Comics Arts Conference #5: The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre

**Time/Date:** 10:30am - 11:30am 10 July, 2015  
**Location:** San Diego Convention Center  
**Chair:** Dr Liam Burke (Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne)  
**Panellists:**  
Tom Brevoort (Marvel Comics senior vice president of publishing)  
Joe Kelly (*Deadpool, Ben 10, I Kill Giants*)  
Michael E. Uslan (*The Boy Who Love Batman*)  
Mark Waid (*Kingdom Come, Archive, Avengers*)

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START OF TRANSCRIPT

**Liam Burke**

Thanks everyone for coming, I know there's a lot of competition out there but I think this is time better spent than queuing up for Hall H. I am Liam Burke, I am a media studies lecturer at Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia. I'm also the author of this book, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre*. And as that unwieldy title suggests, it is about the last 15 years of unprecedented comic book film adaptations. Why they were produced as well as their impact on the respective industries. And in preparing this book, I needed to speak to leading industry professionals and we're very lucky to have some of those stars with us today.

So in all the excitement of Comic-Con, you often forget that for the longest time, Hollywood did not consider comic books to be an ideal source material for adaptation. And one of the people responsible for changing that perception is our first panellists, Michael Uslan. Michael has the first doctorate ever in comic books, he's also written a number of comic books himself, and, as he details in his memoir *The Boy Who Loved Batman*, he is the originator and executive producer of the Batman film franchise. So in many ways, without the tireless enthusiasm of Michael and similar comic fan-filmmakers, Comic-Con wouldn't be the massive event it is today and I wouldn't have a job. So please show your gratitude by welcoming Michael Uslan.

Amazingly, Michael has five more panels today, with topics ranging from Matt Wagner to Doc Savage, so please check some of those out.
Our next panellist has worked on both sides of the adaptation divide. As a comic book writer, he's worked on X-Men, Superman, Daredevil and his run on Deadpool made the character a fan favourite. He's also one of the founders of the transmedia empire Man of Action, and he's also adapted his own Action Comics story as the DC animated universe movie *Superman vs. The Elite*. He has been equally successful in creating his own titles, not least of which is the award-winning *I Kill Giants*, which he is currently adapting for producer Chris Columbus. So please welcome Joe Kelly.

I should also point out that Joe and his other Man of Action colleagues are in a big panel tomorrow in room nine, so please go along.

And our final panellist for the moment is someone who has 30 years experience in the comic book industry as a writer, an editor and a publisher during which time he has worked on about every major character you can think of. His collaboration with Alex Ross, *Kingdom Come*, is deservedly one of the best-selling graphic novels of all time. Recently he has spearheaded the Archie Comics revival, began writing the historical fiction series STRANGE FRUIT for Boom!, and was just announced as the writer on Marvel’s *Avengers*. Also, as a long-standing advocate of digital comics, he publishes a number of titles through his own company, Thrillbent. Would you please welcome Mark Waid. Like our other panelists, Mark is also packing in a number of panels at the Con, and tomorrow he will be back in this room at the same time to discuss “Comic Books in Therapy”.

And the eagle-eyed amongst you would’ve noticed that the schedule has four comic book pros coming. Tom Brevoort has had an unavoidable clash with a Marvel panel that doesn't conclude for another 20 minutes, but he is hoping to make it to the latter part of this session. Having said that, it's at the other end of the Convention Centre and he is the senior vice-president of publishing for Marvel Comics. So if he manages to weave across the convention floor unrecognised in that time, it will be something of a Comic-Con miracle. So fingers crossed.

So I'm not going to talk for too long, I'll just put up a few discussion topics for our panellists and hopefully if we have ten minutes at the end, we can throw it open to the floor for Q&A. So think about questions and we'll hopefully get to those at the very end.

Comic books and cinema began roughly around the same time depending on your definition of the forms, but they had a century of indifference. There were occasional adaptations, but there wasn't a sustained trend of comic book movies. But in the past 15 years, as this event testifies, we've seen an unprecedented number of comic book film adaptations produced. So maybe let's start with Mark down at the end and let's start with, why?

**Mark Waid**

Good question. There's two things going on. One of them is that, and I can only speak from experience, that in dealing with creative filmmakers or in any media outside comics, we know the people who were there in the 60s, 70s, 80s, they didn't grow up reading comics. Or if they did grow up reading comics, comics were shorthand for children or morons, one of the two. Certainly in every television show, every movie, every media presentation that ever showed
comics in the 60s and 70s and stuff, if a grown man was reading a comic that was shorthand for something's wrong, that he's a man-child or something.

So then in the mid 80s, the trifecta of Watchmen, Dark Knight, Maus, comics had one of its best years ever. And then ten years later, all the guys who were reading that stuff are suddenly junior executives at studios, talent coordinators and so forth, and they're into this stuff. I saw it myself, starting to have meetings with people in the 90s and the early 2000s who instead of saying, "I don't know much about comics, my kids read them", instead it was, "Man, I grew up reading Dark Knight", or, "I thought Watchmen was the greatest thing ever". So as fans of the material, they understood that there's a lot more to it than just Biff, Bang, Pow, and that there was a lot more texture you could mine there, I would say.

Liam Burke

Michael, you were at the vanguard of that transition to fan filmmakers. Was that your experience as well, that there was a generational shift?

Michael E. Uslan

Oh definitely and not just about Hollywood. Folks, 51 years ago this month, I was at the first Comic-Con ever held on the planet Earth. We booked a hotel in downtown in New York, 200 of us showed up for the first Comic-Con. At that first Comic-Con, there were only four pros who showed up. Stan Lee was afraid to show up. He's going, "What kind of adults would be gathering in a convention? They must be deficient in some way, shape or form", and Stan sent his secretary, Flo Steinberg, to the convention to check it out, let him know if it was dangerous. So we didn't even have respect from the industry. So when I went out to acquire the rights to Batman in 1979 from DC Comics, you have to understand what was happening in the context of the times. The question should be asked as follows to me, "How the hell did a kid in his 20s buy the rights to Batman? How could that possibly happen?" And the truth, the unglamorous truth is that nobody else on the planet Earth wanted it. Nobody showed up.

The president of DC Comics at the time was a wonderful man named Sol Harrison, who was my mentor into the comic book industry, and he was very fatherly toward me. Sol, when I told him I wanted to buy the rights to Batman to make dark and serious Batman movies, he looked at me and turned absolutely white and said, "For God's sake Michael, don’t do this. I don’t want to see you lose your money". He said, "Don’t you understand? Since Batman went off the air on television, the brand is as dead as a dodo. Nobody's interested in Batman anymore". I said, "Yes Sol, but if we do a dark and serious Batman movie, nobody's ever seen a comic book movie like that. It'll almost be like a new form of entertainment". And he put his hand on his head and said, "Is there any way I can talk you out of this?" And I said, "No". He said, "Alright, come on in". And after six months negotiation, on October third 1979, I acquired the rights to Batman with my partner Ben Melniker, a legend in the movie business, who in fact in May turned 102 years old and is still as sharp as can be and sends you all his greetings from New York--but the point is now that, and I don’t want to run on too long, I just want to try and get this point across--I then quit my job, put Batman in my back pocket and came out to Hollywood.
I didn't know anybody, I had no relatives in Hollywood. I didn't come from money. I'm a blue collar kid from Jersey so I couldn't buy my way in anywhere. But I was convinced this was going to be a slam dunk. Of course, every studio is going to line up at my doorstep when they heard I had the rights to Batman. How could they not? How could they not envisage the sequels, the animation, the toys, the games? It's going to be the easiest thing I had done since my spelling test in fifth grade. So I get out to LA and I am turned down, I am rejected, I am practically thrown out of the offices of every single studio in Hollywood. They tell me my idea sucks, it is the worst idea they've ever heard. Warner Brothers won't even let me in the door to pitch to them.

Mark Waid

Give us the year again?

Michael E. Uslan

1979.

Mark Waid

So Superman the Movie, already making box office everywhere, and they still didn't take your meeting?

Michael E. Uslan

So I actually spoke to people at the time, I was dealing with Warner Communications, and I'm talking about people who are no longer around. And in my conversations with them, the head of the whole division, they were embarrassed that they owned a comic book company in the 1970s. The only reason he told me they bought DC was to get the rights to Superman because they thought that was the only comic book character of any value and the only one capable of being made into a blockbuster movie. Nothing else in the DC library and certainly nothing Marvel was doing had any value whatsoever. That's 1979 thinking. Why? The executives that we're dealing with were all young adults or adults during the Frederic Wertham Seduction of the Innocent era. They bought that stuff hook, line and sinker. This guy I was dealing with, who everybody had to report to, he thought at best, comic books were simply cheap entertainment for children. At worst, maybe they could be harmful. That was the atmosphere. And anybody I met in Hollywood, whether they were studio execs, agents that talent pool, it was the same general reaction that I got everywhere.

So just to wrap up this part of it, I have to give you my two favourite rejections as Batman in 1979. This one came from Columbia Pictures. Well actually the one from the Columbia came a couple of years later, I went back for a second round. I pitched my heart out for a dark and serious Batman and the man who was head of production at the time was a silver haired, dapper dressed guy and he listened to me and then he shakes his head and gives me a tisk tisk and he says, "Michael, you're crazy. Batman will never be successful as a movie because our
movie, *Annie*, didn't do well*. I'm sitting there going, "Well wait a minute, are you talking about the little redheaded girl who sings that song Tomorrow?" And he goes, "Yeah". I go, "Well what does that have to do with Batman?" He says, "Oh come on, Michael. They're both out of the funny pages". That was my rejection from Columbia.

My rejection from the United Artists, which was a major studio at the time, the executive there, every other word out of his mouth was a curse word, so I'm going to give you every other word of my rejection. Remember, this is 1979. He says, "Michael, you're out of your mind. Batman, Robin will never be successful as a movie because the movie *Robin and Marian* didn't do well*. Now for those of you too young, *Robin and Marian* was a Sean Connery, Audrey Hepburn movie about an aging Robin Hood and Maid Marian. I'm sitting there and I'm going, "Huh?" I didn't even question it. I just stood up, I didn't say a word, I pick up my Batman comics, I turned around and I walked out of the room. But over the next ten years, which is how long it took me before we got our first Batman movie made after everybody kept telling me to go away and it sucks, I would periodically go to a mountaintop and sit in the lotus position and ponder what this guy said. And honest to God, I figured it out. The only reason he turned down Batman for United Artists was that both had the word Robin in the title. There's no other connection. Welcome to Hollywood, ladies and gentleman.

**Liam Burke**

And Joe then, so if there's been this generation shift. Why has the mass audience outside of the niche readership embraced these films in your experience?

**Joe Kelly**

Well for me, it's a combination of what Mark said. I mean the audience is now ready for it. They grew up with it, they don't think of it as entertainment for children. Kids started to see their parents dig it, and the technology caught up. I mean that's the other component, is that we were finally able to make movies that look like what we want them to be. There was a very short Spider-Man TV show if anyone remembers that, ropes being shot out of web slingers in reverse and all this kind of stuff. And I still liked it as a kid, but as an adult you just can't look at that for five seconds. But you hit the technology, you hit the cultural zeitgeist, you hit the people who green-light, it all works. And the audience, they want to be entertained. These are great stories, these are stories that are iconic, epic, archetypal. They're the kind of entertainment we want.

**Liam Burke**

And what about the move then towards media conglomerates? You're not going to get a theme park ride out of Oliver Twist, you're not going to get a video game out of Pride and Prejudice -- but a character like Superman or Spiderman, that's spreadable content. Do you think that has anything to do with why Warner Brothers and Disney are so enthusiastic?

**Mark Waid**
Yeah. I mean we were talking about this yesterday, for the Superman radio show panel, and the idea that DC Comics and its forbearers in the 1930s and 40s, they were geniuses when it came to marketing and exploitation of that character. And the money they put into Superman in the first year or two of that character's publication, because they were producing the radio—they weren't licensing it, they were producing the radio show. They were heavily involved in the newspaper shorts, they backed the television show, DC Comics did. Not a license deal. So they were very good about making sure that drove the company and making sure they could market that character, and that's very much what's happening today. It's just that Disney and some of these other companies have caught up to that. 75 year success, that's a proven track record. Even for somebody who would think that Robin and Marion is proof that you can't make a Batman and Robin movie, that…

Liam Burke

So comic book characters were really transmedia icons before we had the term?

Mark Waid

They really were. I mean when were well managed. And those that weren't became Woody Woodpecker and Betty Boop and Andy Panda and characters that were just banished off the radar, off the landscape.

Liam Burke

I remember back in 2002 when Spider-Man broke box office records, journalists and other cultural commentators were very quick to link it to real world events, because they always do. They were suggesting that there was a renewed desire post 9-11 for readily identifiable heroes, ones that tap into a certain type of nostalgia. Do you guys think there was any weight to that argument or was that a lazy sort of zeitgeist reading?

Michael E. Uslan

Well first of all, where have our heroes gone today? Where have you gone Jo DiMaggio? You've been replaced by baseball players on steroids and football players with deflating footballs. And I have to explain that to my kids and my grandchildren. What about the great politicians we all looked up to? Come on. Heroes there? Not many. What about the astronauts that we used to look up to? Well we no longer have a space shuttle program really. Our heroes are evaporating around us. So superheroes, in a sense, do, I think, fill a void. I think it's a void that's missing globally. I think a lot of us are polarised in this country, whether it's politically or culturally, we are polarised all around the world. Yet, Captain America is doing well at the box office in China, for God's sake. So the superheroes have a chance to bring us all together, in a sense, that overcomes differences of religion and politics and culture, and they are crossing the borders and they are crossing those cultures. So I think they really do fulfill the same need we needed thousands of years ago, whether it was Odysseus, Tales of Beowulf, whatever it might have been. It's still the same thing.
Liam Burke

Like a mythological tradition?

Michael E. Uslan

Yeah.

Liam Burke

Maybe we'll move on slightly now. We're here at Comic-Con. The visibility of Comic-Con suggests that the power relations--I don't know if that's the best term--between fans and filmmakers have shifted a little bit. Certainly in this kind of digitally empowered age, fans have greater visibility and they've used that visibility to lobby for more faithful adaptations. So maybe we'll start with you Joe, because you've adapted your own comic once and you're doing it again now with *I Kill Giants*: Is there a genuine fan power and how do they wield it? And has it had an impact on these more faithful adaptations?

Joe Kelly

Oh, I definitely believe that there's a huge power base for fans. I mean you saw it certainly in comics. I mean with Deadpool as an example, that comic was cancelled four times and then letter writing campaigns brought it back four times. I just couldn't emotionally handle the stress for the fourth time so that's why I stopped working on it. But then cut to now, here we are and the special effects trailer “leaks” and fans explode and it becomes, the momentum that then you can walk to your studio head and you can say, "Look what all these people did". I mean again, the same executives who understand comics now also now understand social media, so when they go out and they see this Deadpool trailer got a million views, five million views or whatever, "We need to make the movie". That translates for people. So the voice of the fans is very powerful. Like right now, I'm really curious to see what happens with it's not a comic book film, but *Hannibal*. Hannibal's a show that I love, very vocal fan base, really challenging property for network television but they pulled it off for three seasons. And I think that voice is going to save that show.

Liam Burke

So Mark, do you think if fans have this power, to fall back on Spider-Man's axiom of “power and responsibility”, do you think they always use it responsibly?

Mark Waid

No, no, no, no, no. But here's the thing, social media changed everything. It never would've occurred to me when I was a fan growing up to get on the phone and call the publisher of Marvel Comics and say, "Where's my Spider-Man comic?" But social media gives a voice to those people who didn't have a voice for such a long time, and who can blame them for using it very loudly? It's a tricky place because as a creator, and I think I probably speak for all of us up
here, you want to be sensitive and in tune with what the fans are interested in. But at the same time, you can't let that dictate what you do. You can't cede too much of that control over because then you're not writing the story.

**Liam Burke**

And then it kind of becomes movie making by committee, which is something that fans used to criticise the studios for doing.

**Mark Waid**

Yeah, and now if they could all pick the end of *Man of Steel*, they would themselves. If they had the power to vote for it, instead of them watching it, they would want that power.

**Joe Kelly**

It's a real challenge because you absolutely want to be true to the spirit of the character. But I mean that's our job, we drill down and go, "What are the core elements? What's the DNA that we love? Why do we love it?" Like even something like in a comic adaptation, I did a *Space Ghost* adaptation. And I didn't do a complete homage to the Hanna-Barbera show, I just took what I remembered as a kid and what I thought was important and expanded on that. And that's what we try to do. Even in my own work, that's what I try to do. It's what made that story work, what will work for this media, then go for there. We could talk about the ending of *Man of Steel* all day. Especially Mark's screed on that was one of the greatest things ever written on the internet. You articulated it so well. But it's critical, and it's critical that you are able to take that fan input that understands the DNA and then translate that to studio executives who go, "Well everything needs to be dark and there's a reason"—and it's like, no. Because when you talk about heroes and where are heroes, that's immediately what I thought about was the ending of *Man of Steel*. That is not something I would've chosen personally.

**Michael E. Uslan**

But you're absolutely right because the way Hollywood works is Batman, *The Dark Knight*, they're dark. "Oh, now I get. All superhero movies must be dark". So we've got to do the dark *Hawkman* or the dark *Ant-Man*, whatever it might be. And I swear to God, the next studio that comes out with Casper is going to do “Casper the Unfriendly Ghost”. But it gets that mentality. Now let me take you back about three-quarters of a generation. One of the problems that we ran into, and I'm speaking generally in the motion picture industry, not about any specific studio. Everybody get that? What used to be movie studios are now conglomerates. They own lots of companies. There's a lot of wheels to be greased. They might own a theme park, they might own a home video department, they might own a toy company or piece of one. Who knows what it is, but those wheels have to be greased. So the IP, the superheroes really grease all the wheels really well for them. But what can happen is sometimes the heads of these kinds of conglomerates can become very enamoured with licensing merchandising. If they become very enamoured with that and they then dictate to a filmmaker and say, "Here's the deal. We want to please the toy companies and the licensees. Make sure, this movie must be light and
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bright and kid friendly and family friendly". Or they might say, "The toy company said you've
got to have at least three superheroes and three supervillians and each one has to have two
costumes and two vehicles". And my point is when that happens, the tail is wagging the dog.
You're no longer making films, you're making two hour infomercials for toys. And it was only
when the next generation of executives came in that could understand the concept that we were
pushing, which is let's just find filmmakers who love these characters, have a passion for it,
have an understanding for it, have a declared vision for what they want to do and that we
believe they have the ability to execute that vision. If we just make great comic book movies,
you're going to sell toys anyway. That has been part of the battle and part of the reason, with
the changing of the guard generationally in Hollywood, that it has worked to the advantage of
all of us and has produced, along with the technology catching up, what I consider to be the
Golden Age of Comic Book Moviemaking.

Mark Waid

And where that also leads us, which is great, is that leads for more opportunities for things like
I Kill Giants, because it's not a superhero story at all, but it gives validity to this thesis that the
source material is worthwhile, the source material has integrity, and is worth pursuing. I think
that's happening now. Because we've talked exclusively about superhero stuff, but we could
talk about History of Violence or Ghost World or…

Liam Burke

Well that is an interesting point, because we use “comic-book movie” as kind of a catch-all
term, to the point that the movies are sort of produced and sometimes moved away from their
source material to a prescribed idea of what a comic book movie should be. I remember when I
interviewed you for the book, Joe, you talked about The League of Extraordinary Gentleman
and you described it almost as an “exploitation film”, in that it was trying to not be anything
like the Alan Moore/Kevin O'Neill literary pastiche, but more like an X-Men movie to the
point that at one stage it was re-titled to “LXG”. So is there a comic-book movie genre and
does it move some of these movies away from their source material to what is a comic book
trope or conventions or aesthetic?

Joe Kelly

Well I definitely feel like there's this superhero genre and I think that's fair to define. The
comic book genre is I think when you've got the ill-informed executives who are just kind of
like--we worked on some very weird projects at Man of Action when they go, "Well we want it
to be like a comic book", and it'll be like a nature show about monkeys. Honest to God, true. It
was on for three episodes, you can find it. Monkeys via 300, it was really crazy. But they had
comic book panels and all this sort of stuff. They felt like this was somehow tapping into the
comic book movie. Like Mark said, comic books are not a genre, they're a medium. So we
have everything, we've got romance, we've got crime, we've got noir, we've got superheroes.
So I think it's the next level of education that's going to come and it's going to come quicker as
people are discovering new things. I'm totally blanking on the title which is ridiculous, but the
gangster one with the kid.
Mark Waid

*Road to Perdition.*

Joe Kelly

Right, *Road to Perdition.* I mean it's like an Oscar winning movie. And nobody knew it was a comic book. Then it was like people were almost embarrassed that it was a comic book. It was not part of their PR machine at all. Great movie…

Mark Waid

Which I think it might be today. I mean a movie studio has a bunch of different factors, but they'd be a lot more likely to point out that it was from the acclaimed graphic novel, which they wouldn't dare have done ten years ago.

Michael E. Uslan

That's totally true. One of the problems we're facing today is the majority of execs in Hollywood still think that when they are discussing comic book movies, they are discussing superhero movies. They think comic books and superheroes and synonymous.

Mark Waid

And that's true across the nation. I mean most people who aren't at this convention think of comic books and superheroes as the same.

Joe Kelly

There’s somebody who’s not at this convention?

Mark Waid

His name is Bill

Liam Burke

I want to talk briefly about how you often hear about how movies and other media have influenced comics. You think back to Bob Kane’s debt to *Citizen Kane,* up to widescreen comics today. But if cinema and other media have had a steady diet of comic books for 15 years at the very least, surely comic books are now influencing those media. So maybe we can start with Mark and work our way down to Joe, and start thinking about, is there a way that you've noticed that comic books have influenced either the aesthetics or the storytelling tropes of not necessarily just cinema, but media more generally?
Mark Waid

That’s a really good question. The Matrix is a really good example, especially if you ask Grant [Morrison], it's really good example. I don't know. Michael, why do you think? I mean where do you see the bleed over in the other direction from comics to movies, in less obvious ways than, "Oh, it's just a horror movie"? But where do you see the more subtle influences from the comics?

Liam Burke

And it mightn't even be direct adaptations. It might just be new TV shows, new video games, new movies, but they seem indebted in some way to storytelling or aesthetic conventions that we would associate with comic books originally.

Michael E. Uslan

Well when people ask me, what's the secret to a great movie? I say it's ten things. It's story, story, story, characters, characters, characters, story, story, story. And I think from comic books, because of the way they're serialised and told, and because of the interest of the fan base in the lives of our characters--let's face it everybody, when it comes to Peter Parker, Bruce Wayne or anybody, we want to know it in detail. We want to be involved in every part of their lives. I want to know what's going on at Peter Parker's house with Aunt May and at his girlfriend's, I want to know what's going on in Superman's Clark Kent life. So they get textured, layered characters. And I think the depth of that characterisation, to find ways to carry that over that would work great for the way TV has just risen dramatically in quality over the past number of years, the comic book characters give them that ability to explore that on an ongoing basis. And it also helps when we only have two hours and change to tell a story every two or three years. What do you do then? You've got rely on clearly defined and textured characters that audiences can relate to and feel like they know. So I see it as more of a character driven thing.

Joe Kelly

Yeah, I think that's a great way to put it. Also, the world's that get created. Everyone's about world building in Hollywood, "Can you give us a world? Can you give us a universe?" All this sort of stuff. Comics have been doing that since day one.

Mark Waid

I love sitting down with studio people who act like it's magic and they have no idea of. And then you're a wizard because you can build a world half and hour and stuff. It's what we do every day. But we don’t tell them that.

Joe Kelly

No, don’t tell any executives that.
Liam Burke

These kind of transmedia universes rely on a certain story world depth and you see them trying to make that work for Terminator and it doesn't have the history that the Marvel cinematic universe or the DC universe has.

Mark Waid

It really is that feeling of, and I know that we've all had this experience, the most flattering thing I ever heard in a meeting was after half an hour I was just doing what I do, "How did you think of that?" It's what I do every day, it's like asking a plumber how did he manage to put the two pipes together. But they think it's magic.

Joe Kelly

But also our media by it's very nature is cheap, it's always been cheap. I mean prose is probably the only cheaper art form, so the industry has always developed multiple projects, multiple characters, worlds blah, blah, blah. You can have a massive amount of material that does not cost a fraction of what it would cost at the time to make a TV show or a film or something. We already have this massive body of work, that then when they can come in and they just need a slice...

Liam Burke

When I interviewed you for the book, you described it as the R&D branch of these large conglomerates, and that's what comics are treated like with characters flowing across a wide variety of forms that we never would have anticipated even 15 years ago.

Joe Kelly

And now with the transmedia where that's a need, it's an absolute necessity to have, "What is your online component? What are you going to do for toys? What are you going to do for theme parks?" That already exists for us. We've been doing that for decades.

Mark Waid

It goes back to the fact that comics are cheaply produced. We've burrowed through the churn. Because there's no investment of capital, you and I could sit around for half an hour and come up for an idea for a comic. And at the end of the half hour, if it doesn’t work, we didn't spend any money on it so it goes into the trash and we move onto the next thing. That's part of why we're able to generate these ideas so quickly. Again, it seems like magic to these people

Joe Kelly
The other thing I would just throw out is that the writers and the directors that you're seeing these days all grew up on these comics. So there is some very subtle storytelling and not so subtle storytelling elements that are—“ripped off” is the wrong term -- but where you went to film school to learn how to make films, so much of it is do it yourself now. So much of it is people pulling in from other resources that the people that grew up with *Watchmen* and who grew up with that kind of visual storytelling, it applies in so many different ways. I think internationally you see it especially, which is really cool.

**Liam Burke**

It is easy to see that influence. I mean certainly the serialisation is hugely important. There's no one better at serialising characters than comic book creators.

I know we're going to be wrapping up in a few minutes, so Michael, you described this as a Golden Age of Comic Book Filmmaking, but is it sustainable? What do you think is the future of comic book filmmaking?

**Mark Waid**

The Silver Age!

**Michael E. Uslan**

The danger. Let's start with the danger. The danger is that Hollywood does what it has traditionally done, which is to kill the goose that lays the golden egg. To me, the danger is oversaturation. When you get to a point when the studios on mass have announced their comic book releases through 2039--and by the way if you have your cell phones or just a pad or something, please mark down May 15th 2029 is the opening weekend for *Ant Man 5*, you don’t want to miss that. One year from today, there will be from my best count 24 TV series on the air based on comic books. Think about that. To me growing up as a kid, that was an unthinkable thought. 24. So what if the law of averages applies? What if three or four of them are great and three or four of them are really good? How many does that leave that suck? And at what point do audiences say enough? So that to me is the big danger moving forward. How do you solve that? You get passionate filmmakers with a vision and you give them everything they need to execute that vision based on story, story, character, character, story, story and story. To me, that's the ultimate solution for a silver age being here.

**Liam Burke**

Let me ask maybe one more question and we might have time for a bit of Q&A then. Is there any comic book, and it doesn't have to be in the superhero wheelhouse, but is there any comic book that you would love to see on the screen, or you never want to see on the screen?

**Mark Waid**
I neve wanted to see *Watchmen* on the screen, I really didn't. That's not even a slam on *Watchmen* because I think they did as good a job as they possibly could, but that to me is the essence of comics. What makes *Watchmen* “*Watchmen*”, it is the perfect marriage of every bit of grammar that the comic book uses with the perfect synthesis of all that stuff. And so why would you adapt it into another media?

**Liam Burke**

Truffaut said that a masterpiece has found its perfection of form and therefore it's a perfect comic book.

**Mark Waid**

To me, that was like turning a coffee table into a jet airliner. You wouldn't do that. So just my two cents.

**Liam Burke**

What do you think, Michael? Is there one book that you'd love to see or never want to see?

**Michael E. Uslan**

The one that I would never want to see is Bat-Mite the Movie. And I know that disappoints a lot of you, I know, but maybe just direct to DVD would be the way.

**Joe Kelly**

I was totally going to pitch you after this.

**Michael E. Uslan**

What I would love to see is Sugar and Spike as the new—what was that movie with Travolta movie? *Look Who's Talking*. Sugar and Spike would work for me. I would love one day to see the definitive *Archie* movie. I think that would be a lot of fun. Shazam, The Shadow, and the list just goes on and on.

**Liam Burke**

Joe, is there any you'd add to that list?

**Joe Kelly**

Yeah. There are a lot that I would love to see, again just because I love the characters so much. I want to see them articulated in a new way. I mean Shazam, absolutely, and I would love to see a TV series of *The Spectre*. The Spectre is just for me so amazing. I love that character. The technology has caught up to where you could do that. But gosh, the never one, that's a really tough one. I don’t have one that comes immediately to mind but I know I have them in the back of my head, that they're just so precious and beautiful…
Liam Burke

Unless of course you were adapting one of your own yourself. Are you ever nervous with someone else adapting--because you of course are adapting *I Kill Giants*

Joe Kelly

You know, *I Kill Giants*, when I wrote it the story was very pure for me. When I wrote the script I also wrote the screenplay at the same time, because I just knew it was one of those that I'm like, "I can translate this for either one". The film version is different because you have to make it different for film and the requirements of filming and stuff. It's mostly expanded and the scope is a little bigger to give it less of that small indie feel. It's a slightly bigger film. But it's still stuff that's true to the theme and the characters, and again it's the characters and world that we created. We don't want to mess that up.

Liam Burke

We might have time for maybe one or two questions.

Audience Question 1

The success of the comic book films has affected the source material itself. For example, every superhero's costume now has to be something that will look right on the screen. Are these changes good for the comics themselves or is it a case of the tail wagging the dog?

Mark Waid

Let me take this one. Here's the thing, that's always been the case. It's been the case since the very first time anybody adapted the comics in any medium. Again, here's what I'm saying, Kryptonite, Jimmy Olsen, Perry White, Daily Planet all that stuff came for the radio show, a bunch of stuff came from comic strips, Harley Quinn comes from the animated series. I also say, working at Marvel, and this is my hand to God truth, no one comes down the hall and says, "You have to make this more like the movie". Because even at Marvel, they're very aware of trying to keep the synthesis there and trying to keep the give and take, so that one informs the other. But at least at this point, no one's coming down the hall and saying, "We want the tail to wag the dog".

Liam Burke

Because your Avengers is quite different from the movie team.

Mark Waid

Nobody came down and said, "Your Avengers team, it's got to be the one in the movie".
Michael E. Uslan

1943 Batman serial gave us the Bats Cave, which was adapted for the comic books. One of the examples is after our first Batman movie in 1989, Jenette Kahn of DC Comics made the conscious decision there with Julie and everybody, Denny, to incorporate Anton's Furst's design work of Gotham City into the comic books, darken up the character’s uniform a bit and kind of reflect what was in the 89 movie. Whether it was good or not for the comics to incorporate that vision of Gotham City is up to each individual. I think it has over the long-term played out very well.

Audience Question 2
I wanted to say that when I first saw the first Batman movie, it was a revelation. And I think that's because the comic of Batman had already lost that sense of well I guess vengeance in Batman. And it leads me to wonder whether the problem isn't just adaptations with Batman into a movie, but the fact that even with comics, they were always pulling back from that?

Mark Waid

Because in comics, even at that time, still the feeling was we want to try to get a little bit bolder with the audience, but Batman comics were still for kids and older kids.

Joe Kelly

And there was the show. I mean the 66 show cannot be underestimated for how powerful that show was. When I went to school Lorenzo Semple was my teacher.

Mark Waid

I didn't know that.

Joe Kelly

Yeah, one year. It was awesome. And he would tell all these great stories about the show. But when Batman was on the cover of Time Magazine for that show, there was also a article about “Lorenzo Semple, most hated man in comics”. And it was because they had taken Batman at the time in the comics was more serious, and they made it the lighthearted romp that it is. But that influence stuck for a long time and I can only imagine what you had to fight against for that. And there was no vengeance in that at all.

Michael E. Uslan

And that literally is my origin story. The reason I came up with a career and life goal to bring a dark and serious version of Batman to the screen, to show the world what the true Batman is like, as he was created in 39 by Bob Kane and Bill Finger and embellished by Jerry Robinson, it was to overcome the fact that I was horrified as a kid when I saw the show and realised the whole world was laughing at my Batman. It was a joke. It just killed me.
Audience Question 2 [continued]

I didn't even know that that wasn't the original Batman. And then when I saw the movie I realised the TV show was sort of Batman written by The Joker.

Audience Question 3

It seems that as fans, part of our desire to see the movie adaptations is about validating ourselves and saying, "Well see everybody? This is great". And as we've moved up that scale, to more adult-centred comics, it feels like we've moved everything and now there's a gap at the bottom again, where if I want to bring a kid to see a Superman movie, I can't. So where is the space for that type of comic book adaptation?

Michael E. Uslan

Guardians of the Galaxy.

Joe Kelly

Yep. Big Hero 6. I mean they do exist. They know that that won't--well I say “they” -- I like to give them a little more credit than they deserve. But no, it's true. People will come to those movies and the ones that do well, and then they go, "Oh, there is an audience for that". We just have to make sure that we support those films.

Michael E. Uslan

I agree with you. I had a father say to me when The Dark Knight came out, "Can I bring my kid to it?" I said, "How old is your kid?" He said, "Five". I said, "It's PG-13 for a reason". He goes, "Well can I bring him?" I said, "You can bring him but he'll never look at a pencil again for the rest of his life".

Liam Burke

So some of you would've noticed that Tom [Brevoort] has made it, so I think Tom deserves a round of applause for weaving across the convention centre.

We were getting the wrap up sign but I think I'm going to have to ask you one question, and one question the panel has already answered is: What comic book that has not been adapted yet would you love to see on the screen, or what would you never want to see adapted for the screen?

Tom Brevoort

Those are the worst sort of questions to ask me, because I don’t tend to think about it that way.
Liam Burke

It could be outside superheroes. Is there any book where thought, “that would make a great movie”, or, “that is perfect on the comic book page and I never want to see it adapted by anyone ever”?

Tom Brevoort

Well I think almost anything that you do could be adapted to another medium, it just requires a skilful adaptation. It's not a one to one thing in most instances. What works on a comic book page, what works with the passage of time, the breakdown and syncopation of copy and visuals on page, not the same thing as actors performing for two hours on the screen. But as long as you can get to the essence of whatever a thing is, you've adapted it well. You can adapt it poorly, there is plenty of evidence of that, but I don’t know. I'm sure there's an answer, I don’t know what it is off the top of my head in terms of what I wouldn't want to see. Who wouldn't want to see any of this stuff done well? But “done well: is the key thing more than the specifics of whatever. I should say, it was really nice to see a really good Batman movie.

Liam Burke

I'm going to push my luck and ask you one more question before I'll be thrown out of the room. The question that we opened the panel with was: Why do you think there are so many comic book movies produced now? We talked about technology, we talked about the rise of fan filmmakers. What we didn’t talk about as much is why do you think the wider audience, people who've never really read comic books, are coming out in record numbers to see films based on quite niche source material?

Tom Brevoort

Well I think it goes back to one of the problems that film has these days. As movie audience cumulatively get smaller because the number of options, whether it's TV and cable and direct streaming, all of these things--it's the same phenomenon that every other media has. Movies tend to look for things that movies do better than anybody else or an experience that you cannot get in the same sort of way from your television set or watching a DVD or a live stream. And I think that comic-book movies, superhero movies in particular but not exclusively, lend themselves to the big budget, big special effects, larger than life treatment that film entails. And so I think audiences respond to that. Whether it's a Marvel superhero or a DC superhero or The Transformers or any property that's like that, science fantasy beyond the bounds of what you would normally get and that they can afford to make. Most of those things on a television budget are just not possible. So it's that confluence of: it can be done, it can be done better in that form than any other, form and that's why people go to see those movies. Because even if you don’t know what it is, they run the trailers and the commercials and whatnot and it looks cool and I want to go see that.

Liam Burke
Awesome, before I thank the panel I want to give a shout-out to my fellow Irishman in the crowd Will Sliney, who is the artist of Spider-Man 2099 and also provided my book’s cover.

Join me thanking our panellists Tom Brevoort, Mark Waid, Michael E. Uslan, and Joe Kelly.

END OF TRANSCRIPT

For Immediate Release

The Comic Book Film Adaptation
Exploring Modern Hollywood’s Leading Genre
By Liam Burke
University Press of Mississippi
ISBN 978-1-62846-203-6, hardback, $60

The first study that explores how the comic book took center stage in Hollywood

In the summer of 2000 X-Men surpassed all box office expectations and ushered in an era of unprecedented production of comic book film adaptations. This trend, still highly popular and profitable in its second decade, has blossomed into Hollywood’s leading genre. From superheroes to Spartan warriors, The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood’s Leading Genre (University Press of Mississippi) is the first dedicated study to examine how comic books moved from the fringes of popular culture to the center of mainstream film production.

Through in-depth analysis, industry interviews, and audience research author Liam Burke charts the cause-and-effect of this influential trend. He considers the cultural traumas, conglomerate demands, and digital possibilities that Hollywood faced at the dawn of the twenty-first century.
The film industry managed to meet these challenges by exploiting comics and their in-built audience. However, studios were caught off-guard when these comic book fans, empowered by digital media, began to influence the success of these adaptations. Nonetheless, anticipating wider shifts, filmmakers soon developed strategies to utilize this intense fanbase, while simultaneously codifying the trend into a more reliable genre, the Comic-Book Movie, which appealed to a wider audience.

Within his narrative Burke incorporates exclusive interviews with high-ranking industry professionals, including: former President of DC Comics Paul Levitz, *Batman* Executive Producer Michael E. Uslan, *Green Hornet* screenwriter Evan Goldberg, comic book writers Mark Waid (*Kingdom Come*), Joe Kelly (*Deadpool*), Scott Mitchell Rosenberg (*Cowboys & Aliens*), and Steve Niles (*30 Days of Night*).

Central to this genre was a comic aesthetic—an expectation that saw filmmakers exploit the new expressivity of digital cinema to engage with the language and conventions of comics like never before. *The Comic Book Film Adaptation* explores this unique moment in which cinema was stimulated, challenged, and enriched by the once dismissed medium of comics; and, for longer than anyone could ever have imagined, the Comic-Book Movie became Hollywood's leading genre.

**LIAM BURKE** is a media studies lecturer at Swinburne University of Technology. His publications include the *Pocket Essential Superhero Movies* and the edited collection *Fan Phenomena: Batman*.

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Read more about *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood’s Leading Genre* at [http://www.upress.state.ms.us/books/1770](http://www.upress.state.ms.us/books/1770)

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**Praise for The Comic Book Film Adaptation:**

*Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre*

“By far the most insightful look ever at superheroes in film. It’s not about what’s been translated from comics to the movies—it’s about why it has, how it has, and why it works well enough to produce some of the most popular movies in all of cinema history. There is no better, smarter examination of the relationship between comics and film.”

— Mark Waid, Eisner Award–winning writer of *Kingdom Come* and *Daredevil*

“Liam Burke takes the reader on a compelling journey through this new ‘Golden Age’ of adaptation, his argument combining the rigorous, exhaustive research of a committed scholar with the energy and encyclopedic knowledge of a passionate fan.”
This is a serious book about comic books and their relationship with cinema; it is seriously enjoyable, and also seriously important.”

— Will Brooker, author of *Hunting the Dark Knight* and editor of *Cinema Journal*

“What is all too often an overlooked form is finally given the seriousness it deserves in *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*. A most welcome intervention in the field of adaptation studies.”

— Deborah Cartmell, coauthor of *Screen Adaptation: Impure Cinema* and coeditor of the journal *Adaptation*

“Burke presents a masterly and engaging argument regarding cultural, technological, and industry transformations, which have facilitated a shift in the comic book form—on page and on screen—from the margins to the mainstream. This excellent book is sure to become a key text in the burgeoning field of comics studies, while also having a great deal to offer film and media studies.”

— Angela Ndalianis, editor of *The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero* and *Super/Heroes: From Hercules to Superman*