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Clash of the Industry Titans: Marvel, DC and the Battle for Market Dominance

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By

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Abstract

This thesis examines the corporate structures, marketing strategies and economic shifts that have influenced the recent resurgence of the comic book superhero in popular Hollywood cinema. Using their original texts and adaptation films, this study will chronologically examine how each company's brand identities and corporate structures have reacted to and been shaped by the major cultural and industrial shifts of the past century in its attempt to account for the varying success of these companies throughout their histories. Beginning with the superhero's first appearance on screen in the 1940s, this study traces the development of Marvel and DC's distinct brand identities through their major franchises including *Superman*, *Batman, Captain America, X-Men, Spider-Man, Iron Man, The Incredible Hulk*, and *The Avengers*. In particular, this thesis links cultural and commercial dominance of Marvel's independent, vertically integrated corporate structure to its proliferation of blockbuster film adaptations over the past decade.

Key Words

Comic Book, Superhero, Popular Culture, Cultural Studies, Adaptation, Hollywood Cinema, American Cinema, Blockbuster, Action Genre, Action Films, Entertainment Industry, Timely Publications, Marvel Comics, Marvel Entertainment, Marvel Studios, National Comics, Detective Comics, DC Comics, DC Entertainment, Warner Bros., AOL Time Warner, *Superman, Man of Steel, Catwoman, Watchmen, Batman, Batman Begins, The Dark Knight, The Dark Knight Rises, Captain America, Hulk, The Incredible Hulk, Iron Man, The Avengers, X-Men, Spider-Man, The Amazing Spider-Man*.

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Introduction

"In 1998, only two of America's 50 highest-grossing films were based on a comic book" (Bloom 9). Today, however, comic book adaptations—specifically superhero comic book adaptations—have become an integral part of Hollywood's summer 'tent-pole' releases. Superhero comics, which were once relegated to the fringe subcultures of society, have recently exploded into mainstream popular culture. The reasons for the recent resurgence of the comic book are twofold: First, much like other cultural texts such as film and television, which were often subject to artistic and academic ridicule in their early development, the comic book has slowly been recognized for its ability to both reflect and shape our understandings of society. As Jason Bainbridge aptly notes, the critical potential of comic books lies precisely in the fact that they offer a kind of wish fulfillment; therefore, a study of comic book superheroes can also be seen as a "study of the perceived deficiencies in society" (Bainbridge 64). For example, characters such as Superman and Captain America emerged and gained popularity during the events of The Great Depression and World War II in part because of the ways they addressed the needs of the American public. At first, the nature of the comic book's adventure fantasy narratives provided Americans with a much needed sense of escape and emotional uplift from the harsh realities of their daily lives. Later, as America entered the war, superheroes became patriotic role models that reinforced America's belief in the values of truth, justice and freedom. While there has been much popular and scholarly work linking the comic book's rise to fame to the socio-cultural and political events with which they were engaged, there have been fewer investigations into the corporate and industrial structures of the markets and companies that produced them. This thesis intends to explore the corporate and industrial elements that enhanced the popularity of the original comic texts as well as gave rise to their proliferation across a variety of multimedia revenue streams, most notably their adaptations in Hollywood cinema.

Looking at the list of the top performing superhero adaptation films, one may understandably come to the conclusion that all superheroes are products of one of two companies: Marvel or DC. While this is not actually the case, there must be a reason why their specific heroes have been deemed worthy of such prolific adaptation. One possible explanation is that since the beginning of the superhero film boom in the 2000s, Marvel and DC have controlled approximately 70% of

the comics market; however, this was not always the case (ComiChron.com). In order to account for their market dominance, a closer examination of each company's corporate beginnings is necessary. From the inception of their original comic texts to their first live-action adaptations, DC and Marvel's comic narratives appeared to construct distinct definitions or brands of justice and heroism. Because Marvel developed in direct competition with DC, it was forced to ensure that its characters could not be confused with anything produced by DC (Bainbridge 65). This difference was initially mandated by legal copyright restrictions, yet it also became an important factor in cultivating readership and creating market competition. Over the years, the success of one company over another has been linked to how its texts have responded to broader cultural events and economic shifts, as well as to the strength of each company's own internal corporate structures. Even though both companies emerged at roughly the same time and had characters that responded to the events of WWII for example, Marvel's success was largely limited to a single character that quickly declined in appeal when the war came to a close. Even in their early stages of development through the 1930s and '40s, the key differences between the relative success of Marvel and DC can be explained through each company's varying corporate and industrial approaches.

One of the first major distinctions between Marvel and DC is the type or "brand" of heroism each of their characters embodies. For example, DC's most popular characters, such as Superman, Wonder Woman and Batman, represent a combination of classical or pre-modern heroic archetypes, through which these heroes are perceived as divine figures of righteousness. Their superpowers enable them to enact a form of justice that is interventionist and that transcends the bounds of institutional and natural law and order. For example, Superman and Wonder Woman are alien demigods from the Planet Krypton and the island nation of Themyscira, respectively. As such, their powers are more or less linked to each hero's divine origins. Even Batman, whose superpowers are not innate but rather tied to his own billionaire industrialism, develops a quality of mysticism through his association with bats and shadowy myths. He too appears unfettered by the laws of the common man, operating outside of the official jurisdictions of the Gotham City Police Department, which is often shown to be insufficient, broken or corrupt. Regardless of their individual origins, each hero of the DC universe is shown to be an all-powerful, self-assured, divinely superior being that cannot be bound by the legal and moral conventions of human society in the process of protecting it.

Marvel's heroes, however, are less easily interpreted through these classical heroic narratives. Instead, its heroes are portrayed as products of a hostile socio-cultural environment in which the characters' powers are an often gruesome side-effect of modern science and technology. For example, Captain America receives his powers through a secret physically enhancing serum designed to create super-soldiers for America's war effort. Similarly, heroes like The Hulk and Spider-Man are a product of scientific and genetic experiments gone awry. More importantly, Marvel's heroes are weak, self-critical, outcast humans that have been transformed by science (Daniels, *Comix* 137). As a result, unlike DC's unabashedly self-assured heroes, Marvel's heroes are often dark and brooding figures full of self-doubt, even self-loathing, as they struggle to understand and control their newfound abilities. The distinctly human and realistically flawed quality of Marvel's heroes also helps them to connect with their audiences, inspiring pathos and sympathy with their real world struggles.

While these basic overarching character structures have remained the same throughout the history of Marvel and DC, the varying success of these heroes over time suggests that their popularity is a product of both cultural resonance and industrial adaptability. For example, throughout WWII, both DC's Superman and Marvel's Captain America played important roles in supporting the country's war effort and promoting nationalistic ideologies. However, cultural analysis alone does not seem to account for DC's continued success throughout the era in contrast to Marvel's quick decline after the war. A key factor that contributed to DC's success was its corporate partnerships with the War Department, which virtually guaranteed DC's circulation profits and helped to cultivate brand loyalty among the service members who received copies of DC's *Superman* comics (Greenberger 2009). While DC was an active corporate participant in the war effort, its comics continued to offer escapist fantasies of Superman's everyday adventures. These universal and historically non-specific narratives served the dual purposes of boosting national morale during the war and ensuring *Superman*'s continued popularity after the war. Such calculated corporate and industrial responses to the war stood in stark contrast to the war-oriented narratives produced by Marvel, which were no longer resonant once the Nazis were defeated. This extended study of both the original texts and adaptations of Marvel and DC's superheroes will chronologically examine how each company's corporate structure has reacted to and been shaped by the major cultural and economic shifts in order to account for the varying success of each company over the past century. In particular, this thesis

will link the emergence of Marvel's independent, vertically integrated corporate structure to its proliferation of blockbuster film adaptations over the past decade.

In addition to providing historical overviews of both companies, this thesis will also explore the recent emergence of the superhero comic book adaptation in popular Hollywood cinema. While other comic book film adaptations such as *Men in Black* (Sonnenfeld, 1997), *Blade* (Norrington, 1998)*, Road to Perdition* (Mendes, 2002), *Sin City* (Miller, 2005) and *V for Vendetta,* (McTeigue, 2005), have undoubtedly influenced the recent emergence of superhero comic films, neither these original comics nor their film adaptations follow the same generic and narrative structures or production and distribution channels of Marvel and DC's adaptations. For example, both *Men in Black* and *Blade* were produced by subsidiary companies, or imprints, of Marvel comics and are not a part of the same cohesive universe as its other superheroes. Similarly, *Road to Perdition* and *V for Vendetta* are products of DC's Paradox Press and Vertigo imprints. Additionally, *Sin City* is a product of Dark Horse Comics, which is an independent comic publisher with no affiliations with either Marvel or DC. These comics are more easily classified as horror or fantasy comics that do not follow the typical superhero narratives, as exemplified by Marvel and DC. Instead of following roughly archetypal narratives based in the universal traditions of ancient mythology or melodrama, these stories follow the individual exploits of largely self-motivated protagonists (Eco and Chilton 15). For example, *Road to Perdition* is the story of a mob enforcer's search for revenge against those who killed his family. Thus, for the sake of more accurate comparison, this extended study will chronologically trace the developments of the most popular superhero properties produced directly under the Marvel and DC publishing banners since their inception in the 1930s.

Most of the recent scholarly and historical studies of the comic book superhero have taken one of two critical approaches: they either trace the socio-cultural resonance of the comic book throughout history or they produce historical overviews of the industrial development of the comic book medium. Some of the most important works that frame the context of my own analysis of the original comic texts and film adaptations include Jeffrey K. Johnson's *Super History*, which parallels the development of the superhero and its response to major cultural events such as WWII, 1960s American counter cultural movements, and America's reaction to 9/11. His arguments focus on how the superhero narrative as a cultural text is used to reflect and

explore the real world problems of society. Building upon Johnson's work, this study intends to demonstrate how such cultural reflections are also products of each company's corporate structures and industrially constructed brands of heroism. In addition to studying the original texts of both Marvel and DC, work by comic historians such as Les Daniels and Jim Steranko provide much of the historical foundation of the comics industry itself. These texts express a consensus view of Marvel and DC's competing brand identities in which DC's characters exemplified classical interventionist heroism whereas Marvel's heroes were less self-assured. Using these underlying brand identities, this links the varying success of each company to its ability to effectively market its brand-image in relation to the broader, culturally specific needs of the comics and film industries and their consumers. In addition to trade and industrial reports from *The Wall Street Journal*, *Economist*, *New York Times*, and *Variety*, Dan Raviv's *Comic Wars* presents one of the most concise historical overviews of Marvel's early corporate development. His analysis links Marvel's stunted development in the 1980s and '90s to the corporate mismanagement of Ronald Perelman which limited Marvel's access to multimedia revenue streams.

Drawing on these works, the ultimate goal of this thesis is to put these critical approaches in dialogue with one another in order to demonstrate how the cultural proliferation of the comic book superhero is contingent upon its ability to respond to a singular cultural moment and to be universally or commercially exploitable. These industrial and corporate underpinnings have been crucial to the development of the cultural brand identities of both Marvel and DC Entertainment yet have been largely overlooked in recent accounts of their popularity, which tend to polarize the ideological viewpoints of each company. For example, in a recent article discussing *Man of Steel* (Snyder, 2013), Jim McLauchlin links DC's relative decline in popularity compared to Marvel to each company's perceived worldview. He argues that over the last decade, DC's universe has become an ultimately pessimistic one, whereas the heroes in Marvel's universe are more optimistic (McLauchlin 2013). While this may appear to be the case, this thesis will argue that upon closer industrial analysis, DC's perceived pessimism has less to do with its ideological shifts than with the corporate marketing strategies of its brand identity. In other words, perhaps it is not DC's brand of justice that has changed, but rather how it is marketed and promoted especially in relation to its competition. For example, while DC has always maintained its interventionist brand of heroism, the company has shifted its brand-image

to target the dominant socio-cultural needs of society. In the 1950s, *Superman* was used to uphold conservative post-war ideologies and traditional American values, yet in his most recent incarnation in *Man of Steel* (Snyder, 2013), the same interventionism attempts do distance Superman from his all-American boy scout image. In order to fully understand how each company's corporate structures and marketing strategies have changed over the last century, this thesis will begin by analyzing the corporate and industrial origins of Marvel and DC Entertainment. In the early years of its development, DC's emphasis on corporate control and creative continuity helped to establish the company's iconic brand-image in the American national consciousness. However, within the last decade, DC's promotion of a cohesive brand image has been troubled by its struggle to realign its brand of heroism with mainstream filmmaking practices. Thus, within the last decade, DC's corporate instability has contributed to the widespread cultural and industrial dominance of Marvel Comics, especially in its superhero film adaptations.

The first chapter examines the origins of Marvel and DC's publishing histories during The Great Depression and the outbreak of WWII in the 1930s and 1940s. During this period, DC quickly established itself as the dominant corporate force in comics through buying out its competitors and obtaining its own distribution division, which greatly increased DC's circulation potential. While other comic publishers were simply reproducing older comic strips from newspaper syndicates, DC was one of the first companies to establish its own original characters (Daniels, *Comix* 135). This strategy eliminated the costly licensing fees and helped make DC more popular with audiences who were interested in following new fantasy adventure stories. Other important industrial influences during this period include DC's ability to shift Superman's character from a socially crusading vigilante during The Great Depression to a nationalistic patriot during World War II. Unlike the one-track narrative of Marvel's *Captain America* that emerged solely to confront the war, DC's seemingly universal adaptability to the needs of society enabled its heroes to survive even as society's tastes continued to change. During this time, DC was also the first company to fully realize the iconic status of its heroes and their potential for merging cultural success with corporate success. For example, even though Marvel's *Captain America* was the first comic narrative to directly address the WWII conflict, DC's perceived universality and corporate partnership with the War Department gave the company a significant advantage. These calculated corporate strategies helped establish DC's

presence in the American national consciousness to the point where buying a DC title became a patriotic act that supported the American war effort. While Marvel's *Captain America* arguably generated similar nationalistic pride, it lacked the financial stability and brand recognition of DC, which had been in business five years prior to Marvel. This chapter will compare Marvel and DC's first major adaptations to film though the *Superman* (1948) and *Captain America* (1944) serials that were produced by Columbia and Republic Pictures respectively. The success of each adaptation can be linked not only to the corporate strategies of the individual comic publisher, but also to the corporate partnerships between DC and Columbia and Marvel and Republic. For example, both Marvel and DC had very different approaches to their licensing agreements, which greatly affected how each production company would handle the original source material (Harmon and Glut 260). Even in these early stages, DC's tightly controlled corporate structure and interest in cross-promotional marketing campaigns gave Columbia's adaptation of *Superman* a great advantage over Republic's adaptation of *Captain America*. DC's licensing deal ensured that they maintained creative control over the project, which forced Columbia's adaptation to be much more faithful to the original text. As a result, the serial simultaneously generated more profit and critical attention for DC's comics, unlike Republic's *Captain America* which bore little resemblance to the original text. By examining DC's investment in cross-promotional tie-ins and in promoting the creative continuity of its narrative across multiple media platforms, this chapter provides an early example of how DC's widespread industrial and cultural success was a direct result of its effective marketing strategies.

As a result of *Superman*'s unprecedented success in serials and comics, DC continued to develop its brand identity throughout the 1950s as well. The second chapter of this thesis examines the impact of DC's cross-promotional marketing campaigns on the success of its original comic texts as well as *The Adventures of Superman* TV series, which began on ABC in 1952. Another key industrial influence during this period was the rise of comic book censorship during the 1950s. During this time, virtually every other comic publisher, including Marvel, was either forced out of business or severely crippled by the enactment of the Comics Code Authority in 1954. The CCA was a censorship board established in the 1950s as a method of controlling the lurid and violent content of many pulp comics that were deemed to be harmful to the development of children as the result of a crusade led by psychologist Frederic Wertham. Despite the harsh criticism being leveled against the entire comics industry, DC once again managed to flourish as

a result of its tightly controlled corporate structures and responses to these cultural and industrial pressures. During this time, the interventionist attitudes of Superman were put in the service of national protection and moral guidance as opposed to overthrowing the status quo. *Superman*'s transition was made easier by the universality of its classic archetypal narrative and the comics thus stood in stark contrast to the horror and crime genre comic magazines that were being produced by Marvel and other companies. As a result, DC's characters came under far less scrutiny than others. DC also sought to cultivate its family friendly image during this period by associating the image of Superman with wholesome All-American companies like Kellogg's Cereal, which sponsored the *Superman* TV series. Not only did these early partnerships help secure DC's position as the producer of wholesome American ideology, but they are also an important indication of DC's early interest in synergistic cross-promotion. By cultivating these partnerships, DC continued to expand its culturally iconic reach as well as its commercial and industrial dominance. The importance of DC's corporate structure and marketing campaigns are also further emphasized by the fact that Marvel was not able to license or adapt a single new property during the 1950s. In fact, the only adaptation of a Marvel character was a re-release of the *Captain America* film serial previously produced in 1944. However, due to Marvel's lack of clearly defined licensing terms, they saw little profit from even this release. By the end of the 1950s, Marvel's corporate structure was in such disarray that they were further forced to sign a distribution deal with DC, effectively giving up any control they had over their circulation to the competition. This chapter demonstrates that despite Marvel's cultural relevance, the company's characters quickly faded in comparison to DC's, which were supported by a tightly controlled, vertically integrated corporate structure that emphasized the characters' universal appeal.

Chapter three of this study marks an important turning point in the corporate history of Marvel during the 1960s and'70s. During this time, the company underwent a series of corporate overhauls that enabled the creation of the Marvel Comics Universe as we know it today. Two of the major cultural and industrial influences of this decade that influenced Marvel's rise in popularity were the proliferation of 1960s counter cultural ideologies in American society and the sale of Marvel to Cadence Industries in 1968. As Americans began to question the foundations of their society, Marvel's introspective, self-critical, and darkly cynical heroes seemed to resonate more with counter cultural audiences who shared these feelings of oppression and disenfranchisement (Johnson 87). Marvel's newfound cultural resonance, coupled with its

newly redesigned corporate structure finally enabled the production of a number of film and television adaptations. In the 1960s, Marvel introduced *The Incredible Hulk* comics that engaged with the social and political anxieties of living in the post-nuclear age. In these comics, Marvel's shy, self-critical heroes also worked to anticipate the proliferation of counter cultural ideologies in the 1960s. During the late '60s, Marvel's unique superhero narratives finally appeared in other media, such as cartoons and live-action TV movies, when the company was sold to Cadence Industries, an American medical publishing conglomerate. The sale of the company coincides with Marvel's increased visibility in the comic book market and in popular media. For example, *The Hulk* (CBS, 1977) became one of the most popular TV shows known for its dark, reflective and self-aware narrative that helped Americans confront 1960s Cold War politics and comment on their involvement in Vietnam. More importantly, this TV show was made possible by the efforts of Marvel's new CEO Jim Galton, who realized that the company had failed to maximize its multimedia potential in over the last few decades (Daniels, *Comix* 181). Here, Marvel's newfound success was a direct result of both the sale of the company to Cadence Industries and the efforts of CEO Jim Galton, who successfully exploited Cadence's other subsidiaries for Marvel's benefit. Throughout the 1960s, DC had proved that multimedia cross-promotion was the key to success through their 1966 adaptation of the *Batman* TV series. The series sparked a nationwide trend of 'Bat-mania,' which was the result of a series of lucrative promotional licensing deals made between DC and a variety of consumer goods companies that produced anything from books and toys to lunchboxes and pyjamas, all of which were emblazoned with DC's signature *Batman* insignia. Another important industrial influence on the proliferation of cross-promotional media was the development of the action blockbuster film, sparked by the unprecedented success of *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977). As a result of the film's promotional and marketing campaign, corporate synergy quickly became the watchwords for success in Hollywood. As Marvel began challenging DC's widespread market dominance during the late 1970s, their success in adaptations would be measured by how well they incorporated this blockbuster formula into their previously existing narrative formulas. While DC's blockbuster success with the first installment of *Superman* (Donner, 1978) continued to overshadow Marvel's adaptations, the 1960s and '70s were a watershed moment for the development of Marvel's cultural and commercial proliferation. As Marvel's corporate structure grew stronger, so too would the success of their adaptations. Marvel's growing popularity over

DC in the comic market during this period was one of the first indications that Marvel's overarching brand of heroism had the potential to be more successful than DC's. However, because DC's comics and adaptations were marketed more aggressively, DC's brand of heroism ultimately remained more culturally and commercially successful. DC's continued dominance suggests that, although DC's overarching brand of heroism was less culturally resonant during the 1960s and '70s, its corporate structure and aggressive exploitation of multimedia revenue streams were arguably the most important factors in its success.

The fourth chapter traces the development of the blockbuster formula through the superhero comic adaptations of the 1980s and '90s. Even though both companies produced comic narratives that responded to 1980s Reagan-era revisionism and Cold War politics, DC continued to be the leading producer of film adaptations throughout the 1980s and '90s through their development of the *Superman* and *Batman* franchises. However, DC's decline in overall readership popularity during this period also suggests that DC was facing a larger problem with its underlying narrative structures. Tellingly, between 1985 and 1986, DC Comics published a cross-over series entitled *Crisis on Infinite Earths* that was an attempt to reorganize the narrative continuity of DC's comic universe, which would make DC's various comics more cohesive and easily accessible to new audiences. *Crisis on Infinite Earths* represents DC's larger crisis to align its overarching brand identity and narrative structure with comic book audiences in the 1980s and 1990s. While DC's relative decline in readership allowed Marvel's comics to achieve considerable popularity during this time, Marvel's overall success was significantly impacted by the corporate mismanagement of Ronald Perelman, who purchased the company in 1988 and seemingly undermined much of Marvel's corporate development in the 1970s (Raviv 9). Due to Perelman's disinterest in cultivating Marvel's newfound multimedia revenue streams, Marvel failed to produce any significant live-action adaptations during this period, and DC's heroes flourished once again with virtually no competition. Without these adaptations, Marvel struggled to reach audiences beyond comic book readers, which greatly impacted the company's overall financial success. DC, on the other hand, was bought out by Time Inc., making DC Comics a subsidiary of one of the world's largest telecommunications companies, which can also account for its widespread success during the 1980s and '90s (Craft and Quick 2:1279). As a result of this merger, DC's franchises developed multi-million dollar marketing campaigns with companies like Coca-Cola, and *Time* magazine, all of which contributed to the success of the

big-budget, star-studded special effects driven films such as Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989). Another reason for the success of DC's adaptations, which is particularly evident in *Batman*, is its alignment with the hard bodied action hero that was typical of Hollywood cinema in the 1980s. The film was based on Frank Miller's *Dark Knight* comic series that emphasized the conservative and violently interventionist underpinnings of DC's narrative structure. *Batman* attempted to depict The Caped Crusader as a dark, hyper-masculine hero similar to other popular action hero figures like Sylvester Stallone's Rambo and Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Commando* (Lester, 1985). As a result of the film's adherence to this cultural and industrial trend, DC's heroes maintained a strong presence in American popular culture, even though only a select few of their comics remained popular.[1] Even though DC's original comic texts had lost a significant amount of their market share to Marvel, DC maintained its overall success because it continued to exploit these texts through various revenue streams, which ultimately overshadowed Marvel's comic book successes. However, the decline of DC's box office returns and comic circulation, especially during the 1990s, suggests that the Reaganite values and Cold War politics being supported by DC's interventionist brand of heroism were increasingly at odds with the view of American society. DC's struggle to realign their brand-image with American society also suggests that the company's brand of heroism was becoming less universally or culturally adaptable than Marvel's more ambiguous and self-critical approach.

The fifth and final chapter of this extended study uses the corporate histories of both Marvel and DC in an attempt to account for the success of Marvel's heroes since the comic book adaptation boom of the early 2000s. For example, there is an undeniable correlation between Marvel's corporate redevelopment under the leadership of Avi Arad and Ike Perlmutter and the proliferation of Marvel's superhero adaptations, beginning in 2000 with *X-Men* (Dir. Brian Singer) and *Spider-Man* in 2003 (Dir. Sam Raimi). Finally, with the establishment of Marvel Studios between 2005 and 2006, Marvel's heroes finally began to break the near twenty-year stranglehold that DC had on the superhero film market (Lichtenfeld 253). While the success of superhero narratives within the American film industry can also be linked to the desires for escapist fantasies and reassuring heroic role-models in the wake of 9/11, the global dominance of

[1] While comics like Frank Miller's *Dark Knight* were some of DC's most popular during the 1980s, they represented only a small fraction of DC's publishing slate. Most of DC's other comics shied away from extreme violence, which was indicative of their overall struggle to maintain a cohesive narrative voice.

the superhero film is more importantly a result of combining these superhero narratives with the universal appeal of the action-blockbuster formula. For example, the big-budget special effects sequences and universal stories of good versus evil inherent in films like *Batman Begins* (Nolan, 2005) and *The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012) are just as popular in America as they are overseas. The universal appeal of these action-oriented narratives is further emphasized by the fact that in addition to being the most successful comic book film of all time, *The Avengers* is also the third highest international box office success (BoxOfficeMojo.com). The ability of the superhero narrative to engage with the cultural underpinnings of the 2000s accounts for only part of Marvel's success during the period. After all, cultural address is not unique to any single comics company. What is unique to Marvel, however, is its transition from the licensor to the producer of many of its films with the creation of Marvel Studios. By maintaining corporate control and creative continuity over their properties, Marvel exploited their intricately connected universe of heroes to maximize fan interest and reaped the majority of the commercial profits in the process. Emerging after a somewhat rocky start, the widespread success of Marvel's films demonstrated how the company's overarching corporate structure greatly impacted its success. Additionally, although DC produced a few major blockbuster successes during this period, the company still struggled to compete with the success of Marvel. Here, Marvel's success can also be linked to its ability to incorporate blockbuster modes of filmmaking with its underlying brand of heroism more consistently than DC. For example, while Marvel's films like *Iron Man* and *The Avengers* maintain the squabbling, self-critical roots of their characters, the films' focus on action, spectacle and simple narrative structures distances these adaptations from the culturally specific underpinnings of Marvel's early development.

Marvel's success garnered enough industrial attention that Disney purchased the company for $4 billion in 2009. The merger gave Marvel increased access to Disney's previously established franchising power and could maximize the cultural and commercial presence of its characters through Disney's subsidiaries. As a result of this merger, Marvel became a subsidiary of one of the world's largest entertainment media conglomerates and was now competing with DC on relatively equal corporate footing.[2] Now that Marvel and DC have relatively similar corporate structures, the success of each company depends upon its ability to market its brand identity. For

[2] DC had been a subsidiary of another media conglomerate, Time Warner, since the late 1980s.

example, while Marvel's corporate restructuring deals have worked to reinforce one consistent creative vision and brand-image, DC's corporate overhauls and reinvented brand-images seem to have had the opposite effect. Between 2005 and 2012, DC went through two logo changes, and released two comics series that fundamentally altered the continuity of its universe. Further, despite the press releases that expressed DC's commitment to generating new readership and bringing even more of its iconic characters to life on the big screen, DC's comic sales only increased by 1% and only the films based on DC's *Superman* and *Batman* were successful at the box office (ComiChron.com; BoxOfficeMojo.com). This chapter's investigation of Marvel and DC's corporate developments over the past decade concludes that Marvel's success over DC is closely connected to the ways in which its corporate structures have reinforced the existence of a cohesive Marvel universe through its comics, films and other franchise-based consumer products.

Through its emergence and development over the last century, the popularity of the comic book superhero has risen from the fringes of an American sub-culture to achieve international pop cultural and commercial success. Within the last decade and a half in particular, the superhero narrative has become an integral part of Hollywood blockbuster film production. While the popularity of the superhero comic as cultural text has been widely explored in recent scholarly studies, this thesis seeks to explore the broader corporate structures and economic shifts that have influenced the popularity of the comic book superhero. One of the most important industrial trends that this study seeks to explore is the recent success of Marvel's superheroes over DC's. Despite its large character bank, DC has only managed to cultivate two of those characters into majorly successful franchises, whereas virtually every major marvel character has exploded onto the screen within the last ten years. By tracing the development of each company's unique brand identities and corporate structures, Marvel's recent success can be linked first to the corporate development of its own independent film production studio in the mid 2000s, and later to its merger with Disney in 2009. Throughout each transition, Marvel has increased the visibility of its characters through a variety of film franchises, merchandizing tie-ins and cross-promotional advertising campaigns. While the underlying brands of heroism and narrative structures of both companies have arguably remained consistent throughout their histories, their abilities to align these brands with particular cultural events and industrial trends have varied according to the strength of each company's particular corporate structures and

strategies. Additionally, Marvel's widespread cultural and commercial dominance can also be linked to the company's use of the blockbuster aesthetic, which employs simple narratives and big budget spectacles which have helped to distance Marvel's characters from the cultural specificity of their origins and appeal to both more mainstream American and global audiences.

Chapter 1

Origin Stories: The Birth of the Comic Book Industry in the 1930s-1940s

Comics have been around since the early 1920s in the form of cartoon strips appearing in newspapers and pulp magazines. Since their inception, comics have functioned as cultural texts that inform the varying socio-political climates of the societies that produce them. More importantly, like films, comics exist not only for artistic and social expression, but they are also a fundamental part of a consumer-driven commodity market. As a result, comics have often been constructed according to a careful balance of social and economic value. Even in the early years of their existence, the success of the comic book was often a product of economic, corporate and industrial market influences. By the time that major market competition began to arise in the late 1930s, especially between DC and Marvel, each company's success depended on its ability to distinguish its own unique brand identity. For example, DC was the first publisher to develop original superheroes, and other companies, including Marvel, developed in direct competition to these characters. As a result, Marvel was forced to come up with heroes that were similar enough to capitalize on the cultural trend, yet distinct enough to avoid copyright infringement. Marvel had to develop its own brand identity or marketing gimmick that would guarantee its circulation. Once established, the success of one company over another became increasingly dependent upon its marketing strategies or its ability to align its particular brand identity with the broader socio-cultural needs of society. For example, even though both DC and Marvel produced comics that addressed the context of WWII in the 1940s, DC's comics ultimately fared better by using the war as a marketing strategy, associating its brand-image with American patriotic sentiment and developing its characters as nationally iconic figures, without altering the universal narrative of its comics. Finally, the success of DC's *Superman* (Columbia, 1948) film serial over Marvel's *Captain America* (Republic, 1944) can also be linked to the ways in which DC used its corporate structures and licensing partners to construct Superman as both a cultural and commercial icon.

One of the first major industrial influences on the creation of the comic book industry was the improvement of printing press technologies that made production and distribution of pulp magazines much easier. At the same time, pulp magazines were in high demand because Americans were eager to read the adventure and fantasy stories they published, especially after

the devastation of WWI. By the 1930s, many publishers began to realize that there was profit to be made by licensing and republishing older individual comic strips, producing an entire magazine of collected comics. These pulp magazines, such as *Famous Funnies* (Eastern Color Printing, 1934), were effectively the first 'comic books' (Jones 100). Taking the idea one step further, pulp magazine entrepreneur Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson realized that he could reduce production costs by eliminating the licensing fees associated with reprinting old comics and producing a magazine with its own original characters. Thus, in 1934, he founded National Allied Publications and later released *New Fun Magazine* in December 1935 (Jones 113). Not only did Wheeler-Nicholson create one of the first original comic magazines, he also indirectly founded the company that would later become one of the world's largest, most successful comic publishers under the moniker DC Comics. Despite the success of *New Fun*, the company soon fell into a series of financial crises spurred by The Great Depression and problems with distribution and publishing schedules. To avoid bankruptcy, Wheeler-Nicholson approached Harry Donenfeld, another pulp magazine publisher and owner of Independent News Co. distribution, who bought-out National Allied Publications in 1935 with his accounting partner, Jack Liebowitz (Jones 107). Together, Donenfeld and Liebowitz created Detective Comics Inc., which published the first issues of *Detective Comics* in 1936, after which Wheeler-Nicholson was forced out of the company due to his on-going financial troubles (Jones 121). After Wheeler-Nicholson left, Donenfeld merged his company, Detective Comics Inc., with National Allied Publications to form National Comics, which would eventually be known simply as DC Comics.[3] Just as comics like *The Yellow Kid* (1895-98) were used to reflect and critique the "crude, noisy, sordid and eccentric" social and economic environments of the late 1890s, the comics of the early 1920s and '30s often adapted to express the needs of the American public. For example, many of the post-war comics of the 1920s featured lighthearted slap-stick comedies and escapist adventure stories, which provided Americans with a much needed escape from reality. As the 1930s progressed and Americans began to feel the effects of the Great Depression, the comic industry shifted to reflect America's desire for action-oriented stories that featured protagonists fighting against the social and economic injustices that the government seemingly could not (J. Johnson 37). As a result of these shifts, DC began publishing a new comic

[3] Donenfeld's magazines had become known colloquially as "DC Publications" as early as the 1940s; however, the company did not officially change names until 1977 (Businessweek.com).

magazine called *Action Comics* that introduced America to the soon-to-be famous Superman in *Action Comics #1* (June 1938).

Writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster had developed the character of Superman as early as 1934; however, their idea was met with skepticism in the early years of the comic industry. Even in these early stages, the corporate and cultural environments of the comic industry greatly impacted what could and could not be published. For example, in 1934, comic magazines were still in the process of reproducing old newspaper strips; Wheeler-Nicholson had not yet challenged this dominant trend by producing original material and publishers were not interested in taking such an untested financial risk in the height of The Depression. As a result, Siegel and Shuster faced a series of rejections from numerous newspaper syndicates until Donenfeld, whose distribution company gave him a financial advantage in the industry, was willing to take on the risk. In the first issue of *Action Comics,* Superman quickly established himself as the "champion of the oppressed" by using his powers to save the life of an innocent woman placed on death row by the ineffectual justice system (*Action Comics #1* June, 1938). In order to save her, Superman physically forced his way into the governor's home, which framed the god-like powers of Superman as unbound by institutional or natural laws. Here, Superman's early interventionist tendencies resonated with the American public looking for a savior figure that could fight "the injustices that plagued Great Depression America" (J. Johnson 30). One year after his first appearance, Superman was given his own self-titled magazine in July 1939, establishing him as the flagship character of the DC publishing universe. This issue included Superman's origin story, an introduction to his creators, and a *Superman* "pin up" poster, which can be read as early examples of DC's emphasis on industrial promotion and brand awareness (*Superman #1* July, 1939). Such desires for industrial brand promotion were further emphasized in DC's later publications such as *Batman* and *Wonder Woman*, which were emblazoned with the words "a DC publication" as early as 1940 (Figure 1). These words, which appeared in a small white circle, can be considered DC's first, albeit unofficial, 'logo,' which was later updated to the "DC Bullet" logo in 1976 (Figure 2). According to Les Daniels, "by 1939, the emergence of Superman had thrown the publishing industry into chaos. Publishers who had missed out on the lucrative newspaper funnies reprint sweepstakes in the early thirties were signing up anything that looked anything like a superhero" (Daniels, *Comix* 135). As a result of this chaos, two important events in the comics industry occurred. First, in 1939, publisher Martin Goodman

created the Timely Comics Company in direct response to the competition of DC; Timely would eventually become Marvel Comics, DC's biggest industrial rival. Second, the sudden explosion of superheroes in the pulp industry gave rise to a number of "Superman imitators." This caused DC to launch a series of lawsuits for copyright infringement that effectively put many publishers out of business if they attempted to copy *Superman*'s formula too closely (Bainbridge 65). As a result, companies such as Timely (Marvel) had to ensure that the heroes they developed were markedly different than those produced by DC.

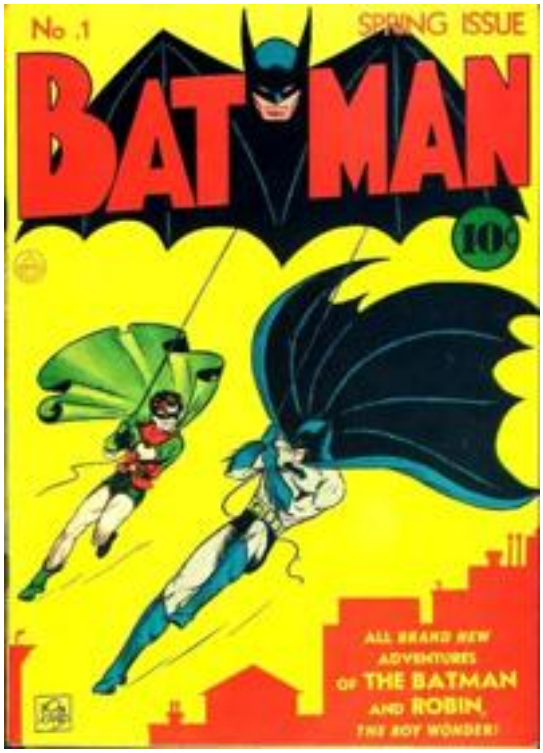

Fig. 1 Cover of Batman #1 (Spring, 1940)[4]

[4] Image retrieved from: http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Batman_Vol_1

Fig. 2 DC'

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who were affected by the produc
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(*Marvel Comics #1* October, 193
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[5] Image retrieved from: https://en.wikip

Another major difference between the characters of Marvel and DC at the time was their artwork. As Les Daniels notes, Marvel's comics quickly became known for their visual flash and use of fast-paced action and motion within their panels. On the other hand, DC's early comics contained "simplistic and often understated artwork" (Daniels, *Comix* 137). These artistic differences can also be read as early reflections of the ideological differences between the two companies; DC was often known for its black and white moral distinctions, whereas Marvel came to be seen as a pioneer of change, later acquiring the moniker "The House of Ideas." Finally, another major influence in the development of the Marvel Comics universe was that it emerged in direct response to WWII. For example, Marvel's first majorly successful character was Captain America, who appeared in his own self-titled comic series, in which the Captain delivers a blow to Adolf Hitler himself. The release of *Captain America* serves an example of Marvel's revolutionary role in the presentation of unique, human and realistic heroes. Captain America was one of the first heroes to be designed as a direct symbolic reflection of the United States; Marvel's heroes were also among the first to exist in "the real world" of New York City, unlike the fictionalized locations of other comics.

The release of *Captain America* also marks an important shift in the comic book industry as virtually every comic publisher, including DC, followed suit and shifted to address the issues of WWII, often featuring "covers of [America's] heroes kicking the crap out of the Nazis" (Greenberger 2009). More significantly, however, Marvel's *Captain America #1* predates America's official entrance into the war by almost a year.[6] Here, *Captain America* serves as an example of how Marvel's comics were often used to explore controversial issues in American society. For example, though the U.S had not officially entered the war in 1940, they were contributing to the war effort by sending aid to the Allied forces; however, there was still no public consensus regarding America's involvement (J. Johnson 35). As a result of these tensions, *Captain America* was initially met with a surprising number of negative reactions from the American public who remained unsure about America's involvement in the war. In fact, the public reaction was so aggressive that the comic's creators, Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, received death threats and required police protection for a short time (Thomas viii). Undoubtedly, the creation of *Captain America* was also influenced by Simon and Kirby's Jewish-American

[6] Although *Captain America #1* was cover dated March of 1941, the issue had actually gone on sale in December of 1940 (J. Johnson 35).

background and their desire to speak out against the atrocities being committed in Europe. Thus, Captain America not only became a symbol of hope for Jews and oppressed people everywhere, but he also became an important tool that would help shape America's public opinion about the war.

By the time that Pearl Harbor was attacked in December of 1941, signaling America's official entry into the war, many publishers in the comic industry realized just how much influence comic books could have on the American audience, and they began working with government agencies to produce highly propagandistic comics. Marvel, as such, created the Sentinels of Liberty, which was essentially the *Captain America* fan club. As a member of the Sentinels, Captain America's followers received a membership card pledging their agreement to "uphold the principles of the Sentinels of Liberty, and to assist Captain America in his fight upon the enemies who attempt treason against the United States of America." Here, *Captain America*'s direct narrative ties to WWII temporarily elevated his cultural popularity, and yet because Marvel's entry into the comic industry was so closely connected to WWII, Marvel's comics quickly lost popularity after the war. Instead of using corporate marketing strategies to develop Captain America as a timeless icon who could represent America's needs in *any* cultural context, Marvel focused on the short-term profitability of the character's cultural specificity. As a result of these strategies, Marvel ultimately failed to promote its overarching brand identity and enabled DC to dominate the market until the 1960s.

While virtually every comic book character "shifted to a wartime footing" when America officially entered the war, Marvel's Captain America was the only hero to reference the war directly (Greenberger 2009); other heroes like DC's *Superman* opted to battle simpler fictionalizations of the conflict. For example, only the covers of *Superman* made overt depictions of the Americans fighting the Axis powers. The stories inside were often the same old fantasy adventures. It seems that the closest Superman got to a direct reference to the war in its narratives was in *Superman Issue #15* (March-April 1942), in which Superman intervenes in the crisis in the fictional land of Oxnalia and battles an army whose leader is undeniably a cartoon stand-in for Hitler. Even though DC's *Superman* may have lacked the immediacy of Marvel's *Captain America*, the morality plays of *Superman*'s fantastical narratives served the war effort in different ways. First, by intentionally avoiding the subject of war, *Superman*'s stories provided a

much needed means of "escape for a weary nation" (Harrington 2012). At the same time, the covers and the sentiment of *Superman*'s interventionist justice re-instilled Americans with a sense of patriotism. More importantly, these wartime issues of *Superman* were an excellent example of DC's ability to promote its universal brand identity while simultaneously capturing a cultural moment. For example, with the emergence of the War, Superman became increasingly patriotic while maintaining his underlying classical or universally interventionist brand of heroism. Here, DC's universally interventionist approach to heroism stood in stark contrast to Marvel's culturally and historically specific interventionism, which arguably led to the company's decline after the war. In a special episode of *Superman*, drawn exclusively for *Look* magazine in 1940, Siegel and Shuster explained "how Superman would end the war." In this comic, Superman flies Hitler and Stalin to a meeting of the League of Nations, leaving justice in the hands of a real world political institution ("How Superman Would End the War" 1940). This ad is an excellent example of how DC used wartime narratives as a marketing strategy to culturally re-align its overarching brand identity without compromising the universal appeal of its heroes. In this comic, Superman is still an interventionist hero who acts outside of the law in order to protect society; however, his actions work to reinforce society's belief in institutional forms of justice. Many of DC's other publications also indirectly supported America's war effort by using its characters to sell war bonds and to emphasize the importance of America's involvement. For example, the cover of *Action Comics #58* (March, 1943) carried Superman's propagandistic and racist endorsement that "You can Slap a Jap with War Bonds and Stamps" (Figure 3). Additionally, covers of *Wonder Woman* were emblazoned with pro-war slogans such as "Let's Go! USA Keep 'em Flying!" (Figure 4). These covers effectively marketed the war effort by associating DC's heroes with patriotic acts. At the same time, however, DC's decision to de-emphasize the war within their narratives ensured that its comics would still be popular after the war. DC further showcased their commitment to patriotic duty by working with the War Department to release a special issue of *Superman #33* (March, 1945) that was distributed to the GIs. This issue featured classic *Superman* adventure narratives, but it used simpler dialogue and word balloons in order to boost morale and to educate the thousands of newly drafted, functionally illiterate servicemen (Greenberger 2009). Here, DC's corporate partnership with the War Department would be the first of many cross-promotional campaigns crafted by the company. These campaigns served the dual purpose of maximizing circulation

profits as well as developing brand loyalty. For example, DC's deal with the War Department would virtually guarantee continued readership by the servicemen who saw *Superman* as a beacon of hope and security, reminding them what they were fighting for while they were abroad. Unfortunately, while Marvel's *Captain America* may have sparked the industry's transition to a war-time mentality, their hero had nothing to fight once the war was over. With the Nazis defeated, Marvel's super soldier was out of a job. Attempts to transition him back to civilian Steve Rogers ultimately failed, proving that "Captain America's popularity varied in direct proportion to the intensity of the war" (Steranko 55). Here, the cultural and political specificity of *Captain America*'s narratives proved to be Marvel's greatest weakness because they failed to develop the company's brand identity beyond the context of WWII. Conversely, DC profited by marketing its characters through the war while simultaneously developing their popularity independently of the war. This is an early example of DC's investment in cross-promotional brand association. By situating Superman and other heroes as supporters of the war effort and of everyday American struggles, DC's early investment in cross-promotional brand association allowed its characters to achieve widespread popularity beyond any singular cultural moment and cultivated the company's overall association with "The American Way."

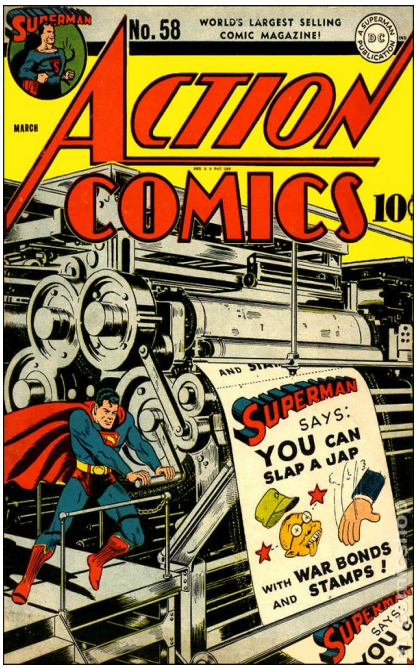

Fig. 3 Cover of Action Comics # 58 (March, 1943)[7]

Fig. 4 Cover of Wonder Woman #2 (Fall, 1942)[8]

[7] Image retrieved from: http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Action_Comics_Vol_1_58
[8] Image retrieved from: http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Wonder_Woman_Vol_1_2

Throughout the 1930s and '40s, the rise of the comic book industry was undeniably linked to the comic book's role as a cultural text that Americans needed in order to address and grapple with the socio-cultural impacts of events such as The Great Depression and WWII. Much like other cultural texts, including films, comic books shared America's paradoxical desire to support and acknowledge their involvement in the war while simultaneously disavowing the terrifying implications of such an involvement (Schneider 75). For example, musicals such as *Yankee Doodle Dandy* (Curtiz, 1942) were produced during the 1940s as a means of providing uplifting escapism and were thus filled with patriotic sentiment. As a result of this similarity in approaches, it was not long until the comics were licensed for adaptation by the Hollywood film industry. By 1944, Republic Pictures produced the first live-action film serial of *Captain America* and Columbia soon followed with its own serialization of *Superman* in 1948. The production of these serials marked the comic industry's first forays into the competitive world of cross-promotional marketing, in which the success of any property depended heavily upon its ability to reach a widespread audience and continue generating profit. Even in the early stages of each company's development, the production of *Captain America* and *Superman* and their licensing deals with Republic and Columbia Pictures ultimately laid the foundation for the corporate development of Marvel and DC Entertainment.

Serials have their roots in the age of silent cinema and were often motivated by a unique negotiation between economics and artistry, relying on pre-packaged or previously existing properties with a built-in audience. Serials themselves followed a similar structure to the average comic books, which were produced on a monthly basis and slowly established characters and story arcs (Cline 4). As a result, pulp magazine comics provided serials with an ideal source material for adaptation. Many fans were already reading the stories week after week with every publication and thus would naturally be drawn to the cliff-hanger format of the serials. In the 1930s, the three major motion picture serial producers were Mascot, Universal and Republic. Another similarity shared between comics and serials was their longtime repudiation by the cultural elite. For example, Republic, which produced *Captain America*, was considered "the first step down the ladder to obscurity and unemployment" and was given the unfortunate nickname of "Repulsive Pictures" (Grossman 13). Despite this moniker, or perhaps because of it, Republic also had a reputation for churning out serials faster than any other company in the business (Grossman 13). As a result of Republic's corporate influence, *Captain America* was

often perceived as little more than an excuse for cheap action thrills and was criticized for bearing virtually no resemblance to its original source material (Kinnard 78). Much of the publicity for the film promoted *Captain America* on the basis of its well-known serial actors and a silly adventure narrative that was typical of most serials during the 1940s ("Republic to Make 32 Feature Films" 19). As a result, the serial did little to promote the popularity of Marvel's original comics. Given that the serial industry was largely supported by licensing pre-existing properties in order to generate profits from a built-in audience base, Republic's decision to stray so far from the source with their adaptation of *Captain America* would have undoubtedly had the effect of alienating the series' long-time fans. In the serial, almost every one of Captain America's origin stories are dispensed with, including his creation by super-enhancing secret serum and his active involvement in WWII. Even the name of Cap's alter ego, Steve Rogers, is left out of Republic's version. Instead, Republic's Captain America was district attorney Grant Gardner moonlighting as a masked vigilante. On the one hand, these changes could be read as Republic's attempt to shift Hollywood's war-time content towards nationalistically uplifting narratives by making the hero a champion of institutional justice; however, these attempts would ultimately have been undermined by Gardner's dubious activities outside of his jurisdiction. Perhaps more troubling was Republic's own explanation of their 'artistic liberties.' Apparently, after Marvel had expressed their distaste for Republic's changes, Republic responded by arguing that the source materials Marvel provided in no way indicated that the character of Steve Rogers was Captain America. They also argued that retakes would have been far too costly. To make matters worse, they additionally claimed that Marvel's licensing agreement provided no contractual obligation to maintain strict adherence to their source material (Harmon and Glut 259/60). Marvel's failure to establish a licensing agreement that allowed them to maintain creative control over their properties thus led to a somewhat lackluster adaptation. The resulting distancing of Marvel from the *Captain America* serial also prevented the company from establishing its own cohesive brand identity across multimedia revenue streams. Ideally, Republic's serial should have generated new readership for Marvel's original *Captain America* comic series, which could have helped the company survive in the years immediately following the end of WWII. However, Republic's loose interpretation of the original text made the association of this Captain America with Marvel's very difficult for audiences who were not

already familiar it—especially since no mention of the original *Captain America* comic was made in the serial's opening credits.

Despite the negative impact of Republic's failure to produce a faithful adaptation, the serial did have a few redeeming qualities, most notably in its use of the comic's slam-bang, cartoon inspired action sequences. Amidst their hastily produced adaptation, Republic did manage to fill *Captain America* with a surprising number of big-budget, special effects-driven action sequences, at least for 1940s standards. For example, within the first three minutes of *Captain America*'s first chapter, "The Purple Death," the audience was treated to three gruesome suicides: one by a man driving his car off a cliff, another by jumping out a window from an extreme height, and another by a gunshot to the head. The episode even concluded with Captain America being trapped inside a building as it, rather realistically, collapsed around him. Contrary to the popular perception of its cheaply made serials, Republic somewhat redeemed itself by including pulse-pounding action sequences tied to the company's expertise with miniatures and other live-action special effects techniques. These techniques were developed through years of producing westerns and other action-oriented serials, including *Zorro Rides Again* (1937), *The Lone Ranger* (1938) and *Adventures of Captain Marvel* (1941). Republic's reliance on action-oriented narratives also seems to have anticipated the comic book superhero's eventual association with the action-blockbuster formula that emerged during the 1970s. For example, as Thomas Schatz has noted, some of the defining characteristics of the Hollywood blockbuster included the use of a star-studded cast, "heavy up-front spending on marketing as well as production…minimal character complexity or development and by the numbers plotting" (Schatz 35). Comparing this formula to the production of *Captain America*, we can see at least a few of these elements at work. Certainly, Republic's removal of Captain America's convoluted science fiction origins can be viewed as their attempt to distill his character down to the most basic elements of heroic, action-driven physicality. Moreover, in order to produce said action sequences, *Captain America* also relied on relatively big-budgets and high production values (Hurst 117). Here, it seems that one of Marvel's only obstacles to the development of its own cohesive and tightly controlled universe was its failure to blend these proto-blockbuster characteristics with a faithful adaptation of its source material as a means of distinguishing its properties from other comic book publishers. Unfortunately, Marvel would continue to suffer

from such corporate and industrial set-backs until it reorganized itself in the 1960s and '70s; it thus left DC to dominate the market for the next twenty years.

Much like many other motion picture serial producers, Columbia Pictures, perhaps unfairly, shared a reputation for producing cheap serials. This industry-wide perception neglects to consider that during the 1940s the emergence of labor unions began to inflate Hollywood's production costs, which inevitably led to budget cuts (Kinnard 3). Because serials were not the studios' main source of profit, their budgets were the first to be cut. Despite these typically low budgets, Columbia's production of *Superman* in 1948 managed to make a lasting impression in the dying industry. A few key elements contributed to the success of *Superman* that can be attributed to the synergistic relationships of DC and Columbia. First, DC's licensing agreement was extremely strict and demanded that DC maintain a great deal of corporate and creative control over the adaptation. Ironically, Republic had tried to secure the rights to *Superman* as early as the 1930s; however, they balked at DC's restrictions and eventually gave up the project. DC's agreement seemingly demanded control of virtually every element of production, from final say on casting to distribution. This licensing deal was arguably one of the greatest examples of DC's development of their own tightly controlled corporate structure that would ultimately give them the competitive edge they needed to stay in business in the coming years. For example, one stipulation of the agreement was that the *Superman* serial could only have one theatrical release by the production company, after which all control of the property would revert back to DC (Kinnard 107). At the time, especially for Republic, it was industry standard that serials were re-released on a regular basis, often later in feature format, to enable the studios to continue generating profits (Kinnard 5). This agreement ensured that DC would be in control of all future releases, and therefore the exclusive beneficiary of all future profits. Due to this restriction, Republic had to abandon the project, which left *Superman* for Columbia's taking. This licensing agreement also had the added benefit of forcing *Superman* to be a remarkably faithful adaptation of DC's comic. For example, the entire first chapter of the serial was spent establishing Superman's origin and ended just before he performed his first public rescue. This cliff-hanger had the dual effect of ensuring that Columbia could expect great profits from the built-in *Superman* fan audience and it also boosted audience interest in DC's original source material. Unlike the *Captain America* serial that failed to include any reference to the original source material in its opening, each chapter of Columbia's *Superman* opened with a mock issue

of the comic book and even bore DC's unofficial logo that indirectly stamped the adaptation as "a DC publication." The final major contributing factor to the success of *Superman* was that Columbia's producer, Sam Katzman, was notorious for his prolific, low-budget achievements within the serial industry. As a result of his talents, and despite Columbia's reputation for cheap thrills, Katzman was also "noted for never having lost money on any film bearing his name" (Harmon and Glut 209). Together, the partnership of DC and Columbia succeeded in making *Superman* the most profitable serial of all time (Harmon and Glut 204).

As the reception from fans and industrial critics indicates, the success of *Superman* can also be linked to its adherence to a proto-blockbuster production mode and marketing campaign. For example, a short announcement in the *Los Angeles Times* promoted *Superman* by appealing to the star quality of its cast members such as Noel Neill and Kirk Alyn. While today Neill's performance of Lois Lane may be regarded as her most memorable by fans, she also had acting contracts with Monogram and Paramount in the 1940s (Schallert 7). Neill was also known, especially to the GIs of the 1940s, as a famous pinup girl (Tye 254). Columbia's emphasis on Neill as Lois Lane helped generate audience interest in the serial, and her continued use throughout other *Superman* adaptations well into the 1950s helped create a sense of authenticity or brand recognition with DC's characters.[9] DC's desire to emphasize authenticity and cultivate brand awareness was also furthered by the press conference Columbia held prior to the release of *Superman*. During production, Katzman called a press conference to announce that the role of Superman was so demanding that they were unable to find a suitable actor and that, instead, the 'real' Superman would be making an appearance in the serial (Harmon and Glut 210). While Kirk Alyn was credited as Clark Kent, they kept his identity as Superman a secret to sustain the illusion for the younger fans of the *Superman* comics, who were also the target demographic of the serials (Scivally 33). Another way in which *Superman* appeared to anticipate its blockbuster potential was that the budget for the serial was extraordinarily high for 1940s standards; it even eclipsed *Captain America*'s budget, making *Superman* the most expensive serial ever made with a total price tag of over $300,000 (Scivally 37). Ultimately, the key difference between the success of Marvel and DC's adaptations was that, more so than Marvel, DC actively cultivated its own brand image and realized *Superman*'s potential as a pop cultural icon much earlier on.

[9] Neill's star persona has also been used as a promotional gimmick as recently as 2006 in Brian Singer's *Superman Returns.*

For example, *Superman*'s marketing campaign featured advertisements on radio, in DC's comics, as well as in the theaters. To increase the fans' and audiences' desire to return for each installment of the serial, DC even created the "Superman Club Card," which would be stamped at every installment. If you could prove that you had seen the first fourteen chapters, you would get to see the final one for free (Grossman 53). By the time *Superman* hit theaters in 1948, audience interest was so high that *Superman* managed to break yet another industry record and became the first serial ever to warrant a first-run theatrical release, with showings in the evening in addition to the typical Saturday matinees of most serials ("First Runs Book Serial" 23).

One of the only drawbacks to the production of *Superman* was its lack of special effects. Instead of using live-action stunts or miniature models, Superman's special powers were depicted through cartoon animation. For example, whenever Superman needed to fly out of a window or tunnel through solid rock, he was transformed into a somewhat crudely rendered cartoon version of himself (Kinnard 110). While this stylistic choice was heavily influenced by budgetary restraints and Columbia's lack of special effects expertise, especially compared to Republic, one could also argue that this choice further emphasized the serial's broader connection to DC's original comic text. Furthermore, *Superman*'s immense financial and critical success in spite of this stylistic shortcoming works to reinforce the importance of corporate management and marketing structures to the overall success of any adaptations. After the success of *Superman*, Columbia released another fifteen-chapter serial, *Atom Man vs. Superman* (1950), which kept DC's pop-cultural icon alive in the American national consciousness well into the 1950s, and spawned further adaptations and licensing deals along the way. Over the next decade, each new incarnation of *Superman* helped DC to develop and solidify its corporate brand identity. At the same time, Marvel's own lack of corporate stability temporarily forced Goodman out of the comic industry, allowing DC to dominate the market with minimal competition.

Throughout the 1930s and '40s, DC's success over Marvel can be attributed to the strength of its corporate structure. Even though both DC and Marvel produced comics that addressed the context of WWII in the 1940s, DC used the war as a marketing strategy to build its brand identity. For example, DC's partnership with the War Department guaranteed the circulation of its comics during the war. However, because DC's narratives did not shift to reflect the war directly, DC's comics remained popular even after the war had ended. Conversely, because the

war formed the foundation of Marvel's entire narrative structure, the company was only able make a short-term profit. Marvel's lack of a cohesive brand identity and corporate structure was also evident in its first adaptation of *Captain America*. The adaptation should have been a synergistic opportunity to promote its comics through other revenue streams; however, Marvel's poorly constructed licensing deal only served to dissociate Republic's *Captain America* from Marvel's original comic. Tellingly, in 1945, *Captain America*'s wartime story arc ended with Captain America being frozen in the arctic; he was not revived until the mid 1960s. After the "death" of Captain America, DC faced very little competition from Marvel and continued to develop its brand identity through its first adaptation in 1948. Even in these early stages, DC's tightly controlled corporate structure and interest in cross-promotional marketing campaigns gave DC's adaptation of *Superman* a great advantage over Marvel's *Captain America*. DC's licensing deal ensured that they maintained creative control over the project, which enabled the company to cultivate its own culturally and commercially iconic brand image that would bolster DC's overall success even as its comic sales fluctuated throughout history.

Chapter 2

Super-Seal of Approval: DC's Proliferation of Family Values & The Comics Code of America

After WWII, comic book sales were dwindling across the industry; Contrary to what they had hoped, DC lost the guaranteed readership of the GI's abroad who were no longer interested in reading childish stories upon their return, and Marvel's super soldier no longer had a war to fight and soon even civilian Steve Rogers slipped into obscurity. However, despite such low post-war readership, DC's brand of pre-modern heroism proved to be uniquely qualified to adapt to the socio-political shift in post-war America, which ultimately enabled the company to survive into the future. During the 1950s, the post-war socio-political climate, along with the concerned mothers of America and the Comics Code Administration, helped to transform Superman from a liberal demigod fighting for social change, to a law-abiding citizen enforcing the status quo. These socio-political and industrial shifts are most clearly exemplified in both the *Superman* comics as well as the *Superman* TV series from 1952-58. DC's quick corporate response ultimately enabled them to realign their brand of interventionist heroism with the socio-cultural needs of post-war America.

By analyzing the original structure of Superman's character and his parent company, DC, it is clear that the pre-modern tradition of heroism upon which its characters are based was a core component of DC's success during the war. Typically, DC's superheroes have been aligned with the archetypal monomyth, which likens them to the ancient mythological gods with pre-destined or divinely ordained powers. According to Bainbridge, these superheroes, including Superman, can be considered pre-modern in the sense that "they promote themselves as divine figures of retribution, offering both the promise of transcendent justice in the place of equality (enabled by their super power) and physicality in the place of rationality…as the conduits to truth" (Bainbridge 67). In other words, for Superman, justice is interventionist and due to his god-like abilities, he must, at least to a certain extent, operate outside of the failing jurisdiction of the traditional legal system. For example, this pre-destined interventionist attitude is shown through Superman's origins story, most notably in the early film and television adaptations, when Clark Kent unflinchingly decides he must move to the city and insinuate himself in the breaking news

of disaster and injustice; it is as though he fights for "truth, justice and the American way" by divine right. Here, we can see how the pre-modern structure of the hero appeals to the American consciousness on two levels: On the one hand, the interventionist nature of Superman's character appeals to the history of American Manifest Destiny and the American myth of the "lone, rugged individual who comes into society and cleans it up" (Slosser qt'd in Muir 13), and on the other hand, *Superman* projects this myth into the (then) present war-time mentality of interventionist justice that America is now famous for. However, after the war, "a time when domesticity was a central preoccupation of the burgeoning middle class," it appeared as though the new consumerist America, as depicted by various advertisers and women's magazines, which glorified the housewife and mother figure, desired a return to traditional family values and a conformist social order—despite the fact that such traditional roles were being increasingly challenged (Spigel 33). Unfortunately, in this new social climate, the interventionist spirit of DC's *Superman* was now radically at odds with the new 'American Way' thus, in response to the cultural shifts of the 1950s, DC had to find a way to transition Superman from individualist crime fighter to "company man" (J. Johnson 75).

Following the atrocities of WWII, it seemed natural that America favored a return to the peace and stability of domesticity; however, as Jeffrey Johnson notes, such a desire for homogeneity inevitably led to the creation of "a rigid social order that provided safety and a concrete definition of normalcy, but left little room for dissent or individualistic expression" (70). While many other comics companies, which produced gory pulp crime and science-fiction horror stories, failed to adjust to this new social climate, "DC comics quickly became the era's leading publisher and its characters became synonymous with the idea of superheroes until the 1960s" (J. Johnson 73). Looking at the structure of DC publishing, there appear to be three main reasons underlying their success. First, due to the generic 'everyday' storylines of the pre-war *Superman* comics, it was easier for DC to re-market its narrative structures to cater to the demand for more wholesome, family-friendly content. Second, because DC had preemptively created an editorial advisory board to monitor violent content in 1941, their line of comics was not as devastated by the industry's enactment of the Comics Code Authority in 1954. Finally, by the 1950s, as evidenced by their exceptionally successful transition to the new medium of television, DC was far more successful at industrial cross-promotion and licensing than other comics companies

This was especially true compared to Marvel, which maintained little to no creative control over their adaptations, which often alienated fans of the original material.

One of the first and most important changes that DC made to the structure of Superman was to transform him from a vigilante fighting for social change in America to a super-normal law abiding citizen who fought to "protect the status quo and…[praise] law enforcement and elected officials" (J. Johnson 74). For example, in *Action Comics #1* (June, 1938), Superman physically assaulted a governor in his home in order to save the life of a death-row inmate who was wrongfully convicted, yet by *Superman #60* (October, 1949), "the Man of Steel, while working undercover for the Metropolis police, allows himself to be sent to prison for Clark Kent's murder" (J. Johnson 74). Such character shifts, while subtle at first, also began to appear in the early film and television adaptations of *Superman* and became even more pronounced after the enactment of the CCA in 1954.

The war-time popularity of *Superman* prompted a number of multi-media adaptations, including Columbia's two 15-chapter film serials, *Superman* (1948) and *Atom Man vs. Superman* (1950). Despite being made in such a short time period, the tone between these two serial adaptations was markedly different. In *Superman vs. Atom Man*, the post-war atomic threat that plagued the American national consciousness is evoked, first on the level of the title and second in the serial's opening credits, which consists entirely of mushroom clouds from a nuclear explosion. In response to this growing atomic anxiety, American society tended to return to traditional family values and gender roles. The link between this atomic threat and the increased need to reinforce the traditional family structure was clearly demonstrated by Charles Walter Clarke, director of the American Social Hygiene Association, when he argued that "following an atom bomb explosion…families would become separated and lost from each other in confusion…supports of normal family and community life would be broken down" (Clarke qt'd in May 90). In response to these fears, American society sought to eliminate such strains of the traditional family structure, which included bringing the American woman back into the home following her economic and sexual empowerment which was creating much anxiety after the war.

This new-found anxiety can clearly be seen in the late *Superman* serials and in the 1950s TV series, in which Superman is transitioned into a supporting role for institutional justice and Lois Lane's character is gradually contained. For example, even though Superman still reports to the government in the first serial, there is far less visual involvement by the police or any other officially sanctioned government agency. Instead, the heroic plans and rescues are almost always carried out by Superman himself, with Lois and Jimmy acting as civilian side-kick vigilantes, such as when Lois impersonates the police in order to scare away the villains in *Superman Episode 8:* "Superman to the Rescue." This shows that the first adaptation of *Superman* still favored the divine interventionist style of justice that structured DC's original war-time publications of *Superman*. However, just a mere two years later, we begin to see the post-war American mentality affect the production of the second serial, which attempts to normalize and assimilate Superman into society at large. For example, in episode one of *Atom Man vs. Superman*, Superman saves the day by using his powers to hold the suspension bridge steady while the police move in to rescue the stranded motorists and then informs the police of Lex Luthor's whereabouts before going to confront him. Next, when Clark Kent spots an escaped prisoner, he reports it to the police before taking any action himself. Here, the police have a much larger presence and Superman's powers are made subservient to the officials of law and order. Additionally, in the early film serials, Lois represents the strong, liberated woman: she is outspoken, opinionated and openly chastises Kent for his perceived weakness. However, near the end of the *Atom Man* serial, her independence transforms her into a potentially dangerous woman, whose constant challenges to the authority of her editor in chief are perceived more as a nuisance, until she is finally fired from the Daily Planet. This trend of containing female independence continues throughout *Adventures of Superman* in the mid 1950s as Lois is given far less screen time and is portrayed as more of a damsel in distress than a strong character.

These attempts to restrain Superman's 'super-ness' are a result not only of the drastic shift of post-war American family values, but are also the result of DC's larger corporate structure which maintained creative control over their adaptations, allowing them to implement these changes to the character of Superman in print, film, television, and even advertising. A review of the 1950s TV show in *Billboard* magazine notes a dispute between National Comics and the show's producer Robert Maxwell Associates wherein National was "miffed" that Maxwell was claiming to be associated with their company in display ads for the show when in fact he was not. As a

result, the company fired Maxwell Associates and appointed Whitney Ellsworth, editorial director at National and former producer of the *Superman* film serials, executive producer of the series for the second season ("Ellsworth to Head Prod." 7). In addition to maintaining such strict control on the corporate level, DC also capitalized on the cross-promotional appeal of *Superman*. For example, a display ad in the *Los Angeles Times* from April 1955 announces that Superman (George Reeves) will be appearing at a local department store to sign autographs. The ad also features a young boy and girl dressed in 'officially licensed' Superman suits and reminds them to watch *The Adventures of Superman* every Saturday at 7 PM ("Meet Superman" 12). This ad is clearly an attempt to assimilate Superman into the realm of 1950s American domestic life by having him appear in the department store, the epitome of American commercial consumerism. The attempt to assimilate and domesticate Superman is further emphasized in a follow up article of the *Los Angeles Times*, which notes that "Superman is the national sponsor of the Little Helpers, a children's organization working in behalf of the City of Hope, a free, nonsectarian medical center at Duarte" ("Children in Stores" 9). Unlike the previous promotional announcements for the *Superman* serials and TV shows, which emphasized the god-like superiority of Superman and minimized the press surrounding the actual actor who portrayed him, these more recent announcements and cross-promotional campaigns sought to make Superman more human and more specifically, American. One of the best examples of cross-promotion that emphasized the all-American wholesome nature of Superman was the advertising sponsorship of the TV series by Kellogg's Cereal. As a 1953 review of the TV series demonstrates, the partnership of Kellogg and *Superman* attempted to capitalize on positioning the show as wholesome entertainment for children (Burnett 29). While such cross-promotional advertising helps build the commercial success and popularity of the *Superman* franchise, it is also an attempt to sanitize the character of Superman with wholesome American values of peaceful and institutionalized justice. Even though Superman's actions are still considered classically interventionist, DC's corporate marketing strategies shifted the perception of Superman's powers away from their potentially "harmful" anti-establishment associations. With the advent of the new medium of television, which was widely being promoted for its ability to bring the American family back together, DC was effectively able to associate its brand with American family values even in the early stages of its adaptation in *Adventures of Superman*. Such drastic shifts in the character and structure of DC's *Superman* would continue

throughout the decade, especially due to the increased social and industrial pressures created by the Comics Code Authority.

In 1954, psychiatrist Fredric Wertham published his book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he protested the harmful effects of sex and violence in popular comic books; he believed there was a direct correlation between comic books and juvenile delinquency. While the government saw no reason to officially intervene in the comics controversy, "the simple fact that there was an investigation gave more momentum to comics critics" (Daniels, *Comix* 84). As a result of this increasingly harsh criticism, most notably by concerned parents of America's youth, the comics industry attempted to regain public favor by creating the Comics Code Authority (CCA), which would provide basic restrictions of violence and amoral behavior to which all major comics publishers would comply. As noble as the intentions of the CCA seemed to be in its desire to both save the comics industry from persecution and placate the concerned public, the effects of the Code, together with other economic and distribution problems, ultimately crippled the industry because it forced many independent publishers, which did not carry the CCA seal of approval, out of business. The genres of comic book that were most often criticized by Wertham and others were horror and crime. In fact, it was more than just a mere coincidence that the CCA was brought into full effect shortly after EC (Educational Comics) revolutionized the industry with its creation of gruesome crime and horror comics that challenged the previous standards of comic stories and artistic styles. By the 1950s, EC produced titles such as *Tales from the Crypt*, and *Vault of Horror*; as Les Daniels describes them, EC's comics were "created not…to pacify the mind of some theoretical child out there in newsstand land, but rather to give writers and artists a free hand in extending the limits of the medium in all directions" (Daniels, *Comix* 62/3). Unfortunately for EC, these challenges of social norms and conformity were deemed unacceptable by Wertham and other critics (Daniels 62/3).

While the influence of horror, crime and the macabre were not entirely new to the comics industry at this time, the difference between EC and other mainstream producers was in the presentation of morality. For example, seedy or questionable elements of crime and horror are present in the origins of DC's *Batman* with the cold-blooded murder of Bruce Wayne's parents and Superman's villains such as Lex Luthor could be particularly violent. However, the narrative structure and recurring hero of these texts created stories which were much more reassuring than

the abject horror of EC. The inclusion of this ultimately reassuring narrative slant in DC's comics of the 1950s is yet another example of DC's strategic attempts to market its products to 1950s audiences. With the gruesome horror and scathing political satire of EC comics on the rise, it is not surprising that immediately following their boundary pushing stylistic innovations, the CCA was enacted in 1954.

The enactment of the CCA had much the same effect as the Hollywood Production Code in that arguments in favor of such codes often proceed from what Richard Maltby calls a "fear of entertainment," which maintains that certain displays of wish fulfillment are in conflict with the higher moral standards of traditional society. Thus, it is through these systems of regulation "that such desires be rendered harmless" once again (Maltby 472). It is important to note that the CCA, much like the Production Code, was a system of self-regulation by the comics producers themselves, so as much as the code seemed repressive or restrictive, it was actually created as an alternative to more serious forms of externally governed regulation. However, the effects of the code also proved to cripple the industry as much as save it. On the face of it, such outcomes may seem somewhat accidental, but the fact that DC remained one of the few successful mainstream producers after the enactment of the CCA suggests that imposing the code may have been a much more calculated move to eliminate the competition posed by independent producers. This is a further example of how much of DC's success in these early years can be attributed to their adept control over industrial structures and politics. For example, part of the CCA stipulated that "the word 'crime' shall never appear alone on a cover... [and] No comic magazine shall use the word horror or terror in its title" (Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency Interim Report, 1955). Here, the code is being used to eliminate a particular genre of comic: the crime and horror comics most notably produced by EC and Marvel (then Atlas Comics). Given this set of restrictions, it became impossible for titles like *Vault of Horror* to carry the Code's seal of approval and were subsequently forced out of business. While it is true that there were other mitigating factors that led to the downturn in comic popularity during the 1950s, including lack of distribution and competition created by the new medium of television, the enactment of the CCA played a crucial role in eliminating a lot of independent comics producers. In an interview with Bill Gaines, founder of EC, Gaines admitted that he felt targeted by the other members of the Comics Association because even though he was one of the first producers to start the association, "the first thing they did was ban the words weird, horror and terror from any comic

magazine" after they had disagreed on how to regulate the industry and their content long term (Gaines qt'd Nyberg 109). To add credence to Gaines' suspicions, it is important to note that Jack Liebowitz, co-founder of DC (then National Comics) was also vice-president of the Comics Magazine Association of America which enacted the Code. Since DC was already pushing for moral standards in comics as early as the 1940s, his company was not nearly as affected by the new code.

After the enactment of the CCA, the comic writers and publishers that remained had to develop new subtle yet sophisticated methods of representing 'controversial' material like sex, violence and crime. Coincidentally, such methods of censorship, particularly for childrens' entertainment, were of growing concern not only in the comics industry, but in television as well, which was under increased scrutiny as its influence was being felt deep within the homes of suburban America. As Spigel notes, this was because television was simultaneously perceived as "the great family minstrel that promised to bring Mom, Dad and the kids together…[yet] it had to be carefully controlled so that it harmonized with the separate gender roles and social functions of individual family members" as conceived by the proponents of post-war American traditionalism (37). With these social tensions in mind, looking at the *Superman* TV series (ABC, 1952), we can see a drastic shift in both the style and content from season one (1952) to season three (1955). After the enactment of the CCA, the *Adventures of Superman* went from noir pulp horror to a more toned down childish, even farcical adventure story. In season one of *Adventures of Superman*, there are already some early indications of the 1950s post-war influence on Superman's character, as both Superman and Clark Kent are featured working with the police and other government agencies. Such civic involvement is an example of how DC attempted to shift the perception of *Superman*'s heroism and align it with the 1950s norm of conformist domesticity. However, there is still a heavy influence of the darker, hard-boiled pulp tradition common in the 1940s crime and horror comics. For example, episode two, "The Haunted Lighthouse," features noir-inspired low key lighting and an eerie voice-over narration that sets the gruesome tone of the mystery that is about to unfold. This ominous atmosphere is continued throughout the first season of the series, featuring overt and brutal violence, including Jimmy being held at knifepoint and Lois being punched in the face by a gangster. These darker, more violent characteristics are precisely what the CCA sought to abolish during the latter half of the decade as the new post-war mentality took hold in American society.

As the series progressed, the attempts to normalize the character of Superman became even more apparent. By 1956, after the enactment of the CCA, the villains and violence in *Adventures of Superman* were far less sinister than the gangsters of the earlier seasons and were more like bumbling idiots when faced with Superman's abilities. As George Reeves later noted, the shift in character and content was a deliberate one in which the scripts were carefully screened "trying to avoid as much gore as possible" and eliminate some of the more "undesirable elements" that were present in the first twenty six episodes (Tepper G7). For example, in season three episode thirteen "King for A Day" none of the villains' attempts to assassinate Jimmy are successful because Clark Kent subtly foils each of their plans. Even the methods of assassination appear much less violent than in previous episodes, and instead feature poisoned ice cream sodas or exploding cigarettes in the place of guns and knives. While still conveying the danger and adventure of conventional comic books, these newly designed episodes had to resort to more subtle methods of displaying controversial material in order to make the entertainment suitable for all audiences and by having Clark Kent rather than Superman fight these battles, DC's *Superman* was better able to transition into the new American landscape and continue to gain commercial success and popularity.

By the end of the 1950s, even the promotional material for the television series had shifted to reinforce the normalcy of Superman, proving that much of the success of DC Publishing throughout the 1940s and 50s was related to their ability to shift and re-design their particular brand of heroism. For example, an article from the *Los Angeles Times* in May of 1959 promotes the TV series by altering the iconic tagline, "it's a bird, it's a plane, it's Superman!" to "it's a bird, it's a plane, it's Reeves!" (Tepper G7). Where earlier promotional materials for the film serials had appealed to the authenticity of the "real" Superman and guarded the identity of the actor who played him very closely, the TV series of the 1950s made a clear attempt to emphasize the real life *American* qualities of the Superman / Clark Kent duo and can be read as another example of how the 1950s conformist impulse helped to re-shape DC's brand of heroism to portray Superman as both an all-powerful interventionist hero and a respectable civil servant.

The new moral standards created by the CCA worked as a method to control the production of "acceptable" comic narratives throughout the remainder of the 1950s, and with the elimination of the competition of independent producers, DC proved to be the company that was uniquely

qualified to flourish in this new environment. First, DC was able to effectively market its classically pre-modern brand of justice in order to adapt to the changing socio-political climate of post-war America; Superman was god-like in his abilities, but he was able to use his abilities to uphold the *American* way of life above all else. Second, DC was able to maintain greater corporate control over its adaptations than any of its competitors and was able to capitalize on the extensive cross promotional and merchandizing potential of its characters, such as Superman, in order to bolster both commercial and cultural success (Plotnik 8). Taken together, these factors were the major stumbling blocks which prevented Marvel, the company that would eventually prove to be DC's biggest competition, from gaining much ground until the 1960s.

In the wake of the industry crisis created by the CCA, Marvel, like many other comics companies, suffered drastic cutbacks as the industry shifted away from artistic expression in an attempt to survive economically. Such cutbacks were made even more devastating by Goodman's lack of concern with building narrative and character continuity by cultivating the talent of in-house staff. Instead, he favored hiring (and firing) slews of free-lance writers as his constantly fluctuating budgets and production schedules permitted, and after the enactment of the CCA, Goodman "settled into publishing a formula of science fiction and mystery stories which were free enough from sex and violence to win the Code's seal of approval" (Daniels, *Comix* 137). As Sean Howe further notes, during this time of economic and industrial instability, "the honing of craft, the following of whims and the breaking of rules all took a back seat to the necessity of family-supporting paychecks" (31). This lack of creative continuity and innovation can be seen in the distinct lack of cross-promotional advertising and adaptations produced by Marvel during the 1950s. For example, virtually the only film adaptation released by the company was actually a *re*-release of its *Captain America* serial from the 1940s, newly titled as *Return of Captain America* (Republic, 1953) and as previously mentioned, this adaptation gave little regard for the authenticity of the original. Unfortunately for Goodman, this lack of creative continuity would leave his company floundering until the 1960s, when Stan Lee's seminal *Fantastic Four* would eventually save the day.

Chapter 3

Mighty Marvel: The Emergence of Marvel Comics in the 1960s and 1970s

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of tremendous social and political upheaval for the American people and nation. Issues of race and gender politics that had long been ignored were finally making their way into the light through the civil rights, women's liberation and sexual revolution movements. More often than not, America found itself trapped in a period characterized by self-doubt and instability as it was caught between the poles of staunch conservatism and radical change. This growing sense of disenchantment with the status quo was also being reflected by changes in the entertainment industries as well, including Hollywood cinema, television, and comic books themselves. Notably, Marvel's rise to power in the comic book industry took place in relation to these events and arguably paralleled the rise of American countercultural movements, particularly in its engagement with the civil rights movement and issues of racial inequality. Consequently, faced with the growing pressure of Marvel's competition, DC also was forced to enact some corporate changes of its own in an attempt to remain relevant to its ever changing audience. During this time of cultural unrest, how each company reacted to these changes would ultimately be the determinant of their success. Marvel's comics began to dominate the market due to their narrative alignment with 1960s culture and politics, which seemed to both address and target the counter cultural youth audience; DC continued to maintain its hold by exploiting its comic books through cross-promotional revenue streams. However, even though Marvel's heroes were becoming more popular than DC's, their lack of a unified corporate structure significantly impacted their cultural reach. DC was in fact able to produce a number of successful superhero film and television adaptations throughout the 1960s and '70s, including *Batman* (ABC, 1966) and the blockbuster hit, *Superman* (Donner, 1978). It was not until Marvel's corporate restructuring in the mid 1970s that the company began to produce adaptations of similar acclaim, such as *The Incredible Hulk* (CBS, 1977). This suggests that the success of comics companies depended almost entirely on this combination of socio-cultural resonance and a strong industrial support network. Once Marvel developed a corporate structure similar to DC's, Marvel's brand of neurotic, self-aware and self-critical heroism became more popular, reaching not only fringe youth and counter cultural audiences, but mainstream American society as well. Here, the expansion of Marvel's reach was a product of both the

growing counter cultural concerns of the 1960s American national consciousness *and* Marvel's increased commercial visibility within the pop cultural medium of television. For example, while *The Hulk* comics were popular with Marvel's relatively small audience base since its inception in the 1960s, Marvel began actively growing and cultivating this audience through the broader reach of the 1970s TV series at the same time that many more Americans were becoming to confront and work through the social changes of the 1960s. By the late 1960s and early 1970s, events such as the assassinations of President Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Kent State shootings had caused even the most conservative Americans to question the validity and stability of their nation's founding principles. While Stan Lee would later argue that his comics were never intentionally targeted to one specific political or ideological view point, Marvel's comics did seem to emphasize their counter cultural appeal as a means of market differentiation (Lee 45). Much like DC seemed to align the consumption of its comics as a patriotic act during the 1940s and '50s, Marvel too began to reap the benefits of blending social messages with consumerist ideology.

The early success of the Marvel universe has been largely credited to the combined efforts of writer, Stan Lee and artist, Jack Kirby. Together, they created Marvel's first major series, *The Fantastic Four* (November, 1961), which marked the birth of the Marvel universe as we know it today (Lee 9). The series was important because it both mimicked the work of DC, Marvel's main rival, and it also sparked a revolution in the comics industry. According to legend, during one of their regular golf games, DC publisher Jack Liebowitz informed Marvel's CEO, Martin Goodman, that DC was seeing considerable success with their newest series called *The Justice League of America* (*JLA)*. Rather than follow one superhero, the *JLA* took DC's most popular characters, Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman, and combined them into one ultimate adventure series. By the time their game was over, Goodman left the golf course with the intention of starting his own super-series (Daniels, *Fabulous Decades* 84). The following day, Goodman approached Lee and instructed him to create a series just like *The Justice League*, the result of which was *The Fantastic Four*. Even though the initial conception of Marvel's series was designed to mimic the competition, Stan Lee added one important twist: in an industry where heroic gimmicks and super powers were usually viewed as the keys to success, Lee took a revolutionary approach that made characterization the focus of the story (Daniels, *Fabulous Decades* 85). As a result, the heroes in *The Fantastic Four* all had incredibly well-developed

personalities and, more importantly, personality flaws. For example, Reed Richards may have been Mr. Fantastic, but he was also very boring and overly intellectual, which caused him to be severely alienated from other people. Sue Storm, or The Invisible Girl, was a conflicted maternal figure for her younger brother Johnny. In the early 1960s, she was designed to be little more than a love interest for the leading male hero; however, as she gained command of her powers, particularly her ability to manipulate energy force fields, Sue took on a more important role within the team. Although she did not officially become The Invisible Woman until *Fantastic Four # 284* (November, 1985), Sue was given much more agency throughout the mid-to-late 1960s. This in-depth approach to storytelling created heroes that were decidedly more realistic and human than their counterparts at DC. As the 1960s wore on, the self-reflexive cultural commentary of Marvel's heroes gradually became popular with the American youth audience. For example, Reed Richards' obsessions with nuclear physics and military technology provided a space for audiences to interrogate Cold War nuclear anxieties and America's involvement in Vietnam. This is especially apparent in the villain Dr. Doom, who was initially a contemporary of Reed's in college; they excelled in the same field and pursued the same scientific interests. That one of them turned into an evil villain allowed *The Fantastic Four* to explore the precarious relationship between humanity and the development of technology. However, the full force of Marvel's revolutionary potential was not felt until the mid-to-late '60s, due in part to the regulation imposed by the Comics Code Authority and the continued proliferation of Cold War anxiety throughout much of American society in the early 1960s.

Much of the early 1960s were filled with the same postwar fear and anxiety that characterized the 1950s. Yet in an attempt to create peace by reinforcing 1950s conservative ideology, post-war adults paradoxically gave birth to a generation of children that would spend their youth rebelling against those very ideals (J. Johnson 87). As a result, many socio-cultural texts, including the comic book, continued to reflect the traditional family values of 1950s Cold War conservatism well into the early 1960s. For example, in 1960, DC still dominated the comics market with stories such as "The New Life of Superman," which appeared in *Superman #139* (Aug. 1960). This particular story revolved entirely around Lois' desire to marry Superman, despite his declaration that he must put his duty to the world before love. Stories like these, which clearly emphasized gender conformity and the importance of national security, were a common occurrence in early 1960s comics. It is thus not surprising that in order to compete with

the popular comics of the time, Marvel's early stories, especially those in *The Fantastic Four*, were framed in the context of a conservative, family-oriented agenda. Even with their elaborately neurotic back stories, the members of The Fantastic Four could also be seen to represent a nuclear family. For example, as Robert Genter argues, Reed and Sue often acted as paternal and maternal figures to the teenage and infantile sensibilities of Jonny "The Human Torch" Storm and Ben "The Thing" Grimm (957). In these early stories, evil could only be vanquished when the group came together, put their squabbling and differences aside, and worked for the common good as a family. In this way, Marvel's early stories continued to perpetuate the conservative post-war mentality by reaffirming the ideological importance of the nuclear family and its role in protecting America from foreign threats (Genter 939). However, as the 1960s continued, and counter cultural issues such as the anti-war, free speech and pop art movements gradually took hold, Marvel began creating comics that challenged the status quo through their daringly vibrant color palettes and college level writing, which featured an expanded vocabulary and complex sentence structures. By writing comic stories on two levels, Lee satisfied Goodman's desire to remain competitive by producing simple stories that were safe and appealed to children. However, the characters' complicated histories also allowed Lee to showcase their internal struggles to reconcile their superior abilities with their self doubt. This provided older audiences with critical satire and insight into their own real-world struggles. By 1963, Lee had introduced the comic world to the tales of *Spider-Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and *Iron Man*, which were filled with tenuous explorations of new scientific frontiers and Cold War nuclear anxieties tempered by alliterative, self-reflexive humor that spoke to a broad range of emergent counter cultural audiences. For example, from his inception in 1963, *Iron Man*'s Tony Stark was initially conceived to stand in stark opposition to the spirit of Marvel's other heroes. In the height of the Cold War, Stan Lee presented America's disillusioned youth with a playboy billionaire industrialist and weapons manufacturer (Lee 46). However, both Stark and *Iron Man* quickly gained favor with American readers due to Stark's notoriously conflicted role as both weapons manufacturer and national hero, and his playboy persona was often an act he used to hide the fact that he struggled with his own masculinity when he wasn't gallivanting as Iron Man. The *Iron Man* comics of the 1960s similarly trace the rise of the anti-war movement in America. For example, as American opposition to the Vietnam War began to intensify, Tony Stark began to shed his staunchly conservative, anti-communist views, and his internal conflict

between his role as hero and military industrialist came to the foreground. Finally, all of these issues came to a head in a 1979 storyline that fully explored Stark's descent into madness and his battle with alcoholism which were a result of his inner struggles about his views on war, and his dual roles of perpetuating and preventing it (Daniels, *Fabulous Decades* 101).

Despite Marvel's growing popularity with the counter cultural youth audiences of the 1960s, it is important to note that there were a number of social and industrial factors that continued to work against their burgeoning success. First, while Marvel revolutionized the superhero narrative, through its focus on three-dimensional hero characterizations, the majority of the American comic book audience continued to valorize the conventional conservative superhero as defined by DC's Superman. Second, even though the majority of Marvel's characters were interpreted as counter cultural heroes by fringe audiences in the 1960s, Marvel did not actively begin targeting such audiences until the mid-to-late 1970s. As a result of these influences, Marvel's comic narratives continued to oscillate between developing their 'counter cultural' brand of heroism and attempting to create more universal narratives that would reach a broader audience. Marvel's struggle was also partly due to the fact that many counter cultural issues, civil rights demonstrations and anti-war protests did not fully make their mark on the mainstream American national consciousness until the mid-to-late 1960s. For example, Martin Luther King Jr's famous "I have a dream" speech, which is largely considered the defining moment of the civil rights movement, didn't take place until August 1963 (Grant xi). In many ways, Marvel's early 1960s emphasis on constantly shifting, self-critical character arcs anticipated America's counter cultural developments throughout the late 1960s and '70s. However, it was not until the late 1960s and early 1970s that Marvel's comics arguably began to actively target these audiences, and it was later still that Marvel began targeting these audiences through other media. For example, the *X-Men* comics in 1963 worked to address issues of inequality through their somewhat vague "us versus them" narrative structures. Heroes like The X-Men were viewed positively because they fought against Magneto and his group of mutants who used their powers to rule humanity; however, while such narratives can invite critical readings of race, gender and even sexual inequality, they are also more akin to the archetypal struggles of good versus evil. Arguably, these stories could also be read as Marvel's attempt to *limit* their counter cultural specificity in an attempt to reach a broader fan base. It was only in 1973 that Marvel began actively addressing issues of *racial* inequality, through titles like *Jungle Action*, which tellingly

featured a hero named Black Panther. While the comic does address the lack of African-American superheroes, the comic's troubling stereotypical associations with jungle imagery and primitive behavior doesn't completely overcome the problem of racial inequality. Marvel's commitment to targeting the counter cultural audience becomes further complicated considering that such titles never reached the same popularity as Marvel's other heroes and The Black Panther's first appearance in the Marvel universe was in *Fantastic Four #52* (July, 1966), as a villain as opposed to a hero (Lindsey 33). It was not until the late 1970s that Marvel fully began to exploit its counter cultural resonance as means of developing a cohesive corporate structure and cultivating its own readership base. For example, even though *Iron Man* was popular with youth audiences from its inception in the 1960s and subtle explorations of ideological juxtaposition, the series still waited until 1979 to bring Tony Stark's ideological struggles to the foreground.

Other factors that hampered Marvel's success during this early period included Marvel's early distribution deal with DC's Independent News Company. In order to stay afloat financially during the 1950s, Goodman struck a deal with the DC owned distributor that allowed Marvel to keep eight of its titles in circulation, but this deal effectively limited Marvel's access within the comics industry ever since (Craft and Quick 481). This arrangement remained in place until 1968, when Goodman sold Marvel to Cadence Industries, which had its own subsidiary distribution company (Daniels, *Fabulous Decades* 139). Finally, another major factor that inhibited the widespread cultural impact of Marvel's comics was that, under Goodman's leadership, the company was more concerned with following the industrial trends, and Goodman often ordered the creation of more titles as a means of artificially inflating Marvel's circulation numbers (S. Howe 33). Marvel also lacked a well established corporate support system that would have enabled them to mass-market their properties across a variety of multimedia revenue streams. Instead, DC maintained its cultural dominance by exploiting its own well established corporate network. In response to the growing popularity of Marvel in the mid-to-late 1960s, DC maximized the cultural prominence of its own characters through the *Batman* TV series, which ran from 1966-68 on ABC and sparked a nation-wide craze of 'Bat-mania' (Hartley 1).

After the enactment of the CCA in the 1950s, virtually every comic producer shifted their content away from the dark crime stories of the 1930s and '40s towards more family friendly

fare; DC's *Batman* was no exception. Much like the company had done with Superman, Batman similarly shed his vigilante roots to become a champion of institutionalized justice and an upstanding role model for his young ward, Robin. The socio-cultural demands of the CCA were also reinforced by DC's corporate structure as editor Irwin Donenfeld instructed his writers to produce stories with a silly science-fiction slant (Sanderson 31). As a result, stories such as "The Riddle-less Robberies of the Riddler" and other *Batman* comics produced in the early 1960s became fodder for the 1966 ABC TV series. The widespread popularity of the *Batman* TV series was important for two main reasons. First, it worked to suppress the competition of Marvel, which was not yet able to produce any successful adaptations of its own; it was an excellent example of how DC's vertically integrated corporate structure bolstered its success. Partnering with ABC and the subsequent proliferation of Bat-mania proved to be DC's first step towards dominating the market through cross promotional advertising and corporate synergy. Second, the *Batman* TV series epitomized the cultural turmoil of 1960s America as it essentially repackaged DC's aging conservative heroes in the guise of 1960s youth movements such as mod culture, Pop Art and an ironic use of deliberate camp.[10] Even before it became a subsidiary of Warner Bros. or Time Inc., DC was intent on exploiting the multimedia potential of its properties. For example, in its first year, DC's licensing deals for *Batman* exceeded $75 million, and produced over 500 products emblazoned with the black and yellow bat-insignia (Hartley 1). Even though the show's pilot episode "drew some of the worst scores in the history of TV pilot testing," ABC also aggressively promoted the show through hourly announcements during its other youth-oriented television programs. They even managed to attract the attention of older, more mainstream audiences by having sky writers announce the impending arrival of the Caped Crusader in the sky above the Rose Bowl football game ("Holy Flypaper" 68). As a result of these efforts, young Americans everywhere flooded to the stores, eager to participate in what was sure to be a pop culture phenomenon. The fact that the show's cross-promotional marketing campaigns generated enough audience and fan interest, despite the show's initial low ratings and the recent decline in *Batman*'s popularity in comics, proved that DC's advantage clearly lay in the strength of their corporate structure and synergistic practices. With a circulation average of

[10]According to Sontag, deliberate camp purposely makes use of fantastic narratives , corny dialogue and wooden acting (Sontag 101). While she argues that deliberate camp is often less satisfying than naïve camp, or unintentional uses of a camp aesthetic, many pop art critics and enthusiasts disagree. Instead, they argue that the audiences' participation in decoding a camp text such as *Batman* is the source of its enjoyment.

898,470 issues, *Batman* became the best-selling comic title of 1966 (ComiChron.com). Compared to the ninth place ranking it held the previous year, it was clear that the *Batman* TV series had also revitalized the comic.

Undoubtedly, *Batman*'s marketing campaign had made it an unprecedented commercial success, yet at the same time, the show also sparked a rather polarized debate regarding the show's use of Pop Art and camp aesthetics. On the one hand, some audiences and critics credited the show's producer, Bill Dozier, with employing these two popular counter cultural aesthetics in a way that would appeal to all audiences; kids watched it in earnest, while hip teens and grownups saw *Batman* as a tongue-in-chic parody of pop culture (Morrison 105). On the other hand, there were also those who viewed the show's corny dialogue and wooden acting as an attempt to ape the style of Marvel's self-aware narratives and flashy visual style; however, as Sean Howe argues, *Batman* was often criticized as "Marvel gone wrong, with only Stan Lee's puns and none of his heart…only arch idiot-savant modishness" (69). In reality, *Batman*'s use of camp arguably lays somewhere between these two extremes. As Michael Hamersky argues, *Batman*'s 'played-for-straight' approach to the outlandish comic book derived sequences was in fact a valiant effort to satirize the staunch conservative values typically expressed by DC's heroes (175). However, these efforts were often complicated and even undermined by the show's condescending treatment of Robin, who was arguably a stand-in for broader youth audiences. While children may have taken *Batman*'s overly serious delivery of moral messages to heart, older youth audiences may have been more offended than entertained. For example, throughout the series, Batman continually reminded Robin of the importance of following governmental authority. In one episode from 1967, for example, Batman explained that The Constitution was the cornerstone of the nation and they must abide by it. On the one hand, the exaggerated seriousness of this statement could have been interpreted as an ironic 'wink' to the counter cultural audiences who were well aware of the constitutional abuses that occurred during the race riots and military protests that were erupting all across the nation at the same time the episode aired. However, such critical readings were often thwarted by the show's refusal to depict Robin with the agency that characterized many members of 1960s counter cultural youth movements. Instead, Robin's role in the series was limited to the boyish sidekick, often in need of saving and protecting, and who seemed to blindly abide by Batman's conservative platitudes. Furthermore, when the series finally made direct references to counter cultural elements such as the hippie

movement and the various student riots, it still failed to address them on their own terms. Instead, the show became a "caricature of what was actually happening during the time period… [or] a window into how the youth of the period were thought of by their elders" (Hamersky 187). For example, the mods and hippies that appeared throughout *Batman* were often depicted as waifish simpletons that were easily brainwashed into participating in criminal activities. Thus, instead of directly fostering a counter cultural appeal, the *Batman* TV series was more likely a product of the cultural conservatism that was perpetuated by the entertainment industry.

These depictions of counter cultural movements were further complicated by Dozier's and DC's own attempts to distance themselves from and disavow the more problematic aspects of the show's use of camp, especially the queer connotations that permeated the *Batman* comics and TV series. For example, throughout *Batman*'s promotional interviews, Dozier notoriously emphasized the show's morally instructive purposes. He argued that *Batman* was designed to remind people that they ought to have respect for authority. In response to critics that attempted to 'over-analyze' *Batman's* over-the-top performances, Dozier also argued that the show was never intended to "lend itself to probing analysis" (Schuer G2) and he hated the show's association with camp on the basis that it sounded "so faggy" (Benshoff 156). These statements, which openly attempted to curtail progressive readings of the show, were also compounded by the fact that DC also made changes to the *Batman* comic series in order to defuse rumors of Batman's ambiguous sexual orientation. For example, after ABC introduced Aunt Harriet in the show to alleviate the homosexual tension of Batman and Robin living together, the character soon appeared in the comics as well. Likewise, other female characters such as Batgirl and Catwoman were later developed as Batman's love interests (Benshoff 155). This later inclusion of sexualized female characters also problematized the show's counter cultural potential by reinforcing conservative gender stereotypes. For example, Batgirl was hardly an empowered female figure enlightened by 'Women's Lib.' Instead, her femininity was often used a source of her ineffectual heroism, as she frequently let criminals get away. Taken together, the manipulations of the show and comic were overt attempts to curtail the many counter cultural readings of *Batman*, which went against the Pop Art movement's use of camp as a means of interrogating dominant Western ideologies. Ultimately, *Batman*'s inability to connect with 1960s counter cultural audiences was further emphasized by the show's relatively short three season run from 1966-68. Just as the show's initial cross-promotional campaigns generated

enough excitement to reinvigorate the sales of *Batman* comics, sales began to drop off again by the end of the series, suggesting that the appeal of *Batman* had more to do with DC's aggressive marketing strategies than with *Batman's* present-day cultural resonance. For example, the decline in *Batman'*s popularity also coincided with the increase in counter cultural protests and conflicts. By the late 1960s, the television had brought the conflicts of Vietnam into virtually every home in the US, prominent civil rights activists had been assassinated, and *Batman*'s high camp antics just weren't funny or clever any more (Morrison 334). In the aftermath of such atrocities, both America and the comics industry needed to develop more productive strategies of overt socio-cultural address.

As America prepared to enter the next decade that further marked the decline of a conservative consensus, Marvel's character-driven narratives finally began to take an industrial lead, indicating a preference for more critically self-aware heroes among the majority of American comic book audiences.[11] DC, which had once viewed Marvel as an insignificant threat, began to take notice of this increased competition and responded by commissioning more 'serious' versions of its own heroic narratives. For example, after audiences lost interest in the campy *Batman* of the 1960s, writer Dennis O'Neil and artist Neal Adams deliberately distanced The Caped Crusader from the TV show and returned him to his 1930s pulp roots as "a grim avenger of the night" in *Detective Comics #395* (January, 1970) (Wright 233). While DC's more well-established corporate structure may have stifled Marvel's success in the 1960s, the '70s also ushered in a new era of corporate stability for Marvel, particularly after Goodman sold the company in 1969. By 1975, Marvel's new president, Jim Galton, realized that the company had not been exploiting its multimedia potential and began talking with a variety of film producers, television networks and animation studios in an attempt to push Marvel further into the adaptation business (Daniels, *Fabulous Decades* 181). As the 1970s progressed, corporate synergy became the watchwords of the Hollywood film industry that was increasingly driven by the blockbuster successes of films like *Jaws* (Spielberg, 1975) and *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977). As a result, the success of both Marvel and DC would depend on their ability to incorporate the blockbuster formula of big budget, star-driven adaptations with their pre-existing brands of justice and heroism.

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[11] By 1968, Marvel's comic circulation reportedly reached over 50 million copies annually (Daniels, *Fabulous Decades* 139).

Throughout the 1960s, Marvel had slowly gained popularity with counter cultural audiences through its brand of conflicted, unsure and cripplingly self-aware heroes. After breaking free of its old restrictive distribution deals with DC, Marvel had finally become the industry leader in the comic book market. By the 1970s, Marvel had revolutionized the comic world and made a significant impression on the broader American national consciousness. Throughout this period, Marvel produced stories that challenged the principles of the outdated Comics Code and explored the turmoil of 1970s America. For example, in 1971, Marvel produced Issues #96-98 of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, a three-part story about the dangers of drug addiction. Despite the story's important social message, these issues were rejected by the CCA, which prohibited any mention of drugs, irrespective of its purpose (Daniels, *Fabulous Decades* 152). As a result, Marvel released these issues without The Code's seal of approval, effectively ending the CCA's rigid control over the industry. Now, unlike the comics of the 1950s, publications that did not bear the seal were not at as big of a risk of failure. In fact, cultural texts that openly addressed controversial socio-cultural issues such as drugs, sex, race, sexuality and violence, became much more popular with mainstream audiences in the 1970s. For example, in Hollywood, the 1970s gave rise to films such as *M*A*S*H* (Altman, 1970), *Deer Hunter* (Cimino, 1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola, 1979), which were some of the first films to openly address America's discontent with the involvement in Vietnam.[12] With the increased competition created by Marvel, the comics industry was also experiencing similar critical shifts in the 1970s. DC attempted to make its heroes more relatable to the pessimistic and disillusioned audiences of the 1970s by removing some of Superman's godlike powers, making him more human and vulnerable. For example *Superman*'s "Sandman Saga," published in 1971, famously removed Superman's vulnerability to Kryptonite and reduced his godlike powers by 1/3 in an attempt to make the writers create new, more Earth-based obstacles for him to overcome. Without his powers, Superman relied more on his wits and performed more realistic physical feats with the strength of an average man. However, these changes did not last long and Superman regained most of his abilities shortly after the story arc concluded in 1971. This short-lived renaissance suggested that DC was unsure of how to redefine itself in this era of socio-cultural change and also showed how DC's classical brand of divine interventionist heroism was struggling to

[12] The gradual erosion of Hollywood's Production Code Administration throughout the 1960s and its eventual replacement in favor of a ratings system in November of 1968 also led to the increased visibility of films and material once thought to be too controversial (Grant 18).

compete with the new heroes being created by Marvel. Meanwhile, Marvel proved to be somewhat more adept at reworking even the most conservative icons in its character bank to provide a meaningful socio-political commentary about America's place in society during the 1970s. For example, *Captain America #153-56* (1972) revived Captain America of the 1950s in order to interrogate the "overly aggressive and over confident" politics of post-war America that led to the turmoil of the 1960s and '70s (J. Johnson 112). In these issues, Steve Rogers of the 1970s fought against the original Cap from the 1950s in order to demonstrate how America's post-war fears had turned them into a racist and xenophobic nation. Before defeating Captain America, Steve Rogers poignantly observed: "I've never fought the evil side of my own nature. And that's what he is, after all…In a very real way, I'm responsible for all the evil he's done" (*Captain America # 156* Dec. 1972). Here, Steve Rogers openly critiqued the values that he once held back in the 1940s and '50s and, upon reflection, he was no longer as self-assured in the superiority of his country and its ideals. Finally, in 1974, Captain America joined the growing number of disenfranchised citizens who had lost faith in the core values of America, and he eventually decided to renounce his citizenship and fight crime independently of the "American Way"—a decision that would take DC's Superman an additional thirty years to reach.[13] Even though both Marvel and DC's characters expressed a great deal of ambivalence during the transitional period of the 1970s, Marvel's heroes reveled in the opportunity to engage in complex social critique, whereas DC's remained unfalteringly patriotic, determined to re-instill the values of 1950s America that had long since failed to resonate with 1970s audiences.

Although Marvel dominated the comics market throughout the 1970s, they had yet to challenge the overall success of DC, whose franchise properties such as *Batman* and *Superman* generated millions of dollars in other entertainment media markets. DC's ability to produce a number of successful film and television adaptations proved to be one of its greatest advantages over Marvel, especially since Marvel had only recently began to explore the multimedia potential of its characters. Prior to the 1970s, the only Marvel-based hero to appear in a live-action adaptation was Captain America, during the film serial boom of the 1940s;[14] however, these adaptations bore very little resemblance to their original texts and Marvel (or Timely as it was

[13] In *Action Comics #900* (April 2011), Superman similarly renounced his American citizenship as a result of his dismay with America's foreign policy in Iran.

[14] While *The Return of Captain America* appeared in 1953, it was a re-release of the same Republic serial from 1944.

then known) saw very little profit due to the haphazard nature of the fledgling trademark and licensing industry (Nelton 70). As the Hollywood film industry shifted towards the blockbuster formula in the mid-to-late 1970s, the overall success of both Marvel and DC would be tested through their ability to compete in such a profit driven industry. One of Marvel's first major forays into the adaptation market was its comic adaptation of 1977's blockbuster, *Star Wars*. *Star Wars* was a watershed moment in the history of product licensing; it was the first example of how licensing plans could be laid out well in advance of the property's release as a part of a larger marketing campaign (Nelton 71). This deal helped announce Marvel's presence in the corporate marketing scene, which further enabled its other licensing deals with CBS and their production of *The Incredible Hulk* TV series (1977-1982).

The success of the *Hulk* TV series was important for two key reasons: First, it was an important corporate milestone for Marvel, which had long been stifled by previous years of corporate management that did not pursue multimedia outlets. Marvel's heroes established a much broader cultural reach after the company was sold in 1968 and began remodeling its corporate structure in the 1970s. This further suggests that Marvel's success varied in direct proportion to the strength of its corporate structure. Second, the show's overwhelmingly positive critical reception reinforced the idea that there was something appealing in the cultural resonance of Marvel's brooding and critically self-aware heroes. These heroes were much more conflicted about their "super-ness," which seemed to strike a chord with audiences that ceased to identify with the unquestionable moral superiority of DC's omnipotent demigods. As Paul Weingarted of the *Chicago Tribune* argues, The Hulk, unlike characters that came before him, had no control over his powers and "there was something endearing about the big green brute" who could not communicate his suffering; "he evoked pathos…[and] nobody ever felt sorry for Superman" the way they did for Bruce Banner (A2). Such potentially complex readings of Marvel's heroes were available in both *The Hulk* comics from the 1960s and were later translated to the show in 1977. For example, in the comic books, Bruce Banner's exposure to gamma radiation built on the nuclear anxiety of Cold War culture. In this context, the split personalities of The Hulk and Banner could be used to epitomize the struggle between the purely destructive powers of nuclear-assisted brute force and more liberal approaches that questioned America's hulk-like mentality and favored peaceful, intellectual solutions to conflict. Later such struggles were presented in the TV series and were often read as a critique of America's larger struggle with its

own national identity following the political turmoil of the 1970s, particularly its loss in Vietnam. For example, Banner's struggle to find the reason why he lacked the strength to save his wife from a fatal car accident mirrored the struggle that Americans was faced with after their loss in Vietnam. As Christian Keathley has argued, this loss was "the onset of trauma resulting from a realization of powerlessness in the face of a world whose systems of organization—both moral and political—have broken down" (293). In other words, Banner's inability to save his wife, and America's loss in Vietnam, were manifested in the form of The Hulk, the very figure of trapped, repressed anger with no appropriate outlet. While some critics of the show have argued that the slow pacing and serious tone of the show are what contributed to its perceived boringness, there was an overwhelming amount of critical support for the show that argued the pace and tone were what encouraged a deeper understanding of the series (McNally 27A; Bergling B6).

The widespread cultural appeal of *The Incredible Hulk* was emphasized by its critical praise as well as its consistently high network ratings. For example, even as the show entered its fourth season in 1980, it remained the most popular program it its timeslot (Friedman 28). However, in an expert manipulation of the company's vertically integrated corporate structure, DC did manage to detract from Marvel's TV success by re-commissioning *Superman* into a blockbuster extravaganza. Here, DC's strategy was twofold: On the one hand, DC's revival of *Superman* in 1978 served a larger cultural purpose of distracting audiences from the nation's present day problems. As some cultural historians have argued, the late 1970s were characterized by "a much deeper pessimism about the state of America and its future… [as well as] a growing rejection of recent liberal orthodoxies" (J. Johnson 103). As a result, Superman's return to the big screen re-invigorated a patriotic postwar nostalgia for the Golden Age values that he represented. On the other hand, this cultural nostalgia was further reinforced by *Superman*'s use of the action blockbuster formula in which big-budget advertising played a significant role in a film's success. As a result of this culturally and corporately driven nostalgia, *Superman* became one of the top grossing films of all time (BoxOfficeMojo.com). The debut of *Superman* was arguably the best example of how DC's corporate marketing power helped support the franchise in the wake of the new competition posed by Marvel. The film's critical reception also focused heavily on the marketing and commercial potential of the *Superman* franchise. According to *Screen International*, it was "one of the most formidable promotion campaigns ever launched for

a film," giving *Superman* the same widespread cultural and commercial appeal as previous blockbusters like *Jaws* and *Star Wars* ("Selling Superman" 12). The role of DC's corporate structure was also emphasized by the fact that Warner Bros., which had acquired DC in the late 1960s, enabled *Superman* to be promoted across radio, television and print mediums using a "staggering 6.5 billion messages" ("Selling Superman" 12). The sensational appeal of the film's revolutionary flying special effects sequences and the buzz generated by the film's all-star cast also greatly contributed to the proliferation of the *Superman* franchise. In addition to creating media buzz for the new film, Warner and DC's corporate cross promotion increased the sales of the older *Superman* comics and thousands of other products ranging from badges and bumper stickers to lunch kits and pyjamas. Here, it is important to note that such methods of merchandising were no accident, but were a conscious decision made between the licensing, distribution and production companies, which by this point, were all vertically integrated subsidiaries of DC Entertainment ("Selling Superman" 12). As a result of such aggressive promotion, producer Ilya Salkind capitalized on the commercial success of the *Superman* franchise and was already working on a sequel to the first *Superman* prior to its release in 1978.[15] Even though DC's comic circulation had been significantly outmatched by Marvel throughout the 1970s, DC was able to overshadow Marvel's success through the use of a series of well-developed corporate marketing strategies.

Throughout the 1970s, Marvel began to develop a vertically integrated corporate structure that closely mirrored DC's (Friedman 28). As a result, Marvel produced a number of licensed adaptations including *The Incredible Hulk* and two TV films, *Captain America* and *Captain America II: Death too Soon* (CBS, 1979). While the production of these adaptations was a significant milestone in the overall development of Marvel's corporate structure, their limited success proved that Marvel's corporate expansion ultimately hinged on its ability to exploit its brand of heroism through the blockbuster formula specifically. For example, both *The Incredible Hulk* and *Captain America* adaptations focused heavily on developing the psychology of the characters as opposed to reproducing the action sequences from their original comic texts. While the nuanced psychological development of its characters was one of Marvel's greatest

[15] *Superman*'s end credits participated in generating audience anticipation for the *Superman*'s next installment. While the announcement reads "Next Year, 'Superman II,'" the U.S release of the film was delayed until 1981 due to production and directorial disputes.

strengths in distinguishing itself from DC, they had yet to balance these emotional stories with the increasing appeal of big budget blockbuster action sequences. This was especially true of the early *Captain America* adaptations, which alienated audiences by deviating from Marvel's original *Captain America* comics and relying on low-budget production values. Throughout the 1960s and '70s, Marvel's unique brand of neurotic and self-critical heroism became increasingly popular with American audiences. While their early success in the 1960s was largely limited to countercultural audiences, Marvel finally began to break DC's industrial stranglehold as it developed a corporate structure enabling their culturally resonant heroes to reach a broader audience base. Thus the rise of Marvel throughout the 1960s and '70s proved how their corporate structure greatly impacted their success. As the decades progressed and Marvel and DC continued to compete in an increasingly more equal corporate market, their success would be defined by how well each company was able to showcase their unique brands of justice and heroism through the Hollywood blockbuster formula.

Chapter 4

Marvel Rises, Superman Dies: The Transformation of Comic Book Heroism in the Reagan/Bush Era

Throughout the 1980s and '90s, Marvel's comics were steadily increasing in circulation and fan popularity and had even surpassed DC by the mid 1980s (ComiChron.com). While both DC and Marvel's comics took on a more conservative bent during the 1980s, Marvel's comics were quickly becoming more popular than anything being produced by DC. This was because Marvel was able to incorporate the violence and individualism that was characteristic of the Reagan-era hero with their existing ambiguous approach to heroism, which defied any singular interpretation of conservatism. For example, even though Marvel's heroes remained as violent and individualistic as many of the other popular 1980s action cinema heroes, they were also deeply conflicted about their actions and were often filled with self-doubt. Indeed, such characters worked to critique Reagan-era policies and ideologies as much as they supported them. Despite DC's blockbuster success in film, first with *Superman* (Donner, 1978) and later with *Batman* (Burton, 1989), the company as a whole often struggled to keep its classical forms of heroism relevant as America's understandings of male heroism began to shift in the 1980s and '90s. However, DC still maintained a clear advantage over Marvel in its ability to produce a number of film and television adaptations, which was largely due to their vertically and horizontally integrated corporate structure. There were three main socio-cultural and industrial factors that helped carry DC through the 1980s and 90s: First, 1980s Reagan-era America brought with it a resurgence of conservative values in the wake of the counter cultural and economic turmoil of previous decades. This resurgence of conservatism in America gave rise to the violent and hard-bodied action hero that shared many key characteristics with DC's pre-modern interventionist and individualistic brand of heroism. Second, DC's use of the action blockbuster formula and aggressive cross-promotional merchandising created enough media hype and audience interest to recoup the losses from comic circulation. For example, the aggressive cross-promotion of Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) successfully made up for DC's loss in comic circulation. These efforts were particularly strengthened by the acquisition of Warner and DC by Time Inc. in 1989, making them a part of one of the largest telecom companies in the world. Finally, even though

Marvel's comics were selling more than DC's, they were also experiencing a great deal of corporate upheaval during this period and DC, thus, faced little to no competition from Marvel in the realm of comic adaptations. Taken together, these factors helped to keep DC afloat until their formula finally began to falter in the mid-to-late '90s. As the 1990s progressed, it became clear that corporate support and reliance on the blockbuster formula alone would not be enough to sustain DC's dying brand of conservative interventionist heroism as it increasingly conflicted with the new, more "sensitive" understanding of masculinity emerging in the 1990s. Indeed, the decline of DC's box-office returns and comic circulation during the 1990s suggests that the Reaganite values and Cold War politics inherent in DC's characters and narrative structures were increasingly at odds with an American society that had begun to question the validity of such beliefs.

During the 1980s, Warner Bros and DC attempted to revamp the images of Superman and Batman into representations of the hard-bodied and violently individualistic hero of Reagan-era America (Jeffords 24). Throughout the *Superman* comics and films, DC attempted to transition The Man of Steel from the innocent All-American hero of the 1950s to a more modern, violent man of action that was typical of 1980s action cinema. Similarly, the first installment of the *Batman* film series was a much darker and more serious portrayal of The Dark Knight as he fought against a decadent and corrupt society. However, for both Superman and Batman, these changes were short-lived. From the late 1980s to 90s, DC began to suffer from the lack of a unified voice and struggled to redefine their brand of heroism in the aftermath of the 1980s Cold War. As a result, their flagship characters appeared equally confused as to what kind of hero they were supposed to be. Throughout *Superman II-IV* (1980-87), Superman oscillated between his 1950s and newfound 1980s persona before finally reverting back to his traditional, and less violent understandings of conservatism. Similarly, with each subsequent installment of the *Batman* series, Batman became less violent and increasingly resembled his camped-up Comics Code era counterpart.

Much like the return to traditional family values experienced by much of American society during the post WWII era, 1980s America similarly experienced a nostalgic longing to return to "simpler" times in the wake of the counter cultural turmoil of the previous decades; however, this new era of conservatism also brought a renewed interested in interventionist military

strength and physical violence or aggression. After events such as the conflict surrounding the US's involvement in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal, many Americans struggled with their loss of national pride; they "had grown weary of the hardships and shame associated with the 1970s and wanted to feel good about themselves and their country again" (J. J. Johnson 128). By the time president Ronald Reagan took office in 1981, it seemed as though conservative America's prayers were answered. Reagan-era policies, which were often, following Nixon, attempts at undoing the liberal advances of the New Deal era, promised to restore America to its former glory politically and economically (J. Johnson 128). Throughout his presidency, Reagan extolled the values of the private sector over government for improving the economy and encouraged Americans to be self-interested in order to promote the collective good. Even though the economy was still down and unemployment rates remained high during the 1980s, Reagan maintained a sunny disposition and constantly declared that things were getting better, reassuring Americans of their cultural and political superiority (Jeffords 3). Drawing upon his background in acting, one of Reagan's greatest strengths was his "ability to substitute a cinematic notion of America for a material one" and to manipulate America's historical narrative to fit his desired superior outlook (Nadel 84). Reagan-era revisionism tried to rewrite history while re-instilling the importance of conservative ideologies and American exceptionalism; his success also depended on a collective cultural amnesia.

With films the *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones* and *Rambo* series, 1980s blockbuster action cinema was characterized by films that promoted a nostalgia for the values of the 1950s and a disavowal of the cultural revolutions of the 1960s and '70s (Nadel 96). As Susan Jeffords notes, Reagan-era policies were concerned with promoting the image of the American citizen and nation as a strong, powerful and resilient "hard body." Unlike the physically weak and soft bodies that had ostensibly produced the national turmoil of the previous decades, the "invincible masculine body became the linchpin of the Reagan imaginary" (Jeffords 25). America's desire to overcome or forget the shame and failure of the 1960s and '70s was achieved through its identification with the collective symbol of these hard bodies, especially through their representation in Hollywood cinema. For example, films such as *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (Cosmatos, 1985) and *Commando* (Lester, 1985) starring Stallone and Schwarzenegger, respectively, provided American audiences with uncomplicated action figures of immense physical prowess whose acts of heroism were achieved primarily through violence. The individualistic and interventionist

mentality projected and encouraged by the Reagan-era also seemed to be well aligned with the mentality of the comic book superhero, and both Marvel and DC's comics adopted their models of heroism to appeal to the ultra-violent conservatism of the 1980s. Critically acclaimed writers such as Alan Moore, Frank Miller and Grant Morrison, for example, attempted to re-write the histories of some of Marvel and DC's flagship characters into darker, more violently interventionist versions of themselves. Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* (1986) emphasized the god-like interventionism and superiority of DC's underlying character structure by returning Batman to his vigilante outsider roots, akin to the cowboy figure fighting against a crumbling, morally bankrupt city. Miller also worked on the *Daredevil* title for Marvel comics in the early to mid 1980s, in which he emphasized the violent and vengeful, yet importantly conflicted nature of The Man Without Fear.

The important distinctions between Marvel and DC's brands of justice, character types, and narrative structures become clearer when looking at how each company's original comic books responded to the resurgence of conservatism in the 1980s. Although both companies took on a more conservative bent during the period, Marvel's comics increasingly outsold those of DC. By comparing DC's *Dark Knight* (1986) series with Marvel's 1980s *Daredevil* series, both written by Frank Miller,[16] we can see that while both company's heroes are depicted as physically aggressive vigilantes that must work outside of the law to defend their cities, DC's heroes are largely one-dimensional and leave little room for self-criticism, whereas Marvel's characters are more openly conflicted about their so-called acts of heroism. For example, Miller's Batman was far removed from the clean-cut, polite and physically slight crime fighter of the Comics Code era and the 1960s *Batman* TV series. Instead, this new Batman came to exemplify aspects of the Reagan-era hero. Emphasized by Miller's dark color palette and grittily realistic drawings, Batman's body, while aged and battered, was nevertheless hard-edged and capable of extreme physicality and violence. He was also driven by a nostalgic desire to return to 'simpler' times and to restore Gotham to its former glory. More importantly, this Batman was unwavering and unapologetic in his beliefs and actions. His acts of brutal violence were, in his mind, the only means capable of restoring order. He was convinced of the superiority of his conservative ideals and believed that others, including Superman himself, were not conservative enough and had

[16] Miller was a contributing artist and writer on a number of *Daredevil* comics throughout the 1980s. His last issue was Daredevil #191 (1983), but the comics continued to emulate his distinctive style even after his departure.

become complacent with the liberal changes in society. For example, Batman chastised Superman for being a 'Company Man,' blindly serving the government that Batman viewed to be corrupt and ineffectual. While the *Dark Knight* storyline was interjected with media reports that disavowed the violent means of Batman's extremism, there was still an overwhelmingly conservative sympathy that ran throughout the book. For example, even though Batman was supposedly killed, his actions remained an important symbol of the old ideals he served, and by the end of the book, he was training Robin and the youth of America to take up his vigilante cause in a final declaration of the resilience of conservative American ideology. This darker, harder, more outspoken Batman helped to solidify the appeal of the Reagan-era hero to the American youth audience that was looking for a new symbol of order and stability in the wake of the social and political upheaval of previous decades.

DC's early penchant for aggressive and unapologetic conservatism was also evident in the reception of other *Batman* comics that attempted to continue Miller's darkly violent style while also trying to offer a more direct critique of American politics. For example, Grant Morrison's *Arkham Asylum* (1989) was actually criticized by fans of DC's traditional god-like heroes for making Batman more introspective and psychologically damaged. In *Asylum*, Batman is forced to go to the asylum to confront The Joker, and he admits that while Batman is not afraid of anything, Bruce Wayne is. He is afraid that he is just as crazy as The Joker and, unlike the Batman of *Dark Knight*, this Batman has begun to question the rationality of his actions. Another key difference that led to the novel's mixed reception by fans was the use of violence throughout *Arkham Asylum*. In the *Dark Knight* series, the hero was the primary perpetrator of violent acts as a means of restoring order. In Morrison's *Arkham Asylum*, however, the focus shifted to emphasize the violent tendencies of the Arkham inmates that usually targeted innocent victims such as women and children. As a result of this shift in the representation of violence, fans of DC's traditional character model, as well as fans of the Reagan-era heroism perpetuated throughout the decade, lacked a "hero" to look up to in the traditional sense. Even the end of the story was somewhat anti-climactic and anti-heroic as Batman agreed to let Two-Face flip a coin to decide whether he lives or dies, which went against the god-like interventionism of DC's heroes. Morrison's *Arkham Asylum*, along with other important graphic novels produced during the mid-to-late 1980s, such as Alan Moore's *Watchmen* and his work on *Superman*, serve as important examples of how a few creative minds were attempting to re-direct DC's brand of

heroism throughout the period. However, such gritty, introspective and openly ambiguous narratives proved to be the exception to the rule of DC's corporate influenced affinity for Reagan-era hard-bodied heroes and conservative ideology. Even Miller's *Dark Knight* series, which was arguably the most representative of the ultra-conservative violent hero in the 1980s, was a surprisingly short-lived series.

Ultimately, the work of creators like Miller, Moore and Morrison can be read as an example of how DC continued to struggle to find a coherent brand near the end of the 1980s and into the 1990s. Despite the initial success of Miller's *Dark Knight* for example, *Batman*'s total circulation remained unsteady, reaching a low of 89,217 in 1985, before returning to 193,000 in 1987 (ComiChron.com). Throughout this period, DC attempted to use these select titles and critically acclaimed freelance artists as a means of challenging Marvel's success in comics, yet the company inevitably preferred to stay well within the comforts of its Comics Code era, morality driven, conservative stories. For example, despite Miller's reworking of Batman's image in favor of a gritty, hard-bodied older man, the majority of *Batman* issues continued to use the more clean-cut, kid-friendly, image closer to that of the 1960s *Batman* cartoons. These comics also reduced the level of gore in the violence they depicted and conveniently left out the more controversial elements of Miller's story, such as Robin's ambiguous sexuality. Tellingly, Warner Bros. and DC also postponed the release of *Arkham Asylum* so that the book's more critical and introspective slant, which included an openly gay Joker and a schizophrenic Batman, would not negatively impact sales of Tim Burton's upcoming film adaptation of *Batman* in 1989 (Shone 23). For the 1980s Reagan-era audience, Joker's queerness could of course be viewed as one of the dangerous repercussions of 1960s counter cultural liberalism, a sign of the moral corruption and decadence that Burton's *Batman* (and other 1980s action heroes) fought to correct. And yet, while DC's texts such as Miller's *Dark Knight* and Morrison's *Arkham Asylum* present queerly coded characteristics in both their villains and heroes, DC's *Batman* sought to suppress such queer connotations, at least within the construction of the hero. Much like the producers of the *Batman* TV series and comics introduced new female characters to disavow homosexual tension between Batman and Robin, Kim Basinger's Vicki Vale was used to dispel suggestions of Batman's queer sexuality in Tim Burton's film. More troublingly however, were the ways in which many of the *Batman* adaptations continued to queerly code their villains. For example, before his transformation into the Joker, Jack Nicholson's character was presented as a

suave mobster virile enough to have an affair with his boss's girlfriend. After his transformation, however, Joker's costume, make up and flamboyant antics re-assert his queerness. Similar examples of queering villainy were apparent in the *Batman* TV series as well, especially in the performances of Frank Gorshin as The Riddler and Liberace's various guest appearances. While Batman's queerness was almost always a site of contention in these mainstream adaptations, associating queerness and villainy was not as much of a problem. Choosing which queer elements to suppress and which to emphasize in its mainstream adaptations suggested that DC was struggling with the possibility of transitioning its conventionally masculine heroes into the next decade, which held increasingly more complex understandings of what it meant to be a "real man" in the 1990s.

If DC's heroes generally continued to be "symbols of American exceptionalism" that allowed "readers to bask in the nation's pre-eminence," Marvel's heroes used the resurgence of conservatism to more openly question its implications in society (J. Johnson 129). As Marvel creator Stan Lee explained, one of the reasons for Marvel's decidedly liberal slant during the mid-to-late 1960s was due to his staff of "young, idealistic and passionately liberal" writers and artists (Lee 45). This current of liberalism that ran through much of Marvel's work, often worked to counter-balance or complicate the conservative violence that they adopted as a result of the influence of 1980s Reagan-era heroism. While Lee claimed that they never intended Marvel's comics to be forcefully political or one-sided, they did make a conscious effort to "include every shade and facet of the political spectrum" throughout their stories (Lee 45). As a result of this effort, Marvel produced a number of fraught, neurotically introspective and even anti-heroic characters, while still providing readers with violent and hard bodied heroes. For example, Daredevil's alter ego, Matt Murdock, was more openly conflicted about his duties as Daredevil. He did not see it as something he wanted to do and, unlike Bruce Wayne, his inner monologues were filled with self doubt as he often struggled to reconcile his actions as Daredevil with his responsibility as an attorney to uphold the justice system—how ever flawed it may be. Other instances of Marvel's attitude towards individualism and acts of violent aggression can be seen in the fight between Daredevil and his nemeses Kingpin and Bullseye. In *Daredevil # 172* (1981), Daredevil recounted a fight he had with Bullseye. After beating him, Daredevil openly wrestled with the idea of leaving Bullseye on the train tracks to die violently once and for all. Instead, Daredevil saved his life, only to have Bullseye continue to kill. On the one hand, this

act of mercy was shown to be a mistake; Daredevil should have killed him in order to protect the city. On the other hand, his decision shows how Marvel's heroes often struggled to reconcile their need for vengeance and justice with their duty to protect social order. This point is emphasized again at the end of the issue, when Kingpin gives Daredevil the legal evidence he needs to arrest a majority of the city's gang members. Kingpin tells Daredevil that he must think of the greater social good before recklessly attacking him. Either he takes the files and lets Kingpin go for now, or he attempts to kill him and risks losing everything. In the end, Daredevil admits he has no choice and walks away from Kingpin in a bittersweet conclusion.

While the *Daredevil* series that ran throughout the mid-1980s anticipated the kind of interventionist and hard-bodied violence that would later characterize Reagan-era heroism, the success of Marvel over DC in this period can also be linked to the way Marvel's comics blended these themes with its pre-existing brand of angst-filled, self conscious heroism. It is also important to note that while Marvel's violence maintained a Reagan-era focus on the physicality of the hard male body, it was also typically bloodless violence, unlike the work found in Miller's *Dark Knight*. This was primarily because Marvel owner Martin Goodman was worried about alienating audiences, particularly children, with stories that were too complex or violent. In response to the pressure from Goodman, Lee and his writers continued to construct their stories on two levels: "color, costumes and exaggerated action for the kids; science-fiction, satire and sophisticated philosophy" for older audiences (Lee 15). This two-tiered approach, combined with Marvel's self-critical, conflicted political and ideological stance, was yet another key reason why Marvel's comics continued to outsell DC in terms of circulation, capturing over 50% of the overall market share by the early 1990s (ComiChron.com). While both Marvel and DC's comic books shifted to incorporate more conservative ideals and darker, more violent heroes, the success of Marvel's comic book sales indicated that DC's brand of heroism was beginning to struggle to redefine itself throughout the Reagan-era and beyond. However, unlike DC, 1980s-era Marvel lacked the vertically and horizontally integrated corporate structure that enabled DC to proliferate its characters across many different media forms. As a result, even though Marvel was enjoying success on the publishing front, the company "failed to parlay a single one of its titles into a film series" while DC produced at least seven multi-million dollar feature films within the span of about twenty years (Litchtenfeld 254). Throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, the success of DC's *Superman* and *Batman* film adaptations was linked to their effective use of

industrial cross promotion, as well as their manipulation of the action-movie blockbuster formula, which helped align their characters—at least in their representations on film—with the other hard bodied Reagan-era heroes such as Stallone and Schwarzenegger.

In the decade's early years, Warner had maintained a diverse portfolio of companies ranging from Atari video games to various sports teams. However, this diversity led to an overextension of the company's resources. After the video game market crashed in the 1980s, Warner divested itself of many of its subsidiaries and focused solely on entertainment communications including publishing and music recording (Prince 9). Following this drastic corporate overhaul that was implemented between the early to mid 1980s, Warner and DC devoted themselves to producing as many star driven, big budget feature films as possible in order to regain its losses. Thus, virtually every one of Warner and DC's subsequent film adaptations attempted to strictly follow the 1980s blockbuster model of big budget action spectacles that required "heavy up-front spending on marketing as well as production" (Schatz 35). During the 1980s in fact, "film ceased to be primarily a theatrical medium, based in celluloid" (Prince 2). Now more than ever, global merchandising and cross-promotion in the entertainment and communications industry was a key component to any company's success. Even though the circulation of DC's comic books was down during this time, the company made up for it through the hundreds of licenses and over 1200 different product lines that remained in circulation from comic book stores to Bloomingdales (Harmetz 50).

The continuation of the *Superman* film series throughout the 1980s served two important functions: on the one hand, the corporate management, financing and promotion of each sequel demonstrated how both Warner Bros. and DC were able to utilize the 1980s blockbuster formula and capitalize on the franchise's licensing and merchandizing profits, particularly with *Superman I* and *II*. On the other hand, the diminishing critical success and box office returns of *Superman III* and *IV* (1983 and 1987) can be linked to DC's struggle to provide a unified voice or identity for its heroes throughout the Reagan era. For example, throughout the film series, Superman oscillates between various versions of himself, unsure of whether he should represent the conservative ideals of the 1950s or align himself with the other ultra-masculine interventionist heroes of the 1980s. As a result of this struggle, *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* (Furie, 1987) would be the last feature film appearance of The Man of Steel for almost twenty years.

As a demonstration of their belief in the continued commercial success and profitability of the Superman franchise, the Salkinds were already filming *Superman II* (Lester, 1980) during the production of 1978's installment. This meant that they were hoping to create a character that audiences would be invested in to get them back into theatres the following summer. Thus, much like the first film, *Superman II* and all subsequent sequels were aggressively promoted by both Warner Bros. and DC Comics. The Man of Steel appeared on anything from Bazooka gum wrappers to boxes of Sugar Crisp cereal—complete with collectible stickers (Figure 5). As Alex Sutherland of *Screen International* has noted, "Warner's marketing campaign [linked] together a whole network of companies working on advertising, promotion and marketing tie-ins…[and] DC Comics through the Licensing Corporation of America (LCA) [exploited] every conceivable Superman merchandising product" (33). By saturating the market with as much Superman merchandise as possible, Warner and DC ensured that virtually everyone was aware of his existence and going to see him on screen would be a natural step since he was already such an integral part of their everyday lives. In addition to generating such widespread public interest in the *Superman* series, Warner Bros. executives decided to release the sequel at different times world-wide to coincide with each country's varying peak movie-going periods. This calculated move by DC's supporting corporate structure ensured that both Warner and DC would earn back their investment and generate as much profit as possible (Scivally 94).

Fig. 5 Left: Bazooka gum wrapper promoting Superman II (1980)[17] Right: Sugar Crisp cereal box promoting Superman III (1983)[18]

Amidst Warner and DC's widespread commercial success, the overall cultural popularity of their brand of heroism was continually being complicated by DC's lack of a unified vision for one of its most iconic flagship characters. While the *Superman* series remained relatively successful throughout the 1980s, it also began to experience a significant drop in box-office revenues.[19] The decline in both profits and critical reception of these films can be explained by the varying types of heroism that Superman portrays throughout each sequel. As Thomas Schatz has noted, one of the major keys to the success of any blockbuster, particularly the male action picture, was "minimal character complexity or development and by the numbers plotting" (35). However, there seemed to be no such continuity throughout the *Superman* series. While many of the *Superman* films share the similar 1980s fetishistic appeal of the hard male body, there are a number of instances in which this Reagan-era ultra-masculine hero is complicated or undermined. For example, the emphasis on the hardness of Superman's body remains throughout the series; his skin tight suit works as a substitute for the exposed skin and muscles of other '80s-era heroes like Stallone's Rambo and Schwarzenegger's Terminator. However, Superman's potential to become a Reagan-era hero is disturbed in *Superman II*, when Superman gives up his super powers to be with Lois Lane. This particular kind of 1950s heroism, which emphasized the importance of family values, would gradually become outmoded as 1980s cinema began to transition to the ultra-violent cowboy conservatism that would eventually typify the Reagan-era. Exploring Superman's vulnerability produced a hero that was more akin to the countercultural heroes of the 1960s and '70s and did very little to reaffirm the heroic American myth as the majority of 1980s action cinema attempted to do (Arnold C1). By the end of *Superman II*, Clark Kent attempts to redeem himself by picking a fight with a tough guy in a diner, one of the film's only examples of a self-interested act of violence, which is followed by Superman flying the American flag over the White House. This closing sequence suggests an

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[17] Image retrieved from: http://mrpottersfuntimeblog.blogspot.ca/2011/04/topps-superman-2-movie-cards-1980.html
[18] Image retrieved from: http://www.supermaniii.com/siiiweb/siii%20merchandise/Sugar_Crisp_Cereal_Box_Back_Superman_III.html
[19] *Superman II*'s total box office gross was $108,185,706 where as *Superman III* & *IV* only made $59,950,623 and $15,681,020 respectively. (Boxofficemojo.com)

attempt to recuperate the classical American hero mythology; however, it appears to be too little too late. With each new *Superman* sequel, box-office revenues continued to decline and Superman continued to oscillate between a 1950s and 1980s version of himself, suggesting that Americans were beginning to lose faith in DC's Superman because he lacked the uncomplicated, hard-edged violence and self-assuredness they desired.

In 1983, Warner and DC released the third installment of the *Superman* series starring Christopher Reeve and comedian Richard Pryor, which further complicated the company's brand of heroism. Pryor, who was cast only after he expressed his enthusiasm for *Superman II* on the *Tonight Show*, was a major site of contention for fans of both the original *Superman* comic books and films. On the one hand, the casting of Pryor was an excellent example of how the producers continued to exploit the blockbuster formula by using such a stunt to expand audience interest in the film. On the other hand, according to many fans and critics, the slapstick comedy that was present throughout the film resulted in an "appalling sequel that trashed everything that Superman was about for the sake of cheap laughs and a co-starring role for Richard Pryor" (Maltin 1306). The critical failure of *Superman III* can also be linked to its failure to effectively transition Superman into the action-blockbuster hero that was becoming popular in film. For example, throughout classic 1980s action movies like *Rambo: First Blood Part II* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark,* the hero is typified by self-interested, interventionist and hyper masculine violence. In *Superman III*, however, this macho individualism is depicted not by the hero, but by the film's villain, an evil Superman who is shown to be selfish, depressed and destructive. In this film, Clark Kent, the all-American traditionally conservative beacon of truth and justice, defeats this darker version of himself, ultimately declaring DC's preference for old-world 1950s-era conservative values and notions of heroism. In addition to deviating from the traditional 1980s model of the action-hero, this particular action sequence was almost identical to one that played out in the pages of Marvel's *Captain America* a decade earlier, in which modern day Steve Rogers defeated the 1950s Captain America. By recycling this old storyline, it was evident that DC was beginning to feel the pressure to compete with the success of Marvel's comics. However, it is also important to note that while Marvel's storyline *challenged* America's 1950s values, DC seemed more intent on re-instilling them.

By the time *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace* was released in 1987, it was clear that audiences and critics had had enough of Superman's naïve golden age heroics. In this film, Superman's villain is nuclear war and, at the behest of a little boy, he takes it upon himself to destroy the world's supply of nuclear weapons. Superman's solution is to fling all of the missiles into the sun and hold a press conference urging world leaders towards world peace for the betterment of mankind. Such an emphasis on negotiation likely held limited appeal for audiences attuned to the ultra-violent, interventionist and hyper-masculine understanding of 1980s American heroism established in films like *Commando* (Lester, 1985) and *Die Hard* (McTiernan,1988). Unlike the fight sequences in these films, which featured blood-caked men with rippling muscles, the brief fight sequences in *Superman III* resembled the bloodless action sequences of the early Comics Code era. As numerous critics have noted, part of the problem with many of the *Superman* sequels was that they go back and forth between the various representations of Superman (J. Johnson C5A). These disjointed depictions of Superman suggest that Warner and DC were struggling to compete against the increasing popularity of Marvel's comics and were conflicted about how to transition the now seemingly naïve classical hero into the action cinema 1980s. Putting The Man of Steel aside, Warner and DC turned their attention to Batman, whose dark and violent re-imagining in the comic books seemed to offer a more promising adaptation film that might re-capture the 1980s audience.

In the summer of 1989, DC attempted to revive its brand of heroism in the wake of *Superman's* recent box office failure. Once again, the initial success of the first installment of *Batman* can be credited both to Warner and DC's vertically and horizontally integrated corporate structure and aggressive merchandising campaigns as well as to the film's realignment with an extension of the 1980s action-hero blockbuster model. Since director Tim Burton drew much of his inspiration from Miller's *Dark Knight Returns*, *Batman* was a much better example of the Reagan-era emphasis on violence and physicality that was being popularized on film and in comic books (Figure 6). The commercial success of the film was also greatly benefited by the acquisition of Warner Communications (which included DC Comics) by Time Inc., one of the world's largest telecom companies. As a result of this merger, *Batman's* promotional campaign included deals with other powerhouse companies such as Coca-Cola, *Sports Illustrated, People, Time Magazine* and of course many of DC's own comic book publications ("Batman Promo Plans" 60). Much like the hype and market saturation that was created for the release of the first

Superman film, critical reception for Burton's *Batman* indicated that, whether they wanted to or not, audiences were being drawn to theaters by Warner Bros.' "jillion-dollar TV campaign" and other cross promotional merchandising stunts (D. Howe, "Holy Hype" 37).

Fig. 6 Left: Illustration of Frank Miller's Batman in The Dark Knight Returns (1986)[20] Right: Michael Keaton as Batman (Tim Burton, 1989)[21]

During *Batman*'s original theatrical run, it seemed as though Warner and DC had finally balanced their commercial success with a gritty, brooding and violent hero that appealed to American audiences. The film broke virtually every box-office record, making $43 million on its opening weekend and taking only ten days to reach $100 million. *Batman* had the biggest opening film in motion picture history and remained one of the top-grossing films of the entire decade, bested only by Lucas's *Return of the Jedi* and Spielberg's *ET* (Pond B9; Prince 447). Through the use of star actors and an exorbitant production and advertising budget, the widespread commercial success of *Batman* not only utilized the prevailing 1980s blockbuster formula, but worked to redefine it as well. As Jennifer Holt notes, *Batman* provided the industry with a "new paradigm of a developing conglomerate aesthetic…in which a film's narrative

[20] Image retrieved from: http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Batman:_The_Dark_Knight_Returns_Vol_1_2
[21] Image retrieved from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Keaton_as_Batman.jpg

would be designed to capitalize on all potential revenue streams and corporate holdings" (216). Using its music recording division, Warner developed a number of music tie-ins for *Batman*, including an album featuring the music of Prince. Additionally, much of Batman's critical praise focused on the film's "dark grandeur" and realistic depictions of a decadent corrupt city in need of saving (Hinson F1; Salamon A12). The gritty realism depicted in this film was a much closer approximation of the kind of weakness and corruption that Reagan, and other "heroes" like him, believed they were fighting during the 1980s. For example, the film opens onto an oppressive and dark cityscape with an infinite number of back alleys where sinister deeds are always in progress. In Burton's world, Gotham's mayor even serves as a stand in for President Reagan as he wants to celebrate Gotham's 200th anniversary and pull a veneer of prosperity over his crumbling city. Upon constructing this bleak and hopeless landscape, the audience becomes immediately sympathetic to the lone hero who operates outside of the law in order to restore the city to its former glory. As a result, this Batman was the epitome of the Reagan-era hero, one who unapologetically applies brute force in order to rid the city of its enemies. Even though the film debates the heroism of Batman in a manner more reflective of Marvel's comics and compares his violent actions to those of the psychotic Joker, the film ultimately promotes Batman's methods because he uses violence in order to protect his city and rid it of corruption. By the end of the film, any doubts as to Batman's status as a national hero are cast aside when Gotham's police force installs the Bat-Signal, a symbol of America's approval of individualistic violence as a means of protecting their traditional ideals of truth, justice and the American way.

On the heels of *Batman's* widespread critical and commercial success, Warner and DC released a series of sequels starting with *Batman Returns* in 1992. Following the pattern of the *Superman* series, each of these sequels was subject to a decline in box office revenues (at least compared to the original) as well as an increasingly negative critical reception. The mixed critical and fan response to each of these sequels was important for two main reasons: First, despite its immense corporate support, DC was beginning to strain the blockbuster formula to the point of diminishing returns. Second, as Americans entered the 1990s and began dealing with the aftermath of Reagan-era Cold War politics, DC's lack of a unified brand of heroism reflected this similar search for a new emerging identity. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the U.S had seemingly defeated its largest enemy and was again faced with the prospect of redefining its purpose and its definitions of heroism. As the 1990s progressed, the *Batman* series shifted away

from its previous portrayals of the ultra-violent action hero towards a more reserved and morally instructive action hero that was more reminiscent of the 1960s. This shift can also be read as a reflection of America's conflicting notions of heroism and masculinity that prevailed during the 1990s under the new Clinton administration (Malin 7).

By the time *Batman Returns* hit theaters in 1992, executives were worried about creating too much bat-hype for the series and wanted to avoid over-saturating the market as they had done in the 1960s. Instead, Warner and DC restricted the number of licensing deals and began promoting the sequel much later than they had done with the first *Batman* installment (Elliott D1). This smaller-scale marketing campaign would prove to be a wise decision as audiences did in fact grow tired of the Caped Crusader and his increasingly silly antics. Much of the criticism of this film and the subsequent bat-sequels emphasized their disorganized narrative structure, lack of character development, and, most notably, their increasingly camped-up heroes and villains. For example, *The Globe and Mail* described Penguin's over-the-top performance as a "$55 million shout for help" and argued that *Batman & Robin*'s (Schumacher,1997) "incoherent plot, under developed characters [and] confused performances" show no evidence of ironic superiority or intent to subvert these conventions through their knowing or self-reflexive use (Groen C1; Lacey C1). More than anything, the downward spiral of DC's Dark Knight that occurred throughout the 1990s is evidence of DC's struggle to find its place in the post Cold-War era. Without the threatening force of the communists to rally against, DC's brand of classically interventionist heroes struggled to redefine the terms of heroism and masculinity. As the 1990s progressed, Americans found themselves similarly at odds with their previous definitions of heroism and masculinity and began to question the legitimacy of their interventionist strategies. For example, many Americans disagreed with the military tactics of Operation Desert Storm, which involved a large scale bombing of Iraq's civilian infrastructure (Rouleau 61). Other major influences that led Americans to question their traditional understandings of masculinity were the expansion of the Gay Rights movement and President Clinton's scandal with Monica Lewinsky. As Brenton Malin noted, the policies and personal actions of President Clinton became "the model of a conflicted masculinity characteristic of the '90s" (7). As a result, Americans began searching for a new understanding of the American male hero, one that attempted to reconcile non-traditional masculinity and sensitivity with America's continuing desire to remain powerful. These explorations of non-traditional masculinity can even be seen in the early films of the

1990s such as *Kindergarten Cop* (Reitman, 1990) starring former 1980s hard body action hero Arnold Schwarzenegger. In this film, Schwarzenegger is an odd combination of sensitive father figure and care giver mixed with the violent protective instincts of his *Terminator* persona. Such seemingly contradictory depictions of American masculinity and heroism were typical of representations of American society in the 1990s, which was "caught up in contemporary arguments critiquing the heterosexist, patriarchal, classist, and racist values traditionally underwriting the standard picture of the 'real American man' (Maltin 8).

By the mid 1990s, DC had seemingly sealed its fate as the producer of increasingly irrelevant heroes after the Cold War. For example, in 1992, *Superman Issue # 75* proclaimed the death of Superman. In this issue, Superman was the perfect embodiment of the conflicted 1990s hero. In the beginning, he corrected a TV talk show host when she acknowledged Superman as the leader of the Justice League. Superman displayed the new sensitivity of the 1990s male when he explained that they are a group of people who came together as equals to fight for the common good. As the story progressed, however, the 1980s-style behemoth villain, Doomsday, remained undefeated by this version of Superman. In the final showdown, Superman also took on the form of the 1980s hero, bloodied and bruised with strained and muscles bursting through his tattered uniform. The importance of Superman's death in this issue was two-fold: On the one hand, it demonstrated the strength and power of the traditional 1980s hero as the only force capable of defeating evil. On the other hand, the death of this hero simultaneously suggested that he no longer had a place in the world, leaving Americans to weep for his loss while searching for a new model of heroism to look up to. DC's struggle to redefine its brand of heroism was similarly represented in the *Batman* comic series between the spring of 1993 and summer of 1994, when the original Dark Knight was incapacitated by Bane. Throughout each of these story arcs, the original incarnations of DC's flagship characters were defeated by 1980s-style villains, suggesting that this new "sensitive" '90s-style heroism was ultimately weaker than its predecessor. For example, with his strappy leather costume and exposed chest, Bane is virtually identical to Stallone's Rambo (Figure 7). More importantly, in the wake of the heroes' demise, DC auditioned newer versions of the Man of Steel and the Caped Crusader in an attempt to re-imagine these characters, but none of the replacements lasted long. Superman returned in *Reign of Superman* (1993) and Batman returned in *Knightquest: Knightsend* (1994).

Fig. 7 Left: Bane defeating Batman in Batman # 497 (July, 1993)[22] Right: Sylvester Stallone in Rambo III (MacDonald, 1989)[23]

Throughout the 1980s and '90s, the vertically integrated structure of Time, Warner, DC and the Licensing Corporation of America generated enough cultural hype and commercial success to allow DC's heroes to captivate audiences across a wide variety of media and marketing platforms. But despite DC's success on the big screen, Marvel Comics actually maintained a significant lead in overall comic market shares and among comic fans.[24] One of the reasons for Marvel's success was that its brand of interrogative and conflicted heroism remained popular with comic fans, regardless of the time period. Unlike DC, Marvel was not as concerned with re-evaluating their definitions of heroism and masculinity because their characters were already being used to discuss and reflect such conflicts. For example, while the *Daredevil* series of the 1980s may have shifted to incorporate the violence and interventionism characteristic of the decade, Daredevil remained openly conflicted about his use of such power, which later became typical of the heroes and comics of the 1990s. Another Marvel series that was popular during this period was the *X-Men* series that ran throughout the 1990s. As Marc DiPaolo explains, the universal appeal of "the super-powered mutants allegorically represent[ed] real world

[22] Image retrieved from: http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/Batman_Vol_1_497
[23] Image retrieved from: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Rambo3poster.jpg
[24] In 1994, DC held 19.35% of the overall comics market, while Marvel controlled 31.87% (ComiChron.com).

people…The story of the X-Men [was] the story of the oppressed and the disenfranchised striking back against their oppressors, so any reader who [felt] oppressed may relate to the X-Men" (DiPaolo 219). This universal appeal that allowed readers of all backgrounds and political affiliations to identify with the struggles of these heroes was combined with a real-world aesthetic that placed Marvel's heroes in a present-day New York City, which enabled their stories to reflect upon the current issues facing American society. For example, racial tensions continued to mount throughout the 1990s, especially after the Rodney King beating in 1991 and the resulting race riots and debates about crime and police brutality. With the initial acquittal of the officers involved in the beating, many Americans began to question the validity of their values that had led to such violence and inequality. Throughout the *X-Men* series of the 1990s, the struggle between the "race" of mutants and humans often became a platform for Americans to discuss their various views and opinions on civil rights. Such discussions of race and equality became particularly apparent in 1997, through the *X-Men* series known as *Operation Zero Tolerance*. In this story, a group of humans were given permission by the US government to capture torture and kill any and all mutants. Other examples of how *X-Men* continued to address American social issues throughout the 1990s occurred in *Alpha Flight # 106* (1992), in which the character Northstar finally announced his homosexuality, making him one of the first openly gay superheroes. While *Alpha Flight* itself was not one of Marvel's most popular titles, this particular issue sold out within one week, which proved that Americans were eager to find superheroes that reflected the conflicts and struggles of their time (Furey 2007).

Marvel's greatest disadvantage from the 1970s through 1990s was its lack of a cohesive corporate structure. As Marvel was quietly gathering a fan base and garnering critical attention throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, its widespread commercial success was being hampered by the corporate mismanagement of Ronald Perelman & Andrews Group Inc, who had purchased Marvel in 1988 for $82.5 million (Raviv 9). Under Perelman's new ownership, Marvel became a platform for selling junk bonds, a near-fraudulent means of generating funds to line the owners' pockets. Amidst this crisis, one man tried to talk some sense into Perelman. A few years before Marvel filed for bankruptcy, Isaac (Ike) Perlmutter, CEO of Marvel subsidiary, ToyBiz, and part-owner of Marvel, warned Perelman that he was driving the company towards disaster. Perlmutter noticed that Marvel had over five thousand characters flourishing on paper that were not being taken advantage of in other mediums. In fact, Perlmutter's exact words to Perelman

were “you have to make movies and do all kinds of things so people are going to *talk* about Marvel” (Raviv 6). In other words, it was not enough that Marvel had created and owned these culturally iconic characters, they had to mass market them as well. Unfortunately for Perlmutter and other Marvel fans, Perelman’s fast-cash approach to business only made matters worse when he attempted to license Marvel’s heroes for film. For example, *Captain America* (Pyun, 1990) was one of the few feature film adaptations of a Marvel character produced during the 1990s. Unlike DC’s films, which featured multi-million dollar advertising campaigns and theatrical releases, *Captain America* was a direct-to-video release and had only a few understated print ads that aimed to capitalize on the superhero craze already proliferated by DC (Lovece 1992). The critical failure and overall lack of any successful Marvel superhero adaptations throughout the 1990s was a result of Perelman’s corporate mismanagement.

Perelman’s mismanagement of the company throughout the 1990s was an excellent example of how a company’s corporate and industrial structure can greatly influence its success, yet the resilience of Marvel’s comic book products throughout this period are a testament to the popular appeal of their underlying character and narrative structure. In fact, it is important to note that sales of Marvel’s comics only began to decline after the industry-wide collapse of 1994. The market crash was due to the increased hype of the value of specific comic issues. Many comic producers and vendors began to overvalue their products in the hopes that they would be as rare and desirable as original issues like *Action Comics #1*; however, by 1994 many investors realized that this would not be the case, and sales quickly began to fall all across the industry. The industry collapse combined with Perelman’s mismanagement eventually forced Marvel to file for bankruptcy protection in 1996, yet even after the company’s descent into disarray, Marvel fans and industrial critics remained positive about the future of the company. In an interview with NPR in 1997, Cliff Biggers of *Comic Shop News* noted that “Marvel had more brand loyalty than any other company” and was certain that Marvel would recover from bankruptcy in the coming years as long as they continued to focus on developing their strong and unique characters (Biggers 1997). Even though Marvel’s corporate faltering hampered their development throughout this period, the fact that fans remained undeterred proved that Marvel’s more complex and adaptable brand of heroism would be the source of their continued success in the coming years; all they had to do now was learn how to promote it.

Throughout their comics of the 1980s and 1990s, DC killed and crippled its most popular heroes, only to revive the originals a few issues later. Each time, the company's changes were short-lived, proving that DC's heroes continued to struggle in the ever changing socio-cultural climate. Even though their corporate structure and manipulation of the blockbuster formula enabled them to remain commercially successful by producing a series of multi-million dollar films, their rise in popularity was only temporary. As box office revenues dwindled with the release of each *Superman* and *Batman* sequel, it was clear that DC's heroes were struggling to redefine their brand of heroism in the post Cold War era as well as in the Marvel dominated comics industry. Even though Marvel's heroes lacked the corporate support of DC, they continued to outsell DC in the circulation of their original comic texts, indicating that Marvel's brand of justice was more easily adaptable to the changing socio-cultural climate and more accurately expressed the views and feelings of its audience. The 1980s and 1990s had proved to be a pivotal period in the history of the comics industry. In the aftermath of the Cold War and the industrial collapse of 1994, DC's heroes lost their market majority to Marvel, sparking a trend that would only continue in the years to come as Marvel learned to capitalize on the Hollywood blockbuster model.

Chapter 5

The Battle for Market Dominance: Mergers, Acquisitions and Corporate Rebranding in the New Millennium

The year 2000 marked the dawn of a new millennium that sparked fear and anxiety in many Americans. Still trying to recover from the tumultuous events of the 1990s, Americans were further bombarded with the rapidly growing technology of the internet and all of the anxieties of living in the digital age. Rumors of the Y2K bug that threatened global technological failures caused widespread apocalyptic panic, and people became wary of humanity's dependence on technology for survival. Shortly after the panic subsided, Americans were faced with yet another apocalyptic attack when a series of airplanes were hijacked and crashed into the World Trade Center and The Pentagon, killing almost three thousand people. The events of September 11, 2001 effectively redefined the American nation as it entered the new millennium filled with uncertainty and new found terror both at home and abroad. During this time, the social and political upheaval of the early 2000s also influenced the resurgence of the American comic book superhero, especially in its adaptations to film. Throughout this troubled era, the superhero was used both as nostalgically reassuring escapism and as a platform for social critique and often ambivalent introspection on American national identity. Many of the comic film adaptations produced between 2001 and 2004 presented overly simplistic battles of 'good' versus 'evil,' while the films produced in the latter half of the decade began to reflect a more conflicted national ideology and began questioning the American values that had led to such horrors as 9/11. It is also important to note that throughout this period, Marvel began to break the near "twenty-year stranglehold that DC comics had held on the comic book film" industry, which had as much to do with its ground-breaking corporate restructuring as it did with its unique brand of critically self-aware heroism (Lichtenfeld 25). Throughout the 2000s, Marvel's newly reorganized corporate structure enabled them to produce a number of multi-million dollar blockbuster films, filling the market left by the newly *dis*organized Warner Bros. and its subsidiary, DC. In the mid 2000s, Marvel developed its own independent film studio, Marvel Studios, which marked their transition from the licensors to controlling producers of Marvel properties (D. Johnson 1). Conversely, after the acquisition of Time Warner by AOL in 2001, DC's once tightly controlled corporate structure struggled to exploit its new synergistic

opportunities. Marvel's newfound corporate strength and commercial success was also bolstered by the widespread popular appeal of its heroically ambiguous characters that offered American audiences a method of questioning the validity of their ideological principles, while simultaneously giving them a hero to rally behind. While DC also produced a number of wildly successful blockbusters during this period, it is important to note that this success came primarily from only one of their franchise characters, namely Batman, whereas Marvel continued to exploit virtually every character it owned.

Even before the creation of Marvel Studios, Marvel's new licensing deals helped to revive the company after it went bankrupt in 1996. In 2002, Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* set what was then a box-office record by grossing $114.8 million on its opening weekend (Kit & Lewis 70). Until the release of *The Dark Knight* (Nolan, 2008), it was considered the movie to beat by both industrial critics and fans alike. After a series of failed attempts, first with a live action TV series on CBS in 1977, and later with a feature film deal that was struck but never realized in 1985, Marvel had finally managed to transition *Spider-Man* to the screen in 2002. The success of this transition was due in large part to the help of Avi Arad and Ike Perlmutter, who began reviving Marvel in the wake of its bankruptcy in 1996. Arad and Perlmutter, along with Marvel's then-CEO, Bill Bevins, recognized the synergistic potential of their companies and properties almost immediately. By investing the time and money to reacquire the rights to *Spider-Man*, which was one of Marvel's best selling comics,[25] Marvel's new executives were poised to make millions from the film revenues and cross-promotional product licensing deals generated by Marvel's subsidiary, Toy Biz (Raviv 268). Toy Biz, much like DC's Licensing Corp., was responsible for many of the early licensing and promotional deals for Marvel, including the production of some of the first Marvel action figures. The continued success of *Spider-Man* spawned two more sequels in 2004 and 2007 and quickly had Marvel executives turning to its other 4,700 characters for further potential profits (Bloom 9). Unlike DC, which had only managed to exploit two or three of its comic titles, such as *Batman* and *Superman*, Marvel's more widespread success in overall comics circulation clearly gave them the advantage in the early years of their transition to film because it provided Marvel with a much larger built-in audience for its adaptations.

[25] In as early as 1990, Marvel's *Spider-Man* sold almost 3 million copies of its first issue (Kit and Lewis 70).

Between 2000 and 2006, Marvel had licensed twelve major motion pictures based on its comic heroes and had grossed about $3.6 billion worldwide (Hamner 2006). However, unlike DC, which reaped more profits from its own in-house film studio, Warner Bros., Marvel was still only getting a percentage of the profits through its licensing deals with other studios such as Columbia Pictures and 20th Century Fox. In an attempt to recoup more of their profits, Marvel underwent "one of the most radical business-model overhauls in Hollywood history," and redefined itself as an independent film production studio (Hamner 2006). Between 2006 and 2007, Marvel began the transition to develop its new subsidiary, Marvel Studios, by borrowing over $500 million from Merrill Lynch in order to finance its own filmmaking projects, the first of which was *Iron Man* in 2008 (McAllister, Gordon, and Jancovich 111). At the time, this reconstruction deal was seen by many industry critics as an incredibly risky move because the film industry as a whole was already experiencing a significant decline in ticket sales (Hamner 2006). Added to this risk was the fact that if too many of Marvel's films failed to perform at the box office, Marvel would have defaulted on their loans, effectively losing the rights to their entire character bank (Hamner 2006). In order to combat this threat, between 2008 and 2013, another twelve Marvel superhero films were released, seven of which were produced by Marvel Studios. Of the films produced, Marvel Studios made sure to control their most iconic characters, which included Iron Man, The Incredible Hulk, Thor and Captain America. Marvel's decision to maintain control over these particular properties was no accident, as the introduction of each character was designed to slowly generate audience and fan excitement that would eventually culminate in the release of *Marvel's The Avengers* in 2012, which featured all four of these heroes in one highly anticipated summer blockbuster. By maintaining corporate control and creative continuity throughout each of these independent series, Marvel exploited their intricately connected universe of heroes to maximize fan interest and reaped the majority of the commercial profits in the process. Here, Marvel's cross-promotional strategies were markedly different from DC's, whose characters and universes (at least on film) remained largely self-contained. As a result, fans of *Batman* were not as inherently drawn to the later incarnations of *Superman*, in the same way that Marvel fans were encouraged to flock to the theatres in order to root for their favorite Avenger, after establishing their origins over the past five years.

Emerging after a somewhat rocky start, the widespread success of Marvel's early comic book films clearly demonstrated how the company's overarching corporate structure greatly impacted

its overall success. After overcoming the corporate turmoil caused by Perelman's years of mismanagement, Marvel was now more able to cultivate the creative properties it had amassed over the past four decades. Another major factor that contributed to Marvel's success during this period was its newfound ability to utilize the action-movie blockbuster formula, much like DC had done in the 1980s and 90s. Films such as Marvel's *X-Men* (Singer, 2000) and *Spider-Man* (Raimi, 2002) relied on big budgets, CGI enhanced action sequences and aggressive promotional campaigns in order to maximize their box office returns. For example, the marketing campaign for *X-Men*, the first comic book adaptation of the new millennium, featured three trailers, nine TV spots and twelve internet promos intended to target every possible movie-going demographic. The first trailer featured fast paced, rapid cut editing that was designed to showcase almost every one of the film's major action sequences. The second and third trailers were extended to both outline the origin stories of the film's major characters and construct a simplified 'good' versus 'evil' narrative about the war against humanity that emphasized the anxieties associated with biological and technological evolution evoked by the film's "superior" mutants. These anxieties also worked to address the ethics of genetic modification, cloning and stem-cell research that were also prevalent in the early 2000s. While each of these trailers attempted to appeal to slightly different audience groups such as the pre-existing comic book fans, or the intellectual sci-fi or drama fans, each trailer also inevitably ended with the same action-packed sequences and special effects driven character introductions. Marvel's manipulation of these promos emphasized their desire to maximize audience interest before the release of the film. The film's synergistic cross-promotion and desire for complete market saturation was also further emphasized by the film's production company, 20th Century Fox. By licensing the film to 20th Century, Marvel was able to utilize "the full promotional power of Rupert Murdoch's News Corp" (McAllister, Gordon & Jancovich 108). As a result of this licensing deal, the promotional material for Marvel's *X-Men* appeared throughout Fox's network television programs and affiliate stations.

Another factor that greatly contributed to the success of Marvel in the early 2000s was its ability to use the action blockbuster formula to produce films that resonated with the early post-9/11 socio-political climate. For example, much like *Superman* comics of the 1940s worked to simultaneously address yet distract American audiences from their involvement in the war, Marvel's millennial superheroes both directly and allegorically responded to a post 9/11 climate.

And yet, these narratives, when combined with the blockbuster aesthetic, also provided American audiences with classical escapist fantasy entertainment, creating universal stories that would be popular both at home and abroad. The link between Hollywood and its portrayal of post-9/11 politics was further emphasized in October of 2001, when The White House announced the formation of the Arts and Entertainment Task Force. This organization "aimed to use Hollywood to produce films that were more in-line with the needs of the Bush administration" (Baker 4). Short of turning Hollywood into the Bush administration's own propaganda machine, the impacts of the task force can be seen in the early films of the post 9/11 cycle. Many films were delayed in order to reflect the new post 9/11 reality. Most notably, this included the delaying the release of *Spider-Man* (2002) in order to alter the New York skyline and remove a scene in which Spidey spins a web between the twin towers of the World Trade Center. While the release of the film was delayed in order to project a new post 9/11 landscape, the film itself actually goes out of its way to avoid any direct political address. Instead, the film used the dangers of technology and biological enhancement to create the villain of the story, while turning Peter Parker into an All-American boyhood hero that the entire audience could identify with. For example, in Spider-Man's final confrontation with the Green Goblin, the Goblin is attacked by a mob of New Yorkers who are trying to give Spider-Man more time to rescue Mary Jane and the children. While assaulting the Goblin, the crowd shouts slogans like "you mess with one of us, you mess with all of us," which echoed the united spirit of New York City and America as a whole in the wake of 9/11. Without addressing the context of 9/11 directly, *Spider-Man* functioned as an angst filled coming of age action film in which Spider-Man's unyielding virtue triumphed over evil in a simple, morally instructive tale. The film catered to America's desire for escapism and simultaneously re-affirmed their belief in their core values of truth, justice and freedom through its use of powerfully reassuring blockbuster action sequences. Further, while the final scene of *Spider-Man* begins with Peter Parker brooding over the loss of Harry's father and his inability to be united with Mary Jane, Peter's final voice over transitions the sequence into the awe inspiring 'final swing sequence.' After lamenting his loss, Peter claims responsibility over his powers and his identity as Spider-Man, which marks Peter's transition from an awkward, insecure teenager to a symbol of self-assured masculinity. Peter's newfound confidence is further emphasized by the gracefully choreographed CGI sequences of Spider-Man swinging through New York City. This final sequence emphasizes the physicality

of Spider-Man, and the camera shifts behind him to adopt Spider-Man's point of view as he conquers the dangerous New York cityscape, inviting the audience to identify with this feeling of dominance.

Throughout the early to mid 2000s, Marvel had seemingly recovered from the corporate and financial turmoil of its past. By using a formula of adapting well-known comic properties into major blockbuster action films, Marvel was finally able to capitalize on their long neglected character bank. In fact, during the initial comic film boom of the 2000s, Marvel managed to license at least ten adaptations before DC and Warner Bros. were able to compete. Even though DC had typically been the major producer of comic film blockbusters in the 1980s and 90s, they had begun to feel some of the negative consequences of such rapid corporate expansion. As one industry critic has noted, it was very strange that DC had fallen behind in the production of comic film blockbusters, especially given the widespread synergistic success of Time Warner's *Batman* series of the 1980s and 90s (Worley qtd. in Bloom 16). One possible explanation for DC's faltering success during the outset of the 2000s could have been the AOL-Time Warner merger that occurred in early 2001 (Craft and Quick 54). This merger seemingly united two of the world's largest telecom giants, yet unfortunately for the companies and their investors, this merger also took place during a time when the dot com bubble was bursting, which caused the value of high-tech stocks to plummet. By the end of 2001, AOL Time Warner had lost $4.9 billion and many of its divisions, including DC, found themselves in disarray (Goldsmith 36). Faced with the competition created by Marvel, Warner and DC attempted to reorganize themselves starting in 2003 and began looking for a new studio executive that would maximize DC's creative potential.

In 2004, Warner and DC finally made their way back to the big screen with the release of *Catwoman*, directed by Pitof and starring Halle Berry. Unfortunately for DC, this film was a surprising box office disappointment and served as an early example of the risks studios take when they rush production of a film.[26] While the film had all the makings of a blockbuster, such as an A-list cast, an established director with a background in digital effects, and a $100 million dollar budget, it also lacked a well developed storyline and failed to take advantage of the pre-

[26] *Catwoman*'s production budget was $100 million, yet the film made only $40,202,379 at the box-office. (BoxOfficeMojo.com).

existing comic book fan audience. DC's production strategies during this time stand in stark contrast to Marvel's; even in the more "self-contained" narrative universes of the early 2000s, like *Spider-Man* and *X-Men*, Marvel stressed the development of each character (or group of characters) over a series of films. In DC's *Catwoman*, however, the film version of Catwoman's character bore little resemblance to the original comic book creation, in which she was part hero and part femme fatale to Batman. Instead, the film focused more on the mythical origins of Egyptian cats and ultimately failed to connect this adaptation to the broader DC universe of characters. Additionally, unlike DC's previous film adaptations, which featured multi-million dollar cross-promotional advertising campaigns directed at the pre-existing comic fan as well as the action blockbuster audience, one of *Catwoman*'s only major publicity stunts took place at Henri Bendel, an upscale women's retail store (Robertson, Schwartz, and Ryzik B2). While this press stunt did pay homage to the Catwoman costumes and performances of previous film adaptations, such as those by Eartha Kitt and Michelle Pfeiffer, it did little else to re-establish DC's as a major force in the production of authentic or faithful superhero adaptation films. Even Warner Bros. executive, Kevin Tsujihara, admitted that *Catwoman* was a 'misstep' on their part (Gustines C8). At a time when Hollywood blockbusters depended on the built-in audience of comic book fans, maintaining creative continuity proved to be an essential part of Marvel's success throughout the 2000s.

The critical and commercial failure of *Catwoman* may also be linked to a larger problem with combining female characters with the typically male-dominated superhero comic narrative as well as the action genre. While the conflicted representation of Catwoman was influenced by the decidedly anti-feminist views of *Batman*'s creator Bob Kane, the film itself also traffics in troubling polarizations of gender norms. For example, in his autobiography, *Batman & Me*, Kane explained that he felt women were more like cats because they are "cool, detached, and unreliable," which could explain why the character was treated with very little respect in the comics (107). These initial anti-feminist leanings were further complicated by the dual personalities of Halle Berry's Catwoman and her alter ego, Patience Phillips. Arguably, the film reproduces the virgin/whore binary wherein women are either perceived as passive and pure, or as sexually aggressive (Hayes 24). This was emphasized in the contrast between Patience's shy, submissive personality and the dominatrix-like Catwoman. The film's emphasis on Catwoman's body often works against an understanding of empowered female sexuality and instead works to

perpetuate the sexual commodification and objectification of women. These conflicted and anti-feminist depictions of female sexuality and empowerment also point to the industry-wide difficulty of producing powerful female heroes in Hollywood cinema. For example, Marvel's *Elektra* (Bowman, 2005) was similarly a box office disaster.[27] While female heroes have arguably been more successful as parts of ensemble casts, like Halle Berry as Storm in *X-Men* (2002-present), Hollywood continues to struggle to produce successful superhero narratives based entirely on female heroes. Here, the comic book superhero's adherence to Hollywood norms, while useful for generating a universal blockbuster appeal, is often limiting, especially in its portrayals of female superheroes, which are often stripped of their complexity in favor of their male-oriented sex appeal.

Determined not to dwell on their box office failures, Warner and DC continued their attempt to revamp their image, which culminated in 2005 with the release of the *Infinite Crisis* comics series, the release of *Batman Begins* (Nolan, 2005), and DC's first new logo design since 1976. Here, DC's brand re-launch served three major purposes: First, the limited edition *Infinite Crisis* comics worked to address many of the continuity issues that had plagued the DC universe for years. As Dan DiDio, DC's editorial VP said, DC began to realize that its comics had struggled to connect with the older, more critically-aware reader bases, and *Infinite Crisis* was an attempt to resolve this problem (Gustines 2005). Second, both the *Infinite Crisis* series and the 2005 *Batman Begins* film adaptation worked together to re-connect with comic readers and film audiences by emphasizing the darker, more serious side of DC Comics' heroes. DiDio and other executives hoped that these grittier heroes, inspired largely by the work of Frank Miller and Alan Moore, would appeal to both comic and film audiences that were now looking for "more complexity and depth" from their pulp heroes (Gustines 2005). This move towards grittier more heroically ambiguous characters can also be read as DC attempting to 'copy' Marvel's formula of comic book heroism that had long since featured ambivalent and introspective characters. Finally, to further emphasize their commitment to changing and revitalizing their brand, DC unveiled their new 'swoosh' logo "just weeks ahead of the 'Batman Begins' opening" (Schiller 6). The inclusion of the 'swoosh' conjured images of constant movement and symbolized DC's desire to move forward and to distance itself from both its static heroes and its static 'bullet' logo

[27] On a budget of $43 million, *Elektra* only managed to gross $24.4 million (BoxOfficeMojo.com)

(Figure 8). By pairing the release of their new logo with the release of the darkest re-imagining of The Caped Crusader since Tim Burton's *Batman* in 1989, Warner and DC were able to heighten audience expectation not only for *Batman Begins*, but for every subsequent DC film adaptation as well. The success of *Batman Begins* and the following two *Dark Knight* sequels, also directed by Christopher Nolan, proved that maintaining a tightly organized corporate structure was an important part of Warner and DC's comeback in both the comic film adaptation market and the publishing market. Following DC's brand-image overhaul, *Infinite Crisis #1* became the best selling comic book in December of 2005, and over the next year, DC's market share rose from 32.23% in 2004 to 36.95% in 2006 (ComicChron.com). The importance of corporate synergy within the comic film and action blockbuster market was further emphasized by Warner Bros' financing deal with Legendary Pictures, which co-produced the *Dark Knight* trilogy. Legendary Pictures, which split the budget and profits with Warner Bros. 50/50, is a company that prides itself on making "consistent reliable returns in the inconsistent movie business" by investing in big budget blockbuster formula films that are virtually guaranteed to earn back their investment (Mehta 120).

Fig. 8 The DC 'Swoosh' Logo (2005-2011)[28]

The importance of the action blockbuster formula to the success of any comic book adaptation film can be seen not only in the successful films, but in the failures as well. In the films produced by Marvel and DC, the comic films that were less popular with audiences and critics and that performed poorly at the box-office all shared a significant deviation from the action blockbuster formula. For example, Ang Lee's *Hulk* (2003), which was a quiet, contemplative character study filled with emotional pathos for the misunderstood monster, paled in comparison

[28] Image retrieved from: https://en.wikiped`ia.org/wiki/File:DC_Comics_logo.svg

to *The Incredible Hulk* (Leterrier, 2008). This later adaptation brought the character back to his violent conflicted roots, but it was still primarily framed and promoted as an action film. Other relative critical and box-office failures included DC's highly anticipated yet significantly underwhelming releases of *Superman Returns* (Singer, 2006) and *Watchmen* (Snyder, 2009). Throughout each of these films, one common criticism seems to be that they failed to strike an appropriate balance between capturing the complex drama inherent in each character's origin story, and delivering the pulse-pounding, audience-captivating action sequences or epic battles that comic book heroes are famous for. For example, Noah Bertlatsky of *The Chicago Reader* argued that the contrast between *Watchmen*'s fast-faced action sequences and its lack of proper characterization ultimately resulted in the film being "hollow and disjointed" (24). Similarly, Ang Lee's *Hulk* does conform to the action blockbuster in several ways, with its heavy use of CGI and action sequences in the final half of the film, but these sequences seem trapped by the painfully slow progression of the film's narrative. For example, the film's opening sequence was a painstakingly slow pseudo-flashback sequence that attempted to establish Bruce Banner's psychologically traumatic childhood. However, this pacing actually worked against the establishment of an emotional connection with the viewer, who was often more focused on trying to make sense of the artful, yet incoherent use of close ups and other special effects shots that were seemingly designed to carry some unknown emotional or metaphorical significance. While the reliance on introspection and family drama can be seen as Lee's own personal influence on the film, it can also be seen as an attempt to capture the fraught ambiguity that characterized Marvel's heroes since their inception in the 1960s. However, where Marvel's use of ambiguity was intended to create more realistic heroes, Lee's *Hulk* seems to have had the opposite effect. For example, while Lee's directorial experience was seemingly able to capture the "troubled perplexity" of The Hulk, his use of split screens, CGI sequences and inserts was also "pointedly non-naturalistic" and drew too much attention to the construction of the film, and the title character as artifice (White 34/5). While some critics, such as Rob White of *Sight and Sound*, argued that the use of such techniques elevated the film from the typically juvenile comic book genre, the film's fan reception and box-office revenues seemed to indicate otherwise. With a budget of $137 million, the film only made a relatively disappointing $62,128,420 on its opening weekend and only reached a total domestic gross of about $132 million (BoxOfficeMojo.com). Furthermore, fans of *The Hulk* comics and of comic films in general also

found the film's opening to be too slow with not enough build up to the film's final showdown between hero and villain. The first half of the film was comprised of slow moving character drama, while the last half became a series of unmotivated, CGI heavy action sequences that seemed more like an afterthought to appease the action-movie audience. Ultimately, it seemed as if Lee wasn't entirely sure what kind of a film he was trying to make. In the words of one fan reviewer, "Ang Lee spent a lot of money making a film that [didn't] really connect with…the target audience" and while Lee tried to combine thoughtful artistry with conventional blockbuster action, "he broke the first rule of responsible blockbuster filmmaking" by promising more than what could be delivered (Parry 2004). While many fans still credited the film for its artistically innovative attempt to portray the character's psychology, they argued that the film failed to live up to the standards of the superhero action blockbuster. While *Hulk* may be reflective of Ang Lee's auteur status, the film's relatively poor reception by comic book fans suggests that the continuity of the comic book universe does not lend itself well to individualistic interpretation. In other words, in order to promote Marvel's desired cultural and commercial proliferation, the perception of the film as Ang Lee's *Hulk*, ultimately works to distance the film from the rest of Marvel's narrative universe. This is particularly apparent in the later adaptations that were produced by Marvel Studios. Even though each project was helmed by a different director, they became products of Marvel's larger continuous narrative leading up to *The Avengers*. Here, the ideal superhero narrative is created not in terms of discrete films, but rather by foregrounding creative continuity and through commercial cross-promotion (D. Johnson 14).

The importance of using the action-blockbuster formula was further emphasized by the performance and reception of *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), which was directed by prominent action film director, Louis Leterrier, who also directed summer action hits like *Unleashed* (2005) and *Transporter 2* (2005). While this film may not have made the box-office splash Marvel Studios had hoped for, it was still more successful than Lee's version released five years prior.[29] The 2008 *Hulk* reboot was important for two key reasons: First, it was one of Marvel Studios' first film productions as an independent studio, following their release of *Iron Man* two months earlier. As such, this adaptation represents Marvel's attempt to redefine itself in a market

[29] While *The Incredible Hulk* was the top box-office draw on its opening weekend in June of 2008, its overall gross was still less than expected, earning only $134,806,913 on a $150 million budget ("Hulk's more Incredible" E2; BoxOfficeMojo.com).

dominated and controlled by corporate synergy. Second, the success of this film can be credited to director Leterrier's radical departure from Ang Lee's ambitious, yet ultimately ill-conceived project. As both audiences and critics note, the key difference between these two films is the latter's extensive use of the action genre to bring the original spirit of the *Hulk* comics to life. As Kirk Honeycutt of *The Hollywood Reporter* notes, the film "emphasizes action over introspection, but…makes certain the hero still broods over the curse of his cells poisoned by gamma radiation" (14). While the opening of Leterrier's film proceeds slowly in order to establish Banner's character, who is now living in Brazil, the opening is also framed by the number of days he has gone "without incident" or without turning into The Hulk. As a result, the slow progression of watching Banner try to master his outbursts is heightened by the audiences' expectation that with every provocation, Banner may explode. Such manipulation of the audiences' expectations is a key convention of the Hollywood action blockbuster. With Leterrier's film, the audience benefits from the balance between the drama of Marvel's emotionally tortured heroes and the blockbuster appeal of bringing those comic book action sequences from the page to the screen. The success of *The Incredible Hulk* was further bolstered by Marvel's promotional campaign, which emphasized the film's connection to the original comic book and the Marvel universe as a whole. Even though they had just finished filming *The Incredible Hulk*, Marvel executives made sure to get the cast to appear at Comic-Con in San Diego in order to maximize fan awareness of the film (Blair et al. A5). Marketing for the 2008 *Hulk* film also emphasized Marvel's new, post-2005 corporate overhaul interest in cross-promotion and featured licensing deals with Burger King, 7-Eleven and K-Mart (Stanley 2008). Convincing advertisers to get on board with this new version of *The Hulk* was particularly difficult given that the failure of Lee's film in 2003 was still fresh in their minds and they were wary of making a poor investment decision. However, Marvel Studios' newly designed corporate structure, and, particularly the recent success of *Iron Man* helped to put the investors' minds at ease.

The relatively disappointing critical and commercial performances of Warner and DC's *Superman Returns* (2006) and *Watchmen* (2009) can also be linked to their deviation from the conventional superhero action film. *Watchmen* in particular suffered from DC's series of corporate overhauls that sought to emphasize the dark ambivalence of their so-called heroes. *Superman Returns*, which marked the first appearance of The Man of Steel on screen since 1987,

was arguably one of the most anticipated comic book adaptation films of the year, yet it made only $52.5 million on its opening weekend (BoxOfficeMojo.com). Much like Marvel's *Hulk* in 2003, this film confounded audiences with its slow plot progression and minimal action sequences. On the one hand, *Superman Returns* has been praised for its attempts to keep up with the changing times by updating Superman's image to include the modern day complications of war and an evolved understanding of the family unit. Yet, on the other hand, the film clings to the nostalgia of the Golden Age *Superman*, which only helps to emphasize how truly out of place (and time) DC's flagship hero has become. For example, the opening credits sequence of Singer's 2006 film is virtually identical to the zooming credits of the 1978 film, and Brandon Routh is an eerie facsimile of Christopher Reeve's original incarnation of Superman. However, this 'new-old' Superman also struggles to reconcile his Golden Age heroics with the hardships of the present day, as the brooding Clark Kent watches the deeply saddening reality of post-9/11 America flit across the screen of his local news broadcast. In keeping with Warner and DC's typically successful blockbuster formula, the film was also aggressively promoted with a marketing budget of $45.5 million and product tie-ins with General Mills Cereal, Pepsi, and even NASCAR (Johannes 2006). Yet despite having the full support of Warner and DC's synergistic potential, the film's decidedly anti-climactic narrative ultimately hindered its success.

One of the main reasons for the film's disappointing performance was that it was more of a character study and family drama than an action film. Superman's battle with his past and his long lost love with Lois Lane becomes the driving force of the film, as opposed to his battle with Lex Luthor. Just as Ang Lee's heavy handed auterist influences in *Hulk* off-set the balance between emotional drama and action present in Marvel's original comics, *Superman Returns* similarly reinforced the conception of the superhero narrative as a delicately balanced generic hybrid. While the dramatic shift of *Superman Returns* was consistent with DC's 2005 rebrand in favor of serious, contemporary storytelling, the film lacked the balance of DC's previous adaptation, *Batman Begins*, which featured a dark and brooding hero as well as a series of CGI explosions and heroic rescues.

Another explanation for the lackluster performance of *Superman Returns* has to do with the timing of its release within a post-9/11 context. The film followed the release of *Batman Begins*, which had previously established DC's desire to unleash the darker side of its universe. As a

result, Singer's film works against DC's corporate overhaul by appearing overly nostalgic for the days of "1950s-inspired Reaganomics" (Hassler-Forest 138). *Superman Returns* also emerged during the final years of the Bush-Cheney Administration, which was a time when both American society and the comic book industry began an openly aggressive critique of American ideology. For example, between 2006 and 2007, Marvel released a long-running cross-over comic book series called *Civil War*, which actively questioned and problematized the notion of America as an innocent victim in the wake of 9/11. The series ostensibly split the Marvel universe into two sides, those in favor of government regulated superhero registration, led by Iron Man, and those who saw registration as a violation of their freedom, led by Captain America. Within the context of this series, the conventional notions of U.S exceptionalism and militarism are often presented as a threatening force and source of conflict for Marvel's America. For example, the weapons developed by Iron Man's Stark Industries were sold to foreign terrorists only to be used against America. Captain America's surrender near the end of *Civil War* likewise transforms him into the epitome of the post-9/11 fragmented national identity. He does not condone America's violation of civil rights and liberties, yet he surrenders to them to avoid further bloody conflicts. In contrast, even though some aspects of Superman's character and narrative are updated in Singer's 2006 adaptation, the nostalgic optimism presented in *Superman Returns* was ultimately at odds with the new post-9/11 landscape and suffered as a result.

In 2009, DC's *Watchmen* proved yet again that the success of any comic book film rests with its ability to blend introspection and cultural critique with equal parts of the action blockbuster formula. The film was based on the 1987 graphic novel by Dave Gibbons and Alan Moore, arguably the most celebrated graphic novel of all time.[30] Ironically, where the original graphic novel was praised for its ground breaking departure from the standard superhero genre, the film adaptation suffered because of this difference. For example, as Kim Newman of *Sight and Sound* explains, "if fidelity to the source were the only measure of a film, [*Watchmen*] has to be rated a success;" yet sadly, the film's frame-by frame re-creation of the novel causes the movie to spend more time on people standing around than delving into serious action (Newman 81).

[30] In 2005, *Watchmen* was the only graphic novel to appear on *Time*'s list of the top 100 novels written since 1923 and was the first graphic novel ever to have received the Hugo Award for science fiction and fantasy (Goldstein 2005).

While this slower, more in-depth pacing helped to produce the novel's deeply conflicted and complex characters, it only seemed to create an apathetic audience that could barely identify with any of the film's "heroes." To the film's credit, however, Warner and DC's marketing campaign followed the blockbuster formula closely enough to generate enough excitement that the film ranked number one at the box-office on its opening weekend (BoxOfficeMojo.com). *Watchmen*'s twelve TV spots seemingly followed in the footsteps of Marvel's successful ad campaign for *X-Men* and emphasized the creation of a singular heroic action narrative while introducing each of the film's major characters. As a result of these promotions, any audience member not already familiar with the plot of the original graphic novel was led to believe that the *Watchmen* film was about a group of heroes who came out of retirement to save the world from nuclear war. Yet upon watching the film, the plot was revealed to be a much more cynical cultural critique on the role of heroes in the 21st century.

The key difference between *Watchmen* and the success of DC's other grittily anti-heroic adaptations such as *The Dark Knight*, can be seen in *Watchmen*'s failure to produce an action hero with whom the audience can identify. Due to DC's desire to showcase the darker, more complex realities of its brand of heroism, both *The Dark Knight* and *Watchmen* contained heroes that visibly struggled with their actions and roles in society. However, the anti-heroic treatment of Batman in *The Dark Knight* was still used to produce a symbol of hope that the people of Gotham and the audience could root for or identify with. For example, while Batman employs some highly unethical tactics to spy on Gotham's citizens, he only does so to save them from an even greater villain. Later, Batman makes the ultimate heroic sacrifice by choosing to protect Harvey Dent's reputation, allowing Batman to be cast as the villain so that Harvey, the symbol of institutional justice and morality, could be preserved as a beacon of hope. More importantly, in this film, Batman's deceit is framed by his faith in the people of Gotham, which makes his ambivalent role easier to digest. Here, DC's revival of *Batman* as "The Dark Knight" serves two important purposes. First, it establishes the universal appeal of the *Batman* franchise through the duality of the Dark Knight figure as both transgressor and savior. Second, Batman's decision to valorize Dent is reminiscent of DC's desires to use superheroes to uphold institutional law and order. This further suggests while DC's various corporate brand-*images* and marketing strategies have changed over the years, its underlying brand, or its ideological understandings of justice and heroism have arguably remained the same. A similar form of deception is used at the

end of *Watchmen* as a means of bringing the people together, but here the act is far from hopeful or uplifting. Not only did The Watchmen decide that the world had to be lied to in order to maintain peace, their act of anti-heroism involved killing millions of people. As a result, the people of New York were brought together by fear of a god-like creature as opposed to their faith in the basic morality of mankind. While both *The Dark Knight* and *Watchmen* represented the increasingly pessimistic viewpoints of the late post-9/11 film cycle, the lack of a conventionally uplifting message and easily identifiable hero coupled with the lack of emphasis on heroic action sequences ultimately caused *Watchmen* to be less successful than other, more conventional comic book adaptations.

As both Marvel and DC entered the 2010s, the strengths of their corporate structures and individual approaches to heroism continued to be tested throughout the production of their films and comics. Two of the major corporate changes that had a significant impact on each company's performance were Disney's buy out of Marvel in 2009, and DC's creation of DC Entertainment that occurred in direct response to Marvel's announcement. While these acquisitions and corporate overhauls helped each company produce a number of comic adaptations across a variety of media forms, the long-lasting effects of these changes have raised some potentially troubling questions about the company's ideological and artistic directions from both industry critics and long-time comic fans.

In August of 2009, The Walt Disney Company announced its buy-out of Marvel Entertainment for $4 billion ("Of Mouse and X-Men" 71). The announcement carried with it a bittersweet outlook for the future of Marvel, which had spent the last seventy years as an independent company. On the one hand, Disney's previously established franchising power promised to be a great asset for Marvel. For example, shortly after Disney's takeover, Marvel began co-producing *Disney/Pixar Presents*, a magazine that reproduced the animated heroes of Disney and Pixar in comic book form. Later, in 2012, the characters of the Marvel Universe appeared on the ABC/Disney cartoon television network called Disney XD (Acken 2012). Even today, Marvel's merger continues to keep the comics and television industries buzzing with excitement over the company's development of a digital comics platform and its upcoming release of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*, which is set to air this Fall on ABC (Dove 2013). In just a few short years after the merger, Disney's acquisition of Marvel seemed to be the perfect model of corporate synergy at

work. Marvel was benefitting from Disney's extensive network of multimedia outlets, and Disney looked to Marvel's edgier character bank to "fill a hole in [their] much cuddlier portfolio" ("Of Mouse and X-Men" 71). Yet, despite this success, Marvel's merger worried some of Marvel's other investment partners. One concern that is still being felt in the industry today is that Marvel's conglomeration into Disney has the potential to ignite a series of drawn out legal battles over the licensing and distribution of some of Marvel's most profitable franchises such *X-Men* and *Spider-Man*, which are currently owned by Fox and Sony respectively. In response to these industrial concerns, the recent rebooting of these franchises can be seen as an attempt by Fox and Sony, through its Columbia Pictures division, to maximize the profits of these franchises while they still hold the licenses. For example, in 2012 Columbia Pictures released *The Amazing Spider-Man* as the first in a series of four films that secures their license until at least 2018. Other foreseeable legal battles may involve ownership over other cross-promotional merchandise such as toys and theme-park rides. As one industry report from *Reuters* has noted, Hasbro toys stands to be one of the biggest losers in the Marvel-Disney deal. While their licensing agreement extends until 2017, there is a growing concern that Disney will either honor their longer history and partnership with Mattel, Hasbro's biggest competition, or keep the licensing deals completely in-house through Disney Consumer Products (Sivaraman 2009). These licensing deals formed the basis for Marvel's success in the early 2000s, and while Disney's corporate framework has the potential to continue supporting Marvel, a series of legal battles could significantly disrupt Marvel's earning potential. One of the reasons Marvel suffered in the 1970s-90s was because of legal disputes over the ownership of *Spider-Man*, and if similar disputes occur, these licensing conflicts may have the undesired effect of similarly fragmenting Marvel's universe.

While the future of Marvel's success cannot be entirely known, these concerns show just how sensitive Marvel's properties are to changes in corporate structure. More importantly, investors and industrial critics are not the only people who have reservations about the merger. Long-time Marvel fans and action movie audiences were concerned about how Disney's family-oriented image might affect the brooding edge of Marvel's heroes ("Disney's Big Deal" 3). Since the inception of the Marvel universe in the 1960s, one of Marvel's key advantages over their competition was their unique ability to construct action packed narratives around realistic, humanly flawed characters that just happened to be special. As Marvel finally began to establish

itself in the superhero film industry through their licensing deals in the mid 2000s, their stories continued to astound audiences by capturing the emotional depth and cultural resonance of their characters and narratives in a commercially successful action blockbuster. With Disney's takeover, it is understandable that many fans were worried that Disney's penchant for family friendly morality plays and censorship would work against Marvel's more ambiguous narratives and produce heroes that were more akin to DC's one-dimensional heroes of the Comics Code Era. For now, these fears have been assuaged by Stan Lee's public approval of the merger and belief in the creative and synergistic potential of both companies. Disney's CEO, Bob Iger, has also expressed his intention of allowing Marvel to operate fairly independently, as Marvel's edgy heroes cater to Disney's previously under represented demographic of pre-teen boys ("Of Mouse and X-Men 71).

In direct response to the media attention as well as the critical and commercial success that Marvel received following the Disney buy-out, DC countered with a corporate restructuring plan of its own. A mere month after Marvel's announcement, Warner Brothers Entertainment announced that it would be "revamping its DC comics franchise into a new company, DC Entertainment" (Wyatt B5). While the deal had been in development in January, before Marvel's announcement, DC timed their re-launch both to distract from the success of Marvel (as they had done previously) and to address any industrial questions concerning the heightened competition between the two companies (Wyatt B5). On the one hand, this strategically timed re-launch can be read as an expert corporately controlled response to Marvel's competition. On the other hand, however, the fact that this was DC's third major corporate overhaul in a decade seemed to indicate that DC was failing to remain relevant in an ever-changing market. The mission statement of this new company—which was virtually identical to the one given only four years prior—maintained that Warner and DC were committed to the aggressive exploitation of its comic book characters. However, as a sign of their renewed commitment, this corporate re-design installed Diane Nelson as the DC Entertainment's new president. Nelson, who had overseen Warner's wildly successful *Harry Potter* franchise, was expected to increase Warner's output of blockbuster films and franchises using DC's stable of characters. To Nelson's credit, DC significantly increased its production of comic film adaptations with the release of *Watchmen* (Snyder, 2009), *Jonah Hex* (Hayward, 2010), *Green Lantern* (Campbell, 2011), *The Dark Knight Rises* (Nolan, 2012), and *Man of Steel* (Snyder, 2013). Unfortunately for DC, not

many of them were successful. For example, *Jonah Hex* was a very loose adaptation of a comic book series that was initially published in 1977-87. It was only revived in 2006 in an attempt to regenerate audience interest for DC's potential franchising opportunities. More importantly, compared to the hundreds of millions of dollars that were being spent to create other comic blockbusters, it's not surprising that *Hex's* paltry budget of $47 million failed to achieve significant attention (BoxOfficeMojo.com). The critical and commercial failure of *Green Lantern* also points to DC's inability to successfully parlay its lesser known characters to the big screen. In light of these set-backs, DC revamped its brand identity with the release of the DC 'peel' logo (Figure 9). A press release for the new logo stated that DC's use of the 'peel' effect was meant to "symbolize the duality of the iconic characters that are present within DC Entertainment's Portfolio" ("DC Entertainment" 2012). After "ruining" their company's previous re-brand with a series of unsuccessful adaptations, DC seemingly cut their losses and attempted to distance themselves from their now tarnished image. The company focused instead on its previously established franchises, and *The Dark Knight Rises* became the first film to carry the new logo. DC's abandonment of its lesser-known characters may be indicative of its desire to return to the classical interventionist justice espoused by their original heroes, especially since these characters seemed to be more easily adaptable for global audiences. Even though DC's heroes have typically been aligned with traditional interventionist, even simplistic, modes of heroism, DC's emphasis on the perceived duality of its characters can be read as an example of the company's desire to make its heroes appear similar to the complexity of Marvel's, which had gained considerable popularity in the last decade.

Fig. 9 DC's 'Peel' Logo (2012-present)[31]

In the midst of the social and political upheavals of the 2000s, the escapist wish fulfillment fantasies of the comic book narrative flourished in popular Hollywood cinema. During this time, adaptations like *X-Men, Spider-Man,* and *The Fantastic Four* provided simple narratives of good triumphing over evil that fostered feelings of hope and togetherness. As the decade progressed, American discontent with the War on Terror grew and began to shake the nation's faith in traditional ideologies of American heroism. The resulting boom in the production of comic film adaptations thus drew from darker more cynical texts such as Marvel's *Hulk* and *Iron Man* series as well as DC's *Watchmen* and *Dark Knight* series. While both companies managed to produce films that reflected the various needs of the post-9/11 commercial landscape, the films that balanced meaningful socio-cultural critiques with the action blockbuster genre were the most successful. For DC, this success came primarily through the multimedia exploitation of their *Batman* franchise in the form of Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* Trilogy, which began in 2005. However, with its recent transition from property licensor to producer, Marvel found success across a much larger number of film series including *Spider-Man, The Incredible Hulk*, *Iron Man* and *The Avengers*. By maintaining corporate control and creative continuity over their properties, Marvel effectively exploited their characters using the company's intricately connected universe of superheroes in order to maximize fan interest in its films. The creation of Marvel Studios enabled the company to maximize its commercial gain from these properties as well. In addition to these corporate shifts, Marvel marketed its superheroes through the use of the Hollywood blockbuster format and produced action-driven films with straightforward, universally appealing narratives that expanded Marvel's audience well beyond the fans of the

[31] Image retrieved from: http://dc.wikia.com/wiki/DC_Comics

company's original comic texts. Although this shift in Marvel's marketing has somewhat distanced its films from the critical power and cultural specificity of its original comics, Marvel's superhero adaptations have, on average, been more successful at the box office than anything produced by DC.[32] While Marvel's adaptation films may not be as culturally specific as their comic book predecessors, they offer audiences moments of subtle critical introspection without alienating a broader international audience. For example, in *The Avengers,* Tony Stark is still highly critical of America's potential role in perpetuating global terror through its interest in weapons manufacturing, yet such politically charged moments are often offset by the lighthearted banter between the other characters.

As the effect of each company's latest mergers, acquisitions and restructurings continues to be felt throughout the industry, the success of their upcoming projects will play a crucial role in determining whether Marvel will maintain its market lead. Current box-office reports place DC's latest adaptation, *Man of Steel* as the tenth most popular superhero adaptation of all time, and there are rumors of a possible sequel leading up to the release of a long-awaited *Justice League* franchise, which suggests that DC may well be poised for a comeback (BoxOfficeMojo.com; ComingSoon.net). However, both Marvel and DC are facing some potentially troubling corporate shifts that may affect the production, marketing, performance and reception of these future projects as well. For example, Marvel's buyout by Disney will supersede the company's previous marketing and distribution deals with Paramount Pictures and Hasbro toys, which may have significant drawbacks to Marvel's creative and commercial continuity. Likewise, according to *Variety*, none of DC's upcoming projects will be financed by Legendary Pictures, which was once DC's primary investor. Legendary was responsible for the production of *Batman Begins*, which arguably sparked DC's major commercial comeback following their relative disappearance after the *Superman* and *Batman* adaptations of the 1980s and '90s (Abrams 24). Thus, it is not enough for Marvel and DC's properties to continue being culturally relevant or popular among fans in the comic industry alone; each company must maintain the pop cultural visibility of its adaptations through aggressive cross-promotional marketing strategies and corporate structures.

[32] When adjusted for ticket price inflation, Marvel's films gross an average of $214,347,600, whereas DC averages only 195,605,500 per film (BoxOfficeMojo.com).

Conclusion

During the comic market slump of the 1980s and '90s, licensing adaptations for Hollywood audiences became an important platform for providing comic companies with an alternate source of revenue. Today, it appears as though the roles have reversed, as superhero adaptations have gradually become one of the major sources for Hollywood's tent-pole summer release schedule. Since the year 2000, over twenty of Hollywood's most popular and commercially successful films were superhero adaptations (BoxOfficeMojo.com). Despite this widespread cultural and industrial trend, it appears that not every superhero adaptation was guaranteed to be a hit. Upon closer industrial analysis of the top grossing comic book superhero adaptation films made within the last decade, a specific list of criteria for success can be discerned. One of the most common characteristics that united the majority of the box office winners was that they were all either licensed or produced by Marvel Entertainment. One of the main goals of this study has been to account for this market disparity beyond any singular understanding or neat polarization of each company's approaches to justice and heroism. After all, such critical approaches do not adequately account for the varied successes of both Marvel and DC's comics and adaptation films over time. Instead, this study argues that the commercial and cultural visibility of both Marvel and DC's comic book superheroes has varied according to each company's adherence to blockbuster models of filmmaking and their exploitation of cross-promotional marketing strategies, all of which are products of tightly controlled, often vertically integrated, corporate structures.

Since their inception in the mid-to-late 1930s, DC and Marvel developed in direct competition with one another, resulting in the need to distinguish their products in the comic industry by creating two distinct interpretations or brands of heroism. More importantly, the success of one company over another depended heavily on its ability to market these brands of heroism to the particular historical and socio-cultural needs of society, thus maximizing both its cultural and commercial visibility within the comic industry. For example, while both Marvel and DC's comics worked to address America's involvement in WWII during the 1940s, DC's comics were significantly more successful because they used the war as a marketing strategy to develop the company's own brand identity and narrative standards. Without changing the interventionist

adventure narratives of *Superman*, DC simply shifted its marketing strategies and used Superman's interventionist spirit in support of the nation's involvement in the war. While the covers of DC's comics directly addressed the war, their narratives remained everyday escapist adventures, which served the dual purposes of boosting America's morale and associating DC's comics with America's patriotic ideals of truth, justice and freedom. In contrast, Marvel used the war as the foundation for the existence of its first wholly independent character. Consequently, while *Captain America* was popular during the war, both Steve Rogers and Marvel struggled to find their place as America transitioned into the post-war period.

The link between DC's corporate structure, marketing strategies and industrial adaptability with the success of its comics is also apparent in its early film adaptations. For example, DC's *Superman* serial (Columbia, 1948) employed a much more restrictive licensing agreement that enabled the company to retain creative and commercial control over the adaptation. Even in these early stages, DC's desire to maintain control was indicative of the company's larger desire to cultivate a distinct brand identity and create timelessly iconic heroes. In the release of the film serial, DC's marketing strategies emphasized the release of *Superman* as a widespread entertainment "event." They also focused on the authenticity of its characters and the narrative continuity of *Superman* across the company's comics, film adaptations, and 'officially licensed' consumer goods and promotional items. These cross-promotional marketing strategies encouraged the proliferation of DC's characters across a variety of multimedia revenue streams, which enhanced the company's overall cultural and commercial dominance within the comic book and superhero adaptation markets. Unlike DC, Marvel's adaptation of *Captain America* (Republic, 1944) bore little resemblance to Marvel's original comic series and further failed to establish the connection between the two in the serial's promotional campaign. As a result, Marvel's comic sales continued to stagnate and their lack of an established cultural and commercial brand identity forced them temporarily out of business until the 1960s, when the development of the company's brand identity was taken more seriously.

The 1960s and '70s were a watershed moment for Marvel in terms of both popular appeal and the development of a distinct brand identity that enabled Marvel to compete directly with DC in comics and multimedia adaptations. First, Marvel gained visibility within the comic market by aligning its brand of brooding, introspective heroes with the proliferation of 1960s counter

cultural ideologies. Second, the sale of Marvel to Cadence industries in 1968 led to a series of corporate overhauls that replaced the company's former CEO with Jim Galton who actively began cultivating Marvel's cross-promotional multimedia potential. Even though Marvel began to challenge DC in terms of comic circulation profits in the mid-1960s, the company did not reach widespread cultural and commercial visibility until the late 1960s and 1970s, when it produced a series of film and television adaptations. As Marvel challenged DC's widespread market dominance during the late 1970s in particular, each company's success was measured by how well it exploited the emerging Hollywood action blockbuster formula and the cross-promotional marketing potential of its previously established superheroes. For example, in response to the growing popularity of Marvel's comics during the mid 1960s, DC remarketed its conventional heroes to both counter cultural and mainstream audiences by turning its *Batman* TV series (ABC, 1966) into a pop cultural phenomenon through an aggressive cross-promotional marketing campaign. DC's corporately and culturally driven trend of 'Bat-mania' effectively overshadowed Marvel's budding success. Indeed, DC's vertically integrated corporate structure and cross-promotional revenue streams ensured the company's overall commercial and cultural dominance throughout the decade. By the time that blockbuster filmmaking practices began to emerge in the Hollywood film industry with films like *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977), DC continued to expand the cultural and commercial reach of its heroes by adapting their brand of classically interventionist heroism into the big-budget action-driven *Superman* franchise that remained successful throughout the late 1970s and mid 1980s. DC's continued dominance during this period proved that, although DC's overarching brand of heroism was less culturally resonant during the 1960s and '70s, the company's corporate exploitation of multimedia revenue streams successfully shifted the cultural perception of its brand by realigning it with the industrial consumerism of the Hollywood blockbuster.

DC's adherence to the action blockbuster formula and its reliance on synergistic marketing strategies were particularly important to its success throughout the 1980s and 1990s. For example, DC's comic sales during the early to mid 1980s continued to be impacted by the company's struggle to realign its narrative structure with the socio-cultural needs of Reagan-era America. During this time, many of DC's superheroes including *Superman* and *Batman* were characterized by narrative instabilities as the company seemed unsure as to how to market its brand in an increasingly conservative social climate. However, DC improved the stability of its

brand image during the late 1980s through the promotion of darker, more violent re-imaginings of its heroes, particularly through Frank Miller's revision of Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986). Even though comics like Miller's *Dark Knight* were relatively distinct from DC's overall narrative types, the company maximized the appeal of the comics' ultra-violent interventionist heroism by using Miller's *Dark Knight* as a source for the 1989 blockbuster adaptation of *Batman*. This dark, ultra-masculine re-imagining of Batman also helped to enhance DC's cultural visibility by aligning its interventionist brand of heroism with other popular 1980s hard-bodied heroes such as Schwarzenegger and Stallone. DC was further able to expand the film's cultural and commercial reach through the company's cross-promotional licensing deals with companies like Coca-Cola and *Time* magazine. The importance of these underlying corporate structures to the company's success was made even more apparent by Marvel's disappearance from the superhero adaptation film market during the 1980s as a result of Ronald Perelman's corporate mismanagement after he purchased the company in 1988. Even though Marvel's corporate faltering slowed their development throughout the 1980s, fans of Marvel's comics remained undeterred, suggesting that Marvel's brand of neurotic and introspective heroism was capable of attaining a broader cultural appeal. All the company needed was a supporting corporate structure similar to DC's that could promote Marvel's heroes through alternative revenue streams in order to maximize their commercial visibility.

Throughout the early to mid 2000s, there were three key industrial shifts that drastically altered the cultural perception of both Marvel and DC's comic book superheroes. Together, these shifts ultimately led to the widespread pop cultural and commercial dominance of Marvel's heroes in today's markets. First, under the new corporate leadership of people like Avi Arad and Ike Perlmutter, who helped stabilize the company after it went bankrupt in 1996, Marvel began the arduous task of reacquiring the licensing rights to *Spider-Man,* which was one of its most popular comic properties throughout the 1990s. By reacquiring these rights, Marvel made millions when it licensed *Spider-Man* to Columbia Pictures in 2002. Furthermore, since the company's take over in 1996, Marvel developed its own vertically integrated corporate structure. This new business model, which was very similar to DC's previously established corporate structure, enabled Marvel to license the production of cross-promotional marketing and consumer items such as action figures and collectibles through Ike Perlmutter's company, ToyBiz, now a subsidiary of Marvel Entertainment (Raviv 268). By maintaining corporate

control and creative continuity over their properties, Marvel was finally able to cultivate its brand identity across multiple consumer revenue streams, which catered to the built-in audience of Marvel's original comics and generated also new fan interest in the company's heroes. The second major industrial shift that led to the success of Marvel's properties during the 2000s was the merger of AOL with Time Warner in 2001. The resulting corporate backlash from this merger prevented DC from producing any major live-action film superhero adaptations until 2004, when the increased competition from Marvel forced DC to reorganize the company and re-establish their characters in the now booming superhero adaptation market. The final major industrial shift that improved Marvel's cultural and corporate visibility in the superhero adaptation market was its development of Marvel Studios in 2006 (Hamner 2006). Marvel's newest vertically integrated subsidiary transformed the company from a licensor to the producer of its major motion picture franchises, giving Marvel even more corporate and creative control over its properties. Between 2008 and 2012, Marvel used their newfound creative and corporate control to produce a series of superhero adaptations that slowly introduced a new member of Marvel's intricately connected universe of superheroes and culminated in the release of the multi-character blockbuster *The Avengers* (Whedon, 2012). Unlike DC's superhero franchises which remained self-contained on film, Marvel followed DC's example of cross-promotional marketing strategies and took them one step further, promoting the creative and narrative continuity of Marvel's heroes across every one of its films.

By 2009, Marvel's success as an independent film studio caught the attention of Disney, which purchased the company for $4 billion ("Of Mouse and X-Men" 71). As subsidiaries of the world's largest media conglomerates, Marvel and DC had successfully established very similar corporate structures. However, Marvel's continued success over DC suggested that the company was able to use these corporate structures to develop and market a more coherent brand identity than DC's. Without changing its underlying brand of self-critical, introspective heroism, Marvel successfully broadened the appeal of its characters from their specifically politicized fan bases of the 1960s to the mainstream audiences of Hollywood cinema by incorporating their brand of heroism with the action-blockbuster formula. While both Marvel and DC's films produced in the 2000s have addressed the socio-political issues of the post 9/11 commercial landscape, Marvel's adherence to the straightforward, action-oriented, special effects-driven blockbuster formula created simpler, more universally appealing narratives with easily identifiable heroes.

While DC produced similar results with its *Superman* and *Batman* series of the 2000s, the company went through a series of corporate overhauls, logo changes and brand-image overhauls that worked against the development of DC's brand-image. For example, in response to Marvel's success over the past decade, DC attempted to emphasize the darker, brooding and violent natures of its characters in an attempt to compete with Marvel's characteristically ambiguous heroes. This was especially apparent in DC's 2009 release of *Watchmen* (Snyder). While this film was marketed as an action blockbuster, and included big budget, highly stylized action-sequences, its overly complex and ambiguous narrative ultimately failed to produce heroes that mainstream audiences could identify with. The failure of *Watchmen*, which is ironically closer to Marvel's original model of culturally specific heroism, demonstrates the importance of Marvel's blockbuster hybridity to the success of its adaptation films of the last decade. While the introspective and self-critical spirit of Marvel's brand of heroism remains an important facet of its characters, the company's adherence to blockbuster modes of filmmaking has helped to realign Marvel's heroes with virtually any socio-cultural audience.

Marvel's continued ability to produce universally appealing, culturally relevant and commercially successful superhero adaptations is apparent in the reception its most recent adaptations. This is especially notable in the reception of Marvel's *The Avengers* when compared to DC's recent releases. For example, Brian Johnson has argued that the combination of action-oriented mayhem with Marvel's characteristic use of witty banter and squabbling heroes in *The Avengers* served as an example of how Marvel's newly developed corporate structure has worked to "re-engineer the DNA of the comic-book blockbuster" (64). He also notes that while DC has tried to produce similar blockbuster successes, its inability to produce successful adaptations beyond those based on Superman and Batman suggests that not all of DC's interventionist heroes have the same universal cachet as those produced by Marvel. DC's failures like *Green Lantern* (Campbell, 2011) were a result of DC's inability to use its cross promotional marketing strategies to generate fan interest in its less iconic characters. Further criticism of DC's most recent film, *Man of Steel* (Snyder, 2013) has also indicated that DC's diminished cultural and commercial presence, compared to Marvel characters is a result of the company's inability to emphasize its own unique brand identity in the blockbuster formula. While *Man of Steel* was definitely the most action-oriented Superman film produced within the last ten years, which undoubtedly contributed to its strong box office performance, its disjointed

narrative structure failed to create an emotional link between DC's iconic character and the audience. Instead, the film was viewed by some to be a "crass attempt by Warner Bros to cash in on the Marvel magic," with its heavy reliance on the visceral thrills of the film's pulse-pounding action sequences (Bardi 72). While both Marvel and DC have developed unique brands of heroism that run through the narratives of each company's characters, this study concludes that Marvel's increased cultural visibility and commercial success over the last decade is a direct result of the company's greater ability to market a relatively static, unchanging brand across virtually every one of its multimedia revenue streams.

In the early years of Marvel's development, Marvel's corporate and narrative structures were largely determined by its competition. As the industry shifted towards original superheroes in the late 1930s, Marvel copied the trend while making its characters distinct enough to avoid legal action by DC. Further, Marvel's development of *The Fantastic Four* in the 1960s was a direct response to DC's creation of its *Justice League* comics. As competition within the comic industry grew stronger, the success of one company over another became increasingly dependent upon the ability of its corporate marketing strategies to maintain its iconic brand-image while simultaneously meeting the broader economic and socio-cultural needs of the industry and its consumers. Throughout each of Marvel's cultural and industrial transitions of the last seventy years, the company slowly increased the visibility of its heroes within the American pop cultural and commercial landscapes. Although Marvel's early brand development was hampered by a series of corporate mismanagement and restructuring deals particularly during 1980s and 1990s, these setbacks worked to prove that the success of both Marvel and DC was heavily influenced by each company's corporate structures and responses to larger industrial and economic shifts in addition to the cultural resonance of their heroes. Through the chronological examination of how each company's corporate structures have reacted to and been shaped by these cultural and economic shifts, this thesis concludes that the emergence of Marvel's vertically integrated corporate structure, its increased exploitation of cross-promotional marketing strategies and adherence to action-blockbuster formulas of filmmaking have all been an integral part of the company's widespread commercial and pop cultural success within the last decade. Interestingly, while Marvel's commercial success was initially tied to its ability to mimic the industrial strategies of DC, in more recent years, DC has often been accused of attempting to mimic the seemingly universal appeal of Marvel's heroes. This reversal is indicative of a larger shift within

the comic and film industries toward a hybrid understanding of heroism, in which each company's distinct brand identities are made increasingly similar through blockbuster filmmaking practices.

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