marvel's fictional universe building. If the film had been set in the original period, fundamental artistic elements of the text such as character development would remain unchanged and therefore this analysis concludes that the change reflects commercial logic only. The second adaptation change considers the difference between the comic and the

film in their portrayals of, and attitudes towards, the international villains of the narratives. This change arises from the films' attempts to resolve the contradictions between the explicit nationalistic aggression of the early comic books and the relatively more liberal politics of the present day. Whilst evidence is provided that the commercial consequence for such a change is that it widens the potential audience for the films internationally, a deconstruction of the texts in relation to their artistic elements suggests the film's underlying message mostly remains unchanged from that of the comics. The conclusion is therefore that this particular change can only reflect commercial logic as no measurable change has been made to the artistic elements.

Adaptation change 1: Altering the temporal setting of the narrative

The first adaptation change analysed is the difference between the period setting of the comic and the film. Making the decision to set the film version of *Iron Man* in the present day as opposed to the original comics' 1960s setting may appear to be an obvious decision and one which initially does not require a deeper analysis. After all, it would seem to make sense that a story which relies on technology and engineering would benefit from an updated setting that can exploit the full range of today's technology (in addition, of course, to the fantasy fictional technology which many superhero comic books create). For contemporary audiences, a 1960s setting may well provide a kitsch, 'retro' charm but would also limit the technology depicted onscreen and risk making the film appear deliberately outdated, the blockbuster's

need for spectacle therefore making a temporal shift necessary. Yet because *Iron Man*'s origin story is so explicitly grounded in its contemporary historical setting of the Vietnam War and America's subsequent fight against Communism, any change to the source material's period setting does have consequences. Therefore the comic's narrative, which sees Stark kidnapped by the 'red guerrilla tyrant' Wong-Chu in Vietnam (Lieber and Heck 1963, p 3), is altered in the film to show him being abducted by a generic terrorist organisation, The Ten Rings[68] led by a man named Raza, whilst Stark is on a business trip to Kunar Province in Afghanistan.

Figure 8.2 – Panel from the first Iron Man story in *Tales of Suspense* #39 (Lieber and Heck 1963, p 3)

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[68] The Ten Rings is a subtle reference to the aforementioned villain the Mandarin who, in the comic books, can wield magical power through the ten rings that he wears.

Although this geographical region is real and its reputation as a hideout for insurgent groups has been documented (Lamb 2009), the film is careful to avoid explicit political affiliations for the Ten Rings. Their costumes may play on Western fears by evoking stereotypical images of Middle Eastern terrorists, but the screenplay refuses to reference specific real world politics in greater detail (Stark learns that the Ten Rings' members speak 'Arabic, Urdu, Dari, Pashto, Mongolian, Farsi, Russian' allowing the film to avoid targeting any particular political groups or nationalities). Whilst he is captive, the film follows the comic's storyline by having Stark team up with fellow prisoner Professor Yinsen to build the armour. Significantly, Yinsen in the comics is explicitly racialised, Heck's drawings depicting the stereotypical image of a small, elderly Chinese man with a long white beard and thin moustache dressed in a traditional Tang suit, whereas the film deliberately features an Iranian actor (Shaun Toub) in the role but still retains the character's Chinese name.

Iron Man's director, Jon Favreau, has claimed that the temporal shift of the adaptation stems from his personal desire to not film a period piece (Quint 2007) but while it is not helpful to assume he is being disingenuous, it would be naïve to assume that a decision as central to the film as this was solely made on this basis. Instead, the consequences of this change need to be examined in order to determine the implications for the commercial and artistic aspects of the film. In terms of how this change affects the film as an artistic product, the updating of the historical period actually has very few significant consequences for certain artistic elements of the film. I should clarify here that when I make a statement such as this I am referring to the specific criteria of narrative and characters. Whether Stark is involved in the Vietnam war, the conflict in Afghanistan or any other war, his journey as a character

is the same (wealthy industrialist has epiphany and uses technology to fight crime) and therefore the historical context is largely irrelevant – the story could even have been set in the industrial revolution and Stark's development would have been the same.

Of course, the artistic aspects that the period change does have consequences for are those which I identified in Chapter Two as being dependent on the viewer's mental interpretation, namely the symbolic dimension and the thematic content. By setting Stark's character progression in the contexts of contemporary capitalism and the war on terrorism, the film achieves a more obvious thematic and political immediacy in its engagement with, and critique of, the real world. It is possible to argue, however, that even this aspect of the film is, in essence, unaffected by the change in temporal setting. This is supported by the existence of other texts which use seemingly unrelated settings as allegories for contemporary events, the most obvious examples being Arthur Miller's 1953 play *The Crucible* (Miller 1966), in which the events of seventeenth century Salem are dramatised by the playwright in order to pass comment on the 1950s McCarthy-era witch hunts in America, and George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945) which uses talking animals on a rural farm as an analogy for the political history of the USSR. Both Miller's play and Orwell's novel demonstrate that even with a radical change in period or context, a text can still make incisive comments on contemporary events, proving that historical setting does not necessarily alter the textual comment or critique, but simply makes it less explicit. It is therefore possible to state that *Iron Man*'s critique of the arms industry and America's aggressive foreign policy could still have been present in a 1960s setting and that therefore the period change is not symptomatic of artistic logic because it has no demonstrable effect on the film as an artistic product.

Updating the period setting of the adaptation does however have obvious consequences for the commercial elements of the film. Principal among these (and one of the reasons why *Iron Man* has been selected as a case study) is that the contemporary setting of the film allows its story to tie-in with other Marvel superhero films so that *The Avengers* could be made. Following its release, Marvel Studios revealed that *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk* were the first films in 'Phase One' of its adaptation strategy, a five-year plan that would culminate in the superhero team-up film *The Avengers* (see figure 8.3). Marvel's phased strategy demonstrates that, as the goal was for the individual superheroes to team-up in one film, *Iron Man* could never have been set in any other period but the present day[69] if the character was to team up with Hulk and Thor, whose films are also set in the present day. As a change in period does not affect the artistic elements of the film significantly, the change can be argued to be a reflection of commercial logic in that it allows the superhero film to perform its required function of helping to build a fictional universe by connecting with *The Avengers* and *The Incredible Hulk* (in which Tony Stark has a cameo).

Of course, Marvel's long term plan to create a fictional universe which echoes the one depicted in its comics (one in which the narratives of each comic book are supposedly occurring alongside each other according to a definitive timeline and in which events in one comic have ramifications for other comics) means that all of the superhero adaptations released by the studio after *Iron Man* are required to work not only as films in their own right but as parts of a greater overarching narrative. This

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[69] Captain America is the only *Avengers* character whose individual film has a non-contemporary setting, but this is because the character's origin story is intrinsic to World War II. Marvel's plan also explains why changes are made to Captain America's origin story in the film, including the fact that he is frozen at the end of the film and then thawed out in present day America.

PHASE ONE: 2008-12

Iron Man

(appearances by Agent Coulson, Nick Fury)

The Incredible Hulk

(appearance by Iron Man)

Thor

(appearances by Nick Fury, Agent Coulson, Hawkeye)

Captain America

(appearance by Nick Fury)

Iron Man 2

(appearances by Nick Fury, Agent Coulson, Black Widow)

The Avengers

PHASE TWO: 2013-2015

Iron Man 3

(appearance by Bruce Banner)

Captain America: The Winter Soldier

(appearances by Black Widow, Nick Fury)

Thor: The Dark World

Guardians of the Galaxy

(appearance by Thanos)

Avengers: Age of Ultron

Ant Man

(appearance by The Falcon)

PHASE THREE: 2016-19

Captain America: Civil War

(appearances by Iron Man, Black Panther, Everett Ross, General Ross, Ant Man, Spider-Man, Aunt May)

Doctor Strange

Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2

Thor: Ragnarok

(appearances by Hulk and Doctor Strange)

Black Panther

(appearances by Everett Ross and Bucky)

Avengers: Infinity War

Ant-Man and the Wasp

Captain Marvel

(appearances by Ronan, Nick Fury, Phil Coulson, Korath)

Avengers: Infinity War Part II

Figure 8.3 – The three announced phases of Marvel's planned film release strategy (bracketed information shows appearances of crossover characters that link to other parts of the Marvel Cinematic Universe in each film). Model updated from original sources Kit and Bond (2013), Kinnear (2013) and Graser (2014).

suggests that the filmmakers of these films do not have free artistic reign to adapt the individual narratives because they must ultimately conform to Marvel's phased plan. A key point to be made here however is that within each film there is undeniably room for manoeuvre and artistic expression. The exact means by which Captain America, for example, manages to end up time travelling to the present day and the adventures he has on the way there are somewhat negotiable. In the same way, it is in the widest sense largely irrelevant how Thor comes to Earth and what he does there, provided the story strands which tie-in to *The Avengers* (the introduction of Thor as a superhero and his brother Loki as a villain who goes on to become the chief antagonist of *The Avengers*) are in place by the end of his first film. Clearly, there is room for artistic expression in the process but this can only occur as long as it does not transgress the rigid boundaries formed by Marvel's plan to unite its superheroes in *The Avengers*. Naturally, such a strategy means that the narratives of the original comics, which were not subject to the same phased plan as the films (although Marvel did eventually produce an *Avengers* comic), are significantly changed and warped in their transition to the screen.

Adaptation change 2: Selection and use of villains

Although the *Iron Man* films populate their narratives with a range of nemeses from the pages of the original comic books, the ways in which they use these villains are significantly different. Not only do the films make alterations to the back stories and narrative arcs of the villains but they also attempt to change and complicate the way they are presented in comparison to the rather more narrow constructions of the comic books. The villains which appear onscreen are The Ten Rings terrorist

organisation and Obadiah Stane/Iron Monger (*Iron Man*), Ivan Vanko/Whiplash and Justin Hammer (*Iron Man 2*) and the Mandarin and Aldrich Killian (*Iron Man 3*). While these are all characters who appear in the comic books (except for the Ten Rings who are an update of Wong Chu's guerrilla army from the first issue, and Killian who is not a villain in his comic incarnation but rather a scientist who makes an unwitting error in creating the Extremis virus), the ways in which they are combined are unique to the films due to the fact that many of the villains are taken from different periods of the comic's run. Vanko and the Mandarin are taken from 1960s storylines, while Hammer debuted in the late seventies, Stane in the mid-eighties and Killian more recently in the mid-2000s. This is significant in itself as Vanko and the Mandarin are transposed from the earliest era of the comic when the texts unashamedly expounded nationalistic and, by modern definitions, racist ideology – examples include Iron Man's assertion that Vanko 'knows how treacherous all Communists are!' (Berns and Heck 1963b, p 13) and a description of the Mandarin's homeland as 'seething…secretive Red China' (Lee and Heck 1964, p 2) – as opposed to Hammer, Stane and Killian who reflect the increased focus on domestic corporate villains in the later comics.

All three *Iron Man* films therefore play as variations on a similar structural formula which combines the villains of the 1960s with the more recent creations. This quite specific structure is characterised by establishing a foreign villain early in the film who is then later revealed to be working for (or comes into the employ of) an American corporate rival of Stark's. Thus in *Iron Man*, the Middle Eastern Ten Rings group are revealed to have been hired by Stark Industries' director Obadiah Stane, who is unmasked as the chief villain. *Iron Man 2* similarly establishes the Russian Ivan Vanko (a cinematic amalgamation of the comic book characters Crimson

Dynamo and Whiplash) as the initial antagonist who is later bankrolled by Justin Hammer, Stark's rival, so that Hammer can use Vanko's engineering expertise against Stark. This structure is replicated again in *Iron Man 3*, the principal threat of which comes in the form of the Middle Eastern terrorist the Mandarin, a mysterious warlord who, in a later twist, is exposed as an incompetent actor hired to play the part by the real mastermind, American scientist Aldrich Killian.

In terms of the commercial consequences of such a change, the decision to make the international villains relatively minor antagonists who are only partly responsible for any wrongdoings compared to the greater evil of their American capitalist exploiters allows the film to perform one of its commercial functions of appealing to the widest audience possible. In recent years, the American film industry has seen a significant growth in international markets compared to the domestic market (United States and Canada). Between 2007 and 2011, gross international box office revenue increased by 35% compared to 6% for domestic (MPAA 2012, p 4), continuing a trend for international box office growth which has been evident since 2004 (Hoad 2011). Marvel's awareness of the importance of the international market was evidenced mere months after the release of the first *Iron Man* film by its formation of an International Advisory Board, established with the express aim of 'expanding the penetration of Marvel into international markets' (Marvel Entertainment 2009). Consequently, the quite specific alterations to the villains in the *Iron Man* films have a direct commercial consequence in that they temper the original comic books' xenophobic and nationalistic stances whilst still allowing Marvel to incorporate Iron Man's traditional international enemies. The fact that these enemies are now shown to work independently of any national agendas renders the narratives of the source material more palatable and less like American

propaganda for international audiences. This strategy is also reflected in the adaptation of *Captain America* which McClintock notes did surprisingly well internationally despite initial fears that it 'would struggle in foreign markets because of the character's patriotic overtones'. McClintock explains this partly by the marketing's focus 'on the film's action, rather than it being a World War II…piece', but does not acknowledge the significant role of narrative content in making the film more internationally friendly (2011, pp 8–9). The tone of *Captain America* as a film is somewhat different from the original comics which championed the character as a personification of the American war effort and revelled in his xenophobic pugilistic adventures. Instead, the adaptation is filtered through a contemporary ideology which stresses the heroism and bravery of all the men and women during wartime and accentuates the character's compassionate, romantic and libertarian qualities rather than solely focusing on his American identity. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in a scene in which Steve Rogers (who will later become Captain America) is asked if he wants to enlist because he wants to kill Nazis, to which he replies: 'I don't want to kill anybody. I just don't like bullies'. Significantly, the film also subtly separates the fictional villains from the Germans, using Cap's traditional comic book nemesis the Nazi scientist Red Skull as his cinematic antagonist but establishing early on that the villain has gone rogue from Hitler's party to form his own movement, Hydra.

Further evidence of Marvel's strategy of changing material in order to appease overseas territories comes in the form of the slightly different version of *Iron Man 3* which was released in China. *Iron Man 3* was announced as a co-production between Marvel and the Chinese film production company DMG in an attempt to make it one of the few non-Chinese films granted a release each year under China's

strict quota laws. The Chinese release contained four minutes of extra scenes filmed in China and added some of the country's more famous actors to the film in order to make an exclusive version (Wan 2013; Davis 2013)[70]. Obviously these extra scenes are not derived from the source material in any way (they include slightly increased screen time for the character Dr Wu – whose role as a surgeon operating on Stark is almost non-existent in the American version – as well as a newly created role for the actor Fan Bingbing and a scene of explicit product placement at the start of the film; Enk 2013), but what is significant about the Chinese involvement in the film for this analysis of *Iron Man 3* is the fact that one of the film's villains is the Mandarin. In order to avoid the portrayal of the character that appears in the comic books, and risk offending not only contemporary Chinese audiences but also many other audiences both domestic and international, the adaptation makes significant changes: the character is portrayed onscreen by Ben Kingsley, a British actor of Indian descent, whose make-up and vocal inflections in the grainy videos through which he threatens Stark on the news resemble the stereotypical aesthetic of a Middle Eastern terrorist, rather than a Chinese man. Of course, the change to the Mandarin's character is in fact likely to be the result of more than one factor (the link to Middle Eastern terrorists in the first film, China's lack of association with terrorism historically speaking and the desire of the franchise as a whole to ostensibly avoid explicit demonisation of any specific culture), but it remains true that the Mandarin could not be presented onscreen in the way that he is in the early comics in a film which China promoted as a co-production and thus alterations are necessary as a result.

In terms of the films' identities as artistic products, the change in the roles of

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[70] Later reports confirmed, however, that the film 'did not pass as a co-production…because it did not include "significant participation" of Chinese talent and Chinese settings' (Li 2013, p 2)

the villains also has important consequences. The films transform the early comic books' attacks on America's enemies into a critique of capitalism and nationalism in which the enemies are not so much foreign countries but are instead corporations and rogue individuals who are frequently motivated by a narrow profit-seeking mentality and America's aggressive foreign policy. This counter-attack on the culture which spawned *Iron Man* is demonstrated through the character of Stark before he becomes a hero, in the initial presentation of him as a shallow and glib war profiteer. Upon presenting his new missile to the military in Afghanistan, Stark arrogantly tells the assembled generals that he likes 'the weapon you only have to fire once. That's how Dad did it, that's how America does it – and it's worked out pretty well so far. Find an excuse to let one of these [missiles] off the chain and I personally guarantee you the bad guys won't even want to come out of their caves'. Here, Stark blithely cites Orientalist imagery but his arrogance is later deflated when he is described by the terrorists he has previously mocked as 'Tony Stark: the most famous mass murderer in the history of America'. The irony of the Ten Rings' stockpiling of Stark Industries' weapons is not lost on either Stark or the audience as the film considers the uncomfortable implications of his work, something which is echoed in the sequel when Vanko tells Stark: 'You come from a family of thieves and butchers and now, like guilty men, you try to rewrite your own history.' The idea of Stark, and by association, America, as a Frankenstein figure responsible for creating the demons that will return to destroy him reaches its ultimate expression in *Iron Man 3*, the prologue of which shows Stark virtually ignoring Yinsen (the man who will later save his life in Afghanistan) at a New Year's Eve party in 1999. Crucially, Stark also smugly dismisses the clumsy scientist Killian at the same party, an act which fosters a sense of resentment in Killian that ultimately culminates in his attempt to destroy

Stark and his friends in the present day. The idea that there will be severe consequences for Stark, whose complacent arch-capitalist attitude reflects a belief that power and wealth allow him to treat people as if they are insignificant, is reinforced with the present day Stark's more sombre voice-over at the start of the film: 'A wise man once said, "We make our own demons"'. As *Iron Man 3* progresses, it depicts not a superhero but a fractured and vulnerable man who is still experiencing trauma from his past adventures and is in therapy with Bruce Banner.

Thus far, it would seem that the consequences of the adaptation change are artistically significant, putting increased focus on the film's themes, character and symbolism. It would therefore be logical to conclude that the changes to the villains in these adaptations are symptomatic of both commercial and artistic logic – the former making the films more acceptable to international audiences by being less celebratory of American nationalism, and the latter allowing all three films to construct a nuanced and complex debate about the responsibility that the world's superpowers (and I use the term in the political and militaristic sense here) have to the human race. However, further deconstruction of the films suggests that the manner in which they transmit their true message is more complex than this and reveals a new dimension to the artistry/commerce relationship hitherto unseen in these case studies. Thus far it has been argued that the films ostensibly offer a more pacifist, anti-militaristic message and reject the notion that America is superior to other countries, even going so far as to vilify the American corporations which profit from war and weaponry. However, the films' sub-textual messages actually appear to run counter to these surface critiques and contradict them.

In terms of their narrative structure and the ways in which they conclude, all three of the films arguably support a pro-American, militaristic ideology on a deeper

level and subtly espouse the values they appear to condemn. This is evidenced by a consideration of the figure of Iron Man himself who acts as a heroic reconciler of the fears raised by questioning America's role in creating terrorism. In this sense, all three films adhere to the screenplay formula that writer and director Steven E. de Souza describes wherein 'a protagonist [overcomes] adversity against a background that exorcises the audience's guilt about an uncomfortable subject' (cited in Maltby 2003, p 438). Accordingly, whenever Stark is presented with an uncomfortable reminder of his past (the Ten Rings, Vanko, Killian) he is able to expurgate the guilt and redeem himself by climbing into the suit, at which point the spectacular action sequences encourage the audience to forget (or at least be diverted from) the complexity of the moral argument and root for the hero. In doing this, the trilogy evokes the spectres of capitalist and nationalist guilt only to attempt to lay them to rest with the straightforward and reassuring message that Iron Man (or America) will save the day from the aggressive foreign Others who threaten the status quo – even if Stark/America has indirectly created these problems in the first place. In this sense, the films implicitly exonerate America and in doing so return the message of the text to that of the early pro-American comic books.

Similarly, the films work against their own anti-war message. When Stark returns from Afghanistan and has a pacifist epiphany, declaring 'I came to realise that I had more to offer this world than just making things to blow up', the film espouses non-violent solutions to conflict, yet Stark as Iron Man unfailingly resorts to physical violence to resolve the disputes in every single film. Despite the fact that the screenplays establish that Stark is drawn into these conflicts in a defensive or protective capacity (when, for example, he returns to Afghanistan to thwart the Ten Rings' attack on a village or when he must defend himself from Whiplash), the

dynamism and, at times, humour of the action set pieces combined with Iron Man's impressive, fetishized technology appears to celebrate the destructive violence. The true message of the films, then, proves to be a somewhat modified version of Tony's unequivocal anti-war stance: it *is* acceptable to deploy extensive weaponry and 'blow things up' as long as you are fighting on the 'right' side. All three films depict Stark achieving a resolution to his difficulties not through peaceful means but by entering into combat: with Stane in the first film's climax, with Vanko at the conclusion of the second film and, most spectacularly, with Killian and his soldiers against whom he uses an army of Iron Man suits at the end of *Iron Man 3*. Indeed, these conflicts are literally solved by 'blowing things up': Stane plunges into the arc reactor, a dying Vanko detonates numerous bombs and Killian is locked inside an Iron Man suit which combusts around him. Interestingly, none of the three films contain any scenes after the battles which show Tony attempting to reconcile his pacifist stance with the destruction he wreaks as Iron Man, implying that his adoption of the Iron Man identity has resolved his internal conflict. The final line of the trilogy provides affirmation that Stark has accepted his role as the powerful superhero. In a celebratory voice-over that contains none of the doubt or uncertainty audible in his opening speech, Stark announces: 'there's one thing you can never take away from me: I am Iron Man!"

If the artistic elements of the film ultimately allowed for a more complex discussion of international rivalry and a deconstruction and critique of American capitalism and foreign policy (as they initially seem to), it could be concluded this specific adaptation change reflected artistic and commercial logic, in that a change in the motivation of the villains would lead to a deepening of the film's artistic functions such as its themes, symbolism and narrative. However, closer analysis shows that

the franchise's overall message – namely that violence and superior American might do in fact triumph – contradicts these ideas and ultimately means that the film texts offer the same message as the original 1960s comics, albeit disguised under a veil of pacifism and international acceptance. Here, the analysis demonstrates that the artistic elements are performing a hitherto unseen, very specific function. On an explicit, textual level through dialogue, character and story, the films reflect a more contemporary, socially acceptable ideology, rejecting xenophobia and acknowledging that conflict and war can be understood from multiple perspectives. Yet the films' subtext more strongly suggests the franchise's true regressive ideology in which moral conflicts are resolved through spectacular sequences of violence.

The conclusion that can be drawn from this is that the adaptation change appeals to commercial logic because it makes the film more palatable for the international market and widens the potential audience for the product by claiming to critique America. It is not possible however to demonstrate that this same change is symptomatic of artistic logic because close reading shows that there is, in essence, *no* change in the original textual message of the source material. If the updating of the villains to better reflect a more tolerant, less nationalistic perspective was truly borne out by the film's core presentation of narrative, character and themes, it could be concluded that the changes were reflective of artistic logic. However, as deconstruction has shown, this is not the case and as there has been no alteration to the text's themes and message in this respect, the adaptation change can only be justified in relation to its commercial consequences.

Conclusion: Implications of the *Iron Man* case study

The two adaptation changes identified in the *Iron Man* franchise – the updating of the comic's temporal setting, and the variations in the selection and presentation of villains – have both been argued to be symptomatic of a dominant commercial logic. Again, this conclusion does not disprove the assertion that artistic considerations have a degree of effectivity; it simply shows that certain aspects of superstructural artistic products are determined by economic considerations, just as certain aspects are determined by artistic considerations. This is not to say that the *Iron Man* films as a whole are entirely shaped by commercial logic but rather that these two specific adaptation changes are. The case study contributes to this research's ongoing theoretical conversation however, by providing a new perspective on the second part of the proposition, the description of economic considerations as being determinant in the *last* instance. The first adaptation change analysis discusses how the temporal setting of *Iron Man* allows the protagonist's story to fit in to a specific narrative space within the phased plan for the Marvel Cinematic Universe, a plan which ultimately ties-in with *The Avengers* films. As a whole, Marvel's phased plan is an example of the proposition that artistry has a degree of effectivity within a structure for which economics is the ultimate determinant. Just as Universal's hiring of Lee for *Hulk* was an example of commerce granting artistry a degree of influence because it supposedly served a commercial objective, so too does the long-term commercial strategy of the Marvel universe permit artistry to have some influence on the individual films contained within it.

Iron Man suggests, however, that this theoretical formulation might perhaps be reconfigured to better account for the specific ways in which art and commerce

interact to shape these films. The first adaptation change analysis acknowledges that there is a degree of narrative flexibility within each superhero's individual films, providing that the characters are positioned (like chess pieces) in the places assigned to them by Marvel's phased plan and thereby suggests that, in terms of each individual film, a more accurate description is that economics is determinant in the *first* instance rather than the last. This is not simply a linguistic detail; here the individual films which comprise the Marvel Cinematic Universe must fit into a pre-established framework defined by a commercial logic which intends to sustain a long-running and successful film universe. From a long-term perspective, with the release pattern for each phase of the films predetermined in the first instance, the individual films have, theoretically speaking, *relative* degrees of freedom to be shaped by artistic and commercial logic. Such a reconfiguration of the proposition should of course be treated with caution and I should make clear here that this revised description of the relationship between art and commerce does not go so far as to say that their roles are reversed and that the former now occupies the latter's position. Whether it is in the first or last instance, the status of economic considerations as the ultimate determinant is not in question here, but what the case study does suggest is that, for this example at least, economic considerations assert themselves in the early stages of filmmaking rather than at the end. Inevitably, this case study alone does not constitute enough evidence to reach a definitive conclusion regarding this and this theoretical adjustment will be reconsidered at greater length in relation to the other case studies in the concluding Discussion (Chapter Ten). The *Iron Man* analysis does however suggest that it might be necessary to rephrase the central proposition to a degree.

Chapter Nine

Case Study Four: The *Dark Knight* Trilogy

Historical context: Batman in comics and on screen

Batman, despite a lack of any actual superpowers, is one of the most enduring and well known superheroes in popular culture. Decades of comic book, television and film appearances have furnished the character with an iconic set of associations such as his caped suit and cowl mask with its yellow and black bat insignia, the projected 'bat-sign' which lights up the night sky when he is needed, his vehicle the Batmobile, partner Robin and a rogue's gallery of nemeses such as the Joker and the Riddler. The character was created for DC Comics by Bob Kane and Bill Finger in 1939 and made his debut, like so many other superheroes of this era of comic book publishing, in the pages of an anthology comic (*Detective Comics* #27; Finger and Kane 1939) before moving on to his own eponymously titled comic in 1940. Since then, the character has retained his consistent popularity as one of the most prominent characters in comic book history, appearing across a range of monthly titles.

The character's origin story begins when a young Bruce Wayne is orphaned

after his parents are killed by street thugs in his fictional home of Gotham City. As a consequence, Bruce resolves to dedicate his life to protecting the city and ridding it of crime, using his vast inheritance to create an array of weapons, armour and vehicles to do so. As Batman, Wayne operates from his Batcave underneath the stately Wayne Manor where he lives with his butler Alfred (and, in some narratives, his assistant Robin), alternating the nocturnal crime-fighting activity of his alter ego with his daily existence as both a socialite and the head of Wayne Enterprises. Although Batman has no superpowers, relying solely on his advanced technology, the comic book narratives have historically strayed into science-fiction and fantasy territory through enemies such as The Scarecrow with his fear chemicals, Mr Freeze, who can freeze people with his ice gun and the mystical immortal Ra's al Ghul. Batman's most famous nemesis is the Joker, a colourful but psychotic villain who has consistently resurfaced throughout the comics' history.

Batman made his first appearance onscreen in the black and white serial *Batman* (1943) and its sequel *Batman and Robin* (1949), both released as a series of short films to be played before the main feature in cinemas. It was not until 1966 however, that one of the definitive adaptations of the character appeared in the form of the television series Batman and its cinematic spin-off, *Batman: The Movie*. This comedic and camp lampooning of the source material starred Adam West and Burt Ward as Batman and Robin and ran for three years. The series is responsible for many of the persistent stereotypes which still surround the character today such as the famous theme tune, the catchphrases ('Holy…Batman!'), the posturing villains and the fight scenes which replicated the visual onomatopoeia of the comic books with colourful captions such as 'Oof!' and 'Thwak!' inserted over the action. Significantly, *Batman: The Movie* was influential in terms of future adaptations in the

sense that its four villains (the Penguin, the Joker, Catwoman and the Riddler)

became associated with the character as his chief antagonists and were the first four

villains to later appear across the first three Batman films of the 80s and 90s

franchise.

Inevitably, the character found his way to animated form, uniting with his

fellow DC superhero Superman for *The Batman/Superman Hour* (1968), before

appearing in other cartoons such as *Super Friends* (1973) and *The New Adventures*

of Batman (1977), an animated continuation of the live action television series using

the voices of West and Ward. It was not, however, until 1989 that the character

achieved worldwide cinematic success with Tim Burton's *Batman*. Released by DC

Comics' parent company Warner Bros., the film was an expensive production which

attracted Jack Nicholson (who was billed above Michael Keaton's Batman) to the

part of the Joker. A more adult retelling of Batman's origin, Burton's neo-Gothic

sensibilities infused it with a stylised darkness in terms of its visuals and its content.

In a number of ways, *Batman* became an archetype for the vast majority of

superhero adaptations. Its relatively large budget and summer release date placed it

firmly in the category of blockbuster and its 12 certificate (the first release ever to

receive the UK's new classification) suggested it would have more adult content than

a film with a PG rating but ensured that it was, crucially, still accessible to a teenage

audience. In fact, the 12 certificate would go on to become the definitive rating for

the superhero adaptation with eighteen of the twenty most successful comic book

superhero adaptations at the US box office having been awarded a 12 or 12A

certificate in the UK (Box Office Mojo 2013). After the film's considerable box office

success (see figure 9.1), Warner Bros. developed Batman into a franchise, the first

film being followed by *Batman Returns*, which established the pattern of having

Batman face two opponents, The Penguin and Catwoman, before Joel Schumacher took over as director for the third and fourth films, 1995's *Batman Forever* (featuring the villains the Riddler and Two-Face) and 1997's *Batman and Robin* (featuring newer nemeses Poison Ivy and Mr Freeze). By recasting the part of Batman twice over the course of the series, the franchise also proved that it was possible to change the lead actor as long as the character remained, with Batman being played by three actors (Michael Keaton, Val Kilmer and George Clooney) over four films, an approach that would later be replicated across the reboots of the Superman, Hulk and Spider-Man films.

The story of how *Batman and Robin*'s box office underperformance led to the cessation of the franchise has already been told in the *X-Men* case study and will not be repeated here, but what the above adaptations illustrate is the source material's potential to be interpreted across a wide spectrum, tonally speaking. From the garish and comedic 1966 television series and film, to Burton's pitch black, horror-influenced noir and back again to Schumacher's brightly lit, tongue-in-cheek camp, the Batman characters and core narratives have seemingly been able to sustain radically different interpretations and have 'been open to all manner of legitimate, workable approaches' (Newman 2012, p 88). Where Burton depicts a dystopian Gotham whose residents are capable of terrorism, infanticide, mutilation and chemical warfare, Schumacher presents a city lit with the multi-coloured hues of a nightclub disco in which Arnold Schwarzenegger's Mr Freeze makes puns such as '*Ice* to see you'. Where *Batman Returns* envisions The Penguin as a monstrous freak who eats raw fish, the television series constructs him as a sophisticated gentleman in a bright purple outfit and, of course, no two interpretations of a character could be further apart than West's parodic faux-naïve Batman and

Keaton's tortured and damaged hero. Brooker notes that, over the course of multiple publications and adaptations, Batman, more than any other superhero has resisted a definitive interpretation, developing a pluralist identity so that 'the character seems to become merely a name and logo adopted by a multitude of different "Batmen", each representing a different facet of a specific cultural moment and taking on the concerns of a period or the tastes of an audience' (2001, p 39).

Following Brooker's observation, it becomes clear that the character's next major interpretation – in Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005) – was one which was representative of the highly politicised energies of an America that was cognisant of the external threat of terrorism and mistrustful of internal capitalist power. Nolan's task was to reboot the Warner Bros. franchise after the critical and commercial failure of *Batman and Robin* but like Ang Lee with *Hulk*, the director was something of a surprising choice for the subject matter, having established critical respect for his dark and relatively low budget thrillers *Following* (1998), *Memento* (2000) and *Insomnia* (2002). As with Lee, there is evidence to justify the description of Nolan as an auteur, the above three films identifiably bearing his signature both visually – through their muted colour palettes and frequent reliance on hand held camerawork – and in terms of their structure and content – through their complex characterisations, thematic explorations of memory and trauma and their non-linear, multi-stranded narratives. Additionally, all three share distinct tonal likenesses, their avoidance of sentimentality encouraging the viewer to maintain an emotional distance despite Nolan's recurring tendency to focus on 'grief…as [a] plot motor' which '[drives his] protagonists to impossible heights' (Newman 2010, p 61). These hallmarks, combined with a repertory ensemble approach to casting (Christian Bale, Marion Cotillard, Michael Caine and Tom Hardy) are also identifiable in the films he

has made since *Batman Begins*, *The Prestige* (2006) and *Inception* (2010), which, according to Bevan, share similarly 'complex structures' and which, as expected from a cohesive body of work belonging to an auteur, have 'all retained the noir-ish gleam, thematic obsessions and technical daring of his earlier work' (2012, p 15). Typically then, Nolan's take on Batman is psychologically complex and dark both visually and tonally, the absolute antithesis of the adaptation which had preceded it. What sets it apart even from Burton's dark vision however is its grounding in realism, Nolan choosing to remove all of the fantastical elements and superpowers from the characters and (with the exception of some of the slightly more advanced technology and vehicles such as the Batmobile/Bat-jet and the Scarecrow's fear gas) considering how Batman would function in a real world environment.

Nolan's trilogy forms a cohesive and self-contained whole, one which is hermetically sealed from any other DC cinematic adaptation and which, unlike Marvel Studios' films, absolutely refuses to acknowledge crossovers with other characters. *Batman Begins* retells the origin of the character, retaining the tragic circumstances of Thomas and Martha Wayne's murder but adding a new story in which a twenty-something Bruce (Bale) is imprisoned in Bhutan where he is trained by Ducard (Liam Neeson) to become part of the villainous League of Shadows. After Bruce turns against the League, he returns to Gotham to create his alter ego and where, with the help of Sergeant Gordon (Gary Oldman) he must confront the Scarecrow (Cillian Murphy), a doctor whose victims are exposed to a powerful hallucinogenic chemical. At the film's climax, Bruce must battle Ducard, revealed to be Ra's al Ghul, a long standing foe of Batman in the comics and the head of the League of Shadows. The sequel, *The Dark Knight* (2008), continues Bruce's struggle against Gotham's growing crime problem, which is made worse after the introduction

of a mysterious psychopath with a painted face known only as the Joker (Heath Ledger). The Joker's desire to create pure chaos in Gotham results in the mutilation of Gotham's district attorney Harvey Dent whose facial burns are so severe that he becomes insane (the film's interpretation of the comic book character Two Face). In the conclusion to the trilogy, *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), Batman must form an uneasy alliance with the morally ambivalent Selina Kyle/Catwoman (Anne Hathaway), in order to take on the terrorist Bane (Tom Hardy) whose army is strongly reminiscent of the real-world anti-capitalist Occupy movement. At the film's climax, the entire trilogy is linked when one of Bruce's trusted board members Miranda Tate (Marion Cotillard) is exposed as the mastermind behind the plot and revealed to be the vengeful Talia al Ghul, daughter of Batman's arch nemesis in the first film.

Nolan's trilogy performed extremely well financially. Even by the standards of successful comic book adaptations at a time when the genre was reaching new heights of popularity with filmgoers, *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises*'s worldwide box office takings of over $1bn each placed them far ahead of nearly every other superhero film and, unusually for a sequel, meant that *The Dark Knight* achieved a 168% increase on its predecessor's takings. In terms of its reception, the films won largely positive reviews, with critics praising their serious, grounded depiction of Batman. A number of critics commented on the way that Nolan's real world take on the character in *The Dark Knight* reinvented the superhero blockbuster in an overcrowded genre, Dinning arguing that it took 'a switchblade to the face of summer conformity and carve[d] a work of twisted beauty out of it' (2008) while others such as Newman acknowledged the seriousness of *The Dark Knight Rises*'s treatment of themes such as 'heroism, self-sacrifice [and] Greek tragic levels of

vengeance-seeking' (2012, p 89). Atypically for a comic book superhero adaptation, *The Dark Knight* also received artistic recognition at the Academy and BAFTA Awards for one of its performances, with Ledger posthumously winning Best Supporting Actor for his role as the Joker, demonstrating the film's ability to earn both economic and symbolic capital[71]. A summary of the various cinematic adaptations of the Batman comic books and their box office performance is shown in figure 9.1[72].

In terms of how the comics and films have been interpreted by academics and literary theorists, Batman is one of the most analysed superheroes. The range of discussion is, as always, as wide as the range of disciplines. One of the most common starting points for analysis is an acknowledgment of the multiplicity of the often contradictory (yet often coterminous) versions of Batman which exist across various media formats such as the comics, films, live action television series, animated television series, video games and even live arena shows. While there are those who argue the merits of one representation of the character over others (Carter 2003), Brooker questions whether or not it is even possible to work towards a unified and monolithic vision of the character as a bricolage constituted of the various portrayals and considers how the relationship between these sources, 'whether of sameness or difference, convergence or opposition[, is]…established and confirmed' (2012, p 2). Research on Batman tends, however, to assuredly return to the same four areas: mythology, sexuality, psychology and politics. Mythological readings such as Nichols's and Anderson's (2011 and 2012 respectively) argue that

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[71] The film was also nominated for its cinematography at the Academy Awards and Ledger also won the Golden Globe and Broadcast Film Critics Association awards among others.

[72] Post-2013, Warner Bros. rebooted Batman once again. Now portrayed by Ben Affleck, the character exists in a separate universe from that of Nolan's films in which superpowers (and other heroes such as Superman and Wonder Woman) exist. This version of the character has appeared in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), *Suicide Squad* (2016) and *Justice League* (2017).

Film (year of release)	Director/writer	Adapted from (source material)	Budget estimate (in US$m)	Worldwide box office takings (in US$)	Position relative to other films in its year of release in terms of worldwide box office earnings
Batman (1966)	Leslie Martinson/Lorenzo Semple, Jr.	Original screenplay based on the 1966 television series	1.37	3,000,000[73]	Unavailable
Batman (1989)	Tim Burton/Sam Hamm and Warren Skaaren	Contains elements from *Batman* #1 (Finger and Kane 1940a) and *Batman: The Killing Joke* (Moore and Bolland 2008; originally published 1998).	35	411,653,257	2
Batman Returns (1992)	Tim Burton/Daniel Waters	Contains elements from *Batman* #1 (Finger and Kane 1940a) and *Detective Comics* #58 (Finger and Kane 1941a).	80	266,778,473	6
Batman Forever (1995)	Joel Schumacher/Lee Batchler, Janet Scott Batchler and Akiva Goldsman	Contains elements from *Detective Comics* #38 (Finger and Kane 1940b), *Detective Comics* #66 (Finger and Kane 1942) and *Detective Comics* #140 (Finger and Sprang 1948)	100	336,563, 612	6

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[73] Source: Imdb (2013). This is believed to be a very loose estimate as there is no data on the three box office sites for this film

Batman and Robin (1997)	Joel Schumacher/Akiva Goldsman	Contains elements from *Batman* #121 (Wood and Moldoff 1959), *Batman* #139 (Finger and Moldoff 1961), *Batman* #181 (Kanigher and Moldoff 1966) and *Batman: The Animated Series*, *Heart of Ice* (1992)	125	238,244,019	15
Batman Begins (2005)	Christopher Nolan/Christopher Nolan and David S. Goyer	Contains elements from *World's Finest Comics* #3 (Finger and Kane 1941b), *Batman* #232 (O'Neil and Adams 1971), *The Man Who Falls* (O'Neil and Giordano 1989), and *Batman: Year One* (Miller and Mazzuchelli 2005; originally published 1987).	150	369,193,357	9
The Dark Knight (2008)	Christopher Nolan/Jonathan Nolan and Christopher Nolan	Contains elements from *Batman* #1 (Finger and Kane 1940a) and *Detective Comics* #66 (Finger and Kane 1942).	185	1,003,628,238	1
The Dark Knight Rises (2012)	Christopher Nolan/Jonathan Nolan and Christopher Nolan	Contains elements from *Batman* #1 (Finger and Kane 1940a), *Detective Comics* #411 (O'Neil and Brown 1971), *Batman: Vengeance of Bane* #1 (Dixon and Nolan 1993), *Batman: No Man's Land* #1 (Gale and Maleev 1999) and *Batman: Knightfall* (Moench et al 2000; originally published 1993)	262.5	1,081,042,330	3

Figure 9.1 – Film adaptations featuring Batman, 1966-2012

Batman is a totemic figure who, like many heroes, is an archetypal symbol of goodness. While Anderson examines the way the concept of choice is presented through Batman as opposed to the villains, Nichols traces the character's literary roots to mythological notions in folklore through which the Joker and he become 'symbols of chaos and order' (2011, p 237). The sexuality readings encompass the idea of deviancy through an exploration of Wayne's motivations for dressing up in an outfit and engaging in combat with other costumed individuals (Orr 1994) as well as the common application of queer theory. The latter theory picks up on 'the barely sublimated homoeroticism' which critics such as Tipton (2008, p 322) have argued has been a consistent component of the Batman comics' subtext since the debut of his sidekick Robin and the subsequent controversial attack by psychologist Frederic Wertham in *Seduction of the Innocent* in which he likened Batman and Robin's relationship to 'a wish dream of two homosexuals living together' (1954, p 190). The third category, psychoanalytical readings, includes research by Rubin (2012), who explores how Wayne has developed the Batman persona as a response to the trauma of his orphaning, and by Brody, who places his reading of the narratives in relation to the protagonist's psychological trajectory of 'personality fragmenting and recovery' (1995, p 177).

The politicised readings of the texts tend to focus on Batman as a symbol of right wing politics, whose ruthless vigilante activities and brutal response to crime arguably border on fascism. While writers such as Iadonisi (2012) have read Batman's body as a site and symbol of the aggressive policies of Reagan's America, others such as Kowalik (2010) have viewed his willingness to use illegal force as a metaphor for America's foreign policy in the wake of the terrorist attacks of the early 2000s. Kowalik argues that, in certain Batman texts, his strange mix of heroism and

physical threat makes him the ideal figurehead for 'neoconservatism', a personification of 'the belief that it is the responsibility of the United States to propagate [their] concept of…liberty and that the government is responsible for protecting us from…threats to our way of life' (2010, p 395). In fact, it is the sociopolitical perspective that seems to be the most obvious theoretical approach for any reading of Nolan's film trilogy which is concerned with the power and corruption of Gotham's institutions and governing bodies and which likens the Joker, Bane, Ra's al Ghul and Talia al Ghul to real world terrorists with destructive personal and political agendas.

Adaptation Analysis

This case study focuses on Nolan's self-contained Batman trilogy comprised of *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises*. This is not because they are considered to be better films than the previous Batman adaptations but purely because they are the most fruitful for this particular analytical approach. On an artistic level, Nolan's films constitute the most recent and politically relevant version of the character, tackling issues such as the fear of terrorism, the threat of capitalism and the public response to it. Nolan's 'real world' approach also fits neatly into this research's partial history of the genre. Not only does his auteur status allow some of the ideas concerning artistry and commerce discussed at the conclusion of the *Hulk* case study to be developed, but his serious treatment of the comic can also be seen as a natural development of the stylistic and tonal movement begun by Singer's *X-Men* at the beginning of the superhero comic book film's resurgence in 2000. On a commercial level, the films are certainly worthy of further consideration

due to the phenomenal box office success of the last two films (*The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises*) whose revenues suggest that audiences responded positively to Nolan's approach on some level and that his vision was culturally relevant.

The first adaptation change examines what I term Nolan's 'quasi-realist' mode of storytelling and attempts to define how the films balance the gritty realist tone and narrative of the source material with the more fantastical elements of Batman's mythology. This analysis argues that the more traditionally fantastical comic book elements of *Batman Begins* are a reflection of a commercial logic which forces the film to fulfil its commercial function of providing audiences with a replication of a familiar film narrative. The second adaptation change is Nolan's addition of economic storylines and themes, exploring the extent to which they are threaded throughout the trilogy and how they come to fruition in *The Dark Knight Rises*. The analysis examines the artistic and commercial consequences of this decision and argues that it is primarily symptomatic of artistic logic.

Adaptation change 1: Nolan's quasi-realist mode of storytelling

Critics have consistently reiterated that Nolan's approach to the source material reflects a desire to imbue it with a less fantastical realism (Newman 2005; Pierce 2012), a view which is confirmed by Nolan's own description of his approach as 'more real' (cited in Jolin 2009) and by the writer of *Batman Begins* David S. Goyer's acknowledgement that '[Nolan's and my] approach has always been naturalistic, realistic; we always try to imagine these stories as if they could happen

in the same world in which we live' (cited in Dyce 2012). Indeed, realism seems to be the key word in many discussions of the three films, including interviews with those who were directly involved in the filmmaking process. From the instructions given to special effects supervisor Chris Corbould by Nolan (to only 'use CGI…if we couldn't do something for real' and to build a fully functioning real Batmobile) through to the designs for Gotham City which were mapped 'onto real locations' in New York and for which sets were largely rejected in favour of real Chicago streets, the guiding principle for Nolan's vision was, as Williams notes, to 'keep it real' (2012, pp 96-9). Accordingly, some of the staple comic book elements are absent from the films, linguistically if not physically: Batman's vehicle is called the Tumbler and not referred to as the Batmobile, Selina Kyle is never called Catwoman and Wayne's lair is never given the moniker of the Batcave. Additionally, many of the traditional signifiers of the comics' notoriously theatrical villains are refracted through the prism of Nolan's real world logic and are only included if they have a real world purpose. Thus the Joker's white face and green hair are not chemical scarring but are instead merely the result of face paint used to hide his identity, the Scarecrow's hessian mask is required for his chemical fear experiment, Harvey 'Two Face' Dent's distinctive scarred face is presented as the painful and anatomically accurate result of terrible burns and the only time Selina Kyle's iconic Catwoman costume is referenced is when she places her infrared goggles on her head, 'accidentally' forming the ears of her comic book counterpart's cat mask. In keeping with this real world logic, *Batman Begins* also goes to great lengths to show Wayne making his own accessories, depicting him fashioning his weapons by hand and spray painting his suit and vehicle, both of which have been requisitioned from his company's neglected research department.

Yet a comparison with the specific Batman comic which Nolan and his co-writer Goyer based *Batman Begins* on[74] – *Batman: Year One*[75] – suggests that describing the trilogy as a realist interpretation of the comics is not only insufficiently detailed for the purposes of this analysis but is also, in fact, inaccurate. The comic book *Year One* is itself a dark and realistic take on the Batman myth, paralleling the story of a young Bruce Wayne and his return to Gotham after an extended absence with that of Jim Gordon's arrival in the city. While *Batman Begins* is undoubtedly a fusion of an original screenplay with characters and ideas from several different Batman narratives (see figure 9.1), it takes a significant proportion of its plot and structure from *Year One*, including Bruce Wayne's inspiration for, and creation of, his Batman identity, the increased focus on Lieutenant Gordon as Batman's ally and the fight against the city's criminal underworld and its corrupt police force as represented by more realistic villains such as Carmine Falcone and Detective Flass. The film also recreates some key sequences from the comic such as Batman's evasion of a SWAT team in a vast building by summoning a cloud of bats and the advent of the Joker's appearance in the final panels. It is significant however that the changes made to *Year One* by *Batman Begins* actually constitute a move away from the comic book's realism toward a slightly more fantastical science-fiction version of the comic. Two of the most prominent changes are the addition of two villains from Batman comic book history (Ra's Al Ghul and the Scarecrow) and an extension of *Year One's* storyline which sees Ra's Al Ghul and his League of Shadows funding the release of the Scarecrow's fear toxin into Gotham's water supply before importing a microwave emitter device into the city which, in the film's climax, is

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[74] Nolan claims that this Batman text was one of his core inspirations and the comic book which he gave to Goyer to influence his vision of the story (Schuchman 2012). Christian Bale also reiterated Nolan's desire to base the trilogy on *Batman: Year One* among other texts (Murray 2005).
[75] Henceforth referred to as *Year One*

triggered so that the toxin is vaporised and becomes a panic-inducing gas. These two changes can be considered as part of the same overall adaptation change, namely Nolan's application of what shall here be termed a 'quasi-realist' style. I describe Nolan's adaptation of Batman as quasi-realist simply because, despite the fact that he goes to great pains to stress that the films are set in a real, physics-based world without superpowers, they are certainly not realist in the way that, for example, the films of Mike Leigh or Ken Loach are. Nolan's inclusion of science-fiction tropes such as the Bat-jet which weaves through the city's skies, the large nuclear bomb that exists in an underground lair (*The Dark Knight Rises*) and the sonar imaging mobile phone technology (*The Dark Knight*) has the consequence of removing Batman further from reality. By adapting *Year One*'s story to include devices such as the vaporiser and the fear toxin – which are, at a stretch, technologically credible but which are employed in the film in a simplistic way reminiscent of a less realistic science-fiction adventure[76] – the films move away from the source material's realism towards the more fantastical narratives of the Batman comic books and the previous film franchise.

The commercial consequence of Nolan's quasi-realist adaptation is that *Batman Begins* tempers its supposedly radical realist reimagining of the myth with elements which will allow the film to conform to the more formulaic expectations of both the traditional Batman mythos and the summer blockbuster. A more faithful adaptation of *Year One* would have resulted in a Batman film which lacked several foundational elements of the Batman myth (the Batmobile, the Batcave, the

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[76] Examples of theoretically possible items of technology which are used in a simplified manner in the plot include the vaporiser and the Scarecrow's fear gas. The vaporiser is relatively simple to transport and can easily be turned on with a switch. As it speeds through the city on Gotham's rail system, the manholes on the street beneath it are instantly ejected into the air via clouds of steam. Likewise, the Scarecrow's fear gas is instantaneous and has a similar effect on all who inhale it.

costumed villains – excepting Catwoman who appears briefly) as well as a narrative structure which lacked the spectacular, large-scale action climax required of a summer blockbuster because *Year One* culminates in a short fight between Gordon, Bruce Wayne and two men and does not even feature Batman. The adaptation changes therefore reflect a desire to resort to a more formulaic presentation of the source material by incorporating two traditional comic book villains who, as opposed to the more mundane mob bosses that stand against Batman for the first half of the film, have theatrical alter egos and, in the figurative sense, recognisable 'trademarks' such as the Scarecrow's hessian mask and Ra's al Ghul's goatee beard and black ninja outfit. Here, even though Warner Bros. and the creative team consistently reiterate that the film is the very antithesis of Schumacher's *Batman and Robin*, *Batman Begins*'s adaptation changes deliberately construct a more traditional Batman film narrative than that of *Year One*. This is symptomatic of commercial logic, allowing the film to fulfil one of its tasks as a commercial product, namely the recourse to formula through a replication of a narrative structure which audiences are more familiar with. This more traditional narrative minimises risk by aping previously successful Batman films (of which only the last one was a box office disappointment) and creating a story which more clearly meets the audience's typical expectations of a Batman film. Accordingly, when its plot structure is viewed in the context of its predecessors, *Batman Begins* is not as radical an overhaul of the franchise as expected: like the four previous Batman films, the reboot's plot is built around a chemical or technological threat that places the entire city in peril, culminates in a physical fight between Batman and a villain with a nickname/alter ego and even follows the template established by *Batman Returns*, *Batman Forever* and *Batman and Robin* which demands that there are at least two villains (as indeed

there are in all of Nolan's Batman films).

In this sense then, *Batman Begins*'s quasi-realism – a tonal struggle characterised by the fundamental contradiction of a desire for realism versus the more traditionally outlandish elements expected from a Batman film – has two commercial consequences: the gritty realist aspects of the film clearly signal to audiences that the new franchise has distanced itself from the camp commercial disappointment *Batman and Robin*, whereas the film's more fantastical elements cleave to the traditional structure and content of a Batman film and thereby minimise the risk inherent in a total reinvention. The film is therefore constructed around two opposing styles of realism and science-fiction which, while seemingly contradictory in a tonal and a narrative sense, are the two logical consequences of a commercial strategy which reflects the 'same but different' approach of bounded originality, stressing a reinvention of the character but also wishing to ensure it meets previously established expectations.

The artistic consequences of this quasi-realist adaptation change are also demonstrative of this clash of genre and tone between realism and science-fiction. Despite *Batman Begins*'s consistently dark and serious tone, there are several points at which the inevitable clash between a realist approach and the less grounded, more fantastical elements of traditional Batman narratives is visible. *Batman Begins* follows a structural trajectory that moves from relative realism to relative science-fiction as its narrative progresses, with approximately the first half of the film concerning Wayne's training and return to a corrupt mob-run Gotham before Batman's first appearance proper at one hour into the film (making the audience wait almost twenty minutes longer than Ang Lee does for Hulk) during a sequence in

which he apprehends Gotham's crime boss Carmine Falcone. Batman's appearance (and Falcone's defeat) constitutes a subtle tipping point in the film's genre with the relative realism of the first half giving way to a more traditional Batman narrative that details the rise of established comic book villains the Scarecrow and Ra's al Ghul. However, the minimal references to these villains in the film's second half suggests that the addition of these more recognisable elements of the Batman mythos reflect a commercial logic which the film as an artistic product attempts to minimise.

One such example is the Scarecrow. The screenplay limits the screen time of the Scarecrow, having him instead appear in his real world form as Dr Jonathan Crane and only allowing him to don his hessian mask – the dominant signifier of the comic book character – in the second half of the film. Rather than driving the narrative from the beginning, Crane is featured as an accessory to a larger plan and only confronts Batman for the first time in a short sequence relatively late into the film (1 hour 18 minutes into a running time of 2 hours 20 minutes). Indeed, even the villain's name is not clearly mentioned, the word 'scarecrow' being merely overheard as the muttered ravings of one of his victims who is simply describing the hessian mask. It is only in the closing stages of the climax that Crane appears in full costume and announces that he is the 'Scarecrow' (1 hour 55 minutes), but even this is undermined when he is shot immediately after his pronouncement and the character is not seen again (apart from his cameos in the two sequels). Ra's al Ghul, the other established comic book villain, is also minimised by the narrative in that, despite the fact that he is revealed to be the mastermind behind the entire plot, only appears onscreen at a relatively late stage (1 hour 43 minutes).

The point is that *Batman Begins* is, for its majority, concerned with a more

realistic depiction of crime and corruption, as suggested by scenes such as the one in which Bruce goes to court to watch his parents' murderer be released by a judge in the pay of Falcone and by the inclusion of characters such as Gordon's corrupt colleague Flass. Yet the addition of the two theatrical villains, Scarecrow and Ra's al Ghul ('theatrical' in comparison to 'normal' criminals such as Falcone and his associates because they have alter egos, wear stylised costumes and their plans rely on advanced technological devices and chemicals whose scientific basis is not explained fully) is somewhat incongruous. Indeed, when an incarcerated Dr Crane is freed from Arkham Asylum just before the climax by two henchmen who throw him his Scarecrow mask and inform him that it is 'Time to play', the screenplay itself acknowledges that *Batman Begins*'s serious examination of crime and society has ended and that it will now seek recourse in a more traditional form of Batman film narrative: the protagonist saving Gotham from the comic book villains. This switch between the realism of *Year One* and the more fantastical elements of traditional Batman narratives is not clumsily handled (the Scarecrow's inclusion being justified on a thematic level by enhancing the film's exploration of fear and its inhibiting and galvanising qualities), yet it does remain true that *Batman Begins*, as an artistic product, does not require the inclusion of the two villains and their science-fiction technologies to tell its story. This is because, as stated earlier, Batman has no superpowers, and therefore a purely realist Batman story in which there were no theatrical villains or semi-fictional technology could easily be told and still remain true to the character (in the same way that Tony Stark's character redemption could have taken place in any period). Conversely, characters such as Superman, Hulk and the X-Men are defined by their superpowers and any adaptation which removed these powers could therefore no longer be classed as a recognisable adaptation of the

source material. Therefore, in terms of *Batman Begins* as an artistic product, the addition of the Scarecrow, Ra's al Ghul and their technologies and plotlines are not demonstrative of artistic logic because they do not, in essence, necessarily make it a better or worse story than the one told in *Year One*, they simply make it a different story. Additionally, bearing in mind that the guiding concept behind the reboot was to create a more realistic and gritty adaptation of Batman, the changes made to *Year One*, which clearly echo the more fantastical narratives of the previous four Batman films, can be interpreted as commercially motivated in that they reformat the source material to better fit the traditional structure of a typical action-fantasy superhero film.

As figure 9.2 shows, the narrative of *Year One* is structured so that its central action sequence, in which Batman takes on a SWAT team in a burning building, comes three-quarters of the way through (taking up sixteen of eighty-nine pages and constituting most of the third chapter). For the remainder of the narrative, the text details a series of smaller fights between Batman and the criminal underworld and shows Gordon's attempts to end corruption, culminating in an almost anti-climactic finale which depicts a short fight on a bridge between Gordon, Bruce and two criminals, a finale from which Batman is conspicuously absent. The changes made to the source material by *Batman Begins* however (and I refer specifically to those changes in adaptation discussed above which introduce the villains Scarecrow and Ra's al Ghul), conform to commercial logic because they restructure the comic's narrative into a more traditional blockbuster film format, facilitating a series of escalating confrontations that result in a large scale finale which pits Batman against the chief antagonist and his army.

Significantly, these changes also bring *Batman Begins* into line with the four

Year One

| Bruce returns to Gotham/Gordon arrives in Gotham. Both witness the institutionalised corruption |

↓

| Gordon starts to tackle crime. Bruce becomes Batman and starts to tackle crime. |

↓

| Large-scale action sequence: Batman in a burning building versus the police force. |

↓

| Smaller action sequences: Batman and Gordon versus the police and Falcone.

Finale: short bridge sequence involving Bruce, Gordon and two criminals |

Batman Begins

| Bruce returns to Gotham |

↓

| Bruce becomes Batman.

Small-scale action sequence: Bruce defeats Falcone |

↓

| Emergence of Scarecrow

Small-scale action sequences: Bruce versus Scarecrow in apartment and Arkham Asylum |

↓

| Emergence of Ra's al Ghul

Finale: Large-scale action sequence – Batman and Gordon versus Ra's al Ghul and his army |

Figure 9.2 – A comparison of the narrative structures of the comic book *Year One* and the film *Batman Begins*

point superhero film narrative model as outlined in the *Hulk* case study. *Year One*'s story format does not follow this formulaic structure of hero's origin, villain's origin, hero and villain's development of powers and resolution of conflict because there is an absence of a central villain and, indeed, more than one hero (it is as much Gordon's story as Batman's and at one point even Selina Kyle dispatches a criminal). *Batman Begins*, however, does cleave to the four point formula, as it depicts the figurative birth of the Scarecrow, who is created by Batman when he douses Crane in his own fear gas, as well as the origins of Ra's al Ghul, whose quest for revenge begins when Bruce destroys his base at the start of the film. As I argued in the *Hulk* case study, this four point film format is not the only option for a superhero narrative structure, artistically speaking, something which is especially true of Batman because his lack of superpowers allows writers to escape the necessity of incorporating an escalating battle between powered villains – as indeed Frank Miller, writer of *Year One*, shows in the comic's low-key climax.

The changes made by *Batman Begins* are therefore symptomatic of dominant commercial logic in that they remodel the less typical structure of *Year One* into a more traditional superhero film structure. In an empirical sense, the changes do not conclusively make *Year One* better or worse – or rather, whether they do or not is a subjective argument which must be decided by the individual, not by this analysis – they simply make it more like other Batman films, fulfilling a commercial function of the film.

Adaptation change 2: The economics of Gotham as a thematic concern in the *Dark Knight* trilogy

The second adaptation change to be examined is the thematic focus on the economic which can be seen across the trilogy as a whole. As Newman notes, Nolan's three Batman films display an 'engagement with the economics of Gotham City' (2012, p 89), containing several significant plots and subplots which are all facets of a broader exploration of how financial measures are used to obtain and sustain power for both positive and negative ends and how easily they can be corrupted. As the trilogy progresses, this idea achieves greater prominence until it emerges as one of the dominant thematic motors that drive the final film's plot. This theme is classified as an adaptation change because the films' treatment of economics and finance is not explicitly evident in any of the source texts which the films are based on and therefore constitutes a major addition to the adaptations. The *Batman* comics are of course unable to avoid economic considerations completely due to the fact that their protagonist Bruce Wayne is a billionaire businessman and the head of a global company, Wayne Enterprises – listed at number eleven in Forbes's semi-serious '25 Largest Fictional Companies' (*Iron Man*'s Stark Industries comes in at number sixteen; Noer and Ewalt 2007). However, the comic book narratives only reference financial matters in terms of the broader character context (Wayne's wealth finances his futuristic crime fighting technology) or when they are needed to facilitate specific plot developments as in *Batman/Catwoman: Follow The Money* (Chaykin 2010) in which the Wayne Enterprises pension fund is wiped out by the villainous thief Cavalier. In this sense, the *Batman* comics are similar to the *Iron Man* comics in that any discussion of finance and economics is plot-based and rarely

thematic or ideological. This is, of course, an inevitable consequence of genre, the

expectations of the superhero form meaning that even the most mature and

sophisticated *Batman* comics will never function as discourses on economic theory

when their primary objective is to tell a superhero story.

Nolan's films however, present a significantly different exploration of

economic ideas from the comic books. In his iteration of Gotham – one which, as has

already been established, is presented as a quasi-real world location – matters of

corporate finance, power and capitalism are consistently present as realist aspects

of the Batman universe. In order to reveal the extent to which the trilogy's addition of

material that relates to economic issues and themes has influenced and modified the

adaptation of the source material it is necessary at this point to trace how these

ideas manifest over the course of the three films. Initially, the exploration of

economics is presented in the form of one of the protagonist's conflicts in *Batman*

Begins, namely Bruce Wayne's attempt to regain control of his parents' empire and

stop its acting chief executive William Earle turning Wayne Enterprises into a public

company. Earle is a character created especially for the film and is therefore not one

of the famously theatrical villains from the comic book's history, but he is presented

as one of the more realistically powerful enemies that Bruce must defeat (something

which he eventually does by outmanoeuvring Earle financially). The importance of

this corporate storyline in *Batman Begins* is reinforced by Earle's consistent

presence throughout the film. He is introduced at an early point as the first

antagonist that the adult Bruce comes into conflict with after his return to Gotham

and he appears as an emotionally cold and sombre figure in a flashback to the

funeral of Bruce's parents. Earle is also the last opponent of Bruce's to be defeated

in the film, his ignominious firing from Wayne Enterprises resolving Bruce's final

conflict in the epilogue, just five minutes before the end of the film.

Economic commentary is evident elsewhere in *Batman Begins* with the film touching upon some of the negative social effects of late capitalism such as extreme wealth disparity. Shots of the homeless wandering through the cardboard cities in the litter-filled alleys of Gotham are glimpsed just after a scene in which Falcone sneeringly tells Bruce 'You've never tasted desperate…This is a world you'll never understand – and you always fear what you don't understand', implying that Wayne's intrinsic morality is nothing more than a luxury bestowed upon him by a vast wealth that ensures he wants for nothing. Such ideas are made more explicit at the end of the film, when Ra's al Ghul admits that his plan to destroy Gotham via the fear gas is not his first attempt, The League of Shadows' original plot having been to limit the 'human corruption' inherent in the city by crippling it financially: 'Over the ages our weapons have grown even more sophisticated. With Gotham we tried a new one – economics'. Ghul's reference to a twenty year old plan, which is intended to realise the theory that if you 'create enough hunger…everyone becomes a criminal', may be a basic description of the kind of Benthamite ideas of crime and poverty supported by economists such as Becker (1968), but hints at ideas which are developed in *The Dark Knight* and in *The Dark Knight Rises* in particular, namely the potential for corruption within the financial world and the ways in which these structures can, wittingly or unwittingly, create socially detrimental phenomena.

Accordingly, the two sequels extend these themes, the screenplays intertwining the new economic commentary with the source material's existing characters and storylines. Thus a subplot of *The Dark Knight* details Wayne Enterprises' business deal with Mr Lau, a mob accountant masquerading as a

Chinese businessman, whose subsequent escape to Hong Kong and pursuit by Batman culminates in a spectacular action sequence in Lau's offices. Like Earle in *Batman Begins*, Lau is another corrupt businessman created especially for the adaptation whose role as a more realistic corporate villain underscores *The Dark Knight*'s more flamboyant comic book villain, the Joker. While Lau is not a primary antagonist, Wayne's and Batman's conflict with him forms a substantial part of the film (Lau is not apprehended and charged until approximately thirty seven minutes into the film's 145 minute running time). What is significant here is that even though Lau's storyline leads to the appearance of the Joker (the conditions of his plea bargain meaning that he must testify against his mob clients who then hire the Joker), this fact alone does not justify the amount of screen time given to Lau's story. From a narrative perspective, the Joker could be introduced into Gotham in any number of ways that do not require Lau's preceding subplot, suggesting that it is Nolan's interest in the theme of financial corruption which is the reason for the existence of the subplot and the character's inclusion in the adaptation.

Further evidence of Nolan's interest in this theme is demonstrated through the Joker, whose desire to cause chaos and civil unrest surprisingly lacks financial motivation. This is reinforced in the scene in which he incinerates Lau on a pyre of the mob's money, the film using his disinterest in pecuniary reward as an indication of just how insane he is (even Bruce is confused by his behaviour until Alfred explains that 'some men aren't looking for anything logical like money, they can't be bought'). The Joker's lack of desire for monetary gain separates him from the more prosaic villains such as Earle and Lau in the same way that the Scarecrow and Ra's al Ghul's desire for chaos and destruction differentiates them from the average criminals who seek to profit from crime, such as Falcone and Flass in *Batman*

Begins. In doing so, the films reiterate that while theatrical villains may not exist outside of fiction, the real world versions of these characters are those individuals and corporations whose greed and corruption are very much evident in the instances where capitalism fails. Whilst *The Dark Knight* replicates *Batman Begins*'s structure in that the more realistic villains (Lau and crime boss Sal Maroni) are prominent in the first part of the film, before fading from the narrative with the emergence of the traditional comic book villains (the Joker and Two Face), both films lay the blame for the rise to power of these more unusual villains squarely at the feet of corrupt businesspeople.

Nolan's fascination with the financial world and how it is symbiotically enjoined with social and political power and corruption expresses itself most fully in the final film of the trilogy, *The Dark Knight Rises*. Here again, these ideas are interwoven with the existing source material, the film being based in part on the comic book *Batman: Knightfall* which details Batman's conflict with Bane but does not delve into the financial side of Gotham. Set eight years after *The Dark Knight*, Nolan's sequel depicts both Gotham and Wayne Enterprises as being in the midst of an economic slump where the unemployed are so desperate that they are literally going underground to work for criminal gangs in the city's sewers. The film adopts a similar narrative structure to its two predecessors, with the initial villain being the businessman John Daggett, who resorts to funding the violent terrorist Bane in his desperation to destroy his corporate rival Wayne Enterprises. Bane's methods are appropriately matched to their victims: he targets Bruce financially by breaking into the stock exchange and wiping the value of his shares and attacks Batman physically by beating him to the point of death. As in the earlier films, the realist villain is substituted for the comic book villain, with Daggett replaced as the primary

antagonist by Bane who is working to a different, non-financial agenda: the destruction of Gotham. When Daggett reminds him that 'I've paid you a small fortune', Bane replies 'And this gives you power over me?...Your money and infrastructure have been important…'til now' before killing him and leading his own coup of Gotham. Once again, the acquisitive and corrupt capitalist is the catalyst for socially detrimental phenomena, Daggett's funding of Bane echoing Alfred's description of the criminals' hiring of the Joker: 'in their desperation they turned to a man they didn't fully understand'. This theme of corporate corruption is something which is reinforced at the film's climax when the businesswoman Miranda Tate is revealed to be the mastermind behind the entire plot to destroy Gotham.

The Dark Knight Rises's focus on the economic is intensified even further with the adaptation altering its older source material and imbuing it with a contemporary immediacy by using the *Batman* characters to explore the growing social dissatisfaction with capitalism's disparities. This involves altering the character of Selina (known in the comics as Catwoman but only as the 'cat burglar' in the film) who in Nolan's narrative is an ambiguous mercenary initially employed by both Daggett and Bane but who later redeems herself by helping Batman. In Batman comic book history, Kyle is indeed a cat burglar who is variously a friend, opponent and lover of Batman, but in *The Dark Knight Rises* a new dimension is added to the character when she functions on a symbolic level as the voice of a specific kind of social conscience, echoing the language and attitudes of the anti-capitalist '99 per cent' and 'Occupy' movements of the real world (see Sharlet 2011). Her contempt for Bruce's vast inherited wealth is shown in a scene in which he visits her shabby apartment after Bane's plan to bankrupt him has succeeded. In a conversation which epitomises the antagonistic dichotomy between the wealthiest '1 per cent' and the

remaining '99 per cent', Bruce tells Selina that he will retain his manor as part of the settlement, to which she responds 'The rich don't even go broke like the rest of us'. After penetrating a high society function for Gotham's wealthiest, she tells Bruce 'You don't get to judge me just because you were born in the master bedroom of Wayne Manor'. Her questioning of Bruce's lifestyle – 'You think all this can last?' – and subsequent warning – 'There's a storm coming…batten down the hatches, 'cause when it hits, you're all gonna wonder how you ever thought you could live so large and leave so little for the rest of us' – are interspersed with images of members of Gotham's wealthy elite dancing and greedily tearing apart meat at a luxurious buffet.

In fact, Selina's outspoken protests against the rich (she is initially seen disguised as a waitress whilst robbing Wayne Manor) constitute an adaptation change in itself, one which can be more usefully subsumed under this wider adaptation change of economic themes. Throughout her lengthy comic book history, Selina/Catwoman has certainly been morally ambiguous and has displayed signs of a social conscience, as shown in texts such as *Year One*, *Catwoman: The Dark End of the Street* (Brubaker and Cooke 2002) and *Catwoman: Crooked Little Town* (Brubaker et al 2003), the narratives of which repeatedly show her blurring the line between social avenger, guardian, vigilante and criminal by using illegal methods to right injustices. The comic book character, however, has never explicitly vocalised opinions on specific contemporary political and economic issues in the way that she does in *The Dark Knight Rises*. The film's adaptation of Selina, therefore, proves to be significantly influenced and shaped by economic themes so that the character comes to represent something noticeably different – namely a very specific, early twenty-first century anti-capitalist ideology – than that of the comic book version who

has been, among other things, a proponent of broader ideologies such as feminism and social justice.

Ultimately, events in *The Dark Knight Rises* prove Selina's predictions about the downfall of Gotham's wealthier citizens to be correct when Bane's army of prisoners and dispossessed criminals seizes power, the terrorist promising that 'The powerful will be ripped from their decadent nests and cast out'. Accordingly, there follows a montage of scenes which shows the sacking of opulent town houses and apartments, replete with images of mobs overpowering doormen, citizens being dragged from their hiding places underneath antique furniture and the throwing of their expensive possessions down stairwells and onto streets. Like Selina, the character of Bane has also been adapted to better engage with the economic themes of wealth disparity and disenfranchisement. In *Batman: Knightfall*, from which Bane's defeat of Batman is adapted, Bane is certainly an intelligent villain but he simply plans to rule Gotham and destroy Batman rather than aspiring to the role of anti-capitalist demagogue; when Batman asks 'What has it all been about?', Bane simply replies 'Gotham – the ultimate prize…I want it' (Moench et al 2000, p 250). In short, the economic motivation and social ideology of the cinematic Bane is entirely absent from the original comic book.

The reason I have outlined the trilogy's incorporation of economic ideas in such detail is to demonstrate the extent to which these themes have influenced Nolan's film adaptations of Batman. None of the core texts used as inspiration for the films – chiefly *Year One*, *Batman: Knightfall* and *Batman: No Man's Land* (Gale and Maleev 1999), from which the third film takes its story of Gotham being segregated from the rest of America – include any specific engagement with economic issues in

the way that Nolan's adaptations do. Whereas *Batman Begins* references economic and corporate themes to a certain extent and *The Dark Knight* also touches upon these ideas, the exploration comes to fruition in *The Dark Knight Rises* where, as has been shown, several storylines and, indeed, characters from the source texts have been significantly altered to enable the development of economic themes. The artistic and commercial consequences of these changes will now be discussed.

The first interpretation of the consequences of the economic themes of the *Dark Knight* trilogy is artistic. Nolan's inclusion of these ideas as subject matter to be explored through the Batman narratives has significant consequences for the films as artistic products. Many of these changes have been outlined in the discussion above and will not be repeated here, suffice to say that Nolan uses the economic ideas underlying the films to fashion the trilogy into a cohesive whole. This is evidenced in part by Ra's al Ghul's intention in *Batman Begins* to destroy Gotham by means of its own 'economics', a plan which nearly, and neatly, reaches fulfilment through Bane's stock exchange heist and Occupy Gotham movement, and through Talia al Ghul who, in the tradition of a true supervillain, exploits the trust placed in her corporate alter ego Miranda Tate and gains control of the company's nuclear reactor. Thus, in relation to artistic criteria, the development of the economic themes from their background role in the first two films to their explicit foregrounding in the third has the effect of enabling Nolan to form a trilogy which is unified and cohesive both narratively and thematically.

A second artistic consequence of the economic themes is that their inclusion allows the film to be more anchored and connected to the real world, creating the opportunity for audiences to draw parallels with their own society. This therefore

288

permits the film to develop its artistic functions of tone and theme and deepens the complexity of the film's symbolic dimension by forging connections to the real world. Whilst it is a subjective matter of interpretation to decide whether these consequences for tone, theme and symbolism are beneficial to the film, the fact remains that the inclusion of a richer economic subtext is symptomatic of artistic logic. Moreover, from a creator-centric perspective, remembering that Nolan's intention was to depict 'an ordinary world in which we could be living in Gotham' and to present Batman and his enemies as 'extraordinary characters[s] in the background of an ordinary world' (cited in Schuchman 2012), the inclusion of elements which echo real economic and social events such as the Occupy movement can be interpreted as symptomatic of an artistic logic that strengthens artistic products that were designed by their director to be quasi-realist pieces of art.

The commercial consequences of including economic themes in the adaptation are related to the artistic ones above. The primary consequence is that by including parallels with real life events and strengthening the film texts as artistic products by imbuing them with contemporary relevance, a commercial function of Nolan's Batman films is fulfilled in that they potentially become attractive to a wider audience of filmgoers who might not normally watch superhero films. Whilst this is speculative – it is of course impossible to obtain data complete enough to reveal the individual reasons why every audience member chooses to see a particular film – it is speculation which is supported by the extremely high box office revenues for *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises* (see figure 9.1). These revenues were significantly higher than any other superhero adaptations at the time of their releases suggesting that Nolan's films found a much wider audience beyond the typical core demographic for the genre in that period. Of course, it cannot (and should not) be

assumed that the disproportionate success of the final two films in the trilogy can be explained simply by the fact that a wider audience was necessarily attracted to them due to their exploration of more realistic economic issues. In reality, there are several credible explanations for the increased box office revenue, from more immediate factors such as the untimely death of the actor Heath Ledger (the Joker) which morbidly guaranteed significant early publicity for *The Dark Knight* , and the success of Nolan's *Inception* which was made between the last two Batman films, to wider cultural factors such as the steadily growing rise in the popularity of the superhero genre (*The Avengers*, for example, exceeded *The Dark Knight Rises*'s box office a year later both domestically and worldwide and, in terms of its tone and content, contains nothing as realistic, complex and socially relevant as Nolan's film).

However, it still remains true that the largely positive critical response to Nolan's films which consistently note his serious, gritty and semi-realistic approach to the comics (something which his treatment of economic themes is a significant part of) became an aspect of the films which was equated, by the studio at least, with commercial success. Evidence to support this comes in the form of comments made by Jeff Robinov, president of Warner Bros., soon after *The Dark Knight*'s release, when he suggested that the tone of Nolan's film and its approach to the source material was to be a template for future DC superhero films: 'We're going to try to go dark to the extent that the characters allow it' (cited in Schuker 2008). Additionally, Warner Bros. reiterated its confidence in the commercial appeal of Nolan's narrative approach by hiring him as story consultant and producer for the Superman reboot *Man of Steel* and as executive producer for its sequel, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*.

The question remains, however, as to whether the inclusion of economic themes ultimately suggests that artistic or commercial logic is dominant. I would argue that artistic logic is dominant here for a number of reasons. Firstly, Nolan's economic themes may well be (as argued above) part of the films' quasi-realist tone and may therefore contribute towards helping them appeal to a wider audience but it is significant that these specific economic plots and themes were not marketed as a selling point to potential audiences. *The Dark Knight Rises*'s official synopsis published by Warner Bros. focuses on the primary villains of the film, Selina and Bane, emphasising that Batman 'may be no match' for the latter (Warner Bros. 2012) but makes no reference to the film's portrayal of the economic crisis facing Gotham and Wayne Enterprises, Bruce's bankruptcy or, surprisingly, even the role of the businesswoman Miranda Tate (played by the Academy Award-winning actor Marion Cotillard). Similarly, the posters and film trailers tend to emphasise the action scenes in the film rather than the economic themes. The trailer shown on the film's official homepage (*The Dark Knight Rises Official Trailer 2* 2012) contains no dialogue that references any of the economic themes – even Selina's verbal reference to 'a storm coming' is shown out of context of her discussion with Bruce about wealth and is instead interspersed with images of Bane's attacks, suggesting that she is referring to his physical threat to Gotham rather than the social and ideological rebellion which specifically targets Bruce and the other wealthy citizens. Similarly, although another trailer for the film does contain a longer version of Selina's speech and a clearer indication that she is talking about Bruce's wealth, it is still the only reference made to Nolan's economic ideas and, again, it is a reference which is embedded within a series of clips which accentuate the physical, rather than the financial, threat to

Gotham of Bane and his army (*The Dark Knight Rises Trailer 1* 2012) [77].

Whilst this may seem like something of an obvious observation – after all, a trailer for a summer blockbuster featuring Batman is not likely to focus on its economic storylines – this is exactly the point I wish to stress here: that the studio does not consider this aspect of the film to be a commercial strength or a selling point. Certainly it is arguable that, by the time the third film in an already successful trilogy arrives, the audience do not need to be told that Nolan's work contains realist social commentary and it could also perhaps be argued that cinemagoers would not need to see such content in the trailer to understand that it is in the film and might therefore see the film regardless. However, the trailers and synopsis are two of the most central marketing strategies for any film and if *The Dark Knight Rises*'s economic themes and plots are not emphasised through these methods then it cannot be assumed that audiences will know for certain that they are featured in the film before having seen it. In other words, it remains true that if the inclusion of economic thematic content was an element of the film which helped the product to fulfil its commercial purpose, there would be evidence of it in the film's marketing and promotion, as opposed to it being ignored.

Further evidence to support the above claim is linked to the earlier observation that Nolan's socioeconomic commentary becomes more dominant as the trilogy progresses, being a more subtle presence in the first two films before becoming a central part of the third film's narrative and its characters' motivations. The screenplay credits for the three films reveal that the first was co-written by Nolan

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[77] Trailer numbering is taken from the official *The Dark Knight Rises* subpage of iTunes' Movie Trailer site (Apple, Inc. 2013)

and Goyer – a writer and director with previous experience of superhero adaptations – while the second and third films were co-written by Nolan and his brother Jonathan. Both Nolan brothers have spoken in interviews about the writing process. Christopher clarified that for *Batman Begins*, Goyer wrote the story and 'very quickly' wrote the first draft but that the director then 'rewrote it', whereas for *The Dark Knight* and *The Dark Knight Rises*, Goyer and Christopher Nolan wrote the story and Jonathan and Christopher then wrote the screenplay, with Christopher noting that for the third film, Jonathan was busy on other projects so 'I wound up doing more on my own' (cited in Perez 2012). In discussing the second part of the trilogy, Jonathan Nolan reiterates this, claiming that his writing of the script was informed by Christopher's ideas and developed from 'a story mapped out in cue cards in Chris's garage', confirming that it was Christopher who was the overseer of, and constant element in, the trilogy's story and scripting processes (Nolan 2010, pp 103-4).

Although these interviews might suggest that the economic themes are due to Nolan's desire to include his own artistic content in the three adaptations, they do not categorically prove such an assumption on their own. Further evidence to support the argument that this adaptation change is symptomatic of artistic logic is however provided by comments made by Nolan and his colleagues regarding the relationship with the studio during the filmmaking process. After *Inception* and before making *The Dark Knight Rises*, Nolan noted in an interview that 'I'm very, very glad…to be embarking on the last chapter of our Batman saga without any sense of obligation or duty to the studio', citing the box office success of *Inception* as the reason for his creative freedom (cited in Jensen 2010). This is a view supported by Nolan's collaborator Wally Pfister, the director of photography on the trilogy, who similarly observes that once *Batman Begins* had proven successful, the studio applied a

relatively laissez-faire policy to Nolan and the franchise: 'By the time we did *The Dark Knight…*we could do whatever we wanted to' (cited in Williams 2012, p 98). When Nolan and Pfister's comments are combined with the fact that the director was the only screenwriter to co-write all three films, that it was he who mostly wrote the third film (which contains the most extensive exploration of economic themes) and with the aforementioned lack of marketing of the economic themes, the evidence strongly suggests that this adaptation change is reflective of artistic logic.

Conclusion: Implications of the *Dark Knight* case study

The two adaptation changes and their analyses provide valuable additional information about how commercial and artistic logic interact in the creation of a superhero adaptation. The first adaptation change, which concerns Nolan's quasi-realist mode of storytelling, illustrates a more antagonistic manifestation of the art/commerce relationship. This is shown by the tension in *Batman Begins* between the film's desire to present a grounded presentation of Batman more akin to its source material and the need for it to conform to the more fantastical expectations of a Batman film. Such a clash exposes the ways in which even a reboot must temper the radicalism of its reinvention and suggests that the commercial logic of film does not permit any significant reinvention of existing comic book narratives, at least at the present time. In this particular conflict between commercial and artistic logic, it is the former which emerges as dominant.

The second adaptation change – the addition of economic themes and storylines to the source material – helps to build upon the conclusions that were

drawn in the *Hulk* case study about the role of the auteur. Here, Nolan's comments regarding the increasing creative freedom he was given to add material that was, in terms of mythology, extraneous to the Batman narrative are interesting. The analysis again supports the notion first discussed in *Hulk*'s conclusion that there is a positive correlation between the revenue generated by a director's films and the degree of freedom granted to them in filmmaking, which the increasing prevalence of the economic theme over the course of the trilogy demonstrates. The fact that the *Dark Knight* trilogy was a financial success means that it is able to demonstrate something which *Hulk* could not: that commercial logic dictates that artistic freedom is granted as a reward not just for accrued symbolic capital but also for accrued economic capital. Indeed, as the conflict between commercial logic and artistic logic that is evident in *Batman Begins* becomes less evident in the second and third films – the more fantastical, science-fiction elements symptomatic of a more traditional Batman narrative being phased out to a certain extent by Nolan's more realist narrative – the films arguably become increasingly more reflective of Nolan's body of work outside of the superhero genre. Just as *The Incredible Hulk* illustrates what happens when commercial logic punishes failure, the sequels to *Batman Begins* show how commerce rewards success. For Nolan's trilogy, commerce increasingly cedes authority to artistry as long as the films prove that they have the ability to accrue economic capital.

Chapter Ten

Discussion

The four case studies have provided new perspectives on the theories which underpin this study and these will now be discussed in more depth. To ensure full coverage, the first part of this chapter has been divided into sections for the discussion of each research question. These are followed by a consideration of how the superhero genre at a broader level has demonstrated one of the study's central theoretical arguments, namely that there is a degree of reciprocity between superhero films as superstructural products and the mode of production. The next section contains a breakdown and discussion of this study's thesis. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the study's limitations and some suggestions for potential future applications of this research.

Research question 1: How can the superhero comic book adaptations released between 2000 and 2013 be theorised in a way which addresses both the artistic and commercial aspects of the production of cultural goods?

One of the central challenges for this study has been the development of a methodology which would be able to usefully address the complex and often

problematic relationship between commerce and art that has been debated by critics, theorists and artists for centuries. As the earlier chapters showed, this analysis has manifested in a variety of ways: from the more abstract, macrocosmic social construction of Marx's base/superstructure model through more practical theories such as Bourdieu's to the cultural materialist approaches which view individual texts as microcosms of these larger relationships. In developing a methodology for this research, the objective was to explore how artistry and commerce interact in the production of some of the comic book superhero adaptations produced by the major American film studios between 2000 and 2013.

As a means of exploring the interactions between art and commerce in superhero films, the methodological framework has advantages. It has been designed to integrate interdisciplinary elements such as textual analysis and financial data in an attempt to reflect film's dual nature and construct a more complete picture of the medium and the industry. Additionally, the study's application of the ideologeme provides distinct advantages of its own. Chief among these is that it allows each adaptation change to be considered in an artistic and economic context, ensuring that the changes are considered from both perspectives and that any conclusions are not reached on the basis of simplistic assumptions. Of course, this method of investigating the art/commerce relationship does not claim to be definitive and, like any other, it has its limitations. Inevitably, any method is based on assumptions to some extent; these assumptions should not weaken or invalidate the study as long as they are identified. One such assumption is the identification of the functions which define film as a commercial and an artistic product and help shape the study's notions of commercial and artistic logic. It is important to reiterate that I do not claim that these definitions are universal; they are simply definitions which

have hopefully been justified as logical and appropriate within the context of this particular study. Such definitions constitute a necessary initial step – after all, every analysis must have a starting point – but it is also understood that definitions of any kind are rarely categorical and that the ones used in this study may not necessarily be the starting points for other investigations. Accordingly, other investigations might possibly draw alternative conclusions from this data. While these four case studies do present a set of evidenced interpretations, the contribution to knowledge of this research lies as much in its method and analytical process as it does in its specific conclusions.

An additional constraint of this method is that it is has been designed to fit very specific textual subjects. Without a film text which is the product of an adaptation process that has altered the source material there would be no adaptation changes and therefore no clear starting point from which to begin. The broader conceptualisations – that film possesses a double function and can be interpreted in more than one context – can be applied to any film but this methodology is specifically designed for the analysis of adapted material. The source material for the film adaptation need not necessarily be a comic book; if this method was perhaps to be applied to the adaptation of a novel, the first stage – the adaptation change – could still be identified, but certain criteria would have to be changed. The artistic elements of the film (narrative, symbolism, theme, tone and character) would not necessarily need to be redefined, but the commercial criteria identified in this research are specific functions of a twenty-first century superhero blockbuster and would therefore need to be rethought. If, for example, the subject of analysis were an obscure eighteenth century novel which had been adapted into an adult period drama, criteria such as franchise building and replication of narrative would not be as

applicable (if at all). Therefore, the commercial logic needs to be rethought and redesigned for each genre or type of film, whereas the artistic criteria need only be rethought if the medium of the adapted material is changed significantly (to painting or sculpture for example).

Research question 2: What are the implications of the changes made between page and screen for the films as commercial products and as artistic products?

and

Research question 3: To what extent are the changes made to the source material in the page to screen adaptation process reflective of commercial logic and to what extent are they reflective of artistic logic?

As the case studies have shown, the adaptation change analyses reach a variety of conclusions over whether commercial or artistic logic is the more dominant in each case. A more in-depth consideration of these will be saved for the thesis discussion later in this chapter, but here it is necessary to consider the conclusions that can be drawn from these particular aspects of the methodology.

As previously noted, the case study analyses reject attempts to assign definitive motives to the changes and focus instead on the consequences of each change for the film in a commercial and an artistic sense. It is therefore more appropriate to argue which type of logic is dominant in each change rather than claiming that commerce or artistry is the 'reason' for the change. The latter conclusion is not only impossible to reach without being disingenuous but also risks exactly the kind of reductive summary of the complex interactions between art and

commerce which this study has been determined to avoid. Whilst it could be argued that working towards a conclusion which identifies a dominant logic merely replicates the either/or dichotomy, this is not the case. In those cases where it can be argued that the adaptation change is more reflective of one type of logic than the other, a conclusion has been drawn so that the study can construct its overall argument that the adaptations are not solely determined by commercial logic. If such conclusions do appear to be stark in some cases, this is a necessary yet nuanced response to the more blunt theoretical ideas covered in the early chapters which assign agency to the economic base and passivity to the non-economic realms.

Considered holistically, the case studies' considerations of the commercial and artistic implications of each adaptation change demonstrate a significant point: that the relationship between art and commerce manifests in unique and different ways in each situation. Thus the interactions between them can at times be antagonistic and at other times highly productive, depending on a variety of factors. Specific case study examples illustrate how different the art/commerce interaction can be. The analysis of *Hulk*'s second adaptation change – alteration of the comic book's villains – shows how, at the film's climax, commercial and artistic logic potentially conflict because a more meditative and dramatically rich artistic product must compromise with the rigid formula of a superhero film (something which will be considered in more depth in the thesis discussion).

Theoretically speaking, this clash between commerce and art is demonstrative of commerce's policing of artistry. As Althusser identifies, commerce – the 'ultimate determinant' – here cedes a degree of authority to artistry (as represented not simply by Lee, but by those aspects of Lee's filmmaking approach

that evidence dominant artistic logic rather than commercial logic; his stylistic and thematic interests, for example). This ceding assumedly occurred because Universal hoped that the film would convert Lee's symbolic capital as a respected filmmaker into economic capital at the box office. Whilst there is no definitive proof that this was the studio's strategy, it is a logical conclusion because knowledge of Lee's previous films certainly does not suggest that he was hired for his action blockbuster experience. Thus commerce permits art a certain degree of influence, but the relationship is something of an uneasy one for some films as the veil of artistry under which the commercial requirements are often concealed wears thin in key places – *Hulk*'s climactic physical confrontation for example. Indeed, a similar situation is apparent in *Batman Begins*'s incongruous mix of theatrical comic book villains, science-fiction technology and realist criminals. In other words, commercial logic permits only so much deviation from, or lack of adherence to, its formulas and the tension between strong artistic logic and strong commercial logic is evident in some films.

However, other case studies reveal that the relationship between art and commerce manifests in less conflicting ways at times. Admittedly, this often occurs in those adaptation changes which are revealed to be dominantly reflective of commercial logic and thus there is little conflict to speak of. For both of the *Iron Man* changes, artistic logic cedes to a dominant commercial logic and simply adapts to fit around it. *Iron Man*'s period change, as argued, does not constitute a clash between artistic logic and commercial requirements because the protagonist's story can be told in any period and remain fundamentally unchanged. In regards to the second adaptation change, the apparently significant alterations made to the source material's villains and nationalistic message is not symptomatic of a clash between

commercial and artistic logic because commercial logic uses the artistic elements of the films to achieve its objective. On a surface level, the films are able to perform their commercial function of appealing to international audiences because the artistic elements such as dialogue, character and narrative structure appear to primarily critique American capitalism rather than the international villains. This surface content is, however, only used to mask the films' actual subtexts which reject pacifism in favour of the requisite action and destructive violence of the typical blockbuster. Thus there is no demonstrable clash between artistic logic and commercial logic because the former is not actually changing the films in any significant way. If the films truly were pacifist critiques of America's foreign policy it is likely that numerous aspects of their plot, character and structure would have had to be altered in a fundamental way – Stark would have had to renounce retributive violence altogether, for example, and each of the final confrontations would have had to have been resolved without a fight – meaning that the *Iron Man* franchise would lack many of the recognisable elements of the superhero film formula. If such versions of these films could ever have existed, they would have been likely to have been demonstrative of significant clashes between commercial and artistic logic but the *Iron Man* franchise circumvents this by only *appearing* to alter the artistic elements of the film in this regard.

An example of a wholly different and more productive manifestation of the interaction between art and commerce is evident in the second adaptation change of the *X-Men* case study. In this case, the smaller budget for the film and the hiring of a director with no experience of blockbusters meant that the comic's action content and level of spectacle was reduced in favour of an increased focus on character, theme and plot. The resulting film played a definitive part in shaping the genre and

was highly influential in terms of how studios approached successive superhero films. Thus, even though commercial logic is dominant, the interaction between commerce and art appears to be less antagonistic and more constructive in this case.

The art/commerce relationship manifests differently across all of these case studies because each film is inevitably produced under a unique and specific set of industrial and cultural conditions. For example, Singer, Lee, Nolan and Favreau all have different directorial styles and varying levels of experience, some of the comics the films are based upon were more well-known at the time of their adaptations' releases than the others were and the state of the genre that the films are released into is constantly changing. Therefore the case studies justify their cultural materialist approach by demonstrating that the ways in which art and commerce interact are determined by a range of factors. These include the director (his or her filmmaking style, previous body of work and status as an auteur or otherwise), the nature of the comic book property itself (how familiar audiences are with it) and the temporal context (the specific point in the genre's development at which the adaptation is made).

Research question 4: How has the superhero comic book film genre as a whole between 2000 and 2013 been shaped by the interactions between commerce and artistry?

Much has changed in the superhero film genre between 2000 and 2013. Although this study has not been able to cover every single film released during this

time, the franchises selected have hopefully demonstrated why they have been chosen as definitive in terms of the genre's development. At this point it is necessary to consider the films in the broader context of the genre during this period.

The final section of the first case study demonstrated how *X-Men* proved to be a significant influence on the films that followed in terms of its serious tone, emphasis on dramatic content over effects and spectacle and its desire to ground comic book fantasy in a more realistic world, thereby creating a powerful symbolic dimension to the material. While this model has certainly been influential, it is also true that *X-Men*'s sequels' were granted larger budgets and their narratives became increasingly ambitious in terms of scope, action content and use of visual effects. This suggests that once superhero films had proven themselves capable of generating revenue, studios were more willing to invest in them, increasing the opportunities for spectacle and allowing the films to conform more to the typical blockbuster format. In other words, the template established by *X-Men* did not remain unchanged. Hollywood's embracing of the genre since 2000 is a clear example of Bourdieu's theory of how artistic industries absorb less popular, marginalised art into the mainstream when it proves to be commercially successful (admittedly a film such as *X-Men* could not ever truly be labelled as marginalised or radical art but its relatively low budget, almost total lack of A-list stars and location within a genre that was not particularly popular at the time, are all indicators of its *relatively* marginalised status before release).

The evolution of the serious comic book film into a more action-based, tonally lighter model was compounded by the success of the effects-heavy *Spider-Man* and the commercial disappointment of *Hulk*. The latter's underperformance at the box

office effectively signalled the end of the less formulaic superhero film. Its psychological drama, portentous tone and emotionally complex style, which rendered it unusual for its genre – but not for an Ang Lee film – came to represent the nadir of the superhero film as relatively experimental artistic product. Marvel Studios' response was to seek recourse in shaping its superhero adaptations more along the lines of the traditional action-based summer blockbuster as demonstrated by the *Iron Man* franchise and *The Incredible Hulk*. The *Hulk* case study shows that when a film such as this fails, that is to say a film that reflects artistic logic more explicitly, one way of 'correcting' this failure is for commercial logic to increase its influence on any similar films which are released afterwards. Thus, the films that follow in the same genre tend to be more 'safely' formulaic and are likely to replicate previously successful films, for a period of time at least. In theoretical terms, the superhero genre between 2000 and 2013 conforms to this study's central proposition that artistic considerations do have some degree of influence, but this influence is strictly policed; commercial logic is always waiting to more explicitly reassert itself should a film prove financially unsuccessful.

Commerce's reassertion is not only evident when a film fails at the box office. Conversely, when a film succeeds, the commercial logic of replication of a previously successful formula appears to be rigorously enforced for the film's sequels. This is shown by the *Iron Man* trilogy's repetition of a narrative structure which sees an international villain being replaced by an American businessman and by the *Dark Knight* trilogy's replication of, coincidentally, the opposite narrative structure wherein an American businessman is replaced by a more theatrical villain. Therefore, commercial failure is met with a strengthening of the commercial elements but commercial success is *also* met with a similar strengthening of commercial elements.

This suggests that, for this genre in this period at least, Garnham's argument that greater financial success creates more variation and diversity within the superstructure – 'the greater the surplus to immediate physical reproductive needs the greater the autonomy of the superstructure and indeed the greater the possible variation and diversity within superstructural organization' (1979, p 126) – is *not* true. Such a conclusion seems to confirm Adorno's worst fears about the 'repetition' of the culture industry and the similarity of cultural products (1991, p 58). However, his theory that 'every product refers back to what has already been preformed' (ibid, p 58) is not nuanced enough to adequately describe the development of the genre because it implies that *all* films are formulaic and fails to account for those films such as *Hulk* which do deviate from commercial logic to a certain extent. Even if commercial logic reasserts itself in the long term, it is not accurate to claim that *every* product simply conforms to the same model.

The degree of reciprocity between superhero films as superstructural products and the mode of production: a macro-level analysis

Before the final discussion of the central proposition, it is necessary to briefly consider an important aspect of this study's theoretical foundation. This is a point that has been argued several times over the course of the case studies, namely that the superhero genre is demonstrative of Althusser's conception of a two-way, interactive relationship between the mode of production and the superstructure, a relationship in which a superstructural element such as an artistic genre has a

'degree of presence (or effectivity) in the economic region itself' (Althusser 1970, p 179). The *X-Men* and *Hulk* case studies have already demonstrated that the commercial logic which shapes individual superhero films and, in turn, the genre as a whole, is a logic that is at least partly influenced by artistic considerations: the style, content and narrative structures of the successful films help to define the templates that commercial logic requires later films to follow.

Whilst it has been argued that 'the relationship between the base and superstructure [is] reciprocal' (Lee and Murray 1995, p 140) on an internal level in the superhero genre, at this point in the study's conclusion it is worth adopting a broader view of how this reciprocal relationship is demonstrated at a macro-level – in other words how this film genre (as a superstructural element) has had an effect on the wider film industry. When the genre is considered at this level it can be argued that it supports Althusser's statement that elements of the superstructure are 'implicit and present in a specific way in the relations of production' (Althusser 1970, pp 177-8). Indeed, the evolution of the genre between 2000 and 2013 reveals a clear process of reciprocity between superstructure and the forces and mode of production. Under the original Marxian formulation, the films as superstructural artistic products are supposedly the end result of the production process and nothing more than reflections of the forces of production. However, it is clear that as the superhero genre has become more successful and the adaptations have become as close as it is possible to get to the concept of the guaranteed blockbuster, these films – in terms of both their narrative content and their potential to create revenue – have influenced the mode, relations and forces of production.

This is evidenced by the creation of Marvel Studios itself (as detailed in

Fernandez 2008). Marvel created its studio in response to the increased demand for the superhero films of the early 2000s – an example of how a superstructural artistic product effected changes within the mode of production (as represented by the studio itself and its ongoing production practices). In a literal sense, these films therefore partly constitute the 'condition[s] of existence' (Althusser 1977, p 205) of the studio. Inevitably, it could be argued that this is nothing more than an example of a company simply creating revenue and then using their profit as capital to generate more revenue in the future. A straightforward Marxian reading of this might be that it is a simple case of expansion to meet demand which then manifests in the superstructure in the form of more superhero films – an example of the superstructure reflecting, not influencing, the mode of production. But this argument cannot be sustained because Marvel Studios is a specific response to the popularity and cultural visibility of a particular artistic genre. It is by no means an example of a change in the capitalist mode of production as a whole, but it is a structural change within the industry because Marvel Studios now produces films in an unprecedented way, developing specific patterns of production that can respond to the needs of comic book adaptations (for example multiple crossover storylines, multi-picture deals for actors, producers and directors, and the creation of team-up films such as *The Avengers*) – a change which affects the relations of production at the very least.

This point can be developed even further through the argument that the films' unique *artistic* content also has a specific influence on the relations of production. The fact that comic book narratives lend themselves so easily to sequels and franchise construction means that labour relations are changed because actors, writers and directors (and, theoretically, crew members) sign contracts for multiple films and television crossover appearances – all of which are direct or indirect results

of the narrative requirements of the fictional universe being built by Marvel (Kit 2009). Whilst this meeting of audience demand for superhero narratives is clearly a commercial strategy, it is one which is demonstrably influenced by the films as artistic products. Thus the commercial logic that the genre is built around is in fact something which is partly derived from specific textual structures and forms, the exact combination of which is unique to the comic book genre. Even the commercial logic which a superhero film must conform to (identified at the beginning of this research) is derived in part from the way the films work as artistic products. One of the central commercial functions of a superhero film – universe building – is a consequence of an artistic element: comic book narrative structure. To clarify, it is not that the commercial criteria identified are actually all artistic criteria or that their separation at the start of this study was disingenuous, but rather that certain commercial functions such as the replication of existing material and the desire to build universes are direct reflections of the ways in which the texts operate and are structured as artistic products. Thus the genre as a whole can be viewed as having a reciprocal effect on the larger economic structures of which it is a part.

Thesis discussion

The central proposition that this study has attempted to argue is that 'While economic considerations are determinant in the last instance, artistic considerations also have a degree of effectivity in the shaping of superhero comic book adaptations'. The theoretical review outlined in the early chapters of this work will not be repeated in detail here and it will suffice to say that the above assertion is derived from Althusser's refusal to accept Marx's position that superstructural elements such

as art are merely expressions of the economic base and that, instead, they actually have some 'degree of presence (or effectivity)' (Althusser, 1970, p 179). In other words, Althusser's notion of structural totality argues for the 'relative autonomy of the levels of the superstructure' and states that art can 'function in partial independence of the economic' (Dowling 1984, p 70). Even before the case studies had been taken into account, I had already argued that Althusser's interpretation of the art/commerce relationship not only offers a more fruitful investigative starting point but also reflects one of the central tenets of this study: that the analysis must not start from a position where economic considerations are already considered to be omnipotent. It was in an attempt to represent this ideological position in methodological form that the case studies adopted the approach of first establishing the separate functions of film as a commercial and an artistic product.

This discussion of how the case studies contribute to an understanding of the proposition will be divided into two parts, each reflecting a part of the proposition. The first part discusses how far it can be argued that artistic considerations have a degree of effectivity in the shaping of superhero comic book adaptations, and the second part reconsiders the idea of economic considerations as determinant 'in the last instance' and argues that, based on the case studies, a better description might be that they are determinant in the *first* instance.

i)   The degree of effectivity of artistry in the shaping of superhero comic book adaptations

A summary of the conclusions drawn from each adaptation change (figure

10.1) shows that the adaptations studied have elements which reflect both dominant

artistic and commercial logic:

Film/franchise	Adaptation change	Conclusion: reflective of dominant artistic or commercial logic
X-Men trilogy	Selection of X-Men characters appearing in the film	Artistic
X-Men trilogy	Differences in action content and spectacle between the *X-Men* comics and films	Commercial
Hulk	Thematic, character and psychological enrichment of the source material	Artistic
Hulk	Banner's father as villain and the hero/villain relationship	Commercial and artistic
Iron Man trilogy	The temporal setting of the narrative	Commercial
Iron Man trilogy	Selection and use of villains	Commercial
The Dark Knight trilogy	Nolan's quasi-realist mode of storytelling	Commercial
The *Dark Knight* trilogy	The economics of Gotham as a thematic concern	Artistic

Figure 10.1 – A summary of the case studies' adaptation change conclusions

As the case studies have shown, it is possible to argue that some elements of

these adaptations are reflective of a dominant artistic logic, some a dominant

commercial logic and one is reflective of both. It is significant that two of the three

changes reflecting a dominant artistic logic are thematic changes to the source

material (Lee's addition of themes which reappear throughout his body of work and

Nolan's economic theme). Contrastingly, those adaptation changes which could

potentially affect the film's narrative structure – Nolan's quasi-realism in *Batman*

Begins, the similar use of American and international villains in *Iron Man*, and Lee's

alteration of the villain's relationship to the protagonist in *Hulk* – reflect commercial

logic, or both commercial and artistic in the latter case. In this respect, the case

studies demonstrate that while certain elements of these films can be shaped by the

filmmakers' artistic interests, others are dominated by a rigid commercial logic. The

recourse to repetition of narrative formula is seen not only in the broadest sense

across the entire genre but also internally within franchises whose films demonstrate

similar structural components but vary the characters and situations for each film.

Interestingly, of the artistic elements of film identified at the beginning of this study

(narrative, character, theme, tone, symbolism), it is the three which were earlier

identified as the mental aspects of film – theme, tone and symbolism[78] – which are

affected by the dominant artistic logic adaptation changes. For those adaptation

changes which affect aspects of the film that are less reliant on subjective

interpretation – the more 'material' aspects such as narrative structure – the

commercial requirement of conforming to an existing formula is dominant,

suggesting fewer opportunities for deviation. This is demonstrated by those changes

which appear to be major alterations to the source material – *Iron Man*'s updating of

its period setting and the ostensible 'replacement' of the international villains with

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[78] I return here to the discussion in Chapter Two in the section 'The doubled logic of film': mental in the sense that they are more subjective and not immediately identifiable in a film as opposed to the materiality of narrative and character which are, for the most part, less subjective elements and are more easily identifiable parts of a film.

Stark's American business rivals – but which are in fact revealed to not produce any real measurable changes to the more material aspects of the film such as plot or character. It appears to be only those changes which affect the mental, more subjective aspects of the source material and the film for which artistic logic proves to be dominant.

It is also significant that the two films which each have thematic adaptation changes that reflect dominant artistic logic are directed by the two directors who are arguably auteurs, Lee and Nolan. Although it is difficult to reach a widely applicable conclusion based on a limited number of adaptation changes and films, this does suggest that those adaptations made by filmmakers who have established strong, identifiable styles tend to be more demonstrably reflective of artistic logic. Certainly, themes which are not present in the source material but which deepen the films as artistic products (and regardless of whether the viewer believes it 'improves' the films or not, the increased focus on more complex themes still deepens and expands the films as texts) seem to be more evident in *Hulk* and *The Dark Knight* trilogy than they are in *Iron Man*. This of course could perhaps be explained by their tone and subject matter – it could be argued that *Hulk* and the *Dark Knight* trilogy are simply more serious films than *Iron Man* – but this argument is countered by the fact that *X-Men*'s subject matter is similarly serious yet its source material's themes are not as drastically altered by Singer (who, like *Iron Man*'s director Favreau, did not have a reputation as an auteur when he made *X-Men*).

It can be concluded that those adaptations made by auteurs contain more changes (and more significant changes) to the source material so that the films become more reflective of the directors' pre-existing artistic concerns and styles. For

those films which are directed by individuals who may be no less experienced but whose body of work is not particularly identifiable (directors such as Favreau, Leterrier and Ratner), commercial logic tends to be more dominant in the adaptation changes. This supports the notion that directors' symbolic capital (accumulated by filmmakers such as Nolan and Lee who, prior to their superhero films, had cultivated more unique, less mainstream reputations) is converted into a degree of increased artistic influence and freedom when they work on mainstream films. The key phrase here is 'a degree' of freedom because, as argued earlier, even the superhero films of a director such as Nolan who has demonstrated the ability to generate symbolic and economic capital, still tend to replicate each other's structures. This again suggests that artistic logic is permitted less freedom to shape the more material (and less subjective) artistic aspects of a superhero film such as narrative structure.

ii)   Rethinking the idea of economics as 'determinant in the *last* instance'

Whereas the individual adaptation changes listed above support the part of the theoretical proposition that states that artistic considerations have a degree of effectivity in the shaping of superhero adaptations, it can be argued that the conclusions from the case study research as a whole suggest that the remaining part of the proposition, that 'economic considerations are determinant in the last instance', requires a degree of amendment.

This suggested modification to Althusser's theory of 'determination in the *last* instance by the economic' (1977, p 113) was first discussed at the conclusion of the

Iron Man case study. Based on the conclusions of this research into the superhero genre and select films within it, an argument can be posited that a more accurate description is that economic considerations are determinate in the *first* instance. This description is something which is already implicit in the process of filmmaking wherein, as noted earlier, the budget and funding is determined initially and then the film is made. Of course, this is a simplistic description yet it is one which places the economic aspect of filmmaking at the start of the process. Admittedly, a screenplay comes before funding and the commercial aspects of film continue long after the film has been completed (promotion, marketing, distribution), but the order of this process can be broadly described as an initial economic decision which then gives way to the filmmaking process itself.

The above formulation is of course nothing more than a simple outline so it is necessary to consider how the case studies support this theory. One of the adaptation changes which supports the argument that, for these films, economics is determinant in the first instance is that of the period setting in *Iron Man*. Here I argued that the film could not have been set in any other period than the present because it needed to tie in with the contemporary setting of *The Avengers*. Thus, in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the filmmakers must ensure that their individual films conform to Marvel's phased plan. In terms of commercial logic, it does not matter how these characters get to where they need to be to join the Avengers as long as each film allows them to arrive at a place (narratively speaking) which conforms to the plan[79]. Whilst this proves that the business plan is ultimately the determinate

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[79] In a different way, this theory is also demonstrated by Nolan's trilogy. As stated in the case study, Warner Bros. planned for the *Dark Knight* films to be a self-contained trilogy that did not connect to any other DC adaptations. This therefore allowed Nolan the freedom to end the trilogy in a relatively radical fashion for a comic book franchise. The epilogue of *The Dark Knight Rises* shows that Bruce Wayne has faked Batman's death and left Gotham, leaving John Blake (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) to adopt the role of the superhero in his

factor, it does also suggest, in theory at least, a degree of freedom once these boundaries have been set.

The argument for amending Althusser's theoretical stance is supported by the case studies' analyses of the adaptation changes. If it were the case that economic considerations were determinant in the last instance, then it would be impossible to argue, as this study has done, that any aspects of the final films were symptomatic of artistic logic – if that were true, every adaptation change in the finished films would reflect commercial logic. What this implies, as has already been suggested, is that at those points where commercial logic cedes authority to artistic logic, whether in a minor or major way, economic considerations determine this ceding of authority in the first instance and artistic logic then assumes the power to shape that particular aspect of the film. For each individual film, once the authority to shape specific aspects of specific cultural products has been transferred to artistic logic, economic considerations cannot then reassert themselves in the final instance.

Aspects of *Hulk* are an example of this theory of first instance determination. As the case study demonstrates, Lee's strong sense of artistry shapes certain parts of the film resulting in a finished product which is reflective of dominant artistic logic in some aspects. While the film does replicate the basic narrative structure of a typical superhero film, the particular way in which it tells its story, and by this I mean the precise, specific and unique form of the film as a text – those themes and subtext which are specific to Lee's version of a superhero narrative – are determined in the

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absence. Such an ending was only possible because the studio planned for the franchise to end and decided that there would be no fourth film. Conversely, in Warner Bros.'s new connected superhero film universe, Ben Affleck's Bruce Wayne must, for now at least, continue as Batman at the end of each film in order to maintain the character's central role in the franchise. Even when Batman's fellow superhero Superman dies at the end of *Batman v Superman*, he is resurrected in the sequel *Justice League*, so that the character can continue to appear in future films.

shooting and editing of the film after the economic considerations have been decided. Ultimately a studio can only control the process by budgeting for cost, greenlighting the screenplay and then allowing the filmmaker to craft the film[80]. Even in those relatively rare cases where a studio takes back control of a film from the director and assumes responsibility for the final cut (and there is no evidence to suggest that this happened in any of the case studies), economic considerations are limited in their authority at this stage because the film has been shot and completed. If anything, the very fact that some films are recut to better meet a studio's specification is evidence that economic considerations are not determinant in the last instance or no recut would be needed.

Yet it is not only those films which have underperformed which demonstrate that economic considerations are determinant in the first instance. Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy was commercially successful but the films were still shaped into their precise form after economic considerations had been determined. The fact that the films were popular meant that the studio could greenlight sequels that replicated the structure of their predecessors but any presence within the films of adaptation changes that reflect artistic logic such as Nolan's addition of the economic theme to the Batman narratives demonstrate that not every aspect of the film is shaped by commercial logic.

It is vital to clarify at this point that this description of first instance determination is localised, and applicable only on a short term, micro-level (the

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[80] Even though a studio is likely to monitor the 'daily rushes' (the footage filmed that day) every evening during filming and therefore seeks to monitor a film while it is in production, this still does not mean that economic considerations are determinant in the last instance. In fact, this is as effective an indication of economics being determinant in the first instance as anything because the very act of a studio asking for reshoots is reflective of how the moment of creation of the film itself is beyond the control of economic considerations even when elements such as screenplay and story have been agreed in advance.

individual film texts in other words). The description is not accurate for the long term at macro-level (the whole genre/film industry). As an amendment to the theoretical proposition, it does not of course contradict any of the fundamental theoretical understanding of this study; it does not imbue artistry with an unassailable authority, nor does it alter the fundamental point that economic considerations are ultimately determinate in the long term. The point has already been made that the case studies have shown that in the long term, for the entire genre, economic considerations are determinate in the last instance and this is still true. Commercial logic will always reassert itself because it remains the case that revenue is the dominant factor in deciding which films a studio will make more of and how much they will cost. If a film fails to generate sufficient revenue it is highly unlikely that the franchise will continue, however this reassertion of commercial logic can only happen *after* a film's failure, as a response to it. For example, when *Hulk* underperformed, commercial logic reasserted itself by more explicitly shaping its re-quel *The Incredible Hulk*, but in terms of *Hulk* itself, commercial logic was only able to assert itself in the first instance. The resulting assertion of commercial logic was not the last instance of *Hulk*'s but the first instance of *The Incredible Hulk*'s. Similarly, when a film is a success such as *Iron Man* or *Batman Begins*, the commercial logic that requires its structure to be replicated in its sequel manifests as the first instance of that next film. In other words, the power of economic considerations to replicate a film's success or correct its failure is only observable as the first instance of the new filmmaking process for the next film.

Therefore, whether economic considerations are determinant in the first instance or the last instance is dependent on the level of analysis and the time frame: in the short term, for each individual film, economic considerations are

determinant in the *first* instance whereas in the long term, for the genre as a whole, economic considerations are determinant in the *last* instance.

Where next?

This study has been necessarily limited to one genre of mainstream filmmaking and there are many directions that this research could be taken in. One of the most logical extensions of this research would be to apply the same method to a later period of this genre (2014 onwards) to assess how the genre has changed in relation to artistic and commercial logic. In terms of changing the focus of the research, this study's method is limited to film adaptations of comic books and it would be interesting to explore how the thesis applies to film adaptations of plays or novels, for example. Similarly, with some alteration, this research could offer a useful model for analysing adaptations in mediums other than film, for example, plays and long-form television drama series that are based on novels, comic books and films. Alternatively, a different approach – which would require a reconsideration of how the film operates as a commercial product – would be to analyse a non-mainstream film adaptation and explore whether or not the conclusions differ and whether artistic logic is more dominant in the adaptation changes for non-mainstream films with smaller budgets.

This study rejected the idea of using audience research as data sources and justified this decision, however there are still some ways in which primary qualitative audience data could be employed. The methodology would have to be significantly restructured to allow for this approach but a companion study which is audience-

based as opposed to text-based might constitute an interesting extension of this work. Research into how aspects of the filmmaking process such as the choice of director, cast and source material are perceived by audiences and how this in turn affects the film's revenue, would be an interesting way to explore the art/commerce relationship from a significantly different perspective. Alternatively, audience research into how viewers identify the presence of commercial and artistic logic in film texts would also be valuable.

In terms of the theoretical aspects of the study, further textual research could be carried out into Althusser's superstructural formulations. One option would be to develop the film readings even further by investigating the evolution of a genre textually; in other words, a consideration of how specific elements of texts are influential in shaping other texts. This could provide a further exploration of the role and agency of artistry in the filmmaking process. There is, after all, still a great deal of practical work to be done in developing a detailed map of how the superstructural elements function in relation to each other.

Appendices

Appendix I – Gross box office revenue for superhero comic book film adaptations referred to in this dissertation

Film (box office region worldwide unless specified)	*Box Office Mojo* total (US$)	*BoxOffice* total (US$)	*The Numbers* total	Mean total (to the nearest $)
Amazing Spider-Man, The	757,930,663	758,031,662	757,890,267	757,950,864
Avengers, The	1,518,594,910	1,514,357,910	1,514,279,552	1,515,744,124
Batman	411,348,924	412,261,924	411,348,924	411,653,257
Batman and Robin	238,207,122	238,207,122	238,317,814	238,244,019
Batman Begins	374,218,673	374,218,673	359,142,724	369,193,357
Batman Forever	336,529,144	336,632,547	336,529,144	336,563,612
Batman Returns	266,822,354	266,688,774	266,824,291	266,778,473
Catwoman	82,102,379	82,102,379	82,145,380	82,116,713
Captain America	370,569,774	370,569,774	370,569,783	370,569,777
Daredevil	179,179,718	179,179,718	182,782,520	180,380,652
Dark Knight, The	1,004,558,444	1,003,434,911	1,002,891,358	1,003,628,238
Dark Knight, The (domestic)	534,858,444	534,858,444	533,345,358	534,354,082
Dark Knight Rises, The	1,084,439,099	1,079,343,943	1,079,343,948	1,081,042,330
Elektra	56,681,566	56,681,566	56,409,722	56,590,951
Fantastic Four	330,579,719	330,579,719	330,717,080	330,625,506
Fantastic Four 2	289,047,763	289,047,763	288,215,319	288,770,282
Ghost Rider	228,738,393	228,738,393	229,545,589	229,007,458

Ghost Rider 2	132,563,930	134,565,310	149,217,355	138,782,198
Green Lantern	219,851,172	221,901,172	231,201,172	224,317,839
Hulk	245,360,480	245,359,120	245,229,234	245,316,278
Hulk (domestic)	132,177,234	132,175,930	132,177,234	132,176,799
Incredible Hulk, The	263,427,551	263,427,551	263,417,913	263,424,338
Incredible Hulk, The (domestic)	134,806,913	134,806,396	134,533,885	134,715,731
Iron Man	585,174,222	585,134,041	582,443,128	584,250,464
Iron Man 2	623,933,331	622,128,345	623,561,331	623,207,669
Iron Man 3	1,215,439,994	1,214,713,994	1,172,805,920	1,200,986,636
Jonah Hex	10,903,312	10,902,243	11,022,697	10,942,751
Man of Steel	668,045,518	668,045,518	667,999,518	668,030,185
Spider-Man	821,708,551	821,708,551	809,942,906	817,786,669
Spider- Man (domestic)	403,706,375	403,706,983	403,706,375	403,706,578
Spider-Man 2	783,766,341	783,704,827	783,705,001	783,725,390
Spider-Man 3	890,871,626	890,871,913	890,875,304	890,872,948
Superman	300,218,018	206,925,251	300,200,000	269,114,423
Superman IV (domestic)	15,681,020	15,681,804	11,227,824	14,196,883
Superman Returns	391,081,192	391,081,192	374,085,065	385,415,816
Thor	449,326,618	449,326,618	449,326,618	449,326,618
Thor: The Dark World	644,783,140	634,762,140	633,360,018	637,635,099
Watchmen	185,258,983	185,248,060	184,068,358	184,858,467
Wolverine, The	414,828,246	417,019,529	416,456,852	416,101,542
X 2	407,711,549	407,711,527	407,711,551	407,711,542

X-Men	296,339,527	296,339,528	296,339,717	296,339,591
X-Men (domestic)	157,299,717	157,299,255	157,299,717	157,299,563
X-Men: First Class	353,624,124	353,908,305	355,408,305	354,313,578
X-Men Origins: Wolverine	373,062,864	373,058,714	374,825,760	373,649,113
X-Men: The Last Stand	459,359,555	459,359,888	459,359,557	459,359,667

Appendix II – Estimated production budgets for selected superhero comic book film adaptations

Film	*Box Office Mojo* estimate (US$)	*The Numbers* estimate (US$)	Mean budget estimate (to the nearest US$)
Avengers, The	220,000,000	225,000,000	222,500,000
Batman (1966)	n/a	1,377,800	1,377,800
Batman (1989)	35,000,000	35,000,000	35,000,000
Batman and Robin	125,000,000	125,000,000	125,000,000
Batman Begins	150,000,000	150,000,000	150,000,000
Batman Forever	100,000,000	100,000,000	100,000,000
Batman Returns	80,000,000	80,000,000	80,000,000
Cast Away	90,000,000	85,000,000	87,500,000
Dark Knight, The	185,000,000	185,000,000	185,000,000
Dark Knight Rises, The	250,000,000	275,000,000	262,500,000
Gladiator	103,000,000	103,000,000	103,000,000
How The Grinch Stole Christmas	123,000,000	123,000,000	123,000,000
Hulk	137,000,000	137,000,000	137,000,000
Incredible Hulk, The	150,000,000	137,500,000	143,750,000
Iron Man	186,000,000	140,000,000	163,000,000
Iron Man 2	200,000,000	170,000,000	185,000,000
Iron Man 3	200,000,000	200,000,000	200,000,000
Man of Steel	225,000,000	225,000,000	225,000,000
Manderlay	14,200,000	14,200,000	14,200,000
Meet The Parents	55,000,000	55,000,000	55,000,000
Melancholia	n/a	9,400,000	9,400,000
Mission Impossible II	125,000,000	120,000,000	122,500,000
Perfect Storm, The	140,000,000	120,000,000	130,000,000

Scary Movie	19,000,000	19,000,000	19,000,000
What Lies Beneath	100,000,000	90,000,000	95,000,000
What Women Want	70,000,000	65,000,000	67,500,000
Wolverine, The	120,000,000	115,000,000	117,500,000
X-Men	75,000,000	75,000,000	75,000,000
X-Men: Days of Future Past	200,000,000	200,000,000	200,000,000
X-Men: First Class	160,000,000	160,000,000	160,000,000
X-Men: Origins Wolverine	150,000,000	150,000,000	150,000,000
X-Men: The Last Stand	210,000,000	210,000,000	210,000,000
X 2	110,000,000	125,000,000	117,500,000

Appendix III: Breakdown of *X-Men* franchise in terms of action sequences

Film	Action sequences[81] (and length to the nearest minute)	Total length of action sequences[82] (to the nearest minute)	Percentage of running time constituted by action sequences
X-Men	Wolverine's cage fight (1) Wolverine's van crashes (3) Train station fight (6) Statue of Liberty climax (10)	20	19
X2	White House (3) Mansion attack (8) Magneto escape/Pyro versus police (3) Fighter jets (4) Stryker's base (21)	39	30

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[81] Action sequences are denoted as those scenes where the depiction of physical actions such as running, fighting and flying is dominant in the scene and dialogue is minimal. Also includes scenes of destruction such as explosions and vehicle-based chases.

[82] In extended sequences (such as Stryker's base) which have intermittent dialogue-based scenes in between the action, the dialogue scenes have not been included as part of the total action sequence length

X-Men: The Last Stand	Danger Room (2) Jean's return (1) Magneto destroys the convoy (1) Jean and Wolverine (1) Professor versus Jean (4) Wolverine in the forest (2) Soldiers in the forest (1) Golden Gate Bridge scene (4) X-Men versus Brotherhood battle (16)	32	32

Appendix IV: Breakdown of specific *X-Men* comic issues' action sequences

Comic (authors and year of publication)	Number of panels	Number of panels depicting action sequences	Percentage of panels in issue which depict action sequences (to the nearest whole percent)[83]
The X-Men #1 (Lee and Kirby 1963a)	152	77	51
The X-Men #2 (Lee and Kirby 1963b)	115	55	48
The X-Men #3 (Lee and Kirby 1964b)	149	66	44
The X-Men #4 (Lee and Kirby 1964c)	154	63	41
The X-Men #5 (Lee and Kirby 1964d)	160	82	51
Giant Size X-Men #1 (Wein and Cockrum 1975)	287	139	48

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[83] Action sequence panel defined as a panel in which a physical action dominates the image such as running, fighting or a panel which includes explosions or vehicular action. Individual panels which depict static events and/or focus on dialogue and conversations but which appear as part of an extended action sequence of panels have not been included.

Appendix V: How the typical narrative structure for superhero films manifests in the top twenty highest earning superhero comic book adaptations at the US box office (as of December 2013)

Film	1. HERO'S ORIGIN	2. VILLAIN'S ORIGIN	3. DEVELOPMENT OF POWERS	4. RESOLUTION OF CONFLICT
The Avengers	Captain America, Iron Man, Hulk, Thor - team made up of characters whose origins have been established in previous eponymous films	Loki - whose origin has been established in previous film, *Thor*	While Loki builds an army to destroy Earth, the Avengers attempt to form a team to protect it	Battle between aliens and the Avengers in New York
The Dark Knight	Batman – origins established in *Batman Begins*	The Joker – emerges as the mob's response to Batman's capture of Lau	Neither Batman nor the Joker have superpowers but are evenly matched as representations of order and chaos, respectively	Battle between the Joker and Batman on a building construction site
The Dark Knight Rises	Batman – origins established in *Batman Begins*	Bane and Talia al Ghul – both connected to Batman's destruction of Ra's al Ghul and a desire for revenge	Talia exploits her business wealth and resources to fight Bruce Wayne and Bane matches Batman as a physical threat	A siege of Gotham in which Batman must fight Bane and destroy Talia's bomb
Iron Man 3	Iron Man – origins established in *Iron Man*	Aldrich Killian – possesses a desire for revenge on Tony Stark as a result of his snub of him years before	Killian enhances himself by using the Extremis serum which makes him a match for the Iron Man suit	Fight between Killian and Stark's forces on a dock

Spider-Man	Spider-Man – Peter Parker is bitten by a genetically altered spider	The Green Goblin – Norman Osborn experiments on himself using a powerful gas	Peter learns to use his powers for the good of others while Norman Osborn wreaks havoc	Spider-Man versus the Green Goblin in an abandoned building
Spider-Man 2	Spider-Man – origins established in *Spider-Man*	Doctor Octopus – Otto Octavius, a scientist friend of Peter's, is driven mad by an artificially intelligent machine	Octavius attempts to steal money and harm Peter's loved ones while Peter tries to stop him	Spider-Man versus Doctor Octopus in his laboratory
Spider-Man 3	Spider-Man – origins established in *Spider-Man*	Sandman – a criminal who is involved in a particle experiment Hobgoblin – Harry Osborn, Peter's friend, inherits his father's Goblin technology Venom – an alien symbiote which mimics Spider-Man's powers	Spider-Man must overcome his own misuse of the Venom symbiote before preventing Sandman, Hobgoblin and Venom from wreaking destruction	Spider-Man versus Sandman, Hobgoblin and Venom on a building site
Iron Man	Iron Man – Tony Stark is captured by insurgents and must build a suit to escape	Iron Monger – Tony's business associate Obadiah Stane uses Stark's technology to build his own suit	Tony decides to stop profiting from weapons manufacture while Stane manipulates the insurgents and encourages destruction	Iron Man versus Iron Monger on a freeway

Iron Man 2	Iron Man – origin established in *Iron Man*	Whiplash – Ivan Vanko uses a suit made out of similar technology to fight Iron Man Justin Hammer – a business rival of Tony Stark's	Whiplash uses his suit to kill and wound, Hammer uses Stark's technology to build weapons	Iron Man versus Whiplash at an expo
Man of Steel	Superman – born on the planet Krypton and has superpowers due to Earth's gravity	Zod – a fellow survivor of Krypton who also has powers while on Earth	Superman vows to protect Earth while Zod wreaks destruction	Superman versus Zod in Metropolis
The Amazing Spider-Man	Spider-Man – Peter Parker bitten by a mutated spider in a laboratory and granted powers	The Lizard – Curt Connors experiments on himself using similar animal-based research from the same laboratory	Spider-Man must learn to use his powers for good while The Lizard attempts to mutate the whole city	Spider-Man versus The Lizard at the Oscorp headquarters
Batman	Batman – Bruce Wayne's parents are murdered by Jack Napier and Wayne vows to fight criminals	The Joker – Jack Napier accidentally plunges into a chemical bath after fighting Batman	The Joker attempts chemical warfare on Gotham while Batman must protect its citizens	Batman versus the Joker in Gotham
X-Men: The Last Stand	The X-Men – mutants whose origins are established in *X-Men*	Magneto and the Brotherhood – a mutant army	The X-Men must stop Magneto from wreaking destruction on humans when he unleashes the power of Jean Grey	The X-Men versus the Brotherhood at a San Francisco laboratory

X2	The X-Men – mutants whose origins are established in *X-Men*	William Stryker – a military scientist who has experimented on mutants	Stryker is human but has a number of powerful mutants in his employ that he uses to fight the X-Men in his attempt to destroy mutants	The X-Men versus Stryker in his underground headquarters
Batman Begins	Bruce Wayne is orphaned and vows to fight crime	Ra's al Ghul – Bruce's former mentor and trainer Scarecrow – Dr Jonathan Crane, who has developed a nerve gas	Batman must protect the city from the crime wave and invasion of The League of Shadows who are set on destroying Gotham	Batman versus Ra's al Ghul on the monorail
Thor: The Dark World	Thor – origin established in *Thor*	Malekith – a Dark Elf from ancient Svartalfheim	Thor must protect his homeland of Asgard and Earth from the Dark Elves who wish to destroy them	Thor versus Malekith in London
Superman Returns	Superman – origin established in *Superman*	Lex Luthor – a human	While Luthor is human, his use of Kryptonite weakens Superman	Superman versus Lex Luthor on an island
Batman Forever	Batman – origin established in *Batman*	Two-Face – a lawyer scarred by acid and driven mad The Riddler – a Batman-obsessed criminal with significant intelligence	Two-Face and The Riddler team up to steal resources to make the Riddler's mind device. Batman must stop them	Batman and Robin versus The Riddler and Two-Face on their island hideout

Thor	Thor – an Asgardian warrior who can control lightning	Loki – Thor's adopted brother who can play tricks on people's minds	Thor is banished to Earth where he must learn to be humble and to protect others before his powers are restored. Loki abuses his powers to try to rule Asgard	Thor versus Loki in Asgard
X-Men Origins: Wolverine	Wolverine – a mutant who was experimented on and weaponised by the army	Sabretooth – Logan's half-brother and also a mutant with similar powers Deadpool – a mutant who has been experimented on	Wolverine must protect his friends and loved ones from Sabretooth who is working to aid the army's research	Wolverine versus Sabretooth and then later Wolverine versus Deadpool at a nuclear power plant

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