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Foreword: Why Superheroes?

Morgan Oddie

Is superhero fatigue real? In contemporary popular cinema, super- and other-than-human bodies of heroes dominate. Since 2007, Marvel Studios has produced twenty-two films, with nine more slated for development and production. In a review of *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), A.O. Scott pejoratively noted, “It’s Marvel’s Universe. We just live in it.”¹ The amassing popularity of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has contributed to the mainstreaming of what was historically a fringe subculture, confined to dingy comic book stores and children-focused animated adaptations. DC’s cinematic legacy is longer—though arguably less consistent in quality and critical and popular reception than MCU—and is also producing films at an overwhelming rate.² However, this does not even account for the films outside of the MCU and DC Extended Universe (DCEU) that have been produced by other studios, or the vast array of superhero-centred television series. A little more than halfway through the year and we have already seen the live-action releases of *Glass* (2019), *Captain Marvel* (2019), *Shazam!* (2019), *Hellboy* (2019), *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), *Brightburn* (2019), *X-Men: Dark Phoenix* (2019), and *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019). So, why superheroes? It seems that this trend is more than the natural evolution of action films³ and the financial success of these products indicates a staying power dictated by a large and committed audience. Even if there were no other reasons (there are), this is enough to make superheroes a relevant and worthy topic of study.

The adoration of superheroes has been an ongoing staple of Western popular culture, functioning both in the idealization of human potential and the fight against evil. Perhaps it is the tremendous feeling that the world is burning in a giant trash fire, and the superhero is the figure that can fix what is broken. Through incredible abilities and unquestionable authority, the world can be repaired by the superhero. As Peter Coogan wrote in *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, “The metaphor the superhero most often embodies outside the superhero genre is the idea of effortless efficacy, the power to right wrongs without danger to oneself...the superhero has a unique signifying function. It can be used to express ideas that other genres cannot portray as well...Superheroes enforce their own visions of right and wrong on others, and they possess overwhelming power.”⁴ Superheroes create order. Simply, the audience is able to gain scopophilic pleasure from this order.

Once contained to the margins of geekdom, largely populated by white, cismen, superhero fandom is expanding and simultaneously being reimaged by creators. Erika Chung’s “Ms. Marvel: Genre, Medium and an Intersectional Superhero” examines the 2014 release of *Ms. Marvel* with a Muslim Pakistani-American teenager as its new titular character. Chung’s article shows the importance of meaningful representations and how the elements of comic books can

be employed to nuance characters and their intersectional identities. Existing legacy characters are ripe with opportunities for revamping beyond the traditional stereotypes of white, cis, heteronormative heroes with super-human bodies. Writing about Brazilian fandom, Larissa Tamborindenguy Becko discusses identity formation and cultural performance in her article, “Consumption of Superheroes: The Performance of Fans as Strategies of Involvement.” Including excerpts from ethnographic interviews with superhero fans, the article traces patterns of consumer engagement as expressions of fandom adherence.

In general, fans most strongly identify with superheroes that represent them. In the study “Superpowering Girls” by the Women’s Media Centre, researchers found that there is not enough female representation in the superhero genre, but there are rich opportunities for relatable themes and heroes.⁵ Claire Meagher’s “Crossing No-Man’s Land: *Wonder Woman & Liminality*” locates Patty Jenkin’s *Wonder Woman* (2017) in a liminal state that allows the character to undermine gendered and cultural expectations. These gaps produce the potential for power, and Wonder Woman is able to exploit this for remarkable boundary transgressions. Meagher closely examines the cinematic representation, particularly the aesthetics of costuming, and compares them to the original comic character. Shreyashi Mandal’s “Claiming the Domains of the Natural and the Supernatural in Netflix’s Occult Series *The Chilling Adventures of Sabrina*” locates the titular character in herodism by highlighting Sabrina’s supernatural superpowers in the politics of gender and violence that thread throughout the first season of the series.

Unfortunately, representation is not always done well. Ky Pearce’s “Deadpool is Normal(ly) Terrible: A Queer Critique of *Deadpool 2*” examines how Deadpool’s non-heterosexuality is only prominent for comedic effect. In this case, superhero cinema’s supposed representation of a 2SLGBTQ+ character actually problematically reinforces damaging stereotypes of queer sexual predators and maintains the hegemony of cis-heteronormativity. In her article, “Aquaman: The Eternal Return of the Male Subject,” Francesca Lopez situates the release of *Aquaman* (2018) as a pushback against the more diverse representation seen in contemporary superhero films. The film exhibits themes from classic Greek heroism, while buttressing hegemonic masculinity. Her article shows how the masculinity emblematic in the film relies on heteronormativity, cisgenderism, and a particular masculinized use of force for good and justice.

While the interaction of fans with superheroes is often a topic of psychological analysis,⁶ fewer works have turned to the psychology of the superheroes themselves. Two authors in this collection examine superheroes in this light. Matthew Wincherauk’s “A Foe He Can’t Fight: Tony Stark, Addition, and PTSD” examines the representations of mental illness in the *Iron Man* film trilogy. By looking closely at Tony Stark/Iron Man’s traumatic history, Wincherauk traces the evolution of traits and coping mechanisms as they are depicted through events in each film. He argues that representations such as these positively contribute to the destigmatization of

mental illness. In “Of Amazons, Humans, and Batman: Superheroes and the Affectual Dynamics of Loneliness,” Emily Scherzinger analyzes *Batman Begins* (2005) and *Wonder Woman* (2017) to illustrate the complexity of loneliness as individual affective dynamics of each superhero as well as how loneliness organizes Western public life. Unjust hardship, trauma, and sometimes oppression, found in superhero stories is a narrative exaggeration of the existence of these under neoliberal capitalism. In this way, Scherzinger uses *Wonder Woman* and *Batman* as mythologized and exceptional figures to illustrate larger processes of loneliness and its affectual dynamics.

Although distant from the fascist fighting heroes of the Golden Age of comics, superhero cultural texts have a continued importance in modern politics. In “Ready Player Four: Waluigi and the Rainbow Road to the Alt-Right,” Michael Bodkin discusses how the Nintendo character Waluigi from the Mario Bros. universe has been taken up by contemporary alt-right internet users. Originally intended as a foil to Luigi and a very pragmatic option for the Nintendo 64 console’s fourth controller, Waluigi has become a manipulated cultural symbol for neo-nazi ideologies. Bodkin situates this analysis in the concepts of Jean Baudrillard’s empty signifier and Mikhail Bakhtin’s carnivalesque to show how through folkloric processes, Waluigi (and his memes) became a tool of alt-right adherents. Meg D. Lonergan’s “It’s a Bird! It’s a Plane! It’s Security as Pacification! Security as Pacification in *Superman Red Son*” uses the comic book to make cultural criminology more accessible and emphasizes the importance of cultural texts in critical analysis. *Red Son* re-envisioned a Soviet-raised Man of Steel and highlights the underlying (somewhat supervillainous) motivations of state securitization. Lonergan argues that the revisionist nature of this text in its emphasis on pacifying security—as well as the possibilities in the superhero genre more largely—enhances the audience’s critical engagement.

Our editorial team is proud to have collaborated with authors to produce the second volume of our inaugural issue of *Panic at the Discourse: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. Aligned with the mandate of the publication, we have worked to support unique theoretical contributions from graduate students and early career researchers. There is no signal that the superhero mania will slow anytime soon, and while superhero fatigue may be real, these texts illuminate threads of cultural analysis that are important to examine. We hope that you enjoy reading the journal and the works provide unique perspectives, whether you are a long-time fan of superheroes or if this is providing an introduction to the depth of the genre.

Notes

¹ A.O. Scott, “‘Avenger’s Infinity War’: It’s Marvel’s Universe. We Just Live in It,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/24/movies/avengers-infinity-war-review.html>.

² DC Entertainment is a subsidiary of Warner Bros. that is responsible for DC Comics films, television, and video games since 2009. It has released eleven films and has another six in various stages of production.

³ This is suggested by Dani Di Placido, “Why Superhero Fatigue is a Myth,” *Forbes*, January 20, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/danidiplacido/2019/01/20/why-superhero-fatigue-is-a-myth/#5ef0dfa747c0>.

⁴ Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Austin: MonkeyBrain, 2006), 231.

⁵ Women’s Media Centre, “Superpowering Girls: Female Representation in the Sci/fi Superhero Genre,” *WMC Reports*, October 8, 2018, <http://www.womensmediacenter.com/reports/bbca-wmc-superpowering-girls-infographic>.

⁶ See for examples, Robin S. Rosenberg, ed., *Our Superheroes, Ourselves* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013); and, Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society* (New York: Continuum, 2004).