

**“PRINCE v MICHAEL JACKSON”, “BATMAN v SUPERMAN”,  
“CAPTAIN AMERICA v IRON MAN”, “MARVEL v D.C.”,  
... and why the D.C. films are on the right track.  
(“WHEW!”)**

by CEJ

Remember Chris Rock’s 2004 stand up special, NEVER SCARED, when he says, “*Remember back in the day when we all would argue who’s better, Michael Jackson or Prince?*”. Then, after citing more than a few of Jackson’s at the time personal and legal conflicts and problems, he declared, “...*Well, Prince won!*”. In a few years we think people may be saying the same about the D.C. comic-book-to-film adaptations over the Marvel ones.

“*ARE YOU OUTTA YOUR EFFIN’ MIND!*”, you say, “*Didn’t you see MAN OF STEEL or BATMAN V. SUPERMAN?*”. Yeah, we saw ‘em. That’s why we’re saying it. Oh, and for the record “back in the day” we actually dug both Prince *and* Michael Jackson. That is possible, ... and kind of the point too. It doesn’t always have to be “*Sushi or Cerviche*”, “*Stromboli or Calzone*”, “*Conservative or Liberal*”. To borrow another Rock-ism (I mean, the guy’s both hilarious and common sense at the same time, is he not?) “*No normal, decent person is one thing, OK? I’ve got some shit I’m conservative about, I’ve got some shit I’m liberal about. When it comes to crime, I’m conservative. With prostitution, I’m liberal*”. Anyway, ...

Welcome to the latest installment of our THE INHERENT POWER OF GENRE series, wherein we sprint through the cinematic history of the horror, science fiction and fantasy genres; taking note (and giving them the props they so often fail to receive) in relation to how they, more times than not, can be a more accurate barometer of the angst, mores and general leanings of contemporary society than those films considered more “serious” and “important”. A prime example we’ve used in earlier installments – how say back in 1968 the original PLANET OF THE APES was able, in a far more subversive manner, to make comment on many of the same topics which caused films such as THE DEFIANT ONES and GUESS WHO’S COMING TO DINNER to be protested and banned in many cities.

Other examples? Look at how Stephen King / Brian DePalma’s CARRIE (1976) was a chillingly accurate depiction (and warning) of the pressure cooker of abuse, repression and bullying / hazing leading to a mass act of school violence decades before Columbine. And most recently – do a double take on BATMAN V. SUPERMAN and CAPTAIN AMERICA: CIVIL WAR. And notice how both films deal with terroristic acts (both foreign / alien and domestic) which leads to normally decent people turning upon one another in an ideological conflict of how to best address the problem. Now, if *that* doesn’t sound like the 2016 American Presidential primaries (and the citizenry wading through them), then you just haven’t been paying attention. Take a look at the two trailers embedded below to see what we mean. Chillingly “spot on”, aren’t they? At any rate ...

Some might call this installment of THE INHERENT POWER OF GENRE “the Minority Report” as we may be taking a position most consider that of a loony. But we learned long ago to stick to our guns

because, ... well, because sometimes it just takes the rest of the world a little time to catch up is all. Is that arrogance or hubris? Nah. It's just age combined with (lets call it) long-term cinematic memory.

You've seen **BLADE RUNNER** and John Carpenter's **THE THING**, right? They actually opened on the same day – June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1982. And both at the time were savaged by critics, and ignored by the general public to such an unholy degree that they crashed and burned miserably at the box office, and within two weeks were doubled-billed together in many theaters. We caught 'em both at such a double feature one Saturday afternoon in Delran, New Jersey.

To this day one of the most memorable “freak out” movie-going experiences of our entire lives (the energetic audience helped big time), we left the theater both dumbfounded as to how and why both films were so ripped apart by the media of the day, and determined to talk up both to friends, family and like-minded film fans in the hope that neither of these two amazing movies would disappear from memory all together. Imagine our delighted amazement when within a year we started hearing Art Institute classmates going back and forth about how they'd “discovered” this awesome film called “**BLADE RUNNER**” the night before at a local art house revival theater.

Derided in 1982 by many as “*style over substance*”, “*needlessly dark, violent and nihilistic*” and more, we saw **BLADE RUNNER** and **THE THING** as not only brilliantly made from a technical standpoint, but wonderful examples of the irony of “Kafka-esque optimism”. To a certain degree Terry Gilliam's **BRAZIL** (another brilliant film which bombed at the time of its release) falls into this category as well.

“Kafka-esque optimism” (our own term there, by the way – it's not copyrighted, so you can go ahead and use it if you want) is where the environment in which the story takes place is so bleak and arguably without hope, that the faint beams of humanity which *do* exists shine that much more brightly. Not to jump off track during what is essentially an introduction, but **BLADE RUNNER** isn't still fascinating today simply because of the brilliance of its art direction, but rather more because the story is about characters desirous of, and covetously clinging to, the concepts of humanity, emotion and love at a time when in their world these commodities are rapidly becoming extinct.

I recall and love how one article (I don't remember which, it's definitely buried in that pile of 30 yr. old magazines up there – probably **STARLOG**) pointed out that as the created Replicants of **BLADE RUNNER** continue to gain human emotion, the human Blade Runners themselves – those charged with hunting down and exterminating the Replicants, are rapidly losing theirs. That's powerful thematic stuff.

Believe it or not the same “sense of humanity” flows through nearly every blood spattered, shape-shifting frame of **THE THING**. Though, not unlike with the recent **BATMAN V. SUPERMAN**, many are distracted by other things (no pun intended) to notice. John Carpenter at the time essentially said his movie was about “*the beginning of end of the world*”. But, after the most intense examination in personal paranoia since the McCarthy era, **THE THING** ends with the last two survivors – Kurt Russell's “MacCready” and Keith Davids' “Childs”, deciding to trust one another, even if it means one of them may be a “thing”. They do the unthinkable (or is it “unTHINGable”? *heh! heh!*, cue the Crypt Keeper's laugh!) – lowering their weapons and drinking from the same bottle of scotch, full well knowing that even the tiniest of DNA exchanges (in this case the “backwash” of saliva in the bottle) could be fatal. So (to us at least), **THE THING** ends on something of a “hopeful” note wherein if the human race will indeed *physically* become extinct, ... it's spiritual humanity never will. Anyway, ...

Today both **BLADE RUNNER** and **THE THING** are considered cinematic classics, and examples of genre film making so influential as to continue to be emulated today both stylistically and thematically. But it isn't difficult to see, in the context of the world into which they were released, why they initially proved unpopular that filmic summer of 1982. Notwithstanding a few darker films which *did* prove moderately successful that season (**THE ROAD WARRIOR**, **CONAN THE BARBARIAN** and **AN OFFICER AND A GENTLEMAN** among them) the majority of 1982's warm weather hits were throwbacks to "more optimistic" times where within the span of three months neighborhood and drive-in movie screens were dominated by an incessantly impressive week to week lineup of titles such as **E.T.**, **STAR TREK II: THE WRATH OF KHAN**, **POLTERGEIST**, **ROCKY III**, **TRON**, **FIREFOX**, **FAST TIMES AT RIDGEMONT HIGH**, the musicals **ANNIE** and **THE BEST LITTLE WHOREHOUSE IN TEXAS**, the animated **THE SECRET OF N.I.M.H.** (perhaps the darkest of that lot) and more.

The years have proven that **BLADE RUNNER** and **THE THING** weren't "bad" films as much as they were perhaps out of synch with the current zeitgeist of their era; and the judgements against them based primarily upon popular subjective *perception* of the day rather than on what would ultimately prove to be *objective* observation eventually reached via the always more fair leavening agent of the passage of time. Which brings us to the whole "**MARVEL VS. D.C. – is it too dark and / or too pretentious?**" debate.

If you wanna save yourself time, we'll cut things short right now and say it's our intent to here expose the whole **MARVEL Vs. D.C.** competition as an apparition; as a fantasy construct which doesn't really exist except within the fevered minds of a few over-imaginative fans, and perhaps a few more film critics who should know better, ... or at the very least do their homework. Those familiar with the histories of both companies and their catalogs know that over the years a great many artists, writers and more have crossed the street (both literally and figuratively) to work for both. Another "for example": did you also know that over the last 25 years the films based on Marvel and D.C. comic book properties have taken in a combined \$16 billion dollars?!

Impressive to be sure. But more impressive is the fact that the tally is pretty much evenly split between both companies right down the middle – with each raking in approx. \$8 billion of that sixteen. Hmmm? This would seem to indicate that both companies have learned how to work their respective sides of that aforementioned street most effectively, and that neither "schooled" nor "owned" (or the present equivalents of those words) the other, wouldn't it? Hey, it ain't just our opinion. Look at the numbers. The math doesn't lie. This falls under the unfortunately increasingly rare rubric of "doing one's homework", as opposed to social media (and modern day "journalism")'s more common contemporary habit of sloppily passing off personal inclination and opinion (of which each person is surely entitled) as indisputable gospel fact (of which each person is *not* entitled).

These numbers also rather succinctly lend credence to our belief that there's more than enough room on said street for both lighter and darker takes on a genre. Therefore, before diving into this nifty little shindig, how 'bout we first agree to do away with that mythical "*verses*" shit from the git go, huh?

Cool beans! Now that's outta the way ...

To those familiar with the Marvel and D.C. films, but perhaps *not* so familiar with the specific source material from which many of the newer ("darker") movies are taking plot elements (**BATMAN V.**

SUPERMAN integrating Frank Miller's THE DARK KNIGHT RISES graphic novel, and CAPTAIN AMERICA: CIVIL WAR doing likewise from Mark Millar's AVENGERS: CIVIL WAR series, etc.), consider this a primer to gear you up for Marvel's upcoming "PHASE 2" films – including the aforementioned CAPT. AMERICA, along with DR. STRANGE, ANT-MAN & WASP, THOR: RAGNAROK, BLACK PANTHER and AVENGERS: INFINITY WAR. Also consider it an outline to help guide you through D.C.'s similarly evolving cinematic universe which, kicking off with BATMAN V. SUPERMAN, will also include WONDER WOMAN, JUSTICE LEAGUE, AQUAMAN, THE FLASH and CYBORG.

On the other hand, if you're already well enough familiar with the rich heritage of the Marvel and D.C. literary lines (and make no mistake, many of the award-winning publications of both companies over the years *have* been referred to as such by literary critics), then consider this a nifty retrospective, or trip down memory lane with a few old friends we're introducing to a new generation. Whichever is "*yo thang*", we say ...

From the satire of MEN IN BLACK, to the urban nightmare-scape of Chris Nolan's DARK KNIGHT trilogy. And from the socio-political analogy of the X-MEN, to the deconstructionist intent of THE WATCHMEN, whether one is intrigued *or put off* by the lighter or darker themed nature of current comic-books-to-film, we remind you that (as was the case with BLADE RUNNER and THE THING) often it is less a matter of said adaptation being "good" or "bad", or "too light" or "too dark" per se, and usually more a matter of how they are individually filtered through the societal temperament of the day.

Or, as Stephen King might say, *HOW CERTAIN THINGS ARE FILTERED THROUGH ONE'S OWN MENTAL MESH.*

Let's take a look-see.

## **THAT MAN BOLT**

If we were to ever teach a creative writing or film making class, we'd make damn sure those forwards to Stephen King's short story and novella collections were a required part of the curriculum. Simultaneously entertaining and informative (as well as often pretty effin' funny) you wonder how this guy didn't end up a million dollar shrink to those in the creative arts. Which, actually, by exorcising his fears, hang-ups, fantasies and other assorted woes, then putting them down on paper, he kinda sorta *did*. Anyway, over the years his forward to the 1978 collection NIGHT SHIFT has become one of our writer's Bibles if you will - its words forever etched on the Ten Commandment slabs of our very creative soul. Just as with other ancient philosophical texts, we've since passed "Guru-shisya" Stephen King's sacred writings down to other younger authors and artists.

Mr. King has the floor ...

*"Sometimes I speak before groups of people who are interested in writing or in literature, and before the question-and-answer period is over, someone always rises and asks this question: Why do you choose to write about such gruesome subjects?"*

*I usually answer this with another question: Why do you assume that I have a choice?*

*Writing is a catch-as-catch-can sort of occupation. All of us seem to come equipped with filters on the floors of our minds, and all the filters having differing sizes and meshes. What catches in my filter may run right through yours. What catches in yours may pass through mine, no sweat. All of us seem to have a built-in obligation to sift through the sludge that gets caught in our respective mind-filters, and what we find there usually develops into some sort of sideline. The accountant may also be a photographer. The astronomer may collect coins. The schoolteacher may do gravestone rubbings in charcoal. The sludge caught in the mind's filter, the stuff that refuses to go through, frequently becomes each person's private obsession. In civilized society we have an unspoken agreement to call our obsessions 'hobbies.'*

*Sometimes the hobby can become a full-time job. The accountant may discover that he can make enough money to support his family taking pictures; the schoolteacher may become enough of an expert on grave rubbings to go on the lecture circuit. And there are some professions which begin as hobbies and remain hobbies even after the practitioner is able to earn his living by pursuing his hobby; but because 'hobby' is such a bumpy, common-sounding little word, we also have an unspoken agreement that we will call our professional hobbies 'the arts.'*

*(excerpted from NIGHT SHIFT by Stephen King / orig. pub. Doubleday – Feb., 1978)*

We've always been lucky in that *our* mesh has always been a dual one - split in two right down the middle, as if nature pulled a psychological prank on our childhood, originally intending this to be a cruel joke preventing us from any degree of "normalcy". And for a time we felt it was, till later discovering it was actually more of a creative gift.

Our biological father was an outspoken member of the Black Panthers back in the 1960s and 70s; then he eventually became a member of the New York State Legislature. How's that for dual irony? And my mother (always introspective and spiritual) would become an ordained minister. Yeah, I know. How the two of them ever got together, ... anyone knows. But to this day, half of our personality is 100% outspoken "*By Any Means Necessary*" social radical, while the other 100% is quiet and observant student of nature and human nature. Hell, even that 'ol paragon of peace and love himself, Mahatma Gandhi once said ...

*"It is better to be violent, if there is violence in our hearts, than to put on the cloak of nonviolence to cover impotence".*

Wrap your noggin around that one if you will, because it's really *not* ironic, complex or opposed to logic in any way *if* you can be, ... if you *are* ... one of Robert Bolt's "MEN FOR ALL SEASONS". And yes, hang on, this is still about "Marvel vs. D.C.". We're doing that nifty English comp "inductive reasoning" thing wherein you lay out a series of examples then string them all together into that elegant necklace of inescapable logic at the end. We promise you'll dig this big time by the time we get there. Anyway ...

The late great playwright / screenwriter Robert Bolt (1924 – 1995) emerged as one our personal all-time favorites upon discovering how closely we *personally* identified with pretty much ALL of his character creations. While the multi-award winning dramatist of theater, radio, television and film left behind an innumerable list of credits, he's perhaps best known for his collaborations with David Lean on LAWRENCE OF ARABIA (1962), DOCTOR ZHIVAGO (1965) and RYAN'S DAUGHTER (1970), as well as

the non-Lean directed THE BOUNTY (1984), THE MISSION (1986), and perhaps most tellingly, the Oscar winning A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS (1966) – based on his own earlier BBC radio and stage drama.

A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS tells the story of the 16<sup>th</sup> century England's Lord Chancellor Sir Thomas More (in the film portrayed by Paul Scofield), who was venerated as a Catholic Saint ... *while also being a renowned lawyer, philosopher and Renaissance humanist*. Wow! Talk about another "dual mesh". Maybe his dad was in the Black Panthers too, huh? Anyway, the play and film's title, a reference to More's rare but essential mental / spiritual duality, is taken from a quote about him by a contemporary of his, British grammarian Robert Whittington:

*"More is a man of an angel's wit and singular learning. I know not his fellow. For where is the man of that gentleness, lowliness and affability? And, as time requireth, a man of marvelous mirth and pastimes, ... and sometime of as sad gravity. A man for all seasons"*

If you take a close look at Robert Bolt's characters throughout cinematic history, you notice they are ALL either one person psychologically split down the middle, like Lawrence and Yuri Zhivago, or two men representing opposing sides of a single conscience (or consciousness), like Rodrigo and Father Gabriel in THE MISSION, and certainly in Bolt's interpretation / depiction of Fletcher Christian and William Bligh in THE BOUNTY.

So, from Chris Rock, to Gandhi, to Stephen King, to Robert Bolt we kind of / sort of see the necessity (or mother nature's penchant) for duality in life in general and the creative arts in particular.

You see where we're headed with this, right?

### **"BAT"-ING ... WITH NO BALLS"**

Most concur that the birth of the superhero, as well as the comic book as we know it today, was with the creation of the "Man of Steel", SUPERMAN – the legendarily artistic offspring of BFFs Jerry Siegel & Joe Schuster. Interestingly, while the world is very familiar with Kal-El's later day exploits against a panoply of larger-than-life super villains (General Zod, Braniac, Mr. Mxyzptlk and Doomsday among them), many are to this day unaware that the earliest published Superman adventures had him tangling ass with what were *then* considered the greatest villains of the era of the Great Depression - slum lords, who's dangerous tenements risked the lives of many; gangsters who preyed upon the weak; corrupt politicians and millionaires responsible for criminal activity in third world nations, and more. Even the man who would come to be known as Superman's greatest foe, that super-intelligent dastard Lex Luthor, didn't make his first appearance until 1940 – two years *after* Superman's debut in the first issue of ACTION COMICS (June 1938). We mention this to inform you that the Superman canon you think you know, isn't necessarily the Superman canon you thought you knew. Heh, heh!

ACTION COMICS was the fourth magazine title published by DETECTIVE COMICS, which after several name changes over the years would eventually revert back to its original designation – or at least the initials of said earlier designation, in the form of "DC COMICS". *Tada!*

After the resounding success of SUPERMAN, the company later to be known as "DC" launched THE BATMAN (Detective Comics #27 / May 1939). Created by artist Bob Kane and writer Milton "Bill"

Finger, the nocturnal avenger, later to be known alternately as “The Caped Crusader”, “The Dark Knight” and simply “Batman”, borrowed considerably from Emma Orczy’s earlier THE SCARLET PIMPERNEL (1903) and Johnston McCully’s ZORRO (1919) in that the hero would bear the dual identity of a wealthy aristocrat who dons a mask in order to bring justice to the masses.

Unlike ZORRO’s Don Diego de la Vega or the PIMPERNEL’s Sir Percy Blakeney, THE BATMAN’s Bruce Wayne would have a much more grim motivation for his crusade, ... along with a much darker modus operandi in bringing it to fruition. As a child, young Wayne witnesses up close the murder of his parents, and as a result becomes fiction’s first anti-hero. Long before Popeye Doyle, Frank Bullitt or John Shaft, the scared psyche of The Batman (also often referred to as “The World’s Greatest Detective”) would make him as violent and as feared within the nocturnal alleys of Gotham City as the criminals to whom he was determined to mete out justice in brutal / near-Biblical “eye for an eye”-like fashion.

Both “the Bat” and the Man of Steel would (for lack of a better term) soften over the years - first a little, then a helluva lot. For Superman the “little” was between 1940 – ’43, when the character went from extraterrestrial outsider / borderline Christ-figure to surrogate big brother / father upon starring in both a radio show and a series of popular Fleischer Studio cartoon shorts aimed squarely at kids. Actor Bud Collyer provided the hero’s voice for both incarnations. Then in 1940 The Batman would undergo a similar “paternal”-like downshift with the introduction of a newly minted kid sidekick – Robin, later also known as “The Boy Wonder”. (Detective Comics #38).

The “helluva lot”, for not only Superman and Batman but the entire comic book industry, happened in September 1954 with the creation of the CMAA (Comics Magazine Association of America) and the introduction of the “Comics Code”. It was a response to the near McCarthy-like “Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency” wherein, fueled by the theories of Fredric Wertham’s 1954 book “Seduction Of The Innocent”, comic books (rather than drugs, alcohol, or a post war society in flux) were blamed for the increase in juvenile criminal activity. The “Code” - a self-censorship body created to keep comic books from being banned all together, stripped werewolves of their claws, detectives of their whiskey and guns, femme fatales of their curves, and superheroes (many still believe) of their huevos (English trans. – “eggs”).

After the introduction of “the Code”, Superman – who had in the past battled so-called authority figures, became one himself, while Batman and Robin began spending more time with women (to quell rumors of a homosexual relationship), and even Wonder Woman (originally created as a female Superman) began spending more romantic quality time with Steve Trevor.

Ironically, while the Comics Code was the near death knell for the industry, it was also the chrysalis which would ultimately allow it to reawaken in a more adult and socio-politically-aware version of its former self. Many felt that by the 1960s a creative malaise had set over the once mighty D.C. empire. And while, under publisher Julius Schwartz, the company produced a few successful new wrinkles on old favorites, such as a modern reworking of the fastest man alive – “The Flash”, and the uniting of its most popular characters (incl. Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman) into the “Justice League Of America”, for the most part the former publishing giant lay inert save for two extremely popular TV adaptations of its two tentpole characters.

THE NEW ADVENTURES OF SUPERMAN was produced by Lou Schimer's Filmation Studios - the Reseda, California based animation house also responsible for those two iconic animated fixtures of Saturday morning TV, FAT ALBERT & THE COSBY KIDS and THE GROOVIE GHOULIES. The Filmation SUPERMAN cartoons - a series of 68 fast moving, six-minute animated shorts, ran for three original seasons (and one consisting of repackaged reruns) on CBS television from 1966 – 1970. While Superman episodes were the primary anchor, over the series' four-year run (alternately as both a half hour and one hour broadcast) a new generation would also be introduced to animated versions of other D.C. Universe characters such as Aquaman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, Hawkman, Green Lantern, the Atom, and (of course) Batman.

Developed for television by screenwriter / playwright Lorenzo Semple Jr. (THE RAT PATROL, PAPPILLON, THE PARALLAX VIEW, THREE DAYS OF THE CONDOR) and produced by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Television, the live-action BATMAN TV series ran for three seasons on ABC beginning in 1966. It famously (some would say infamously) starred Adam West as Batman / Bruce Wayne, and Burt Ward as Robin / Dick Grayson. With a panoply of famous stars appearing as recurring villains (incl. Burgess Meredith as "The Penguin", Caesar Romero as "The Joker", Frank Gorshin – "The Riddler", Otto Preminger – "Mr. Freeze", and alternately both Julie Newmar and Ertha Kitt as "Catwoman"), it was a campy, tongue-in-cheek ratings smash which some felt, with its pop art-like "Bam!", "Boffo!" insert cards flashing on screen during fight sequences, forever painted the comic book as kiddie fodder.

During the same decade of the 1960s, the 50+ year "MARVEL VS. D.C." smackdown began, with the character catalogs of the two competing comic book companies "leap frogging" and switching crowns as the "Most Popular" every other decade hence.

Via an intro by his uncle, young Stanley Martin Lieber (later to be known to the world as "Stan Lee") came to work as an assistant / gofer at publisher Martin Goodman's New York-based "Timely Comics" – founded in 1939. The comic book off-shoot of Goodman's print empire (which also included men's magazines "Stag" and "Swank", and pulp mag titles such as "Uncanny Tales"), over the years "Timely" would undergo a name change to "Atlas" before finally becoming "Marvel" in 1961.

## **"A TIMELY MARVEL"**

Timely had little success with late 1930s versions of THE HUMAN TORCH and THE SUB-MARINER, but it hit paydirt in March 1941 with Jack Kirby & Joe Simon's creation of CAPTAIN AMERICA. CAPTAIN AMERICA was the story of Steve Rogers, the proverbial 90 lb. weakling who, eager to serve his country during WWII, volunteers for a "super soldier" experiment wherein he is injected with a serum which transforms him into the war era version of "The World's Greatest Athlete" - his strength and reflexes heightened to near Herculean levels. When the creator of the serum is assassinated by Nazis, Rogers, originally intended to be the first prototype super soldier, becomes the one and only one.

When Kirby and Simon departed Timely, following a disagreement with Goodman, 19 yr. old Stanley Lieber was promoted to the position of "Interim Editor"; that "interim" ending up being 30 years as Editor-in-Chief and principal Art Director. Kirby would return to Timely (now called "Marvel"), then in 1961 he and Lieber, who'd since legally changed his name to "Stan Lee", would create what most consider to be the first modern superheroes in THE FANTASTIC FOUR (first issue – Nov. 1961).



Genetically altered during a space mission, Reed Richards, Susan Storm, Johnny Storm and Ben Grimm acquire super human traits which (and this was the modern twist) *they didn't want!* With no secret identities (à la Clark Kent, Bruce Wayne, or ZORRO's Don Diego de la Vega) behind which to hide, they must nakedly deal with the extremes of public celebrity, both in unwanted adoration as well as negatively fearful backlash, all the while wading through the all-too-common minefield scenarios of an average dysfunctional American family.

With FANTASTIC FOUR Lee and Kirby had made the "super" much more so by setting it within (for lack of a better term) a mundane everyday "bickering family" environment to which the majority of readers, both young and old, could identify. While THOR - Marvel's later near Christ-like Hercules from another galaxy, IRON MAN's Tony Stark - a wealthy vigilante / inventor, and Diana Prince - D.C.'s powerful Amazonian super goddess WONDER WOMAN, represented wish fantasies to readers, within Reed and Susan Richards' challenges as a married couple, and Johnny and Ben's constant love / hate sibling-like bickering, audiences could actually see more realistic ("down to earth" if you will) mirror versions of themselves. And this was unique for the era.

While the 1960s Filmmation ADVENTURES OF SUPERMAN helped transform D.C.'s former Man Of Steel into "The Big Blue Boy Scout", and TV's BATMAN turned the once dark and dangerous Caped Crusader into a campy anachronistic punch line, over at Marvel, Lee, Kirby and a rebelliously creative cadre of artists and writers such as Bill Everett and Steve Ditko, were busy creating the counter-culture version of the modern hero. Their list of all-too-humanly-flawed, soon-to-be-iconic characters came to include Bruce Banner / THE INCREDIBLE HULK - who, doused with radiation, turns into an enormous green monster when angered; Tony Stark / IRON MAN - a former war profiteer industrialist who creates an iron suit to keep his heart alive after a near fatal kidnapping; the blind Hell's Kitchen lawyer turned vigilante Matt Murdock / DAREDEVIL; the Evel Knievel-like stunt motorcyclist Johnny Blaze - who sells his soul to Lucifer, then turns against him to become an agent of justice as GHOST RIDER. And (of course) famous High School science nerd, Peter Parker, who can't get a date to save his life, but who, empowered with super abilities after being bitten by a radioactive spider, dons the mask of the justice-seeking SPIDER-MAN.

Discovering, much to their surprise, that their books were being read by not just kids, but politically active college students and adults, throughout the remainder of the 1960s / early 70s Stan Lee took Marvel into even more adult thematic waters with the introduction of cosmic philosophers THE SILVER SURFER and HOWARD THE DUCK - both perfect for the current "Age of Aquarius" generation. And, at the height of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, Marvel would introduce the first super heroes of color in the form of the popular LUKE CAGE, BLADE, BLACK PANTHER, and THE FALCON.

Partnered with a Steve Rogers / CAPTAIN AMERICA - who is awakened from a 30 year cryo-sleep, and doesn't completely understand the 1970s world in social flux around him, Rogers and Sam Wilson / THE FALCON, while battling evil side by side, often ironically became audience "stand ins" - debating the at times controversial "Left" and "Right" political views of a nation's citizens who searched for a common ground as they too battled the evils of modern day life side by side.

In fact, so in touch with the socio-political tectonic shift of the era, in nationwide college campus surveys, Marvel characters such as THE HULK and THE SILVER SURFER were found to be as equally popular as contemporary counter-culture icons Malcolm X and Che Guevara. In a 2005 Radio Four

interview, WATCHMAN, THE KILLING JOKE author Alan Moore gave his opinion as to why Marvel's characters of the 1960s / 70s caused a publishing revolution:

*"The DC comics were one dimensional characters whose only characteristic was they dressed up in costumes and did good. Whereas Stan Lee had this huge breakthrough of two-dimensional characters. So, they dress up in costumes and do good, but they've got a bad heart, or a bad leg. I actually did think for a long while that having a bad leg was an actual character trait".*

While Marvel dominated the 1960s and 1970s publishing arena, the ever-leapfrogging "MARVEL VS. D.C." popularity competition would flip like a coin during the 1980s with Mighty Marvel nearly going bankrupt, and D.C. flying high once again with popular cinematic versions of its two most iconic characters ... courtesy of directors Richard Donner and Tim Burton

## **SUPERMAN REBORN / BATMAN BEGINS ... AGAIN**

Film historians and cinematic pundits forever argue over what makes one film a timeless classic while another, just as good, is relegated to the "cheapie bin" of historical obscurity. While certainly script, direction and performances have more than a little to do with it, in the end most believe BUTCH CASSIDY & THE SUNDANCE KID / THE PRINCESS BRIDE screenwriter William Goldman's assertion that *"nobody knows anything"* to perhaps be most accurate. Sometimes however certain properties already contain such built-in iconic power, and are so forever ingrained within the public consciousness, ... or within the collective societal psyche, that often that property and / or character(s) is / are merely awaiting an adaptation which measures up and taps into to their already "inherent greatness" so to speak.

In the mid 1970s when producer Ilya Salkind brought to his father Alexander the notion of bringing a big budget, widescreen adaptation of SUPERMAN to cinema screens, the elder Salkind (having achieved success with Orson Welles' THE TRIAL – 1962, and THE THREE MUSKETEERS / THE FOUR MUSKETEERS – 1973 & 1974) was personally unaware of the character, and asked his son if Superman was well known. To which Ilya replied, *"He's as known as Jesus Christ"*, ... which is true.

Over the years certain characters have become so globally well known and loved that they've both out-distanced their own creators (everyone knows Tarzan and Sherlock Holmes, but not necessarily the names "Edgar Rice Burroughs" and "Sir Arthur Conan Doyle"), and to a degree become Teflon – nearly impervious to a bad adaptation. Keep in mind that's *nearly* impervious. This of course isn't *always* the case, as evidenced by other acclaimed literary works turned into not-so-well-received films. Remember Jaqueline Susann's THE LOVE MACHINE and ONCE IS NOT ENOUGH, F. Paul Wilson's THE KEEP, Sidney Sheldon's THE OTHER SIDE OF MIDNIGHT, and even Frank Herbert's legendary DUNE? When a film *does* however measure up to its source material, that source material often then becomes a preexisting "retroflex" overdrive engine of sorts.

That's another made up word on our part describing how a popular book can fuel the desire for a film. Then, when the film is made and well received, it conversely becomes fuel which causes more sales of the book; then the *combined* increasing book and film ticket sales come to feed (and feed upon) one another - with the title becoming a "perpetual motion machine" of sorts: a pop-culture sensation which *everyone* just has to read and / or see lest they be left out of the conversation of the day.

LOVE STORY, THE GODFATHER, JAWS, THE EXORCIST and JURASSIC PARK are prime examples of this phenomena - all enormous international best-sellers before their film versions hit the screen; and the films, living up to the impact of / expectations established by those novels, coming to enjoy the iconic status the novels had already laid down. The superbly realized SUPERMAN THE MOVIE (1978) and BATMAN (1989) continued this phenomena.

Originally slated to be directed by GOLDFINGER / DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER's Guy Hamilton, SUPERMAN: THE MOVIE was offered to Richard Donner (at the time primarily known as a TV director who'd just scored a major film hit with THE OMEN) when the film was ultimately set to shoot in England - where Hamilton could not return due to changing national tax laws.

Appalled by the script's near BATMAN TV series-like camp humor, Donner brought aboard the project good friend screenwriter Tom Mankiewicz (LIVE AND LET DIE, THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN GUN) to bring a sense of "verisimilitude" to the piece - not unlike Stan Lee setting the fanciful FANTASTIC FOUR in the midst of a realistic world with realistic interpersonal situations. Donner and Mankiewicz proceeded on the thematic foundation of "Two kids on a date", believing that if they could realistically make the love story work, all of the other fanciful elements would fall into place and take care of themselves.

In leaning more towards the lighter "Big Blue Boy Scout" ideals of the 1950s and 60s over the darker "alien in a hostile world" tone of the character's comic book origins, Richard Donner's SUPERMAN THE MOVIE (replete with a stirringly judicial John Williams musical score) became - and remains - what most consider the GONE WITH THE WIND of comic book film adaptations. Over the next decade three SUPERMAN franchise sequels would follow, starting with 1980's acclaimed SUPERMAN II - released in the U.S. in 1981. But the series began to peter out critically and financially with the less than enthusiastically received SUPERMAN III and SUPERMAN IV. D.C. was still in good cinematic shape however. For by the time SUPERMAN IV: THE QUEST FOR PEACE had limped into (and quickly out of) multiplexes in 1987, Warner Bros., (owner of D.C. Comics since 1969), already had in production another epically mounted adaptation of one of the publisher's most popular properties.

## **BAT-ING A THOUSAND ... \$400 MILLION**

Notwithstanding Richard Donner's SUPERMAN THE MOVIE in the popularity department, Tim Burton's BATMAN is widely considered the film which not only launched the superhero film genre as we know it today, but altered the course of the industry (marketing-wise) like no other motion picture since the original STAR WARS (1977). Namely because SUPERMAN, for all of its success, wasn't really thought of as a "superhero film" per se at the time as much it was conceived then perceived as a cinematic blockbuster, ... a positive "filmic freak" if you will, of a kind during its initial staggering run with THE SOUND OF MUSIC, THE GODFATHER or THE EXORCIST. One of those beloved anomalies which came along every few years, gobbled up the box office, left an historic mark, then marched along its merry way.

Opening on June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1989 BATMAN, however, for better and for worse, was the true industry fulcrum shift point wherein the "franchised property" could and would become the cornerstone of entire studios. United Artists / MGM had done it with James Bond, and Paramount was presently

doing it with STAR TREK. But whereas those were still considered rarities, BATMAN would make the cornerstone “tentpole franchise” the bread and butter concept of the business. The monstrous successes of such films over the next decade would have the unforeseeable (yet eventually positive) effect of causing smaller films to be squeezed out of multiplexes, which effectively lead to the burgeoning of the independent film movement as a viable (and commercial) alternative in the subsequent expansion of festivals, the building of theater chains specifically for such titles, and the establishment of 24 T.V. networks dedicated to distributing them via non-multiplex means.

The first film to earn \$100 million + in its first ten days of release (this long before beefed-up IMAX and 3D prices existed), BATMAN would also cause an industry wide paradigm shift in the importance of opening weekend box office receipts. It would set another marketing trend when its home video release (which added an additional \$150 million to its coffers) came in November, a mere five months after it’s record-breaking big screen debut, and while the film was still playing in some theaters. This is the norm now, but wasn’t so in 1989. In fact so successful was this concept, the window between theatrical releases and their home video debuts would increasingly shorten to the point where it would lead to the death of the second-run and \$1.00 movie theater.

BATMAN’s success would also create the “kiddie spin-off market” which, especially with comic book-based films, is also today’s norm. And not just “kiddie market” in terms of toys and merchandised tie-ins, but in terms of fully realized spin-off programming - such as Warner Bros. Animation’s critically acclaimed BATMAN: THE ANIMATED SERIES - and entire networks dedicated to them. One of today’s most popular and profitable successes, owing its existence to the “kiddie crossover” programming paradigm which BATMAN created, is the Disney XD network which, ironically, is home base to today’s “Marvel Animated Universe”.

In 2004, BATMAN: THE ANIMATED SERIES co-creator Bruce Timm (largely responsible for what we know today as D.C.’s “animated universe”) credited the neo deco art design of Tim Burton’s BATMAN as a primary influence on the present day look of his show in particular, and D.C.’s animated universe in general, he going so far as to acknowledge *“our show would never have gotten made if it hadn’t been for that first Batman movie.”*

And, oh yes, the movie itself is pretty damned good, still holding up today (almost 30 years later!!!) when rewatched alongside Christopher Nolan’s own DARK KNIGHT trilogy – which itself owes a great deal to Burton’s dark original. But BATMAN didn’t have an easy path to the screen, mostly because of die-hard comic book devotees.

While Warner Bros. lighter take on SUPERMAN proved a box office success throughout the 1980s, in the actual comic book world itself things had become considerably more dark, with a group of young up and coming artistic rebels more fond of the harder-edged origins of iconic characters than they were of the more “family friendly” take popularized over the last twenty-odd years. Under the pen of this “New Wave” of writers and artists, old favorites would (as SIN CITY / 300’s Frank Miller once said) *“Get their balls back”*, and a series of new works would bring mainstream and critical cred to the term “graphic novel” – for the first time making it mean more than a “comic book for grown ups”.

Vietnam war vet Frank Castle (created by Gerry Conway & John Romita, Jr. ) first appeared as THE PUNISHER in SPIDER-MAN #129 (Feb.’74), and even had his own comic book series. But it wasn’t until the more cynical and violent mid – late 1980s, when filmic heroes such as Stallone, Norris, Segal and

Schwarzenegger were all the rage, that his character – a vigilante using military tactics against the mob in vengeance for the death of his family, became a bonafied success. The same with GHOST RIDER (created by Roy Thomas, Gary Friedrich and Mike Ploog) - who originally debuted in 1974, and THE WOLVERINE (cr. by Len Wein & John Romita, Jr.) – who first showed up in THE INCREDIBLE HULK #s 180 – 181 (Nov. '74). It wasn't until writers such as Chris Claremont and Frank Miller brought "Wolverine / Logan" into the 1980s that his "*I'm the best there is at what I do, but what I do best isn't very nice*" attitude found a proper fit with audiences.

This mid – late 1980s comic book Renaissance was arguably the industry's most successful time since the WW2 era. And four signature publications, all of them dark, provided the greatest fuel for said boom in particular and for the later comic-books-to-film phenomena in general. They were Art Spiegelman's MAUS, Frank Miller's THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS, and Alan Moore's WATCHMEN and THE KILLING JOKE.

MAUS was based on American cartoonist Spiegelman's interviews with his father regarding his experiences as a Polish Jewish Holocaust survivor. These recollections were then filtered through the postmodern WATERSHIP DOWN-like lens of telling the story via the anthropomorphic device of depicting the Jews as mice, and Germans and Poles as cats and pigs. For the brilliantly realized manner in which Spiegelman encouraged an entire new generation *not* to repeat the sins of the past, the stunningly realized MAUS became the first graphic novel to claim the honor of the Pulitzer Prize.

Moore's WATCHMEN – a borderline nihilistic Cold War saga about the all too humanistic shortcomings of a group of former AVENGERS / JUSTICE LEAGUE-like superheroes, revolutionized the industry in finally allowing a more realistic (some would say "cynical") and *very* adult depiction and discussion of the concept of heroism, with its sometimes attendant irony and hypocrisy. Grappling with issues from impotence to homosexuality, and featuring a disturbingly graphic climax involving a citywide genocide, WATCHMEN was absolutely not for kids. And it would singlehandedly and instantly cause the term "Graphic Novel" to be taken seriously.

Moore, based in the U.K. - where his work appeared in such publications as 2000 A.D. (the magazine which introduced the JUDGE DREDD character) and WARRIOR (where Moore's V FOR VENDETTA first debuted), initially came to the attention of American comic book aficionados with his critically acclaimed reworking of Marvel's THE SAGA OF SWAMP THING (1983). When his WATCHMEN debuted (serialized between 1986 – '87 / collected as one volume in '87), then was followed immediately by the New York Times best-selling (and more-than-a-little disturbing) THE KILLING JOKE – wherein both the Joker and Batman / Bruce Wayne are depicted as psychologically scared figures, the "family friendly" Adam West version of the Caped Crusader (at least in film) was erased forever.

Frank Miller came to the attention of many upon taking over writing duties on the DAREDEVIL comic book series from the late 1970s - early '80s. During that same time he'd also create the spin-off character ELEKTRA. Years later he'd receive fame for the graphic novels SIN CITY (1991) and 300 (1998) – both of which would be adapted into popular films. But perhaps his greatest claim to fame remains in the fact that he preceded Alan Moore's THE KILLING JOKE with two of his own back to back (now influential) additions to the darker 80s era comic milieu – THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS (1986) and BATMAN: YEAR ONE (1987). YEAR ONE was a reboot / reimagining of sorts (along the lines of the film version of CASINO ROYALE) wherein Batman's origin story is fleshed out in detail. In fact in so much psychologically valid detail, that elements of that graphic novel would be integrated / adapted into

the critically acclaimed animated feature **BATMAN: MASK OF THE PHANTASM (1993)**, all three films of Christopher Nolan's **DARK KNIGHT** trilogy (2005 – 2012), and even Joel Schumacher's **BATMAN FOREVER (1995)**.

Miller's **THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS** is essentially a "one shot" alternate timeline story wherein Bruce Wayne, now in his mid 50s, comes out of retirement to battle crime, and surprisingly finds as multi-antagonists the Gotham City Police force, the U.S. government, and even Superman himself - the story climaxing with a battle royale between the two icons. Sound familiar? Now, back to Tim Burton's **BATMAN ...**

Back in the 1980s, "darker comic book story"-enamored fans were at first thrilled upon learning that the upcoming cinematic incarnation of Gotham's most famous vigilante bad-ass was going to integrate elements from **THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS, YEAR ONE** and **THE KILLING JOKE**. But they were very soon outraged upon discovering that the supposedly darker Batman / Bruce Wayne would be portrayed by Michael Keaton - at the time best known as a comedic actor in films such as **NIGHT SHIFT** and (of course) Tim Burton's **BEETLEJUICE**.

With the combination of Burton and Keaton many feared a comedic camp fest more akin to the Adam West TV series rather than the "emotionally scarred warrior" depiction of Moore and Miller. **BATMAN** film producer Jon Peters stuck to his casting guns, however, convinced that Keaton possessed an "*edgy, tormented quality*" after he saw him opposite Kathy Baker and Morgan Freeman in the drama **CLEAN AND SOBER (1988)** where Keaton was galvanizing as a successful Philadelphia real estate broker battling a crippling cocaine addiction.

On the other hand, upon the *release* of Burton's **BATMAN**, many casual film goers (and some critics) - unaware of the darker psychological metamorphosis the Batman character had undergone in the last ten years in print, were shocked and appalled at what they perceived to be a violent bastardization of the hero they'd known and loved primarily from the live action and animated TV series. The debate would reach an even higher crescendo with Burton's 1992 follow-up, **BATMAN RETURNS**. Originally uninterested in the sequel, Burton returned upon the promise of greater creative freedom. And the second film *really is* much more of a quintessential Burton-esque cinematic ride than the first. Co-starring Michelle Pfeiffer as the Catwoman, Danny DeVito as the Penguin, and Christopher Walken as ethically challenged corporate magnate Max Shreck, **BATMAN RETURNS** was a critical and financial hit, ... even though it took in a little more than half the box office of the first film.

Many credited this to the harsh parental backlash the film received, which, among other things, led to McDonald's dumping their proposed **BATMAN RETURNS** Happy Meal promotion. And while we don't necessarily agree with Roger Ebert's assessment of the film in particular (and super hero films in general), his comments perhaps best sums up the still ongoing debate of "Darker Vs. Lighter", and by extension "Marvel Vs. D.C." ...

*"I give the movie (BATMAN RETURNS) a negative review, and yet I don't think it's a bad movie; it's more misguided, made with great creativity, but denying us what we more or less deserve from a Batman story. No matter how hard you try, superheroes and film noir don't go together; the very essence of noir is that there are no more heroes."*

While this same complaint was leveled by some at the first three Daniel Craig James Bond films, many fans of the Ian Fleming novels (us included) have never viewed Bond *as* a “classic” hero, but rather as a severely flawed and tarnished one; his character (regardless of the immensely entertaining but lightweight depiction in the Roger Moore films) less a debonair spit and polish “Clublands Hero”, and cut more from the rough and tumble (if stylish) cloth of Raymond Chandler. The same with the so-called darker depictions of Batman and, in recent years Superman. Mainly because, in actuality, with the exceptions of the Adam West and animated series (SUPER FRIENDS, et al) the Batman and Superman characters really haven’t changed all that much since their inception, ... though the world around them, and their reactions to it, very much has.

## **A “ZERO TO HERO” MARVEL**

The “Which is more popular?”, “Which is darker?”, Marvel vs. D.C., “leap frogging” phenomenon began in the 1960s - 70s as D.C.’s heroes (their darker edges shaved away in the 1950s because of national censorship concerns) became more “establishment” figures, while over at Marvel (in the way of CAPT. AMERICA, HULK, SILVER SURFER, SPIDER-MAN, FANTASTIC FOUR, X-MEN et al) became the ever-increasing-in-popularity “counter culture” equivalent. The positions would dramatically reverse in the 1980s / 90s as D.C. (at least in film) dominated the arena with the financial success of its SUPERMAN franchise, along with the financial (and dark-hued thematic) success of its Tim Burton BATMAN films. All of this transpiring while “Mighty Marvel” at the time proved to be none of what it’s moniker implied.

Once the enviable “new kid on the block”, by the 1980s / 90s Marvel’s fortunes had plummeted to such a degree that its company stock shares, once selling for nearly \$40, had nosedived to less than \$2.50. On the verge of bankruptcy the company licensed out a number of its most valuable properties in deals which produced a series of critically derided bombs ... or no films whatsoever. Then after changing ownership more than once, in the end its future filmic fate would fall into the hands of a shrewd and daring Israeli-American toy executive with a radical plan to turn the company’s fortunes around.

Just as with real estate and other popular markets, so too did the boomtown years of the 1980s / 90s comic book Renaissance to a large degree come to be based upon a fragile bubble of consumer perception perhaps coupled with a little retail deception. Believing that the new wave of comic books would, like their WW2 era predecessors, become high-priced collectibles which just might “*put my future children through college*”, a huge speculator market grew during the late 1980s. Failing to acknowledge that the reason many of the comics during and immediately following the war years of the 40s / 50s had become so valuable was because many had been destroyed (due to paper drives or censorship – thus making them rare), publishers not only jumped onto, but helped stoke the coals of the growing speculator market by releasing single issues with multiple “collectible” covers. Therefore a collector would buy say five copies of the same issue, each with a different cover - keeping them unopened in their original poly bags, while buying a sixth copy to actually tear open and read.

With the industry propped up on “multiple run” issues, when the demand suddenly vanished, stock prices crashed and burned, and the industry went belly up. Shielded under the corporate umbrella of

Warner Bros., D.C. was better able to weather the storm than Marvel, which was (for all intents and purposes) an individual entity left to fend for itself in the winds of the economic storm.

From the 1970s up to this point, in order to stay afloat as a corporate entity Marvel – under the title “MEG – Marvel Entertainment Group”, had sold off the screen options to many of its popular characters including SPIDER-MAN, THE FANTASTIC FOUR, HULK, SILVER SURFER, DAREDEVIL, IRON MAN, HOWARD THE DUCK and more. At the height of the speculator market MEG had been purchased in 1986 by *New World Entertainment* – formerly “*New World Pictures*”, the company founded by “B” movie king Roger Corman, until Corman sold the company and its catalog for \$16 million.

During the New World years MEG produced a mildly entertaining and moderately successful 1989 version of its THE PUNISHER with Dolph Lundgren and Louis Gossett, Jr. But the formerly “Mighty” Marvel at this time mostly became the less than marvelous butt of industry (and fan) jokes as it saw made from it’s properties a laughably cheesy adaptation of CAPTAIN AMERICA (1990) from SWORD AND THE SORCERER director Albert Pyun.

Adding insult to injury (and already hemorrhaging finances) the comic book company would also watch it’s SPIDER-MAN go unmade for half a decade after shifting hands from Pyun to Golan & Globus’ Cannon Pictures (where it was to be directed by TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE and POLTERGEIST’s Tobe Hooper), then to Carolco Pictures (RAMBO, THE TERMINATOR), where an unused treatment and script were hashed out by a young up-and-coming force to be reckoned with named James Cameron.

The George Lucas produced HOWARD THE DUCK (1986) was perhaps the most *high profile* black-eye inflicted upon a Marvel property up to this date. But undoubtedly the greatest genuine debacle was a film which was made but never intended to be seen – 1994’s “ashcan” version of THE FANTASTIC FOUR.

In 1986 German producer Bernd Eichinger (THE NEVERENDING STORY, THE NAME OF THE ROSE, RESIDENT EVIL) optioned the film rights to THE FANTASTIC FOUR. For those unaware, an “option” is when the rights to a story and / or its characters is / are “leased” (would be the most accurate term) for a designated period of time. If the film fails to go into production by the expiration of that option, the rights revert back to the original owner. If the film is made, the “lease-er” (if the original agreement designates) maintains the rights to make another film based on that same property.

This option “lock” is why Marc Webb’s newly rebooted THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN arrived so quickly after the final Sam Raimi SPIDER-MAN film with Toby McGuire – so that Sony might retain it's license on the character without the filmic rights reverting back to Marvel. This is also why Fox produces a new film every couple of years from the X-MEN universe - X2, THE WOLVERINE, DEADPOOL, X-MEN: APOCALYPSE, etc. Anyway ...

With his FANTASTIC FOUR option set to expire at the end of 1992, Eichinger approached low-budget king Roger Corman to produce a FANTASTIC FOUR film for \$1 million - Eichinger’s quoted reasoning at the time being “*They didn’t say it had to be a big movie*”. Shot in three and a half weeks in and around Los Angeles, trailers for the film ran at the beginning of home video copies of the Corman



produced JURASSIC PARK cash-in CARNOSAUR. And the film's four principal cast members even appeared at San Diego Comic-Con to promote it.

Various versions as to why the film was never released (either theatrically or on home video) persists to this day - with the late Eichinger insisting the film was meant to be distributed, while Marvel's Stan Lee claims it was never anything but an "ashcan" write-off tossed together in order for Eichinger to hold on to the option.

Adding to the confusion, eventual Marvel head Avi Arad would claim that, while the film showed an admirable passion for the project, it's low production values would have ultimately proved detrimental to the property's future integrity, and for this reason he purchased the film himself from Eichinger in order to have all prints destroyed. In spite of it all online bootleg prints still persists to this day. Interestingly, Eichinger would eventually get to produce (with Arad and 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox) the 2005 FANTASTIC FOUR and its immediate 2007 follow up FANTASTIC FOUR: RISE OF THE SILVER SURFER.

If there is a single genuine "Iron Man" within Marvel's "zero to hero" rise to filmic respect it is surely the aforementioned Avi Arad. As Marvel's fortunes began to wane in the late 1980s / early 90s, the toy company "Toy Biz" (owned by Issac Permuter) in 1993 signed an unheard of "exclusive, perpetual, royalty free" deal with the comic book company to manufacture toys based on their characters in exchange for 46% of Toy Biz's equity. Arad joined Toy Biz that same year for a salary and a 10% stake in the company. Then over the next few years Toy Biz saw enough success to outsell Mattel toys by a near 25% profit margin.

It's a long and serpentine legal story, but the "Reader's Digest" version is that in 1989 MEG (Marvel Entertainment Group) was purchased by billionaire Ronald Perelman's diversified holding company, MacAndrews & Forbes – the group which also held Revlon, Gillette and other well known American corporations. In 1996 "Marvel Studios" is created to handle the film aspects of the company's characters; and Arad and Permuter – because of their large stake in Toy Biz, become part of the new studio's Board of Directors.

Perelman and corporate raider Carl Icahn (who over the years also controlled percentages of Motorola and Lear) attempt to make a huge profit by breaking up and sell off Marvel. And in 1997 they file the company for bankruptcy in an attempt to thwart any counter-actions to that plan. With personal stake in Marvel, Arad and Permuter engage in a "David and Goliath" legal battle against Perelman and Icahn, which in the end *they actually win!* Having secured financial backers they now embark on a plan to rebuild the studio. Many cite 2002's SPIDER-MAN (dir. by Sam Raimi) as the film which turned Marvel's fortunes around. But it actually began with 1998's BLADE (dir. By Stephen Norrington) and 2000s X-MEN (dir. by Bryan Singer) – both under the auspices of Arad.

A part human / part vampire (and certainly part John Shaft), sword wielding, modern day vampire hunter, the BLADE character was created by Marv Wolfman (*yes, that's his real name!*) and Gene Conlan, and first appeared in comic book form in 1973. Marvel had been working on a BLADE film since '92 with rapper L.L. Cool J. attached as the lead. But when the film was set up at New Line Pictures with a script by David Goyer (who'd go on to pen the next two BLADE entries, as well as Chris Nolan's DARK KNIGHT trilogy, MAN OF STEEL, BATMAN V. SUPERMAN and JUSTICE LEAGUE), it was

Goyer who brought Wesley Snipes' name into the mix – feeling he actually *was* the living essence of that character.

Filmed for \$40 million, it's A-list production values (including cinematography by Theo Van de Sande - BODY PARTS, VOLCANO, and a cutting edge score by Mark Isham - LITTLE MAN TATE, QUIZ SHOW, OCTOBER SKY) gave it a look and feel twice its budget. Then upon release BLADE divided the critics (Roger Ebert loved it) but thrilled audiences to the tune of a \$140 million + take at the box office. While a success, BLADE was still largely (unfairly) considered by the industry as a "fluke", and not necessarily the "shot heard 'round the world" signaling the dawn of a new film genre trend. That changed with X-MEN.

Always Marvel's most deliberately socio-politically analogous comic book series, the X-MEN were created in 1963 by Stan Lee and legendary illustrator Jack Kirby. At the height of the Civil Rights, Gender Rights and Sexual Revolution movements, the X-MEN were a group of (so-called) "mutants" who represented the next step in human evolution - they able to alter matter and do other (what non-advanced humans think of as) "super-human" feats.

Because they're different, they're also feared and persecuted. Brought together by Professor Xavier, the X-MEN watch each other's backs, learn to integrate their abilities into daily life, and more often than not end up saving from destruction a world which continues to despise them. For anyone ever part of a minority, looked down upon because of their gender, orientation, weight, shyness or whatever, the X-MEN characters resounded as spiritual kin.

Moderately successful throughout the 1960s and 70s, their adventures shot to the top of best seller lists during the 1990s comics Renaissance thanks largely to a revised version of the character the Wolverine. Originally created in 1974 as a Clint Eastwood-like anti-hero of few words who, during the era of DIRTY HARRY sequels, followed suit in "dishin' it out to the bad guys as badly as they dished it out to others".

In development as a film since the mid 1980s (where names such as James Cameron and Kathryn Bigelow were attached), Arad and Marvel were finally able to get it launched at 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox under producer Lauren Shuler Donner (LADYHAWKE, ST. ELMO'S FIRE, BULWORTH), who brought in THE USUAL SUSPECTS' Bryan Singer to re-write and direct. Stressing the philosophical "Martin Luther King, Jr. vs. Malcolm X" relationship between Professor Xavier and Magneto, Singer was successful in bringing Shakespearean heavyweights Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellen to the roles respectively.

And while featuring an impressive line up of character actors as various X-MEN (incl. Halle Berry, Famke Janssen, James Marsden, Anna Paquin and more), the breakthrough star performance was that of Australia's Hugh Jackman as "Logan" (aka "the Wolverine"), primarily known at the time outside the U.S. as a theater performer, and who took the role (on his wife's recommendation) after Russell Crowe turned it down, and Dougray Scott, because of scheduling conflicts with MISSION: IMPOSSIBLE II, had to back out.

Produced on a budget of \$75 million, X-MEN took in nearly \$300 million worldwide and landed on many critics yearly "Top Ten" lists. It's sequel X-2 (2003 – also dir. by Singer) was an even bigger critical and financial hit; and it lead to not only the present series of "X-MEN Universe" films from 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox (incl. THE WOLVERINE, X-MEN: FIRST CLASS, DEADPOOL, the upcoming GAMBIT and many

others), but also (for better and for worse) signaled to the film industry that a new “mother lode” had been struck which could *and would* be mined throughout the coming decades.

## **“LITE”(ER) AT THE END OF MARVEL’S TUNNEL**

Two years after the debut of the first X-MEN film, the cinematic world was rocked with its first bonafied new generation worldwide comics-to-film blockbuster in Sam Raimi’s SPIDER-MAN (2002). A modern day reworking of arguably Marvel’s most famous character, a high school student whose life sucks; then after he’s bitten by a radioactive spider and obtains super powers ... *his life sucks even more!*, director Raimi brought equal parts adventure, sci fi, action, humor, romance, and old fashioned tug-at-your-heart pathos to a series of three films which between 2002 – 2007 enraptured the entire globe (young, old, male, female, from all social and economic groups) to the tune of approx. \$2.5 billion at the box office.

While Arad and Marvel were pleased their titles were finally getting the production value (and respect) they deserved, there *was* at the time (because the BLADE, X-MEN and SPIDER-MAN characters were controlled by other studios in agreements made long ago) a growing feeling of *“making everyone rich and famous and respected ... but ourselves”*. So, in 2004 David Maisel was brought in by Arad as “Chief Operating Officer of Marvel Studios” to supervise the creation of the company’s new production slate.

Armed with a \$525 million financial structuring deal with Merrill Lynch - to produce 10 films from its current catalog of characters over the next ten years, the new “Marvel Studios” set out for the first time to self-finance its own films beginning with IRON MAN (dir. by Jon Favreau) and THE INCREDIBLE HULK (dir. by Louis Leterrier), both released during the summer of 2008. Financial successes (IRON MAN would even end up on numerous “Top Ten” lists), inherent within both films were seeds to create a larger scale interconnected “Marvel Cinematic Universe” consisting of a series of films-to-come wherein various characters of one movie would crossover into another’s, plot elements would occasionally overlap, and it would all eventually lead to *and continue beyond* (just as in the comic books) the assembling of the Marvel super hero force known as THE AVENGERS.

Samuel L. Jackson appeared (in a post credit sequence) as S.H.I.E.L.D commander Nick Fury at the end of IRON MAN. Robert Downy, Jr. appeared as Tony Stark at the end of THE INCREDIBLE HULK. In IRON MAN 2 (2010) the character BLACK WIDOW is introduced, Nick Fury reappears to fill Tony Stark in on how the industrialist / inventor’s father was a founding member of S.H.I.E.L.D. And, oh yes, Thor’s hammer, Mjölfnir, is found in the desert of New Mexico. Nick Fury shows up again at the end of THOR (2011) – he now protecting an intergalactic artifact / power-source. And the character “Hawkeye” is also introduced.

The “power source” - the *Tesseract* - from THOR becomes the central “McGuffin” of CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE FIRST AVENGER (2011). And at the end of CAPTAIN AMERICA the ever ubiquitous Fury again makes an appearance, this time helping Cap / Steve Rogers understand, and begin the critical adjustment to life in, the present day; this after Cap has been thawed from a 50+ year Rip Van Winkle-like cyro-sleep.

When Thor's villainous brother Loki turns up, commandeers the Tesseract, and puts the entire world in danger, Nick Fury becomes the superhero genre's version of Lee Marvin's Capt. Reisman from THE DIRTY DOZEN; he assembling his own group of "rugged individualists who must set aside their differences for the greater good" in THE AVENGERS (2012). Marvel's self-financed "Cinematic Universe" was off and running. What the hell could go wrong? Well ...

Not seeing eye to eye on the planned rate of Marvel releases (and how the number of films debuting so closely together might possibly sap the integrity of each character down to the level of glorified cameos), Avi Arad - the man who spearheaded Marvel's financial resurrection, left the company in 2006, just as the first IRON MAN adventure was going into production. David Maisel, the young Chief Operating Officer brought in by Arad in 2004, was made Marvel Studios' Chairman. And Kevin Feige, originally tapped by producer Lauren Shuler-Donner to be a "consultant" on Bryan Singer's first X-MEN film, had proven his mettle enough over subsequent years with the emerging studio to be named its new President of Production.

Within ten years, with the exceptions of the X-MEN universe and FANTASTIC FOUR characters (both still at 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox), and NAMOR: THE SUB-MARINER (in legal limbo between, at last count, *three* studios), the rights to all formerly-licensed-to-others Marvel properties have either reverted back to Marvel Studios completely (BLACK PANTHER, DAREDEVIL, GHOST RIDER, THE PUNISHER, LUKE CAGE, BLADE, HULK, etc.), or agreements have been hashed out to integrate Marvel characters presently based at other studios into the ever expanding "MCU" (Marvel Cinematic Universe). For example, in 2015 Sony agreed to allow SPIDER-MAN to appear in future MCU films (first up – CAPTAIN AMERICA: CIVIL WAR), while it would continue to own, finance, produce (with Marvel's Kevin Feige) and distribute its newly rebooted franchise – the first such new SPIDER-MAN film slated for release in July 2017. The agreement also allows for the possibility of MCU characters (such as Iron Man, Black Widow, etc.) to be featured in those Sony produced Spidey films.

Before the founding and self-financing of Marvel Studios in 2006, Marvel's Avi Arad and Kevin Feige, while *officially* credited as "producers" on Fox and Sony's X-MEN and SPIDER-MAN franchises, in actuality functioned more as Marvel character "consultants" offering advice on, and filling in the backstory and histories of the characters for those who in the end legally had final say and final cut on how those characters were depicted on screen. During this time Arad and Feige learned what they liked and didn't like in how their characters were portrayed, and they attempted to discern what audiences responded and didn't respond to in these adaptations. So, when the time came to launch their own slate of films, they'd make the decision to primarily take things a slightly lighter thematic direction than the BATMAN and BLADE films had chosen.

While not wanting to undermine the integrity of the characters by "camping it up", they also (regardless of the uber serious tone of some of the comic books– see 2005's IRON MAN: EXTREMIS) wanted to make their MCU a little more "fun". Beginning with IRON MAN Marvel Studios would take things seriously, but also infuse their films with a mostly upbeat / optimistic vibe – this upbeat-ness sometimes crossing over into light comedy in adventures such as GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY (2014) and ANT-MAN (2015).

## **PROFITABLY “DARK” DAYS AT D.C.**

As Marvel films such as HOWARD THE DUCK and Corman’s FANTASTIC FOUR wallowed in the subpar arena, the D.C.’s properties made hand-over-fist millions, and received critical accolades, for everything from its Burton BATMANs (even the Joel Schumacher films were profitable), to TV endeavors such as LOIS & CLARK: THE NEW ADVENTURES OF SUPERMAN, SMALLVILLE and THE FLASH (a critical hit though not a ratings one); onto its acclaimed animated universe which included BATMAN: THE ANIMATED SERIES, the lauded theatrical film BATMAN: MASK OF THE PHANTASM and more.

At the dawn of the new cinematic millennium however, Marvel (and of course by now you’re seeing how this “back and forth” seesaw goes) would again “leap frog” over D.C. in the (apparent) popularity department for the first time since its original publications of the 1960s. “Apparent” because while (in media at least) the D.C. films of the 2000s would come under criticism for being too dark, and therefore supposedly shunned by audiences, in actuality they - with the notable exceptions of CATWOMAN (2004), JONAH HEX and THE LOSERS (both 2010), and GREEN LANTERN (2011) - would *all* be financial hits around the world. *Yes, even Bryan Singer’s SUPERMAN RETURNS!* (2006). Oh, and if you’re wondering, we’re not counting 2003’s THE LEAGUE OF EXTRAORDINARY GENTLEMEN film (loosely based on Alan Moore’s comic book series published by D.C.’s “America’s Best” imprint) because, produced by 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, it was *not* a D.C. / Warner project.

At any rate, as mentioned at the beginning of this piece, when glancing at a box office tally breakdown of the so-called “D.C. vs. Marvel Battle”, it’s remarkable to notice (not counting at the time of this writing the recently released BATMAN V. SUPERMAN, and soon-to-be-released CAPTAIN AMERICA: CIVIL WAR) that [the combined worldwide ticket take of Marvel & D.C. comic book adaptations over the last 25 years has been a whopping \\$16 billion](#) pretty much evenly divided between the properties of both companies.

The largest bulk of that “\$16 bill split two ways” began in 2004 for Marvel with the founding of its Marvel Studios self-financing slate, and in 2009 for D.C. with the official establishment by Warner Bros. of “D.C. ENTERTAINMENT”. In launching DCE, Warner Bros. assigned Diane Nelson - former Walt Disney Records promotions director, and former Warner Vice President of Global Brand Management, the new triple-threat titles of “President of DC Entertainment”, “President Of Warner Bros. Consumer Products” and “President & Chief Content Officer of Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment”.

Quite a bit for one person to take on all at once, especially when considering the “believe it or not” fact that, even though Warner Bros. for years had cranked out a successful series of films based upon their D.C. properties (incl. the Burton BATMANs, SUPERMAN RETURNS, Nolan’s first two DARK KNIGHTs, and Snyder’s WATCHMEN), until Nelson was appointed head of DCE the studio really had no officially designated D.C. Comics *film division*. Before 2009 the decisions on which films to make, and how to make and market them, largely fell to the WB brass themselves with now and then input from particular film makers. For this reason for a short period director / producers Nolan and Snyder became the defacto “creative heads” of Warner / D.C.’s unnamed-at-the-time film division.

In October 2014, on the eve of the release of Nolan's INTERSTELLAR, the [Wall Street Journal detailed](#) how Nolan had come to be revered (and wield the creative power) of few film makers within a single studio since Hitchcock, Spielberg or Cameron. Owing to the fact that not only were his first two Batman entries, BATMAN BEGINS and THE DARK KNIGHT, worldwide smashes, but that his INCEPTION (2010) - a complex and heady non-franchise film, was just as equally successful with critics and audiences, Nolan had established a name (and filmic brand) within the WB studio for entertaining genre crossed with artistic intellectualism. As such he became the darling of the studio, along with Snyder, who's 300 and WATCHMEN were also critical and audience faves displaying an intelligence considered not usual for the comic book genre at the time.

Nolan declined the offer to spearhead D.C.'s upcoming slate of comic book films, though he would show his gratitude for Warner's support of him over the years (from INSOMNIA through INTERSTELLAR) by co-producing (via his Syncopy production banner) with Snyder MAN OF STEEL, DAWN OF JUSTICE, and (if reports hold true) the upcoming WONDER WOMAN and JUSTICE LEAGUE.

While the Marvel films tended to be more "upbeat", the D.C. films would (counter-programming-like) deliberately work the "Dark Side of the Comic Book Street" - this to the chagrin of some. For a brief time yes, Marvel would flirt theatrically with darker material via it's short lived "Marvel Knights" banner. But when their licensed properties featured in the films PUNISHER: WAR ZONE (2008) and GHOST RIDER: SPIRIT OF VENGEANCE (2012) failed to sufficiently ignite the box office (RIDER was profitable; WAR ZONE was not), the characters reverted back to Marvel's ownership.

Fiege and company then made the decision to reserve it's darker material mostly for the burgeoning OnDemand / Netflix-like television streaming world where fans of those edgier denizens of the Marvel universe - like DAREDEVIL, JESSICA JONES and LUKE CAGE - would find a more suitable arena in which to explore the fascinatingly murky psyches of those cult characters who don't quite fit into the more pastel-colored landscape of SPIDER-MAN, THOR, CAPTAIN AMERICA or THE GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY. Hey, that ass-kicking vigilante Frank Castle himself (aka "The Punisher") would even show up, to great critical acclaim, in Season Two of Netflix's DAREDEVIL.

With its choice to work the "darker side of the street" (a decision confirmed by the failure of its "lighter" comic-book-to-film adaptation GREEN LANTERN in 2011) D.C. would boldly stake its cinematic claim with a series of edgier-than-Marvel comic book films such as the Jack The Ripper thriller FROM HELL (2001), BATMAN BEGINS (2005), CONSTANTINE (2005), the politically incendiary "V" FOR VENDETTA (2006), THE DARK KNIGHT (2008), WATCHMEN (2009), THE DARK KNIGHT RISES (2012) and MAN OF STEEL (2013).

At the same time, refuting the myth that darker themed comics-to-film don't register with audiences, a slew of numerous other "dark and edgy" non-D.C. / non-Marvel adaptations exploded across movie multiplexes - nearly all of them critically and financially successful. Among the many (which many audiences didn't even realize *were* adapted from comics sources) were ROAD TO PERDITION, SIN CITY, 300, AMERICAN SPLENDOR, VIRUS, THE MASK, WANTED,

GHOST WORLD, A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE, HELLBOY and HELLBOY: THE GOLDEN ARMY, 30 DAYS OF NIGHT, RED and RED 2, DREDD, WHITEOUT, BULLETPROOF MONK, ART SCHOOL CONFIDENTIAL, KICK-ASS, SCOTT PILGRIM VS. THE WORLD, PRIEST, KINGSMAN: THE SECRET SERVICE, SURROGATES, and 2 GUNS.

(Commentary)

## **“BATMAN V. SUPERMAN” / “CIVIL WAR” – TWO SIDES OF THE SAME SOCIO-POLITICAL COIN?**

At the time of the *finishing* of this article (we actually started it last fall, stepped away to attend to film and podcast works, then returned to it) Warner / D.C.’s BATMAN V. SUPERMAN: DAWN OF JUSTICE is in its second week of release. Officially bowing on Friday March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2016, it received an “early bird” debut (increasingly common these days) on Thurs. night March 24<sup>th</sup>. And not even through the U.S. Easter holiday weekend it, in spite of mixed reviews, received immensely positive film-goer word of mouth to the tune of taking in a whopping \$424 million globally in 2 ½ days. Not too shabby. In fact the “Cinematic SuperSlam match” took the box office crown away from previous March opening weekend champion THE HUNGER GAMES, and it trails only STAR WARS: THE FORCE AWAKENS, JURASSIC WORLD and HARRY POTTER AND THE DEATHLY HOLLOWES PT. 2 as the top weekend opening of all time. To date the highest ranking comic book-to-film adaptation on that list.

In our recent GullCottageOnline article [“The Kobayashi Maru of THE FORCE AWAKENS”](#), and also earlier in this piece, we posited the notion of the “perpetual motion” concept of popular success, wherein a film (or book, album, TV series or any trend in general) becomes increasingly popular ... *because* it’s popular; and the average person, unwilling to be left out of the conversation, *must* find out for themselves “*what all the talk is about*”. While this can account for a surge of interest in a project, it cannot account for the sweepingly cross-cultural global box office of something like THE SOUND OF MUSIC, THE EXORCIST, JAWS, STAR WARS, E.T., TITANIC, THE DARK KNIGHT or PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN.

In other words, there’s isn’t that much curiosity in all the world to make those films as successful, right out of the gates, as they all were / are. They all, in their own unique way, managed to somehow tap into the current sub-conscious sociological zeitgeist of their eras – which is usually a larger scale extension of the shifting turmoil within the minds of individual audience members.

This is how a film such as BATMAN V. SUPERMAN can be simultaneously critically derided by some, but publically embraced by many. And yes, we realize the film isn’t universally panned by critics. Many have given it high marks including [Rolling Stone’s Peter Travers](#) who proclaimed ...

*“Better than MAN OF STEEL but below the high bar set by Nolan’s THE DARK KNIGHT, DAWN OF JUSTICE is still a colossus - the stuff that DC Comics dreams are made of for that kid in all of us who yearns to see Batman and Superman suit up and go in for the kill”.*

And Mark Hughes, in his [Forbes Magazine review “BATMAN V. SUPERMAN TRIUMPHANT”](#) referred to the film as ...

*“... the follow-up to THE DARK KNIGHT that many viewers and fans wanted or hoped for; ... it's visually stunning, with powerful emotional storytelling; an awe-inspiring action spectacle”.*

Perhaps the most telling, ... or at the very least the one with which we most concur, Charles Koplinski of the Illinois Times, in his piece [“Intelligent Script Grounds JUSTICE”](#) called it ...

*“... a brooding, but most importantly intelligent take on the seminal figures of our 20<sup>th</sup> century pop culture mythology; a movie that at once pays tribute to these characters' roots while offering up modern incarnations of them that ring true for our times”.*

Perhaps via coincidence of time of birth, which made us one of those split down the middle / Robert Bolt / A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS-kind-of personalities (we were raised on both the more traditional “family friendly” versions of Batman and Superman as well as on the darker revisionist take of the 1980s - 90s) we clearly understand why some love, while others despise, the Snyder MAN OF STEEL and BATMAN V. SUPERMAN: DAWN OF JUSTICE reworkings of the characters – much of the debate seeming to stem from subjective individual perceptions / conceptions of what those characters are, and what they personally mean to each individual audience member.

As many aren't familiar with the “canon” of Marvel characters such as IRON MAN, the X-MEN or NICK FURY as laid down when they were first created back in the 1960s, they aren't aware of the massive differences between those original versions and their 1980s re-working / revamping / upgrades if you will. And as such they aren't bothered by the canonical changes to them within the current Marvel films ...*simply because they weren't aware of original canon to begin with.*

Because many *were* familiar, however, with the original canon of Marvel's most iconic SPIDER-MAN, many didn't take too kindly to the two Marc Webb films, THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN (2012) and THE AMAZING SPIDER-MAN 2 (2014), even though they were rather faithful to the tone of the Spidey books of the later 80s / 90s era. Once again, an audience can only judge / gauge a film as “good”, “bad” or “faithful” to the extent that it is aware of the original material on which it is based. This is normal.

BATMAN V. SUPERMAN: DAWN OF JUSTICE makes reference to one of the most famous (or infamous) of them, Jason Todd, the next young man to don the Robin costume after the departure of an aging Grayson. In 1988's BATMAN: A DEATH IN THE FAMILY story arc, Todd is captured and killed by The Joker; and for years Batman blames himself. That's what the “*Ha! Ha! Ha! Joke's on you Batman*” message painted / scrawled on that suit in DAWN OF JUSTICE was all about.

In an attempt to avoid (we'll reuse that phrase from our earlier [D.O.J. film review](#)) “re-blocking old hat”, in the late 1980s / early 90s the BATMAN comic book creators made the Bruce Wayne character more intriguing by allowing him to age - with all of the positives and negatives which go along with it. Among the positives was an even more cleverly stealthy (damned near ninja-like) Batman slinking through the nocturnal landscapes of Gotham. On the negative side however, the “World's Greatest Detective” also became more like a Detective who's spent too much time on the street, ... with that time beginning to soil his very soul. This was the Batman which re-emerged in Frank Miller's THE DARK KNIGHT RETURNS (1988). And it's also why director Zack Snyder chose Ben Affleck (approaching his mid 40s he's to date the oldest actor to portray Batman) for DAWN OF JUSTICE.



Now, this is (relatively) newer material to which many are unaware, and which they will therefore mistakenly interpret as being unfaithful to previously established "canon". But canon, not unlike those "Uncanny X-MEN" is forever changing / forever evolving. Today Kryptonite, Lex Luthor, the Fortress of Solitude, and the backstory of Superman's father Jor-El are all considered near-biblical canon within the SUPERMAN mythos. But most of these concepts didn't exist when the character was first created. They were added years later; and now, in historical retrospect to modern audiences, are assumed to have "*always been there*".

The same with the depiction of a flat-headed FRANKENSTEIN with neck bolts, or a Medusa with the body of a serpent. It wasn't until the 1931 James Whale film that Frankenstein's monster (created by Mary Shelly in 1818); and the 1981 appearance of the legendary Gorgon (created in ancient Greece) in CLASH OF THE TITANS, that these depictions of those famous characters came to be considered *the* canonical depictions. In fact today there are those completely unaware that these depictions have not "*always been there*". The same with the BATMAN and SUPERMAN characters, and their newer "sacrilegious" reinterpretations in recent films. Quite simply when you make reference to a reworking / re-inventing of a canon to which the majority of an audience is not familiar, the perception (as sincerely and unknowingly slanted as it may unknowingly be) becomes that that new film(s) are being sacrilegious to laid down and established rules ... when they actually aren't. They're just faithful to rules of which many are unaware.

Also, it's important to keep in mind (and just simply notice) that, while maybe slightly updated a bit here and there, the Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman characters in BATMAN V. SUPERMAN: DAWN OF JUSTICE aren't really all *that* dramatically different from their earlier depictions. The world in which they now live, however - a violent, cynical, xenophobic, post 9/11 world, very much *is*. And as such those characters in BATMAN V. SUPERMAN, and in MAN OF STEEL, are having difficulty "fitting in" with it. *That* to us is what is so fascinating with BATMAN V. SUPERMAN, and the Snyder films in general. Superman is still Superman, but a xenophobic world (as depicted in the films) isn't embracing him now in the manner in which they did back in that entirely different, innocent and alien world of America during the 1950s.

As also alluded to in our [THE FORCE AWAKENS](#) piece, we deduce that many are upset that (more than with the characters being supposedly altered) their fond childhood memories *associated with those characters* are being usurped. So, in a way the newer films become "guilty by association" with those memories. The new adaptations can't win because, in the subconscious minds of some audience members, "*NOTHING will ever compete with, when as a 12 yr. old, I saw Chris Reeve fly for the first time as Superman*". In this all too common – if unrecognized – scenario we're not comparing the new film to its own established canon of which we may or may not be familiar, we're comparing it to the *personal canon* our own lives at a certain point in our own well remembered history. Our judgement becomes based more on personal recollection, and emotions associated with that recollection, rather than being based on the fact that the film is a "good" or "bad" new adaptation in and of itself.

Not unlike with the original releases of SNOW WHITE, FANTASIA, BLADE RUNNER and THE THING, the objective determination of the "good" or "bad" of the film itself is being swallowed up by said film's conformity, or lack thereof, to the current popular (and personal) zeitgeist.

One more thing in closing ... .

## **GHOSTS OF 9/11**

Too heavy a topic / subtext for the panels of a comic book, or the frame of comic book film? Then you really don't know either. One of the greatest strengths of film in general, and the genre film in particular, is the manner in which the latest additions to the art form (intentionally, but more often than not *unintentionally*) mirrors the brooding inner trauma of society at large – essentially becoming the “waking dream state” in which audiences purge / exorcise dark and brooding fears, concerns, anxieties and other hang-ups via the cathartic osmosis of seeing others play them out before us on screen. Arguably second only to the horror genre, the comic book genre (in print and in film) does this more often, and more effectively than any other.

During the 1940s, when, in the minds of many, the line between good and evil was much more cleanly delineated, the comic book heroes all (Superman, Wonder Woman, the earlier versions of Captain America, the Sub-Mariner and others) went off to fight Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan with great gusto and (now realized in retrospect) a degree of ethnic simplicity. And both of these were a parallel to the feelings of the public at large. During the post war / Cold War 1950s the comics industry endured its own mini version of the McCarthy “Witch Hunts” as comics were blamed for that rise in juvenile delinquency. Then subsequently, just as in society at large, the individual uniqueness of many characters was homogenized into saccharine cookie-cutter “family friendly” paternal versions of their former selves.

During the 1960s – 70s, the backlash against those societal expectations for everyone to conform to LEAVE IT TO BEAVER / BRADY BUNCH-like ideals, mirrored itself in the rebellious rise of the marginalized “counter culture” (and growingly minority based) heroes of the Marvel universe – realized in characters such as SPIDER-MAN, X-MEN, HULK, BLACK PANTHER, FALCON and a time-displaced CAPTAIN AMERICA.

During the “carry a big stick” Ronald Regan / Margaret Thatcher years – when “actions speak louder than words” filmic heroes such as Schwarzenegger, Norris, and Van Damme ruled the multiplex, anti-hero characters such as the WOLVERINE, THE PUNISHER, GHOST RIDER, DAREDEVIL, ELEKTRA and SPAWN saw a surge in popularity as they spoke to the “Why do criminals get all the rights?” angst of the day. Batman would re-emerge as a more emotionally scarred version of his former self. Superman would take on new psychological depth – he even beginning to question whether or not he, as an alien, truly belonged. And new characters such THE WATCHMEN would arise to question accepted concepts of heroism and political patriotism.

The next seismic shift within the zeitgeist of popular Western consciousness was the fateful morning of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. With the terrorist attack on, and decimation of New York's World Trade Towers, mainland America, and by extension those nations under her protective umbrella, were rudely awakened to the fact that they were as open and susceptible to mass acts of subversive terrorist warfare every bit as any warlord-torn so-called distant Third World nation. Triggering a defensive net, both geographically and mentally, America would see herself fall into a level of political paranoia the likes of which had not been experienced since the days following Pearl Harbor or the advent of the Cold War.

Politicians began to speak of building walls, civil rights would be curbed in controversial actions such as the Patriot Act, the NSA would be granted greater powers of surveillance, and the government would begin to lean on corporations such as Apple in attempts to force them to apply its technological knowledge in services deemed essential to national security. The internal pressure would aggravate pre-existing social fault lines, and split even wider ethnic, economic, religious and racial divides; pitting citizens against one another not only in voting booths, but in physical protest clashes such as the “Occupy Wall Street”, “Black Lives Matter” and “Ban the Confederate Flag” movements.

As was the norm, both comic books and their film renditions would both foresee and then comment on this state of civil unrest. How could they not? Echoing Stephen King's "*What makes you think I had a choice?*" truism, both Marvel and D.C. - and we're not just talking the corporate entities, but the artists and writers and their families and other loved ones, had lifelong connections to New York City. And many personally lost some of those loved ones on that tragic September morning. How could a cathartic "exorcism" of sorts, ... a creative purging of consciousness and anxiety *not* show up in their work from that point onward?

While in many ways the comic books of the early 2000s themselves explored and made commentary on 9/11 specifically, years later the films *based on* the comics of that not-long-ago era would (logically and chronologically) explore the fallout (societal "collateral damage" if you will) of that cultural shift point in American history. Hence MAN OF STEEL, BATMAN V. SUPERMAN, CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE WINTER SOLDIER and (if it lives up to specs) CAPTAIN AMERICA: CIVIL WAR. Once again we remind you how the world itself has changed dramatically since the days of Richard Donner's SUPERMAN: THE MOVIE.

The “First Contact” sci fi film has long been a staple of genre history. For our purposes divided into two categories – the “Benign Visitation” First Contact and “Alien Invasion” First Contact - the popularity of each tends to vary according to the social climate of the day. The optimistic “Benign Visitation” saga, such as CLOSE ENCOUNTERS OF THE THIRD KIND, E.T., STARMAN and John Sayles’ THE BROTHER FROM ANOTHER PLANET, features a peaceful (even Christ-like) visitor from another world who brings wisdom and knowledge, and causes humankind to reexamine said humanity in the hope of bettering themselves for the future.

The more cynical “Invasion” yarn on the other hand is self explanatory. With WAR OF THE WORLDS, INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS, THE THING, INDEPENDENCE DAY and the like, the “Invasion” tale often mirrors the paranoia of the era in which it is released every bit as much as the “Benign Visitation” saga mirrors it’s sense of hope. Zack Snyder’s MAN OF STEEL is among the most unique of science fiction films ever made in that *it is simultaneously both!*

In MAN OF STEEL Superman / Clark Kent is the benign visitor – with all of which that entails; and General Zod and his force, armed with their “World Engine” planetary terraforming devices, are the antagonistic invaders who (true to filmic history) come to represent contemporary national fear and xenophobia. Unlike the way in which Superman is embraced in the beloved Max Fleischer cartoons of the 1940s, TV’s THE ADVENTURES OF SUPERMAN in the 1950s, and Richard Donner’s SUPERMAN THE MOVIE of the 1970s, in the post 9/11 era MAN OF STEEL, while Superman himself is still the classically benign, Christ-like visitor, he is met not with welcoming arms, but by a wounded, fearful and suspicious world which can’t tell whether he is friend or foe, and essentially decides the most expediently wise course of action is to treat him as the later.

This sentiment is clearly carried over into **BATMAN V. SUPERMAN: DAWN OF JUSTICE** wherein Bruce Wayne / Batman, both emotionally scarred by the senseless murder of his parents years ago, and guilt-ridden over the more recent tragic yet seemingly preventable loss of a number of employees under him, commandeers the mantle of self-appointed savior of humanity, and declares of Superman, *"He's a potentially dangerous alien who, if he wanted to, could annihilate our entire world; and if there's even a one in one thousand chance he might do that, it's our duty to act to prevent it from happening"*. A rather familiar line of monologue heard during many a contemporary Sunday morning political interview show, is it not?

For those eager to use this as fodder for the argument that D.C. *is indeed* taking things far too seriously these days (with all of those post 9/11 paranoia references and such), please note that Marvel's **AVENGERS: AGE OF ULTRON** (2015) - you know, from the "lighter" side of the street - does the same thing. Only in place of the alien / foreign "benign or threatening" paradigm, **AGE OF ULTRON** does it's clever "two sides of the same coin" post 9/11 subtextual paranoia narrative using the concept of the present day cyber threat.

Just as the degree of optimism or pessimism of the "First Contact" subgenre varies depending on the socio-political mood of the day, so has / does the "Cyber" subgenre follow(ed) suit. Think about it. During the Cold War / nuclear fear days of the 1950s - 60s the new all powerful computing machine was often the modern day version of the "magic antidote" or elixir which helped stave off 3rd Act cinematic calamity in films such as **THEM!**, **EARTH VS. THE FLYING SAUCERS** and **THIS ISLAND EARTH**. But by the time we get to the much more politically cynical Vietnam / Watergate era of the late 1960s / 1970s the once marvel of man has become a threat in **2001: A SPACE ODYSSEY**, **COLOSSUS: THE FORBIN PROJECT**, **DEMON SEED**, **THE TERMINAL MAN**, **WESTWORLD**, etc.

During the more optimistic 1980s, just as "First Contact" films like **CLOSE ENCOUNTERS**, **E.T.** and **STARMAN** encouraged us to lay aside old school fears of the unknown, so too did the "Cyber" film genre introduce more benign and trusting "silicon based" characters like **SHORT CIRCUIT**'s "Johnny Five", the government created A.I. child in 1985's **D.A.R.Y.L.**, and even the defense system **WOPR** / "Joshua" of 1983's Oscar nominated **WARGAMES**. What's that you say, *"In WARGAMES Joshua damned near started a Third World War!"*? Yes, maybe so. But remember it was only because he / it was following (mirroring) us in what we seemed to deem the important and logical course of action. In the end his *more* logical central processing mind deduces that thermonuclear war is *"a strange game"*, and that *"... the only way to win is not to play"*. So, in essence, he / it begins as a threat, then (in popularly optimistic 80s era fashion) becomes a hero, ... even though he / it doesn't realize it.

With **AGE OF ULTRON** we're in the midst of the same post 9/11 **MAN OF STEEL** thematic paradox of being both types of cyber films - the "positive" and "negative" - at the same. After that fateful day in September dashed the optimism of an entire generation, and replaced it with mistrust, **AGE OF ULTRON** gave us a comforting (not in what we want, but in what we expect) cyber terrorist threat in the title character himself; he / it cut from the classically antagonistic mold of 2001's "HAL 9000", Professor Forbin's "Colossus", and **DEMON SEED**'s "Proteus IV" - right down to he / it attempting to create a "child". But, just as with **MAN OF STEEL**, we also at the same time have the more benign and wise side of the same coin in the cyber character "Vision". Partially created from "Jarvis", Tony Stark's computer in all of the previous **IRON MAN** films, **AGE OF ULTRON** maintains a wonderful sense of conceptual consistency in having acclaimed actor Paul Bettany (who voiced Jarvis in the **IRON MAN** films) portray the new character.

The current controversy over *“Is it civil responsibility or the erosion of civil rights / is it wisdom or xenophobia to take preventative action against a possible or perceived threat?”* was predicted over thirty years ago in Frank Miller’s *THE DARK KNIGHT RISES* graphic novel – which, with its Batman vs. Superman climax, serves as partial basis for the current *DAWN OF JUSTICE* film. It was also kinda / sorta foretold ten years ago in Marvel’s *AVENGERS: CIVIL WAR* (2006 – 2007 / by Mark Millar & Steve McNiven) where the controversy over a government sanctioned “Superhero Registration Act” causes an ideological division within the Avengers, which then erupts into those in favor of the act and those opposed to it turning upon one another. This plotline is adapted into the soon-to-be-released *CAPTAIN AMERICA: CIVIL WAR* - the first film of the next phase of Marvel’s Cinematic Universe.

Via these newer films, while still patrolling their respective “lighter” and “darker” sides of the street, both the Marvel and D.C. franchises are thematically concerning themselves with attacks on homeland soil (from both foreign / alien and domestic sources), which leads to increased “security precautions” and an erosion of civil rights, which then leads the members of a community to turn upon one another. Sheer coincidence ... or contemporary artistic prescience? It’s fascinating either way; and perhaps more than anything else causes us to double-down on our long held assertion that, within the long (so-called) history of “Marvel vs. D.C.” we champion the side-by-side, “light” and “dark”, “split-right-down-the-middle” reign of both.

This also brings us full circle regarding the earlier mentioned Gandhi-ish, Robert Bolt *“MAN FOR ALL SEASONS / LAWRENCE OF ARABIA / ZHIVAGO”*-like “duality” roosting (sometimes dormant / other times violently) within both the individual as well as the society in which he / she lives. From microcosmic representations of the divisive struggle within one’s own heart and mind to do what’s right, to the more macro-cosmic battle within contemporary society to do what’s right for the population at large, both the comic book world, along with its filmic adaptation off-shoots, have proven themselves to often be much more than lighthearted / light-headed / feel good popcorn fodder and nothing more.

And, for those long-standing comic book / graphic novel fans out there (*who haven’t read the inset BATMAN V. SUPERMAN film review on pg. 2 - for this issue was broached there as well*) as far as so-called “faithfulness to canon” we ask, why are so many in favor of new and revisionist interpretations of ancient, even what some would call sacred, text in films such as *THE LAST TEMPTATION OF CHRIST* and *NOAH*, as well as literature such as Salmon Rushdie’s *THE SATANIC VERSES*.

So many of us proudly stand behind those works when they’re criticized by others as being blasphemous. And we champion the concepts of an open-minded and fresh take on a long standing (borderline cliched’) philosophical trope. Yet when it comes to James Bond, *STAR WARS*, *STAR TREK*, Superman or Batman, ... *we’ll have none of it!* Uh, uh! To alter *them* into a new revisionist mode is to either treat them as less than the icons they deserve to be preserved as, ... or those doing the modern adaptations have little respect for the value of the originals. Take a moment to think about that one if you will.

As with *any* genre there is a time and place for both the frivolously fun as well as the darker, more penetrating, multi-layered riff on a theme. And to criticize the Marvel films of yesteryear for not being as serious as the Tim Burton / D.C. *BATMAN* films, then to years later criticize the darker D.C. films for not being as “fun” as the current crop of Marvel releases is as foolishly (and unrealistically) tantamount to the narrow-minded demand that there be no various shades within the comedic film genre. No dark satire of M.A.S.H., political comedy of *BULWORTH*, perceptive romantic social humor

of TOOTSIE, but only the flat out non-sequitur spoof-fests of AIRPLANE, BLAZING SADDLES and I'M GONNA GIT YOU SUCKA'.

The same with thrillers. We don't insist they must all have the gritty and visceral tone of THE SILENCE OF THE LAMBS, and that lighter ones can't exist laced with humor such as TREMORS, or that others can't be erotically charged like BASIC INSTINCT? The only reason the comic book / comic book film genre is so pigeonholed is because those largely unfamiliar with the source material (and yes, even some who are familiar) still have a problem viewing them as anything other than "kiddie stuff" traded during lunchtime for a baloney sandwich, or adapted into a Saturday morning cartoon. But from the very beginnings of SUPERMAN in the 1930s, the comic book has been but another form of literature. And as such it has that geared towards children, adolescents, teens, and some which is strictly for adults only. R. Crumb's FRITZ THE CAT anyone?

Time to give the Adam West version of BATMAN, and the animated THE SUPER FRIENDS rendition of things a rest as being the *only* kind of representation possible. As societal mores, angst, fears and general beliefs (be they "Left", "Right" or "Middle of the Road") fluctuate, so does the arts in it's music, literature and other forms of popular (and pop culture) entertainment. You may despise Andy Warhol, Philip Glass and Zack Snyder's SUPERMAN next to Goya, Prokofiev and Richard Donner's version, ... but there is room (and a necessity) for all.

As both comic book and film fans (as well as world philosophy and religion students) since childhood, we've always felt there was room for both traditional and revisionist takes on material. In the end one doesn't necessarily have to agree with, *or even like*, that take. But one must (at the very least) give breathing room for both to exist.

As such, when viewing those new trailers for the upcoming SUICIDE SQUAD (2016) - sort of an urban DIRTY DOZEN mission with of a band of D.C.'s top villains, we react with a resoundingly shocked "*Goddamn!*", immediately followed by a resoundingly impressed "*God - f\*\*kin'-damn!*" But there is already talk of Warner / D.C. considering reshoots to tone things down and make them a bit lighter.

Written and directed by David Ayer (TRAINING DAY, END OF WATCH, FURY), and with a cast featuring Will Smith as "Deadshot", Jared Leto as "The Joker", Margot Robbie as "Harley Quinn", Jai Courtney as "Boomerang", Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje as "Killer Croc", and with an appearance by Ben Affleck as Batman / Bruce Wayne, one wouldn't expect a lighter take on the material. But the finished product either way - lighter or darker, and set to debut in August 2016 - will tell the final wisdom of the decision.

In the meantime, as long as the creative apple-cart is now and again upset with the surprising addition of a more humorous Marvel based GUARDIANS OF THE GALAXY or ANT-MAN; or D.C. pulls a surprisingly more adult-oriented something like SUICIDE SQUAD or FROM HELL from their sleeve of creative tricks, we'll continue to challenge those naysayers who predict the eminent demise of the comic-to-film genre.

Many foresaw the death knell of the popular printed novel ... then along comes JURASSIC PARK, HARRY POTTER, FIFTY SHADES OF GREY, THE HUNGER GAMES, TWILIGHT, ... keep naming 'em! At the height of the "reality TV" movement the same predicted the final gasp of intelligently scripted television; ... then we get DEXTER, HOUSE OF CARDS and THE PEOPLE VS. O.J. SIMPSON. Now social media trolls, a handful of critics - who generally didn't care for the genre in the first place (and we

admit those muscle filled tights *are* sometimes a difficult visual pill to swallow), and others peer into cracked crystal balls from whence they divine the end of comic-books-to-film, citing how “*too much of the same thing*” leads to burnout. And we couldn’t agree more.

Therefore perhaps it is high time we stop insisting that all Marvel, D.C., and other films snugly fit into the tonal / thematic paradigm of last week’s most successful comic book movie. For from IRON MAN to TANK GIRL, and from SUPERMAN: THE MOVIE to MEN IN BLACK, to MYSTERY MEN, ROAD TO PERDITION, 2 GUNS, BLADE, AMERICAN SLENDOR, MAN OF STEEL and BATMAN V. SUPERMAN, as long as Marvel, D.C., and every other publisher stapling and gluing illustrated pages together, continue to reinvent and reinvigorate the genre, we’ll always say there’s room for Michael Jackson *and* Prince, Coke *and* Pepsi, McDonald’s *and* Burger King, and (of course) both The Stones *and* The Who.

Hey, D.C., it’s been a long (at times difficult) road in bringing respect to this genre. But you’re on the right track. And you too Marvel. As mighty as ever, you continue to live up to your name!

*“EXCELSIOR!”* to you both.

CEJ

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