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Superheroes and Shared Universes: How Fans and Auteurs Are Transforming the Hollywood Blockbuster

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Abstract: Over the course of the 2000s, the Hollywood blockbuster welcomed the superhero genre into its ranks after these films saw an explosion in popularity. Now, the ability to produce superhero films through an extended transmedia franchise is a coveted prize for major studios. The likes of Sony, 20th Century Fox, and Warner Bros. are locked in competition with the new kid on the block, Marvel, who changed the way Hollywood produces the blockbuster franchise. Drawing upon my previous and current postgraduate work, this essay will discuss fans and authorship in relation to the superhero genre which, I posit, exemplifies the industrial model of the Hollywood blockbuster and the cycle of appropriation and revitalisation that defines it. I will explain how studios like Marvel call upon up-and-coming directorial talent to further legitimise their films in order to appeal to middlebrow expectations through auteur credibility. Such director selection demonstrates: 1) how the contemporary auteur has become commodified within transmedia franchise blockbusters and, 2) how, due to the conflicting creative and commercial interests inherent to the blockbuster, these films are now supported by a form of co-dependent authorship. Related to this, I will also explore how fans function within this industrial context and the effect that their fannish support and promotion of superhero films has had on the latter's viability as a staple of studio production.

Introduction

From the 2000s, through to the present day, the superhero film has seen a titanic increase in popularity, becoming a staple of the mainstream film industry. Major Hollywood studios – including Sony (Spider-Man), 20th Century Fox (X-Men), and Warner Bros. – are engaged in fierce competition to dominate this new genre, through the various characters they each hold the rights to. In the midst of studio rivalry over superhero properties, a new kid arrived on the block, Marvel Studios (now a subsidiary of Disney), producing a franchise of films that have not only challenged how we view the superhero genre, but how we look at the Hollywood blockbuster, and the franchise model it relies so heavily on. In this essay, I will discuss fans and authorship in relation to the superhero genre which, I posit, exemplifies the industrial model of the Hollywood blockbuster and the cycle of appropriation and revitalisation that defines it. In particular, I will focus on Marvel's transmedia franchise, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (hereafter, the MCU), as the most prevalent example of the superhero genre's potential for blockbuster revitalisation. I will explain how studios like Marvel now call upon up-and-coming directorial talent to further legitimise their films in order to appeal to middlebrow expectations through auteur credibility. Such director selection demonstrates how the commodification of the auteur continues apace with the rise of the transmedia blockbuster franchise, and how, due to the conflicting creative and commercial interests inherent to the blockbuster, these films are now supported by what I refer to as, "co-dependent authorship". Relatedly, I will also explore how fans function within this industrial context, particularly in regards to discourses of fidelity and authenticity generated by these communities and their interaction with contemporary superhero films. The effect of their fannish support and promotion of superhero films has played a significant role in the auteur's viability as a staple of studio production.

The Hollywood blockbuster, as we know it today, is the result of a complex industrial process that aims to entertain the largest possible heterogeneous audience whilst simultaneously achieving high profits. The blockbuster is therefore defined by a cycle of appropriation and revitalisation due to the creative and commercial interests that are inherent to these films (see Smith 2015). In fact, this cycle goes beyond defining just these films, and encompasses Hollywood by extension, as an industry that seeks longevity and

stability. The cycle I describe refers to blockbusters' ability to a) appropriate genre(s) and other elements as needed, and b) franchises' ability to supplant any failures years later through various "reboots". Furthermore, the success of blockbusters can be largely attributed to their appeal to 'middlebrow expectations'. Gillian Roberts argues that this enables blockbusters (such as *Titanic* [1997]) to achieve both commercial *and* critical success (2003). Roberts follows Pierre Bourdieu's definition of middlebrow, which he claims comprises 'accessible versions of avant-garde … bringing legitimate culture within the reach of all' (Bourdieu 1984, p. 323). In regards to film, middlebrow expectations feature elements of "high culture", which typically emphasise prior knowledge of intellectual or aesthetic features of texts, but brought within the purview of an accessible film. In contrast, there is "low (or lowbrow) culture", which is premised on a text's appeal requiring limited intellectual or "complex" material. Commercially-motivated blockbusters are often associated with low culture due to their "superficial" and "simplistic" aesthetic and narrative elements – particularly through their reliance on spectacle, which is seen to occur at the expense of quality storytelling – while high culture is associated with more critically-acclaimed, "serious", artistic films. Because of these classed cultural associations, critics and award ceremonies are reluctant to reward blockbusters – although this is not always the case, as seen with the success of *The Lord of the Rings* Trilogy (2001-2003) and *The Dark Knight* (2008) at the Academy Awards. Therefore, by appealing to middlebrow expectations, blockbusters can supersede their traditional association with lowbrow culture. In exploring the contemporary blockbuster, I have chosen to focus on the superhero genre, due to its current prevalence within the industry. Furthermore, these films exemplify the Hollywood blockbuster through their ability to appropriate aspects of other genres into individual films and through "rebooting", which revitalises audience interest.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe and Fandom

The MCU began in 2008 at the end of Jon Favreau's *Iron Man*, with a post-credits scene (which has since become a staple of their films) that teased at the wider universe into which the film's protagonist, Tony Stark/Iron Man, had entered. Subsequent standalone films followed – *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Thor* (2011), and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) – all of which gradually built up their individual characters'

respective mythologies and worlds. In addition, Easter eggs, subtle references to the wider universe, acknowledging the events of other films through hidden clues in the film's narrative, extend the shared universe of the MCU films and reward continued audience engagement. These standalone films culminated in the crossover event of Joss Whedon's *The Avengers* (2012), the triumphant conclusion to Marvel's 'Phase One' films in their Cinematic Universe. This film, as well as achieving both commercial (becoming the third-highest grossing film ever, at the time of its release) and critical success, managed to accomplish what was previously unheard of: uniting characters from various, separate franchises, into a single film. The success of *The Avengers* led to a second Phase of standalone films, mostly sequels and two new properties: 2013's *Iron Man 3* and *Thor: The Dark World*; 2014's *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*; and 2015's *Ant-Man*; all of which concluded in the second crossover film, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015). As of now, Marvel has begun 'Phase Three' of the MCU, with the recent *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), another critical and commercial success, with nine more films scheduled for release between now and 2019. Collectively, films produced by Marvel Studios have made approximately $10 billion at the box office (Box Office Mojo 2017) and, for the most part, have all been critically successful (as demonstrated by review aggregator, Rotten Tomatoes 2016). In addition to the films, Marvel has also expanded into other media: first, with their 'One Shots' – short films exclusive to home media; television, through *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-present) and *Agent Carter* (2015-2016); and online series via Netflix, including *Daredevil* (2015-present), *Jessica Jones* (2015-present) and *Luke Cage* (2016-present). This demonstrates the success and range of Marvel's transmedia franchise.

The success of Marvel, and by extension, the superhero genre, can be attributed in part to the promotional role of fandom. Fans of the comic books on which the films are based have eagerly followed the development of the genre, particularly through its recent domination of the Hollywood blockbuster, and have played a key role in introducing comic book superheroes to mainstream audiences, securing the latter's viability as franchise material. For a transmedia franchise like the MCU, the relationship between studio and fan, between the product and the consumers, can influence the desired effect of narrative synergy. According to Henry Jenkins, a transmedia franchise is one whose story 'unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable

contribution to the whole' (2006, pp. 95-96), sustaining audience engagement with the original text through various media. For Jenkins, fans 'are more apt to watch series faithfully, more apt to pay attention to advertising, and more apt to buy products' (p. 63). This creative and consumptive role involves fans creating their own ancillary works (fan fiction, for example) and gathering as much knowledge as possible about media properties to speculate and comment on their development. Ultimately the comic book culture superhero films are based on is 'one of consumption and commodity' (Pustz 1999, p. 18). This relationship is viewed to benefit both fans and transmedia franchises. Jenkins comments: 'If old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumers are active … If the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, the new consumers are now noisy and public' (2006, p. 19). Media companies prize this new active audience because of the potential for brand loyalty. Alex Brundige suggests, 'active viewership on the part of fans generates an affective energy through the processes performed around these properties in fan communities' (2015, p. 4). Therefore, film studios' engagement with fan communities is vital to the success of the superhero genre and franchises like the MCU, due to the way in which fans' passion can serve as a means of promotion. In discussing this fannish promotion through transmedial devotion, I will be drawing upon Brundige's master's thesis, *The Rise of Marvel and DC's Transmedia Superheroes: Comic Book Adaptations, Fanboy Auteurs, and Guiding Fan Reception*.

Authenticity and Amplification: maintaining "fidelity" in adaptation

When engaging with superhero franchises, there is a lot of debate among fans as to the use of and/or adherence to the source material. In discussing the source material, I am referring to the comic book texts that have influenced their readers' interpretation and understanding of the characters and stories. This understanding can potentially complicate any discussion of film adaptations of said texts, as the comics and their characters have had numerous permutations over their decades-long history. Brundige notes that 'age and generation is central to the perceived authenticity of an adaptation, as certain source texts are privileged at different periods in time' (2015, p. 5). This can be seen in many recent film adaptations, which are often based on texts from the 1980s. These stories, from Frank Miller and Alan Moore, among others, were considered to offer a more grounded approach to characters

and stories and often serve loosely as the canonical basis on which film adaptations' successful translation of source material are evaluated. The notion of authenticity and fidelity when adapting the comics is integral to appealing to the comics' fans, and the various interpretations and reimagining of these properties over the years can result in the questioning of their primacy, with a single text possessing a 'plethora of possible meanings' (Stam 2000, p. 57). Fans are not necessarily concerned with an adaptation accurately translating the source's authorial meaning from one text to another however. Rather, fans judge an adaptation based on its "faithfulness" to its origins. In regards to comic book adaptations then, authenticity is, at best, ambiguous, yet remains a key part of fans' reception to these films. Brundige notes that, to fans, 'the fidelity important to comic book adaptations is a "discourse of fidelity"; it is what fans say to each other and to a wider audience regarding perceived "faithfulness" that matters, not actual intertextual connections' (2015, p. 7). Consequently, it is "the *claim* that an adapted text is authentic [which provides] the basis of acceptance" (p. 7). Thus, the authenticity of comic book adaptations is inherently selective due to fan interpretation rather than an element of filmic production that can be measured against a straight-forward set of external criteria. But this perception of authenticity is valuable for film studios in engaging fan consumption.

As a studio, Marvel is unique within the genre, as they can offer a perceived level of authenticity and fidelity that their competitors, with the exception of DC Comics and Warner Bros., lack. Former Marvel CEO Avi Arad established the company's position on the expectations of the filmmakers involved in their properties, stating in 2006: 'Unless you buy into the gestalt of what Marvel is and understand the characters and metaphors and treat them as living people, we are not interested. This is material that has withstood the test of history, and the director and writer have a sense of responsibility' (in Stork 2014, p. 87). Therefore, it was imperative to Marvel that they ensure that the fans of the comics were also fans of their filmic adaptations. Economically though, only a small portion of audiences consist of fans. As Brundige comments though, by 'appealing to a larger mainstream audience, studios [like Marvel] cater to fans in order to facilitate the positive discussion of their films' (2015, p. 15). Thus, contemporary comic book fans play a part in the marketing of these films to more mainstream audiences through the process of "amplification". As described by Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith:

> Amplification … usually occurs among two or more people who have read the same comic book, but it is also possible for a reader to relate portions of the comic book message to someone who has not encountered it first-hand. The significance of this amplification is that the final meaning that resides with a receiver might be the product of both the reading itself and the discussion that followed, or, in the case of second-hand receivers, it could be the product solely of discussion. (2009, p. 13)

Liam Burke acknowledges that it is these 'second-hand receivers' – the mainstream audiences – that give fan discourse power, since 'with no familiarity with the source, they will propagate fan opinion, often considered expert, thereby giving the first-hand receivers wider influence' (2015, p. 139), as fans typically offer the most prominent online reaction to promotional material. This positions fandom(s) as an influential minority within mainstream audiences. For example, Matt Hills (himself following from James Collins' 1992 essay, 'Television and Postmodernism') uses the term 'coalition audience' instead of 'mainstream audience' as he finds it provides 'a more accurate identification of the situation where fandom is able to occupy a space within a series of other audience fragments gathered around a single programme' (2002, p. 37). Clearly, tent-pole films cannot be held up by comics' fans alone, regardless of the extent to which these films are addressed towards them. This understanding of the heterogeneous, coalition audience as the blockbuster's target, helps to categorise the audience in both the singular and plural (as niche or fandoms).

Fans' opinion, or non-reception, of adaptations plays a significant role in the broader mediation and understanding of superhero films by mainstream audiences. The desirability of fan opinion can be attributed to mainstream audiences valuing 'fidelity, or at least the idea of it' (Burke 2015, pp. 140-141) in assessing the quality of films, showing how comic book fans' thoughts on superhero films are tied to how mainstream audiences will also receive them. The dichotomy between these two groups is intrinsically linked to how they each approach contemporary superhero films. As noted by Jonathan Gray and Neil Rae, 'although comic book readers are the most knowledgeable of audiences, they are very much a minority within the total number of viewers for comic book movies' (2007, p. 86). At the other end of the scale are mainstream audiences, who, generally, enter these films with little to no prior knowledge of, or engagement with, the properties involved. In discussing the

numerous textual experiences involved in the superhero genre, Gray and Rae note that superhero films call upon 'all viewers to struggle somewhat with the intertextual networks of knowledge and precedence, ultimately creating two very different textualities for the film, with significant tension between the two types' (p. 86). Despite their lack of fan knowledge though, mainstream audiences do know that the source material exists, ultimately meaning that the films' function as adaptations of fannish properties is still relevant to them. The perception of source authenticity in adapting these properties is an important factor in ensuring their success.

To Matthias Stork, it is important to note that Marvel's relationship with fans was not 'merely designed to appeal; it was designed to appeal and to be *sold*, as a myth come to life, ready to be experienced as a consumer good' (2014, p. 91). By appealing to fans' desire for authentic adaptations, Marvel (and by extension, their competitors) were able to retain their old fans, whilst simultaneously utilising those same fans to expand their audience. This strategy was hugely effective, especially because it ostensibly satisfied both producers and consumers. The MCU's use of serialised storytelling broke with previous conventions of the superhero genre that attempted to remain self-contained. Their use of transmedia storytelling and inclusion of source material across different texts serves as an emulation of fannish behaviours, due to this narrative model being borrowed from comics; series like DC's *Justice League* or Marvel's *The Avengers* served as crossover events that allowed for several individual properties to interact. In regards to this comic book model of filmic storytelling, Kevin McDonald notes that the 'unique ability to simultaneously elicit fan involvement while also maximising the overlapping commercial potential of this involvement anticipates one of the main aspirations of the franchise model. Indeed, it suggests that the film's expansive storylines and mythological substrata were instrumental in converting viewers into life-long apostles' (2014, p. 123). Marvel has capitalised on fannish behaviour by basing their transmedia storytelling on comic book crossover events, creating a greater sense of "comic book authenticity" for fans, increasing their consumption of the franchise, as well as offering mainstream audiences an "authentic" entry-point for comic book stories.

Marvel has also gone to great efforts to communicate with and appeal to fans by using 'sites of comic book fan culture in constructing recognisable brands for film franchises'

(Brundige 2015, p. 21), namely, the MCU. Perhaps the most notable of these sites is the San Diego Comic-Con (hereafter, SDCC), which has grown from its humble origins in the 1970s, to the major arena of fan participation and corporate branding it is known as today. McDonald states that although it was formerly aimed at a niche market, SDCC 'is [now] aligned not only with the blockbuster phenomenon but with an intensified version of the blockbuster where individual films are explicitly conceived as part of a brand-oriented franchise designed to foster a transmedia multiverse of profits' (2014, p. 118). Studios now utilise panels at conventions like SDCC to reveal exclusive new footage for upcoming films and/or announce upcoming films. In regards to the latter, Marvel have established a new standard within the industry by announcing entire blocks of upcoming films, such as their unveiling of Phase Two (2013-2015) and Phase Three (2016-2019) of the MCU. By doing this, studios reward fans for their engagement with their franchise's brand between and during the films' release. This method of corporate branding is demonstrated through the specific language used by the producers and creators to further appeal to fans. Stork highlights the repetition of certain terms in marketing the MCU, specifically, the idea of a "promise" on behalf of Marvel to the fans as they introduced *The Avengers*. Stork elaborates, saying that the 'notion of the promise carried through the entire discursive process of assembling and selling *The Avengers*, with Marvel increasing its cultural fan capacity as a company that honours its relationship with its core customers' (2014, p. 92). With this in mind, Brundige comments that 'the importance of fandom in current pop culture is made clear through the studios' focus on appealing to the fan audience through multiplicity and forms of affective address' (2015, p. 22). By cultivating fandom through discourses of authenticity, studios like Marvel demonstrate an acknowledgement of the fans' desire to maintain the fidelity of their characters and ensure they are reliably represented onscreen. To Brundige, 'this authenticity will affect a wider audience who engage with fannish commentary surrounding these films in online communities' (p. 22). Therefore, fans play a vital role in the production of superhero films, from their ability to confirm an adaptation's authenticity, to their role in these films' marketing through events such as SDCC.

Navigating the Blockbuster: The Auteur's Dilemma

Appealing to this expectation for authenticity has had an impact on the role of the director within the production model of the contemporary superhero genre. Here, I find it necessary to briefly review poststructuralist auteur theory, the terms of which were established by Roland Barthes' essay, 'The Death of the Author' (1977), which will be relevant to the later discussion on contemporary authorship within Hollywood blockbuster production. Barthes argues that by "killing" the author, they can be removed from their position as a theological authority over a text(s). Giving a text an author places an inherent limit on the meaning(s) that the text can produce (p. 212). If the author is removed from the equation, there will be no "secret", "ultimate" meaning hidden within the text, instead, the onus to produce meaning falls onto the reader. Barthes proposes a new figure, the "scriptor" – more editor and recycler than traditional creator – to replace the author. The scriptor knows that the text can only draw on pre-existing texts in an 'immense dictionary … that can no know halt … the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, instantly deferred' (p. 212). In essence, he is arguing that meaning exists as an "echo", always reflecting and referring to another interpretation. Here, there is no certainty of a source, origin, truth or ultimate explanation. To Barthes then, the author serves a cultural function as opposed to a universal component of textual production. Michel Foucault agrees and expands on this, arguing that the author's 'presence is [only] functional in that it serves as a means of classification' (1980, p. 284) whose role is decided by their cultural context. Foucault argues that, in a contemporary society, an author's main purpose is to provide a label, a method of categorising and differentiating texts from one another.

For Foucault, the author-function serves bourgeois, capitalist notions of art through the identification of a creator's work as 'a form of property … a possession caught in a circuit of property values' (1980, p. 285). Essentially, this approach provides an author with a "stamp" of sorts, a guarantee of status. Rather than an individual subject then, authorship is defined in terms of systems of ownership, classification, and legitimation. Poststructuralist notions of authorship therefore rejects the historical figure of the author as the authority over textual construction due to the limits this imposes on the production and reception of meaning. Instead, texts should be interpreted on multiple levels, from which the author is one discursive or semiotic code among many. Regarding films, poststructuralism also takes intertextuality into account in filmic meaning, for example by emphasising how our

understanding of context (previous films we have seen) informs how audiences produce meaning in relation to a specific film experience. Furthermore, by opening up film analyses to multiple levels of meaning-making, the various aspects of film production (involving key creative personnel other than the director) are taken into account. By acknowledging the intertextual and collaborative process of meaning-making, the auteur-director is removed from their previous position as a supposedly theologically authoritative figure to one source of meaning among a larger group of people and filmic codes.

Film history positions the auteur-directors of the 1970s' New Hollywood era (Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Steven Spielberg, and George Lucas, among others) as the creators of the contemporary Hollywood blockbuster. The success of the auteurs in the New Hollywood can be linked to the changes, such as the collapse of the traditional studio system in the 1960s, that brought about this movement, particularly the need for studios to engage with the younger generation and so-called cinephiles. The major studios of Hollywood were unable to discern what audiences wanted at the time, leading to their reliance on a younger generation of directors. However, the peak of the auteurs' success that was the blockbuster also proved to be their undoing. These big-budget films were aimed at the largest possible heterogeneous audience, and consequently, there was no longer a need to target particular demographics, and thereby no need for the auteurs' creativity, once a formula for revitalisation had been found. Nevertheless, the need for brand recognition in studio marketing remains, and as such, the 'American auteurs are, often and largely, defined by their commercial status and ability to promote a film, sometimes regardless of its distinction' (Corrigan 2003, p. 86). Timothy Corrigan's argument is of particular relevance, considering that since 'its inception, auteurism has been bound up with changes in industrial desires, technological opportunities and marketing strategies' (p. 83). In a contemporary film environment, the auteur-director, the figure responsible for, at the very least, unifying a film's creative elements, continues to retain an important role within Hollywood production and marketing, albeit a comparatively marginalised one in terms of creative control.

The integration of the auteur into industrial practices has been demonstrated through the Hollywood blockbuster, particularly through the contemporary superhero film. One notable early example would be Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989), which clearly

demonstrates horizontal integration, synergy, and cross-promotion. This film was a product of global media conglomeration Warner Bros.' parent company Warner Communications merging with Time Inc in 1989. The terms horizontal integration, synergy, and cross-promotion broadly refer to the support of products (blockbuster films, for example) that can be used to generate revenue for different divisions within a conglomerate. In the case of Burton's *Batman*, Time Warner used its publishing arm to promote the film, produced and distributed of a chain of inter-related cultural products, including a Warner Books novelisation of the film and two Warner Bros. Records soundtracks. Time Warner partnered with other brands to commission *Batman* products such as toys, clothing, and cereals. To Richard Maltby, 'in these aspects of their economic organisation … [films] have moved ever closer to the heavily commodified aesthetic of broadcasting, "by which the viewer is led not into a work for consideration of its thematic and ideological elements, but away from the text itself into those commercial frames that surround it"' (Hilmes as cited in Maltby 1998, p. 27). Indeed, Burton's *Batman* used product placement, such as Prince's 'Party Man' being played from a boom box during a scene with the Joker. Based on this strategy of cross-promotion, the film made approximately $1 billion from its merchandise. The way in which the blockbuster and, by extension, the superhero film, is bound up in Hollywood's industrial imperatives is important for understanding the auteur's current role within this context. The poststructuralist approach to authorship continues to position the auteur as one source among many in a film's production of meaning. At the same time, the contingency of the author and their ability to signify legitimacy is analogous to the auteur's role in personifying the cycle of appropriation and revitalisation that I have put forward as being a definitive and significant aspect of the Hollywood blockbuster.

Here, I turn to Will Brooker's discussion of Christopher Nolan's transition from indie-oriented director to bona fide blockbuster-auteur. In his chapter 'The Nolan Function: Authorship' (2012), Brooker analyses how Nolan was presented during the marketing, and in reviews of, *Batman Begins* (2005), *The Dark Knight*, and *Inception* (2010). In the marketing for *Batman Begins*, Nolan was all but ignored in the film's promotion, which relied more on the *Batman* brand and its star power, being 'presented as a new kid, a smart guy and a fresh pair of eyes, but certainly not as bankable guarantor of value in this project' (Brooker 2012, p. 12). References to Nolan's "personal stamp" typically looked to his earlier films, rather

than his biography and, even then, not as frequently as one might expect today (only nine out of twenty-seven reviews, one third, referred to Nolan's previous features). From Brooker's analysis of the marketing surrounding *Batman Begins*, we can note that 'when the individual author carries comparatively little voice in the discourse around a film, and has not yet become a commercially powerful "function", other aspects rise in volume to fill that space' (p. 17). Brooker refers specifically to critics discussing Tim Burton and Joel Schumacher more than Nolan in reviews for the film. Here, Barthes' idea of the auteur as editor is helpful for understanding how Nolan was positioned as less of an individual creator, and more as an editor of pre-existing meanings, and a recycler of previous texts surrounding Batman. Instead of being regarded as an auteur, "Nolan" was simply a function that guaranteed "fidelity" and "realism" in his interpretation of the Batman mythology, the former of which I have established is key to securing fans' support of superhero adaptations. At this point then, Nolan is a 'distinct but faint signal … almost drowned by the noise of other competing discourses … The sheer scale of the 66 year mythos, at this stage, overwhelms the relatively unknown director' (p. 25).

This changed dramatically however, after the release of Nolan's subsequent feature, *The Prestige* (2006). Brooker comments that 'in the absence of other associations, Nolan's name began to come into its own as a signifier of quality and a guarantor of certain values: as a function, in Foucault's terminology' (2012, p. 26). As a result, the marketing material surrounding *The Dark Knight*, while still emphasising its star power and the *Batman* brand, now presented Nolan as a stronger authorial presence in the framing of the film. In particular, Nolan had built up a filmic cannon increasingly associated with themes of psychological complexity and a cerebral style of storytelling. To Brooker, '"Nolan" has, by this point, become a distinct, recognisable term, carrying an agreed set of traits: a "function" with enough presence to hold its own in this dynamic of meanings, and strong enough to establish a perceived tension between the impulses of authorial style and the generic demands of a Batman narrative' (p. 33). Here, Brooker notes that in Nolan's role, we can recognise neither the 'death' of the conventional author, as Barthes expressed, nor its triumphant return (p. 43). Instead it has developed into 'a different type of creative authorship: from the author as sole provider of meaning to the scriptor as, in Barthes' words, "a compiler or arranger of pre-existing possibilities within the language system" … a

role that involves the individual agency, creativity and vision through the editing process' (in Brooker 2012, p. 43). Brooker notes that this understanding of authorship corresponds with Foucault's idea of the author-function which, to Jonathan Gray, 'allows a middle ground, wherein the author is denied outright authority, but exists as a discursive entity that channels and networks notions of value, identity, coherency, skill and unity' (2010, p. 109). With regards to recent developments in blockbuster authorship, Nolan's author-function demonstrates how a director can achieve this status in such a commercialised industry.

I have established the significant role of the fan in amplifying the mainstream success of superhero films. Consequently, Marvel, DC and their competitors have been extending their engagement with fans with each film they produce, selling their franchises as authentic representations of the comic book source material. In doing so, they promote the "fanboy auteur" whom Suzanne Scott describes as 'a textual authority figure that appeals to fans [and so] is better positioned to engender fans' trust, and thus has greater potential to channel fan interpretation and participation in ways that best suit the industry's financial and ideological interests' (2013, p. 43). Scott's interpretation of these films' directors is of a figure that serves as an intermediary between the studios and the fans, due to the directors' own (perceived) fannish background. Citing Travis Langley, Brundige notes that the authorial vision of filmmakers such as Joss Whedon or Christopher Nolan is satisfactory for fans since they do not '[demean] the characters and the importance of their lives' (Langley as cited in Brundige 2015, p. 28). Essentially, 'the goal of the fanboy auteur is to harmonise fandom with studio filmmaking, creating a product that is marketable to a mass audience through its exemplary status to the fans of the property' (Brundige 2015, p. 31).

Consequently, the fanboy auteur can be linked to discussions of auteurism within an industrial context. Despite these changing processes, the centrality of the auteur to creative products reflects Thomas Elsaesser's argument that, in contemporary cinema, the auteur's name signifies quality and authenticity. For Elsaesser, the auteur is a 'seal of endorsement on an industrial product' (1995, p. 12). Therefore, contemporary approaches to auteurism account for the modern auteur's role as a creative and commercial legitimiser, a role which is clearly expressed through the fanboy auteur. The fanboy auteur arguably serves as a means of classification through legitimisation, exemplifying poststructuralist accounts of the

auteur as being *a* source of meaning, as opposed to *the* source. To this end, Brundige comments that 'Scott largely discusses the fanboy auteur as marketing construction and Jenkins ascribes a much greater level of altruistic involvement' (2015, p. 32). Like Brundige, I would argue that the fanboy auteur's role lies in the middle of Scott's and Jenkins' definitions. Although the fanboy auteur does ultimately function as another marketing tool in the superhero film production process, they also tend to bring their own unique vision to the films they are assigned to, whilst avoiding becoming the primary source of meaning with respect to the superhero's wider textual origins and branding because they are also simultaneously positioned as fans/audiences of the source material they are adapting.

Rise of the Fanboy Auteur

In his work, Brundige highlights Christopher Nolan and Joss Whedon as prime examples of the fanboy auteur, albeit two variations of the figure. Brundige comments that the 'seal of endorsement' Elsaesser describes legitimises Whedon and Nolan's films for Marvel and DC respectively (2015, p. 33). Like most who tackle the superhero genre, Whedon and Nolan are not exceptional enough to deviate significantly from their respective properties' pre-existing canon, resulting in these filmmakers being forced to focus less on creating original work and more on adaptation. Although Whedon and Nolan both work as writers and directors for their films, as fanboy auteurs their authority lies with their choice of source material to draw influence from. In adapting the characters, worlds, and stories of these superhero mythologies, these fanboy auteurs exercise what authority they do possess in order to appeal to the fans the studios are looking to cultivate. To Brundige, 'for these figures to be accepted by … fans, there has to be some relation between the established "world view" or "artistic vision" of the fanboy auteur and the "essential shared traits" of the story and characters' (2015, p. 35). So, despite not being able to create original characters, for example, Whedon and Nolan can still incorporate them in such a way that it is faithful to the overarching vision attributed to their previous work whilst simultaneously remaining faithful to the superhero texts from which they borrow. Nolan's work on the *Dark Knight* Trilogy (*Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Dark Knight Rises* [2012]) reflects his other work in *Memento* (2000), *The Prestige* and *Inception*, which utilise elements of the crime and mystery genres that are associated with the noir and detective elements often seen in iconic

Batman stories including Frank Miller's *Batman: Year One* (1987) and Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* (1988). Likewise, Whedon's earlier work as the creator of cult science-fiction and fantasy television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and the short-lived *Firefly* (2002), demonstrated not only his expertise in the aforementioned genres, but his preference for bringing together a motley group of outcasts – "loners" if you will – who form a platonic family or team. It was this aspect of his work in particular that led to many fans' support of Whedon as the prime choice for bringing together the titular characters of *The Avengers*.

However, even though they were able to bring their creative expertise to the table, the two prominent fanboy auteurs' names also became reliable brands of their own – another part of their studios' marketing machine. In relation to the MCU, Leora Hadas argues that Whedon's role within the transmedia franchise contributes further to the commodification of the auteur-director. She argues that transmedia storytelling provides another means of branding for companies, for instance Marvel including their logo before all of their films, television shows and short films, including the superhero films of their competitors, Fox and Sony, who utilise different Marvel characters. This builds upon the idea of maintaining consistency within a transmedia brand in order to retain a coherent overarching story-world. From a commercial perspective, transmedia storytelling provides a successful way of building and developing a franchise with built-in audience engagement. From a creative standpoint, a transmedia franchise will inevitably be judged by its audiences, who will question whether or not it is primarily a creative or commercial endeavour for the studio(s) responsible for its production. Hadas notes that Marvel has relied on the "brand" of Whedon's involvement in the MCU, or more specifically, his name, to reinforce the credibility of the projects associated with this universe (2014). This was evident in the initial marketing for *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, during which Marvel promoted Whedon's involvement, despite his role being minimal. In fact, it was Whedon's brother Jed, and Jed's wife Maurissa Tancharoen, who worked as the show-runners. Regardless, Marvel used this strategy to capitalise on the huge success of *The Avengers* and the storytelling elements associated with Whedon's work, namely, characterisation and teamwork, and a particular style of knowing pop-culture humour. Like Whedon, Nolan's name has been used in promotion for DC's answer to the MCU, the DC Extended Universe (hereafter, DCEU), notably in the marketing

for Zack Snyder's *Man of Steel* (2013), which he co-produced. Consequently, we see how, through their commodification, the fanboy auteur demonstrates the practical, commercial benefits of their position within the superhero film production process. This demonstrates the fanboy auteur's creative and commercial potential within the superhero film production process.

Within a blockbuster (and transmedia) franchise like the MCU, the auteur occupies an important position, providing an assurance of quality and authenticity for fans on a creative front. Meanwhile, from an industrial standpoint, the auteur provides a source of legitimisation for these franchises since their involvement has the potential to raise these films' profiles to middlebrow expectations. With these factors in mind, we can consequently see how the auteur falls into the blockbuster's cycle of appropriation and revitalisation. The auteur's (assumed) creativity, and the influence this carries for fans (and their mainstream counterparts) demonstrates another means by which studios like Marvel appropriate filmic conventions to their benefit.

In capitalising on the potential of these directors – these fanboy auteurs – major studios, particularly Marvel, have made a habit of hiring directors with backgrounds in low-budget, independent filmmaking. These filmmakers are typically hired after achieving critical and (occasional) commercial success with their first film(s). Recent examples with Marvel include James Gunn, whose previous films such as *Slither* (2006) and *Super* (2010) preceded his successful entry into the MCU, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, and the Russo Brothers (Joe and Anthony), whose previous work included *Arrested Development* (2003-2006), *Community* (2009-2015), and *Welcome to Collinwood* (2002). Since then, the Russo brothers have found great success with *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and *Captain America: Civil War*, notably demonstrating their comedy background in these films, without detracting from the action/tension, or from the overarching, family-friendly tone present across the majority of the films in the MCU (*The Incredible Hulk* being the only exception to this rule, due to this tone not being established during the film's production). Consequently, as well as lesser-known, indie-oriented directors, Marvel has also hired directors whose background fulfil the genre purposes of the films they helm. *The First Avenger* was directed by Joe Johnston, known for both his work in special effects (having worked on *Star Wars* [1977] and *Raiders*

of the Lost Ark [1981]) and his ability to 'take a period setting and make it feel modern without resorting to cynicism' (Goldberg 2016), as seen in his previous films such as *The Rocketeer* (1991). Likewise, the directors *Thor* and *Thor: The Dark World* each brought something with them from their previous work. Kenneth Branagh lent his background in Shakespeare and costume dramas to *Thor*, while Alan Taylor had worked on *Game of Thrones* (2011-present) prior to *The Dark World* enabling his fantasy trappings to enhance latter. This trend of utilising more specific genre directors with indie or art-house backgrounds can be seen in the choices for upcoming films, such as Scott Derrickson, a supernatural horror director that was hired for Marvel's first foray into magic, *Doctor Strange* (2016). Marvel has therefore made this strategy not so much a habit, as a bona fide business practice, one that has certainly paid off.

Marvel's willingness to take a risk with these directors – and the rewards those risks have garnered – has likely legitimised the potential of this strategy to other studios. Over the 2010s, this trend has extended beyond the superhero genre, into the general practices of the blockbuster's industrial model. Now, this strategy of hiring directors with independent filmmaking backgrounds is steadily becoming a staple of the industry, being utilised by several major studios as a means of further legitimising their product(s). Other recent, non-superhero examples of this strategy include: Gareth Edwards, whose $500,000 homemade science-fiction film, *Monsters* (2010) led to his direction of Warner Bros.' $160 million *Godzilla* (2014) reboot and *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016); Marc Webb, who went from his romantic-comedy debut, *500 Days of Summer* (2009) to directing Sony's reboot, *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) and its sequel *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014); Rian Johnson, who directed *Star Wars: Episode VIII – The Last Jedi* (2017) after his success with small budget films *Brick* (2005) and *Looper* (2012); and Colin Trevorrow, who, after his debut with *Safety Not Guaranteed* (2012) was hired to make *Jurassic World* (2015) and will be directing *Star Wars: Episode IX* (2019). The budgetary ascension of these directors is fascinating because of the way that studios appear to be relying on their creativity as a means of legitimising to audiences what is ultimately a commercial product. Furthermore, by hiring these directors so early in their filmmaking careers, it is assumed that studios can subsequently wield a greater degree of influence over them, due to their inexperience. Their creativity is used as another tool in blockbuster marketing since, in hiring them, studios

demonstrate that they are taking a franchise seriously, from a creative standpoint, thereby appealing to middlebrow expectations. In a contemporary film environment then, the auteur-director now serves as both a commodity and form of creative legitimisation, operating under a form of what I have chosen to refer to as co-dependent authorship.

Co-Dependent Authorship

In developing the term co-dependent authorship, I am referring primarily to the current climate within the blockbuster's industrial model, wherein both the filmmaker(s) and major studio(s) rely on each other out of both commercial and creative necessity in what is promoted as a mutually beneficial relationship. That is, this relationship is advantageous to up-and-coming directors because a blockbuster potentially allows them greater filmmaking opportunities, essentially putting them on the "fast track" to directorial success. Studios meanwhile benefit commercially from the auteur credibility of directors with indie or art-house directorial backgrounds. It is important to acknowledge that when I use this term, I am not referring to a toxic definition of co-dependence, in the sense of an addicted form of dependence. Instead, I use it as a way of referring to the directors' indie-oriented backgrounds as well as the aforementioned cyclical relationship between the creative and commercial interests of the Hollywood blockbuster. I also acknowledge that in terms of authorship studies, and the relationship between auteurs and studios across film history, this term is not necessarily addressing a unique phenomenon or theory, as this relationship between studios and directors has been prominent throughout discussion of film authorship.

This term recalls Yannis Tzioumakis' own discussion of independent cinema, in relation to the major Hollywood studios. He noted that the economic survival of independent studios, producers, and so on, 'depended heavily on "cooperation" and "symbiosis" with the conglomerated majors, the only companies with the power to release a product in every possible exhibition outlet and therefore maximise its profitability' (2006, p. 246). To a degree, co-dependent authorship is an extension of this relationship between independent and major studios. Emphasising this co-dependency is in keeping with poststructuralist auteur theorists, such as Barthes, whose arguments positioned the auteur as one code, or source of meaning, among many. Furthermore, the fanboy auteur is focused on superhero or comic book films. Although the term offers an important perspective on the

contemporary auteur's role within mainstream Hollywood, it also disarticulates the fanboy auteur from the *structure* of the industrial practices surrounding the blockbuster.

Because of this structural role, the fanboy auteur does not identify the current trend occurring within the blockbuster's contemporary industrial model. Namely, that in an effort to further legitimise their product, major studios are hiring directors with background in indie (or genre) films. In doing so, they hope to provide a similar brand of authenticity and fidelity associated with smaller, cult films much like the fanboy auteur's knowledge of comics makes them reliable caretakers of beloved properties. With co-dependent authorship, the goal of studios is to appeal to middlebrow expectations, thereby achieving critical and commercial success and treading the fine line between innovation and faithfulness that leads to the perfect blockbuster. Therefore, my use of the term offers a platform for discussion of this trend in contemporary authorship, allowing for ideas such as the fanboy auteur to be acknowledged and incorporated into an examination of creative commodification in the contemporary blockbuster.

Conclusion

The superhero film, and surrounding genre, has achieved a remarkable degree of success since the 2000s, due to their reliance on adaptation. Essential to this capacity for revitalisation, is the need to appeal to fans' ideas about authenticity and fidelity in adapting the comic books that provide the foundation for these films. This fannish engagement in turn, offers a unique method of marketing and subsequent extension to mainstream audiences via fan approval and publicity. The necessity for both studio control over the management of properties alongside the retention of audience engagement has led to a development within contemporary authorship, the fanboy auteur, whose intermediary position between fans and studios has contributed greatly to the success of the genre. As a result, we are now seeing a new trend of co-dependent authorship being adopted in blockbuster production, demonstrating not only changes within Hollywood, but the sheer scale on which the superhero genre has influenced this industry, which constantly strives for stability and longevity alongside innovation and differentiation. Although this industrial model is not without risk – in fact, when this model has not worked these films have dramatically underperformed – it has generally realised great success. Consequently, we can

see how the superhero genre's accomplishments have led to the development of co-dependent authorship and has drastically altered the way major studios approach the marketing and creation of blockbusters, ensuring that the creative side of this industrial model is taken more seriously, and mediated as such, in the process.

Author Biography

Edmund Smith is a Masters candidate in the Department of Media, Film and Communication at the University of Otago. His thesis, "The Age of the Superhero: The Cycle of Appropriation and Revitalisation in the Hollywood Blockbuster", examines the superhero genre in relation to the Hollywood blockbuster, exploring the role that transmedia storytelling, fans, the characters, and auteur-directors play in these films' success. In doing so, he hopes to discuss the sustainability of the superhero genre and how it may deal with the looming threat of oversaturation.

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