Secret Origins: The evolving science of superheroes

Episode 10: The blockbuster edition

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Following the record-breaking success of *X-Men* (Singer) in 2000 comic-book heroes began filling the cinematic skies. These films appealed to a wide audience by deftly blending cinematic conventions including the Western’s vigilante archetype, the crime movie’s milieu, and the heightened flourishes of the action film. One of the most potent elements in this generic mix was the science fiction film with cultural theorist Scott Bukatman going so far as to suggest that the “superhero film is surely a variant of the science-fiction film” (“Secret Identity Politics” 115). The superhero’s debt to science fiction goes back to their origin on the page. While antecedents exist, Superman is recognised as the earliest comic book superhero. For the character’s first appearance in *Action Comics #1* (June 1938) writer Jerry Siegel and artist Joe Shuster reworked the story of
Moses to feature a stranger from a “distant planet” who becomes a “champion of the oppressed”. The early comic even offered “a scientific explanation of Clark Kent’s amazing strength” by suggesting his abilities were tantamount to that of an ant or a grasshopper.

Although Superman has enjoyed monthly publication and countless adaptations since that first issue, like many long-standing comic book characters, the hero has remained remarkably consistent. Commenting on the character’s longevity Italian novelist and semiotician Umberto Eco observed that Superman comics “develop in a kind of oneiric climate” with the publisher attempting to curb character progression as the hero “would have taken a step toward death” (17). This consistency across a lengthy publication history has been of great value to critics and scholars hoping to chart the attitudes and anxieties of a particular period, with Andy Medhurst noting how Batman “serves as a cultural thermometer, taking the temperature of the times” (154). Yet when these endlessly serialised superheroes are adapted to another medium they become frozen in time, with the adaptation not only preserving the character, but also the attendant cultural and industrial determinants that shaped them during that era. This fossilisation is not unique to film versions of superheroes, with François Truffaut’s describing adaptation as “an instructive barometer for the age” (Andrew 104). However, as former Spider-Man editor Danny Fingeroth observed, the superhero genre’s “lack of self-consciousness may enable us to read cultural signposts that would be harder to discern in a cultural vein more knowingly developed” (56).

The Sisyphean quests of superheroes are set in motion by an origin story that not only outfits the character with their heightened abilities, but also their heroic purpose. Drawing on prevailing anxieties and interests, these origins are often marked by the cultural signposts that Fingeroth describes. For instance, where once a hero such as the Tarzan was celebrated for his mastery of the natural world, Superman, who first appeared in 1938, responded to the challenges of the machine age.

For instance, the “awe-inspiring icon of modernity, the skyscraper” (Murphie and Potts 50) was a barely an obstacle for this Man of Steel, with the hero’s ability to...
“hurdle a twenty-story building” celebrated in his first appearance. As Jason Bainbridge observed these heroes “are ‘super’ in that they can transcend those limitations (of gridlock, crime, and other urban constraint) that the city places on the rest of us” (168).

Moving into the 1960s, the heroes who populated the growing Marvel Universe articulated the conflicting attitudes to rapid scientific innovation. For instance, the first issue of *The Fantastic Four* (November 1961) found scientist Reed Richards leading an expedition to the stars over the protests of his colleague Ben Grimm who warned, “We haven’t done enough research into the effect of cosmic rays! They might kill us all out in space!”. Grimm is convinced to join the mission when Richard’s finance, Sue, reminds him that “we’ve go to take the chance unless we want the Commies to beat us to it!”. Grimm’s reservations are well founded with the “cosmic rays” sending the crew crashing back down to Earth where they discover they have gained “more power than any humans have ever possessed”, but as recompense for these newfound abilities Ben is irreversibly transformed into the hideous, rock-encrusted Thing.

A similar Promethean perspective informs *The Incredible Hulk* with Dr Bruce Banner becoming a nuclear-powered version of Jekyll and Hyde when he is caught in the blast of “the Incredible G-Bomb!”. Other Marvel heroes also served as atomic age cautionary tales with the high-flying vigilante Daredevil gaining his gifts from radioactive waste that also left him blind. Informed by the civil rights movement, the X-Men, often referred to as “the children of the atom”, represented a new stage of human evolution that was feared and hated by the rest of society. Although Peter Parker displayed no negative side effects after being bitten by a radioactive spider, when his self-serving actions as the wall-crawling Spider-Man inadvertently resulted in his uncle’s death, Peter learned that with “great power comes great responsibility”.

Film scholar Brian McFarlane noted that a “film is not merely (perhaps not even primarily) an adaptation; it is also a film of its time and this fact will bear on the kind of adaptation it
Comic book film adaptations, particularly in the era of digitally empowered fans, tend to be faithful to the characters and their time-tested origins.

This fidelity allows the context-specific inflections to be more easily identified than in films with no recognised source material. For instance, when *The Incredible Hulk* was adapted as *Hulk* (Lee) in 2003, “mysterious gamma rays” were no longer sufficient to justify the mild-mannered scientist’s transformation into a rampaging wall of green muscle. The film maintained the science gone awry motif of the 1960s comic, but moved from big science to cell research with the gamma explosions occurring in the lens of a microscope rather than a desert test site. However, *Hulk* does more than simply update the lessened danger posed by atomic weapons with a more modern interest. The adaptation provides a psychological motive for the monster’s anger. Where the original comic creators were content for Bruce Banner to “hulk out” at the slightest irritation, the film reveals that Banner has repressed the memory of his mother’s murder at the hands of his abusive father. Thus, it is this trauma rather than the lab accident that fuels the Hulk’s rage, a more relatable motivation for a contemporary audience.

Similar updates abound in the recent trend of comic book film adaptations. Where once the Fantastic Four aimed for the stars, the realities of space travel tempered those ambitions with the scientists of the 2005 adaptation, *Fantastic Four* (Story), choosing a space station for their ill-fated experiments. Peter Parker’s amazing gifts still stem from a spider’s bite in the 2002 film *Spider-Man* (Raimi) and its more recent reboot *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Webb 2012), but now the faithful arachnid has been genetically engineered rather than “accidentally absorbing a fantastic amount of radioactivity”. When the X-Men books were adapted for the screen the comic’s theme of prejudice was not only maintained, but expanded to consider many minority groups. For instance, in *X2* (Singer 2003) teen hero Iceman must “come out” to his parents as a mutant, to which is mother
curtly replies “have you tried not being a mutant?”. Thus, the updated science in these movies not only achieves greater verisimilitude, but also tapped into contemporary interests.

While these superhero stories have traditionally articulated a wider response to scientific exploration, increasingly comic book film adaptations have moved these origins from the laboratory to the battlefield. For instance, the most recent film adaptations of Batman and Iron Man saw billionaire vigilantes Bruce Wayne and Tony Stark stock their arsenals with military prototypes, while the law-enforcement agency S.H.I.E.L.D. provides the connective tissue of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This shift first emerged in the comics, with many Marvel characters gaining a militaristic dimension when they were re-launched under the publisher’s *Ultimate* imprint in 2002. In these post-9/11 comics heroes such as Captain America, Thor, and Hulk worked for the government and wore costumes that more greatly resembled military fatigues.

Focusing on *Batman Begins* (Nolan 2005), Justine Toh describes how this trend in comic book film adaptations “encapsulates the militarization of popular culture” (128), with comic book creator Jim Lee observing “the government is now our version of radiation. Radiation used to be the reason why people got superpowers. Now the government is” (DeFalco 190).

More recent comic book film adaptations have returned to the science fiction conventions of earlier superhero origins. *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon 2015) makes use of “the ambivalent figure of the robot” to articulate the science fiction tension between “the optimistic vision found in [Issac] Asimov and the apprehension at the core of the Frankenstein story” (Murphie and Potts 104). In the blockbuster sequel, the superhero team add the android Vision to their roster, with new recruit reflecting, “Maybe I am a monster. I don’t think I’d know if I were one. I’m not what you are and not what you
intended”. Similarly, after the espionage thriller *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Russo brothers 2014), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Gunn 2014) charted the outer reaches of the Marvel Universe; *Ant-Man* (Reed 2015) reworked *The Incredible Shrinking Man* (Arnold 2015) as a superhero story; and, in the most recent reboot *Fantastic Four* (Trank 2015), the scientists-cum-heroes have rediscovered their passion for exploration with the quartet gaining their abilities following inter-dimensional travel.

Linda Hutcheon argues that “Neither the product nor the process of adaptation exists in a vacuum: they all have a context – a time and a place, a society and a culture” (xviii). On the page superheroes intuitively responded to changing attitudes. Each adaptation offers an opportunity to view these characters at a particular time, and, through the figure of the superhero, we are offered a window into a particular cultural moment. As one would expect of heroes, these characters on the page and screen often respond to specific events and wider conflicts. Yet, from their secret origins to their blockbuster films, superheroes can be relied upon to negotiate the trepidation and wonder that greets new scientific discoveries and technological possibilities.

**Bio:** Liam Burke is a screen and media studies lecturer at Swinburne University of Technology. He is the coordinator of Swinburne’s Cinema and Screen Studies Major, which he established in 2014. He is also the Media Discipline Leader. His research interests include: Screen Adaptation, Audience Studies, Irish Cinema, Comics Studies, and Transmedia Storytelling. The University Press of Mississippi published Liam’s latest book, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood’s Leading Genre*, in early 2015. His past books include the Superhero Movies and the edited collection *Fan Phenomena Batman*. Prior to moving to Melbourne, Liam was the BA with Film Studies Coordinator at the National University of Ireland, Galway. He was the programmer of the inaugural John Ford Ireland – Film Symposium in 2012.

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