

## **‘Superman in Green’: An audience study of comic book film adaptations *Thor* and *Green Lantern***

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### **Abstract**

Over the past two decades comic book fans have become a digitally-empowered minority, with mainstream filmmakers much more likely to yield to fan pressure when adapting comics than in pre-digital times. Nonetheless, this fidelity-favouring audience is still only a fraction of the eventual attendance of these blockbuster releases. The larger non-fan audience is frequently drawn to ‘comic-book movies’ by generic markers carefully positioned by filmmakers and publicity to evoke past successes; with the continued popularity of comic-book movies suggesting these strategies have been successful.

To better understand these two broad groups that attend comic book adaptations, audiences at screenings of recent high-profile films *Thor* and *Green Lantern* were surveyed. Adopting a similar methodology to *Watching The Lord of the Rings*, this research was carried out as a quali-quantitative paper survey of filmgoers at three different screenings of each film.

The results offered a nuanced picture of the audience(s) for one of the most popular trends in modern cinema. Ultimately, it was found that while the two broad audiences that attend these adaptations are not mutually exclusive, they do have differing interests and expectations, which the filmmaker and scholar must consider.

**Keywords:** comic-book movie, film adaptation, fidelity, audience research, genre, comic book fans.

The September 2007 issue of the popular UK film magazine *Empire* had an arresting image of a little-known red and yellow clad superhero thrusting his fist into the pavement. By the following summer, *Iron Man* would be one of the most successful comic book film adaptations of all time, but at this early stage of promotion the magazine’s feature writer,

Thomas Ambrose, remarked on the character's relative obscurity by recalling an anecdote in which an LAX customs official curtly said he had 'Never heard of it' before admitting the journalist to the US (2007: 66). Further demonstrating the lack of confidence in their cover star, *Empire* flanked Iron Man with smaller insert images of more recognisable heroes Indiana Jones and Batman. However, since July of that year *Iron Man* had been gaining wider attention following the 2007 San Diego Comic-Con. In the past, presentations at conventions had been successful at generating interest and goodwill among a comic book adaptation's existing fanbase, but by 2007 the web was regularly amplifying convention-fuelled word-of-mouth.<sup>1</sup>



**Fig. 1:** Adi Granov's celebrated cover for *Iron Man* #76 (March 2004), which was reworked for British film magazine *Empire* (September 2007).

Recognising this shift, studios and filmmakers were increasingly looking to fans and their forums to generate interest among non-fan audiences, with *Iron Man* director Jon Favreau later noting, 'You can't underestimate how powerful this group is... It's an unlimited press corps, all of them knowing how to communicate in a digital age. The geeks have inherited the Earth, and that's good news for us' (2009: Bowles). In fact videos from the Iron Man panel at the 2007 San Diego Comic-Con, including the earliest footage from the film, were quickly uploaded on sharing sites such as *YouTube* garnering widespread interest. Thus where once a trailer might be bootlegged and traded among convention attendees, now the hype-generated by early footage can extend far beyond the convention floor.

The *Empire* magazine cover was part of the next step in this strategy of targeting both fan and non-fan audiences. For mainstream audiences this cover was little more than a promotional image, but many fans would have recognised it as a reworking of Adi Granov's celebrated cover for *Iron Man* #76. Thus, the image served a dual function: targeting mainstream audiences through a general interest publication, while reassuring fans of authorial intent. As Jonathan Gray points out 'paratexts regularly address the non-fan, even

when attached to fan properties' (2010: 17). Ultimately, *Iron Man*, through its promotional materials and release, managed to balance the two broad audiences that attend comic book film adaptations, the heavily invested fans and the larger non-fan audience with no particular dedication to the source.

Not all adaptations have been so successful at engaging these two audiences. For instance, the first theatrical trailer for *Watchmen* (Zack Snyder 2009), which played before *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan 2008), offered prospective audiences little indication of the adaptation's plot and introduced images that carried little meaning outside of the context of the source. Unsurprisingly, Brandon Gray of *Box Office Mojo* cited the 'diffuse storyline and marketing' of *Watchmen* for limiting its appeal (2009). Like *Watchmen*, response studies of film adaptations of cult texts, such as Bacon-Smith and Yarbrough's 'Batman: The Ethnography', Chin and Gray's "'One Ring to Rule Them All": Pre-viewers and Pre-Texts of the Lord of the Rings Films' and Brooker's *Hunting The Dark Knight*, have tended to focus on the enthusiastic, textually rich fan audience. However, in the hope of replicating the success of *Iron Man*, this study of comic book adaptations was designed to engage both audiences, the enthusiasts as well as the more reclusive non-fan audience. To that end, this research was carried out as a paper survey at cinema screenings of high profile comic book adaptations *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh) and *Green Lantern* (Martin Campbell), which were both released during the summer of 2011. The aim of the study was to identify audience expectations, online practices, the value placed on fidelity and, most importantly for this research, whether participants considered themselves to be comic book fans or not.

A number of similar studies have been carried out in the past. To coincide with the release of *Batman* (Tim Burton 1989), Camille Bacon-Smith and Tyrone Yarborough undertook an ethnographic study of the various 'audiences' who attended the film adaptation. The scholars visited a number of screenings at different theatres, cataloguing responses to key scenes, with observations including: 'The batmobile drew a favorable response, but the batwing did not. Most fight and chase scenes met with bored inattention but the audience seemed most "up" for Joker's oneliners' (1991: 98). However, Bacon-Smith and Yarbrough note that: 'Ethnography is a data-intensive method in which the researcher studies the culture of informants where they gather in their own native habitats – difficult to do with a heterogeneous mass audience' (1991: 91). Consequently they choose to concentrate their study on the comic book fans, whom they could interact with 'on their own ground', as opposed to the 'Audiences who were not fans of Batman' (ibid) and lacked a regular meeting place beyond the cinema. Consequently, many of their findings were based on direct interaction with visitors to fan forums such as comic stores and conventions, with important findings including the manner in which fans tried, 'to reconcile the conflicting images of the film to the pre-existing model of the characters and setting they already had in their heads' (1991: 111).

Barker and Brooks in their landmark study of *Judge Dredd* (Danny Cannon 1995) audiences, *Knowing Audiences*, encountered a similar difficulty in trying to engage

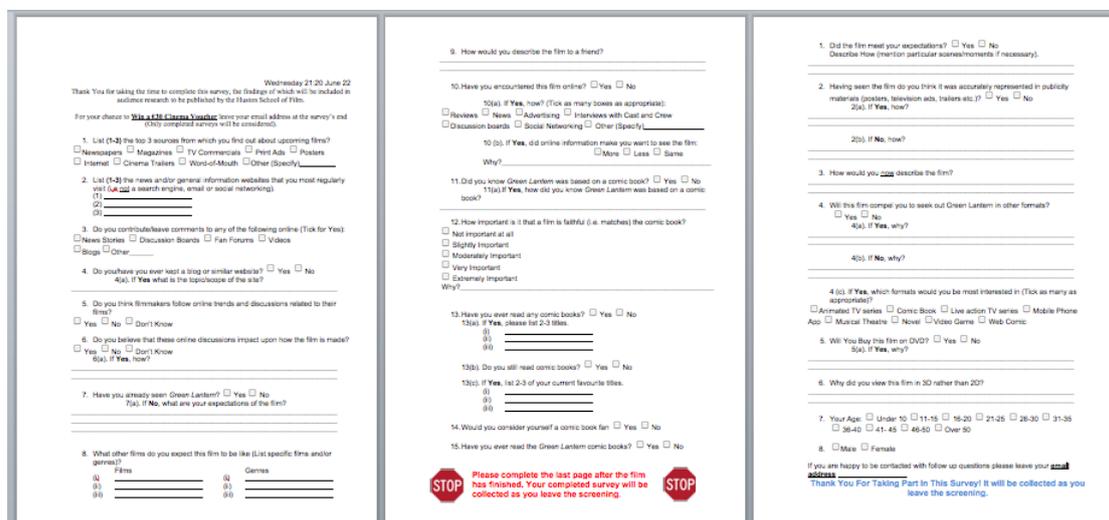
'naturally-occurring groups' (1998: 19). Although gaining permission to recruit informants in the foyers of cinemas they recall, 'this was remarkably unsuccessful, getting a response rate of below 1 in 50' (1998: 21). The researchers found greater success applying a snowballing method through their networks of friends and colleagues, as well as, like Bacon-Smith and Yarbrough, utilising fan forums such as the United Kingdom Comic Art Convention.

Comic book fandom, like similar groups, contain many enthusiasts eager to engage in such studies, with Matthew J. Pustz arguing in his study of comic book readership, *Comic Book Culture*, 'Nearly every member of comics culture – nearly every reader of comic books – is an active participant, not just a consumer' (1999: xiii – xiv). As will be discussed later, while Pustz's direct equating of reader with 'active participant' may be overly general, nonetheless, whether through fanzines, letterpages, conventions and other forums, comic book fandom has long been a participatory culture, and thus these enthusiasts were well suited to the web and its interactive potential. Consequently, where Pustz carried out much of his late 1990s study in comic book stores, more recent fan studies have tended to take advantage of the opportunities presented by new media. For instance, in his latest study of Batman's most 'dedicated audience' for the monograph *Hunting the Dark Knight*, Will Brooker surveyed '75 individuals... using an online questionnaire that [he] promoted through *Batman on Film: The Dark Knight Fansite*' (2012: 35). Brooker employed a similar approach for his earlier study of *Star Wars* fans, *Using the Force*, explaining, 'much of my research was based on internet communication... I see this research method as entirely appropriate rather than as a drawback: most of my correspondents have never met the other fans they communicate with regularly and know them only through text' (2002: xiv). Indeed, with the participatory practices of fans becoming more commonplace in media consumption, Henry Jenkins believes that 'our best window into convergence culture comes from looking at the experience of these early settlers and first inhabitants' (2006: 23).

However, identifying a space in such studies, Neil Rae and Jonathan Gray, adopted a dualistic strategy that went beyond the fan 'to answer a question that is often overlooked in reception studies focusing solely on fans: how do viewers read and make sense of comic-book movies differently when they have and have not read the original material being adapted?' (2007: 86). Through qualitative interviews with different combinations of readers and non-readers they observe that the readers' 'experience of a film that has been adapted from a favorite comic book will involve, and rely upon, significantly more intertextual ties and connections here to that comic, and to its own phenomenological existence for the viewer than it would for a non-comic-book-reader, who is more likely to approach the text as an individual text, not as a number in a series' (2007: 89). However, as Rae and Gray's central research question is posed in relation to adaptation it seemed destined to fall under the yoke of fidelity, with non-readers considered 'intertextually poor' because they 'watch the films as films, and largely as distinct texts' while 'readers, predictably looked at any adaptation as part of an episodic text' (2007: 99). However, this survey found that these non-reader audiences are not textually poor, but can compare these films to other entries in a newly emerging genre.

Like Rae and Gray this study also sought to tackle the non-reader audience, largely ignored in most audience studies of comic book adaptations. The methodology was adapted from the international research project to explore audience responses to *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King* (Peter Jackson 2003), which was described by its organisers as, ‘the largest and most complete attempt to date to study audience responses to a film’ (Barker et al., 2007: 1). The project and its methodology is explained in detail in the Martin Barker and Ernest Mathijs’ edited collection *Watching The Lord of the Rings*. Building on this approach, this study applied a quali-quantitative approach and avoided Internet sampling, which tends to favour younger enthusiasts (Barker, Mathijs, and Trobia, 2007: 222-223). The study took place at regularly scheduled screenings of *Thor* and *Green Lantern* at the Eye Cinema in Galway, Ireland, which is described on its website as ‘amongst the most advanced cinemas in Ireland... [with] 1200 stadium planned seats across 9 screens’.

To minimise the assumptive leaps of Bacon-Smith and Yarborough’s largely observation-based study of *Batman* screenings cited earlier, this study was carried out as a paper survey. Filmgoers were asked to complete a three-page questionnaire, two pages before the screening and one after. The quali-quantitative approach included multiple-choice responses and self-allocation scales, with follow on spaces to allow participants to qualify their responses. In all, participants were asked to respond to 15 questions before the screening and to eight after. To avoid influencing the participants’ responses, questions started generally: ‘1. List (1-3) the top 3 sources from which you find out about upcoming films’ and became more specific: ‘11. Did you know *Thor* was based on a comic book?’.



**Fig. 2:** A screen grab of the three-page survey as distributed at the final screening of *Green Lantern* on 22 June 2011.

Unlike the difficulties Barker and Brooks recount, because this survey was distributed in the screening theatre (as opposed to the foyer) it had a more captive audience. To further encourage potential respondents to complete the survey participants were entered into a draw for a €30 cinema voucher. While the paper survey and theatre setting mitigated some of the problems of previous studies, audience members could still

refuse to participate. Fortunately, of all the cinemagoers approached to participate only one audience member declined. There was also a risk that participants might return incomplete or otherwise unusable surveys, however only five could be considered spoiled in this way. Additionally, while instruction was given to complete the first two pages before the screening leaving the final page until after, given the finite amount of time for surveys to be completed and the number distributed simultaneously, respondents were unsupervised and may have taken a different approach. Furthermore, despite the benefits of the cinema setting, it did not ensure a balanced mass audience. Surveys were distributed as audience members took their seats. As the cinema does not operate allocated seating, enthusiasts were likely to attend earlier, which may have skewed the number of fans that responded at a given screening. Finally, Galway is a college town and the Eye Cinema had gained the reputation for attracting more serious filmgoers, and therefore was more likely to draw young fan enthusiasts than other cinemas. Nonetheless, wide representation was sought where possible.

In total, attendees at six screenings were surveyed. The screenings surveyed included the first scheduled showing of both films, and then a later 2D and 3D screening.<sup>2</sup> It was hoped that 25 filmgoers could be surveyed at each screening but not all screenings, particularly for *Green Lantern*, were well-attended. Not including spoiled surveys, 85 were completed – 49 for *Thor* and 36 for *Green Lantern*. These films were chosen as neither comic book had been adapted to a feature film before, and therefore the distinction between fan and non-fan audience would hopefully be easier to delineate than for audiences of heavily adapted texts such as X-Men and Spider-Man.

By eschewing fan forums this research hoped to encounter a more diverse group of respondents than similar studies carried out in the past. For instance, while Pustz does cite some female respondents most of his research was ‘conducted through interviews with comic book fans’ (1999: xiv) at an Iowa City comic book store, comic book-reading group and a questionnaire circulated through the *Comic Buyers’ Guide*, with Pustz observing that the predominately young and male readers ‘may not be the most demographically diverse group’ (1999: 68). Similarly, in his recent study of Batman fans Will Brooker found that of the 75 individuals who responded to the online questionnaire he promoted through *Batman on Film: The Dark Knight Fansite*, ‘sixty-eight per cent of respondents were aged between 20 and 30, while 93 per cent were male [...] one-hundred per cent identified themselves as Batman fans’ (2012: 35). Contrasting with these fan forum-based studies, this research located a more varied audience. Only 47% of participants were aged between 21 and 30, with respondents in all age sectors represented.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, only 34% of participants identified themselves as fans, and while men still dominated, women made up 33% of total respondents.

What follows are some of the key findings of the survey. While the relatively low number of respondents, as opposed to the 25,000-plus respondents Barker et al. describe in *Watching The Lord of the Rings* (2008: 19), means that quantitative data is more suggestive than definitive, by triangulating these findings with the qualitative responses and analysis of

industrial relays, a more rounded picture of both audiences, fan and non-fan, has hopefully been achieved.

### **Who Are the Fans?**

Of the 85 audience members surveyed in this study, only 29 identified themselves as comic book fans. Tallying with most assessments of comic book fans, the fan audience leaned heavily towards adults with 93% aged 21 or older.<sup>4</sup> All but three of the fans were male, versus a more even split among the non-fan group, which was 55% male.<sup>5</sup> These demographic consistencies have helped give rise to the term 'fanboy'. Matthew J Pustz discusses 'fanboys' in his book *Comic Book Culture* in which he argues that 'more than other cultures surrounding popular texts, this [comic book] culture is truly one of consumption and commodity' (1999: 18). Pustz goes on to contrast comic book culture with television and sports fandom, where consumption 'is not a requirement' and fans 'only need to watch them' (ibid). Thus, Pustz equates comic book fandom with purchasing and reading comics. Such readership has been in decline since the 1950s; with Scott McCloud estimating in 2000 that 'active readership' in North America is 'below 500,000 people' (97). As traditional comic book reading is becoming an increasingly rarefied past time, the attendance at comic book film adaptations regularly dwarfs the sales of the comics with the first issue of the re-launched *The Might Thor* selling only 82,071 copies from US speciality stores during the same month *Thor* was the number one film at the US box office (*CBGXtra.com*). It was disparities like this that prompted Rae and Gray to mount their analysis of non-readers (2007: 86).

However, these sales should not suggest that *Thor* has only 82,071 fans, as fans will read comics by a number of alternative means, including: borrowing, downloads and trade paperback reprints. Furthermore, the audience research showed that little more than half of the self-described 'comic book fans' who attended the adaptations (55%) actually still read comic books of any kind. All but one of these comic book fans indicated that they read comics in the past. That so many still consider themselves fans even though they no longer read comics suggests that comic book fandom can also include the armchair fandom Pustz identified in some sections of sports and television fans, with many respondents not needing to be an active reader to be a fan.

On interviewing Marvel Comics' Senior Vice-President of Publishing, Tom Brevoort, at the 2012 WonderCon in Anaheim, I asked him about the findings of this study. Brevoort suggested that this non-reader fan audience might be attributable to the cyclical nature of readership:

A great demographic of [readers] as they start to get into high school ages and even into college will tend to drop off a little bit or entirely as other things crop up. And then they go off, they enter the workforce, they get a job and have more disposable income and they tend to start coming back, whether they see a movie, or see a cartoon or there is a news story about something

that's going on with the comics and they remember that love that they had for Captain America or Wolverine or Spider-Man or whatever, and that leads them to get back into things again.

As Brevoort suggests, these fans are still clearly invested in the characters, but this significant non-reader sector of fandom, which Pustz would have been unable to observe in his largely comic store-based study, suggests that a new definition of comic book fandom is needed.

Conversely, of the participants who identified themselves as non-fans, 10% currently read comic books. Two younger readers mention British humour comics *The Beano* and *The Dandy*, while the other non-fans cite alternative titles such as *Preacher*, *Promethea* and *Sandman*, which suggests that some readers draw a distinction between a comic book fan and someone who reads alternative and humour titles. In *Comic Book Culture* Pustz suggests that the 'boundaries' between 'mainstream and alternative comic book fans' are not as strong as the border 'between readers and non readers, fans and those in the ordinary worlds' (1999: 22). This survey complicates Pustz's distinctions as some readers dismiss the 'fan' label, while many fans do not currently read comics. Therefore the term 'comic book fan' cannot be equated with reader, with Duncan and Smith's suggestion in *The Power of Comics* that 'a **fan** is someone who wants to take part in the dialogue about the medium' (2009: 173) seeming more apt.

Indeed the online habits of those fans surveyed gravitated towards films and comics, while non-fans had a wider range of interests.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, fans were more active online being almost twice as likely to leave online comments and keep blogs than their non-fan equivalents. Snickars and Vonderau comment on this aspect of the web in their introduction to *The YouTube Reader*. Citing digital anthropologist Mike Wesch, they describe the 90-9-1 rule whereby, '90 percent of online audiences never interact, nine percent interact only occasionally, and one percent do most interacting' (2009: 12). Correspondingly, much online discourse around comic book adaptations is provided by a narrow, heavily invested subset of the audience: the fans. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these fans displayed a greater belief in the power of online discussions to shape a film with 62% of fans versus 46% of non-fans believing filmmakers followed online trends and discussions, with 41% of these fans believing these online discussions impact upon how the film is made. When asked to qualify 'how', respondents on both sides of the fan divide cited *Snakes on a Plane* (David R. Ellis) – the 2006 film, which Kristin Thompson described as a 'fan-generated phenomenon' when it 'became an object of obsession on many unofficial websites' (2007: 183). Building on online interest, *Snakes on a Plane* was partially re-shot prior to release to incorporate online discussions, prompting respondents in this survey to describe the film as 'proof of a fan driven plot line' and an 'obvious example, fans wrote the dialogue'.

However, *Snakes on a Plane* proved to be something of a false dawn for a more participatory type of mainstream filmmaking, as despite online hype the film underperformed, making producers and distributors nervous about placing so much

emphasis on the power of fandom and online buzz.<sup>7</sup> Other examples of online discussion influencing productions provided by fans and non-fans alike include: mid-shoot changes to *The Lord of the Rings*, and writer/director Kevin Smith's Twitter account, which one fan respondent suggested had an impact on the production of Smith's recent horror film *Red State* (2011). Such examples fuel a genuine belief among many fans, and some mainstream filmgoers that online discussion can shape film production, a belief that goes some way towards explaining why fans are so ardent in their online criticisms of planned adaptations.

The eagerness of fans to interact with their virtual communities may also motivate their attendance of the earliest screenings, as the immediacy of the web has given rise to what Matt Hills terms 'just-in-time-fandom', where fans go online to discuss a text as soon as possible, 'in order to demonstrate the "timeliness" and responsiveness of their devotion' (2002: 141). As one might expect the vast majority of the fans surveyed attended the first screening. For instance, of the seven people who attended the first showing of *Green Lantern*, which was a lunchtime presentation in 3D, five described themselves as comic book fans. By comparison, a 2D screening held just one hour later saw the percentage of fans decline to 45%. This drop-off continued with only 22% of the audience being made up of fans five days after the initial release. Such findings suggest that despite premium prices and inconvenient schedules fans are determined to attend the earliest if not the first screening. This accounts for the precipitous box office drops of adaptations such as *Jonah Hex*, *Hulk* and *Watchmen*, which were deemed not to crossover into the mainstream, with the box office for *Green Lantern* experiencing a similar decline of 66.1% in its second week of release.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, while the early attendance of enthusiasts can lead to healthy opening weekend grosses, these first audience members are also in a position to limit a box office run through negative word-of-mouth or as Thompson prefers, 'word of keystone' (2007: 141). No topic garners more online criticism from fans than perceived infidelities to the source material, and indeed the survey demonstrated the premium fans place on fidelity, with 59% considering it either 'very' or 'extremely' important that a film matches the source. In qualifying their answers terms like 'honour' and 'fidelity' were offered as an explanation. While producers may have ignored fans in the past with Tim Burton dismissively explaining ahead of the release of *Batman*, 'There might be something that's sacrilege in the movie... But ... this is too big a budget movie to worry about what a fan of a comic would say' (Pearson and Uricchio 1991: 184), in the digital age the visibility of fan culture has prompted producers to recognise this once-powerless elite and their preferences. Typical of today's fan-appeasing tactics are enthusiastic statements from creators that reflect glowingly on the source material, with director Kenneth Branagh raving 'Growing up, my single comic book passion was *Thor*' (Boucher 2010), and *Green Lantern* star Ryan Reynolds stating 'Geoff Johns is it... his "Secret Origins" book is what I use as the bible' (Marshall 2010).

Describing today's more participatory culture, Jenkins notes, 'the Web has pushed that hidden layer of cultural activity into the foreground, forcing the media industries to

confront its implications for their commercial interests' (2006: 137). Such strategies are warranted given the ability of fans to mobilise others. Writing during the early days of online fandom, Rex Weiner noted in *Variety* how *Batman & Robin* director Joel Schumacher denounced, 'the Web for its prejudicial prerelease buzz on pics' (1997). Schumacher's comic book adaptation was lambasted by fans for its lack of fidelity with the article identifying the film fansite *Ain't it Cool News* as one of the chief online forums for this discontent. Furthermore, Weiner described how, 'studio research has shown a positive correlation between those with Internet access and frequent moviegoers' (ibid). Therefore online non-fan filmgoers, who may make up the mainstream audience, can become aware of negative opinion. Such discourses do not stop at digital boundaries, as Ben Fritz reported in a 2004 article, 'Net-savvy marketing execs note that the mainstream media often picks up on the chatter'.

In keeping with these early reports, the audience research demonstrated an unsurprising correlation between mainstream filmgoers and internet use, with 57% of non-fans citing the Internet as one of the sources from which they get their information about films, with one third identifying it as their number one source (more than any other format). Therefore online non-fan filmgoers, who may make up the mainstream audience, are in a position to become aware of negative online opinion. Applying the Shannon-Weaver Model of Communication to comics<sup>9</sup>, Duncan and Smith discuss 'amplification' of the original source,

It is possible for a reader to relate portions of the comic book message to someone who has not encountered it firsthand. The significance of this amplification is that the final meaning that resides with a receiver might be the product of both the reading itself and the discussion that followed, or, in the case of secondhand receivers, it could be the product solely of the discussion (2009: 13).

It is these 'secondhand receivers' that give power to fan discourse, with no familiarity with the source they will propagate fan opinion, often considered expert, thereby giving the firsthand receivers wider influence.

For instance, 32% of non-fans surveyed considered it 'Very Important' (19%) or 'Extremely Important' (13%) that 'a film is faithful to the comic book'. This response is somewhat surprising given that none of these respondents had, according to their surveys, ever read the comic books on which the films were based. However, qualifying comments such as 'It is disappointing to fans of books/comics to see the story they love is changed' suggest that non-fan audiences value fidelity to any source, perhaps reflecting on a film adaptation of a text they had enjoyed.

Indeed, many of the response tally with the 'constellation of substratal prejudices' that Robert Stam believes fuel 'the intuitive sense of adaptation's inferiority' (2005: 4) including: seniority 'comic book was the original', anti-corporeality 'Too many comic book

heroes are portrayed differently onscreen as to what may be imagined by comic book readers', and parasitism 'I don't believe films should be made more "Hollywood friendly" to sell more tickets'. One non-fan response even seemed to be attempting to include as much of the 'moralistic' (Stam 2005: 3) terms that surround adaptation criticism as possible, with 'Credibility, Truthfulness, Proper Building of Character, Authenticity' included in a litany of complaints. Some even went so far as to display an altruistic concern for fans with non-fan responses as to why it is important that a film matches the comic book including: 'Comic book movies should be made for fans of comic in mind' and simply, 'For the comic book fans'.

Clearly mainstream audiences value fidelity, or at least the idea of it. Thus, when negative, fidelity-centric opinion is amplified beyond the boundaries of fandom it has the potential to sway sections of the mainstream audience, a major cause for concern for filmmakers today who can no longer dismiss fans as Tim Burton once did.

### **The Non-fan Audience**

In *Convergence Culture* Jenkins describes how fans have moved 'from the invisible margins of popular culture and into the centre of current thinking about media production and consumption' (2006: 12). In the wake of such excited rhetoric the non-fan audience is often characterised as passive. As discussed, in their study of comic book adaptation audiences, Rae and Gray describe non-reader audiences for comic book adaptations as 'textually poor' because they 'watch the films as films' (2007: 99). However, this survey found that while non-fans may not be able to carry out the same 'conceptual flipping back and forth' (Hutcheon 2006: 139) between source and adaptation that fans enjoy, they are active in the way that they view these films in the context of an emerging comic-book movie genre.

Genres are dependent upon the industry and audience for their status and significance. In 2002, the box office success of *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi) ushered in a period of unprecedented comic book film adaptation production by Hollywood studios. To determine whether this trend has developed into a fully-fledged genre one could look at what Steve Neale, borrowing from Lukow and Ricci, refers to as the 'inter-textual relay... the discourses of publicity, promotion and reception that surround Hollywood's film' (2000: 2).

Publicity is one of the most important groups in this inter-textual relay. Thomas Schatz describes the 'generic contract' that audiences enter into with filmmakers and that a genre film is expected to fulfil (2004: 691). This contract is put to the audience through promotional material of which Neale writes, '[t]he indication and circulation of what the industry considers to be the generic framework – or frameworks – most appropriate to the viewing of a film is therefore one of the most important functions performed by advertising copy, and by posters, stills and trailers' (2000: 39). As the comic-book movie's popularity increased publicity materials began to suggest generic affiliation by referencing previously successful films. While some inter-generic referencing can be found in early paratexts (e.g. *The Crow*), since the comic-book movies' maturation this practice has intensified. For instance, the promotion for *300* alerted potential audiences through poster taglines that it

was 'From the creator of *Sin City*', with its success resulting in the release of *Watchmen* being heralded with the poster and trailer tagline, 'from the visionary director of *300*'. Through direct promotional strategies such as these, film marketing has attempted to prepare other participants in the inter-textual relay (press, audiences etc.) to meet these films as comic-book movies, with ample evidence suggesting they have been successful.

In 2008 the comic-book movie genre seemed to achieve its peak of productivity.<sup>10</sup> At this time the British Film Institute (BFI) held a season of films entitled 'Comic-Book Movies'; that this programme was not limited to the popular superhero films, but included *Persepolis*, *A History of Violence* and *Danger: Diabolik!* indicates the recognition of a more inclusive genre. The online introduction to the film season went one step further, describing these films as 'a genre too often unfairly dismissed as mindless entertainment'. *Empire* magazine had already adopted this term prior to the BFI tribute, with the cover of their November 2006 issue promising a 'Huge Comic-book movie Special'. Rival publication *Total Film* ran a similar feature in their March 2009 edition, with the cover carrying the slogan, 'The Comic-Book Movie Preview'.



**Fig. 3:** Examples of the use of the term 'Comic-Book Movie' within the inter-textual relay: *Empire* #209 (November 2006) and *Total Film* #152 (March 2009).

These magazine covers and the BFI film season are part of a wider discourse that is treating comic book adaptations and related films as a genre, which is most frequently labelled 'comic-book movies'. Other examples of this generic evolution within the inter-textual relay includes: the popular website *Comic-book movie*, which positions itself as a 'a super news source for comics adaptations', but also includes all those works gravitating toward a comic-book movie genre (e.g. *The Incredibles*, *Hancock*, *G.I. Joe* and the television series *Heroes*); Virgin Books released a dedicated *Comic-book movies* edition in their *Virgin Film* series, which is normally reserved for distinct genres (e.g. *Film Noir*, *Horror Films* and *Gangster Film*); and the Scream awards – 'The event that honors the best in comics, fantasy, sci-fi and

horror' – renamed the 'Best Comic-to-Screen Adaptation' award 'Best Comic-Book Movie' in 2008.

Today, the term 'comic-book movie' has moved between the various organs of the inter-textual relay (production, promotion, press, audience) migrating back to filmmakers who have adopted it. For example, *The Spirit* producer Deborah Del Prete said of the film, 'I had been waiting all my life to make a comic-book movie' (Vaz 34). Such is the industry recognition of the genre that in his musical opening to the 81<sup>st</sup> Academy Awards, host Hugh Jackman sang a tribute to the overlooked *The Dark Knight*, with lyrics 'How come comic-book movies never get nominated?'. Finally, the term has made its way back to the source material itself, comics. In the opening narration of the comic book *Kick-Ass*, an amateur superhero muses, 'I always wondered why nobody did it before me. I mean, all those comic-book movies and television shows, you'd think at least one eccentric loner would have stitched himself a costume' (Millar and Romita Jr, 2008: 1). The use of 'comic-book movie' here signals the term has come full circle.

Rick Altman states that, 'If it is not defined by the industry and recognized by the mass audience, then it cannot be a genre, because film genres are by definition not just scientifically derived or theoretically constructed categories, but are always industrially certified and publicly shared' (1999: 16). However, while examples of the industrial recognition of the comic-book movie abound in paratextual materials, it is more difficult to identify audience acknowledgement. One approach would be to focus on online comments and discussions, and indeed there is a wealth of examples. For instance, in a *Latino Review.com* story 'Green Lantern Story Details And Casting Update'. The term is first used in the article and then echoed in reader comments, 'Green Lantern is the movie I've been waiting for since this comic-book movie craze started'. Furthermore, online commentators often reflect on the genre's history and the revisionist stance taken by recent, more self-aware comic-book movies with a commentator on filmsite *IMDB* suggesting that *The Dark Knight* 'redefines comic-book-flicks' ('And Here...We...GO!!!').

However, as the 90-9-1 rule and the findings of this study suggest, many of these online comments are provided by a small subset of fans and enthusiasts. To circle the square of audience research in the digital age, this study eschewed Internet sampling and asked heterogeneous cinema audiences what their 'expectations' of the film were, 'what other films do you expect this film to be like (List specific films and/or genres)?' and 'How would you describe the film to a friend?'. To achieve the most accurate responses no reference to comic books appeared in this survey until after these questions were answered, and open-ended responses were post-coded based on emerging patterns and recurrent phrases.

When describing their expectations of the film the key term most often used was 'comics' followed closely by 'action' and 'special effects'. When answering this question many filmgoers cited previous adaptations with responses including a 'Comic Book Version of Braveheart' and 'Superman in Green'. This trend intensified when audiences were asked to provide other films they expected *Thor* and *Green Lantern* 'to be like'. By a wide margin

comic book adaptations and superhero films such as *X-Men*, *Iron Man* and *Spider-Man* were the most referenced by non-fans.<sup>11</sup> On the strength of *Green Lantern* screenings alone *Thor* was cited five times, with the yet to be released *Captain America* referenced three times. Films outside of comics were mentioned with fantasy titles *Clash of the Titans* (Louis Leterrier 2010) and *Percy Jackson* (Chris Columbus 2010) being compared to *Thor*, and two audience members expected *Green Lantern* to be like *Avatar* (James Cameron 2009). Despite the mythological and sci-fi inflections in *Thor* and *Green Lantern*, these films were over-whelming compared to popular comic-book movies.

When asked about their generic expectations responses proved more diverse with 'Action' leading the way, followed by 'Sci-fi', 'Comic', 'Superhero' and 'Fantasy'. These results suggest that the comic-book movie and superhero are still not as widely recognised as the action genre, or perhaps filmgoers consider them subgenres of the action movie. Further clarification was provided in the answers to question nine, 'How would you describe the film to a friend?'. Here 'superhero' and 'comic' eclipse 'action', but what is more interesting is how the terms are used. Much of genre studies has focused on when a loose assemblage of films can be deemed a genre. Rick Altman sees this moment as occurring when an adjectival term such as the *Western* melodrama or *Musical* comedy, goes through a substantifying process 'loosened from the tyranny of that noun' (1999: 50). In answering the question, 'How Would You Describe the Film to a Friend?' non-fan responses included: 'A comic book fantasy', 'comic thing, like X-Men', 'Action comic book' and 'one of those comic book films'. From this research one finds 'comic book' used as both an adjective and noun with the terms 'comic-book movie' and 'comic book film' most often used, suggesting the *comic-book movie* adaptation is going through a substantifying process and is beginning to be recognised by audiences as a genre.

Given that so many respondents cited comics as the generic framework for these films it is unsurprising that 87% of non-fans knew the films were based on comics. When asked to qualify 'how' the most frequent replies included: 'having previously collected [comics]', 'word-of-mouth' (with husbands and boyfriends frequently blamed), and 'adaptations' and 'parodies' such as the television sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. Perhaps most interestingly some cited advertising despite publicity for neither film explicitly mentioning comics. Yet the promotion for both films included markers, apart from the obvious superhero setting, that suggest 'comic-book movie'. From the first poster for *Thor*, this film was firmly placed in the comic-book movie genre, with a colour pop over a monochrome image used, which had become synonymous with comic-book movies since the success of *Sin City*.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, it should be unsurprising that despite its mythological setting half of non-fan filmgoers expected *Thor* to be like *Iron Man* as that earlier success was explicitly cited in taglines throughout *Thor's* promotion. Furthermore, the presence of the Marvel logo escaping from comic book images in trailers reaffirms the film's genre, with one respondent even expecting *Green Lantern* 'to follow the general Marvel Genre'. These markers put forward the 'comic-book movie' generic framework to audiences, with the survey's respondents indicating that they had the desired effect.



**Fig. 4:** The first teaser poster for *Thor* included a colour pop that echoed the promotion for *Sin City*, *The Spirit* and other comic-book movies. The Marvel logo escaping from comic book images appeared in the film's trailers, thereby suggesting a generic framework to the audience.

The successful relay of the 'comic-book movie' between producers and consumers evident in this research, strongly suggests that a comic-book movie genre is emerging. This genre can enrich a fan's experience of an adaptation, which is often dominated by, but not limited to, the source. Most importantly, the presence of a genre ensures that non-fans rarely view these film adaptations as the 'distinct texts' Rae and Gray observed during the genre's nascent days, but enjoy a richer intertextuality.

Despite the blockbuster success of many adaptations the mainstream comic book industry has continued to decline. With one exception, all non-fan participants indicated that they enjoyed *Thor*, yet when asked if it would compel them to seek out the comics only 22% indicated that they would, with the reasons given for not reading the comics ranging from 'Too old' to 'Special Effects' with variations on a 'lack of interest' (33%) and 'not being a comic reader' (28%) the most prominent answers given. Following, this result the survey for *Green Lantern* was changed to ask participants would they be interested in following *Green Lantern* in any other format, with 50% saying they would. A series of formats from 'Novels' through 'Musical Theatre' and 'Web Comics' were offered. 'Comic Books' and an 'Animated TV Series' proved to be the top choices among non-fans, with a 'Live Action TV series', 'Mobile Phone App' and 'Video Game' also generating interest, however there were no takers for *Green Lantern: The Musical*.

In concluding his response to the non-reader fan audience, Marvel Comics' Senior Vice-President of Publishing, Tom Brevoort commentated that, 'those people still are likely to go watch The Avengers movie and the Spider-Man movie, or likely to go and watch the new Spidey cartoon or Avengers cartoon, or to experience these characters in other ways, and those avenues will tend to lead them back into the fold again'. However, with only half of self-described comic book fans actually reading comics, and those mainstream audience

members who are enticed by films more amenable to television than the source, the plethora of adaptations of recent years may have bolstered the profile of the characters but it seems to have weakened interest in the source material, with consumers no longer needing to return to ‘the fold’ to get their regular fix.

### Conclusion: One-Sheet World

In an episode of the quickly cancelled 2006 Aaron Sorkin series *Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip*, a television producer laments the state of modern entertainment and the ‘one-sheet world’: ‘You know, a movie poster, a one-sheet. “I think we’ll do the Green Lantern – I can see the one-sheet now. Don’t worry that we don’t have a story – we’re gonna make all our money before word-of-mouth can kill us, anyway”.’ However when *Green Lantern* became a reality, it was less a one-sheet world than a multi-sheet universe. When the first trailer was released it clearly targeted the wider comic-book movie audience, matching *Iron Man*’s first promo beat for beat. A talented but cocky sports-car-driving playboy is involved in a life-changing incident, following which he learns responsibility and develops feelings for the co-worker who recognised his true potential from the beginning. However, this trailer was not well received by comic book fans (Fritz 2011), with Warner Bros. striving to appease them with trailers that concentrated on the Green Lantern Corps and promotional materials that evoked the covers for writer Geoff Johns’ celebrated run on the character in the comic books.



Fig. 5: Later promotional materials for *Green Lantern* emphasised comic book fidelity.

While this strategy did serve to quieten fan discontent it seems to have been off-putting to mainstream audiences. Furthermore, the heavy emphasis on the Green Lantern Corps in publicity led many to believe that they would be a major component of the film. When the Corps’ presence amounted to little more than a second act montage and abbreviated action sequence, reviewers and fans felt the film was not honestly portrayed in publicity materials.

Testifying to this confused marketing, when asked whether they thought *Green Lantern* 'was accurately represented in publicity materials (posters, television ads, trailers etc.)?', one fan responded 'it looked a lot worse in trailers', while a clearly knowledgeable non-fan noted, it had 'less of the Green Lantern Corps'.

Conversely *Thor* achieved box office success through fan-appealing fidelity and mainstream-targeting strategies. For instance, 31% of the non-fan audience cited the film's stars and director as a reason for seeing the film, with no-one citing *Green Lantern's* cast and crew as a factor for seeing that adaptation. While both films had casts that mixed award-winning actors with upcoming movie stars, in moving from a generic model to one that emphasised comic book fidelity the actors in *Green Lantern* were pushed to the sidelines in favour of CGI creations, many of which received little screen time. Consequently, an opportunity was lost to entice mainstream audiences as testified by this audience survey and ultimately the film's box office, which despite Sorkin's predictions was not able to recoup its massive budget before word-of-mouth killed it (Blankenship 2011).

This study clarifies and sharpens many uncertainties about comic book-movie audiences: 'Comic book fan' is a much larger category than comic reader, and not every reader considers himself or herself to be a fan. These fans are incredibly active online and often believe that their actions can influence a production, which may embolden their more enthusiastic online activities to safeguard fidelity. Mainstream audiences are in a position to be influenced by online discussion of adaptations, but often place these films in an emerging comic-book movie genre. Furthermore, despite positive responses to adaptations, those mainstream audiences interested in pursuing the characters in other formats are more inclined to audio-visual interpretations than comics. Clearly, these two audiences, while not mutually exclusive, have differing interests and expectations. If one were to attempt to analyse this audience through online or fan resources the voice of the non-fan filmgoer would be lost. Thus scholars, much like filmmakers, must consider both groups, the easily accessible fan and more hesitant non-fan filmgoer, to get a more rounded picture of today's comic book adaptation, and its audience.

### **Biographical note:**

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## Notes:

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<sup>1</sup> Prior to the release of *Batman* (Tim Burton 1989), Warner Bros. attempted to generate interest among fans and quieten cries of infidelity by sending representatives to conventions, only to find

them booed (Hughes 2003: 1) and their posters torn down (Bullock 2003). Yet, while conventions have proven to be a breeding ground for fan dissatisfaction, equally they can generate positive word-of-mouth. A suitably dark Batman trailer, designed to 'stop the negative rumour mill' ('Shadows of the Bat'), allayed comic book fan concerns. Quickly, positive hype permeated through the various fan forums including conventions, where bootleg copies of the trailer were sold for \$25 ('Shadows of the Bat').

<sup>2</sup> In total six screenings were surveyed, three for each film: the first screening, and later screenings of the film in 2D and 3D. *Thor* was released in Ireland on a public Holiday, Easter Monday (25 April 2011), for one day of previews ahead of its regular release on Friday (29 April). As these screenings were open to the public, the first preview was surveyed on Easter Monday – a 2D presentation at which 24 surveys were completed. Five days later, two screenings were surveyed on Saturday (30 April): a 3D presentation at 7:20pm and a 2D presentation at 7:40pm, with 11 and 14 surveys completed respectively. The first screening of *Green Lantern* was a 3D lunchtime presentation on Friday June 17, which only yielded seven completed surveys. The next screening (approximately one hour later) was in 2D and resulted in 11 usable surveys. The final surveyed screening of *Green Lantern* was five days after its initial release, a 9:20pm screening in 3D on Wednesday, June 22, which resulted in 18 completed surveys.

<sup>3</sup> The 85 individuals who took part in this survey identified their ages as follows: Under 10 (1 participant), 11-15 (4), 16-20 (4), 21-25 (11), 26-30 (29), 31-35 (15), 36-40 (7), 41-45 (4), 46-50 (2) and Over 50 (8).

<sup>4</sup> Today, estimates for the age of comic book readers vary greatly, but all lean toward adults. The website *Comic Collector Live* offers a wide demographic, 'The average age of a comic book reader is between 18 and 34' while *Comic Book Secrets* is more finite 'The average age of today's [sic] comic book reader is around 28 years old' (2007).

<sup>5</sup> As terms such as 'Comic Book Guy' and 'Fanboy' suggest, comic book fandom is a largely male pursuit with Brown noting in a 1997 paper that 90% of comic book fans are male (16). However, adaptations often enjoy a more even split, with Bacon-Smith and Yarbrough observing that while the percentage of female visitors to fan forums (comic stores and conventions) was only 7%, screenings of *Batman* attracted a 37% female audience (1991: 94).

<sup>6</sup> The second question of the survey asked participants to: 'List (1-3) the news and/or general information websites that you most regularly visit (i.e. not a search engine, email or social networking)'. Upon categorisation of the websites it was found that fans cited a much narrower range of topics, with many fans just including film sites. Other topics that garnered strong interest included News, Sport, Comics and Video Games. Non-fans demonstrated a much wider range of interest, with the variety of sites mentioned too numerous to list.

<sup>7</sup> *Box Office Mojo* writer Brandon Gray noted how following the 'media creation' of *Snakes on a Plane*, *Borat* (Larry Charles 2006) was released on a more modest 1,100 theatres.

<sup>8</sup> Many comic book adaptations appear on *Box Office Mojo*'s list of 'Biggest Second Weekend Drops at the Box Office' including *Jonah Hex* (69.7%), *Hulk* (69.7%), *Elektra* (69%), *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (69%) and *Watchmen* (67.7%). These drops suggest that the films were unsuccessful in building a sizable audience beyond their core fanbase.

<sup>9</sup> Duncan and Smith describe their use of the Shannon-Weaver Model of Communication in *The Power of Comics* as follows, 'The basic model for a communication act was first developed by a pair of mathematicians named Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, whose *The Mathematical Theory of*

*Communication* gave rise to the field of information theory. Their model, with its familiar components of source-message-channel-receiver, is often taught as a foundational concept in communications studies. We begin our model of comic book communication building on the foundation of what Shannon and Weaver first proposed' (2009: 7).

<sup>10</sup> This study includes most comic book adaptations in the genre comic-book movie, as well as those films that have become associated with the trend through production, promotion and reception. In 2008 ten comic-book movies were released in North America: *Jumper*, *Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Hancock*, *Hellboy 2: The Golden Army*, *The Dark Knight*, *Punisher: War Zone*, *Superhero Movie*, *Wanted* and *The Spirit*.

<sup>11</sup> Of the 49 non-fans across both films who answered the question, 'What other films do you expect this film to be like?', 22 cited X-Men (or one of its sequels), Iron Man received 20 mentions and Spider-Man received 15. With two mentions at screenings of *Green Lantern*, *Avatar* was the most frequently cited film outside of the comic-book movie genre.

<sup>12</sup> Identifying the generic affiliation in the promotion of *Thor*, *Empire* reporter James White described the *Thor* teaser poster in a news story as, 'bringing to mind the **Sin City** posters with its splash of red on a monochrome image' (2010).