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A thesis submitted to the faculty of
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Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Stagnant Supers: Amplifying the Superhero Genre Through Novelistic Maturity

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Few superhero scholars, if any, are discussing physical age or definitions of maturity. It seems Hollywood and consumers are reluctant to associate "adult" content with anything other than pornography, immature language, and excessive violence—a reluctance that should be explored by scholars and critics alike. Most superhero characters only reflect the insecurities of audiences who are currently undergoing the transition between adolescence and young adulthood. There are very few older, middle-aged, or retired superheroes depicted juggling the demands of a family along with their daring rescues. It is possible that superhero films could continue to enjoy longer, lasting success if they include more than the previously targeted immature audience. Live-action superhero films can target all-ages more efficiently by avoiding the static "mature" audience narratives and presenting relatable and realistic adulthood with novelistic maturity along with adolescence and childhood.

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Introduction

Superhero scholarship has spent a long time establishing the relationship between superheroes and mythology. Countless scholars have noted the connection superheroes have to myth and mythic characters, often citing Joseph Campbell's work *Hero With a Thousand Faces* and Lawrence and Jewett's *Myth of the American Superhero* to equate superheroes to contemporary mythology (see Coogan; Eco; Fingeroth; Morrison; Reynolds; and Rosenberg). Like the scholars, superhero creators and consumers often lump the superhero genre with myths, epic poems, fairy tales, or some combination of the three. This conflation is thanks to typical patterns or motifs found in superhero narratives that are consistent with myths, such as superhuman strength, a desire to protect the world, and a decision to choose good over evil (Brooker; Coogan; Fingeroth; Reynolds; Rosenberg). The categorization within myths is especially complicated since creators like Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster wanted Superman to be a legendary hero who did incredible things (Coogan, "Definition of a Genre," 117-119), from supernatural strength and flying capabilities to personal choices to "dedicate his strength to the benefit of mankind" (Reynolds 10). These heroic attributes and accomplishments found in the superhero narrative have roots in several mythologies, such as the Roman Hercules, the Greek Achilles, the Norse Siegfried, and the biblical Samson.

Questions about audience and association with myths and fairy tales pushed the development of comic stories to another level until eventually the prolific superhero comics were acknowledged as their own genre. Several creators purposefully "linked [their superheroes] to the traditions of heroes before them," writing in origin stories that drew on myths and legends (Fingeroth 114). Stan Lee, creator of Spider-Man and Thor, writes of an experience where a radio host called Marvel's comics "an entire contemporary mythos, a family of legends that

might be handed down to future generations" (qtd. in Coogan, "Definition of a Genre," 117). Lee himself refers to superheroes as "fairy tales for grown-ups" (117). Then, in 2006, Peter Coogan wrote his dissertation and described how the tropes of the superhero genre—where "Superhero origin stories tell of selfish boys made into selfless men,"—differ from those of traditional hero stories where "young men . . . learn to apply their strength to benefit their social group" (*The Secret Origin*, 24). Drawing on myths certainly helped ground the emerging superhero story in an already established genre until the superhero story became its own genre (Coogan 185). Along with these hero stories, the genre could also benefit from tapping into a novelistic maturity and offer another way to flesh out the superhero cycle.

Many scholars and critics have turned their attention to uncovering the appeal superheroes have and continue to maintain. Former Spider-Man editor Danny Fingeroth argues for the familiarity of superhero stories, where audiences can make meaningful connections with superheroes at different times (24, 33). Spider-Man, according to Fingeroth, is a hopeful icon for teenagers because Spider-Man's self-talk is "not the inexperienced hope of a child," nor is his self-talk the "desperate hope of the adult," but it is the "hope that only a teenager can have," a hope that "there will be someone—a mentor—who will understand what we're going through— and be able to tell us just that little something that will make our dreams come true" (149). Several scholars along Fingeroth's line of thinking claim that superheroes relate to the child in all of us. Psychologist Robin Rosenberg suggests superhero stories are valuable because they "allow us to recapture periods of our childhood" and "create a bridge between our childhood fantasies and our adult realism" (4). Superhero scholar Will Brooker explains that heroes like Spider-Man were created for the purpose of reflecting a "reader's [own] insecurities" about gaining acceptance with peers as a teenager, going through puberty, and growing up (11).

Brooker and Rosenberg see superheroes as emblems of hope for all audiences. Les Daniels, Marvel comic book creator, also writes, "While comics are sometimes dismissed as childish, they are—paradoxically—childlike in the best sense: they display uninhabited inventiveness and a sometimes startling capacity for candor. Comics are about what we are thinking, whether as children or adults" (14). Daniels sees comic characters as all-ages entertainment because they reflect both adult and childlike thinking.

However, the majority of the American population—meaning anyone past young adulthood—is completely overlooked in Brooker's, Fingeroth's, and Rosenberg's idealization of superheroes. Superhero characters really only reflect the insecurities of audiences who are currently undergoing the transition between adolescence and young adulthood. There are very few older, middle-aged or retired superheroes depicted juggling the demands of a family along with their daring rescues. It is possible that superhero films could continue to enjoy longer, lasting success if they include more than the previously targeted immature audience.

Some scholars, such as Darowski and Heer, are thinking more about the limitations of the targeted adolescent audience, recognizing the potential this genre has to more inclusively depict races and genders. However, they too are missing something important: age. Few superhero scholars, if any, are discussing physical age or definitions of maturity. It seems Hollywood and consumers are reluctant to associate "adult" content with anything other than pornography, immature language, and excessive violence—a reluctance that should be explored by scholars and critics alike. Live-action superhero films can target all-ages more efficiently by avoiding the static "mature" audience narratives and presenting relatable and realistic adulthood along with adolescence and childhood. One way to do this is to incorporate novelistic maturity into the genre, which means creating characters that develop in healthy, adult ways.

Immature, Adolescent Themes

The consistent lack of marriage and commitment in both the comic books and the live-action films reflects childish, adolescent concerns (Morrison 67-68). Popular live-action superheroes remain forever single, symbols of teenage-heartbreak. Almost all of the male heroes have girlfriends, and their storylines allude to a possible marriage—but most are never realized, for one reason or another. Superman "dies" in *Batman v Superman*, and Lois Lane receives a package with the long-awaited ring after the funeral. Iron Man upsets Pepper Potts and then assuages her by producing the ring he's "been carrying around since 2008" (*Spider-Man: Homecoming*). Even though both girlfriends receive a ring promising long-lasting commitment, there is no promise from film writers that the vows will be said and the commitment actually realized. In fact, the comic storylines predict that something will happen either to the hero or to the girlfriend so that marriage can't actually take place. Similar to the comic books, Captain America is frozen for 60 years and Peggy Carter marries another in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. Spider-Man accidentally kills his girlfriend Gwen Stacy in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*.

Adolescent audiences, in fact, seem to demand this adult plot circumvention. "[T]he most awful thing one could be in Superman's world," Morrison muses about comic books, "was not a monster or an evil genius, but, . . . old, fat, and bald" (70). The old, fat, and bald—a physically mature superhero—is also rarely seen on-screen. Instead, filmmakers cater to immature, adolescent audiences. Movies such as *Deadpool*, despite R-ratings, cater to purely adolescent themes and dreams. In the real sense of the term *mature*, *Deadpool* is the least novelistically mature film discussed in this study due to its violence, language, and sex.

Hollywood's Immature Characters

Extreme violence, language, and sex are all part of the Hollywood package of "mature" content, and it is especially potent in *Deadpool*. The type of violence found in *Deadpool* is labeled for "mature" audiences, suggesting that this violence reflects mature experiences. Yet how often do adults experience genetic mutation or witness decapitations in real life? Deadpool's running commentary, meant to be hilariously inappropriate and a witty parody of stereotypical superhero elements, is often praised for its mature themes (it received an 83% positive rating on Rotten Tomatoes' Tomatometer). The profanity causes critics to proclaim this anti-hero movie non-family-friendly (Rotten Tomatoes). However, these twisted observations actually only highlight his immature fantasies and rely on audiences who expect adolescent humor. Deadpool's unimaginative language includes handling Wolverine's balls, giving friend and foe alike the finger, and tossing the F-word around like candy. These asides can easily be categorized as immature humor that young teenagers—not adult professionals—participate in.

Even though *Deadpool* is chock-full of language and violence, it is the sex scenes that indicate the actual audience of this movie. Love is backwards for Deadpool, and his actions mirror an immature teen boy's misconceptions about sex and the treatment of women. Furthermore, the one-sided sex references focused on using women suggest that the movie specifically targets teen boys, not teen girls. For example, Deadpool accepts his girlfriend, Vanessa, as a sex worker, but his intentions for Vanessa are clearly based on his sex drive once he pays for her services. After a graphic sex montage ensues, Deadpool proclaims his love for Vanessa and desires engagement; love, for him, is based on extreme, self-gratifying sex, using a woman for her body instead of building on a mutual relationship. This concept of love and self-gratifying sex clearly reflects prepubescent attitudes and misconceptions—especially once

Deadpool chooses not to return to Vanessa because of his physical deformities. Eventually Deadpool does return to Vanessa, but not because he wants more than a sexual relationship with her. Vanessa is not an independent woman, but rather becomes a stereotypical damsel in distress who requires Deadpool to rescue her.

A strip club scene with several topless women, a scene showing Deadpool fighting naked flashing his genitals, and the several references made to oral sex and masturbation throughout the film also reflect adolescent misconstructions of adult humor. Though Hollywood may accept this banter imitating immature high school locker room jokes and for mature audiences, they clearly give a skewed view of mature adulthood that is especially harmful when the focus on female bodies gives viewers the message that it's okay to objectify women. With graphic violence, inappropriate commentary, and genitals on screen, *Deadpool* markets itself to male teenagers looking for raunchy content to fill their adolescent desires and sexual outlets, highlighting that an R-rating doesn't actually mean what Hollywood marks as "restricted" or "mature" content.

Traditionally, the real sense of the word *maturity* encapsulates more than just physical growth—maturity also includes developing emotional and intellectual growth. A mature character is one who has reached a "final or desired state" or "a condition of full development" ("Mature"). Mature characters demonstrate responsibility, accepting duty over personal gain or pleasure (Bacchilega and Rieder 33). Socially we differentiate adulthood/maturity from childhood/immaturity through evidence of responsible actions. By the end of the film, Deadpool has still not reached his full potential as a humanistic character (see Maslow's humanistic theories), nor has he shown evidence of taking responsible actions.

Although *Deadpool* may have played to teen fantasies of illicit sex, insipid language, and non-stop violence, other films have followed a similar course. The opening credits scene of

Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2 seems to be catering to a childish audience as Baby Groot dances around to an eighties song for several minutes. The film moves through a fight between Rocket and Star-Lord about the strength of their respective male genitalia, conversations between Rocket and Drax about the size of their fecal material, visual references to robot prostitutes and strip clubs supposedly featuring Yondu and his Scavengers down on their luck, and comments about Star-Lord's overt sexual desires for Gamora and Ayesha. This script mirrors the age-inappropriate language and sex found in *Deadpool*. For a film that was billed family-friendly, the plot unfolds with several more sexual references and immature language, once again focusing on the exploitation of women when Star-Lord's father Ego reveals that he impregnated thousands of women in his hopes to sire a child with his own powers. Most of the humor in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* draws on obscene references that are usually marked for parental guidance and adult, mature audiences, but are actually marketed towards a younger, immature audience. For movies to portray novelistically mature characters means the characters need to progress and demonstrate maturity, not just tell off-color jokes and have sex. Mature content would delineate actual adults with mature concerns.

<div align="center">The Superhero Narrative Cycle and Novelistic Maturity</div>

Superhero narratives traditionally form an easily identifiable and extremely predictable cycle akin to Campbell's monomyth or hero's journey. Umberto Eco, author of the famous review "The Myth of Superman," describes the pattern of the comic book superhero narrative that started with the first generally accepted superhero, Superman. This cycle begins with a superhero coming of age or gaining superpowers. A cataclysmic event occurs that requires action—Campbell terms this the call to adventure—and the hero must make a choice to use their superpowers in the story's climax. This action concludes in a resolution of the capitulating event.

Then some kind of reset occurs at some point in the superhero's series (which could be several comic book issues or films later) that puts the superhero back in place to start the cycle over again with the coming of age or acquiring superpowers (Eco 21). Here is Eco's narrative cycle repurposed for visual readability (see figure 1).
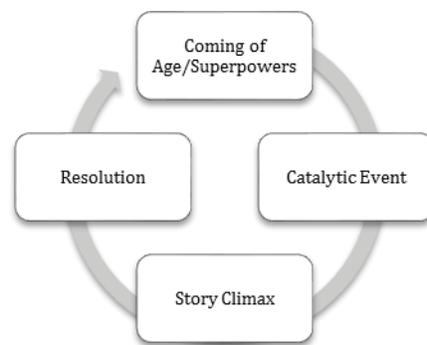
Figure 1. Superhero Narrative Cycle

Eco's superhero cycle is very similar to Bakhtin's description of adventure novels of ordeal, or Greek romances, where heroes experience events that don't change them (85-86). In a typical superhero plotline, the superhero experiences a coming of age—which is Bakhtin's "starting point of plot movement"—and resolves in the superhero succeeding with good over evil, also known as "the end point of plot movement" (Bakhtin 89). Superhero films focus on the space between the points of plot movement, a spaced filled with adventures that don't change the superhero or the events surrounding them. The superheroes are tested but come out of the testing with merely an affirmation of their super identity rather than a development of character (Bakhtin 106-107). For example, Kryptonite was added to the comic books to give Superman a weakness: Superman never overcomes this potential fatality because the Kryptonite exists only to prove Superman's strength and character (Morrison 72-73). The chronology in superhero movies happens when "the world and the individual are finished items, absolutely immobile," and the superhero's actions cause nothing: "no potential for evolution, for growth, for change. . . . nothing in its world is destroyed, remade, changed or created anew" (Bakhtin 110). These static characters are termed *Greek romance heroes*. Like some myth and Greek romance heroes, superheroes neither age nor progress, and their adventure-time lacks all references to biological or historical time.

Hollywood causes core superhero characters to suffer from immature, arrested development rather than capitalizing on the superhero's potential to develop and transform their identity. Bakhtin notes that heroes who experience a "mix of adventure-time with everyday time" are found in adventure novels of everyday life (111). Heroes like these who portray character developments found in novels are "novelistic characters" according to Eco (15), and they experience the opposite of what Greek romance heroes experience (Bakhtin 90). These novelistic heroes—such as Harry Potter, Percy Jackson, or Luke Skywalker—undergo character transformations, progress through the story and develop actual maturity, using the tests and trials to change and introduce new stability and growth into their lives. The wisdom and insight characters obtain in the story is then passed on to the reader or viewer. The term *novelistic heroes* denotes these developing, changing protagonists, and *novelistic maturity* describes the developmental process that transforms and adds to a character's identity.

The difference between Greek romance heroes' character development and Campbell's hero's journey marks the difference between a superhero and a relatable novelistic character. Consumers of superhero stories hold superheroes to novelistic hero standards, wanting to identify both with the superhero's situation or adventures and with the superhero's character development (Eco 15). Eco believes characters in novels are supposed to be relatable, "a man like anyone else," adding, "and what could befall him is as unforeseeable as what may happen to us" (15). Eco's ideas that novelistic heroes reflect and refract the real life of consumers complement those of Clifford Siskin. According to Siskin, audiences usually hold novelistic characters to realistic standards (176-178, 193), but superheroes are often not relatable because they lack novelistic maturity. Superheroes in films are paradoxically caught between creators that highlight the fact that superheroes are "immersed in everyday life, in the present" and

creators that "[a]esthetically and commercially deprive[] [superhero characters] of the possibility of narrative development" (Eco 16). Superhero stories often allude to character development similar to the novelistic hero; however, more often than not in films like *Deadpool*, cinematic superheroes experience superficial development instead of progressing into a realistic adulthood. When live-action superhero movies reboot rather than cultivate this potential narrative aspect of novelistic maturity, they remain stagnant and miss out on opportunities to connect with audiences.

This stagnant narrative pattern containing purely Greek romance heroes is what separates the superhero genre from myth and legend ancestry. Scholars and critics want to grandfather superheroes under myths, legends, and fairy tales based on the similarities between the superhero narrative cycle and the hero's journey, especially since Superman could easily be a hero's tale (Peretti 105). However, folktale protagonists along the hero's journey usually have a detailed origin story, followed by a series of events that propel them to accept their supernatural gifts or powers. The comic books invented Superman's origin story after his creation and popularity, and readers never received an established set of events that led Clark Kent to accept his alien superpowers. In the hero's journey, the hero reaches an end to the journey, usually in a self-sacrificing, glorious event that leads to resurrection in a new form, whereas the superhero's story peters off earlier, barely resolving the catalytic event, and never reaching the journey's end or rebirthing the hero in a new form. Superhero narratives merely imply a progressive sense of time without actually fulfilling it. Superheroes are like Bakhtin's Greek romance heroes, "completely *passive*, completely *unchanging*" (105).

Unlike Eco's novelistic characters or Bakhtin's adventure novel heroes of everyday life, superheroes are not reborn, but rebooted back into a static narrative beginning at the origin story.

Superhero films restart the superhero (though as a different actor) back to the same origin story without any of the knowledge or experience gained in previous adventures: Spider-Man goes back to being a teenager, living with Aunt May and awaiting the spider bite; Batman re-lives his parents' murder, vowing to stop all crime in Gotham City; Superman continually tries as an awkward Clark Kent to date Lois Lane. Any novelistic maturing that may have occurred in previous films disappears with the next generation of film installments. Superheroes could become novelistic characters if writers and audiences allow superheroes to develop into realistic, mature adults.

Hollywood Audiences

Even though Hollywood presents *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* as an adult superhero story, it is yet another film that lacks novelistic maturity. Comic critic Jeet Heer asserts that the superhero genre does best with the child audience. He says, "There is something inherent to the genre that works against aiming for an adult-only audience, as *Batman v Superman* does. The very idea of constructing a story where Batman fights Superman only works on the level of a child's logic" (17). Heer insists that "superheroes work best as all-ages entertainment because the roots of the genre are in children's daydreams" (17). *Batman v Superman* follows a childish line of thinking right to the climax where Batman discovers he and Superman both have moms with the same name: Martha.

The initial target audience of children benefitted from superhero stories reflecting childish concerns (Heer 15). In older comic books, Superman went to extremes to avoid marrying Lois Lane, like using his heat vision to seal Lois inside her car, effectively keeping her from getting to the courthouse to marry him (Morrison 74). Superman treated Lois Lane the same way a ten-year-old boy would, because, like a child, Superman feared commitment, and his

comic book version needed to relate to the children that read him (Morrison 67-68). The Flash and Spider-Man shouldered great responsibilities for children who felt they couldn't take adult action during war times (Morrison 87-89). But superhero narratives have evolved, and Heer laments the manifold storyline possibilities that "[the superhero] genre lost when it stopped targeting kids" (15). Darowski also notes the "loss of the assumed innocence" in superhero comics since the 1980s, signifying the shift from the target comic book audience of children to an adult audience of "mature readers" (11). This evolution from child to "mature" carried over as superhero stories changed mediums from text to screen where many producers try to cater to a questionably "mature" audience—an audience that seems stubbornly determined to remain stagnant inside the superhero fantasy world.

"Maturity," by Hollywood's definition, does not actually display healthy adult themes. Instead, it has an inverse meaning that includes pornography, language, and violence. Recent live-action film adaptations are less family-friendly and increasingly labeled for adult content (Heer 16). Both Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen* are superhero stories "geared toward an exclusively adult audience" (Heer 14). Heer questions Miller's and Moore's "idea of maturity" because it "seemed mainly to mean including explicit scenes of torture and rape" (16). Even though Miller's and Moore's deconstructed, "mature" superheroes were commercially successful, Heer argues that "by following [Miller and Moore's] lead" in marketing superheroes narratives with adult content, "the genre took a fundamentally wrong turn and has lost touch with its basic tendencies" of a child audience (16). Heer suggests that "A good all-ages superhero story works to satisfy the core desire that these emblematic heroes embody, while also providing a narrative hook that allows adult readers to enter the

innocence of a fantasy world" (17), offering novelistic maturity as a solution to bring healthy adult themes into a genre based on childhood fantasy.

Just like the "mature" category, Hollywood doesn't actually mean "general audience" with a G or PG rating either; socially, the "all-ages" audience label has become a reference to "children-only." According to the Motion Picture Association of America's (MPAA) handbook on film ratings, "Ratings do not exist to cast judgment on a film or dictate the viewing habits of adults. Grown-ups have no use for such an approach in a free society," stressing the purpose of ratings is to help adults responsibly filter content for their children (5). The G-rating guidelines underscore that this rating does not "signify a 'children's' motion picture" (MPAA 7); the NC-17-rating guidelines, on the other hand, reinforce the notion that G is for children because NC-17 is "patently too adult for [] children" (MPAA 9).

These are age-based movie ratings perpetuated by Hollywood, and the G-rating for "all-ages" entertainment really just means children—not actually *all ages*, from three to ninety-three. The only requirement to be a rater for MPAA is parenthood, specifically parents of children between five and seventeen (MPAA 11); however, each of these board members is a full-time employee of the MPAA, suggesting that employees live around the metropolises of Los Angeles, California, and Washington, D.C. where the MPAA's main offices are based. Despite wanting to be a transparent system free of censorship and bias, the MPAA does not release who is on the ratings board for each film, including necessary information about gender ratios on the boards, or the educational and occupational backgrounds, economic status, age ranges, or geographic location of board members. It is entirely possible that the ratings boards are perpetuating socio-cultural beliefs that immature content is for adults—and that "adult" content is only content that includes an adult understanding of crass language and acts rather than incorporating adult

concerns, experiences, and issues. A Harvard study also found that ratings given to movies by MPAA between 1992-2003 accept more language, sex, and violent material than before, evidencing a change in standards that the study terms "ratings creep" (Thompson). These ratings could benefit from considering novelistic maturity.

For obvious reasons, Hollywood tries to capitalize on their targeted audiences. "Many filmmakers," the ratings guide states, "strive to make films of a certain rating" (MPAA 12), demonstrating that directors try to capture a specific audience encapsulated in a specific rating. In making superhero films, Hollywood corporations learned to convert superhero stories from "a relatively small community of active comic book readers to a mass audience" (Gardner 2013). Hollywood, Gardner proclaims, "continue[s] to trumpet box office records as if they were meaningful data regarding audience preferences or behaviors" (198), and "productions are still targeting the same young adult audience with safe, modular products designed primarily to optimize the possibilities for merchandising, franchising, and synergizing across the media company's television networks, publishing houses, and theme parks" (201). Hollywood is only targeting the adolescent audience because it is safe—and lucrative for companies. These superhero producers "are determined to shape storytelling environments to serve their horizontal monopolies" (Gardner 201) by rebooting superhero stories to appeal to each new generation of teenagers.

Because Hollywood wants to make money, when they reboot *Deadpool*, it's going to be the same teen story again. There won't be any novelistic character development, just the F-bombs, potty humor, and adolescent drama. This repeated lack of novelistic maturity is already evident in other superhero series like the *Iron Man* trilogy. *Iron Man 3* depicts the same immature Iron Man, living the dreams of every teenage boy, surrounded by money, women,

expensive cars, and cool gadgets, merely going through the motions of adventures only slightly different from the previous movies.

Adult Superheroes

In *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, however, we start to see some superheroes behaving like adults rather than teenagers in sexualized bodies. Though there are several in-jokes about Captain America using bad language that he isn't accustomed to using in previous Marvel films, a tense scene finds Hawkeye calling the younger Wanda Maximoff to adult action: "I can't do my job and babysit. Doesn't matter what you did, or what you were. If you go out there, you fight, and you fight to kill. Stay in here, you're good, I'll send your brother to come find you. But if you step out that door, you are an Avenger" (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*). Another particularly poignant moment finds Hulk admitting to Black Widow that his mutation affects his reproduction abilities, and Black Widow tells the dark story of her sterilization during the final phase of her KGB training. The Black Widow and the Hulk share a moment of adult fear: the fear that they can't have kids. The box office success of this film suggests that actual adult themes can do just as well as adolescent ones in theaters (compare *Avengers: Age of Ultron*'s $1.405 billion to *Deadpool's* $783.1 million).

The *Fantastic Four* films almost realized the antithesis of adolescent wishes. The Fantastic Four was the first superhero family, and they were hugely popular with audiences while in comic book form because they began the tradition of "hero[es] who tussled not only with monsters and mad scientists but also with relatable personal issues" (Morrison 93). Unfortunately the live-action films did not quite follow the successful formula that the comic books laid out. *Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer* continues the love story from *Fantastic Four* between Storm/Invisible Woman and Richards/Mr. Fantastic, opening with the planned

marriage so that Storm can become Mrs. Fantastic. Predictably, the villainous Silver Surfer crashes the wedding ceremony. Richards and Storm have several discussions about their concerns for raising a family as superhero parents, and at one point Richards agrees to give up his powers for the sake of the family. After fighting the climactic battle, Richards decides he doesn't need to be "normal" to have a family, and he and Storm rush through a quick wedding. Despite two wedding ceremonies in the same film, *Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer* grossed $50 million less than the first film, so the planned third film was put on hold (Adler). A few years later, Twentieth Century Fox rebooted the foursome, starting the team over again as first children, then teenagers, and finally young adults becoming superheroes all over again (Delbyck). This film also enjoyed only marginal success, grossing only $167 million worldwide. Prior to releasing this film, Fox had announced a sequel, but after the flop Fox withdrew the sequel *Fantastic Four 2* from its 2017 release date (Delbyck). Even though Stan Lee created the Fantastic Four as characters he "could personally relate to" (qtd. in Fingeroth 97), and that the family team worked well in the comics, the films represented soap operas and didn't fare well.

The real problem is that these stories don't go anywhere. Like the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, Batman, Superman, and others have all been reincarnated multiple times throughout their cinematic history. But every time superheroes are rebooted they come back as insecure adolescents. Superhero film directors aren't re-creating anything: they're simply re-cycling old material.

Current cinematic superhero stories are avoiding the depth and change of novelistic maturity altogether in their narratives, focusing on supporting the superhero's emblematic status only by adding more details to a story that has already been told (Eco 19, 21). It seems characters are rebooted when directors and marketing teams run out of ideas and don't know what to do

with the hero anymore. Perhaps it is not a lack of creativity on the creators' part, but a subconscious, self-imposed limitation that pushes creators to send superheroes back to their standardized origin story script. Perhaps creators think they have to stick to stereotypical storylines, rebooting the main characters back to square one in order to keep the formulaic nature of superhero stories. Whatever the reasons, the standardized superhero narratives are stagnating audiences (Chitwood, "Steven Spielberg"). Sticking to the superhero cycle does not create a static experience for audiences, but always coloring the cycle in the same old way with the same origin stories and ending with no character development does. Mixing different storylines into the superhero cycle doesn't destroy the genre or the genre's familiarity: it just fulfills the formula's requirements in different ways, expanding the range and scope of superhero narratives to be more inclusive.

Rebooting the characters back to the same origin is redundant; and it doesn't allow for meaningful audience connections. Eco suggests that audiences return to superhero films with inorganic, repetitive plotlines because even though they feel they know how the presumed "complete" story of the superhero will turn out, they desire to see it unfold in both familiar and unconventional ways (20), valuing familiarity without repetition. Repetitive film narratives have the potential to alienate adult audiences if not transformed and played with in some way. Expanding storylines with novelistic maturity will not alter the superhero's status as a genre, but perhaps the enhancement might produce more stories that connect with grown-up adult audiences. In order for live-action superhero movies to retain appeal for adults, there are several directions the storylines and characters could go.

Maturing Characters and Themes

Effective storylines, instead of rebooting characters, repeat the previous elements in a new way that connects to contemporary audiences. Stories, Walter Benjamin says, are unlike factual information in that stories retain their power beyond the moment of telling, releasing that power on their listeners at key moments (90). Superhero stories can claim more audiences by embedding themselves into the audiences' experiences, grounding the stories in real life scenarios that audiences can relate to and then pass on to others. For audiences to pass superhero stories on, the superhero narrative should not just be *reproduced* with realistic, contemporary costuming, but should be *retold* with realistic contemporary concerns.

The aging superhero in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* attempted to show an aspect of novelistic maturity for original Batman fans also growing older. Although an animated, direct-to-video film, this movie portrays the concerns and challenges facing a 55-year-old Batman, who comes out of retirement to save Gotham City yet again. The older Batman and his adventures are based on the 1950s comics where DC tried to simultaneously present both a middle-aged Batman and a young Batman (Reynolds 44-45). This idea of older superheroes—cast as older characters, not just older actors like Robert Downey Jr. cast into younger roles—may work better in live-action films than it did in this animated film because of the wider, truly all-ages audience viewing live-action superhero movies. *Hancock*, even though it depicted an older superhero dealing with alcoholism, amnesia, and lost love, didn't meet this standard as a live-action movie because it is simply a parody of stereotypical superhero movies.

Though an animated film parodying a superhero's adult life with adult responsibilities, *The Incredibles* was successful due, at least in part, to its realistic portrayal of family life. This film speculated on a superhero's challenges with marriage, retirement, children with

superpowers, and children possibly without. The film took time to conjecture daily life with the added complexity of superpowers and supervillains. The box office success of *The Incredibles* demonstrates that audiences appreciate a certain amount of complexity added to a familiar story—in fact, audiences seem to appreciate complexity *more* than simplicity and repetition, even in animation. Superheroes reboot rather than develop this potential narrative aspect of novelistic maturity, missing out on opportunities to further connect with adult audiences. Consumers crave superhero narratives that both relate to their everyday experiences and are excitingly different from daily life. More often than not, though, the realistic elements of the superhero narrative are anything but "normal and everyday," whether for adults or for children.

Superheroes with Families

An R-rated counterpoint to *Deadpool*'s lack of novelistic maturity is *Logan.* Like Batman and Hancock, Wolverine is a superhero experiencing the struggles of age, manifesting itself in the fact that his body cannot heal as quickly as it once did, nor can his claws retract completely anymore. The gory bloodbaths are similar to those found in *Deadpool.* Unlike Deadpool, though, Wolverine demonstrates adult responsibility as he cares for the aged Professor X and his destructive, paralyzing seizures. Wolverine finds out he's a father—sort of, because his "daughter" Laura is actually a genetic mutation of his DNA—and he does step up to get Laura to safety in Canada. Wolverine sees the hero's story to the end of the cycle like a true novelistic character, dying in the end in order to save Laura's life. But, again, the events in *Logan* are certainly not normal for either adults or children, nor does Wolverine experience a realistic relationship with his daughter.

Ant-Man gives audiences two father-daughter relationships: Dr. Pym and Hope, and Lang/Ant-Man and Cassie. Neither is quite a healthy relationship; Dr. Pym pushed Hope away

after her mother's death, and Lang/Ant-Man spent years in prison away from Cassie. The movie shows both relationships beginning a healing process when Dr. Pym going to Hope for help against Cross/Yellowjacket, finally telling Hope how her mother died trying to save the world from a bomb. Lang/Ant-Man tries to maintain his relationship with Cassie by promising his ex-wife that he will get a job, find an apartment, and live an honest life so that he can get visitation rights. However, Dr. Pym doesn't appear to change much because mentoring Scott Lang to be the new Ant-Man echoes Pym's mentorship of Darren Cross/Yellowjacket. Lang/Ant-Man initially tries to meet his ex-wife's reasonable demands, calculating the months it will take him to see Cassie. In the end, though, the job Lang takes on is another heist, similar to the one that landed him in prison. As a Greek romance hero, Lang/Ant-Man doesn't actually change; he's still a burglar, even though Dr. Pym assures him that by becoming Ant-Man and breaking into Pym Technologies, Lang will have a second chance "to earn that look in [his] daughter's eyes, to become the hero that she already thinks [he is]" (*Ant-Man*). Lang's ex-wife and her fiancé accept Lang as Ant-Man when he saves Cassie, implying that it's okay to be a superhero dad as long as he puts his kids first.

This film plays with the classic argument that a family—specifically children—are a liability for superheroes. Cross/Yellowjacket uses both daughters to get to their fathers, pretending to confide in Hope as his accomplice, and holding Cassie hostage until Lang/Ant-Man comes to battle him. Instead of avoiding the potentially sticky idea of tying a superhero down to a family, *Ant-Man* engages with it. But it is still far from depicting adult relationships in matured, healthy ways. It's possible that Lang/Ant-Man and Hope/The Wasp will have a relationship in the upcoming film (at the time of writing) *Ant-Man and the Wasp*.

Hawkeye's storyline is another excellent example of where superhero films could go with novelistic maturity. Midway through *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Hawkeye, a lesser-known superhero without his own feature films, brings the Avengers team to his safe house, where he abruptly appears to have a wife and three children. Like the audience, the other Avengers—Captain America, Hulk, Iron Man, and Thor—are visually and audibly astounded that Hawkeye has an unforeseen family life. Director Joss Whedon is proud of surprising audiences with this scene titled "Hawkeye's secret" (Peters). Whedon said, "I love the idea that one Avenger had a secret, and that it was that he was a normal guy who is genuinely connected to the world in a way no other Avenger is" (Peters). Even though Hawkeye's instant family was a surprise to film audiences who are most likely not familiar with the comic books, the family aspect was well received. The Barton family sparked much online discussion, even though they appear very minimally in the movie (Chitwood, "Jeremy Renner"; "Laura Barton").

On the surface, Hawkeye is an example of scriptwriters attempting to break from the frozen cycle of Greek romance heroes. He seems to have a mobile, progressive narrative that develops his super character into a father, albeit over night. However, Hawkeye's fatherhood is not surprising given that Hawkeye is not the iconic, elite superhero in the comic canon that Superman is—or even that Captain America and the other Avengers are. Hawkeye is a second-tier, side-character superhero in both the comic books and in Marvel's superhero films, with a smaller following and little-to-no recognition in the film's marketing products. After the film was produced, the actor for Hawkeye, Jeremy Renner, asked for a larger role in future *Avengers* movies. Renner said he, "wasn't exactly pleased with the fact that his character was being turned into a mindless drone 5 minutes into his screentime, therefore removing any and all character

evolution from his personal arc in the film" (Chitwood, "Jeremy Renner"). So Whedon offered

Renner a familial backstory as compensation for Hawkeye's lack of character evolution (Peters).

It was easy for Whedon to appease Renner and develop Hawkeye's character by adding a

family. Whedon could add a family to Hawkeye's Tier II narrative because the addition wouldn't

have unnecessarily complicated the story arc, whereas the Tier I superheroes like Iron Man,

Hulk, and Captain America are interconnected and frozen to their feature films' narratives. A

family for them would thwart the films' ensuing products and crowd up movie posters. It is

possible that business is affected by developmental narratives, so Tier I superheroes like Iron

Man, Captain America, Hulk, and Thor in *Avengers* have not become fathers. On the other hand,

Tier II superheroes like Hawkeye appear with a freer narrative structure because they are not

inherently tied to the marketing plans and merchandise . . . for now.

Because film audiences never received a version of the cataclysmic event that sparked

Hawkeye's fighting prowess as a worker for S.H.I.E.L.D., producers seem to feel pressured to

depict some kind of cataclysmic event onscreen for Hawkeye. Currently producers are hinting

that Hawkeye's narrative will lead to another cataclysmic event where Hawkeye will tragically

lose the entire Barton family to either a traitor or a supervillain ("Laura Barton"; Wigler). From a

storytelling perspective, heroes need trials to test them, and the deaths of Hawkeye's family will

certainly test the mettle of Hawkeye's character. However, killing off Hawkeye's family to

propel Hawkeye to further superpowers falsely assumes that the superhero needs rebooting to an

origin story like a Greek romance character.

Whedon intended for Hawkeye to be a "normal guy," one superhero audiences could

relate to (Peters), and his rendering of Hawkeye is based on a common Marvel definition of

superheroes. According to the *Marvel Universe Handbook*, a superhero is a "'regular' guy acting

at 'peak human' ability" (qtd. in Fingeroth 33). Whedon's Hawkeye is the only live-action superhero who actually appears as a regular, realistic guy who got past his orphaned beginnings and moved on with his life, growing up and creating a family of his own. In another film Iron Man meta-cognitively comments on Hawkeye's status as an adult: "You're all grown up, you got a wife and kids. I don't understand, why didn't you think about them before you chose the wrong side?" (*Captain America: Civil War*). With this narrative maturity, Whedon makes a statement that fatherhood connects superheroes to the real world, and a superhero father is a relatable, realistic person.

Novelistic—realistic—maturity makes superheroes relatable. In the struggle between appearing to have novelistic maturity and maintaining emblematic status (Eco 15), superheroes have become more iconic and less novelistic—resembling what Reynolds terms "ideological myths" (77) where superhero narratives are supposed to represent the normal, everyday (77). "The normal is valuable," Reynolds goes on to say, " and is constantly under attack, which means that almost by definition that superhero is battling on behalf of the status quo. . . . in order to be functioning superheroes they will need to conform to the ideological rules of the game. The superhero has a mission to preserve society, not to re-invent it" (77). Since superheroes preserve society, they should undergo character developments common within society. There is no reason for superheroes to not be more novelistic because they need to be relatable in order to uphold the ideological rules of iconography. Superhero narratives are not "escapist" when they are "intensely grounded in the normal and everyday" storytelling strategies that make supervillains "seem so much more threatening against a background of recognizable reality" (Reynolds 74). If superheroes can be iconic and realistic through novelistic maturity, then they will connect to real lives.

Healthy Adult Maturity

It seems like a ripe time for aging creators to include their maturing experiences in their work rather than just reflecting on youthful times gone by. Fingeroth calls Spider-Man and the X-Men "myth[s] of the teen hero," myths that are "more compelling" than Superman or Batman because teens can relate better to Spider-Man and the X-Men because their stories are "about the process of *becoming* that adult" (153), rather than projecting themselves into adulthood. However, it is time for superheroes to travel further along the superhero narrative cycle and actually become adults, have families, age, and eventually pass the torch of the iconic hero on to someone else.

This novelistic maturity is almost realized in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* when Iron Man becomes Peter Parker's mentor. During the resolution of the film (after Spider-Man has chosen to use his powers for good in the climax), Iron Man accepts that Spider-Man has proven himself and offers Spider-Man full fellowship into the Avengers. Spider-Man, though, chooses *not* to embrace the Avengers as his new life. Instead, he chooses to go back to his teen life even though he was offered every teenager's dream of acceptance, mentors, and fame. Spider-Man takes steps towards choosing to live a more mature, adult life. This slight narrative change reflects Fingeroth's thoughts that "There is a reason that adolescents are socialized to become adults. As it turns out for most people, even those *without* great power, there must also come great responsibility. To stay adolescent forever is both a dream and a nightmare vision" (151). Just as teenagers can't forever live fantasy lives, adults shouldn't either.

Live-action creators can satisfy audience desires to connect with superhero characters by presenting a fully developed, matured story. In a discussion of fairy tale films, Bacchilega and Rieder note that "The choice to contrast fairy tale and realist elements in telling a story or

making a film, then, necessarily involves taking a position about make believe versus reality in relation to pleasure versus duty and childhood versus maturity" (33). Superhero films are caught in the same paradox as fairy tale films, needing to choose between portraying realism over imaginary, or appealing to maturity over childhood. Only then can the superhero's image symbolize the complete story of their development at the end of the superhero narrative cycle, fashioning the superhero into an icon that represents a fully developed story (Eco 15).

<div align="center">Avoiding Superhero Stereotypes</div>

Fully developed stories need to be inclusive. Despite the comic industry's commercially successful live-action adaptations, some superhero scholarship recognizes the limitations and exclusiveness of superhero stories. The superhero genre is problematic, and Darowski warns, "to ignore some of the problematic aspects of the genre would prevent necessary correctives from taking place" (15). As the genre changes to better include minorities and sexual orientation—along with aging figures and parent-child relationships—to fit a changing society's needs, Darowski hopes that that "the positive aspects of the genre will be maximized and the problematic history of stereotyped minorities and objectified females will be minimized" (15).

Stereotypes concerning race and gender perpetually mark a weak, ignoble society, and some of these stereotypes are constantly reaffirmed in superhero movies (the costuming controversy surrounding the Amazon warriors in *Justice League* is an excellent example of this). Community and family bonds cannot be strengthened when no examples of healthy relationships—only dysfunctional ones—exist in superhero films. Interestingly, in all superhero films the superheroes themselves aren't allowed to have their own heroes/people they can look up to. All have either no relationship with their biological father (Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, Captain America), or have a caustic relationship that is laced with guilt and grievances

(Iron Man, Hulk). This reflects the 23% of American children growing up in fatherless homes (U.S. Census Bureau), noticeably representing (and possibly reinforcing?) a contemporary issue.

Amplifying Storylines

It is time for the superhero genre to shift to inclusive narratives with novelistically mature superheroes, and live-action films are a viable medium for this transition and amplification of the comic canon to take place. In order to avoid stagnation, superhero producers should either reconsider the target audience of childishly imaginative stories, or direct their efforts to portraying mature content beyond sex and violence to reflect realistic adult lives through superhero characters.

So far in the current live-action comic film wave, Hawkeye's backstory in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* is the only example of an intact, traditional family, where a girlfriend became a wife and the superhero has children of his own. Hollywood seems to think family life equals retirement from superhero responsibilities (Richards/Mr. Fantastic provides a meta-commentary on this in *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer*). This begs the questions: Why can't a superhero be challenged by a moral dilemma and/or physical trial within his or her own created family? Does the superhero narrative cycle always demand that the superhero's challenge is losing a loved one, or is that the social expectation creators have built around the cycle? Cannot the superhero triumph over evil—whether within himself or without from villains—and learn something as a father and grandfather? Like its myth and legend ancestry, the superhero genre has more to explore in the middle part of the narrative cycle, more adventures to add to the canon without resetting. Superman doesn't have to retire if he has a kid; if Peter Parker dies, it doesn't mean Spider-Man dies as long as he has passed on his powers to a descendant.

Which brings us to the possibilities that Miles Morales' upcoming *Spider-Man* film alludes to. The trailers for this animated movie (at the time of writing) show a black Spider-Man—*and* indicate that there is more than one teenaged Spider-Man roaming around. This suggests another direction superhero storylines could take to become more inclusive by giving each Spider-Man a different origin story.

The success of superhero stories is often attributed to creators who make relatable superhero characters, enabling consumers to imagine better versions of themselves and the world. Audiences want characters they can relate to, and adult consumers seek realistically matured, healthy characters. Previous comic book successes dictate that amplifying storylines to appeal to more age groups will preserve box office success. Even if adding more inclusive storylines, such as older heroes for the heroes and parental responsibilities for the supers, only adds a layer of complexity to the superhero narrative cycle and doesn't equate to box office gold, it doesn't mean there isn't room for mature heroes dealing with life issues beyond dead parents and revenge. If it is true that "The most powerful popular culture material has the ability to introduce and make understandable the issues of the day for its consumers" (Fingeroth 94), then pop culture material—both film and comic book—should address the concerning issues of adulthood, not just adolescence. "Ideally," Fingeroth writes, "a balanced work of fiction lays out different options for societal stability or change, and leaves those who experience the work with the ability to choose among the options or even to invent their own" (94). Live-action superhero movies can become balanced works of fiction by presenting different options for social stability found in novelistic maturity and realistic storylines like adulthood, parenthood, and retirement.

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