ABSTRACT

The Building of the X-Men Transmedia Franchise
and How Expansive Storytelling is Affecting Hollywood

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This thesis investigates the effects of transmedia storytelling on Hollywood franchises through a case study of the four *X-Men* films and the comic book series *The Uncanny X-Men.* This thesis shows how the adaptive process that transforms the character of Magneto from morally ambiguous comic book anti-hero to a more streamlined movie supervillain is illustrative of the two-edged approach of transmedia theory. It elucidates why transmedia franchises are economically and artistically advantageous, while concurrently having the potential to dilute narrative and thematic complexity. This analysis concludes that transmedia narratives can enrich popular culture, but also risk falling into the traps of formulaic storytelling, which could detrimentally affect artistic production.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This thesis uses transmedia theory to investigate the way Magneto, the militant, terrorist leader of the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants in the long-running X-Men franchise, is transformed and adapted from the expansive realm of the comic book to the more limited space of film. Transmedia is here defined as expansive storytelling where integral plot points are systematically distributed across multiple media to provide a unified and cohesive experience. My aim is not to declare what medium best represents the character, but rather to address the overall effect of transmedia on franchises, with Magneto's transformation as the central illustration. My thesis raises theoretical questions about the nature of transmedia storytelling and uses the X-Men franchise as a case study to explore the strengths and weaknesses of transmedia theory as championed by Henry Jenkins.

While several comic book franchises, from DC's *The Dark Knight* (2005, 2008, 2012) trilogy to Marvel's *The Avengers* (2012), can illustrate attempts at building a transmedia universe, the *X-Men* franchise is significant for its portrayal of Magneto as a Holocaust survivor. By basing his motivations on the noble task of preventing future extermination, a level of depth that is lacking in most comic book movie villains is added to his character, which challenges the audience's conception of what a "supervillain" is. The films are relevant because they served as the precursor to Marvel's current

exploitation of the transmedia potential of their properties[1], which has led to many competitors following suit in an attempt to expand their transmedia universes. These include Warner Bros.' expansion of the DC multiverse in an upcoming Batman/Superman cross-over film, Sony Pictures' planned Spider-Man spin-offs, and 20th Century Fox's potential X-Men/Fantastic Four team-up film.[2]

My overarching goal is to address the variations and continuities in the X-Men franchise from the point of view of the larger implications of the 1) philosophical, 2) aesthetic, and 3) productive nature of transmedia. I will explore the advantages and potential pitfalls of transmedia theory through a case study of the transmedia extensions of Magneto. This thesis will show how the adaptive process that transforms Magneto from ambivalent comic book anti-hero to a more streamlined movie supervillain is illustrative of the two-edged approach of transmedia theory. In other words, it can help elucidate why transmedia franchises are economically and artistically advantageous while concurrently having the potential to dilute some of those texts' complexity. My concern is how Jenkins' arguments ostensibly ignore the theoretical, philosophical, ethical, and aesthetic implications of the transmedia enterprise. I address how outright acceptance of transmedia theory overlooks the questions of authorship, how transmedia franchises

[1] Marvel's experiment of developing individual superhero franchises that build to a colossal team-up in *The Avengers* paid off immensely as the film became the third-highest grossing picture of all time in 2012. Marvel attempted to capitalize on that success by expanding its cinematic universe to television with *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013), a live-action series that picks up after *The Avengers*. The company is using an *Avengers-like* strategy by joining forces with Netflix to develop four superhero shows that will converge in an epic mini-series in 2015.

[2] Unlike DC, whose parent company, Warner Bros., can include virtually any DC comic book character in its upcoming films, several of Marvel's characters/franchises are owned by multi-media international corporations. Sony Pictures holds the licensing rights to Spider-Man, 20th Century Fox has the X-Men, while the Avengers remain at Disney. These costumed heroes team up in the comics, however they do not exist in Marvel's Cinematic Universe and will likely never intersect in this transmedia vision because of competition. However, these rights are not perpetual and could revert back to Marvel.

present complications for how society thinks about good and evil, and how the tendency of transmedia theory to slip into medium-specificity arguments could lead to formulaic proclamations that affect artistic production of the culture industries.

While there is value in Jenkins' assertion that transmedia franchises are economically and artistically advantageous, there is a weakness when he veers into the problematic realm of medium specificity arguments by declaring that "each medium does what it does best." This precarious assumption effectively becomes a medium purity argument that "is a dangerous tendency when seeking to describe media that are in the early stages of emergence, or when seeking to study a mixed or alchemical media" such as transmedia (Maras and Sutton 99). In chapter 4, I discuss the chief concern about medium specific arguments assuming "different media have 'essential' and unique characteristics that form the basis of how they can and should be used" (Maras and Sutton 99). Rather than focusing on an essential trait that determines the proper use of a medium, critics should consider how artists use particular aspects of a medium for aesthetic purposes. This critical view is integral to my analysis of the nature of transmedia storytelling and helps distinguish how expansive crossmedia narratives can enrich popular culture but also potentially become formulaic.

Before explaining how my arguments are organized, I will outline a basic typology of evil that describes three common approaches to portraying villains. This categorization is vital to establishing and understanding the significance of Magneto's transformation from Claremont's complicated comic book antihero to a less complex figure in the X-Men films. The type 1 villain is an absolute dichotomous figure to his/her superhero nemesis; where Superman is purely good, the one-dimensional Lex Luthor

(Gene Hackman) in *Superman: The Movie* (1978) is pure evil and simply motivated by greed. Heath Ledger's maniacal Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008) is another example of a type 1 villain who is simply an agent of chaos similar to Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's version of Magneto in the '60s *X-Men* comics. A type 2 villain is slightly more complex, such as Ian McKellan and Michael Fassbender's Magneto in the *X-Men* film trilogy and *X-Men: First Class* respectively, but ultimately revert to a type 1 evil. A type 3 villain is more humanistic and morally complex, such as Claremont's Magneto who, at one point, renounces his evil ways after confronting the consequences of his actions. These categories are by no means fixed; overlap certainly exists as evidenced by variations in the portrayal of Magneto within Claremont, McKellan, and Fassbender's versions, which will be described in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4. But first, I will provide a brief overview of the *X-Men* franchise and a chronology of Magneto iterations.

Synopsis of X-Men Comics and Films

The early 1960s, identified as the birth of the "Silver Age" in comics, saw a maturing within the industry when "humanized, occasionally neurotic, multi-dimensional characters" were introduced by the Marvel Comics Group (Berger, "Comics," 232). Writer Stan Lee and artists Steve Ditko and Jack Kirby, responsible for creating series such as *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *The Fantastic Four*, and the *Silver Surfer,* presented flawed heroes who dealt with issues relatable to teenage readers such as acne, money problems, and relationship squabbles. Billionaire playboy Bruce Wayne, who moonlights as the masked crime-fighting vigilante in DC Comics' "Golden Age" series *Batman*, never had to worry about the foreclosure of Wayne manor, but the super-powered *Fantastic Four* struggled with paying rent for their headquarters. Similarly, Superman,

with his good looks and charm never had a problem securing a date with Lois Lane, but scrawny teenager Peter Parker, a.k.a. Spiderman, always had girl troubles. Marvel's ushering in of identifiable characters proved a successful formula, as many of its titles became smash hits and the period between 1961–1969 became known as the "Marvel Age."

Aside from introducing ordinary and relatable issues that appealed to teens and college students in the '60s, Marvel also ushered in an era of dealing with social and political issues. In writing about the reflection of a "radicalized" youth culture evident within comics during the 1960s, Lindsay and Lawrence Van Gelder argued that:

> the recognition of the limits of powers among the superheroes, and beyond that their accelerating social consciousness, their deepening anxiety, the proliferation of their neuroses, their increasing involvement in issues with no clear solutions, and most of all, their burgeoning radicalization, have restored excitement, interest and merit to a once crippled industry. (Berger, "Comics," 233).

Presenting more complex and sophisticated superheroes who deal with relevant social and political issues is particularly evident in the *X-Men* comics.

Lee and Kirby's breakout hit series started with *X-Men* #1 in September 1963. The narrative focuses on a superhero team of five men and women (Cyclops, Iceman, Angel, Beast, and Marvel Girl) born with an overabundance of the "X gene" that causes random mutations at puberty and spawns a race of superhumans with extraordinary powers such as telepathy, super-strength, and flight. The team trains at Professor Charles Xavier's "School for Gifted Youngsters" in New York and sets out to protect the innocent.

Figure 1.1 – Panel from *X-Men #1* (1963)

Their first nemesis, Magneto, debuted in *X-Men* #1 (Figure 1.1), as a mutant with the power to control all magnetism. Professor X assesses Magneto's philosophy, noting, "Not all want to help mankind….some hate the human race, and wish to destroy it! Some feel that the mutants should be the real rulers of earth. It is our job to protect mankind...from the evil mutants" (Lee 12). Because the series was published during the tumultuous decade of the 1960s, which saw systematic violence against African Americans, much has been written about the parallels of pacifist Professor X's battle against the militant mutant Magneto as a metaphor for the differing philosophies of the nonviolent Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the radical Malcolm X.[3] However, the metaphor for "mutant as minority," particularly identifying the Jew as mutant, and providing a historical context to explain Magneto's origins was not seen until another Jewish writer, Chris Claremont, took over. With Claremont, Magneto took a more explicitly personal and openly Jewish journey by becoming an archetype for persecuted

[3] See for example, Kaplan, *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books;* Simcha Weinstein, *Up, Up, and Oy Vey! How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero* (Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 2006); Danny Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd, 2007); and Cheryl Alexander Malcolm, "Witness, Trauma, and Remembrance: Holocaust Representation and X-Men Comics," in *The Jewish Graphic Novel: Critical Approaches*, ed. Samantha Biskind and Ranen Omer-Sherman, 144–159. (Piscataway: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

outcasts. A similar framing of Magneto is presented in the four *X-Men* films, which will be addressed in the third chapter.

Before Marvel Studios began producing and outright owning its films in 2008, it relied on a licensing model where other studios paid for the movie rights to particular Marvel characters. Twentieth Century Fox purchased the rights to the X-Men for a few hundred thousand dollars and released the film in 2000. It was followed by *X2* and *X-Men: The Last Stand*. The franchise represented Marvel's first attempt to create an expansive cinematic universe that would serve as the setting for future films including two Wolverine spin-off films, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009) and *The Wolverine* (2013), and the franchise reboot *X-Men: First Class* (2011), that took place decades before the original trilogy, features younger actors, and depicts the origins of the superhero team. The X-Men transmedia universe continues to expand with the next cinematic installment *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014), a time-travel story where older members of the original trilogy concoct a plan to save their younger (newer trilogy) selves from a dystopian future where mutants are systemically exterminated. The film is significant not just because it represents a culmination of Marvel's transmedia experiment with the first *X-Men* film in 2000—even bringing back the original director, Bryan Singer—but because it represents a newer trend in superhero franchises: drawing storylines directly from a specific comic book arc. Part of Chapter 4 will address the artistic and cultural impacts of both X-Men franchises, particularly how the newer series impacts comic book readership.

It is worth noting that my analysis will not emphasize content at the expense of form. I am as much concerned with explaining the techniques and stylistic aims of

specific artists and how they contribute to the larger transmedia Marvel universe as I am with textual analysis of the *X-Men* comics and films. While the *X-Men* franchise spawned several tie-in video games, comic book prequels, and movie novelizations—all integral parts to a transmedia analysis—my focus is primarily on the comics and films. Audience participation is another factor that contributes to transmedia storytelling. There is *X-Men* fan fiction online; perhaps some it has affected the professionals, but fan communities is a robust topic itself and not central to my arguments.

Chapter Breakdowns

Chapter Two reviews recent scholarship on transmedia theory and identifies its major concepts. While the emphasis is placed on Henry Jenkins' concept of transmedia storytelling, this thesis adopts other multi-disciplinary approaches for analyzing and critiquing visual media from the areas of film theory, adaptation theory, visual rhetoric, and comics studies. This chapter establishes a number of issues concerning transmedia storytelling's potential to become formulaic, which will be addressed in more detail in Chapters Four and Five.

The third chapter explores the variations and continuities in the content and forms of each medium and argues that they work toward building the figure of a transmedia Magneto. I borrow arguments from visual rhetorical analysis, comics studies, and adaptation theories to explore issues such as how the adaptive process affects representations of Magneto, how limited the transfer from text to screen is, and how comic book concepts change or stay the same. I examine how the Claremont comics portray Magneto as a nuanced and morally ambiguous antihero and how the original X-Men film trilogy presents a more simplified supervillain.

The distinction between the Claremont comic book Magneto and the film trilogy version is significant because some of the rhetorical power of the comics that frame Magneto as a tragic Jewish figure is stripped away in exchange for more typical cinematic supervillainy. Where the trilogy potentially falls victim to the formulaic model of Hollywood storytelling is in presenting Magneto as a more streamlined character whose megalomania supersedes any notion of restraint. However, *X-Men: First Class* presents a more multi-dimensional antihero, rather than a traditional "bad guy." I am not declaring that the comics medium is inherently superior to cinema in portraying psychologically rich, complex characters; rather, this thesis addresses how Claremont's purpose was to deconstruct the comic book supervillain and present a more dynamic Magneto, while the character's transformation into a streamlined cinematic villain was the result of specific narrative and stylistic decisions intended to make the films more appealing to a mass audience.

Chapter Four looks to a larger cultural and historical context by examining how the comics symbolically parallel Magneto with the State of Israel and Zionists. By framing Magneto as the archetype of the tragic figure, his character becomes a universal symbol for humanity struggling through grief, survivor's guilt, and anger—feelings shared by thousands of Holocaust survivors and their families. Highlighting Magneto's external linkage to the State of Israel and Zionists, often considered bullies on the world-stage, can also further our understanding of the country's oath of "never again" and reveal Israel and Magneto as survivors who want to save their people.

The parallel to the State of Israel and Zionists is culturally relevant because much critical and political attention is devoted to Israel's actions in the Middle East. Their

standard operating procedure is restraint even though the country is capable of wiping enemies off the map (*Jerusalem Post, "IFD's Restraint"*). Similarly, many comic book writers of Magneto implicitly instill him with a level of restraint, an asymptote of power that he never passes.[4] This chapter addresses how the cinematic Magneto problematizes the issue of restraint by reverting to a more simplistic supervillain who tries to remake the world to his liking. This is not to say that the comic book Magneto is never villainous (he certainly is in many issues), but unlike the films, the comics take a more humanist approach by exploring the consequences of his actions and the psychological toll it takes on him. When this deep introspection is absent in a transmedia villain—when the storytelling becomes formulaic—the audience is presented with a more cosmetic view of the nature of good and evil that is less reflective of how complex the debate can be.

Chapter Four also addresses the implications that arise from Jenkins declaration that in "the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best" (*Convergence* 96). This line of thought aids in distinguishing how artists exploit a particular medium for their stylistic purposes, but Jenkins and transmedia theory fall into a trap by adopting what Noël Carroll refers to as the "basic truth of the medium-specificity claim" that "there are certain uses to which a medium cannot be put" (29).

Finally, this chapter explores the aesthetic and ethical implications of a transmedia model. Jenkins describes the pleasure consumers get from transmedia as very different from "the closure found in most classically constructed narratives, where we expect to leave the theatre knowing everything that is required to make sense of a particular story" (*Confessions*, "Storytelling 101"). He does not explicitly say whether

[4] An "unchained" Magneto would be among the very most powerful supervillains in the entire Marvel Universe, practically an unstoppable force that virtually any other hero or villain could not contain.

one pleasure is better than the other, but he implies that the younger generation prefers the newer model of transmedia over "classically constructed narratives." My concern is what happens to these narratives when the current convergence culture demands expansive stories. My arguments help develop the conclusion that transmedia storytelling offers artists the ability to enhance popular culture by expanding their stories across multiple texts, while concurrently having the potential to become formulaic, which could detrimentally affect artistic production.

CHAPTER TWO

Defining Transmedia Theory

In *The Uncanny X-Men* #113 (1978), Magneto exclaims, "I endured one death camp—in Auschwitz—I will not see another people fear what they do not understand and destroy what they fear. Mutantkind's only hope for survival is a world wherein we are the rulers." This revelatory moment is crucial to the X-Men comic book canon, not only for the historical and cultural contexts that frame Magneto's origin, but because it explains his motivations and militant ideology: His militarism is born out of a fear of persecution and eventual extermination. Establishing Magneto's Jewish heritage and identifying him as a Holocaust survivor is representative of Ben Dyer's assertion in *Supervillains and Philosophy* that "on those infrequent occasions when they take center stage, supervillains are humanized and sympathetic, and they might have been us but for an untimely accident or mischance" (2).

Similar to when Doctor Doom's origin in *Fantastic Four Annual* #2 (1964) reveals his disfigurement resulted from an explosion caused by a machine designed to rescue his mother's soul from the underworld, introducing a tragic dimension to Magneto's back story is consonant with Marvel Comics' method of adding depth to villains and challenging the readers' conception of what a "supervillain" is. From 1978–1991, writer Chris Claremont and artists such as John Byrne, Terry Austin, Dave Cockrum, and Jim Lee transformed Magneto into a complex and morally ambiguous

figure that represented a multi-layered anti-hero. Magneto is depicted as taking extreme measures to accomplish arguably admirable goals, yet in the process, he becomes reflexive, revealing a continuous ideological and philosophical struggle. In his path to remake the world, Magneto realized that he became like the people he hated.

Although the cinematic Magneto bears similarities to the Claremont version with lines like, "It is not so surprising really…mankind has always feared what it does not understand," the revelation of his flawed path—a crucial moment in the comic series—is absent in the film trilogy *X-Men* (2000), *X2* (2003), and *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), where Magneto's rigid belief in mutant superiority leads to countless human deaths. Claremont's reflective Magneto is stripped away, leaving behind a megalomaniacal tyrant that more closely resembles the one-dimensional Lee and Kirby version. In *X-Men*, Magneto (Ian McKellen) charges, "We are the future, they no longer matter."

The 2011 franchise reboot *X-Men: First Class* attempts to present a more complex version of Magneto by tracing the evolution of his philosophy and exploring what turned him into a supervillain. The character's ideological struggles are more explicitly addressed through debates between Magneto (Michael Fassbender) and Professor Xavier (James McAvoy), but ultimately Magneto's destructive path is constituted by one line: "Peace was never an option." Magneto's Holocaust past foregrounds the four films in an attempt to create a sense of conflict and complexity that shades how viewers will perceive him, but unlike the comics, which present a complicated anti-hero, the cinematic extensions portray a more simplified supervillain with a narrow arc. Chapters 4 and 5 address how narrative, economic, and commercial decisions contribute to this streamlining.

Major Concepts

The following section identifies the major concepts in my analysis of transmedia theory, specifically the terms *transmedia*, *multiplicity*, *extension*, *radical intertextuality*, *multimodality*, and *additive comprehension*. While the emphasis is placed on transmedia theory, this thesis explores other multi-disciplinary approaches for analyzing and critiquing visual media drawn from the areas of film theory, adaptation theory, visual rhetoric, and comics studies. My primary source for transmedia theory is Henry Jenkins' concept of transmedia storytelling, though this concept has evolved since he first introduced it in a 2003 *MIT Technology Review* article.

While most of the major concepts I utilize originate from Jenkins, he was not the first theorist to discuss transmedia. The term *transmedia* first appears in Marsha Kinder's 1991 book, *Playing With Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games*, where she uses the phrase "transmedia intertexuality" to describe the commodification of Saturday morning American network television where children are taught "to read the intertextual relations between television and cinema as compatible members of the same ever-expanding supersystem of mass entertainment" (40). Kinder describes media producers who adopt this model as "commercial transmedia supersystems" (38). While Kinder's contributions to a definitive transmedia theory are noteworthy, Jenkins' concepts better encapsulate my perspectives on the Marvel transmedia universe.

Jenkins' 2003 article is more of an introduction to the idea of transmedia storytelling, while the full definition emerges in later works. The subtitle offers his stance on the benefits of transmedia storytelling: "moving characters from books to films to video games can make them stronger and more compelling" (*Technology Review*). Jenkins notes that a meeting between top creative talents in Hollywood and the video

game industry that focused on ways to collaboratively develop cross-media content "reflected a growing realization within the media industries that what is variously called transmedia, multiplatform, or enhanced storytelling represents the future of entertainment" (*Technology Review*). He argues that society has entered a period of media convergence "that makes the flow of content across multiple media channels almost inevitable" (*Technology Review*). The prevalence of digital effects in film and the enhanced quality of video game graphics signifies the realistic possibility of lowering production costs by sharing tools across media.

Jenkins asserts that the structure of the modern entertainment industry was designed for one purpose: "the construction and enhancement of entertainment franchises" (*Technology Review*). While the trend toward transmedia storytelling can be economically advantageous to media producers looking to create franchises, it implies that consumers are constantly seeking out more content and can never be fully satiated. This could explain why some franchises never truly die and are just resurrected in some new form to feed our unquenched and never-satisfied thirst for the continuation of certain stories. Here is where the transmedia model can be problematic. If media companies are designed with a single idea in mind and the inevitability of the transmedia model dictates that media producers are mainly interested in franchises, where does that leave everything that is not a franchise? Will we as culture suffer under such homogeneity? These are some of the questions that I will raise and attempt to answer in Chapter 4.

Jenkins expounds on the concept of transmedia storytelling in his 2004 article "The Cultural Logic of Media Convergence" by differentiating it from older media models that he contends simply took works that were successful in one medium and

adapted them into another medium or used the original "to brand a series of related but more or less redundant commodities" (*Cultural Studies* 40). A clearer definition of transmedia storytelling and the aesthetic implications of this model emerge from his discussion of newer franchises such as *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Pokemon* (2000), and *The Matrix* (2003):

> [They] experiment with a more integrated structure whereby each media manipulation makes a distinct but interrelated contribution to the unfolding of a narrative universe. While each individual work must be sufficiently self-contained to satisfy the interests of a first time consumer, the interplay between many such works can create an unprecedented degree of complexity and generate a depth of engagement that will satisfy the most committed viewer. Will transmedia storytelling enrich popular culture or make it more formulaic? (Jenkins, *Cultural Studies* 40)

This is the central question that this thesis addresses. The answer is not simply one or the other; rather transmedia storytelling can do both. This thesis addresses how transmedia enterprises have the potential to "enrich popular culture," but also fall into the traps of formulaic storytelling.

Specifically, one of the larger philosophical questions concerns how a transmedia Magneto impacts the audience's perception of the debate between good and evil. If future transmedia franchises adopt the model of presenting villains stripped of any depth, it implies that the media producers view the nature of good and evil simplistically or think that the audience does. In other words, because the X-Men comics situate the nature of evil around a complex villain/hero relationship, it reflects a level of intellectual sophistication and cultural maturity. However, these qualities exist in the film extensions to a lesser extent. I address what makes it more likely that evil is "thinned-out" and "simplified" in comic book films as opposed to comic books themselves. The short answer is the inevitability of Hollywood building a franchise where economics and

commercial viability dictate a majority of decisions. Disney and Marvel's budget for *The Avengers* was roughly $220 million. Arguably, when that much money is invested into a single project there is less room for experimentation; because production costs for comic books pale in comparison, artists often feel less creative constraint. The most ambitious and well-written comic books often revel in ambiguous motives and complicated heroes and villains.

Similar to the shifts in comic book culture since the 1970s and '80s that led to a sophistication of the medium, the current cultural landscape facilitates transmedia storytelling. In his 2006 book *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Jenkins elaborates on his earlier concept of migratory consumers who act as hunters and gatherers: "audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want… in the world of media convergence, every important story gets told, every important brand gets sold, and every consumer gets courted across multiple media platforms" (*Convergence* 3). He asserts that this cultural shift primes the audience to accept the new aesthetic of transmedia storytelling:

> …[it] places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities. Transmedia storytelling is the art of world making. To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via online discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience. (*Convergence* 21)

Jenkins notes that this technological convergence is not solely fueled by consumers, but is the result of a shift in the structures of media ownership. He distinguishes between the old vertically integrated Hollywood studio system, which focused on cinema, and new

media conglomerates like the horizontally integrated Warner Bros., which has a stake in films, television, music, video games, books, magazines, and comics.

Jenkins notes that there exists a strong aesthetic, as well as economic, motivation for transmedia storytelling:

> In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced as a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you do not need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa. Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole. Reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption...Offering new levels of insight and experience refreshes the franchise and sustains consumer loyalty. (*Convergence* 96)

This is where Jenkins' commentary becomes problematic as he slips into a medium specificity mode of thinking that assumes certain media do things better. What exactly does each medium do best? This question has plagued theorists for decades and serves as the basis for what Noël Carroll calls the medium specificity thesis: an argument that "seek[s] to distinguish that film and the other arts each possess a *unique medium that has stylistic implications about what should and should not be made in it*" (1). Comparable to medium specificity theory, transmedia theory has advantages such as promoting a unified approach to theory, but it also shares similar weaknesses by being prescriptive and systematic. Although certain narrative devices and stylistic techniques can be less challenging to deploy in particular media, declaring that one medium is better equipped than another inherently limits the argument. This discussion will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter Four.

Building from the preceding commentary, Jenkins comes closer to a definition of transmedia storytelling, adding "with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world, a more integrated approach to franchise development than models based on ur-texts and ancillary products" (*Convergence* 293). It is worth acknowledging that different definitions of transmedia storytelling exist amongst media scholars. There is not even agreement on the same term, as evidenced by "Frank Rose talking about 'Deep Media' and Cristy Dena or Drew Davidson talking about 'Cross-media'" (*Continuum* 944). It is also relevant that Jenkins' definition evolves to reflect more recent developments in media. In a 2007 blog post, he builds on the concept of transmedia storytelling and defines it as "a process where integral parts 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" (*Confessions,* "Storytelling 101").

He addresses the potential problem of blurring the lines between entertainment and marketing that emerges from films such as *Batman Begins* (2005) and *Superman Returns* (2006), released theatrically by Warner Bros., which owns DC Comics, the company that published books in advance of the films' premieres. Jenkins asserts that "the current configuration of the entertainment industry makes transmedia expansion an economic imperative, yet the most gifted transmedia artists also surf these marketplace pressures to create a more expansive and immersive story than would have been possible otherwise" (*Confessions,* "Storytelling 101"). Another concern about a transmedia enterprise emerges here. If there is an economic imperative to world-build (i.e., to create open and immersive stories that exist in a transmedia universe for an audience that insists

on mastering all that can be known about that fictional world), where does that leave traditional narratives?

Because transmedia stories span across multiple media, there exists the potential for fractures in continuity, but this should not be viewed as a total detriment to the overall experience. Jenkins asserts that across the various extensions of a transmedia franchise "there are dozens of recurring motifs...No given work will reproduce every element, but each must use enough that we recognize at a glance that these works belong to the same fictional realm" (*Convergence Culture* 113). Drawing from this perspective, transmedia theory can account for the variations and continuities between the *X-Men* comics and its filmic counterparts.

The concept of *multiplicity* describes the method adopted by the comic book industry where several versions of the same title run simultaneously (Ford and Jenkins 307). The concepts of continuity and multiplicity are not mutually exclusive; rather, if a comic character has multiple stories running through various titles in alternate worlds, "continuity must still play a significant part" (Ford and Jenkins 307). Essentially, comic book companies have set the precedent for transmedia storytelling in that their medium can push beyond continuity and balance it with multiplicity.

Jenkins notes that film and television producers generally maintain "absolute fidelity" within franchises to avoid audience confusion. Comics, on the other hand, take advantage of readers' "pleasure in encountering and comparing multiple versions of the same character" (Ford and Jenkins 307). This shows up in comics like DC's Elseworld (re-imagined stories of classic characters like *Gotham by Gaslight* [(1989)], which envisions Batman under the tutelage of Sigmund Freud), villain centered-stories such as

Luthor or *Joker,* film franchises such as the Year One story in *Batman Begins*, and television shows like the CW's *Smallville* (2001–2011). Jenkins notes, "multiplicity seems to coexist with continuity at the present moment: fans are expected to know which interpretive frame should be applied to any given title" (Ford and Jenkins 307).

Part of the pleasure comes from seeing classic stories revisited and re-imagined, "sometimes taking radically different directions from the same choice point" (Ford and Jenkins 307). *X-Men: First Class* (2011) certainly plays with this structure, particularly in developing a romantic relationship between a mature Magneto (Michael Fassbender) and the much younger Mystique (Jennifer Lawrence), whereas the earlier films present more of a father/daughter dyad. While Jenkins addresses the significance of the interplay between concepts of continuity and multiplicity within the comics medium, the idea is applicable to my perspective on the *X-Men* transmedia enterprise: "[these] stories are often seen as ideal jumping-on points for new readers because they reintroduce core mythology, but they also reward the expertise of long-standing fans because they depend on our recognition of the later significance of these first-time meetings" (Ford and Jenkins 307).

When discussing multiplicity as it relates to film, Jenkins notes that recent retellings of stories like J.J. Abram's *Star Trek* (2009) uses the concept to show us "that it indeed does take place in the same universe as the original and is part of the original continuity, but the continuity has to be altered to make way for the new performers and their versions of the characters" (*Confessions,* "Seven principles"). Again, this is applicable to *X-Men: First Class*, where the concept of multiplicity can help alleviate the anxiety of media producers to ensure every detail maintains 100% fidelity to the

continuity because part of the pleasure for fans is seeing characters in fresh perspectives and discovering their connections to other incarnations. These forms of multiplicity inherent in the *X-Men* comics and films can help inform our understanding of transmedia entertainment.

An integral part of transmedia theory is the shifting of terminology from the concept of adaptation to *extension.* Jenkins defines extensions as "the efforts to expand the potential markets by moving content across different delivery systems" (*Convergence* 19). He makes a clear distinction between adaptation," which reproduces the original narrative with minimal changes into a new medium and is essentially redundant to the original work," and extension, "which expands our understanding of the original by introducing new elements into the fiction" (Jenkins, *Continuum* 945). Jenkins acknowledges that this is relative, however, as many adaptations make additions or omissions to the original text that can reshape the story. He identifies Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* (1948) as an adaptation, compared to Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz & Gildenstern Are Dead* (1966), which he considers an extension of Shakespeare's narrative that expands the play by focusing on two secondary characters.

This thesis adopts Jenkins' term and considers the *X-Men* films as extensions of the comics, rather than following certain trends in adaptation theory of privileging the novel over the film (Berger, "Rewiring *Superman*," 88). The latter text is typically judged by how faithful it is to its source material; however, this strategy should build up to a larger examination of what can be gleaned about the nature of storytelling. Unlike cinematic adaptations of novels, comic book extensions exist in a unique realm, as the films are not simply relying on one text, but rather a series of works that can span

hundreds of issues over, in some cases, decades. And, as evidenced by the *X-Men* films, screenwriters cherry-pick issues and use comic arcs as loose frameworks for the films rather than follow a specific sequential and chronological order.

Upon first glance the distinctions Jenkins makes between extensions and adaptations may appear too fixed. He addresses this by acknowledging that adaptations can be "highly literal or deeply transformative. Any adaption represents an interpretation of the work in question, and not simply a reproduction, so all adaptations to some degree add to the range of meanings attached to the story" (*Confessions*, "Storytelling 202"). Jenkins asserts that it would be better to consider adaptation and extension "as part of a continuum in which both poles are only theoretical possibilities and most of the action takes place somewhere in the middle" (*Confessions*, "Storytelling 202"). His earlier distinctions were intended to address "additive comprehension," where a work provides some new detail that changes or adds to the larger story. While not comprehensive, he attempts to construct a schema for identifying "most" transmedia extensions, saying they serve "one or more of the following functions: offers back story, maps the World, offers us other characters' perspectives on the action, [and] deepens audience engagement" (*Confessions*, "Storytelling 202"). This schema plays a part in addressing Magneto's role in the *X-Men* transmedia enterprise.

As with most film and media theories, transmedia theory is not a fixed, immutable framework that can withstand any challenge. Jenkins' interpretation of his earlier works reflects this as he asserts, "shortening transmedia to 'a story across multiple media' distorts the discussion" (*Confessions*, "Storytelling 202"). Transmedia theory evolves into a formula that considers an "ideal" transmedia story as one that combines "*radical*

intertextuality and *multimodality* for the purposes of *additive comprehension*" (*Confessions*, "Transmedia 202," italics added). Radical intertextuality refers to "movement across texts or across textual structures within the same medium" (*Confessions*, "Transmedia 202); for example, the Marvel and DC universes contain multiple titles that are interconnected, where characters interact between them and stories unfold across them. Adopting the term multimodality coined by Gunther Kress, Jenkins' key point is that "different media involve different kinds of representation" (*Confessions*, "Transmedia 202"). Jenkins explains that the comic book Green Lantern may look different from his incarnation in films, games, or animated shows: "each medium has different kinds of affordances—the game facilitates different ways of interacting with the content than a book or a feature film. A story that plays out across different media adopts different modalities" (*Confessions*, "Transmedia 202"). The marrying of radical intertexuality and multimodality to elicit additive comprehension aids in my discussion of the variations in each medium and how they affect the interpretation of Magneto; however, specificity in transmedia theory has the potential to essentialize the texts and create formulas that upon further review can be problematic.

This mainly stems from Jenkins' flawed view that *The Matrix* franchise is an ideal example for explaining transmedia. While the franchise can illustrate how its creators, Andy and Lana Wachowski, built the expansive world of the Matrix from the ground up—an anomaly in Hollywood, where most blockbuster franchises are mined from an already existing canon—spanning films, comics, animated shorts, and video games, it does not represent a capable model for understanding transmedia. In fact, one does not exist yet. Jenkins relies too heavily on the Wachowski's collaborative involvement as the

basis for the franchise's success. Jenkins notes that there have been few successful transmedia franchises, with exceptions "when a single creator or creative unit maintains control" like *The Matrix*, where the Wachowskis "didn't simply license or subcontract and hope for the best," but were actively involved in the making of all content (*Convergence* 104; 111). It appears Jenkins is implying that the major criterion for successfully telling stories transmedially is centralized authorship. Jenkins emphasizes the artistic 'success' of the Wachowskis building an expansive transmedia universe, while neglecting to mention that the second film was critically scrutinized for its convoluted plot that confused even loyal fans that experienced the supplemental extensions and was largely responsible for the third installment's relatively poor box office performance. The transmedia experience was not as seamless as Jenkins implies, nor was the directors' collaboration in all *Matrix* content emblematic of typical Hollywood blockbusters. In other words, Jenkins presents a simplistic view that does not reflect the muddier franchise development process where authorship is not clearly defined. This multitude of authorial voices is reflected in the *X-Men* franchise, where the complexity and ambivalence of transmedia theory and transmedia storytelling can be revealed.

CHAPTER THREE

Magneto's Transformation

As contemporary adaptation theorists have distanced themselves from fidelity arguments that explore a target text's faithfulness to its source, intertextuality has emerged as a new basis for examining relationships between texts (Stam 2). Intertexualists argue that all texts bear traces of other texts. Karin Littau argues that adaptations can be viewed as "an ecology of intermedial borrowings, joinings, and convergences" (19), while Robert Stam contends that "[e]very text, and every adaptation, 'points' in many directions, back, forward, and sideways" (27), and Angela Ndalianis asserts that "the serial logic of contemporary media" dictates that "each addition to the serial whole is reliant on an intertextual awareness of serial predecessors" (72). It is also significant to note that part of the function of transmedia texts is to allow "newbies" an opportunity to enjoy the narrative as well as longtime fans.

This intertextualist perspective will guide my analysis of the X-Men comics and films, focusing on the connections among texts rather than prioritizing one over the other. My focus is not to determine the unique features of each medium, but to explore the aims of particular artists and how they emphasize or exploit aspects of each medium to serve their purposes. This comparative position explores how the "alterity" and "reciprocity" (Tabbi and Wutz, 9) within the X-Men franchise reveals the potential weakness for transmedia storytelling to become formulaic in its portrayal of` good and evil, while

concurrently (re)introducing audiences to expansive stories that offer artists a wider canvas to explore particular narratives.

Complex Anti-hero

Henry Jenkins asserts that contemporary filmmakers, particularly transmedia creators, draw on ancient myth structures to ensure audience familiarity with narrative frameworks. He notes how *The Matrix* borrows from the Campbellian concept of the "hero's journey" where easily recognizable protagonists and antagonists are "broad archetypes rather than individualistic, novelistic, and rounded characters" (*Convergence* 120). The superhero genre, with its moralistic, justice-seeking costumed crusaders battling malevolent supervillains resolute on world domination, certainly appropriates archetypal characterizations. However, dozens of charismatic and ruthless comic book characters with questionable morals like Deadpool (from *New Mutants*), the Punisher (from *The Amazing Spider-Man*), Namor (from *Marvel Comics*), and Magneto have complicated the "hero's journey" plot structure. Emerging from the Silver Age of comics (1956–70), "with its righteous superheroes, its diabolical supervillains, and nothing in between," the Bronze Age (1970–85) introduced fictional worlds where right and wrong were not absolute, instead, shades of grey existed (Robichaud 61)[1]. During this period publishers were less scrutinized by the Comics Code Authority[2] and no longer felt the pressure to present a clearly defined good vs. evil dichotomy. Complicated villains like

[1] There are strong parallels with films of the period that also presented morally conflicted protagonists such as *The Godfather* (1972), *Dog Day Afternoon* (1975), *Taxi Driver* (1976), and *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

[2] The CCA was a self-regulated organization established in 1954 in response to accusations by psychologist Fredric Wertham, who wrote in *Seduction of the Innocent* that comic books were a leading contributor to juvenile delinquency.

Magneto added depth and complexity to storylines whose characters were often portrayed as flat and one-dimensional. His tragic origin revealed that his transformation into a villain was shaped by forces outside his control, similar to the Joker's (*Batman*) fall into a vat of chemicals and the Lizard's (*Amazing Spider*-Man) failed experiment to regenerate his amputated arm. These villains are presented as victims of circumstance. This distinctive sympathetic element served as context for the audience to infer that Magneto viewed his cause of ensuring mutant survival as noble, in spite of his questionable means to achieve that end.

In Arie Kaplan's *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*, Chris Claremont explains that adding a backstory to Magneto changed him from a two-dimensional villain:

> I was trying to figure out what made Magneto tick. And I thought, "What was the most transfiguring event of our century?" In terms that are related to the whole super-concept of the X-Men, of outcasts, and persecution. And I thought, "Okay! It has to be the Holocaust!" And once I sort of found that point of departure for him, the rest fell into place. Because it allowed me to turn him into a tragic figure, in that his goals were totally admirable. He wants to save his people! His methodology was defined by all that had happened to him. When I can start from the premise that he was a good and decent man at heart, I then have the opportunity over the course of 200 issues to attempt to redeem him. To take him back within himself to the point where he was that good and decent man, and see if he could start over, and see if he could evolve (Kaplan 120).

This characterization is by no means unique to comics; in fact, Magneto does not represent the first complicated villain/anti-heroes, but rather he is a descendent of hundreds of years of creative production from literature, theatre, and film.

Magneto is part of a lineage of anti-heroes that range from the Greek tragedy of Oedipus, to Shakespeare's Macbeth, through Edward Rochester in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, to Michael Corleone in *The Godfather* (1972), and into the dark Modern Age

of comics in the ’80s with Alan Moore’s V in *V For Vendetta* and Ozymandias in *Watchmen* and Frank Miller’s Batman in *The Dark Knight Returns*. Arguably, these characters are endearing because their fears and frustrations often reflect our own and their actions weigh heavily on their consciences, which encourages the audience to confront its morality.

The prologue of *X-Men* (2000), typically space designated for a superhero’s origin, is from Magneto’s perspective and details the tragic loss of his parents in a Polish concentration camp in 1944. As the Nazis tear young Erik Lehnsherr away from his parents (Figure 3.1), he resists and reaches to them as they are being herded through a barbed-wire metal gate. Suddenly, his powers manifest, causing the gate to bend. Amidst the family’s cries, several Nazis fail to move the boy, who appears connected to the gate. A soldier knocks Erik out, and the gate ceases bending. Several Nazis bewilderingly look at the damaged gate, and then at Erik; ostensibly, their astonished stare suggests their assumption that this is no ordinary child.

Figure 3.1 – Scene from *X-Men* (2000)

Although *X-Men*’s prologue was not the first comic book film to open from the supervillain’s perspective, it did represent a continuation of portraying a sympathetic type

2 villain/antihero that was prevalent in superhero films of the ’90s. In the 1990 film *Darkman*, Peyton Westlake (Liam Neeson) seeks revenge against the gangsters who burned him alive. The 1992 film *Batman Returns* opens with a wealthy couple discarding their deformed infant son into the sewer. The boy survives and emerges three decades later as the master criminal the Penguin (Danny DeVito). A similar casting out and reemergence motif occurs with the helpless Selina Kyle (Michelle Pfeiffer), who transforms herself into the femme fatale Catwoman after her nefarious boss throws her through a window. Eric Draven (Brandon Lee) becomes an undead vigilante searching for his and his fiancée’s murderers in *The Crow* (1994). Characters with immoral backgrounds such as the criminal Lamont Cranston (Alex Baldwin) and the assassin Al Simmons (Michael Jae-White) become the title characters in *The Shadow* (1994) and *Spawn* (1997) respectively. While these character’s goals often include murdering others, introducing a tragic element to their origin foregrounds each film in an attempt to shade how viewers will perceive them.

Magneto’s sympathetic framing in *X-Men*’s prologue also served as the precursor to Marvel Studio’s portrayals of tragic villains in subsequent films. Type 2 villains from the *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002, 2004, 2007) such as Green Goblin, Doc Ock, and the Sandman all started off as sympathetic characters who, by unfortunate accidents, were transformed into evildoers. The loss of a father spawned Whiplash’s ire toward Tony Stark in *Iron Man 2* (2010) and Loki’s disdain for his adopted family in *Thor* (2011). There are levels of complexity to these supervillains that are virtually absent in portrayals of evil in superhero films where simple type 1 villains such as Gene Hackman’s farcical Lex Luthor in *Superman: The Movie* (1978), who is purely

motivated by greed, or Heath Ledger's maniacal Joker in *The Dark Knight* (2008) who is simply an agent of chaos.

Now that we have differentiated between types of supervillains and the relevance of Magneto's tragic origin, we can turn to analyzing the variations of Magneto among comic and cinematic texts.

Similarities and Variations of a Transmedia Magneto

Just as *X-Men* opens from Magneto's perspective in a Polish concentration camp, *X-Men: First Class* (2011) retells the story and further develops Erik's origin. Although neither films' prologue is directly adapted from a comic book story, Magneto's Holocaust past is essential to the X-Men canon and foregrounds the films in an attempt to add complexity and depth to his character and create a sense of conflict that affects how viewers will perceive him. Following the separation from his family, Erik is introduced to Dr. Klaus Schmidt (Kevin Bacon), a Nazi scientist whose experimentation on Jewish mutants parallels the work of the real-life Josef Mengele. When Erik is unable to move a coin on Schmidt's desk, the Nazi orders Erik's mother in and threatens to shoot her unless Erik completes the test. Again, Erik fails, and Schmidt murders the woman. In grief, the boy's magnetic powers are unleashed, destroying the room and killing two Nazis by caving in their metal helmets. Schmidt, appearing amused by the situation, gives Erik the coin and says, "So we unlock your gift with anger. Anger and pain."

A similar sympathetic framing of Magneto exists in the comics where he is haunted by the past. While reflecting on the death of X-Men member Jean Grey in *The Uncanny X-Men* #150 (1981), Magneto exclaims, "I grieve for her. I know...something of grief. Search throughout my homeland, you will find none who bear my name. Mine was

a large family, and it was slaughtered—without mercy, without remorse" (46). In *The Uncanny X-Men* #161 (1982), the story plays out in Charles Xavier's memory 20 years in the past in the Israeli seaport city of Haifa. Charles meets Magnus (an alias for Magneto/Eric) for the first time (Figure 3.2). We see Magnus' tattoo from Auschwitz—his number is 214782. Xavier says, "That tattoo, Magnus, were you—," to which Magnus replies, "Auschwitz. I grew up there." Xavier responds, "And your family—?" Magnus answers, "I have no family, Dr. Xavier. Anymore" (7).

Figure 3.2 - Panel from *The Uncanny X-Men* #161 (1982)

These panels serve as strong visual and verbal cues to Magneto's past that clearly parallels the experience of millions of Jews and countless survivors living in Israel and abroad. The image of Magneto's tattoo is emblematic of what Martin Medhurst and Michael Desousa refer to as an "enthymematic form," which allows the reader to construct or evoke meanings from that image. An enthymeme is simply an argument with a missing part that the audience has prior knowledge of and then fills in. The word

"Holocaust" is not mentioned in the panel, nor is an explanation given to what Auschwitz is or why Magnus' family is gone. The authors assume that the audience already knows what the tattoo represents, that Auschwitz was a death camp in World War II, and that more than a million Jews died there. The image and text don't explicitly state the creators' rhetorical argument; rather, the audience draws its own enthymematic conclusions. In other words, the creators provide some context for viewing Magneto sympathetically, but it is the reader who realizes the significance in the panel and constructs his/her own argument that Magneto is a Holocaust victim/survivor and therefore not a pure type 1 villain, but rather a tragic figure and persecuted victim worthy of sympathy. The enthymematic form is an integral function for bolstering empathy and making the audience invest with the character.

This panel is also illustrative of Cara Finnegan's argument that some images serve "not as a stand-alone visual argument but a summary statement punctuating broader arguments" (252). This multi-layered effect of visual rhetoric is evident in Magneto's Auschwitz tattoo. The image does not function as a self-contained argument that Magneto is a victim, rather, he represents a summative statement about all Holocaust victims, the broader argument about the implications of genocide, and the state of remembrance and the feeling of survivor's guilt—both of which are shared by humanity. This contributes to the creators' effort to warrant sympathy for Magneto and enhances the image's persuasive potential to provoke audiences to reevaluate their interpretation of the "supervillain."

The polysemal use of Magneto's Auschwitz tattoo as signifier of multiple concepts also appears in the X-Men films. In *First Class*, Erik encounters a pair of

fugitive Nazis at a bar in 1960s Argentina. After one of them reveals his father was from Dusseldorf, Erik retorts that his parents also lived there. The Nazi asks for their names, to which Eric responds, "They didn't have a name." As he slowly reveals his tattooed arm (Figure 3.3), he continues, "It was taken away from them," and then he proceeds to execute them. Here, the tattoo denotes the branded mark of concentration camp prisoners and serves as a historical cue to provoke the Nazis. It also connotes the dehumanization and degradation of Jews who were stripped of their names and reduced to being identified simply by numbers. Showing the tattoo to the Nazis further symbolizes Erik's implicit need to justify his actions to himself. A close-up of the tattoo, however, represents the filmmakers' mediated attempt to justify to the audience Erik's imminent retributive justice against the two fugitive Nazis. The scene sets the foundation for Erik's transformation into an anti-hero—a killer who can garner audience support because the people he attacks are viewed as deserving extreme punishment.

Figure 3.3 – Still from *X-Men: First Class* (2011)

In *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006), Magneto observes a group of mutants discussing the implications of a government cure for their "disease." While some mutants see a vaccination as a path toward assimilation, others fear the cure represents a ploy to

exterminate them. The group leader says, “No one is talking about extermination,” to which Magneto responds, “No one ever talks about it. They just do it. And you go on with your lives ignoring the signs all around you. And then, one day, when the air is still and the night has fallen, they come for you.” This spurs a fellow mutant to brashly ask, “If you′re so proud of being a mutant, where’s your mark?” Exposing his forearm and revealing the numbered tattoo, Magneto responds, “I have been marked once, my dear, and let me assure you no needle shall ever touch my skin again.” Here, the tattoo literally signifies proof that society is capable of committing genocide and serves as a constant reminder of what Erik is vehemently trying to prevent, even though the film trilogy’s Magneto still reverts to plain villainy to achieve his ends.

The caustic environment and attitudes toward mutants in the films and comics provide context for Magneto’s fears and echo earlier prejudicial views. Mutants are treated as outcasts by ordinary humans who view them with suspicion for being innately different. In *X-Men* #14 (1965), a paranoid anthropologist exclaims, “Mutants walk among us! Hidden! Unknown! Waiting–! Waiting for the moment to strike!” (Lee 15). Similar government outrage and fear of mutants occurs in *X-Men* when Senator Robert Kelly (Bruce Davison) espouses the need for a mutant registration act: “The truth is that mutants are very real, and they are among us. We must know who they are, and above all we must know what they can do.” Later in the film, Magneto addresses the potential implications of government identification: “Let them pass that law and they’ll have you in chains with a number burned into your forehead.” Erik reaffirms these sentiments in *First Class* when he tells Charles Xavier, “Identification, that’s how it starts. And ends with being rounded up, experimented on, eliminated.”

Comics writer Chris Claremont poignantly addresses Magneto's fear of the cyclical nature of violence in *The Uncanny X-Men* #199 (1985; See Figure 3.4). Magneto, showing more of his "human side," falls in love with a woman, Lee Forrester. The pair, along with Kitty Pryde, visits the National Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. After a speaker cries, "We must therefore make every effort to teach our children, everyone's children, what was done—that such a nightmare never occur again! We may forgive—but we must *never* forget," Lee says to Magneto, "Man's inhumanity to man ... how easily the race kills," to which Magneto replies, "Then, Lee, it was the Jews. My nightmare has ever been that tomorrow it will be *mutants*" (13).

Figure 3.4 – Panel from *The Uncanny X-Men* #199 (1985)

Magneto is at his most vulnerable and emotionally open state when he is stripped of his costume. Erik the survivor emerges, and Claremont uses him as the archetype of persecuted victim to symbolize the millions of Jews who suffered the atrocities of the

Holocaust because they were different and the countless others who still fear another genocide. For Magneto, the horror of his childhood repeating itself with mutants as victims instead of Jews is his worst nightmare. The rhetoric in this issue, particularly the focus on remembering the past to prevent history from repeating itself, is a common theme in Claremont's writing. And, of course, setting is no coincidence; Claremont's words echo the museum's mission statement:

> [T]o advance and disseminate knowledge about this unprecedented tragedy; to preserve the memory of those who suffered; and to encourage its visitors to reflect upon the moral and spiritual questions raised by the events of the Holocaust as well as their own responsibilities as citizens of a democracy.[3]

Just as the museum's goal is to inform the masses, Magneto—after his disavowal of preemptive violence several issues earlier—plays the role of educator, spreading his teachings and knowledge of the injustices done to minorities in the hopes of preventing history from repeating itself. In *X-Men* Vol 2, #1 (1991), Magneto says, "All my life, I have seen people slaughtered wholesale for no more reason than the deity they worshipped or the color of their skin ... or the presence in their DNA of an extra, special gene." In the film *X-Men*, Magneto explains to Senator Robert Kelly that humans are innately suspicious of the unknown: "You see, what I really think you are afraid of is me. Me and my kind. The brotherhood of mutants. Oh, it's not so surprising really. Mankind has always feared what it doesn't understand." Later in the film when Magneto passes by the Statue of Liberty, he reflects on her significance:

> Magnificent isn't she ... I first saw her in 1949. America was going to be the land of tolerance, of peace … there is no land of tolerance. There is no peace. Not here, nor anywhere else. Women and children, whole families destroyed simply because they were born different from those in power.

[3] See http://www.ushmm.org/museum/mission/.

Magneto uses these reflections to constitute justification for his aggressive and oftentimes preemptive strategies. In *Uncanny X-Men* #161, Magneto calls Charles Xavier "an idealistic fool" to believe mutants will be accepted and predicts a second Holocaust: "If mutants exist, humanity will fear them and out of that fear, try to destroy them…. There is only one way to guarantee the survival of homo superior, and that is for them to hold the reins of power." Another attempt to justify the necessity of Magneto's militaristic self-defense by presenting him as the archetype of persecuted outcast is depicted in *X-Men* Vol 2, #3 (1991). Magneto tells Xavier and the X-Men (Figure 3.5):

> My life was shaped by forces and events none of you can possibly understand. You speak to the *best* in humanity. I have endured the *worst*. You *imagine* the reality of the *Holocaust*, of the Nazi *death camps*. I grew up in one. Perhaps, as you say, I *am* tainted by blood and rage—and death. But perhaps as well, that blood and rage and death comprise the *armor* that will *sustain* me and those who stand by me through the ordeal to come. The past is prologue, old friend. And the future I behold for you is...*WAR*… Whatever comes, I and mine will not go like lambs to the slaughter—but like *tigers*.

Claremont presents Magneto as emotionally and psychologically damaged, a tragic figure who perpetuates violence to prevent violence. Magneto, though, does not see himself as a villain, but rather a hero who justifies his hawkish and preemptive behavior by believing he is preventing a mutant Holocaust. The opposition and complementary relationship between a tragic figure and persecuted outcast who seeks redemption but finds death and misery along the way is evidence of Claremont's adding complexity to a character and compelling the audience to reevaluate their beliefs and previous convictions.

Figure 3.5 – Panel from *X-Men* Vol 2, #3 (1991)

Here, Jim Lee's artwork, Scott Williams' color, and Claremont's text metonymically convey the intangible states of rage and strength (Figure 3.5). A close-up of Magneto's stern facial expression fills the second panel and serves as the concrete visual expressesion of rage. His distinctive phsyiognomy—clenched mouth and locked eyes—coupled with red shaded pupils and a red-framed text cloud with the word "WAR" illustrate a resolute man with a philosophy of destruction. Magneto's raised fist in the fourth panel appears glowing, symbolizing mutant strength as he says, "I and mine will not go like lambs to the slaughter—but like tigers." This can also be read as the expression of Jewish resilience through Magneto's animal references that allude to the cattle cars that carted off millions of Jews to their death. He realizes the threat of another

Holocaust and proclaims that this time mutants will act "like tigers" and use their special abilities to survive.

Magneto echoes this fear of an impending war in *X2* when he says, "The war is still coming, Charles, and I intend to fight it by any means necessary." His rhetoric is illustrative of Richard Berger's assertion that transmedia adaptations often depend on a "dialogue or oscillation with other texts" (88). In other words, intertextual awareness exists in the *X-Men* films when Magneto channels his comic book predecessor, such as in *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006) when Magneto delivers a terroristic threat via the television: "Your cities will not be safe. Your streets will not be safe. You will not be safe." Magneto also uses the medium of television to threaten world leaders into nuclear disarmament in *The Uncanny X-Men* #150 (1981). He broadcasts a holographic image to the capital cities of every nation on Earth—President Reagan gazes upon the image in one panel, as other world leaders view the message—to whom he issues an ultimatum to cede total political control to him and initiate complete nuclear disarmament or face the end of life on Earth. Magneto exclaims, "I am a mutant—homo superior—possessing powers and abilities that set me apart, and above, common humanity. Because we are different ... I and my fellow mutants have been hunted down and slain like wild animals. Those killings will stop. All killing will stop" (2). Although Magneto threatens violence to prevent more violence, he says to a fellow mutant, "I may even be forced to demonstrate that I do have the power to crush them—even though I pray it will not come to that."

Unlike the cinematic Magneto who disregards collateral damage, Claremont portrays Magneto in issue #150, as a complex character and not a typical type 1 villain

who takes pleasure in the idea of world destruction. Rather, his motive is revealed—aside from acquiring a dictatorship—to be less selfish: "The nations of the world spend over a trillion dollars a year on armaments. I intend to deny them that indulgence. The money and energy devoted now to war will be turned instead to the eradication of hunger, disease, poverty." However, a Soviet submarine defies Magneto and fires nuclear missiles at his hideout. Magneto stops them and sinks the sub. Afterward he broadcasts a signal to military command in Moscow showing live images of the newly industrialized Soviet city of Varykino. Magneto triggers a volcanic eruption and earthquakes that destroy buildings, although he deliberately stops the chaos in enough time to allow for a mass evacuation. Claremont's narration points out that Magneto's "message is implicit and grim: But for his benevolence, the entire populace would have perished in their beds." Still, in the midst of total chaos, Magneto prevents genocide and allows an evacuation, which is quite different from McKellan's Magneto in *X-Men: The Last Stand*, who declares, "We will strike with a vengeance and a fury that this world has never witnessed. And if any mutants stand in our way, we will use this poison against them … nothing can stop us."

A stark contrast to Magneto's "benevolence" in issue #150 emerges in *X2* when he modifies a replica of Cerebro—a machine that locates mutants by centralizing Professor Xavier's telekinetic powers—into a weapon of mass destruction against humans. The device was designed by the film's villainous Colonel William Stryker (Brian Cox) to eradicate the mutant race, but Magneto alters the target from mutants to humans. Magneto proffers his justification to Professor X: "How does it look from there Charles? Still fighting the good fight? From here it doesn't look like they're playing by

your rules. Maybe it's time to play by theirs." With a nefarious grin, Magneto appears delighted at the prospect of his plan unfolding. Magneto's decision reflects decades-long changes in the depiction of the character, from Stan Lee's two-dimensional villain who, in issue #1, Professor X assesses "hate[s] the human race, and wish[es] to destroy it," to Chris Claremont's more ambivalent version that *X-Men* comics writer Fabian Nicieza claims became "recognized as a good guy" (McLean 184). *X2*'s Magneto evokes sympathy for his views while reverting to a megalomaniacal plan to wipe out the human race. There is a relative balance, though, within Claremont's Magneto, who oscillates between hero and supervillain, with most portrayals lying somewhere in the middle. However, *X2*'s Magneto takes an unprecedented leap toward type 1 supervillainy when he alters Cerebro. What is more villainous than the total destruction of the human race?

Type 1 supervillains such as Marvel's planet-consuming Galactus or DC's Joker—who is described in *The Dark Knight* (2008) as evil incarnate: "Some men just want to watch the world burn"—lack any remorse for their actions. Stan Lee's earlier iterations of Magneto loosely fits this framework; however, Claremont develops Magneto as a Holocaust survivor with justifiable goals who ruminates over the implications of his actions. This level of introspection is virtually absent in the films save for a few lines of dialogue. When Charles Xavier—arguably Erik's closest friend—dies in *X-Men: The Last Stand*, Magneto laments, "My single greatest regret is that he had to die for our dream to live." A far cry from his assertion to the mutant Rogue in *X-Men* that her "sacrifice [death] will mean our survival." While Charles' death emotionally affects Erik, he still views it as collateral damage, i.e. a necessary evil that will ensure his version of the greater good with mutants as rulers over humans. Magneto's most reflective moment

in the film trilogy appears in *X-Men: The Last Stand* when he realizes the consequences of unleashing Phoenix—an unstable re-born version of the X-Men's Jean Grey—onto the world. After the uncontrollable Phoenix begins killing mutants and humans alike, Magneto admits culpability for his actions, rhetorically asking, "What have I done?" This afterthought either represents Magneto's recognition of his grave error in pursuing mutant superiority or disappointment in his plan backfiring with mutants dying. Here, much of the audience's understanding of Magneto's character is shaped by McKellan's brief, but poignantly delivered reflection.

While this admission is brief, a similar revelation is more thoroughly explored in the comics. Magneto's path toward redemption begins in *The Uncanny X-Men* #150 after he comes to believe he killed the X-Men's Kitty Pryde by sending an electric charge through her body during a fight. Claremont's omniscient narration explains: Magneto's "pain subsides. And his shock at his behavior wrenches him out of the berserker rage that had possessed him" (46). Unbeknownst to him, Kitty is not actually dead; however, this event triggers a major psychological transformation within Magneto (Figure 3.6).

While holding what he believes to be her lifeless body, Magneto explains his philosophy on humanity and then admits his plan was misguided:

> I remember my own childhood—the gas chambers at Auschwitz, the guards joking as they herded my family to their death. As our lives were nothing to them, so human lives became nothing to me … I believed so much in my own personal vision, that I was prepared to pay any price, make any sacrifice to achieve it. But I forgot the innocents who would suffer in the process ... In my zeal to remake the world, I have become much like those I have always hated and despised. (47)

These panels are illustrative of Finnegan's point that "critics may recognize in the content of an image particular topoi, or commonplace themes" (254). The visual topoi of

Magneto holding Kitty's presumably lifeless body close to him and resting his head against her forehead is a recognizable image that conveys deep sadness.

Figure 3.6 – Panel from *The Uncanny X-Men* #150

His lamentation over her death reinforces his remorse and provides the audience with an explicit reference to Magneto's reflection and realization of the consequences of his transgressions. This moral transformation as illustrated through the comic book's content reinforces the artist and writer's goal of developing the archetype of a tragic figure worthy of audience sympathy.

In *First Class* a similar transformative moment mirrors the visual topoi of Magneto holding Kitty Pryde from issue #150. After Erik re-directs a barrage of missiles meant for the X-Men toward the naval ships that released them, Charles tackles him in an attempt to break his magnetic control over the weapons. Moira MacTaggert (Rose Byrne), a CIA operative aiding the X-Men, starts shooting at Magneto, who deflects each bullet. However, one misdirected swipe of his hand inadvertently sends a bullet into Xavier's spine, paralyzing him (Figure 3.7). Magneto drops to his knees, grasps Charles' body and cries, "I'm so sorry... Us turning on each other, it's what they want. I tried to warn you Charles. I want you by my side." In a moment of radical intertextuality, Michael Fassbender's Erik echoes Ian McKellan's Magneto who in turn reproduces Stan Lee's Magneto saying, "This society won't accept us. We form our own. The humans have played their hand. Now we get ready to play ours. Who's with me? No more hiding."

Figure 3.7 – Still from *X-Men: First Class*

When Magneto holds Kitty's seemingly dead body in issue #150, he realizes that, in his fervor, he was mimicking the genocidal actions of those he hated, and this prompts the redemptive journey on which his character embarks in the following issues. Charles

Xavier explains the symbolic nature of Magneto's defeat as not simply physical, but psychological, "changing Magneto's perceptions of who and what he is ... He has wasted so much of his life. Perhaps here, that will end, and he will emerge from this crucible the good man he once was and may yet to be again" (47). This demonstrates Claremont's framing Magneto as a tragic figure and persecuted outcast that reevaluates his life after realizing the errors of his ruthless pursuit of retribution for the terrible fate that befell his people. Also, it is arguably Claremont's attempt to create sympathy for Magneto, to force readers to reexamine their conceptions of what a true "supervillain" is and consider the context of Magneto's motivations for survival. However, when Magneto cradles Charles' paralyzed body in *First Class*, he says, "We're brothers, you and I. All of us together, protecting each other. We want the same thing." Charles replies, "My friend. I'm sorry, but we do not." This motivates him not toward a redemptive path like Claremont's Magneto, but to a destructive one. Here, Magneto represents an amalgamated version of previous comic book and film iterations that contain what Richard Berger—referring to the superhero film genre—calls "utterances" that influence "each other dialogically" (89). However, changes between comic book and cinematic representations of Magneto also illustrate how transmedia extensions "sometimes tak[e] radically different directions from the same choice point" (Ford and Jenkins 307). My interest in highlighting variations between the comics and films is not to declare that one medium is incapable of portraying the nature of good and evil, but that the Claremont comics better reflect the complexity of this philosophical debate than the X-Men films. By acknowledging that such variation in the depiction of evil in media exists, we can then investigate why and explore the cultural and philosophical implications of a more simplistic portrayal of these themes.

Hollywood Superhero Blockbusters vs. Serial Comic Books

What makes it more likely that evil will be "thinned" out and "simplified" in comic book films rather than in comic books themselves? One answer is that the serial nature of comics allows for more room to experiment compared to films, which have a limited time for character development. In *Comic Book Nation*, Bradford W. Wright notes that Stan Lee's editorial strategy at Marvel during the '60s was to "weave his characters and plot references into a coherent modern mythology that invited an unusual degree of reader involvement" (218). The serialized structure of the "Marvel comics universe" facilitated the unfolding of interconnected storylines across hundreds of issues, with new stories appearing every week. Since the cost of comics production was relatively low, dwarfing the size of a typical studio film's budget, writers and artists did not face the same pressures of delivering a success with every issue (or even series of issues) as filmmakers had with a movie.[4] This gave creators the freedom to present reinterpreted variations of characters throughout their titles, oftentimes introducing complicated heroes and villains that revel in ambiguous motives, a far cry from Christopher Reeve's virtuous Superman and Gene Hackman's avaricious Lex Luthor in *Superman: The Movie*.

While *X-Men: First Class* and the original film trilogy portray Magneto as a persecuted victim who metabolizes his rage into the pursuit of mutant survival, four 2-hour-long films have limited space to unravel the mystery of Magneto, particularly in comparison to Claremont's 16-year run as writer of the series where Magneto's journey toward redemption took place over 200 issues. But, Magneto's sympathetic portrayal became a contentious issue for the subsequent writers who felt that he was seemingly

[4] Henry Jenkins asserts this is still the case today, as "comics are being used to expand on universes created for other media into directions that might be cost-prohibitive in film or television" (Ford and Jenkins 305).

adopting Professor X's ideals, which left little room for dramatic conflict. Fabian Nicieza notes that he and fellow X-Men writers "had to find a way to bring tension back between them because they were both starting to go too close together on the same philosophical road" (McLean 184). This tension constitutes the core of the *X-Men* films, where Magneto is explicitly depicted as the villain[5] whom Professor X explains, "believing humanity would never accept us … grew angry and vengeful. … If no one is equipped to oppose him, humanity's days could be over." While many of the comics have instances of Magneto's introspection,[6] the cinematic version is more streamlined, which reflects Nicieza's claim that too much similarity between Xavier and Magneto would leave no conflict to dramatize. Instead, Marvel Studios proved this formula worked, as its experiment of introducing an expansive cinematic universe with *X-Men* led to several successful blockbuster superhero franchises. Whereas the scope of serialized superhero comics allows for deeper exploration of heroes and villains, the extremely high cost of producing one superhero film leaves less room for re-working the popular framework of pitting adored superheroes like Iron Man and Captain America against deranged supervillains vying for world domination.

Interiority in Comics and Films

Transmedia theory suggests that "each medium does what it does best" (Jenkins, *Convergence* 96) and that through multimodality, each medium "has different kinds of affordances" that "facilitat[e] different ways of interacting" with content (Jenkins,

[5] In *X2*, a new member of the Brotherhood of Mutants says to Magneto, "So, they say you're the bad guy."

[6] At one Magneto abandons his crusade to ensure mutant superiority; instead, he aligns himself with Xavier's ideals and begins training the X-Men at Xavier's mutant academy.

Transmedia 202). While Jenkins' argument appropriately addresses how transmedia content may look different across various media, his reliance on the thesis that one medium can do something better than another is problematic, because as Noël Carrol asks, "Can we say whether film, drama, or the novel narrates best, or is it more appropriate to say they narrate differently?" (32). From Jenkins' perspective there is a virtual absence of Magneto's introspective moments in the films because comics, with their "distinctive" thought bubbles, can show interiority better than film. Films can certainly convey a character's inner-feelings through various features such as voice-over, subjective visuals, sounds, and music. So, my argument is not that films are incapable of visualizing a characters' thoughts or that comics "best" illustrate Magneto's contemplations, but rather that each medium illustrates interiority differently.

The constant psychological and emotional battle that Magneto struggles through—his grief for the loss of loved ones, feeling responsible for preventing a second Holocaust, and violence as the only defense—is evident through a number of issues, starting with *The Uncanny X-Men* #113 (1978). While Magneto is on Asteroid M, a floating rock that he calls home, he reflects on the loss of his family, "I have never been stronger—I have avenged myself on my foremost foes—yet I have never felt more haunted" (10; See Figure 3.8). This is Claremont's first use of the archetype of the tragic figure, in other words, a universal symbol for humanity struggling through grief, survivor's guilt, and anger – feelings shared by thousands of Holocaust survivors and their families. Despite his superhuman strength and success at avenging himself against his "foremost foes," it is a pyrrhic victory as he has no one with whom to share in the spoils. By defeating his enemies with brute force and special abilities—taking back

power and restoring order under his control—Magneto's life is anything but stable; it is chaotic. This persecuted victim who suffered under Nazi brutality, now uses strength for revenge but the result leaves him tormented and still a victim of the past.

Figure 3.8 – Panel from *The Uncanny X-Men* #113 (1978)

The comic book's primary tool for showing Magneto's innermost feelings is what Scott McCloud and Will Eisner call a *thought balloon*: a cloud shape with a tail consisting of a series of bubbles that indicate the character is not speaking, but thinking. The panel in issue #113 (See Figure 8) illustrates David Carrier's explanation of the function of word balloons: "by externalizing thoughts, [they] make visible the inner world of represented figures, externalizing their inner lives, making them transparent to readers" (73). There are instances in the films where the audience can infer that Magneto is contemplating his actions, however no words are uttered. In *X-Men*, after Magneto examines the numbers on Wolverine's dog tag, the camera tilts down, revealing a close-

up of his faded concentration camp tattoo. A similar scene unfolds in *X-Men: First Class*, where Erik rolls the coin given to him by Dr. Klaus Schmidt earlier in the film through his fingers (Figure 3.9). Again, through subjective visuals—the camera zooms onto Erik's tattoo, the shot cuts to pictures of Nazis including Schmidt, then back to Erik—rather than through dialogue or voice-overs, enough visual context is given to suggest the filmmakers are alluding to Erik's past and are directing the audience to reflect on his experience at Auschwitz.

Figure 3.9 – Still from *X-Men: First Class*

As Catherine Khordoc notes, "in film or theater, the use of voice-overs are often relied upon in order to create the illusion that a character is not actually uttering his thoughts," whereas in comics, thought "is made clear immediately through the use of a particular type of balloon" (170). In the case of the *X-Men* films, would Magneto's voice-over seem awkward and out of place, particularly if his was the only voice used in this manner? This method appears in *The Uncanny X-Men* #274 (1991), where Magneto reveals his personal ideological struggles through first-person narrative, talking directly to the audience for the entire issue. Magneto says:

> My life's ambition has been to safeguard my fellow mutants.... And I hear the echo of Der Fuhrer's voice in the radio of memory, smell the awful stench of the sick and dying as the cattle cars brought the condemned to Auschwitz. I wear red, the color of blood, in tribute to their lost lives. And the harder I try to cast it aside, to find a gentler path.... the more irresistibly I'm drawn back. I should have died myself with those I loved. Instead, I carted the bodies by the hundreds, by the thousands ... from the death house to the crematorium.... and the ashes to the burial ground. Asking now what I could not then.... why was I spared? (11)

This reflection describes Magneto's mindset. He struggles to be good, but revenge and fear of annihilation prevent him from becoming a pacifist. Claremont presents a character who, unlike previous comic book supervillains, does not relish the deaths of others; rather, his transgressions are depicted as necessary for the survival of his race, and those actions weigh heavily on Magneto's conscience.

Again, conveying these emotions is entirely possible in cinema but as Noël Carrol observes, "clearly the existing output of any medium will only consist of objects designed to serve uses that it is logically and physically possible for the medium to perform" (29). In other words, the cinema is completely capable of conveying inner thought on screen through the use of voice-overs, dramatic music, or subjective visuals such as the *X-Men* films' illustration of Magneto's implicit need to justify his actions to himself through a series of close-ups and subsequent camera tilts which visualizes Magneto looking down at his tattoo. Although the question remains: What is a medium logically and physically able to perform? The answer is not as simple as one might think.

While Claremont's purpose was to create a more reflective and sympathetic Magneto over 200 issues, Marvel Studios' *X-Men* films are driven by the enduring battle between Professor X and Magneto. While there were no physical limitations for showing characters thinking on film through voice-overs, it may not have been artistically advantageous to buttress a long-winded Shakespearean soliloquy that reveals Magneto's

innermost thoughts sandwiched between special effects-ridden superhero and supervillain battles.

Richard Berger makes an applicable assertion regarding the relationship between texts in his discussion of how the five *Superman* films (1978-2006) are not adaptations in the traditional definition, but rather, "they are heteroglossic in that they are 'shot through' with the voices of the many artists, writers and adaptors of the comic books" (90). The cinematic Magneto is similarly an amalgamation of his creators Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, subsequent artists and writers from Len Wein and Chris Claremont to Dave Cockrum and Jim Lee, and various screenwriters such as Zak Penn and David Hayter. Magneto does not have one author, but many. In other words, the multitude of authorship in the various incarnations of Magneto certainly dialogically influenced the cinematic Magneto, and can partly account for variations in the character. There is no privileged text that the Marvel films solely relied on; rather they contained "elements or utterances" of previous versions of Magneto, such as Stan Lee's arrogant and antagonistic supervillain and Claremont's compassionate anti-hero.

Another contributing factor to the variations of Magneto between media is the revisionist nature of transmedia extensions. Derek Johnson notes that the *X-Men* films represent Marvel's attempt at "rolling back the characters to their origins and attempting to tell their old stories in a new way" (Johnson 75). This is applicable to *X-Men: First Class*, which also revisited and rewrote the X-Men's origins. Both *X-Men* and *First Class* keep to Claremont's portrayal of Magneto as a Holocaust survivor, but tweak some details and radically change other elements of the narrative. While the comics paint the Nazis as Magneto's true enemy, *First Class* puts an individual face on evil, making

Sebastian Shaw metonymically stand in for the entire Third Reich. Appropriating Mary Shelley's story, Erik refers to himself as "Frankenstein's monster" and, while staring at a photo of Shaw, declares "I'm looking for my creator." Shaw later says to Erik, "We are the future of the human race. You and me, son." Again, the film recalls the warped father/son relationship between Dr. Frankenstein and his monster. This creative experimentation illustrates that each transmedia extension is not circumscribed and can impose its own mark on the character.

Now that I have identified variations in the transmedia representations of Magneto and examined why they occur, the fourth chapter will explore their implications as they relate to my central question: Will transmedia storytelling enrich popular culture or make it more formulaic?

CHAPTER FOUR

Issues of Transmedia

The simplification of Magneto's evilness, that is, his transformation from the ambivalent comic book anti-hero who contemplates the morality of his decisions to the less complicated and streamlined cinematic supervillain who coldly ignores mutant and human casualties, addresses both parts of my central question, the one that Henry Jenkins initially asked: Will transmedia storytelling enrich popular culture or make it more formulaic? This chapter explores how the variations of the *X-Men* franchise's depictions of good and evil are related to issues of transmedia.

I will discuss the connections between Magneto's Brotherhood of Mutants and the State of Israel and the issues of good and evil and how they are deployed in both the comic books and the films. When Magneto's fears reflect the real-world concerns of Israel, the *X-Men* franchise deepens our understanding of his motivations; this can enhance the audience's viewing experience by encouraging their reflections on the legitimacy of Magneto's choices. However, the original *X-Men* film trilogy potentially reverts to the formulaic model of Hollywood storytelling by simplifying the debate between good and evil. This discussion leads into a critique of the tendency of transmedia theory to slip into medium-specificity arguments that imply one medium is better equipped to portray the nature of good and evil, ostensibly ignoring how these claims could eventually be detrimental to the artistic output of the culture industries. A number of cultural and aesthetic implications arise as well, particularly the risk for transmedia

storytelling to fragment audiences and circumscribe the types of narratives that could be developed into transmedia franchises.

Magneto and the State of Israel

Avi Arad, an Israeli-American Marvel executive and producer of *X-Men* (2000) said of Magneto in a 2005 article in *The Jerusalem Report*, "Magneto, to me, is not a villain. But he becomes more like Kahane the more frustrated he is with the way the world is approaching the ones who are different" (Weinstein 114). Rabbi Meir Kahane was founder of the Jewish Defense League—a militant Jewish group that parallels Magneto's Brotherhood of Mutants—and is believed to have coined the phrase "Never again." The JDL's ideology is to "serve as a spearhead of active resistance to anti-Semitism of any kind, using any means necessary to ensure peace for Jews everywhere" (Siebold 40). While many thought his goals of fighting anti-Semitism were admirable, frequently his actions were criminal. In a 1984 interview with the *Washington Post*, Kahane admitted that the JDL "bombed the Russian [Soviet] mission in New York, the Russian cultural mission here [Washington] in 1971, the Soviet trade offices" (Hall 1).

Similar to the JDL, Magneto believes the Brotherhood of Mutants are the "good guys," carrying out retributive justice on behalf of persecuted mutants. He supported the creation of a homeland for the mutant race, just as Kahane and fellow Zionists supported a homeland for the Jews and advocated that all Jews return to live there. Eventually Magneto would see his dream come to fruition with the fictional country of Genosha[1], a parallel to the State of Israel. In *X-Men* Vol 2, #1 (1991), Magneto says, "I cannot change the world but I can ... and will ... ensure that my race will never again suffer for its fear

[1] Genosha was originally Marvel's version of South Africa under apartheid, with the mutants as slaves. It would became a mutant enclave much later in the series.

and prejudice." Here, Magneto clearly indicates Kahane's cry of "Never Again" is his philosophy, where justification for pre-emptive violence lies with remembering the Holocaust. In other words, Magneto recognizes similarities between the treatment of European Jews during World War II and contemporary mutants and uses these connections to justify extreme measures of self-defense in the name of preventing another attempt to exterminate an entire race.

A parallel metaphorical moment occurs in the finale of *X-Men: First Class* (2011), when Russian and American naval fleets fire a barrage of missiles toward the X-Men. After Erik stops the missiles in mid-air and re-directs them toward the military, Charles says, "There are thousands of men on those ships. Good honest, innocent men. They're just following orders." Erik responds to Charles' poor choice of words,[2] "I've been at the mercy of men just following orders. Never again." In his contentious *Badass Digest* article reviewing *X-Men: First Class* (2011), Devin Faraci posits that Magneto's line of "Never again" solidifies his position as a metaphor for Jewish nationalism and Zionism by echoing the Jewish Defense League's motto. He argues that "the film presents Magneto as a mirror held up to the state of Israel" in that Magneto's "general goals" and his "tactics" are not that different from the State of Israel. He compares the mutants' announcement of their existence in the film's finale at the Cuban beach battle as a moment that parallels Israel's declaration of their existence as an independent state in 1948, "and just as in that case the declaration of existence is met with immediate hostility. The assembled homo sapien war ships fire on the mutants much as the

[2] Earlier in the film while pleading for his life, a Nazi tells Erik "We were under orders." This line, often referred to as the Nuremberg defense, which evokes the ubiquitous plea from Nazis who were on trial for war crimes, implies that culpability rests with those in higher command. In other words, the foot soldiers are seemingly blameless because they "simply" were following their orders without question.

assembled Arab states attacked Israel." He asserts that, just as the Arab Israeli War "helped solidify Israel's stance on self-defense," the military strike against the mutants does the same for Magneto, and in both cases "the newly independent figure finds their [sic] fears of open hostility to be completely founded."

Faraci and Arad's claims of Israeli parallels in the X-Men films illustrate how the franchise is representative of Jenkins' assertion that transmedia narratives like the *The Matrix* (1999) are "work(s) very much of the moment, speaking to contemporary anxieties...feeding on current notions of multiculturalism" (*Convergence* 121). Jenkins asserts that transmedia storytelling such as *The Matrix* enriches popular culture by adding various "multinational and multicultural references largely invisible to Western consumers but designed to give people in different parts of the world toeholds within the franchise" (*Convergence* 113). He describes how some people in India turned discussions of the South Asian family in *Matrix Revolutions* (2003) into debates about labor migration to the U.S., the position of non-whites in the high-tech software industry, and outsourcing. Similarly, Doron Fishler asserts that *First Class* contains "a discussion about the history and character of the State of Israel," a political subtext that is "hard to ignore ... when it comes to Israeli eyes." Fishler contends that the film "appears to posit an alternative which most Americans will not likely notice, because they have never heard of the existence of an Israeli left." He views Magneto as representative of the Israeli right, while Charles Xavier embodies the Israeli left—an idealist who believes in "a solution through negotiations even when the other side attacks with violence." While the parallel to Israel and multicultural subtext within the X-Men franchise contribute to portrayals of a more complex narrative and represent the potential for transmedia

storytelling to enrich popular culture, concurrently, in his complete lack of restraint, the cinematic Magneto presents complications for how society views the nature of good and evil. Identifying how, at times, the cinematic Magneto represents a formulaic villain can reveal deeper philosophical implications of transmedia storytelling.

The Nature of Good and Evil

Jenkins views *The Matrix*'s borrowing of broad archetypes, where antagonists and protagonists are akin to video game stock characters rather than "individualistic, novelistic, and rounded characters," as beneficial: "By tapping video game iconography, *The Matrix* movies create a more intense, more immediate engagement for viewers who come into the theater knowing who these characters are and what they can do" (*Convergence* 121). In other words, *The Matrix*'s Neo (Keanu Reeves) bears resemblances to popular video game protagonists such as Mario, *The Legend of Zelda*'s Link, and Sonic the Hedgehog, who simply exist to snuff out evil. As an easily identifiable character, Neo serves as the audience's vehicle for direct experience of the fictional world. Jenkins suggests that presenting accessible characters is an integral component to transmedia narratives because it provides immediacy for consumers. This in itself is not problematic, but a potential issue of transmedia arises when Jenkins slips into a medium specificity argument by declaring, "In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best" (*Convergence* 96). By asserting that transmedia stories benefit from situating identifiably flat protagonists and antagonists within narratives where value arises from the audience's search for meaning rather than from the intentionality of artists, Jenkins fails to see the risk for simplifying the portrayal of good and evil as is the case when the cinematic Magneto becomes an archetypal

supervillain instead of the complicated Shakespearean anti-hero of the comics. In other words, adding too much ambiguity or complexity to Magneto's character could make him less identifiable and obstruct the audience's attempts to differentiate between his ideology and Charles Xavier's, which constitutes the core conflict in the *X-Men* franchise.

While Jenkins argues that relying on archetypal characters facilitates "a more intense, more immediate engagement" for consumers, he neglects to define what differentiates who is good and who is evil beyond broad archetypes; in turn, this implies that, by adopting formulaic narratives, transmedia storytelling will present a simplistic view of good and evil that fails to address how the debate can be more complex. But before delving any deeper into a philosophical discussion of thematic depictions of good and evil, objectively addressing these concepts is warranted.

When I refer to the X-Men as the embodiment of "good," this denotes behaviors such as the selfless pursuit of mutant acceptance through peaceful measures and protecting the innocent from undue harm either at the hands of the Brotherhood of Mutants or intolerant humans. Referring to Magneto as symbolizing "evil" denotes a sense of cruelty and malice, a callous disregard for mutant or human casualties, and an insatiable drive to secure mutant superiority by any means necessary. This narrow characterization is evident in the original *X-Men* film trilogy, which presents Magneto as a more streamlined character whose delight in destruction supersedes any notion of restraint. In *First Class*, Erik physically transforms into Magneto by donning his signature horned helmet, while symbolically emerging as what Doron Fishler calls "the Nazi's successor" when he admits to supporting Sebastian Shaw's philosophy of mutant

superiority and the destruction of the human race: “I'd like you to know that I agree with every word you said. We are the future.” Unlike the comics Magneto, who Chris Claremont attempted to “evolve in the way that Menachem Begin evolved from a guy that the British considered ‘Shoot on sight’ in 1945 … to a statesman who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1976 for the Camp David accords,” by revealing Magneto’s remorse for his actions and subsequent philosophical transformation, the absence of such deep introspection in the cinematic Magneto encourages audiences to view the nature of evil simplistically. An example of this problematic view is evident in Devin Faraci’s claim that similarities exist between how Magneto and Israel enact a controversial and offensive self-defense policy:

> For many Israel has been a belligerent actor in the region, and their treatment of the Palestinians is unforgivable, especially in the way that it echoes the marginalization and treatment of the Jews in the years leading up to WWII and the Holocaust. But for others Israel is a scrappy state that needs to show its force to keep safe from every other nation in the region, who would like nothing more than to see this country snuffed out. (“Critique of Israel”)

Faraci views Magneto’s story in *First Class* as a critique of Israel and asks whether “Israel has gazed too long into the abyss.” There is no denying that Magneto and extremist Zionists like Kahane justifying their use of violence to prevent further violence is problematic, but Faraci’s comments present Magneto and the State of Israel as either clearly bad or clearly justifiable, when, as Fishler claims, “the ideologies of both the fictional X-Men universe and our very real Israeli nation are as split and divisive as any on the planet.” By transforming Erik from a complex anti-hero to a more streamlined supervillain, the films can potentially be misread, leaving a negative feeling about Jews or one that simply glorifies and props them up as the ultimate warrior. The Claremont

comics reflect the complexity of these issues and the divergent ideologies as embodied through the internal struggles and redemptive path of Magneto, whereas the four films imply a more simplistic view of good and evil. I am not dismissing the films or casting them as inferior to the comic books, as there are certainly instances in the X-Men comics where the debate between what constitutes good and evil is narrowly framed. My point is that instances of simplistically portraying these themes in the *X-Men* franchise illustrate the potential effect of transmedia storytelling to make narratives more formulaic. The potentiality for transmedia to be detrimental to the creative production of the culture industries also exists when critics rely on the medium-specificity thesis to argue that "In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best" (Jenkins, *Convergence*, 96).

Medium Specificity

Jenkins argues that a capable model does not exist for critics to evaluate the effects of transmedia fully:

> There have been far too few fully transmedia stories for media makers to act with any certainty about what would constitute the best uses of this new mode of storytelling, or for critics and consumers to know how to talk meaningfully about what works or doesn't work within such franchises. (*Convergence* 97)

He also notes that "few, if any, franchises achieve the full aesthetic potential of transmedia storytelling—yet," and that media producers will continue to "figure out" how (*Convergence* 97). While Jenkins does not define what that potential is or specify what constitutes the "best uses" of transmedia storytelling, he implies that one medium simply can do something that another cannot.

From this medium-specific perspective, transmedia theory problematically suggests that one medium is better equipped to portray the nature of good and evil. However, both the *X-Men* films and comics contain compelling instances of the philosophical battle between good and evil. Magneto's path toward redemption by foregoing killing comes to a screeching halt in Claremont's *Classic X-Men* #19 (March 1988) after the CIA kills Magneto's girlfriend and attacks him. He exclaims, "It is neither Communists nor Nazis you have to fear, Control—it is we, who your shortsighted stupidity will make your foes ... It is I who shall lead my people to the glory they deserve, I, Übermensch. I, Mutant! I, Magneto" (12). In *First Class*, Erik uses an imminent military strike against mutants as the impetus to declare war against humanity: "The real enemy is out there. I feel their guns moving in the water, their metal targeting us. Americans, Soviets, humans. United in their fear of the unknown. The Neanderthal is running scared, my fellow mutants!" In both the film and comic, violence against mutants provokes Magneto into pursuing aggressive and deadly forms of self-defense that are arguably justifiable from the perspective of necessary for self-preservation. These examples illustrate that one medium is not inferior to the other in its depiction of good and evil but rather each medium can convey these themes in complex ways.

The trouble with Jenkins' line of thinking is that it delimits transmedia theory and slips into what Noël Carroll considers "arguments that purport to establish that the new media have a range of aesthetic effects peculiar to them whose exploitation marks the proper avenue of artistic development within the medium in question" (3). I share Carroll's skepticism of medium-specific arguments that essentialize media and espouse "a correct line of stylistic development within that medium—recommendations,

moreover, which are each putatively based upon having isolated the peculiar potentials or capacities of the medium in question" (3). When Jenkins notes that "each medium has different kinds of affordances" and that a medium does what it does best, he suggests that each art form has a specific or unique mode of expression that differentiates it from every other medium. But, as Carroll correctly notes,

> A medium may excel in more than one effect, and these effects may be incompatible, thus making it impossible for the artist to abide by the medium-specificity thesis by doing what the medium does best. For it is not possible to do all that the medium does best. Nor does the medium-specificity thesis have a nonarbitrary way to decide which of the conflicting 'medium-based' styles is to be preferred. (28)

One can look at classical film theorists to recognize Carroll's assertion about the discordant views of medium-specificity arguments. Rudolph Arnheim writes of cinema's ability to best represent animated action, while André Bazin considers the use of deep focus and wide shots to best encapsulate "objective reality," and practitioner/theorists like Lev Kuleshov and Sergei Eisenstein believe editing is the essence of cinema. Simply put, they cannot all be right. Carroll suggests that artists will "gravitate toward the technique that serves one's purposes best. What aspects of the medium are to be emphasized or exploited will be determined by the aims of the artists and the purposes of the art form" (29). Just as there is no one medium specific argument that delineates what a particular medium is "best" equipped to do, there is no one formula that explains how to best exploit a particular medium in transmedia storytelling despite some theorists' attempts to prioritize transmedia extensions.

When Jenkins says "each medium does what it does best," it is with the assumption that any story can make it in any medium, or can only certain aspects of a story be made in a particular medium because of practical limits? From transmedia

theory's medium-specific perspective, which implies media have particular uses to which they cannot be put, the reason Magneto's reflective moments are virtually omitted in the *X-Men* films could be that comics are better equipped to convey character interiority then cinema. A more compelling argument would suggest that comics and films externalize inner emotions differently, rather than implying that one medium best illustrates certain features over another medium or that there exists a specific quality that a particular medium is best at showing. Essentially, transmedia theory intimates that certain media have particular tools with specific purposes, but as Carroll notes, "instead of trying to find one individual purpose for which a given medium is best adapted," critics should focus on how media can be used in a multitude of ways to explore various artistic purposes (26). Innovation and creativity lies in the range of artistic possibilities, not a single or fixed range.

Jenkins' assertion that "each medium does what it does best" is also representative of what Carroll considers a problematic medium-specificity formula with two components:

> …the idea that there is something that each medium does best—alternatively, best of everything else a given medium does or best in comparison with other media ... Also, the medium-specificity thesis holds that each of the arts should do that which differentiates it from the other arts. (30)

Carroll calls these two components th*e excellence requirement* and the *differentiation requirement* and contends that several problems with the medium-specificity thesis emerge from the combination of these two components. My concern is that when transmedia theorists declare that each medium will pursue what it does best, it becomes prescriptive and implicitly urges a medium to pursue only that which it can do better than anything else. But, as Carroll astutely inquires, "if a medium does something well and the

occasion arises, why should an art form be inhibited especially just because there is something that the art form does better?" (31).

Economic and Artistic Implications of Transmedia Storytelling

There is a cyclical nature to Jenkins' assertion that transmedia storytelling's "process of world-building encourages an encyclopedic impulse in both readers and writers" where "we are drawn to master what can be known about a world which always expands beyond our grasp" ("Storytelling 101"). Jenkins implies that younger consumers are instinctively programmed to seek out more content: "kids who have grown up consuming and enjoying *Pokémon* across media are going to expect this same kind of experience from *The West Wing* as they get older" (*Technology Review*). While Jenkins holds both corporations and audiences equally responsible for this trend, he neglects to address that media companies have nurtured this desire, much like food companies that market sugary cereal to kids. The media facilitates the demand, creates the supply, and then the consumers react. Jenkins believes the older generation viewed the serialized hour-long drama as the true testament of sophisticated television, whereas younger consumers would not consider it engaging enough because the story does not unfold across various media. Jenkins argues that younger audiences are "hunters and gatherers" that take pleasure in searching for character backgrounds and plot points and discovering connections between texts within the same franchise. Whether this experience is truly "pleasurable" for consumers or preferred over "classically constructed narratives" is debatable.

Some in the entertainment industry, such as Danny Bilson, a vice president at Electronic Arts, see transmedia storytelling benefiting consumers by offering an active, participatory experience:

> Going forward, people are going to want to go deeper into stuff they care about rather than sampling a lot of stuff. If there's something I love, I want it to be bigger than just those two hours in the movie theater or a one hour a week experience on TV. I want a deepening of the universe … I want to participate in it. I've just been introduced to the world in the film and I want to get there, explore it. You need that connection to the world to make participation exciting. (*Convergence* 106)

Bilson addresses the potential for transmedia storytelling to enrich popular culture by expanding narratives and offering deeper, broader insights into fictional worlds. While Jenkins agrees with Bilson that when media companies create more engaging content for consumers who want to participate in and control what media they consume "these two forces reinforce each other," he also suggests that a paradoxical dilemma arises that risks audience fragmentation when transmedia storytelling—as evidenced by *The Matrix* franchise—disperses integral plot points across media: "much of the emotional payoff of *Revolutions* is accessible only to people who have played the game" (*Convergence* 127). In other words, companies risk alienating audience members who, either through neglect of consuming the franchise's extensions or sheer unfamiliarity with those texts' existence, will encounter narrative gaps that could negatively alter their entertainment experience.

Another potential risk for transmedia storytelling arises from Jenkins' prediction that some transmedia principles could appear in dramas garnered toward mature audiences such as *The West Wing* (1999–2006) or *The Sopranos* (1999–2007), and soap operas where audiences may be asked "to search for clues across a range of different

media" (*Convergence* 129). Jenkins downplays the significance of how "the encyclopedic ambitions of transmedia texts" run counter to the media habits of older consumers—often referred to as *passive media spectators*—who are skeptical of participatory culture. He admits that many older consumers are "left confused" by transmedia stories, but claims that some will simply learn to adapt. However, must consumers acclimatize themselves with convergence culture to experience future narratives? Fiona Morrow of the *London Independent* describes her skepticism at this prospect: "You can call me old-fashioned—what matters to me is the film and only the film. I don't want to have to 'enhance' the cinematic experience by overloading on souped-up flimflam" (*Convergence* 104). Jenkins' response to such critics is problematic because he seemingly prioritizes transmedia over traditional narratives, suggesting the former can "expand one's comprehension" while "sometimes, we simply want to watch. And as long as that remains the case, many franchises may remain big and dumb and noisy" (*Convergence* 130). Jenkins implies that transmedia narratives are better equipped to offer complex and rich experiences for new consumers, while older and passive consumers are relegated to watching media that lack depth.

David Bordwell raises an interesting counterpoint by suggesting that digging deeper into transmedia narratives can hinder film viewing, which he sees as an innately active, participatory experience:

> It requires attention, a degree of concentration, memory, anticipation, and a host of story-understanding skills. Even the simplest story gears up our minds. We may not notice this happening because our skills are so well-practiced; but skills they are. More complicated stories demand that we play a sort of mental game with the film. ("Platform 1")

Bordwell envisions the potential for the encyclopedic ambitions of transmedia texts to be cumbersome and monotonous:

> Perhaps it's best to let most storyworlds molder away. Does every horror movie need a zigzag trail of web pages? Do you want a diary of Daredevil's down time? Do you want to look at the Flickr page of the family in *Little Miss Sunshine*? Do you want to receive Tweets from Juno? Pursued to the max, transmedia storytelling could be as alternately dull and maddening as your own life. ("Platform 1")

While I agree with Bordwell's assertion that transmedia storytelling could potentially become tedious, there is merit to Bilson and Jenkins' claims that the current convergence culture demands expansive stories and that these narratives can offer a rewarding experience. My concern, though, is what effect both the audience and corporate insistence on more expansive storytelling will have on traditional narratives, particularly when there is an economic imperative driving the creation of transmedia franchises.

Jenkins declares "there are strong economic motives behind transmedia storytelling" and that the structure of the modern entertainment industry is designed for one purpose: "the construction and enhancement of entertainment franchises" (*Convergence* 104). Inherent in each horizontally integrated media corporation is the financial incentive "to spread its brand or expand its franchises across as many different media platforms as possible" ("Storytelling 101"). In this instance, a potentiality for obscuring the boundaries between marketing and entertainment exists while corporations pitch the content as essential for enhancing the overall experience. In other words, corporations can ostensibly publish marketing material under the guise that it is an integral element that, if ignored, might compromise the consumer's ability to have a unified experience. While Jenkins views the inevitability of transmedia franchises as an

"enormous 'upside'" economically, a number of questions arise from his neglecting to address how non-franchise narratives could be affected.

If the fundamental economic driving factor for media corporations is the synergistic model, will creators of non-franchise properties miss out on the companies' full attention, both financial and artistic, that will now be devoted to transmedia stories, ostensibly circumscribing cultural production? In other words, do we as a culture suffer under such homogeneity in Hollywood, particularly if corporations overlook traditional projects simply because transmedia stories offer more revenue streams through licensing, branding, and other avenues? Will creators feel pressure to mold their work to fit this model, and could this essentially homogenize artistic production and lead to an oversaturated market of franchises that sacrifice complexity and depth in exchange for generic and recognizable formulaic storytelling that corporations assume appeals to the masses? And, given the fickle nature of media consumers, could they eventually tire of tracking down tributary narratives, leaving corporations with expensive flops[3]. But for now, as Jenkins emphasizes, "the current configuration of the entertainment industry makes transmedia expansion an economic imperative," particularly because our convergence culture is primed for these types of narratives ("Storytelling 101").

Chapter Five attempts to answer the questions I have raised while also addressing how Jenkins' declaration that transmedia narratives are "the ideal aesthetic form" for the current consumer is problematic and prioritizes transmedia over other types of storytelling, which could have larger implications for artistic production of the culture industries.

[3] Perhaps this is what Steven Spielberg was envisioning when he predicted the inevitability of a massive implosion of Hollywood blockbusters during a talk with George Lucas as the University of Southern California in June 2013.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

When Jenkins declares, “In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best” and that transmedia storytelling “is the ideal aesthetic form for an era of collective intelligence,” he starts to sound dismissive of other types of narratives, implying they are inferior to the expansive world-building of transmedia. He also fails to realize how this has ramifications for various types of media, particularly the potential to prevent certain types of narratives from being told.

Jenkins’ assertions raise a number of questions; chiefly, what exactly makes transmedia storytelling “ideal” over other narrative forms? And does that mean other stories will be eschewed simply because they do not fit the branching narrative model of transmedia where consumers can dig deeper through multiple texts? Let us tackle these questions individually.

Is transmedia storytelling “ideal” because it is seemingly better equipped to fulfill younger audience’s encyclopedic desire to consume every aspect of a narrative? When Jenkins calls modern consumers “hunters and gatherers” whom he suggests are instinctively primed to pursue expansive narrative worlds across multiple texts, it implies that an individual stand-alone work cannot truly satisfy these consumers because it does not offer enough of an investigative experience. But not everyone accepts the assumption that transmedia exploration will enhance a consumer’s viewing experience.

David Bordwell sees film viewing as an innately active, participatory experience that "requires attention, a degree of concentration, memory, anticipation, and a host of story-understanding skills. Even the simplest story gears up our minds" ("Platform 1"). He argues that digging for more details in transmedia narratives can actually hinder the experience, particularly in independent films where non-linear plots purposefully frustrate and challenge the audience's normative ideas of storytelling: "That innovation shrinks if we can run home to get background material online. By following the franchise logic, indie films risk giving up mystery" ("Platform 1"). But when Hollywood's chief interest is commodities, the opportunity for transmedia storytelling to spread brands and franchises across as many media platforms as possible dwarfs any concerns over potential implications for traditional narratives. In other words, transmedia storytelling can tip the scale toward financial concerns in the complex balance between creative and commercial motivations.

If the current transmedia franchise model is predictive, then Hollywood blockbuster films are the template for "the ideal aesthetic form" for our convergence culture, but what about all the other genres? Certainly, as I discussed in chapter 2, superhero films can be insightful character dramas that tackle complex themes but so can non-superhero films. Is the assumption that any genre can make it in transmedia if corporations see the potential, or will other genres be ignored because they are viewed as being incapable of fitting the 'transmedia' model? I believe the former is more of a possibility than the latter.

There have been artistic endeavors not of the Hollywood blockbuster model that theorists consider transmedia entertainment. Jenkins notes how ABC's primetime

dramedy *Desperate Housewives* (2004–2012) experimented with "a game designed to attract older female consumers into gaming" ("Storytelling 101"); Geoffrey Long focuses on how the Jim Henson Corporation attempted to build open worlds with complex narratives in the fantasy realms of *Labyrinth* (1986) and *The Dark Crystal* (1982) ("Aesthetics and Production"); and Sam Ford contends that CBS' daily serial drama *As the World Turns* (1958–2010) illustrates how transmedia storytelling can expand the scope of contemporary soap operas ("World Turns"). There have been other recent attempts to world build across multiple media in other genres as well: *The Matrix* franchise (science fiction); *The Avengers* (2012) (action and adventure); *Glee* (2009–) (comedy/musical); the BBC's *Sherlock* (2008–) (mystery); and the *Saw* franchise (2004–2010) (horror).

If we see far fewer transmedia narratives of particular genres developed, it will not be because those genres are incapable of encapsulating an expansive and immersive experience; rather, it will be because media corporations may not see those genres as a viable economic investment. In other words, commercial and financial decisions will dictate the types of transmedia stories that are developed, rather than assumed limitations of a particular medium. For example, there are plenty of salacious details to be mined from the worldwide best-selling erotic *Fifty Shades* trilogy (2011–2012). Focus Features could certainly develop a sprawling narrative that spans multiple media in conjunction with its upcoming film adaptation of the novel *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2015), but will the company believe it is economically and artistically feasible to help finance a video game set in an S&M world filled with dominatrices and sadomasochism or see a potential in expanding the *Fifty Shades* world into comics? A romantic driven storyline in a video

game is not unorthodox or impractical, and comic books have been unapologetically graphic in their depictions of sex and violently carnal acts. But we may not see as much romantic genre transmedia stories—or other genres such as drama or comedy—developed because corporations may believe genres like action/adventure and science fiction/fantasy can reach a wider audience and offer more opportunities to commoditize and spread the brand of a given franchise.

This chapter has focused on the potential negative philosophical, cultural, and aesthetic implications of transmedia storytelling, while also addressing the prospect for transmedia storytelling to become formulaic. Despite this line of inquiry, I am not apathetic to the potentiality of transmedia enriching popular culture. Several recent attempts to build stories transmedially such as Peter Jackson's *The Hobbit* films (2012–2014), AMC's *The Walking Dead* (2010–), and *The Avengers*, have been derived from previous works and have led to greater audience interest in those franchises. But could this current trend of repurposing existing texts impede artists from creating new transmedia stories from the ground up? Lance Weiler argues that independent filmmakers should embrace transmedia storytelling because it offers "more fluid and social ways" to connect with an audience than traditional Hollywood filmmaking ("Culture Hacker"). He suggests that indie filmmakers, rather than creating a traditional genre script with a three-act layout, should develop a "storyworld bible" that plots details and characters across films, websites, social media apps, gaming, and other platforms ("Culture Hacker"). Weiler's arguments are significant because they are illustrative of Jenkins' claim that transmedia storytelling practices can be artistically and economically beneficial "by creating different points of entry for different audience segments" ("Storytelling 101").

Also by expanding universes transmedially, audiences can be (re)introduced to earlier works from which the new media draw, such as *First Class*' sequel *X-Men: Days of Future Past*'s (2014) explicit borrowing from the comic book arc of the same name. The most recent Wolverine film drew heavily from the Claremont and Frank Miller '80s comic miniseries rather than using the comics as a loose framework. These examples, where Marvel Studios expanded its transmedia universe by reviving earlier works, can serve as illustrations of the positive implications of transmedia storytelling: to create new entryways into a particular franchise; serve as a gateway for younger audiences unfamiliar with earlier comic book stories; and reward long-standing fans of the series by offering a reinterpretation of a familiar work.

While my thesis has attempted to illustrate how certain weaknesses of medium-specificity theory are similar to transmedia theory, both theories do share positive implications for scholarly analysis. Transmedia theory can help develop principles by which to evaluate works and provide a framework to highlight how artists use the medium, though it can become problematic if theorists declare that a specific artistic purpose or feature of a medium is the only one worth pursuing. The critical impasse is whether theorists will continue to essentialize the texts, ostensibly delimiting transmedia by relying on formulas that, upon further review, should be resisted, or pursue the more valid method of exploring how a feature plays a part in helping us understand one of a multitude of aesthetic and stylistic purposes and the evolution of technology and artistic expression in a given medium.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that the streamlining of Magneto's evilness, that is, his transformation from ambivalent comic book anti-hero to the less complicated

and simplified cinematic supervillain, addresses both parts of my central question that Henry Jenkins initially asked: Will transmedia storytelling enrich popular culture or make it more formulaic? The original *X-Men* film trilogy potentially falls victim to the formulaic model of Hollywood storytelling in its portrayal of Magneto as a more streamlined character whose megalomania supersedes any notion of restraint, although *X-Men: First Class* presents a more sympathetic anti-hero that reflects Chris Claremont's complicated comic book version. Although each film problematizes issues of restraint and simplifies the debate between good and evil, they represent Marvel's attempt to build expansive stories transmedially that offer consumers multiple entry points to the *X-Men* franchise. From this perspective, transmedia storytelling offers artists a wider reach to consumers and the ability to expand their stories across multiple texts, while giving the audience an enhanced entertainment experience that does not simply conclude when the movie, TV show, comic, or video game ends. The problem remains, though, whether artists or media corporations will use the tool of transmedia storytelling to create complex narratives or simply fall back on formulaic models.

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