

Superhero films – how big genres live and die

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A word of caution: There be spoilers 'round these here parts.

They say variety is the spice of life, which is perhaps why we have trends or modes. And in the same way nobody wants to eat the same thing for dinner every night, we can grow tired of the types of films we watch. We call these types of films genres, but once tired, it's not like we can just throw out a genre and get a new one. They're limited like that. And so, we have to recycle them, much like we do fashion trends (see 90s normcore in the 2010s). Superhero films are the most recent film genre (and, potentially on its way out). Although the superhero genre has been around since the mid-1940s, over the past two decades these films have occupied a place of cynosure among all genres available to us, on big and small screens alike.

This is probably because of the convergence of several factors, the most obvious being the development of certain film technologies without which these visually demanding films would almost certainly have fallen flat. We could also argue that since the turn of the millennium, the world has been wracked with global terrorism, global financial collapse, global warming... basically, general global unrest. These films provide audiences with a form of catharsis and hope in times of such instability, which is perhaps why early consumers of the superhero were the geeky, downtrodden types. This brings us to the filmmakers themselves, potentially these aforementioned downtrodden geeky types. We are currently reaping a generation of filmmakers who grew up submerged in these stories and their various complexities. Lastly, there's an obscure piece of film theory that might also be playing a role in this success.

Mythology in film is a central topic of Author John Cawelti, especially so in his 1992 paper *Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Film*. Although he used this notion mostly in describing the transitions of the Westerns and hardboiled detective genres, the underlying theory is versatile enough to apply to any genre of story in whatever form, even comics. Fundamental to the theory is the idea that genres have life cycles (or trends). Myths, he said, were a pattern of narrative that a culture learned. More specifically, he argued that it is exactly because these patterns are learned that the genre has to transition from one form to another to avoid becoming predictable.

Arguably the first superhero film to begin the myth learning process was *X-Men* (2000). Where prior films had only ever reintroduced the mainstream interpretations of established household names like Batman and Superman, director Bryan Singer and screenwriter David Hayter were tasked with introducing us to characters with names like Cyclops, Magneto and Wolverine. Characters who could control the weather and shoot laser blasts – or, more accurately, “project beams of heatless ruby-colored concussive force” – from their eyes. Somehow, they managed to attract mainstream interest while simultaneously staying true (to an acceptable degree) to what had previously been no more than geek subculture. Their success ultimately led to emulation by others, and in turn raised mainstream audience expectations and sophistication, leading to our important transitions or mutations.

Burlesque

Burlesque is potentially the first transition to have emerged. Here, the genre tends to become self-aware and sarcastic, even attempting to undermine itself. Films in this phase are tasked with not taking themselves so seriously while avoiding sentimentality. *Deadpool* (2016 and 2018) is the epitome of burlesque. These two films, much like the comics before them, are marked by near constant self-awareness, taking multiple shots at weary conventions. *Deadpool*'s “Look!, she's going to do a superhero landing – wait for it ... Totally impractical; they all do it” gag, is a prime example of this. Through this mockery, the audience and the film are both in on the joke; we're laughing with the cliché rather than at it. But this too can grow tiresome, so much so that we long for the days when we could just sit back and enjoy a good old-fashioned superhero

movie with its simple binary supervillain-superhero showdown. Although we may never be able to go back to our previous states of ignorance, we can try to somehow find the core truth that anticipated the cliché in the first place. However, to look back while ignoring the gains in audience sophistication invites obsolescence and simply reinforces the cliché. Therefore, the past is evoked, but only in relation to the present. And this is known as Nostalgia.

Nostalgia

James Gunn's 2014 *Guardians of the Galaxy* has major 80s nostalgia, and he plays this out on two fronts: thematically and cosmetically. Regarding the latter, look no further than the soundtrack titled *Awesome Mix vol. 1*, which is an alluring mixtape of late 60s, 70s and 80s classics like Redbone's smooth *Come and Get Your Love*. The protagonist, Peter Quill (played by Chris Pratt), is fused to his Walkman – which his dying mother gave him – with an umbilical cord-like connection. The film additionally nods to Indiana Jones, a fact acknowledged by Gunn himself. An example of this is no more clear than in the opening scene, in which we are introduced to Peter ransacking a dilapidated stone structure that looks remarkably like an ancient temple. However, where Indie would have used his whip to get across cavernous rifts and his pistol to fight off exotic Orientals, Quill deploys rocket boots and energy blasts to fend off aliens. Perhaps the most obvious moment is Peter's use of a high-tech gravity mine instead of a sandbag and sleight of hand to remove the artifact. Daddy issues are another parallel for Quill and Indie and, in the sequel, Quill literally meets his past in the present in the form of his father, a celestial god-like creature. He has waited for this moment his whole life, but ultimately, as with all romance, is let down by reality. These films present us with a gratifying picture of our past reimagined, yet we also have a desire to look forward. De-mythologising films shed themselves of all the tiredness that was identified in the burlesque phase. They are conceptually leaner and lighter; or, more aptly, darker.

Demythologisation

Logan (2017) presents us with a gritty and raw look behind the cheesy, yellow spandex. Without his trademark costume and his moniker, Logan is left old, poor and dirty. He has given up on his romanticised past as a hero, and instead we find him working as a limo driver trying to save up enough money to buy a yacht. His plan is to remove the sickly Professor X, whose once benevolent powers now threaten destruction to the outside world. In an early brawl with some thugs trying to steal his limo's rims, we are presented with a Wolverine clearly past his prime. Like an ailing alley cat, he can no longer so readily bare his claws, and his trademark healing powers are also slow to the party. Logan is then more or less forced into protecting a would-be protege called X-23, a young girl being hunted by a biotechnology corporation trying to dispose of their weaponised mutant creations. Ring any bells?

This point is especially driven home when Logan's past catches up to him in the form of his younger, stronger, and far less human clone. He comes face-to-face with his past, and this is also where things get real. We are struck by raw scenes of meaningless and severe violence in which Logan can do nothing to stop the clone from meaninglessly and gruesomely cutting down the Professor and an entire family who had taken them in. He is no longer, and possibly never was, a save-the-day superhero; nor in a later altercation does he live to fight another day. And this is as demythologised as a superhero gets.

Reaffirmation of the myth

What might remain to be seen are the films that reaffirm the myth. These films usually try to distance themselves from the myth, while at the same time attempting to understand what it was about the myth that attracted attention in the first place. Perhaps coming closest to this mode of film is *Avengers Infinity Wars* (2018). Here we are presented with the age-old struggle between good and evil. However, things are not so black-and-white this time. The film's antagonist is not a raging psychopath who wants to see the world burn just for the sake of it; he is motivated by what we might call a moral dilemma. In wanting to kill half of all life in the universe, Thanos hopes to bring about less suffering in general. Moreover, the

moral authority on which the Avengers continually rely when saving the world, as foreshadowed in previous films, has been undermined; in their attempts to save the universe, they also wreak havoc and cause costly damage. The film is therefore offering us an alternative way to understand the genre; we are confronted by two opposing wills, each positing valid arguments for why they are right. Further evidence for this break in convention is that the film ends with Thanos as the victor, having accomplished his task, including killing off many of the heroes whose arcs we have been experiencing over the past two decades.

What is clear from the above, then, is that it appears the genre is on its way to closing the loop. There may not be much left in the myth to surprise us with, and so we may well be nearing the end of the superheroes' dominance of Hollywood. We will probably see a few more years of big releases before the genre starts to peter out. Which leaves us with an interesting question: where to next? Some speculate that the next logical move for big Hollywood genre fodder might be video games. This has already started with the likes of Assassin's Creed and, in some respects, Ready Player One. But, as these early examples are still rare and not quite yet a full-blown genre in its own right, it is far from certain.