

From Funny Books to Filmed Bravissimo: Adapting America's Bastard Child Artform

This summer will see the revival of many comic book classics. Read how writers have managed to get heroes off the pages of comic books and onto the silver screen.

We are in the throes of a comic film renaissance.

Fox's X-Men sequel is a big smash this summer, never disappointing a fan. Universal's The Hulk is still to come, but first, let us jaunt backwards to see how this revival has come to be. Spider-Man's long-awaited high-flying debut ensnared close to a billion dollars worldwide last year, even without James Cameron in the director's chair. Perhaps the response would not have been so tremendous without the modestly-budgeted surprise hit X-Men two years prior. It single-handedly restored interest in a hibernating genre. Until the film's astonishing opening weekend, comic book films had been "on ice" after the debacle of Batman & Robin, the last installment of a four-picture powerhouse franchise for Warner Bros. that originated in 1989 by director Tim Burton's freaky Batman redux. Unforgettable, though, is the godfather of all comics films: Richard Donner's 1979 Superman which utilized cutting edge special effects to bring America's quintessential illegal immigrant, a once two-dimensional character, to vibrant, remarkable life. A genre was born & hellip;

How, then, is a comic book series hundreds of issues long (and counting) translated to two hours of silver screen time? How do you make people of all ages who would not be caught dead reading a comic book in public have the desire to fork over the price of admission?

Surely, if the comic is good enough to be made into a film, there must not be very much that needs to be changed. There must be something magical in those thousands of garish panels worth capturing and presenting on screen exactly as it was originally printed. Why mess with a sure bet, no? Wrong, wrong, wrong. Comics are actually a very delicate, often downright irascible source material to adapt. The process of distillation is a complicated one. If screenwriters get this alchemy right, it's right (to the amazing sound of a billion dollars). If it's wrong, it's barely capable of making its budget back (case in point, Daredevil).

First, the screenwriter sits down with the producers and/or director to figure out the hero's essence. Some essences arrive conveniently pre-packaged as long-standing mantras, e.g. Spider-Man's classic quote, "With great power comes great responsibility." As a comic, Stan Lee intended his creation to be the world's first teenage superhero, directly targeting his readership base. He was attempting to establish an ability to relate never before possible with brooding, orphan millionaires (DC's Batman) nor indestructible, morally impeccable aliens (DC's Superman). Spider-Man's alter ego is the focus of the Stan Lee-scripted original comics. Peter Parker's just a normal kid. He struggles daily to balance an indefatigable barrage of "normal" problems: at home with his overprotective mother-figure, on the job with a lovingly sadistic boss and sometimes, in his love life (or a lack thereof). Additionally, Peter contends with the stress of having superpowers with which he feels compelled by guilt to do something good in the world. Where can this below-average Joe draw the line between his commitment to protecting society and the pursuit of his own personal happiness?

A consistency of the Spider-Man comics for the past three decades is that Peter Parker cannot balance these two separate universes of his life—his personal life almost always gets the dirty end of the stick. However, in his own mind, he functions as a regular guy first, and a superhero second (contrary to Superman). In viewing the 2002 film, one notices it is not jam-packed with action; rather, it is highlighted by it. Parker's relationships are what drive the picture. Tragically, those precious few loved ones are doomed to perpetually tottering on the brink of danger precisely because Parker feels compelled to use his great power responsibly (apparently, supervillains don't like being foiled—go figure). Yet Parker needs this fragile support network of loved ones to stay sane and spiritually fortified in order to continue a hero's thankless, unending mission. This paradox is all one needs to understand the Spider-Man comics' jump to film. This internal/situational paradox is conceptually exquisite enough to provide Sony Pictures story material for sequel after sequel. (No wonder the legal battle for the character rights raged so infamously long!) The paradox plays out so powerfully on film, in fact, that Willem Dafoe's villainous Green Goblin is overshadowed to the point he seems peripheral. Interestingly, the scenes wherein Dafoe portrays the corporate tycoon father of Parker's best friend (a villain-in-the-making himself) are some of the best in the movie. Punches are not being thrown, but multi-layered relationships are evident between the twisted, deceptive troika. Thematically, the Green Goblin identity serves as the flipside of Spider-Man's mantra, illustrating the social terror possible to be wrought when great power is used irresponsibly for personal gain.

Also, in strictly a story sense, Green Goblin provides the obligatory opportunity for "highest stakes" come the film's third act. In the comic, the "wounding" of Parker's loved ones is more often emotional than physical, as it is in the film for Parker's matriarch Aunt May and his love interest Mary Jane. In the original comics, the wounding is inflicted by Parker's perceived "insensitivity" when he's late for important dates or MIA altogether because

he was too busy saving citizens' lives from super-villains. Of course he can't reveal the real reason for his frequently inconsiderate behavior, so he has to come off looking like a self-centered jerk, when in actuality he is the farthest from it! Now that's good drama. Alas, the oft-written unwritten laws of cinema call for highest stakes possible—hurt feelings just can't hack it in an action movie's final act (we watch romantic comedies for hurt feelings). Therefore, Green Goblin must be the one to attempt murdering Spidey's family. If their feelings get hurt in the bloody, baudy process, hey, all the better.

As for the X-Men films, arising from the world's top-selling comic series, the problem for the screenwriters in adapting this rag-tag band of super-powered social outcasts was to dilute the most convoluted, ongoing saga of all time (soap operas have nothing on X-Men comics) into a motion picture experience capable of being enjoyed by someone who has never even heard of the comic before. This was to be a monumental task. One too big for Academy Award®-winning screenwriter Christopher McQuarrie or Ed Solomon to complete. You can't discredit them, though. Over the years, X-Men books (presently around 10 titles published month-to-month) have become an oceanic hodgepodge of science-fiction/fantasy story elements. Government conspiracies? Uh-huh. Time travel? We have it. Space alien empires? Double-check. Deaths and resurrections? Practically every other month! No, in the comics, it isn't just about men and women born with awesome powers trying to survive in a world that hates and fears them. The films, wisely, have chosen to focus on convincing their audience to willfully suspend disbelief for a single premise—mutants walk among us—thereby DUMPING all that extra garbage.

On celluloid, the X-Men are cast as symbols for any ostracized group, the identity of which shifts with the times. When Stan Lee created the book, it was during the turmoil of the civil rights movement. African-Americans wanted equality everywhere in the country, and they should not have been denied simply because they were born different from the majority. Professor X, the X-Men's founder, assumed a sort of Martin Luther King stance on the question of "mutant rights," while Magneto adopted more extreme posturings reminiscent of Malcolm X, or, at times in later years, Marcus Garvey. The 2000 film, brilliantly conceived by director Bryan Singer, retained these two characters and their respective ideologies as the cornerstones of a simple, dark, strange story. Amnesiac protagonist Wolverine is trapped in the limbo between them. Nowadays, "mutants" like to be claimed as symbols by members of practically every ethnic, cultural or racial minority. First, African-Americans in the 60s, then gays in the 90s during the outbreak of AIDS madness and, most recently, Arab-Americans and Muslims. Bryan Singer's skillful team delivered a stand-alone picture, a modern classic, in 90 brisk minutes. (When was the last time you heard complaints about a movie being too short? I haven't, before or since X-Men.)

This summer's X-2 built upon the sturdy foundation set by its predecessor. Where before sequels have torn down, it raised up the merits of the original. No wonder the reception, both by critics and theatergoers, has been as bright as Cyclop's red optic blasts. X-2 is actually the first comic film, at least to my knowledge, to base its storyline predominantly upon a single issue. The comic, written by Chris Claremont, is entitled God Loves, Man Kills. All prior film adaptations of superheroes have been culled from many different moments and stories, or created brand new from the brain of the screenwriter. For instance, Spider-Man's Queensboro bridge showdown finale came specifically from a legendary issue of the series, but the rest of the film was pieced together from other stories and concepts, while Mary Jane's film character, inexplicably, underwent a near-total overhaul from the comics version. Does X-2's comic book-boosted plot herald a new dawn in comic film screenwriting? If those films are like this year's Daredevil, so un-cinematic and faithful to the source that it hurts to watch, let us hope not.

As for the impossible-to-ignore Batman film series, the first installment is the most notable in terms of its variations during adaptation. Costume designer Bob Wringwood is the culprit who started this whole "leather-for-spandex costume" trend (thankfully, so). Story and character premises are also very different. In the comics, the Joker once was a broke, failed standup comedian who participated in a single heist to provide for his pregnant wife. The heist was botched by rookie vigilante Batman, whereupon the comedian accidentally plunged into a vat of chemicals that drove him wholly, terribly insane. In the film, the Joker (portrayed nightmarishly well by Jack Nicholson) starts out as a slow-burning, over-the-hill gangster on the outs with his boss "over a WOMAN!" A very different origin, yes; but also more easily-digestible in the way director Burton was striving for. Hollywood doesn't like its screen villains to steal any of the audience's sympathy from the hero, the dashing star. Cinematically, polarizing the hero and villain tends to work best, whereas in comics, this spectrum is much more fun and open to writers for exploration. Also, to cinematically link hero and villain most tightly, the Joker was made to be the murderer of Batman's parents. Not so, in the comics. Another odd incongruity between the two media is the presence of a love interest (strangely always a blondie) for our leathery hero. Movieland Bruce Wayne falls in love fast and hard. Batman's loves in the printed pages are few and far between—only S&M minx Catwoman is a constant source of sexual sparks. The comics Batman is far too consumed with vigilantism to allow love to blossom in his cold, broken heart. In the four blockbuster films, he broods always at the brink of redemption. Some are surprised to hear that in the comics, millionaire playboy Bruce Wayne is a callous heartbreaker of bimbos. He only dates for social pretenses. Were Bruce Wayne to be portrayed that way on film, sort of a misogynist, the requisite polarity between hero and villain would be compromised. Heaven forbid our film heroes be flawed mortals!

It's 2003, the year of the superhero, yet comics are still regarded as juvenile, if one bothers to regard them at all. The comic industry is slowly recovering from the boom and subsequent "bubble bursting" it experienced in the 90s. Perhaps the glut of comics films slated to hit the multiplexes in upcoming years will resuscitate it, perhaps resulting in the creation of scintillating new characters from which new, groundbreaking films might be made. How boring would it be if the same guys kept getting revamped film treatments every few years? I mean, really, how many Supermen do we need to see in the tights beside Christopher Reeve? How many Batmen …Oh never mind.

About This Author

Robert Piluso is a freelance writer residing in Chino Hills, CA. He has written or co-written numerous specs of various genres (including comics), a novel and is also a produced playwright. 2001's dark drama of drug addiction and redemption *The Point of You* ran at The Old Globe Theatres, San Diego and received warm reviews from both critics and audiences.