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# The Rise of Marvel and DC's Transmedia Superheroes: Comic Book Adaptations, Fanboy Auteurs, and Guiding Fan Reception

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Master of Arts  
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THE RISE OF MARVEL AND DC'S TRANSMEDIA SUPERHEROES: COMIC BOOK  
ADAPTATIONS, FANBOY AUTEURS, AND GUIDING FAN RECEPTION

MONOGRAPH

by

Alex Brundige

Graduate Program in Film Studies

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
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London, Ontario, Canada

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## Abstract

This thesis highlights the industrial strategy of Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment in adapting their comic book properties to the screen, engaging in an analysis of how these studios appeal to a mainstream audience by harnessing the enthusiasm of comic book fans. It proposes that the studios' branding strategies were based in establishing their products as authentic representations of the source texts, strategically employing what Suzanne Scott calls "fanboy auteurs" – filmmakers with strong connections to the comic material – in order to lend credibility to their franchises. Situating the comic book films of Joss Whedon and Christopher Nolan as exemplary case studies, it proposes that these figures mediate fan interests and studio authority. Finally, this thesis traces how that industrial strategy has changed to accommodate unofficial modes of fan activity inherent in participatory culture.

### Keywords:

Marvel Studios, DC Entertainment, Joss Whedon, Christopher Nolan, comic book, fanboy auteur, franchise, film industry, participatory culture, transmedia, spreadable media, convergence, social media, user-generated content, continuity, multiplicity, Cinematic Universe, *The Avengers*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, *The Dark Knight Rises*.

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## Introduction

“Chris Nolan’s Batman is the greatest thing that happened because it bolstered everything. Imagine the one-two punch in 2008 of *Iron Man* and *Dark Knight*? It was great. Six years earlier I was having conversations with studio execs where they’d say, “Why don’t you come work for us? These comic book movies can’t last forever. It’s probably towards the tail end.” And I, being with big bright-eyed naiveté would go, “I don’t know, I think we can do more. I think there’s more fun to be had.”

Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige<sup>1</sup>

As of summer 2015, there will have been forty-nine cinematic adaptations of comic book properties from leading publishers and production companies Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment since the year 2000. Three of those films – *The Avengers* (2012), *Iron Man 3* (2013), and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) – fall within the top ten highest grossing films of all time worldwide<sup>2</sup>, and the majority of films from both studios have received the positive “Fresh” rating from the film review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes. Twenty-nine more films based on properties stemming from Marvel and DC are slated for production over the next six years (Keyes “Over 40”). In the introduction to their 2007 book *Film and Comic Books*, Ian Gordon, Mark Jancovich, Matthew P. McAllister comment on the growing status of comic book franchises as a potential “art” form, stating that these recent films have “even [attained] the dizzy heights of favorable reviews in the *New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books*, albeit accompanied by discussions of what constitutes a comic book and finely delineated distinctions between genuine artistic merit and dross” (Gordon, Jancovich, and McAllister “Introduction” viii). The importance of the comic book genre to the film industry is foregrounded through the critical discourse surrounding these products. While the

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<sup>1</sup> Rogers, Adam. “Kevin Feige Tells How Marvel Whips Up Its Cinematic Super Sauce.” *Wired*. 1 May 2012. Web.

<sup>2</sup> All box office figures and information have come from BoxOfficeMojo.com.

difference between artistry and “dross” is a continued point of contention within the critical discourse surrounding these series, the fact that this discussion is happening against the backdrop of hugely successful franchises based around these properties represents a significant change in the climate of the comics industry, as well as within the entertainment industry as a whole. From films to television series to the original print medium, superheroes have gained a certain respectability, at least in terms of mass appeal, that their source texts sorely lacked only a few short years ago.

The profit of Bryan Singer’s *X-Men* (2000) at the box office facilitated a greater number of adapted comic book materials. However, the particular boom in comic book adaptations associated with the more recent franchises of Marvel and DC can be linked to the success of a few particular films in the late 2000s. In 2008, David Bordwell wrote on this rise in the comic book adaptation genre: “For nearly every year since 2000, at least one title has made it into the list of top twenty worldwide grossers. For most years two titles have cracked this list, and in 2007 there were three. This year three films have already arrived in the global top twenty: *The Dark Knight*, *Iron Man*, and *The Incredible Hulk*” (Bordwell “Superheroes for Sale”). Where Marvel’s *Iron Man* (2008) and *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) both represent encouraging returns for the studio’s planned convergence franchise including multiple series and characters, with the culmination being the unprecedented team-up movie *The Avengers* (2012), DC’s *Dark Knight* trilogy (2005, 2008, 2012) can also be seen as a turning point in the superhero genre. While often noted for its “dark and gritty” tone, Christopher Nolan’s trilogy is in fact more in line with the comic book versions of Batman than many of the hero’s previous filmic depictions. As a result, the success of these films can be read as intrinsically linked to the appeal of Marvel and DC to long-held expectations of fans of the comic book texts. I argue that by courting fans through faithful and authentic filmic adaptations, Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment have gained box office dominance.

Though there has always been intertextuality and adaptation with regard to comic book franchises, the current industry trend is to create long form transmedia franchises based on comics properties. Defining the expression “transmedia”, media scholar Henry Jenkins writes, “Transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a



fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of the story” (Jenkins “Transmedia 101”). While the industrial strategy surrounding blockbuster filmmaking has long involved the production of sequels and tie-in products, Marvel, and afterwards DC, shifted towards what is now commonly referred to as the “Cinematic Universe” model. The expression denotes a series of film franchises set in an overarching fictional world. Characters from one franchise can be featured in other franchises set in this same world, and events and plot points from one film can affect the entire storyworld. Currently, the most prominent example of this is the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which features numerous franchises like the *Iron Man* and *Captain America* series’ that focus on the titular heroes, but continually cross-over in the team-up films based on *The Avengers* comics. DC has followed a similar model in fashioning their recent *Man of Steel* (2013) and *Batman* franchises as set in the same universe, with plans eventually leading to *The Justice League* (2017), a superhero team-up film comparable to *The Avengers*. The box-office success of this model has sparked the use of the Cinematic Universe as an industry model that other studios aspire to. As of 2015, there are various interconnected franchises being produced based on the King Arthur legends (Outlaw “King Arthur”), the Robin Hood stories (Schaefer “Robin Hood”), and Universal Studios’ horror movie monsters (O’Connell “Universal’s Monster”). In order for their transmedia stories to be followed across film series and other media by a mainstream audience, the studio strategy is to appeal and support the interest of pre-existing comics fans.

For companies like Marvel and DC, creating narrative synergy across a plethora of media forms in their Cinematic Universes relies on the fostering of a relationship between the products and the consumers, the most valuable of which are fans. Fans, or “loyals” as Jenkins calls them in his 2006 book *Convergence Culture*, “are more apt to watch series faithfully, more apt to pay attention to advertising, and more apt to buy products” (Jenkins *Convergence* 63). Fans feel ownership over their favoured properties, as viewing is enacting a form of authorship. Indeed, comic book culture in particular is “one of consumption and commodity” (Pustz *Comic Book* 18). They consume a lot in order to have the knowledge to speculate – a kind of virtual authorship – and even create

ancillary works. The creation of this fan culture is a kind of sociality, as “a fan is someone who wants to take part in the dialogue about the medium” (Duncan and Smith *Power of Comics* 173), creating social relations between people on the basis of their shared conversation. This process necessitates consumption in order for the dialogue to be produced. Kristina Busse has commented on what she perceives to be the dilution of fandom, stating, “Fans are ever present in the contemporary media landscape, and fandom is growing both more mainstream and more difficult to define as a result” (qtd. in Booth *Playing Fans* 4). The relationship between fans and mainstream audiences is a central aspect of my work, as I argue that fan discourse impacts reception in the mainstream. Active viewership on the part of fans generates an affective energy through the processes performed around these properties in fan communities. As Jenkins states, “If old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumers are active... If the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, the new consumers are now noisy and public” (Jenkins *Convergence* 19). Thus as Marvel and DC filmmakers producing filmic nodal points of established multiplicities are confronted with fannish discourse throughout the production process, the engagement with fan communities is necessary to the spread of positive opinion to a broad audience.

The worth of these properties to fans derives from the ability to take in popular culture and negotiate meaning from the textual materials that they are provided. This “semiotic productivity... consists of the making of meanings of social identity and of social experience from the semiotic resources of the cultural commodity” (Fiske “Cultural Economy” 37). While this process is “characteristic of popular culture as a whole rather than of fan culture specifically” (ibid.), it becomes fannish through active physical productivity. “Textual productivity” takes place when “[fans] produce and circulate among themselves texts which are often crafted with production values as high as any in the official culture” (Fiske “Cultural Economy” 39), both producing new texts and expanding upon prior texts. The studio-manufactured texts do not implicitly provide meaning for fans to accept at face value, but rather the platform through which fans produce their own meaning. These activities of reinterpretation and recreation are innate to fandom. As Jenkins states, “[fans] construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go

unvoiced within the dominant media” (Jenkins *Poachers* 23). These practices have only become more salient as digital media has become ubiquitous.

Marvel and DC harness this fandom by selling the Cinematic Universes as an authentic representation of the source texts to comics fans. Studios promote the fanboy auteur, a figure that signifies quality and fidelity on behalf of the studio and mediates the relationship between conglomerates and fan cultures. Since direct translation between media is not truly possible in adapting comic texts, fannish readers of the source material – called “fanboy auteurs” by Suzanne Scott – are thus needed to create alternative cinematic versions. These versions, although altered, nonetheless bear a strong relation to the fundamental elements of the characters through multiplicity which, as Jenkins states, “builds upon details and events which were well established in the continuity era” (Jenkins “Just Men in Tights?”). He continues to say that “certain events [have] to occur within these universes – say, the death of Bruce Wayne’s father, the destruction of Krypton, or the formation of the Justice League – but we are invited to read those events from different perspectives” (ibid.). By producing “authentic” films that display these details of continuity, studios demonstrate a sense of respect for the properties based on the fans’ relationship to the source texts.

This is complicated by the fact that when discussing Marvel and DC’s comic book films numerous comic book series have had many permutations over the course of years. Age and generation is central to the perceived authenticity of an adaptation, as certain source texts are privileged at different periods in time. When I refer to “source texts” throughout this thesis, I am referring to the popular comic texts that have consistently shaped the readers’ understanding of the characters and stories in a time period that is specific to current fans. Therefore, recent adaptations take on the shift in popular comics narratives in the late 1980s towards stories that, while fantastical in content, provided a more grounded characterization which features “heroes who have ceased to be superhuman, who sometimes have problems with drugs, alcohol and sex, and above all, who grapple with notions of authority, power, and evil that are not always clear and against which they do not always win” (Bongco *Reading Comics* 141). The inclusion of complex narratives and characters ties to the “legitimacy” of Whedon and

Nolan as filmmakers concerned with the authentic adaptation of the property from one medium to another. When a fanboy auteur like Nolan cites popular Batman source texts such as *Batman: Year One* and *The Long Halloween*, he is referencing historically significant arcs that present the modern representation of the character that has been popular only since the 1980s. While this depiction is accurate to many fans, it cannot truly be said to be “authentic” to a character with such a long history. Nolan and Whedon’s films have been well-received by fans as what they consider to be “faithful” to the source comics, but issues of authority arise when the filmmakers’ reading of the texts clashes with the popular reading of fan culture. *Man of Steel* director Zack Snyder responded directly to fan criticism of the film’s climactic showdown between Superman (Henry Cavill) and General Zod (Michael Shannon) that ends in the protagonist’s execution of his nemesis. Fans’ condemnation stemmed from the supposed idea that this kind of brutal finality was uncharacteristic of the hero, effectively breaking with “brand fidelity.” However, Snyder stated in an interview with Forbes contributor Mark Hughes, “If you really analyze the comic book version of Superman, he’s killed, he’s done all the things – I guess the rules that people associate with Superman in the movie world are not the rules that really apply to him in the comic book world, because those rules are different. He’s done all the things and more that we’ve shown him doing...” (Hughes “Exclusive Interview”). Snyder acknowledges the disconnect experienced by fans in experiencing his version of Superman, but goes on to situate this new iteration as technically closer to the comic book version. Therefore, an understanding of the historical hierarchy of source texts is crucial to an effective fanboy auteur figure.

Robert Stam further complicates notions of authenticity and fidelity to source texts by questioning the primacy of the original material. Stam writes, “All texts are tissues of anonymous formulae, variations on those formulae, conscious and unconscious quotations, and confluences and inversions of other texts” (Stam “Beyond Fidelity” 64). This conception of adaptation is not concerned with the translation of the original text’s authorial meaning across media and the unfaithfulness that comes from subverting this meaning. Rather, Stam points to the “plethora of possible meanings” that can stem from a single text (Stam “Beyond Fidelity” 57). However, fans of a text that is being adapted from one medium to another often judge the film on this very idea of “faithfulness” to the

source material. Consequently, while authenticity is an uncertain term when discussing adaptation, it is central to the way in which adaptation functions among fans. The fidelity important to comic book adaptations is a “discourse of fidelity”; it is what fans say to each other and to a wider audience regarding perceived “faithfulness” that matters, not actual intertextual connections. Here, the *claim* that an adapted text is authentic is the basis of acceptance.

Chapter one of this thesis is centred on the process through which Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment have rebranded themselves as film studios that have an entrenched interest in providing faithful, authentic adaptations of the comic source texts. Marvel has proven the effectiveness of this strategy in generating online discussion surrounding their adaptations, reaching a wider audience of non-fans that have no background knowledge of the characters and story. While it is true that a large portion of this mainstream audience would have likely seen these films solely for their status as blockbusters, the studio managed the risk inherent to selling an untested product to mass audience by generating positive early buzz. I situate Marvel and DC’s success in courting comics fandom as stemming from the marketing of their superheroes as legitimate incarnations in the transmedia multiplicity of the characters. Furthermore, by authenticating their Cinematic Universes to fans, Marvel and DC were able to create a product that appealed to the mainstream’s want for faithful adaptations.

Chapter two analyzes two fanboy auteurs that I consider to be crucial to the establishing of Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment as faithful interpreters of comic texts: Joss Whedon and Christopher Nolan. With regard to his work on Marvel’s *Avengers*, Whedon brought a certain amount of credibility to the then untested superhero team-up film by way of his status as a television showrunner with a pre-existing fan base. Similarly, Nolan was seen to reinvigorate the Batman franchise by providing a darker filmic interpretation of the character that was more in line with the source materials. The industrial significance of Whedon and Nolan is not only that their past filmography was in line with what fans expected from an authentic adaptation of the comics texts, but also that they publicly professed to have a strong engagement with these texts and a respect for the fans. As fanboy auteurs, these filmmakers were meant to authenticate both the

properties they were adapting, as well as the studios they were working under. I analyze their comic book films to demonstrate how Whedon and Nolan both draw on fundamental thematic and iconographic aspects of the source texts as well as on their previous auteurist body of work.

Where chapters one and two examine the strategies of Marvel and DC in creating an authentic product with mass appeal, chapter three examines the tension between studio and fan authority that comes from the creativity inherent to participatory media. Participatory culture is one in which consumers are also, to some extent, producers. Fandom is fundamentally a participatory culture, with viewership not simply an act of watching, but making the act of watching a certain text or texts into a “cultural activity” (Staiger *Reception* 95). I propose that when studios dealing with materials that have strong fan cultures like Marvel and DC enforce strict parameters around how fans can and cannot engage with their properties, fans will subvert their authority. Therefore, these studios have had to alter their industrial model to allow for differing forms of fannish activity. I posit that while studio officiated modes of participation are seen by scholars such as Suzanne Scott and Kristina Busse as limiting to fan creativity, fans are intelligent and resourceful enough to question this censorship and reinterpret the material in their own way.

I analyze and historicize the role of the fanboy auteur by arguing in my conclusion that the role of the guarantor has shifted towards an “auteur producer” (Rogers “Kevin Feige”). In particular, Marvel Studios president and producer Kevin Feige has been noted for his role in coordinating the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Similarly, Warner Bros. president of creative development and worldwide production Greg Silverman and DC chief creative officer Geoff Johns have taken on an increasingly prominent role in the discourse surrounding DC’s film productions. It is through their association with the fanboy auteurs—who would define their franchises in these early stages—that these studio figures have been able to emerge as reliable interpreters of fannish texts. It is also important to note that having taken on this role, Feige primarily ascribes authorship of these films to their directors, stating in a 2015 interview, “We wouldn’t have hired any of the filmmakers we’ve hired if we just wanted somebody who

would do what we say” (Kilday “Paul Rudd”). Though the hiring of filmmakers with prior credibility like Joss Whedon and Christopher Nolan has given way in recent years to lesser-known figures like Alan Taylor (*Thor*, 2011) and Peyton Reed (*Ant-Man*, 2015), the fanboy auteur as an industrial tool was central to the establishing of Marvel and DC as committed to fan approval.

This thesis uses the term “fannish behavior” to denote the characteristic activities of fans, such as consumption and participation. Furthermore, as is the case in most fan communities, comic book fans “enjoy being experts” (Brookey *Hollywood Gamers* 69), lending to the mass consumption of material surrounding their identified object of devotion. Fannish behaviour can encompass participatory practices from online posting and discussion about a film or films to the creative staging of fan fiction and fan videos based on the subcultures object of affection. Busse comments on the limitations that the growing centrality of fandom has put on these traditional fan practices. She writes, “Certain groups of fans can become legit if and only if they follow certain ideas, don’t become too rebellious, too pornographic, don’t read the text too much against the grain” (Busse “Podcasts”). While I recognize the fact that fannish participatory practices have in many ways been co-opted by conglomerates for marketing purposes, I argue that fans are able to engage in capitalist consumption and participatory culture even while being hindered from creative activity by studio authority. In fact, the ability that fans possess to work in accordance with studio-sanctioned fan practices or against them has notably resulted in a shift in Marvel and DC’s industrial strategy in order to account for these kinds of activities. In chapter three especially, I discuss the ways in which fan creativity has complicated the authority of studios like Marvel and DC over their characters and brands. The ability that fans possess to work in accordance with studio-sanctioned fan practices or against them makes fans, according to Jenkins, the “guarantors of continuity and the generators of multiplicity, [with] the two modes [involving] different degrees of closeness and loyalty to the author” (Jenkins “Guiding Spirit” 56).

These three chapters highlight the industrial strategy of Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment and how it generates mainstream interest through the courting of the audience of comic book fans, as well as examining the complications that arise from the

close proximity of these properties to fan culture. The process of selling untested properties like *Iron Man* and *Thor* to mainstream audiences by first appealing to fans was a key way in which Marvel managed the risk of taking on a production role in the film industry. DC undertook a similar approach in rebooting its Batman franchise under Christopher Nolan. These studios demonstrated their authority over these products by hiring filmmakers who, both in relation to their past work as well as their proclaimed status as fans, were seen to represent the source materials in an authentic way. However, the relationship between this studio authority and fannish participatory culture is multifaceted and complicated. As the reception of these films is tied up in how fans actively engage with them in the increasingly interconnected and user-generated digital arena, Marvel and DC must account for fannish creativity and authorship over material owned by the studios as copyright holders. When studio authority chafes against fannish activity, the reverential status that the studios wish to achieve by authentically representing the comic texts is made difficult. This necessitates adaptation on the part of Marvel and DC in order to deal with the unofficial modes of creative participation that fans enact over official studio properties.



## Chapter 1

### 1 “How to Get More”: Adapting Comics, Transmedia Multiplicity, and the Superpower of Fandom

Comic book heroes and their franchises have become nearly ubiquitous in current popular culture, with the most successful films from Marvel and DC, *The Avengers* and *The Dark Knight Rises* having a total worldwide gross of \$1,519,557,910 and \$1,084,439,099 respectively (BoxOfficeMojo.com). While superhero films have historically always had success at the box office, the rise in popularity of these films in the late 2000s onwards coincides with an altered approach to the material on the part of the studios. The use of the cross-media franchise model has developed alongside this superhero genre, and in many ways is inextricable from the success of these films. As production companies, Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment have moved from their roots as comic book publishers into the licensing and ultimately production of their properties as big budget films to massive popularity and financial reward. As former Marvel Studios chairman David Maisel stated in a 2008 interview, “[we’ve] taken control of our own destiny. We’re getting the same producer fee that we would have got if we had been licensing the property, in addition to 100 per cent of the upside” (“Movie maker”). Of course there is greater risk on the downside, but these massive series, referred to as “Cinematic Universes,” have become the standard for success to which studios aspire. In addition to the linking together of several filmic franchises, a central component of these series is the way in which producers have displayed a strong focus on appealing to fans of the original comic books by situating intertextual fidelity to specific source texts as a selling point. Studios have more often than not taken liberties with the source material when adapting comics; the Cinematic Universes of first Marvel and then DC have been structured around the faithful translation of the comic texts from page to screen. The risk inherent to the movement of Marvel and DC from the licensors of their copyrighted materials to producers of the same has meant that they had to pursue new strategies in order to manage the potential downside. As fans are the invested consumers who will engage with these films as early as the production stage, the studios needed to appeal to their long-time engagement with the comic books in order to establish the

perception that they are respecting fannish properties. In appealing to comic book fans, studios are able to generalize this appeal to a wider mainstream audience, who are influenced by the vocal online reception of these adaptations by fan communities. The approach that Marvel and DC have taken is to establish their filmic adaptations as points in the properties' intertextuality, drawing on consistent aspects of characters and stories beloved by fan cultures to create a nodal point faithful to this multiplicity. Essentially, these studios must construct their adaptations as credible versions of the story in the eyes of fans. What this chapter will outline is that this appeal to fans is considered by Marvel and DC to be a necessary step in the marketing of an existing property in the comic book medium to a cinematic mass audience. Marvel Studios will be the main point of discussion, as they have released a larger slate of films that exemplify the way in which the studio has worked to appeal to mainstream viewers through fan-generated discourse. DC will also be referenced for how their business model has adapted to the Cinematic Universe template of Marvel, illustrating the growing centrality of fans to comic book film production.

Fandom is crucial to the success of these franchises, but as online culture has become one less defined by audience passivity, instead facilitating the active experience of the audience in terms of when, where, and how content is engaged with, what constitutes a fan has become a wider definition. Commenting on the so-called "mainstreaming" of fan culture and to proliferation of fannish behaviour and consumption in the digital arena, Henry Jenkins writes, "What doesn't constitute fan culture? Where does grassroots culture end and commercial culture begin? Where does niche media start to blend over into the mainstream?" (Jenkins "Afterword" 364). The increased productivity that users have in terms of the interconnected online arena of social media and user-generated content is commonly known as Web 2.0, which is seen as "dynamic" where prior internet technology was "static" (Hills "Textual Productivity" 131). Though this term is contested for the way that it largely discounts fan productivity before the internet (*ibid.*), it is a useful term to denote the current online participatory climate based on social media and easily circulated content. Though many of the scholars whose work I have drawn on comment on the loss of fan identity, I use Matt Hills' description of fandom as "not simply a 'thing' that can be picked over analytically" but a

status that is “always performative... an identity which is (dis-)claimed, and which performs cultural work” (Hills *Fan Cultures* xi). To assert fandom is to assert “a cultural identity based on one’s commitment to something as seemingly unimportant and ‘trivial’ as a film or TV series” (Hills *Fan Cultures* xii). Though consumptive practices have changed through online culture, in many ways matching what fans have been doing for a much longer time, fan status must still be declared.

## 1.1 Marvel and DC’s Move to Film

The two biggest companies at play in the arena of superhero properties are Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment. Consumer interest in the comics industry began to wane in the early 1990s, leading to a massive downturn in the business, degenerating from 1993 to 1997. Both companies were originally publishers of comic books (founded in 1939 and 1934, respectively), and would ultimately seek out a place in the film industry in order to remain relevant and economically productive. As Derek Johnson writes, “the comic industry as a whole... seemed to be in need of a translation into a new media” (Johnson “Wolverine” 71). DC had long been owned by Warner Bros., which subsequently merged with Time Inc. in 1989, creating a powerhouse media conglomerate (McDonald “Cult of Comic-Con” 120). Under its larger parent company, DC was in a far more stable situation than the autonomous Marvel in terms of financial security. Johnson writes, “the conglomerate nature of Time Warner did insulate and protect DC in a way unknown to the more independent Marvel” (Johnson “Wolverine” 73). In 1996, Marvel had gone bankrupt due to a major decline in the comics industry (Raviv *Comic Wars* 53). As a result, Marvel licensed many of its properties to outside companies for a percentage of the profits. As film adaptations of these properties gained popularity in the early 2000s with blockbuster adaptations like *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* (2002), the comics company would move towards taking a more significant role (and therefore a more significant percentage) in the production of superhero films. Conversely, Marvel’s difficulty in releasing a profitable slate of films on their own terms had facilitated the need for the company to move towards a more self-sufficient form of production. Under their licensing deals, “Marvel could generate the predictable returns favored by corporate accounting and investors only if it could promise something like a *Spider-Man* film every

year—a mean feat considering that the power to green-light rested with multiple Hollywood production partners disinclined to coordinate releases given their competition with one another” (Johnson “Cinematic Destiny” 10). With DC, the major production partners were a greater part of the company itself, a key advantage in terms of financial returns. Taking on a full production role, while lucrative, was an obstacle that Marvel would need to overcome.

As Marvel shifted into filmmaking largely independent from major studios, they moved away from their old production structure, wherein “film studios like Fox and Sony actually [made] the movies – and [sucked] up most of the profit. Marvel generally [got] 2 to 10 percent of the profit” (Hamner “Marvel Comics”). While these deals and the subsequently produced franchises provided “low risk” monetary returns for Marvel (ibid.), the studio nonetheless saw an opportunity to evolve in this industry. Marvel Entertainment CEO Allen Lispon questioned Marvel’s low return on DVD sales, stating “We were getting such a small share of the DVD revenues. How do you get more?” (ibid.). The question of “how to get more” became central to Marvel’s business decisions in the late 2000s. While Marvel had made a triumphant return from bankruptcy as what journalist Dan Raviv calls a “company... deeply committed to film production... [as] ‘the best way to promote superheroes’” (qtd. in Johnson “Wolverine” 69), the potential to increase both monetary returns and independent filmmaking became obvious. In a bid to self-finance their own productions, the company negotiated a \$525 million loan from Merrill Lynch Wealth Management (Hamner “Marvel Comics”). With this loan, Marvel Studios was able to autonomously produce its own films and distribute them through Paramount. The change in financial returns reflected the positive effect this had for the studio as Marvel moved from solely licensing properties to producing its own. In 2002, Marvel’s annual report showed net sales of \$79.6 million (BusinessWire “Marvel Completes”) based on licensing properties to other studios. The deal at that time was that Marvel received a licensing fee for the use of its characters, as well as fifty percent of the merchandising revenue (Brookey *Hollywood Gamers* 68). In 2008, after Marvel had taken on the role of sole producer of its films, annual net sales were reported as \$254 million (ibid.). The drastic increase in revenue, as well as ownership over their properties, makes clear the benefits that Marvel received in taking on production responsibilities.

The company moved from a low risk, low return model to one with a greater upside, but also a greater potential for loss. As former Marvel Studios CEO Avi Arad made clear, “You can’t do \$155 million with just Marvel geeks” (Jenkins “Comics and Convergence”). Marvel’s plan in producing their own big-budget films required that they find an audience beyond fans. Their strategy for reducing the inherent danger in this move was not to ignore fans, but to draw on their pre-existing fan base rooted in comics to legitimize the work to a larger audience.

Marvel needed to make absolutely sure that their existing fanbase was maintained and carried over from all potential media. This approach is evident in the discourse coming from Marvel executives during this transition. Much of the discussion had to do with the benefit that comic book fans would receive from this development, as the studio’s independence was said to have the effect of a superhero product closer in fidelity to the original material. Arad outlined the company’s position on what was expected of the filmmakers becoming involved in these properties. Arad stated in 2006, “Unless you buy into the gestalt of what Marvel is and understand the characters and metaphors and treat them as living people, we are not interested. This is material that has withstood the test of history, and the director and writer have a sense of responsibility” (Stork “Assembling” 87). Fans make up only a small portion of the viewing audience, but are the “early... enthusiasts” (Burke *Adaptation* 138) who will engage with adaptations of comics texts from the early stages of pre-production. In appealing to a larger mainstream audience, studios cater to fans in order to facilitate the positive discussion of their films. Liam Burke cites the success of director Guillermo del Toro’s adaptation of Mike Mignola’s niche comic book *Hellboy* (2004) as being “thanks in part to enthusiastic online fans” (qtd. in Burke *Adaptation* 139). Non-fans have little to no exposure to many of the adapted superhero properties, and so they “propagate fan opinion” (Burke *Adaptation* 139) as it is the most prominent reaction to the material online. Cyclically, the “fan power” that is acknowledged by the mainstream comes from the influence of fan opinion on non-fan reception. As mainstream audiences “value fidelity, or at least the idea of it” (Burke *Adaptation* 140-141), what fans think of blockbuster comic book adaptations is intrinsically tied to the way that a significant portion of the mainstream audience will also receive them.

Though long-time fans are the original audience of these materials, they are in the minority of the filmic viewing audience. As Neil Rae and Jonathan Gray write “although comic book readers are the most knowledgeable of audiences, they are very much a minority within the total number of viewers for comic book movies” (Rae and Gray “Gen-X” 86). This is in opposition to the mainstream audience, which enters the film with little to no prior engagement with the properties and does not seek further activity or participation with the properties. In Rae and Gray’s ethnography, they discuss the multiple textual experiences involved in the comic book genre, stating that these films “[require] all viewers to struggle somewhat with intertextual networks of knowledge and precedence, ultimately creating two very different textualities for the film, with significant tension between the two types” (Rae and Gray “Gen-X” 86). However, non-fans may become knowledgeable of the fact that source material exists, making the status of the films as adaptations of fannish properties still relevant to these viewers.

As Liam Burke writes, non-fans “are active in the way that they view these films in the context of the maturing comic book genre” (Burke *Adaptation* 112). This goes beyond generic designations of “action” and “science-fiction,” creating a relatively new genre that “[narrows] comic book adaptations and related films into a discrete group with shared conventions” (Burke *Adaptation* 116). According to Burke, these conventions include a “comic aesthetic” based on comic book artwork and colour palates (ibid.) and narrative conventions such as the “hero motivated by revenge” (Burke *Adaptation* 117) that is tied to heroes and anti-heroes like Batman and The Punisher. The comic book genre is based not only in specific generic conventions, but also in a sense of authentic representation of the source material. The status of the comic is central to the reception of the film for both fan and non-fan audiences because the source text is incorporated in the films’ marketing. For example, the marketing around the comic book films *300* (2006) and *30 Days of Night* (2007) focused specifically on the fact that these works were adapted from graphic novels, as opposed to being products of their well-known directors or actors (Burke *Adaptation* 119).

The knowledge on the part of mainstream audiences about the existence and prominence of the comic source texts tie issues of fidelity to their reading of the genre.

There are many reasons that mainstream audiences value faithfulness to a text that they have never engaged with, from belief in the “seniority” of the original text over an adaptation (Stam qtd. in Burke *Adaptation* 139) to the deference to original comics fans as “experts” who have a more nuanced understanding of what makes the story and characters “great” (ibid.) In regards to more recent superhero films, both Marvel and DC have shaped the animated company logos that play in their films’ opening credit sequences to include flashes of comic book panels and images taken directly from existing books. The tying of both studios directly to these images demonstrates the communicability of this comic book aesthetic in establishing the intentions of these companies, namely the adherence to fidelity that both Marvel and DC align themselves with. The establishing of this genre as a popular mode of filmmaking is done at least in part by the harnessing of affective energy from fans to mainstream viewers.

## 1.2 Storyworlds: Marvel’s Transmedia Strategy

The term “high concept filmmaking” is strongly tied to blockbuster filmmaking and mass appeal to the widest possible audience. The plots are straightforwardly understood by both producers and audiences, having to do centrally with tangible story elements rather than internal struggles. These films “have very clear external conflicts for the characters to engage with such as human against human, human against technology, human against society, human against nature, human against supernature, just to name the most common ways of classifying the types of story conflict” (Dowd *Storytelling* 90). Justin Wyatt connects the propagation of this term with the evolution of Hollywood practices in his 1994 book *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, especially in terms of “the conglomeration of the film industry and the rise of television, new marketing methods, and changing distribution strategies” (Wyatt *High Concept* 16). Essentially, changes in the industry since the 1960s necessitated the massive restructuring of Hollywood in the move to blockbuster filmmaking. Studios had to account for the wider variety of easily accessible media through which consumers were able to experience pop culture. The utilization of these media in conjuncture with a blockbuster film is an economic function tied to the propagation of a brand, and has also been harnessed for the purposes of telling a transmedia story. This is of course also done with

profits in mind, as the nature of transmedia storytelling involves consumption across several media, increasing a company's chance for financial returns from sales. High concept narratives are the most successful kind of stories for transmedia because they often involve grandiose storyworlds that can be explored through various media (Dowd *Storytelling* 82). In creating strong cross-over appeal geared towards comic fans while at the same time fostering strong interest from a mainstream audience, Marvel's business model hinges on the integration of traditional practices of high concept filmmaking with the constructive nature of fandom. The brand is at this point exactly in line with classic definitions of a transmedia universe with one unified story across multiple media, as tie-in television series such as *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, *Agent Carter* (2015), and *Daredevil* (2015) and comic books such as *Captain America: First Vengeance* (2011), *The Avengers: Black Widow Strikes* (2012), and *Ant-Man: Scott Lang. Small Time* (2015), as well as several video game adaptations that expand on the films' plots all exist within same continuity as the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Avid fans of the Marvel Cinematic Universe were led across several media nodal points in order to piece the whole narrative together. DC, while still in the early stages of its Cinematic Universe, is following this model as well with a prequel comic to *Man of Steel* that both introduces background to the film's narrative and sets up the DC character Supergirl as a presence in the cinematic franchise.

Marvel's alignment with fans "was not merely designed to appeal; it was designed to appeal and to be *sold*, as a myth come to life, ready to be experienced as a consumer good" (Stork "Assembling" 91). The selling point based on appeal to old fans was a tactic largely effective in creating new consumers; essentially, a marketing strategy in which both parties, the producers and the consumers, were satisfied. While mainstream concern with authenticity is a major factor in this process, the fostering of more in-depth participation in a wider audience is just as important. Consequently, what becomes evident is the calculated way in which the studio encourages an emulation of fannish behaviours, even outside of the context of comic book adaptations. Kevin McDonald writes,



“[The] unique ability to simultaneously elicit intense fan involvement while also maximizing the overlapping commercial potential of this involvement anticipates one of the main aspirations of the franchise model. Indeed, it suggests that the film’s expansive storylines and mythological substrata were instrumental in converting viewers into life-long apostles” (McDonald “Cult of Comic-Con “123).

The inclusion of a greater level of serialization throughout the Cinematic Universes of both studios show the way in which they are seeking to duplicate the fannish behaviour associated with the original comic book texts and increase consumer consumption. While film series have frequently been serialized rather than presented as isolated episodes, the synergy of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the similar proposed model of the DC Cinematic Universe foster a different kind of audience engagement. Transmedia serialization has long been a part of comic book storytelling (Burke *Adaptation* 65), and the way in which these Cinematic Universes sustain continuity between separate franchises (e.g. *Captain America* and *Iron Man*) mimics similar approaches found in comics. According to Burke, 81% of audience members surveyed after a series of *Thor* screenings felt compelled to see further films that were produced as part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe based on the quality of one nodal point in the larger narrative. Therefore, by replicating the serialized narrative development of the original comic book source material, the positive reception of one film in many cases lends the same reception to all of the connected franchises.

This serialized narrative illustrates the way in which viewers must work to gain an understanding of the overarching Marvel Cinematic Universe storyworld. The main film franchises (*Iron Man*, *Thor*, *Captain America*, etc.) all provide story content that is necessary for consumers to fully “get” the breadth of intertextual references and plot points going on in each film. For example, in the first two *Iron Man* films (2008, 2010), protagonist Tony Stark is presented as a cocky and confident playboy who approaches superheroism with a cavalier attitude. In the climax of the first *Avengers* film, Stark has a near-death experience while battling the villain’s alien army. In *Iron Man 3*, he deals with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) stemming from this incident, compulsively

building bigger and better weaponized suits of armor in order to assuage the paranoia he has about the safety of himself and his loved ones. If a viewer were to follow only the *Iron Man* films, Stark's character development would be missing the key detail that explains his behaviour in the third *Iron Man* film. The approach to the MCU as a series of cumulative stories is central to the way in which Marvel is structuring their franchises. Studio president Kevin Feige links this to the comic book "team-up" events in the studio's publishing past,

"*The Avengers* films, ideally, in the grand plan are always big, giant linchpins. It's like as it was in publishing, when each of the characters would go on their own adventures and then occasionally team up for a big, 12-issue mega-event. Then they would go back into their own comics, and be changed from whatever that event was. I envision the same thing occurring after this movie, because the [*Avengers*] roster is altered by the finale of [the sequel, *Age of Ultron*]" (Vary "What's At Stake").

This expounds transmedia as "the art of world making" (Jenkins *Convergence* 21). Henry Jenkins writes that "to fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels..." and interpreting these stories in fan communities (ibid.). The way in which this engagement is fostered will be scrutinized in greater detail in chapter three, but here it is important to note that the audience's construction of the Marvel Cinematic Universe story is an essential aspect of how these franchises are conceived.

Marvel comic book adaptations in particular demonstrate not only the plot-based premise factor inherent to high concept, but also the need for high concept imagery (characters, logos, etc.) that could be communicable across a variety of pop culture media. As Wyatt notes, this is primarily a marketing technique based on the ability for these images to be "[replicated] in marketing and merchandising (product tie-in) campaigns" (Wyatt *High Concept* 19). The licensed characters of Marvel and DC were positioned as symbols for marketing. This can be seen as far back as *Superman* (1978), which used the titular hero's "S" insignia as the focal point of the film's poster. The use

of the symbol in ancillary products created a direct branded link between the franchise and its associated media. A more recent example can be seen in the film *Iron Man 2* which features a World Fair in which the hero Tony Stark, a billionaire and inventor, has manufactured a series of Iron Man-based memorabilia products to be sold at the event. While there is a certain degree of purposeful irony to these moments as children play wearing plastic helmets and gloves in the likeness of Iron Man, similar products were actually manufactured and sold as tie-ins to the *Iron Man* series. Derek Johnson refers to Marvel's post-bankruptcy plans to emulate The Walt Disney Company, going so far as to call the comics company a "mini" version of the much larger conglomerate, and stating that "Marvel's primary product was no longer printed volumes of superhero adventures, but the intellectual property of the superhero itself" (Johnson "Wolverine" 72). The marketability of these heroes is tied to branding strategies based on the construction of multiple transmedia nodal points cohering through shared iconography. The strategy here was the construction of a franchise that moved beyond a central filmic version and merchandising tie-ins. This approach provided an increase of audience opportunities to form a relationship with these products.

In recognizing the ways in which fans consume cultural products and engage in dialogue about them, studios have sought to communicate with and replicate fans through their various sites of activity. This can be seen in the way Hollywood studios have used sites of comic book fan culture in constructing recognizable brands for film franchises. San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC), a convention established in 1970 catering to fans of science fiction, fantasy, and other pop culture fandoms, has become a convenient venue for studios to present their film projects based on pre-existing comic book material. Comic-Con becomes highly associated with the brands of these studios, most obviously Marvel and DC. San Diego Comic-Con has recently been the site of a panel discussion with the cast of the *Avengers* sequel, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* as well as DC's expansion into shared universe franchising with *Superman v Batman: Dawn of Justice* (2016). Both panels unveiled new exclusive footage for their respective films, rewarding those in attendance for their engagement with the Marvel and DC brands. This development is exemplary of the way in which studios court a wider fan audience. While formerly a niche venue, San Diego Comic-Con "is aligned not only with the blockbuster

phenomenon but with an intensified version of the blockbuster where individual films are explicitly conceived as part of a brand-oriented franchise designed to foster a transmedia multiverse of profits” (McDonald “Cult of Comic-Con” 118). The status of Comic-Con as a major arena for fan participation makes it an ideal place for studios to showcase their comic book films and reframe their blockbusters as “authentic”. Demonstrative of this methodology is the specific language used by producers and creators in appealing to fans. Matthias Stork points out the repetition of terminology associated with a “promise” on behalf of Marvel to fans at Comic-Con 2010 as they introduced the finalized *Avengers* template. Stork states that “[the] notion of the promise carried through the entire discursive process of assembling and selling *The Avengers*, with Marvel increasing its cultural fan capital as a company that honors its relationship with its core customers” (Stork “Assembling” 92). It is here that the importance of fandom in current pop culture is made clear through the studios’ focus on appealing to the fan audience through multiplicity and forms of affective address. The way in which Marvel and DC work to maintain fidelity of character across different media demonstrates their acknowledgement of fans’ need for reliable representation of their favorite heroes and villains. Ultimately, this authenticity will affect a wider audience who engage with fannish commentary surrounding these films in online communities.

### 1.3 Towards a “Multiverse”: Multiplicity and Character-Branding

Marvel Studios’ approach to blockbuster filmmaking would marry the traditional storyworld approach to a transmedia product with a focus on characters as brands, a strategy that was akin to those of Disney. Rather than presenting a consistent unitary story across its entire vast array of media products, Disney would use its characters in selective individual iterations. While Marvel Studios would eventually come under the ownership of Disney, their plans for character branding were already notable. The visually iconic character of Spider-Man originated in Marvel comics property *Amazing Fantasy* in 1962, but is also frequently featured in different media. Throughout the years, Spider-Man could be seen in a variety of television series starting in 1967, two separate film franchises, starring Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield respectively, novels both

adapted from comics and movies as well as original stories, multiple video games, and even a theatrical musical production. The red-and-blue colour scheme, webbing pattern, and wide, white eyes can be seen on clothing, lunch boxes, etc. In a 2014 financial report, Spider-Man was shown to be the most popular superhero globally, as License Global showed the financial earnings of merchandise based around the hero to be \$1.3 billion (Block “Superhero”). In his 2014 essay “The Cult of Comic-Con and the Spectacle of Superhero Marketing”, Kevin McDonald writes that the construction of transmedia iconography can be seen as early as Tim Burton’s *Batman* (1989), in which “the film’s effort to reference earlier versions of the character and to engage fans of alternate permutations played an influential role in establishing what would become an important strategy” (McDonald “Cult of Comic-Con”121). By identifying that alternate media versions of the character meant that a broader range of consumers could engage with the character and potentially be influenced to interact with other studio produced properties, DC, and later Marvel, demonstrated interest in transmedia multiplicity.

While the Cinematic Universes of Marvel and DC are tied to a consistent storyworld and continuity across media, the way in which they appeal to pre-existing fans is through the movement towards a “multiverse” based on characters (and therefore branding). This method was based on the piecing together of a fragmented “world,” a process that can be seen rooted in earlier definitions of transmedia. However, evolving transmedia franchises no longer necessarily adhere to such a singular approach to narrative. In his 2009 article “Revenge of the Origami Unicorn”, Jenkins reconsiders his earlier stance on transmedia by stating that texts can move beyond established continuity and into “multiplicity” in a rewarding way. He states, “Multiplicity allows fans to take pleasure in alternative retellings, seeing the characters and events from fresh perspectives, and comics publishers trust their fans to sort out not only how the pieces fit together but also which version of the story any given work fits within” (Jenkins “Origami”). For retellings to be acceptable to fans, they must accurately depict the tropes and conventions of the original texts’ themes and characters.

Where earlier definitions of transmedia rely on a clearly unified narrative linking all media nodal points together, the multiverse relies more on what Russell Backman

calls “essential shared traits” as a constant (Backman “In Franchise” 218). In writing about alternate realities present in certain comic book storylines, Backman states that the property is able to function as a transmedia narrative by “addressing issues of coherence” (Backman “In Franchise” 203). Variation is a central part of multiplicity, allowing for the acceptance of different versions of the same character across different media. Still, these narratives “rest on certain shared knowledge about who the characters are, what narrative actions matter, [and] what the parameters of the world are” (Jenkins “Guiding Spirit” 57). Going against this knowledge in any media will risk its rejection by fans. Marvel Comics vice president Tom Brevoort states, “There is a desire to keep consistency, but not absolute conformity, which is to say that [*X-Men* character] Wolverine basically needs to be Wolverine no matter what medium he is in... [he] essentially [has] to be the same individual – the same guy” (qtd. in Burke *Adaptation* 21). Accordingly, the utilization of characters as distinctive brands must present a certain coherent conformity across all media representations. Multiplicity, then, is less about exactly replicating a hero or story and more about reproducing an accurate “essence.”

The studios’ “synergistic strategies are based upon... characters; each character is a wheel whose spokes each represent a product revolving around the brand” (Wasko qtd. in Johnson “Wolverine” 71). For example, the filmic version of Batman in the Christopher Nolan *Dark Knight* trilogy is very different from the version in the earlier Tim Burton series. Christian Bale’s growling and withdrawn hero is in contrast to Michael Keaton’s campy and charming performance. However, both iterations demonstrate the ways in which these off-shoots of the Batman “brand” are “spokes” revolving around the “character.” Both depict the same origin story, showing Bruce Wayne’s vigilantism stemming from his witnessing the murder of his parents. Both present similar costumes, typified by a black cape and cowl in the likeness of a bat. Both show similar crime-fighting strategies inherent to the character, as Batman uses stealth and intimidation against his enemies. For comics fans in particular, multiple but recognizable versions of the same character are an intrinsic part of the medium. Characters and storylines are authored and reauthored several times as series run for years, transferring between multiple writers and artists. For example, one of the most prominent and critically-acclaimed Batman comic texts is *The Dark Knight Returns* by

Frank Miller, which features an older, retired version of the hero in a dystopic future. While this text exists as a standalone story outside of the canonical Batman comic continuity, it is nonetheless seen as a version that is in line with the Batman character brand, fitting the same criteria by which the filmic versions must achieve credibility through fidelity. The synergy created by this coherence across media can be seen in the way that Marvel and DC acknowledge certain issues of continuity necessary in “honoring the characters” between the comic books and the films. This is made obvious when looking at how two different studios adapt the same character from comics to film. Due to legal issues surrounding the character Quicksilver, both Marvel Studios and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox retained the right to depict the anti-hero in their film adaptations. Quicksilver, who in the Marvel comic continuity was a member of both the X-Men and the Avengers teams, was played by two different actors in two different film franchises a year apart. Evan Peters played the character in *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014) and Aaron Taylor-Johnson did in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. While played by two actors in two unconnected continuities, these depictions of the same character show the importance studios see in maintaining the “essential shared traits” of a character or story. In both films, Quicksilver maintains his superpower (super speed) and is depicted as a cocky and brash young man with white hair. Both versions, while at first reluctant, ultimately lend their support to the films’ heroes. The way in which Marvel chose to adapt this character clearly runs closely to the way that 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox did. When both films were in production, it is important to identify that rather than opting for a starkly different adaptation of Quicksilver, Marvel chose to stay close to the “essence” of the character despite the potential for confusion in a wider audience. This coherence is also present in the way Marvel acknowledges certain aspects from the comics that it has not translated to the filmic version. The Marvel comics villain Arnim Zola, a Nazi engineer, had a role in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). In the comics continuity, Zola was portrayed as having a robotic body, with a human face projected onto a screen on the body’s chest. This science-fiction based figure was toned down for the film, in which Zola was played by Toby Jones and depicted as a normal, human scientist. In the sequel, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), Zola had become a sentient supercomputer, and was depicted as a large bank of computers with a human face projected onto a central

screen in much the same way as the character was seen in the comic texts. Many fans saw the way the character was presented in the sequel to be a nod to the source material and to the fans that would recognize such allusions (Dyce “Captain America”, Whyte “Sixteen”). This kind of reflexivity both rewards fan awareness of the source text and acknowledges the significance of importing these key character details in appealing to fans.

## 1.4 Marketing Through Buzz: How Fans Affect the Mainstream

When considering a multi-billion dollar product like the Marvel adaptations, leaving the creative development of the narrative solely to the fans is not a real possibility. The fact that mainstream audiences do not come to these adaptations with the same level of in-depth knowledge of the pre-existing comic book franchises behind them means that the continuity present in the long-running books cannot be directly translated to the filmic version. Comics series “have core audiences of fans that engage with characters over longer periods of time, and... these fans have distinct opinions on how characters should be adapted for film” (Gordon, Jancovich, and McAllister “Introduction” *xi*). In writing about the evolution of intermediary marketing strategies in 2006, Greg Metz Thomas, Jr typifies buzz marketing as “the amplification of initial marketing efforts by third parties through their passive or active influence” (Thomas “Building the buzz” 64). While Thomas’ analysis is broadly about marketing to a “hive mind” in general, it is highly applicable to the situation present in recent superhero franchises from Marvel and DC. In this case, the “third parties” in question are the original comics fans who, ideally, will be carried over to the cinematic adaptations. It is the comic fans who have a stake in the characters and stories being put to screen, and will react accordingly to what they perceive as positive or negative repurposing of their beloved source material, with this reaction exemplifying the “passive or active influence.” As the first consumers to interact with a property, online and then on opening night at the theater, fans provide the first wave of feedback. This feedback will often be what a mainstream audience with no vested interest in seeing a film adapted from an existing property first receives in regards to the film’s quality. In interviewing a variety



of comic book fans, Gray and Rae found that most accepted the need for adaptation in terms of the difference between the comic book and film mediums. However, while not desiring a direct transmedia remake of a given comic book story arc, fans were concerned that new media iterations “honored the character” (Gray and Rae “Gen-X” 92), sentiments akin to Backman’s “essential shared traits”. If characters are the brand, then fans demand a certain level of brand authenticity while allowing for a necessary amount of variation between media. If this level is not considered to have been met, the resulting buzz will be negative.

While catering to a comparatively niche audience seems to be counterintuitive to the marketing of a successful blockbuster film product, in actuality courting fan audiences is a major part of the business model for these films. The need for fan engagement in the form of positive “buzz” hinges on the appeal of these companies to the original fanbase. The supposed “authenticity” of a property cannot truly be measured by its producers, but rather must be interpreted and judged by the fans. This process can be seen readily on display in Marvel Studios, but is also strongly on the rise at DC Entertainment. Marvel hosted and live-streamed the announcement of their “Phase 3” film slate in late 2014. While those in physical attendance were largely pop culture writers and bloggers, the event catered to the inclusion of fans as well through its accessible presence online. DC took an alternate but successful approach to generating fan engagement online. Similarly, *Man of Steel* filmmaker Zack Snyder periodically posted photos of DC Cinematic Universe characters on his Twitter account under the hashtag #UnitetheSeven (a reference to the seven members of DC’s analogue to The Avengers, The Justice League) (Ge “Zack Snyder”). These photos contained very little concrete narrative information associated with them, but gave Justice League fans a look at the studio’s interpretation of various established characters, engendering discussion about whether or not the studio had “gotten it right”. This process, essentially a word-of-mouth strategy, facilitates the spread of buzz online. In terms of microblogging, social media, or word-of-mouth, the dependence on early buzz is vital to the success or failure of a given property. Especially in terms of franchises that have a prior transmedia fanbase, “products... depend on instant success upon their release – at a point in time when consumers are unable to judge their ‘true’ quality and must make adoption

decisions mainly on the basis of promotional material” (Feldhaur, Hennig-Thurau, and Wiertz “Exploring” 4). From the posting of opinions (positive or negative) on online message boards to the “sharing” or “liking” of a bit of movie news or a teaser trailer, the positive engagement of fans with these franchises is vital.

The strategic inclusion of a figure whose authorship is in line with the so-called “essence” of the material according to fans is the topic of chapter two, using the framework of Suzanne Scott’s concept of the fanboy auteur, a “textual authority figure that appeals to fans [and so] is better positioned to engender fans’ trust, and thus has greater potential to channel fan interpretation and participation in ways that best suit the industry’s financial and ideological interests” (Scott “Mothership” 44). These figures bridge the gap between fans and studios, with the goal of ultimately shaping fan reception to the benefit of the studio. The authorial vision of filmmakers involved in blockbuster superhero adaptations like Joss Whedon (*The Avengers*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*) for Marvel and Christopher Nolan (*Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, *The Dark Knight Rises*) for DC is proven to be satisfactory to fans by “not... demeaning the characters and the importance of their lives” (Langley *Batman* 260). Where prior filmic adaptations of comics had faltered in their joking or derisive approach to the source text, adding ideological weight to the genre appeals to comic book fans, as superhero comics have long featured complex themes and narratives that had not been strongly expressed in earlier film adaptations. While both the Marvel Cinematic Universe as well as the *Dark Knight* trilogy are inarguably rooted in differing levels of fantasy, the way that the filmmakers approached the content was seen as respectful to the source material where previous adaptations had fallen short. This will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter, especially in terms of Nolan’s “franchise reboot” of Batman after the rejection of Joel Schumacher’s *Batman & Robin* (1997) by fans and mainstream audiences alike. As producer Akiva Goldsman states, “The worst thing to do with a serious comic book is make it a cartoon” (Langley *Batman* 260).

## 1.5 Conclusion

Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment have emerged as major studios in the comic book genre, one of the most financially successful modes of blockbuster

filmmaking. Both companies had to be restructured after the downturn of the comics industry in the 90s, ultimately leading to the licensing of many of Marvel's properties to studios like 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox and Sony Pictures Entertainment. In order to receive greater financial returns from these films, Marvel took on the central role in their production. The company had to rebrand itself as a film studio that had a vested interest in appealing to the fans of their comic book properties in order to entice a mainstream audience. This was accomplished through the perceived authenticity that Marvel Studios established across their character-brands. Appealing to these fan cultures was done by marketing their superheroes as legitimate nodal points in the transmedia multiplicity of the characters, an important factor in fan reception. The process of authentication involved staying "true" to the "essence" of the source material, reproducing certain aspects of the story and characters that fans considered as essential to the comic texts. Following its success, DC is now following a similar model, selling *The Dark Knight* trilogy as well as their recent Cinematic Universe as authentic adaptations of the source material where early films were seen to disregard the comics. In aligning themselves with fans, Marvel and DC producers effectively promoted themselves as allies of fan culture, therein appealing to a wider audience by way of positive online talk. Harnessing fans as "early enthusiasts" in favour of the comic book adaptations served to authenticate these films for a wider audience, thus fostering positive reception through online discussion and "buzz". The massive success of these franchises, then, is based in the appeal to the niche fan audience through the guiding authority of the fanboy auteur, and the more generalized appeal to a wide audience that this in turn cultivates.

## Chapter 2

### 2 “One of the Gang”: Authorship, Authenticity, and the Fanboy Auteur

Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment’s shift towards a franchise defined by branded characters hinged on the acceptance of multiplicity over definitive continuity, which in turn relied on the need for fans to identify with these filmic iterations as acceptably faithful to their various source materials. Studios, therefore, sought to position themselves as allies of fan culture rather than as appropriators of comic content. While Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment were intrinsically connected to the original “canonical” versions of the branded characters they were producing, these studios nonetheless had to prove themselves as not subservient to the Hollywood conglomerates such as Disney and Time Warner in the eyes of the fans. Indeed, key to the global success of the current superhero blockbuster has been the surrounding rhetoric of fidelity and authenticity on the part of these studios. The hiring of producers, directors, screenwriters, and actors who adamantly portray themselves as long-time fans colours much of the paratextual content associated with the pre-release campaigns of films like *The Avengers* and *The Dark Knight Rises*. Even in cases where certain filmmakers do not identify as fans per se, as is the case with director Christopher Nolan of DC’s *Dark Knight* trilogy, the commentary in interviews still refer to the avid consumption of past comic book incarnations as a form of research. Consequently, gaining fan approval is inherent to the production of these properties. There is a fundamental reliance on the individual “authors” behind these properties to provide the “correct” interpretation of the content. In marking themselves as fans, these filmmakers align their positions of authority as writer-directors with their authority as fanboys. This chapter will examine the necessity and production of these figures, what Suzanne Scott refers to as “fanboy auteurs”, in the management of big-budget comic book properties.

Scott uses the concept of fanboy auteur in describing a “broader trend toward more ‘approachable’ auteurs, whose status as ‘visionaries’ is alternately tempered and bolstered by their self-identification as fans” (Scott “Undead” 440). These filmmakers are

presented as members of the audience, effectively positioned as fans themselves who are as invested in fidelity to the original subject matter as any other devotee. This liminal position between audience and creator is defined by a “reverential approach to genre or source text”, while also occupying a role of leadership able to “mobilize an active fan base” (Scott “Undead” 441). While filmmakers such as Joss Whedon (*The Avengers*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*) and Christopher Nolan (*The Dark Knight* trilogy) assert their knowledge of fan expectations both through extratextual interviews and commentaries as well as through the content of their adapted texts, these primarily promotional statements also establish trust in their capabilities as handlers of superhero properties. Whedon and Nolan fit the rubric ascribed to the fanboy auteur by Scott, as both are “simultaneously committed to retaining the integrity and essence of the franchise, and elevating the property through [their] unique artistic vision” (Scott “Undead” 446). In effect, the goal of the fanboy auteur is to harmonize fandom with studio filmmaking, creating a product that is marketable to a mass audience through its exemplary status to the fans of the property.

The function of the fanboy auteur is embedded in two different discourses: those of fan culture and of auteurism. These two discourses are pulled together, co-opting elements of both into an agent that mediates the development of fan properties as mainstream cinema. Fanboy auteurism is linked to the industries’ need to regulate and guide fans consumption of additional films operating in the same transmedia storyworld, a factor that has become even more prevalent in regard to the Cinematic Universe model stemming from Marvel. To this point, Scott writes that “transmedia stories fragment the author figure, as artists in different media collaboratively create the transmedia text. But, in order to assure audiences that someone is overseeing this narrative expansion and binding those texts together, the author must ultimately be restored and his significance reaffirmed” (Scott “Revenge” 160).

The definition of the fanboy auteur is by nature a gendered one. Scott’s conception of the fanboy auteur aligns with the “feminized” definition of the fanboy, highlighting the “inherently more ‘passive’ (or, in essentialist terms, ‘feminine’) creative approach than the auteur theory has previously afforded” (Scott “Undead” 441). She goes

on to affirm that “it is precisely this reverential quality that makes them ideal contemporary auteurs to mobilize an active fan base” (ibid.). While the fanboy auteur complicates “conventionally masculine conceptions of authorship” (Scott “Undead” 442), they also reify the masculine power structures “between authors and audiences” (ibid.). Scott characterizes this restoration cynically as merely an “industrial strategy” (Scott “Revenge” 161), whereas Jenkins questions these dynamics, stating that “the gender lines are breaking down, somewhat” (Jenkins “Guiding Light” 56). Jenkins argues that while fan activities are often categorized in terms of the “masculine” embracing of authorial intent and the “feminine” rewriting of this material, the fanboy auteur figure is necessary “to create common ground from which [these] multiple fan interpretations and appropriations emerge” (ibid.). According to Jenkins, these filmmakers do not restrict fan activity, but rather establish the canonical basic from which all different kinds of fan activity come.

My belief is that the relationship between fans and fanboy auteurs falls somewhere in between Scott and Jenkins’ definitions. Scott largely discusses the fanboy auteur as a marketing construction and Jenkins ascribes a much greater level of altruistic involvement. It is important to note that their status as industrial tools does not preclude their genuine concern with fidelity to comic source texts. Furthermore, fans are aware of the industrial use of the fanboy auteur; as Jenkins also notes, their authorial status “raises expectations” and invokes criticism when their artistic visions become too authoritative (ibid.). While these figures are positioned in terms of their fandom as well as their past work, the authorship that they are seen to have over their earlier texts becomes complicated when they are working with fannish properties.

## 2.1 Marketing Authorship: Shaping the Fanboy Auteur as a Brand

The way in which Joss Whedon and Christopher Nolan are marketed to fans is twofold: they are high-quality filmmakers with thematic concerns and genre background that conform to what fans expect of the comic texts they are adapting, and as fans of these texts that will be sure to remain faithful to the important details. They must claim fidelity to the comic texts through paratexts, and then show fidelity in their adapted texts

themselves. Rather than a strict dichotomy between their status as either a filmmaker with complete authorial power or one that is wholly beholden to fan expectations, the fanboy auteur occupies “a middle ground, wherein the author is denied outright authority, but exists as a discursive entity that channels and networks notions of value, identity, coherence, skill and unity” (Gray qtd. in Brooker *Hunting* 43).

Situating auteurism within an industrial context has long been central to the discourse of filmic authorship. The influential *Cahiers du Cinéma* critics of the 1950s were focused not on “art” filmmakers, but on industrial auteurs working within the studio system. To this point, Timothy Corrigan writes that “auteurism had been bound up with changes in industrial desires, technological opportunities, and marketing strategies” (Corrigan “New Hollywood” 40). On the shifting status of the auteur, Thomas Elsaesser states that as the auteur exists in modern day cinema, the name of the author stands as a marker of quality and authenticity. Both as a brand and as a reassurance of artistic credibility, the auteur is a “seal of endorsement on an industrial product” (Elsaesser “Auteur Theory” 12). Similarly, Timothy Corrigan delineates the auteur as functioning as another facet of a film’s marketing. This kind of auteur fosters “a relationship between audience and movie in which an intentional and authorial agency governs, as a kind of brand name vision that precedes and succeeds the film, the way that movie is seen and received” (Corrigan *Cinema Without Walls* 102). A comparison can clearly be made between what both Elsaesser and Corrigan are describing and the extratextual role of the fanboy auteur in promoting the film and guiding fan reception in modern comic book films. The films that Whedon and Nolan are making for Marvel and DC are legitimized by the “seal of endorsement” that Elsaesser refers to, as their authorial voice is positioned as likely to produce work that is textually in line with the comic source material.

The effectiveness of a fanboy auteur depends on how the audience relates to them and how their authorial vision serves the comic text that they are bringing from the page to the screen. The acceptance of this vision strongly depends on how the fanboy auteur has articulated their intentions in adapting the original content in extratextual contexts, signaling to fans that they are on their side. They must attempt to shape fan reception from this position through a regulated approach to constructing paratexts, which “start

texts” by providing “ways of looking at the film... and frames for understanding or engaging with it” (Gray *Show Sold Separately* 10-11). For example, Whedon would cite comic sources in the marketing of *The Avengers*, stating that his story “really just goes back to the very first incarnation of *The Avengers*. It goes to *The Ultimates*, it goes to everything about it” (Woerner “Joss Whedon”), tying his adaptation to the original *Avengers* comic (*The Avengers* #1, 1963) as well as writer Mark Millar’s updated early 2000s iteration of the team (*The Ultimates* #1, 2002). Whedon’s intentions in adapting an authentic version of The Avengers are tied intrinsically to his status as a fan through extratextual comments. Similarly, Nolan’s affection for the noirish crime and mystery elements of Frank Miller’s Batman comic texts was central to his public commentary during the production of *Batman Begins* (Gray *Show Sold Separately* 132), aligning his adaptation with the popular mythos of the Batman character of the comics. For the fanboy auteur, paratexts inform fan reception of transmedia multiplicity, parallel continuities of the same characters across different media, as they are the means through which the framework of a creator’s fandom is added to a text.

Extratextual commentary is fundamental to the construction of both Joss Whedon and Christopher Nolan as authors of not only their specific films within a franchise, but also of additional comic book films to which they only have a tangential relation. In the age of the transmedia franchise, audience reception is a key concept in the marketing of a property as well as multiple ancillary ones. Therefore, potential viewer reception is constantly considered as the properties are aligned under a specific figure or figures functioning as a brand. Scott’s definition of the fanboy auteur is generally in line with what scholars like Elsaesser and Corrigan have posited about modern auteurist discourse on a grander scale, equating the name of the author as a marketable brand based on quality and authenticity. Specifically, the attachment of Whedon’s name to subsequent Marvel products, such as *Thor: The Dark World* (2013) and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, and the touting of Nolan as the producer of 2013’s *Man of Steel* provide specific instances which will be examined in greater detail later in this chapter. The use of this authorial brand represents the fanboy auteur associating the studios’ other films with the intentions of their own work and effectively guiding the reception. In adapting a “correct” vision of a particular character brand to the screen, the fanboy auteur is made



into a figure positively received by fans. Whedon and Nolan's status as producers and screenwriters on additional films from both Marvel and DC only lends to the weight of this stamp of authority.

## 2.2 Fidelity in Authorship: Serving the Source Texts

When these filmmakers become involved with a fannish property they must curate aspects of the character multiplicity rather than authoring something completely original. Though both Joss Whedon and Christopher Nolan are involved in the story and writing process of their films, as fanboy auteurs their authority is in how they choose to arrange pre-existing character and story elements in order to appeal to the fans of the source texts that the studios want to harness. However, the presence of an authorial voice from these filmmakers is still crucial. For these figures to be accepted by comic book fans, there has to be some relation between the established "world view" or "artistic vision" of the fanboy auteur and the "essential shared traits" of the story and characters.

While the fanboy auteur is essentially managing established source materials in a way that is faithful to their "essence", the authorship ascribed to the filmmakers' past work must also serve the comics texts they are working with. Nolan's past work in the crime and mystery genres was in line with the noir and detective elements of many iconic Batman stories, namely those of seminal Batman writers Frank Miller (*Batman: Year One*) Jeph Loeb (*The Long Halloween*) and Alan Moore (*The Killing Joke*). Similarly, Whedon's credibility stemmed from his work as the creator of several cult science-fiction and fantasy television series, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and *Firefly* (2002-2003), which showed that he could bring the same genre elements to *The Avengers*. Pop culture articles and commenters stated that his involvement "isn't really new ground for the filmmaker" and that "Marvel is in good hands" (Eisenberg "Three Year Deal"). Whedon's position as the authoritative showrunner, the primary creator and operator of a television series, of multiple series also contributed to fan discussion that he was able to manage the intertwined transmedia franchises of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Both Whedon and Nolan can be seen as strong filmmakers with "unique artistic vision" who come to the property with an established sense of credibility and authority within their specific filmographies. The studios' promotional manufacturing of the

fanboy auteur, then, involves ascribing their credibility and authority to a beloved franchise, thereby convincing fans that their “vision” is in line with the continuity of the characters to an acceptable degree.

While both Joss Whedon and Christopher Nolan are positioned as authoritative interpreters of their respective properties, it is not enough for a filmmaker of this kind to simply acknowledge their fandom. Rather, a certain degree of textual authority must be read from their work, and established through traditional auteurist modes of analysis. Here, the “name of the author” is currency, so the studio risks losing this capital when they replace an acknowledged auteur with someone whose fandom and auteurist credentials have yet to be established. This can be seen most readily in the replacement of filmmaker Edgar Wright (*Shaun of the Dead*, 2004, *Hot Fuzz*, 2007, *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World*, 2010) with lesser known director Peyton Reed (*Bring It On*, 2000, *Down with Love*, 2003, *The Break-Up*, 2006) on Marvel’s *Ant-Man*. Wright had publicly expressed interest in bringing the property to the screen as early as 2003, when he and fellow genre director Joe Cornish wrote a screenplay draft for the film. By virtue of his filmography and long-time involvement with the character, Wright’s trustworthiness with the franchise was already recognized by fans when *Ant-Man* was announced as part of Marvel’s “Phase 2” batch of films. However, in early 2014, shortly after the film had entered its long-awaited pre-production period, it was announced by Marvel that Wright would no longer be directing the film. The departure was stated to be “due to differences in [the] vision of the film” (Graser “Edgar”). In the wake of the split between Wright and Marvel, filmmaker Peyton Reed was announced as the new director of *Ant-Man* through Marvel.com. In order to position Reed as a fanboy auteur capable of leading a new franchise, Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige would argue for his authority, stating in an interview with IGN.com, “People may not remember, though probably your readers remember, that he was attached to *Fantastic Four* more than 10 years ago” (Tilly “Kevin Feige”). The maneuvering of Reed into the history of Marvel Studios can be seen as an attempt to create a public fanboy record for Reed himself. A fundamental difference between Edgar Wright and Peyton Reed is that Wright can be easily categorized as a traditional *auteur*. Wright’s films possess a consistent “stamp” that characterizes them as part of a continuing oeuvre. More than just a tonal similarity, there is a consistent “style”

throughout all of Wright's films, owing to his kinetic stylistic vision and dark sense of humor as he pays homage to past genre films. Wright's "Three Flavours Cornetto" Trilogy in particular showcase the filmmaker's influences, as each represents a comedic take on a different established film genre (zombie horror, buddy cop, and sci-fi apocalypse, respectively) and are tied together thematically by what Wright calls narratives "about growing up and... the dangers of perpetual adolescence" (Howell "Edgar Wright"). Additionally, Wright's name or status as director is frequently tied to the marketing of his films. After the cult success of Wright's *Shaun of the Dead*, his follow-up features *Hot Fuzz* and *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* were advertised as "A New Comedy From the Guys That Created *Shaun of the Dead*" and "From the director of *Shaun of the Dead* and *Hot Fuzz*". In opposition to this, Reed has received little prominence in the marketing of his films. The distinctive authorship of these filmmakers is important not only for the way that it serves the source texts, but also for the way that it can be sold to an audience. In effect, the status of the auteur as a commodity is central to the marketing of their films.

The situation with Reed has involved Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige in the discussion, elevating the filmmaker to the level of reliable fanboy auteur. While Feige and Reed are working to establish Reed's own fan credibility, they are also well aware of the loss of a filmmaker whose authority was unquestioned. Coming in 2014, these comments show that while the proven credibility of the fanboy auteur is still a major industrial tool in the production and marketing of comic book films, the level of authenticity has shifted to the producer and the brand as a whole. While Feige has been a consistent driving force behind the Marvel Cinematic Universe since its inception, called "an auteur producer" (Rogers "Kevin Feige"), he did not have an established authorial vision like Whedon or Nolan did before coming into their franchises. Whedon's position when he took on *The Avengers* made him the key interpreter of the Marvel Cinematic franchise as a whole by virtue of his prior credibility as a showrunner. While Feige's visibility as an authorial presence behind the Marvel Universe has grown as the series has progressed, Whedon's public association with the franchise as a major creator was central to the way that Marvel communicated its commitment to "authentic" adaptation in its early stages. Though the producer has recently been able to take on the persona in current

comic book franchises, the fanboy auteur was essential to establishing the studios and their executives as strongly interested in devotion to source material.

In the following sections, the use of paratextual commentary on the part of the filmmakers as well as the studios will be examined to show how the situating of these figures as fanboy auteurs is a fundamental aspect of the marketing of their superhero films. Additionally, the intertextual connections stemming from the earlier work of both Whedon and Nolan, as well as their direct referencing of specific comic source texts in their extratextual comments and in their filmic adaptations themselves will be used to show how issues of authorial power are tied to deference to fannish concerns about fidelity and character essence.

### 2.3 Joss Whedon: Showrunning *The Avengers*

Joss Whedon's first major experience in big-screen filmmaking was through his script for the 1992 cinematic version of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Predating Whedon's cult television series by five years, the film (for which Whedon only provided an initial script) was reworked by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox during the production process, transforming what the writer had envisioned as a "dark and comedic action-horror film of empowerment" into a slapstick farce (Pascale *Joss Whedon* 58). Whedon is a filmmaker who openly acknowledges his unrealized intentions and perceived missteps with the *Buffy* film, making his potential as an auteur easy to situate. The primacy Whedon gives to his own intended vision of the *Buffy* film is the first indication of a writer with ambitions of establishing an authorial voice.

Whedon's career with Marvel Studios exemplifies Scott's discussion of the "approachable auteur." In a 2007 interview with Tasha Robinson for the website The A.V. Club, Whedon derogatively referred to studio executives as "a bunch of old men in suits", aligning himself with a counter-culture ideology that chaffs against the rigid definitions of what "tests well" (Robinson "A.V. Club" 157). The acceptance of a filmmaker like Whedon by fans of the source material sets up the filmmaker and the product for success with non-fans via positive buzz through online discussions. Speaking to his own personal "brand" in a 2012 interview with *Forbes* magazine, the writer-

director undermines his own authorial status, instead lending it to the actors and their characters. Whedon states,

“The fact is some people really love my work, some people not so much, but at the end of the day I don’t want anybody coming out of the movie thinking about me. I want them thinking about the Avengers. I want to subsume myself in the piece. Tony Stark is enormously fun for me to write because he makes quips and he’s silly and he’s fun and he’s smart. I love writing him. But I don’t want people to go, ‘Ha, that’s a Joss line.’ I want them to think, ‘That’s a Tony line’” (Bercovici “Avengers’ Director”).

By aligning his personal brand with the character brand, Whedon supports the intentions of the greater studio. Whedon and Marvel are positioned as having the same goal: the propagation of creator fandom that is so crucial to the status of the fanboy auteur, particularly in the ways that it directs attention back to the characters and primary texts.

Though Whedon has established himself as a fanboy in the eyes of Marvel comics culture, it is important to note that auteurism depends on his traditional authorship as the perceived voice behind his products. Primarily working as a writer and producer in television, Whedon has been the main creator behind the aforementioned cult hit *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its spin-off, *Angel* (1999-2004), as well as the short-lived sci-fi series’ *Firefly* and *Dollhouse* (2009-2010) and the online miniseries *Dr. Horrible’s Sing-Along Blog* (2008). Aside from *Buffy* and *Angel* – which take place in the same storyworld – these series present no integrated universe. On the contrary, the worlds Whedon has created present a variety of high concept science fiction and fantasy settings. However, these projects nonetheless exhibit a sustained set of characteristics indicating Whedon’s personal signature, which can be seen to run throughout his entire body of work, even in projects that exist outside his direct involvement. Though many episodes of shows like *Buffy* and *Angel* have been written by other figures within Whedon’s Mutant Enemy production company, Whedon is still seen as the fundamental author of the works as a whole. This designation is in line with Scott’s definition of the fanboy auteur as a coordinator, or the figure that is seen to be “steering the mothership” (Scott “Mothership”

51). This is also in line with Whedon's authorial presence with regard to his television series, where he stated that as a showrunner, he was "responsible for everything in every frame of every show" (Newman and Levine *Legitimizing Television* 38). As the person "behind the wheel", Whedon receives primary creative credit for the products of Mutant Enemy.

In viewing Whedon as an auteur, it is vital to consider his creative vision as what Rhonda Wilcox calls "a unified body of work" (Wilcox "Much Ado About Whedon" 1) while also acknowledging the role of established fandom. This can be seen as Whedon foregrounds material specific to the Avengers comic texts through his own specific vision. In terms of Whedon's authorship, repeated suggestions of a cohesive world view come in the form of his continued use of anti-authoritarian narratives, featuring characters rejecting or undermining rigid power structures, as in *Firefly*, *Angel*, and the *Buffy* series. In *The Avengers*, the titular heroes are ultimately let down by S.H.I.E.L.D., the government agency that recruited them, and they instead decide to act on their own to save the world. Whedon's predilection for the "under-dog" can be seen as he portrays the team as a motley crew who must come together in the face of incompetent government militarization. Similarly, Whedon's work repeatedly features strong women situated in rebellion against a patriarchal system, as in *Buffy* and *Dollhouse*. To this point, *The Avengers* featured the second filmic appearance by the character Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson), expanding on her brief supporting role in *Iron Man 2* (2010), and providing her with an in-depth back-story and extended physical fight scenes that were sufficiently in line with the character's comic book history as a violent Cold War secret agent. Whedon's dialogue also exhibits several consistent traits across his body of work. Beyond a predilection for teenage slang terminology and self-aware dialogue, Whedon's series are known for their use of "high-order" literary language (Kneen "Add it up")<sup>3</sup>. The analysis of a unified voice essentially posits a consistent writing style for Whedon, a

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<sup>3</sup> Writing for the Oxford Dictionary Community, Bonnie Kneen exemplifies this partiality with an example of dialogue from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*: "Could you contemplate getting over yourself for a second?" (Kneen). Kneen points to the use of the word "contemplate" and the phrase "[get] over yourself" as indicative of Whedon's amalgamation of literary speech and slang

reading that necessarily denotes his overarching authorship throughout all of his work. *Buffy* executive producer Jane Espenson has commented on this sustained voice in a medium usually full of disparate screenwriters producing dialogue for the same characters, stating that “Joss’s shows are really the products of Joss’s brain” (Pascale Joss Whedon 126). She positions Whedon as the first and ultimately final authority behind the writing process of his creations. This sustained voice can be seen even in Whedon’s work on *The Avengers*, a product that was not purely of his own creation. It is not a matter of situating *The Avengers* within Whedon’s body of work, but rather of acknowledging how this existing oeuvre was seen to be in line with the Marvel brand. Whedon can be seen here combining his own authorship with his – “the target audience is me” – sentiments to create Marvel works that are both satisfyingly individual in terms of stylistic and thematic content as well as respectful of the universe tended by fans and the studio.

If the fanboy auteur is seen to “elevate” a franchise through inimitable artistic vision, the personal attachment to these respective comic series is vital to the filmmaker’s individual fandom. While it would be easy for a filmmaker to simply reference their concern with authenticity in paratexts, as a fanboy auteur they must also follow through with these intertextual statements onscreen. Whedon’s *Avengers* has strong ties to the source material, demonstrating intertextual references that are recognizable to fans of the comics. The plot of the film is an amalgamation of the first narratives from the original *Avengers* comics and their modern day counterparts, *The Ultimates*. 1963’s *Avengers* #1 involved the superhero team first coming together to combat the villain Loki. In both versions, Loki ultimately strengthens the team’s bond as they have to work together to defeat him. Loki’s facilitation of an alien invasion of New York City is adapted from the first *Ultimates* storyline, published in 2002. The narrative was in part based on the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center that took place on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 (Greear “The Avengers”), and the inclusion of the updated version modernized Whedon’s adaptations while still supporting a strong intertextual influence between the film and the comics. Here, Whedon’s textual authorship is made inextricable from the Marvel text, as he authors a filmic narrative that is rooted fundamentally in the comic texts.

While Whedon has not served in the formal capacity of writer, director, or producer on any of the films beyond his own *Avengers* duology, it was announced soon after the first film's premier that he would be serving as a "creative consultant" at Marvel Studios until the second film finished production (Wilding "Joss Whedon Talks"). This terminology implied that all subsequent films would be filtered through his creative vision, a factor that was especially notable as Marvel's sequels were being directed by largely unknown film personalities. In a similar fashion to Whedon's texts coming from *Mutant Enemy* not under his direct involvement, by associating these productions with Whedon, Marvel effectively positioned them as coming from the same reliable interpreter as *The Avengers* had. Here, the fanboy auteur is positioning other producers, directors, and writers as additional/supplementary authority figures. Either they are functioning as fanboy auteurs, or their authority is considered to be just as acceptable. Whedon's overarching authorship was bolstered through paratexts in the form of pre-release interviews. In an interview with SFX magazine, *Thor: The Dark World* director Alan Taylor stated that "Joss came in to save our lives a couple of times... He came down, rewrote [a] scene, and before he got back to his plane I sort of grabbed him and said, 'And this scene and this scene?' And he rewrote two other scenes that I thought had problems. Then finally we let go of him, he took off again, and we shot the scenes; and they were just much better and much lighter on their feet" (Lussier "Joss Whedon"). Similarly, Feige announced Whedon's role as the writer-director behind the short mid-credits scene at the end of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* in an interview with Collider.com before the release of the film. While Whedon was not said to have had direct involvement in the scripting or directing of *The Winter Soldier*, he was nonetheless stated to have a definite role tied to the production as a director of the mid-credits stinger, "[making] audiences increasingly reliant on the fanboy auteur to clarify the relationship between texts" as the scope of the series expanded (Scott "Mothership" 46).

Joss Whedon is publicly framed as the fan that is in the right position to make something that the audience with which he self-identifies can enjoy. This makes it especially significant when he strongly aligns himself with both comics fans and the Marvel brand. In an interview with Wired.com, Whedon stated, "I care about these people. I care about the fact that they're isolated. I relate to them. But at the end of the



day I'm also telling Marvel's story" (Rogers "Joys of Genre"). By situating his intentions as harmonious with those of the fans, and by situating Marvel Studios as an arena that fosters this kind of interpretation, Whedon is able to create the image that the studio demands this level of fidelity in all of its products. Therefore, the goals of the studio are, through Whedon, aligned with those of the fans. The very specific function that Whedon had in the production of *The Avengers* as a fanboy auteur is a fundamental factor in the wider franchise that Marvel sought to establish in its early period as a producer rather than a licensor. The auteur must now reconcile this vision with the sustained life their project must have in fan culture as well as with Marvel's broader franchise strategies.

## 2.4 Christopher Nolan: A "Fan-Conscious Auteur"

While Joss Whedon surely conforms to the definition of the fanboy auteur in terms of his self-professed love for Marvel Comics and his authorial intent in bringing a faithful version of these stories to the screen, Christopher Nolan does not fit strictly into Scott's template; however, his relationship with Batman fandom nonetheless touches on certain crucial nodal points in this classification, namely that of fidelity. Unlike Whedon, Nolan does not provide a "self-identification" as a fan. He has instead openly acknowledged his relative lack of background in comics culture. While this may seem to run counter-intuitively to the inherent function of the fanboy auteur, it in fact suggests another avenue for establishing authority in relation to fan cultures. In a 2012 Q & A prior to the release of *The Dark Knight Rises*, Nolan admitted, "Although I'm not a huge comic book fan, and I never pretended to be – it's very dangerous to pretend you're a comic book fan. I was smart enough to surround myself by co-writers like David Goyer and my brother Jonah, who it turns out is more of a comic book guy than I realized" (Calautti "Christopher Nolan Reflects"). By referring to the danger of potentially fraudulent fandom, Nolan's statements make it clear that fan appeal is a paramount concern in these adaptations. He does not play act as a fan, but rather recognizes his lack of history with the medium's continuity by surrounding himself with collaborators who have an in-depth working knowledge of the characters and mythology. As a result, Nolan can be seen as more of a "fan-conscious auteur", conforming to Scott's description of a

filmmaker who “equates his close proximity to the fans with an understanding of their textual desires and practices” (Scott “Mothership” 44).

Filmmaking partners who are positioned as long-time fans of the material help to situate Nolan as a reliable interpreter. In a 2013 interview with *Indiewire*, Goyer commented on Nolan’s enthusiasm to learn about what details were important for interpreting Batman from comics to screen, stating that the director utilized both the screenwriters as well as comic book writers for background on the character. Goyer said that he “‘identified the ten things that remained sticky about Batman and Superman. [He] wrote them up and said to Chris ‘These are the 10 things that should be in the movie. Like the Ten Commandments. As long as we honour that, we’ll be good’” (Jagernauth “Goyer”). Though Goyer has not revealed what these “Ten Commandments” were, this nonetheless situates Nolan’s consciousness of fandom through his concern with fidelity. Goyer similarly differentiated Nolan from past filmmakers in the Batman franchise by his enthusiasm for incorporating feedback from comic book writers into the screenplay. According to Goyer, both Tim Burton and Joel Schumacher “dismissed the comic books and their creators. We earned their trust” (ibid.). Furthermore, it is important to note that these collaborators situate Nolan as the primary author of these films. In a joint interview, Goyer and Jonathan Nolan stated that “Chris is always going to take the last pass on his scripts going in. He’s a writer as well as a director, kind of 50/50. So... he’s going to get in there and take that last crack at it. So our job is done well in advance of the film” (Roberts “David Goyer”). What is crucial here is Nolan’s positioning as the main interpreter of these films by his collaborators, as the figure that is “steering the mothership.” While not wholly undermining the collective process of production, the final product remains attributed to Nolan as a writer-director.

What also gives Nolan the elevated authority of the fanboy auteur is not a professed knowledge of the Batman mythology, but rather a co-mingling of fan status as well as perceived cinematic credibility. While Joss Whedon has had notable success in both television and film, Nolan came to *Batman Begins* as an acclaimed “new” filmmaker. Following the lauding of his film *Following* (1998) in the festival circuit and the major indie success of *Memento* (2000), Nolan had become known for his innovations

in plot structure and examinations of the human psyche. *Memento* especially garnered favourable praise, with *Sight and Sound* critic Chris Darke calling his second film a “remarkable psychological-puzzle film, a crime conundrum that explores the narrative possibilities of *noir*” (Darke “Mr. Memory”). In an interview with Scott Foundas for *Film Comment* magazine, Nolan commented on the stagnation of the Batman character: ““Warner Bros. owned this wonderful character, and didn’t know what to do with it. It had sort of reached a dead end with its previous iteration”” (Foundas “Cinematic Faith”). Nolan would come at the film from a different perspective than Tim Burton and Joel Schumacher in the past, establishing a Bruce Wayne character who displayed a complex psyche more in line with the most popular representations of the character in the comics, rather than a singular nobility of purpose that was seen in Burton and Schumacher’s versions. What is primarily important here is that it is Nolan who approached Warner Bros. with what would essentially become the template for the franchise reboot. While reimaginings of prior texts have long been a part of cinema (Proctor “Regeneration & Rebirth” 2), the reboot presents a new continuity for a franchise that is meant to usurp the existing version, recreating the story from scratch. This is most often done for franchises that “have fallen out of favour or disappeared to some extent but [are] still the names the public recognize” (Lussier qtd. in Proctor “Regeneration & Rebirth” 1). Christopher Nolan’s *Batman Begins* revived a stagnant franchise, by, in the words of *Variety* editor Marc Graser, “[convincing] the public that a new film could be something entirely different” (Graser “The bat”). Nolan’s Batman existed in a gritty world of rampant crime closer to the Gotham City seen in modern comic texts, rejecting the campy visuals and exaggerated characters of previous installments, characterized by art deco matte paints and gangster stereotypes in Burton’s films and flamboyant day-glo costuming in Schumacher’s. Focusing on the origin story of Bruce Wayne, Nolan opted for a more psychological examination of the hero. The sequels would follow a similar trajectory, keeping the narrative grounded in a “realistic” environment of terrorism and civil unrest rather than one of superpowers and aliens. Though more grounded in a sense of realism, *The Dark Knight* trilogy can be read as an adaptation that is more faithful to the *feeling*, or distinctiveness, of the Batman comics than the earlier films.

The seemingly disparate connection between Nolan's films and Batman fandom should be seen as an amalgamation. The characters who inhabit the films of Christopher Nolan often present a kind of fabrication of identity, either to themselves or others, in order to achieve an individual ultimate truth specific to each. This approach can be traced from the director's most recent blockbusters to his earliest successes. In *Insomnia* (a 2002 remake of a 1997 Norwegian film that also displayed strong faithfulness to the source text), detective Will Dormer (Al Pacino) is haunted by his accidental murder of a colleague, Hap Eckhart (Martin Donovan). Eckhart was set to testify against Dormer as he had tampered with evidence in a previous case in order to get a conviction. To obscure knowledge of his own culpability in the truly accidental murder, Dormer alters the scene of the crime. Throughout the rest of the film Dormer is stricken with insomnia, brought on by the killing and made worse by the constant Alaskan daylight. When Dormer admits to his involvement in the murder as well as the earlier crime against which Eckhart was testifying, he is finally able to sleep. The self-serving deception committed by the detective ultimately results in him accepting the consequences of his past actions. Dormer's lie allows him to recognize his prior faults. Whereas Will Dormer is released by a deception, the character arc of Leonard Shelby (Guy Pearce) in *Memento* is predicated entirely on a lie he tells himself. Shelby uses the specter of his dead wife and his own short term memory loss to position himself as a tool for revenge. Having forgotten that he has already avenged his wife, he coldly manipulates his future self into an act of petty reprisal. Told in reverse, *Memento*'s "truth" is the one told to the audience concerning the cyclical and destructive nature of revenge. Truth for Nolan, according to Todd McGowan, "must emerge out of the lie if it is not to lead us entirely astray" (McGowan *Fictional* 1).

With regard to the *Dark Knight* films, this approach to truth, knowledge, and self-awareness are in line with themes that have been present in the comic texts for a long period of time. In terms of narrative structure, Nolan's films frequently begin *in media res*, thrusting the audience into an unfamiliar environment, typically before shifting to a flashback or expositional scene in order to establish the status quo. This technique furthers Nolan's characteristic use of deception to reach a closure as his characters come

to terms with why they are deceiving themselves and others. The opening scene is often one that begs questions which will be answered once more information is given.

Rather than shaping the Batman character to fit his directorial concerns or shifting his filmmaking themes to accommodate a comic book hero, the director's established status as a filmmaker with comparable thematic concerns make him a reliable interpreter from the standpoint of fan culture at large. His films deal largely with identity and loss, and such themes mesh especially well with the influence of the darker Batman stories familiar to fans. Nolan is seen to imbue *The Dark Knight* trilogy with his trademark psychological dissections as well as with sociopolitical concerns on a grander scale, a move which aligns his series more strongly with fan expectations based on source material. According to David Bordwell, "*The Dark Knight* invokes ideas about terrorism, torture, surveillance, and the need to keep the public in the dark about its heroes. Something similar has happened with *The Dark Knight Rises*... leaving commentators to puzzle out what it's saying about financial manipulation, class inequities, and the 99 percent/1 percent debate" (Bordwell *Labyrinth of Linkages* 8). The allegorical nature of Nolan's Batman is in line with the more complicated "familiar" superheroism based in moral ambiguity and the personal struggles of heroes that had long been a narrative element of comic books, but had rarely made it into the onscreen adaptations (Bongco *Reading Comics* 141). This demonstrates the "legitimacy" of Nolan as a filmmaker concerned with the authentic adaptation of the property from one medium to another.

Not satisfied with simply telling the origin of Batman, Nolan would inject the rebooted franchise with a discourse on heroism consistent with what had come before in his work and in the comic texts. In Nolan's *Dark Knight* series, fabrication is at the crux of the Bruce Wayne-Batman dichotomy, as the reasons for Wayne's vigilantism are called into question to a much greater degree than in previous adaptations. Where Burton was concerned with Gothic slapstick and Schumacher with neon excesses, Nolan's Batman exists in a Gotham City of economic downturn and terrorist agendas. For Wayne, as with many of Nolan's heroes, the lie has become more real than the truth. In *The Dark Knight*, Wayne's love interest, Rachel Dawes (Maggie Gyllenhaal), breaks off their romance via a letter stating, "When I told you that if Gotham no longer needed Batman

we could be together, I meant it. But now I'm sure the day won't come when *you* no longer need Batman." Similarly, in *The Dark Knight Rises*, the hero's butler and confidante, Alfred Pennyworth (Michael Caine) admonishes Wayne's obsession with the Batman persona, telling him "You see only one end to your journey... You used to talk about finishing a life beyond that awful cape." Both characters, Bruce Wayne's closest allies, acknowledge the psychological dependence he has with regard to his superhero identity.

All of this positions Nolan as an exemplary and "reliable interpreter" of Batman, as he presents the character's "essential shared traits" within his specific articulation of the mythos. Although he does not present a unified, coherent working knowledge of Batman's history as a character from the standpoint of a fan, Nolan positions himself similarly to Whedon as a textual authority through his extensive research into specific iconic storylines ranging from story arcs within the series' continuity to standalone graphic novels that have achieved a revered status. With each film in the series, Nolan and his filmmaking team have acknowledged particular intertexts that have influenced the productions, from Frank Miller and David Mazzucchelli's *Batman: Year One* to Jeph Loeb and Tim Sale's *The Long Halloween* to the multi-author, multi-artist opus *Knightfall*, all titles that illustrate the shift towards darker subject matter that Mila Bongco notes. In *Batman Begins*, the hero is cornered by police officers in a derelict building. In a development directly adapted from *Batman: Year One*, Batman uses a sonar device located in his boot to attract an impenetrable cloud of crazed bats, distracting the police and facilitating his escape. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, the physically powerful antagonist Bane (Tom Hardy) triumphs over a beaten Batman. Recalling a famous panel from *Knightfall*, the villain slams Batman down over his knee, crippling him. These direct citations of primary Batman texts complement broader considerations of characters and themes. In *The Dark Knight*, Heath Ledger's sociopathic Joker seems to chafe against past interpretations of the character, as actors like Jack Nicholson and Mark Hamill opted to depict the villain as merely a demented clown with a mean streak. However, in a 2008 Q & A before a screening of the film, Nolan cited his interpretation as rooted definitively in comic continuity, alluding to writer Alan Moore's *The Killing*

*Joke*, a book considered by many fans to be the quintessential Joker story. Nolan stated that the character is,

“[Dedicated] to chaos. He should really have no purpose but I think the underlying belief that Alan Moore got across very clearly is that on some level The Joker wants to pull everybody down to his level and show that he’s not an unusual monster and that everyone else can be debased and corrupted like he is” (Thompson “Dark Knight Review”).

Here, Nolan aligns his version of the character, as played by Heath Ledger, with texts tied inextricably with Batman fan culture. Again, while much of this may in fact be based in the writings of David Goyer and Jonathan Nolan, the ascription of the entirety of a film to a specific authorial voice is typical of auteurist discourse. Christopher Nolan’s authentic characterization of the Joker is used to cement his position as an interpreter of Batman texts.

Historically, DC can be read as allowing for a larger degree of respective authorship behind their blockbuster film adaptations (Stork “Assembling” 89), with Nolan representing only one of many filmmakers who were allowed to put their own distinct aesthetic and narrative into their adapted properties. However, Nolan represents the first of these filmmakers whose aesthetic and thematic concerns were used to emphasize a degree of fidelity, making his status as fanboy auteur take precedence over the simple categorization of auteur in regards to these films. While Matthias Stork differentiates DC from Marvel by virtue of the former’s “space of individualized authorship” (Stork “Assembling” 89), in the time since his writing a shift towards a unified vision can be seen in the construction of DC’s own Cinematic Universe as well. The authorship of Christopher Nolan was imparted on *Man of Steel*, with Nolan serving an overseer of the product at its inception. For both studios, the authorship behind their films effectively functions as a distinctive but also branded and marketable “voice”. When the films become one particular point in an overarching transmedia franchise, it is necessary for this voice to be consistent. Similarly to Whedon’s role as “creative consultant” at Marvel Studios, Nolan’s association with *Man of Steel* was situated as

central to the production from the start. Reports of Nolan's involvement in the production of the film were released alongside news of his work on the third *Dark Knight* film as early as 2010, tying the new film directly to Nolan's work with the Batman character. Like *Batman Begins*, *Man of Steel* was conceived of as a strategic reboot of a franchise that had fallen out of favour with its previous installment. The dual teaser trailers for the film foreground the authorship of director Zack Snyder<sup>4</sup>, but just as strongly attribute the film to "producer Christopher Nolan, director of *The Dark Knight* Trilogy." The teasers themselves are cut in such a way as to recall the early trailers for Nolan's own Batman films, which featured abstract imagery of fire and cityscapes forming the Bat symbol while dialogue clips from the film spoke to the necessity of Batman and his war on crime. The *Man of Steel* teasers take an almost identical approach, with the iconic red-and-blue figure of Superman seen flying in extreme long shot against the sky as narration intones the heroism it is required for the protagonist to embody. The linking of DC's new transmedia Cinematic Universe to the massive success of its previous major trilogy was an attempt to match Marvel's success, and was accomplished by borrowing the perceived maturity or "grittiness" of Nolan's films – that is in actuality content present in comics texts – and applying it to the flagship film for the new franchise to foster the same recognition of fidelity in comics fans. The film, like the post-*Avengers* properties tied to Whedon, became connected strongly with Nolan through virtue of the embedded relationship to his own authoritative depictions of the same/similar characters. As Snyder has stated "[Nolan] set a tone for the DC Universe, and separated us from Marvel in a great way. [The DC Cinematic Universe is] the legacy of those movies" (Jagernauth "Zack Snyder"). By associating Nolan as a key filmmaker involved in the film and by backing this relationship up with visual and aural similarities between the projects in question, DC attempts to transpose the Nolan brand associated with *The Dark Knight* films onto the new Universe.

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<sup>4</sup> Snyder himself has been discussed in terms of his fanboy auteurism in Suzanne Scott's "Dawn of the Undead Author: Fanboy Auteurism and Zack Snyder's 'Vision'." However, I see Snyder as a more precarious and problematic fanboy auteur, as both fans and critics frequently see his personal style as clashing against the comic texts rather than serving them.



## 2.5 Conclusion

Christopher Nolan is a different but equally relevant type of “strong reader” to Joss Whedon, lending to the fact that the most important aspect of the fanboy auteur is the reassurance that fan properties are in “good hands”. While following through on this reassurance is vital to the sustained credibility of the franchises under these filmmakers, establishing Whedon and Nolan as creators who will adhere to the fannish comic texts ideally produces and circulates the positive discussion about the films in online communities that Marvel and DC seek. Marvel’s scramble to reposition Peyton Reed as a faithful authorial voice behind *Ant-Man* (2015) indicates the studio’s concern with credibility in the eyes of fans, showing that the studio recognizes the need for a strong interpreter behind their properties. Similarly, the sustained status of “authorship” provided to both Whedon and Nolan over the expanse of superhero films with which they are only tangentially involved supports the idea that integrity in the eyes of fans lies with an established textual coordinator who also has authorial interests that serve the source texts. The identities of both Joss Whedon and Christopher Nolan as fanboy auteurs must be constructed through paratextual commentary which is put forth through Marvel and DC in a strategy to foster reliability in fan perception. The liminal position of these figures as fans and filmmakers affords them a certain amount of authority, but a studio cannot and will not cater only to a niche audience. Through proclamations of fandom, the filmmakers in question can construct products that appeal to mass audiences through the retaining of fidelity to the original material, ultimately appealing to a wider audience by way of this niche market. It is also important to situate the historicity of the fanboy auteur in Marvel and DC productions. As both studios established a greater presence as producers of comic book adaptations, the industrial strategy of selling comic book films based on their director was a crucial factor in marketing these franchises to fans and mainstream audiences alike. Where initially a new Batman film was leant credibility via the inclusion of the thriller director Nolan and the concept of a superhero team-up film and subsequent franchise interconnectivity was sold through the unifying figure of Joss Whedon as a kind of “showrunner” for the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the director as auteur has been surpassed by the studio brand they had come to represent. By positioning themselves as dedicated to hiring directors who were ‘right’ for the comic source texts,

Marvel and DC have taken on the same credibility and perceived commitment to authenticity that Whedon and Nolan presented. These films are huge blockbusters on a global scale, and the fanboy auteur was used in the early stages of the Cinematic Universes of Marvel and DC as a way to manage this mainstream audience through the establishment of a brand based on authenticity, ultimately lending this same impression of authenticity to the studios themselves.

## Chapter 3

### 3 Official Auteurs and Unauthorized Fans: The Limits of Studio Authorship in Guiding Online Fan Reception

The online visibility of various fan communities is a factor that has helped comic book films to become an economically thriving genre. Stephen Keane states, “The timing has... proven advantageous with regard to the internet providing evidence of a notable fanbase from which to launch these expensive and initially unproven adaptations” (Keane *CineTech* 91). The development of the comic book film franchises of Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment is fundamentally tied to the active engagement of fans by studios. However, Marvel and DC have had to alter their practices with regard to how they regulate fan practices around their properties. As Jenkins writes, “[establishing] the fans’ loyalty often means lessening traditional controls that companies might exert over their intellectual properties and thus opening up a broader space for... creative expression” (Jenkins *Convergence* 191). In encouraging positive fan reception, studios must provide a means for fans to have a creative engagement with these properties, while at the same time trying to steer them and profit from it. Paradoxically, as studios try to control and economically thrive from this activity, the very nature of participatory fandom often works against them. As delineated in chapter two, the fanboy auteur shapes the reception of studio properties through trust and authority over their texts. However, the authorship of fans often moves beyond these “official” activities endorsed by the studios. Activities like the production of fan films that clash with studios’ branding strategies and the organization of public events critical of the series perceived shortcomings goes against what the companies consider to be “appropriate fan participation” (Jenkins *Convergence* 191), or what will be discussed as “official” modes of fandom. I argue that this kind of activity is essential to the functioning of fan culture, based on the participatory authorship of fandom. Consequently, studios have necessarily allowed for a greater level of creativity in fan practices surrounding their properties. This can be seen in the way that Marvel and DC have had to relax their reactions against fan practices that they would have censored more strongly in the past, such as trailer leaks and copyright infringement. When studios react too strongly against fannish activities, they risk alienating and losing

their fan audience. I posit that as modes of fannish creativity and participation became more ubiquitous online, Marvel and DC were forced to permit an active participatory culture that sometimes subverts their authority in order to build the positive fan reception of their Cinematic Universes.

I have used ethnographic studies as well as various pop culture and film websites to characterize fan reception of comic book adaptations. The work of Liam Burke as well as Neil Rae and Jonathan Gray provides a useful basis for contextualizing both positive and negative reception. These authors have performed ethnographic studies on the reception of current superhero films by self-identified fan audiences, supplying a necessary overview of what certain fans think of these films. Additionally, niche film sites and blogs like SuperheroHype.com and ComicBookMovie.com interpret fandom and fan reception. These sites offer extensive comments sections and forums to discuss and debate various issues and developments surrounding the superhero genre, as well as a variety of user-generated articles and links to fan sites. The espousing of fannish opinion positions these sites as beneficial secondary sources through which reception can be interpreted.

### 3.1 Harnessing Participation: Marvel and DC's Use of Fannish Activity

Long before the productive engagement of mainstream Web 2.0 users, fans were taking part in the discussion and circulation of content in offline and even limited online capacities, producing zines, fan fiction, and fan vids stemming from the particular properties they enjoyed. While the term Web 2.0 suggests that interconnectivity and participatory culture are new phenomena, this is not the case. With regard to comic books in particular, a vocal and participatory community has always been a part of the medium. Participatory culture is one with “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations... In a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, members care about others’ opinions of what they have created)” (Jenkins *Confronting*). This is an essential component of fandom, as the work that these viewers do with texts fosters the fan community. Tom Brevoort writes

“[Comics] have a long history of it, going back to the days when it was just... letters pages and so forth, making that very personal interaction between... the Marvel bullpen and the readers. So it’s something we’re steeped in as a subculture, but as the technology has become so ubiquitous, everybody else is doing it as well” (qtd. in Burke *Adaptation* 142). As Francesca Coppa writes that “[what] has changed for fandom in the era of Web 2.0 is that a staggering array of for-profit services and interfaces have been (and are still being) created to support fandom’s core values of collaboration and interaction” (Coppa “Pop Culture” 85). Various networks such as YouTube, Wiki software, SoundCloud, and deviantART are being used to create and share content, in many cases based around fan cultural properties. This focus on fan participation is central to the way in which Marvel and DC have structured their marketing for comic book franchises.

Marvel and DC utilizing these networks of fannish production is a means of marketing based on *spreadable media*, characterized by Henry Jenkins as “media which travels across media platforms at least in part because the people take it in their own hands and share it with their social networks” (Jenkins qtd. in Usher “spreadable doesn’t equal viral”). To be “spreadable,” media must not only be easily shared through social networks and other online forums, but must also promote this sharing. By encouraging circulation, spreadable media harnesses the intrinsic participatory nature of online culture. This is based on “the technical resources that make it easier to circulate some kinds of content than others, the economic structures that support or restrict circulation, the attributes of a media text that might appeal to a community’s motivation for sharing material, and the social networks that link people through the exchange of meaningful bytes” (Ford, Green, and Jenkins *Spreadable Media* 4). Both Marvel and DC have courted fans to connect with their properties through this kind of spreadable media. Increasing the awareness and hype for the *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* Blu-Ray and DVD release, Marvel introduced an online contest called “S.H.I.E.L.D. vs Hydra.” The game centered on fans entering the contest by answering a questionnaire and subsequently being divided into teams based on either the heroic S.H.I.E.L.D. agency or the villainous Hydra group (Perry “Marvel Unveils”). Fans were encouraged to share their allegiances on social media under the hashtag #SHIELDvsHydra and partake in “weekly missions” for a chance to win various prizes in the weeks leading up to the video

release (McMillan “SHIELD vs. HYDRA”). Similarly, the campaign leading up to *The Dark Knight Rises* included an empty webpage playing a sound recording of men chanting. Fans analyzed the recording and were able to decipher the message “#thefirerises”. When this hashtag was posted on Twitter, the user’s profile picture was added to an online mosaic, which would ultimately shape a promotional still of the film’s villain, Bane (Tom Hardy). These official outlets harnessed fan enthusiasm and participation to do promotional work, effectively enmeshing fan culture and studio marketing.

In October 2014, Marvel Studios staged a press event around the announcement of their “Phase 3” slate of films. Representatives from online publications were invited to the El Capitan Theatre in Hollywood for an event hosted by the studio, and were given the ability to live-blog the announcements as they happened. The event consisted mostly of declaring film titles and release dates, but this information was experienced by fans outside of the affair as the announcements took place through these pop culture blogs and Marvel.com’s own live coverage. Shortly after the announcements concluded, video footage of the entire event was posted online by Marvel. While no specific plot information was released, sequels to the *Captain America* and *Avengers* series were given titles with direct ties to comic book story arcs (*Civil War* and *Infinity War*, respectively) and new franchises, well-known to comic book fans but comparatively anonymous to non-fans, were publicized. The footage of the event as well as the officially posted logos and cast photographs of Chris Evans, Robert Downey Jr., and Chadwick Boseman were circulated online through social media and pop culture blogs. Similarly, DC Entertainment held theatrical screenings of their teaser trailer for the film *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* in April 2015. These events took place in IMAX theatres across North America, and featured an introductory video from director Zack Snyder. Following these screenings, a high-quality version of the teaser was released online, allowing for the mobilization of discussion about the footage (Lussier “Full Batman Suit”). Fans shared, discussed, and interpreted the Phase 3 announcements and *Batman v. Superman* trailer on social media and discussion boards. The still images of actors and title cards released online by the studios were circulated on social media websites like Twitter and Facebook, and were accompanied by debate over whether or not the

approach Marvel and DC were taking to the material was correct or not and speculation about how the storylines and character arcs would play out. Fans also posted videos of themselves reacting to the Marvel and DC events on YouTube; fan communities not only circulated the studios' promotional materials, but amplified them through making their own videos. This high level of engagement is an example of what complicates authority over a property, as the participatory nature of fandom extends beyond the ways in which studios have tried to encourage specific activities around their comic book properties.

Studios like Marvel and DC need to be conscious of how they are perceived by fans as authoritative companies. Just as the studios cannot account for all the ways in which fans will rework and interpret promotional material, they also cannot react too strongly against activities that work against studio plans. This is evident in the changing ways the companies have publicly dealt with online leaks of their trailers before they had intended to release them. Where in the past bootleg footage of film trailers posted online have more often than not been quickly taken offline under the threat of legal action from studios, Marvel and DC have recently been seen to take a more tolerant approach to this issue. After a bootleg first trailer for *Avengers: Age of Ultron* was posted in early October 2014, the clip was widely circulated around internet blogs and websites. Marvel reacted to this by release an official, higher-resolution trailer for viewers to watch as opposed to the low-resolution bootleg. They posted the trailer to YouTube, and tweeted "Dammit, Hydra," a joking reference implying that the leak was perpetrated by the villainous organization present in many of the studio's films (Yamato "Avengers: Age Of Ultron"). When a leak took place for DC's *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice*, the studio similarly acted to provide a higher quality version of the trailer. While both companies moved to take legal action against the person or people who had leaked the trailers early (Patten "Trailer Leak"), they nonetheless allowed for and even encouraged the circulation of the footage in online communities. The providing of a higher-quality version of the leaked content showcased Marvel Studio and DC Entertainment's concern with establishing a strong relationship with their fans. Fans can interact with spreadable media in whatever way they want, whether it chaffs against the rights holders of the property or conforms to their desires. By fostering fan participation rather than quelling it at this

early stage in the release process, Marvel and DC influence the context in which their content is discussed.

### 3.2 Complicating Participation: Affirmational and Transformational Fans

Marvel and DC must also account for the more creative aspects of fan culture. This is tied to the concept of “affirmational” and “transformational” fan participation. Paul Booth writes, “An affirmational engagement is analytical, interpreting the source text through ‘shared meaning and characterization’... This celebratory act of fandom revels in authorship” (Booth *Playing Fans* 12). This type of fan is active within established parameters, using what is provided by the creators to participate inside of an industry-sponsored fandom. Examples of affirmational fan practices include the updating of fan constructed Wiki pages, providing an in-depth history based on different properties, as well as the uploading of videos delineating the established timeline of a property, such as the several clips posted on YouTube summarizing the Marvel Cinematic Universe prior to the release of *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. These clips were subsequently reposted by Marvel to their social pages, showing the company’s acceptance of this kind of fan work because of its proximity to the promotional material. Conversely, a transformational fan “‘aggressively alters and transforms the source text, changing and manipulating it to the fans’ own desires.’ This type of fandom sees meaning emerge from fannish readings in a centrifugal pattern, as fans start ‘laying hands upon the source and twisting it to [their] own purposes’...” (Booth *Playing Fans* 12). Fans falling into this category are usually considered to be unauthorized, and will repurpose the content created by media producers, reinterpreting themes, story arcs, and characters in their own productions. While affirmational fans adhere to what studios provide them through established authorship, transformational fans will restructure this authorship through community participation.

In terms of Marvel and DC’s comic book franchises, these transformational fan practices can often undermine the authority of the studios over their properties. The fanboy auteur is used to guide fan participation in accordance with what the studios’ want. The authority given to these figures as both creators and fans “[frames] the word of



the fanboy auteur as an essential extension of the transmedia story, or a ‘text’ that needs to be read and analyzed in order to get the most out of a transmedia story” (Scott “Mothership” 44). The association of the fanboy auteur with a devotion to the source material lends credibility to the studio-acknowledged “official fandom”. For example, Christopher Nolan’s status as a fanboy auteur was cemented through paratexts around the pre-release marketing of *The Dark Knight* in 2008. During this period, an ARG (Alternate/Augmented Reality Game) generated by Nolan and 42Entertainment on behalf of DC Entertainment called “Why So Serious?” was launched, fostering wide participation in fan communities (Booth *Digital Fandom* 26). That this game was an official activity sanctioned by Nolan as an authority figure meant that it was seen as an expansion of the films, bridging the gap between *Batman Begins* and its sequel.

Successful ARGs demonstrate a huge level of participation by fans within a transmedia story. These games function as if their narratives were taking place in reality, and ask fans to become involved in real world activities tied to this fictional universe. They use fans in constructing parts of the continuity. Based on a catchphrase associated with the film’s villain, the Joker (Heath Ledger), “Why So Serious?” “recruited the audience to become real citizens of Gotham City. Over eleven million unique participants in over seventy-five countries fueled the rise of the Joker as henchmen, campaigned for Harvey Dent to get elected as District Attorney, and even took the law into their own hands by becoming copycat Batman vigilantes” (42Entertainment). Websites featuring Gotham City newspapers (TheGothamTimes.com) and campaign advertisements for fictional District Attorney Harvey Dent (IBelieveInHarveyDent.com) were uploaded and quickly “defaced” by graffiti associated with the Joker and his henchmen. These sites and subsequent content encouraged fans to lend support to Batman, Dent, or the Joker, with game instructions ranging “[from] calling phone numbers written in the sky to hunting down GPS coordinates to find mobile phones baked inside of birthday cakes” (42Entertainment) pushing 11 million fans to drive the ARG forward. The participation involved in the “Why So Serious?” campaign is inherently fannish as the level of activity goes beyond that of any non-fan. The generation of buzz was intrinsic to the game, as fans that would find early clues online would bring them to a wider online audience in order for the game to work. As a result, the diegetic world of the film was being

experienced by fans long before the release of *The Dark Knight*. The fans here were not always pre-existing fans, but the participation involved here goes beyond the approximation of an online gaming experience. Rather than necessarily opening the floor to any casual film-goer, “Why So Serious?” provides an inherently fannish participatory experience to those who are interested in the material or property being put forth by a studio on the terms of the studios themselves.

This level of participation depends on the cooperation between creators and fans in order to function successfully. While the fanboy auteur is positioned as an authority over their films, they are also crucially tied to their status as fans. Therefore, their authorship is linked to a much wider culture of fan participation based in creative engagement. As Suzanne Scott writes in her work “Dawn of the Undead Author”, participatory culture blurs the lines between creator and consumer, effectively restructuring the negotiation between audience and text (Scott “Undead” 443). As fans interpret and reinterpret texts to their own liking online, both individually and as part of larger fan communities, works are essentially re-authored several times over. Due to this shared level of control over the final product, creative fan engagement can be seen to move beyond the confines of what has been offered within the structures provided by studios and advertising agencies. In effect, official avenues for fandom provided by studios do not prohibit the fannish reinterpretation of these properties. A successful fan-generated campaign similar to “Why So Serious?” stemmed from Marvel’s *The Avengers* and the subsequent *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-) television series. Whereas the “Why So Serious?” game created for *The Dark Knight* was generated by DC Entertainment, the 2012 interactive game “Coulson Lives” was created by Marvel fans and would ultimately influence the way in which the studio developed *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*

The transformational fan engagement surrounding the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* series demonstrates the interplay between the co-opting of fandom by media conglomerates and the agency possessed by fans. After the success of the first *Avengers* film in 2012, fans protested the death of the supporting character Agent Phil Coulson (Clark Gregg). Coulson had been a consistent character across the Marvel Cinematic Universe, playing a key role in *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2*, and *Thor*, as well as several

Marvel short films called “One Shots,” before the release of *The Avengers*. The film depicted Coulson’s heroic death at the hands of the villain Loki (Tom Hiddleston) as he died protecting the Avengers and his fellow S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. Several months after the release of *The Avengers*, an online fan movement called the “Coulson Lives Project” rejected the death of Gregg’s character. A Tumblr page created by both male and female Marvel fans developed this movement as a game, with the site’s creators going by the names “Agents Stiletto, Collateral, and Glyph” and generating their own transmedia story based on the character’s resurrection. The page began with a post stating “THIS IS AN URGENT MESSAGE TO ALL FIELD AGENTS. Agent Coulson has been compromised. Repeat. Agent Coulson has been compromised... SHIELD needs all its agents for this mission. Instructions to follow. Stay tuned to this frequency” and followed up with instructions for fans to “get a message to Agent Coulson” (*Coulson Lives*). Fans were advised to “cast the broadest net possible to find Agent Coulson. Talk. Tweet. Tumble. Make art, graphics, record a song, put up fliers on public notice boards” (*Coulson Lives*), all posted with the hashtag #CoulsonLives. When a television series centered on the titular secret government agency and their policing of superpowered characters was announced (Littleton “ABC orders Marvel”), Agent Coulson was resurrected for the series with Gregg reprising his role. This was done by Marvel Television in spite of the objections of the showrunner Joss Whedon. In an interview with Chris Tilly for IGN, Whedon would later say that “as far as I’m concerned in the films, yes [Coulson’s] dead. In terms of the narrative of these guys [The Avengers] his loss was very important” (Tilly “Marvel Movie Guys”). In this case, fan engagement with the material would supersede the authorial voice of the fanboy auteur. Actor Clark Gregg gave full credit to the fans in an interview with Jimmy Kimmel, stating “When [Coulson] died, the nerds brought him back to life with a hashtag, #CoulsonLives” (Eisenberg “Coulson”). Here, the studio at least performs the acceptance of fans as credible creators that have a voice in how these properties are adapted. While these films are strongly tied to the authorial voice of the Marvel brand via Joss Whedon as a fanboy auteur, they nonetheless position fan agency as intrinsic to the production process. The participatory nature of the movement, while generated by fans, was advantageous to Marvel, as the brand was extended through the work of fans.

The terms “affirmational” and “transformational” are helpful in denoting certain overarching types of fan practices. Fans that are affirmational in regards to one fannish property, such as Spider-Man comics or Batman films, could be transformational in regards to another. The way in which Marvel and DC interact with different forms of fannish authorship demonstrates the ways in which these studios provide an active participatory culture, ultimately influencing fan reception of their respective transmedia universes. The success of the “Why So Serious?” ARG and the Coulson Lives campaign point to the tension present as studios allow for transformational fan participation while also maintaining their brand image and continued profit. However, this becomes complicated when fannish activity subverts the studios’ authority in ways that do not affirm the Marvel or DC brands.

### 3.3 The Limits of Fan Participation

The need for regulating fan practices on the part of the studios stems from the lack of control media industries have historically had over fannish activities that repurpose copyrighted content, such as fan fiction and videos that present official material in ways that conflict with studio intentions. Kristina Busse and Jonathan Gray discuss the policing of transformational fan activity in participatory culture provided by media conglomerates. Since transformational fandom frequently “questions, pushes, or removes a show’s ‘lines’” (Busse and Gray “Fan Cultures” 432), impinging on copyrighted material owned by creators, conglomerates act to limit unauthorized usage of these properties. They write that “through intellectual property laws and/or posturing, the media industries attempt to lay claim to the power to silence critics” (ibid.). It is not just an act of censorship over fans that are critical of the copyright holders, but a reification of the studio’s authority over their brand. However, studios do not only suppress but co-opt fannish practices. The providing of a “legitimate” outlet for fan practices links the studio intrinsically to fandom. In providing defined modes of online and offline participation with the hopes of fostering fandom around media adaptations of established comic book heroes, the process of fan co-opting is categorized in terms of official and unofficial fandom. While official fandom is enacted by those who stick strictly to the affirmational modes of expression accepted by the studio, unofficial fandom is performed by those who

wish to re-interpret these properties in transformational ways that go against the constraints of the media conglomerates. As the comic book genre has grown as a financially successful mode of filmmaking, Marvel and DC have also been seen to encourage activities that are clear copyright violations, as seen in their propagation of leaked material from Comic-Con. At the same time, they have conversely acted to affirm their own authorship over their properties. The insistence on the parameters of so-called “official” fandom “reifies the subcultural existence of those not playing in the proper sandbox and/or with the proper tools” (Busse and Gray ““Fan Cultures” 438). The “proper tools” here have to do with the fan production of texts that infringe on studio owned copyrighted material, which brings a legal component into the discussion of fans creating meaning. Studios can reinforce their authorship over a property when fan activity is seen to engender confusion about the overarching brand or reframe it ideologically. The existence of official, industry-mandated fan activities serves to situate those not functioning in this arena of participation as tied to an unofficial fandom.

A highly publicized example of this kind of regulation comes from the cease-and-desist orders sent by Marvel to filmmaker Mike Pecci. Similarly to Whedon, Pecci asserted his long-time status of a Marvel comics fan in interviews surrounding the controversy, writing “Those early issues of *Amazing Spiderman*... would expose me to visual storytelling, start my love affair with lighting and color, and would plant the influence I use every day as a photographer and director. Marvel comics started it all for me” (Pecci “Fan Film”). Pecci’s film, *The Dead Can’t Be Distracted* (2013), was made as a fan film, comparable to amateur productions and recreations based on existing characters that are frequently uploaded to sites such as YouTube. The short film was made as a “true” adaptation of *The Punisher* series of comics, with criticism of the prior official adaptations (*The Punisher*, 1989, *The Punisher*, 2004, and *Punisher: War Zone*, 2004) tied to the film’s production. Pecci stated, “[The Punisher] needs to finally be represented with respect. I believe I can do this” (Pecci “Fan Film”). However, upon releasing a short trailer for the film, the director received a letter from Marvel threatening legal action if the final product was ever posted online. The letter reads,

“While we appreciate your affection for the character, we must demand that you immediately stop your unauthorized use, advertising, sale and/or distribution of any production of The Punisher or any other Marvel character-based films therefore, and any other use of the images, likenesses, artwork or other intellectual property owned by Marvel... Your actions confuse consumers into believing that they are viewing an authentic Marvel production or one sponsored or licensed by Marvel, when they are not” (Pecci “Fan Film”).

Here, Marvel asserts its sole creative control over what is legally their intellectual property, effectively silencing participatory fandom that might complicate their branding and from which they cannot directly profit. This is in direct contrast to another fan film based on the same Marvel property, the Punisher short *Dirty Laundry* (2012). The film, while not an official Marvel production, features actor Thomas Jane in the role of Frank Castle/The Punisher, a part he had played in a previous official adaptation of the comic, and artist Tim Bradstreet, who is known in part for his work as an artist on Marvel’s *Punisher* comic books and as a designer on Marvel’s previous *Punisher* films. As a result, *Dirty Laundry* has strong ties to the Marvel brand, while *The Dead Can’t Be Distracted* does not. The producer behind *Dirty Laundry*, Adi Shankar, commented on the legal action taken against the later film, stating, “I think the underlying issue is that the filmmakers in question may have been a little over zealous in promoting their short prior to releasing it” (Goldberg “THE PUNISHER”). Shankar goes on to address to authorship as a defining factor in Marvel’s reaction against Pecci. He states, “Fan driven content strengthens ones brand and the community around it, and Marvel obviously knows this, as evidenced by the plethora of Marvel fan films and fiction on the Internet” (Goldberg “THE PUNISHER”). There are then limits to the “blurring” of authorship that has been demonstrated to be a by-product of the marketing of comic book franchises to participatory fan cultures. While other fan films are accepted by Marvel, *The Dead Can’t Be Distracted* was seen to be too strongly tied to an authority unassociated with Marvel’s, thus infringing on copyright law by confusing the brand. Pecci’s criticism of Marvel’s past filmic work with the Punisher and his statements that his own short film had a greater level of authenticity is what differentiates the studio’s reaction to *The Dead Can’t*

*Be Distracted* and *Dirty Laundry*. Pecci's statements about his long-time Marvel fandom and cinematic background work to position him as a reliable interpreter of content similar to a fanboy auteur, undermining the authority of Marvel over the production of their Cinematic Universe. It is crucial, then, for the official fanboy auteurs to strengthen the Marvel brand by guiding viewership to the correct nodal points in Marvel's canon to help ensure authenticity to fans without endangering Marvel's monetary gains.

### 3.4 Fanboy Auteurism: Guiding the Way Fans Work

Participatory fandom involves a hierarchy of experience based on mentor-mentee relationships (Jenkins *Confronting*). While these relationships exist within comic book fan communities, the figure of the fanboy auteur is used to associate Marvel and DC with the role of the experienced mentor, thus engendering fannish devotion to the studios. The promise of fidelity and respect to the comic book source material helps to establish figures like Whedon and Nolan as the "right people for the job", but the fanboy auteur is also an important figure in guiding audience participation with studio properties. Studios' intentions in directing viewership across planned transmedia franchises encompasses a variety of shared points of contact that encourage active fan participation in understanding or constructing the "whole story". As well as giving fans an active role in building the story, a notable result of this is the greater consumption of Marvel's transmedia products. This is evident in the way that the television series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* was tied to Whedon's authorship. The extension of the fanboy auteur's brand to his collaborators discussed in the previous chapter is central to the advertising for *Agents*, as the "trailers announce the new offering as being 'from Joss Whedon, the Director of Marvel's *The Avengers*' and a continuation of 'the saga that began in Marvel's *The Avengers*'" (qtd. in Hadas 11). Whedon's name is used to guide viewer consumption between different transmedia points. The intersecting transmedia plots of these properties cater strongly to avid fans of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, to the extent that certain major story details which are necessary to the understanding of the plot of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* are only explained on *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* Many viewers expressed confusion online at the seemingly *deus ex machina* nature of S.H.I.E.L.D. Director Nick Fury's (Samuel L. Jackson) intervention in the climax of the film, as he

flew in to help the titular heroes on a previously unseen “Helicarrier,” a war machine that, in the context of the film, is only introduced by the character saying that he “pulled [the vehicle] out of mothballs with a couple of old friends” and that “she’s dusty but she’ll do.” The exact nature of how this feat was managed is covered in the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* episode that following the film’s release. The episode, “The Dirty Half Dozen” (2015), details that the Helicarrier was provided by Agent Coulson and his team, who had previously constructed the weapon in secret. This plot detail had to be filled in either by watching the episode or by engaging in discussion of the episode after its release. In an interview with the film blog */Film*, Kevin Feige stated, “I think it’s fair to say you could fill in some of those blanks in the coming weeks on Tuesday at 9” (Lussier “Avengers: Age of Ultron”). Similarly, the film *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* also had a major plot development that tied into *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* The story of the film features the reveal that the heretofore benevolent government agency S.H.I.E.L.D. had been secretly usurped by the enemy agency Hydra. This plot point was also covered in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* the week following the release of *The Winter Soldier*, effectively revealing the film’s twist for those who watch the show but had not seen the film on its opening weekend. These crossovers show the way in which Marvel has constructed their Cinematic Universe as a narrative that audiences must actively build rather than passively consume or share. Consequently, fans must work to build the storyworld of the Cinematic Universe through participation.

The fanboy auteur also fosters fannish participation by citing the influential comic texts that have informed their representation of characters and back-stories. As I have illustrated, both Whedon and Nolan have referenced key comic texts both in their extratextual commentary as well as in the narratives of the films themselves. Media scholar Jason Mittell discusses this kind of engagement with online media in terms of spreadability and “drillability” (Mittell “Forensic Fandom”). Mittell states that while spreadability is a fundamental part of participation via social media, drillability has to do with the complexity of the texts and the depth with which viewers engage with them. Drillable media “[occupy] more of [fans’] time and energies in a vertical descent into a text’s complexities” (ibid.). Transmedia products serve as co-productions between fans and creators, as the structuring of the narrative requires the active participation of



viewers, as was the case with the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D./Avengers: Age of Ultron* crossover. Part of the value of these properties is the way in which viewers must engage with their storyworlds both critically and creatively. The degree to which viewers follow the narrative developments within these worlds is a direct reflection of their participation. Superhero and comic book franchise films are transmedia works that allow for this kind of complex participation on the part of fans. The discourse of what source material was used is often stated in the pre-release stage of the film, fostering drillable engagement as knowledgeable fans search for intertextual references. For example, Nolan's professing of specific comic book influences have led to many fannish articles and forum discussions tracking references to works like *Long Halloween* and *Knightfall*. Eric Eisenberg's article "The Best Easter Eggs From The Dark Knight Trilogy" on *Cinema Blend* as well as the forum discussion "The Dark Knight Trilogy Easter Eggs" on *Comic Vine* are particularly telling examples, noting the plot points and visual choices that fans interpret to be taken directly from the comics. Fans of the comic texts will be familiar with many if not all of the references Nolan provides, and so reappraising the *Dark Knight* films for textual evidence of the source material becomes a rewarding activity for fans. Thus, acknowledging influential source material not only asserts the textual prowess of the fanboy auteur, but also provides a drillable aspect of engagement to the films, which Mittell argues creates a more sustained avenue of participation for fans. I would also add that in the cases of Marvel and DC, providing intertextual drillability also deepens the relationship between fans of the comics and the film adaptation by creating a strong bridge between the old text and the new. The development from spreadable word-of-mouth discussion to the even more intense drillable interaction – based on complex intertextuality – illustrates the ways in which the commentary of fanboy auteurs steers fan participation.

The guidance on the part of Whedon (as well as Feige) and Nolan illustrates the studio strategy in which the trusted figure of the fanboy auteur is used to foster consumption across as many media points as possible. However, the stressing of these properties as the "correct" ones also runs the risk of alienating the authorship that fans bring to these texts. The culture of fandom is such that consistent work and creativity on the part of the fans is an intrinsic part of how they engage with their favoured media. In

comic book fan cultures especially, fans will form a relationship with an ongoing story and characters over the course of years. In discussing the guiding of fan reception through the figure of the fanboy auteur, Scott writes that “equating participation with intensified patterns of consumption... might... be viewed as an attempt to creatively (rather than legally) censure fan production, stressing ‘correct’ interpretations that economically and ideologically reinforce the franchise” (Scott *Revenge* 61). Scott argues that fandom is transgressive and resistant to the authority of the studio and that the canonical interpretations provided by the fanboy auteurs reign in fan creativity. Jenkins, on the other hand, believes that “storytelling [is not] a zero sum game where the author gains power at the expense of the audience or vice versa” and that the constraints of the fanboy auteur’s authority “enables, motivates, and sustains fan productivity” (Jenkins “Guiding Spirit” 53). For Jenkins, fanboy auteurism is another context through which the viewer can interpret the film, a framework which disintegrates when these creators try to exercise too great an authority over their texts. Many fans were disappointed with how Marvel had handled the villain The Mandarin (Ben Kingsley) in *Iron Man 3*. In the source texts, the character had been a powerful sorcerer, and one of Iron Man’s archenemies. The film reimaged The Mandarin as an enigmatic warlord who was ultimately revealed to be an actor named Trevor Slattery, hired by *Iron Man 3*’s true villain (Guy Pearce) to misdirect the hero. Fans were outraged by what they felt was a lack of respect towards the comic material (Crump “Iron Man 3”). The film’s writer-director Shane Black displayed little interest in the source material when addressing the criticism, stating that his version was “a message that’s more interesting for the modern world” (Cassidy “Shane Black”), further distancing the film from the status of an authentic representation of the characters. Fans criticized his representation of the character as well as his role as interpreter of the comic text. One commenter (draco) wrote that, “Shane Black’s [portrayal] of the Mandarin is based on the fact that he’s never read an Iron Man comic book a day in his life and was too lazy to do any actual research” (O’Connell “Iron Man 3”). This illustrates the way in which the mishandling of comic texts by the filmmakers can result in negative engagement from fans, undercutting the studios’ strategy of appeal through faithful adaptation. The concept of the fanboy auteur guides fan reception in accordance with the affirmational fan practices that studio’s want,

but the engagement between fans and these figures can foster a different kind of participation when fans identify *too* strongly with fanboy auteurs as well.

In the days prior to the official release of *The Dark Knight Rises*, many early reviews were posted on various blogs and news sites based on pre-screenings attended by film critics. While most received the film positively, a few critics had more negative reactions to the film. Reviewers Marshall Fine of *Hollywood & Fine*, Christy Lemire of *The Associated Press* and Nick Pinkerton of the *Village Voice* in particular disliked the film, calling it “grandiose, not grand” (Fine “The Dark Knight Rises”) and “self-important” (Pinkerton “Self-Important”). *Batman* fans began posting in the comments section of the review aggregator website *Rotten Tomatoes*, disagreeing with, challenging, and even threatening the reviewers who they felt were dismissive of the film and of Nolan. The posts “ranged from short, simple cursing all the way up to death threats. One poster said he wanted Fine to die in a fire. Another fantasized about beating Fine to death with a thick rubber hose” (Evans “Ugly Debate”). It is important to note that this reaction took place before many of the commenters would have had a chance to see the film. Ultimately, *Rotten Tomatoes* was obliged to deactivate their comment section for the film until its official release. Nolan affirmed their passion for Batman as understandable. Prior to the film’s premiere in London, Nolan stated, “I think the fans are very passionate about these characters the way a lot of people are very passionate. Batman’s been around for over 70 years and there’s a reason for that. He has a huge appeal, so I think you know people certainly respond to the character” (Singer “Christopher Nolan”). Though fannish devotion to Nolan’s trilogy had cultivated the irate reaction against negative reviews, the fanboy auteur himself did not condemn the actions of the fans in question. Instead, he associated the extreme response with passionate fandom. This kind of fannish reaction can not only align itself with the authority of the fanboy auteur, but against the authority of Marvel and DC when the filmmakers’ artistic intentions clash with larger studio strategies.

The closeness of the fanboy auteur to the fans can also cause problems when authority is ascribed to the individual author rather than the studio at large. As noted in the previous chapter, the unceremonious departure of Edgar Wright from his long-

planned *Ant-Man* adaptation was met with negative response from fan communities who had already attributed the film's authorship to the cult filmmaker. Marvel's response was to situate the new director, Peyton Reed, as an equally viable interpreter of the property. A higher level of loyalty to an author can alter the fan's reading of a copyright holder's text. For example, Joss Whedon had a publicly difficult time directing *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. In interviews leading up to the film's release, he criticized Marvel for their commanding role in structuring the film's narrative. Many viewers had noted a particularly confusing scene in the middle of the film in which Thor (Chris Hemsworth) experiences a vision of the mystical Infinity Stones in a cave with little explanation about how this had happened or what it meant with regard to *Age of Ultron*'s plot. Whedon stated in an interview with Empire Film Podcast that this scene was the result of negotiations between him and the studios about how the film should progress. He stated that if he did not include a truncated version of the Thor scene, Marvel Studios executives had threatened to excise two slower, "character-driven" scenes, one depicting the innermost demons of the Avengers in a dream sequence and another taking place as the team recuperated on Hawkeye's farm. Whedon characterized the conflict as having been forced on him, stating, "With the cave, it really turned into, you know, they pointed a gun at the farm's head and said, 'Give us the cave, or we'll take out the farm.' In this civilized way. I respect these guys. They're artists. But, that's when it got really, really unpleasant... The dreams, the farmhouse: these were things I fought to keep" (Gajewski "Fighting With Marvel"). Fans showed their reliance on the fanboy auteur, interpreting that if there was a problem with *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, it could not be the fault of Whedon as an authority. With this statement, many of Whedon's fans criticized Marvel for interfering with Whedon's authorship. Posting on IGN.com, commenter "Juliano89" said "these Executives never really care about anything else but their wallets to be overflowing with money... Directors such as Mr. Whedon are about making a legacy, and not just a high paycheck" (Lawrence "Joss Whedon"). While it cannot be assumed that such reactions are representative of the entire online discussion, they show that the mobilization of fans against the studio is an active possibility. Here, Marvel is blamed for the film's failing more so than the fanboy auteur. This struggle for authenticity on the part of the fanboy auteur demonstrates the problems inherent to situating official

authorship in the context of fannish participatory culture. While Suzanne Scott has defined the fanboy auteur as an entity that creates only an illusory agency in fans, Jenkins argues for an understanding of the way authorship functions in participatory culture. While the fanboy auteur is a necessary agent in the establishing of an acceptable multiplicity, their status must ultimately be accepted by the fans. As a result, they become fan creators on a large scale, what Jenkins calls the “dungeon master made good” (Jenkins “Guiding Spirit” 57), or a member of the fan culture who has found success within the fandom. The centrality of these creators to their products has the potential to clash with studio authorship, as censorship or imposed parameters from Marvel and DC is seen as an active movement against fan culture. Fans make their opinions known online, providing participatory commentary and discussion that is as spreadable as their positive sentiments. These studios, then, must publicly respond to the fan engagement and criticism against their products in order to suppress negative participation.

### 3.5 Negative Participation: Fan Backlash Against Studio Authority

As online participation has become ubiquitous, a wider variety of fans has been able to express their wants and needs in a public forum. Online grassroots movements have criticized the lack of diversity in superhero films, citing the shortage of female and minority characters in the films of both Marvel and DC. In February 2014, 46.67% of comic book fans identified through Facebook were female (Schenker “Market Research”). Similarly, the viewership of the first *Avengers* film was estimated to be 40% female (Finke “Records & Factoids”). While these numbers are not necessarily precisely accurate, they nonetheless provide a useable proportional representation of gender in comics and comic book adaptation fandom. An online campaign called “Where is my Black Widow Movie?” was started by U.S. blogger Kristin Reilly to get a film produced centered on the character Black Widow, one of the only Avengers without their own franchise and the team’s only female member. The page encouraged fans of the character to sign a petition that would be forwarded to Marvel Studios, to share the movement on social networking sites under the hashtags #WeWantWidow and #BlackWidowMovie, and to engage in an international flashmob in which fans protested the exclusion of the

character by dressing up in red wigs and leather suits (Black Widow's costume) and publicly gathering. The campaign gained support from Black Widow actress Scarlett Johansson and co-star Mark Ruffalo, who both displayed the hashtag on their official Twitter accounts. Marvel's response to the campaign was to acknowledge the participation of the Black Widow fans while also stating that such a film did not fit into their long-term plan for the franchise. Kevin Feige expressed reluctance to include the character in a standalone film in an interview with ComicBookResources, saying "does this mean [we] have to put one franchise on hold for three or four years in order to introduce a new one?" (Huver "Taking a Risk"). These economic concerns in restructuring the franchise are called into question by fans. Jennifer K. Stuller, a pop culture historian and event organizer for the "Where is my Black Widow Movie?" flashmob, stated that,

"Executives empowered with making decisions probably don't care about our desires – as fans or as females. But it's shocking that they don't seem to care about our dollars. Our dollars should be their incentive, and perhaps some visualization of that potential for them... should speak to them in a way that accomplishes something beneficial to everyone with a stake in these stories" (Jusino "Let the World Know").

Here, fans are seen to acknowledge the concerns of the studio while providing what they consider to be a compatible solution. By showing Marvel that there is an engaged audience for a female-led comic book film, fans hope to reassure the studio that their investment would be sound. Stuller is implicitly supporting Jenkins' idea of participatory democracy by tying the capitalist interests of Marvel and DC to giving fans what they want.

The substantial effects of these fan performances are seen in the upcoming array of films proposed by Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment. As of 2015, both companies' main line-ups of filmic heroes are still made up entirely of straight, white men. However, an industrial conversion can be seen to reflect fan concerns about inclusivity. In the aforementioned film slate announcements undertaken by both studios,

there was an evident, conscious effort to include films centered on underrepresented characters on the part of Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment. The studio can be seen to be responding to these sentiments with the announcement of the *Captain Marvel* film for 2018. The film centers on the cosmic superheroine Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel, and will be written by Nicole Perlman and Meg LeFauve. With the *Captain Marvel* film announced, it is important to note that while studios may be making a show of appealing to what these fans are looking for, they nonetheless are producing these films in response to fan participation. DC Entertainment can be seen to be acknowledging these fan movements as well, as a *Wonder Woman* film directed by Patty Jenkins is planned for 2017. Additionally, Marvel announced a *Black Panther* film, centered on an African hero who has long been part of The Avengers in the comic book continuity. Actor Chadwick Boseman, who came to prominence through his performances as African-American icons Jackie Robinson (*42*, 2013) and James Brown (*Get on Up*, 2014), was tied to the title role. DC similarly announced *Cyborg*, a film based on an African-American member of the Justice League team, for the year 2020. Both Marvel and DC can be seen here reacting to negative fan reception and performing an adherence to fandom. While this is done with box office revenue in mind, they are nonetheless tangibly shifting their practices in response to what vocal fans, and by extension their audience at large, are asking for from these films.

### 3.6 Conclusion

The development of the transmedia comic book film franchise is fundamentally tied to the active engagement of fans by studios. With the movement of fan culture online, it has become necessary for Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment to allow for an active participatory culture, cultivating positive fan reception of their respective transmedia products. As chapters one and two have detailed, the success on the part of Marvel and DC in adapting these properties as acceptable nodal points in the transmedia multiplicity is tied intrinsically to the appeal towards the established fan cultures. Fanboy auteurs like Joss Whedon and Christopher Nolan are central to the way in which their studios initially establish this appeal, and are subsequently used to denote what is official and unofficial content surrounding the properties. The authorial trust that fans have in

these figures can be seen in the legitimization of the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* series by Whedon and the way in which Nolan situated “Why So Serious?” as a nodal point in the transmedia storyworld of *The Dark Knight* trilogy. However, while many fans may interact with official activities such as social media contests and ARGs, an active participatory culture can assume a degree of authorship over studio-sanctioned texts, moving beyond what is authorized by the copyright holders. Similarly, the devotion to the fanboy auteurs handling comic book properties may become greater than the authorship ascribed to the studio brand, as was the case with fan criticism of Edgar Wright’s departure from the *Ant-Man* film and fan reaction to Whedon’s dissatisfaction with Marvel’s degree of involvement in *Age of Ultron*. This creates a tension between studio interests and fan interests, as the dilution of authorship essential to participatory culture clashes with the branding strategy of the studios. Studios can still be seen to enforce their own authority when fan creations could potentially be assumed to fall under their official brand. However, as copyright holders, Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment have had to adapt in order to sustain the positive fan reception around their Cinematic Universes. The way in which these franchises have developed to accommodate fan requests and criticisms demonstrates the active authorship that Marvel and DC must allow to fans. While this may be read as pure performance on the part of the copyright holders, the show of listening to fans effectively results in the inclusion of these fannish concerns in the final products, as is the case with the backlash against the lack of female and minority representation in Marvel and DC films. All of this points to the fact that while the superhero genre has grown through these studios’ use of participatory culture, this same approach means that fan activities will complicate studio interests as often they support them.



## Conclusion

“When I first started, you would pitch a story because without a good story, you didn’t really have a film. Later, once sequels started to take off, you pitched a character because a good character could support multiple stories. And now, you pitch a world because a world can support multiple characters and multiple stories across multiple media.”<sup>5</sup>

This thesis has sought to demonstrate the importance of harnessing fan enthusiasm in order to appeal to a mainstream audience, as well as the tension that arises when fan activity conflicts with studio authority. The current transmedia industrial model based on interconnected Cinematic Universes hinges on the circulation of content and discussion online. As participatory culture has become the norm, fans and mainstream audiences have come to occupy the same digital arena. Harnessing fans as “early enthusiasts” serves to authenticate these films, fostering positive reception in a wider audience through online discussion and buzz marketing. Marvel and DC have sought to do this by situating their films as authentic nodal points in the transmedia multiplicity of their properties. By adapting their products in accordance with comic book fan opinion about what elements of character and story are fundamental to the comic texts, studios situate their film franchises as faithful to the source material. This has been crucial to Marvel and DC, as many of the properties they are adapting to film are relatively unknown to a broad audience outside of comic book fans.

The figure of the fanboy auteur has proven to be an invaluable industrial tool in establishing the credibility of Marvel and DC’s comic book adaptations. By crafting an identity based in reverence to fan culture and the comic texts of the Avengers and Batman, the fanboy credentials of Joss Whedon and Christopher Nolan have been central to the way in which comic fans have interpreted their films for Marvel and DC. They are sold as credible filmmakers capable of representing the source material authentically onscreen both through their prior status as talented filmmakers whose filmography

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<sup>5</sup> An unnamed “experienced screenwriter” quoted in Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture*.

informs their work with the comics and as fans who genuinely care about adapting the material in a faithful way. Whedon has proven to be more in line with Suzanne Scott's definition of the fanboy auteur as a "self-identified fan" (Scott "Mothership" 44), enabling his trusted relationship with fans of the Marvel comic books. Nolan too has fit into Scott's discourse of authority by proximity, acknowledging the status of Batman as a cultural icon who must be taken seriously, and working closely with David Goyer and Jonathan Nolan, writers who have been positioned as long-time fans of the Batman comic texts. In placing these creators so centrally to their respective franchises, both studios have used the fanboy auteur as an industrial tool in selling their products to fans. Fanboy auteurs enlist fans, whose response is amplified by social media to persuade the broader audience that the film is "authentic". I have further argued that the reliability of the fanboy auteur must go beyond extratextual promises to be faithful to the material. In order to sustain the positive reception of their films in fan cultures, consistency of "essential shared traits" (Backman "In Franchise" 218) across multiplicity must be present in the films themselves. This is seen in the way that Whedon and Nolan have directly adapted plot points and character details from popular comic texts into their filmic products.

Studios intent on working with fannish properties must provide an active participatory culture for fans to engage with. However, the harnessing of fan agency has the potential to be unstable. I have discussed how transformational fandom can work for or against studios; where the "Coulson Lives" Augmented Reality Game extended the Marvel brand in a way that would ultimately serve the studio, Mike Pecci's *The Dead Can't Be Distracted* blurred the distinction between official and unofficial productions. Additionally, as exemplified in Whedon's clash with Marvel Studios' greater narrative plans surrounding *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, strong identification with fanboy auteurs can turn fans against the studio, painting the corporation as an authoritative power that ultimately does not have the fans' interests in mind. Suzanne Scott argues that fandom is transgressive and resistant to the authority of the studio and that the canonical interpretations provided by the fanboy auteurs rein in fan creativity. Henry Jenkins, on the other hand, believes that the constraints of the fanboy auteur's authority "enables, motivates, and sustains fan productivity" (Jenkins "Guiding Spirit" 53). All of this points

to the fact that while the superhero genre has grown through these studios' use of participatory culture, this same approach means that fan activities can complicate studio interests as often they support them.

The work that I have done is significant for the way it has interpreted past and current scholarship in characterizing the success of the ongoing comic book adaptation abundance, lending new insights to current industrial trends. The industrial situations discussed in this thesis signify that future research should position industrial appeal to fan cultures as a central part of the marketing strategy for adapted material. Increasingly, industrial journalism has identified this trend, lending further strength to my argument. A recent *Grantland* article in particular demonstrates the shifting concerns of studios adapting comic texts with regard to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox's *X-Men* franchise. The first *X-Men* film, released in 2000 and seen by many as kick-starting the popularity of comics on film, depicted the superhero team in black leather costume instead of "the yellow jumpsuits worn by their comic-book counterparts" because "[mainstream] audiences were not believed to be capable of taking an actor seriously in any shade brighter than charcoal" (Schilling "X-Men: Apocalypse"). The effects of the increased focus on authenticity and fan appeal can be seen in the latest entry in the series, *X-Men: Apocalypse* (2016), in which the drab costuming has given way to overtly faithful depictions of the colorful heroes in "a concerted effort to match [writer] Chris Claremont and [artist] Marc Silvestri's initial conception of the character[s]" (ibid.). As fidelity becomes the standard, the prominence of fans in industrial strategies will inarguably be a continual area of study.

Overall, I have posited that when crafting a transmedia franchise based on existing comic book texts, the massive success of Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment's franchises within a mainstream audience first comes from the appeal to the niche fan audience. This is done through the figure of the fanboy auteur, who is positioned as a capable filmmaker who comes to the property with faithful adaptation in mind. However, the authority of these fanboy auteurs and therefore the studios involves a negotiation with a fan culture that has its own agency and unofficial activities that often run counter to the official parameters and participatory culture that the studios have set in

place. I have demonstrated that Marvel and DC have had to alter their practices to account for the agency of fans in relation to their films. More than just providing participatory content for fans to engage with online, these studios have acknowledged fan criticism by showing a response to negative fan sentiments in their future film slate. This is most clearly seen in the studios' reaction to fan disapproval regarding the lack of minority characters in the studios' planned line-up of films. Currently, Marvel and DC have scheduled films with female protagonists (*Captain Marvel*, 2018, *Wonder Woman*, 2017) and African-American protagonists (*Black Panther*, 2018, *Cyborg*, 2020) over the course of the next few years. Both Marvel and DC can be seen here responding to negative reception and performing an adherence to fandom. While box office revenue is of course a consideration, both studios have perceptibly altered their franchises in response to what active fans, and therefore a wider audience at large, have asked for from these films.

I have framed my argument of studio authorship with reference to Marvel Studio president Kevin Feige in both my introduction and my discussion of Whedon and Nolan in chapter two. I draw attention to his having taken on an increasingly prominent and public authority over Marvel's Cinematic Universe. Blogs and trade articles attribute much of the studio's success in creating a coherent storyworld over several franchises to Feige as a "top-dog producer" who is now "the primary guiding force overseeing all Marvel films and TV show productions alike" (Schaefer "Filmmaker-Driven"). By the time Joss Whedon had exited his role as creative consultant over the Marvel Cinematic Universe in 2015, Feige was just as frequently discussed as a coordinator behind the studio's franchises. I have argued that this status comes from his growing extratextual association with Marvel's adaptations, and especially filmmakers whose background is aligned with reverence for the comic texts. This can be seen as well in the discourse surrounding DC's burgeoning Cinematic Universe. Though DC's president of creative development and worldwide production Greg Silverman and chief creative officer Geoff Johns are often tied to the management of the Universe in trade articles, they are also discussed in connection to director Zack Snyder. So far, Snyder has directed two films for DC's series (*Man of Steel* and the upcoming *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice*) with plans to direct several more, including the two-part crossover film *The Justice League*

(planned for 2017). It is important to note that while producers and studio executives are part of the dialogue surrounding the establishment of a DC Cinematic Universe, it is Snyder as a “Feige-like figure” (Schaefer “Filmmaker-drive”) who is most often referenced with regard to “[laying] out the parameters for other DC movies” (Masters “Superman vs. Batman?”). Producers are taking over the role of the fanboy auteur, as many publications have begun to discuss who can be situated as the “coordinator” of the DC Cinematic Universe. While this could be a future area of study, in the context of the Cinematic Universe it is too recent of a phenomenon to discuss sufficiently in this thesis.

Comic book properties have become a coveted commodity, and the Cinematic Universe model has become an industry standard as major studio films must come with a presold storyworld ripe for sequels, spin-offs, and transmedia tie-ins. Many comic book publishers have established partnerships with film and television companies in order to produce franchises similar to those of industry giants Marvel and DC. Valiant Entertainment, an independent comics publisher, has recently partnered with Sony Pictures and the Chinese production company DMG Entertainment in order to bring their “Valiant Universe” of characters to the screen. A press release from the independent publisher in March 2015 announced plans to develop “film and TV projects featuring Valiant characters such as Bloodshot, Shadowman, and Archer & Armstrong” with the goal of creating the “largest independent superhero universe” (Fischer “Valiant”). DMG CEO Dan Mintz directly attributed the joint venture to the popularity of Marvel and DC franchises, stating that “[comic] superheroes are the most lucrative and sought after IP for movie franchises, so taking a stake in the last independent massive comic universe is a strategic investment for DMG that will produce movies and TV that are both appealing and relevant to a global audience” (ibid.). The projects have already been tied to Matthew Vaughn (*Kick-Ass*, 2010, *Kingsmen: The Secret Service*, 2014), a filmmaker known for his comic book films (Opam “Sony”), and J. Michael Straczynski (*Babylon 5*, 1994-1998), a showrunner who elicits the same kind of fannish devotion in his television fans that Joss Whedon does. If Sony and DMG follow the fanboy auteur strategy of Marvel Studios and DC Entertainment, Vaughan and Straczynski are ideal mediating figures comparable to Nolan and Whedon in terms of established credibility that can be transferred to the Valiant franchise. It is clear that the adaptation of Valiant

characters to film is being done with the consideration of an in-built storyworld connecting these properties at the foreground.

Mintz's comments characterize another potential area of future study, namely the reception of comic book genre films in the global market. In a fuller discussion, I would engage with the foreign viewership of these films to a greater degree. In financing the Valiant Universe, DMG Entertainment touts its background in "introducing celebrated superheroes to the Chinese/international marketplace" (Fisher "Valiant"), having co-produced *Iron Man 3* with Marvel Studios. Though this represents the stake that an international company has in the production and distribution of comic book adaptations, I have found that this has largely extended beyond the scope of my research on the processes through which Marvel and DC market themselves to a domestic audience through fan appeal. However, as DMG takes a greater role in the creation of the Valiant franchise, other companies such as L.A. graphic novel publisher Humanoids have similarly sought to establish themselves in foreign markets (Hopewell "Humanoids"). I believe that these recent acquisitions and partnerships necessitate the need for further study of comic book adaptations in global markets. As the comic book genre becomes an increasingly global industry, future research should continue to examine the strategic and conflicting connection between studios and fan cultures.

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