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Multimedia 425

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The Comic Book Boom

Comic books, particularly the superhero, have been around since the 1930s, regaling its readers with tales of fantasy and mystery. For the most part, these comics weren’t regarded by the public as anything more than childish entertainment. At time comics were even ostracized for suspicions of promoting violence and corrupting its readers. Only a devout few followed the tales of the superhero. Suddenly, in the early 2000s, comic books exploded into mainstream pop culture. The beginning of the 21st century marked the beginning of the rise of the comic book and the comic book super hero. Now, comic book studios are producing multi-million (if not billion) movie deals, merchandising and comics sales are on the rise. Writing an analysis on beast that is mainstream pop culture is quite the task. The pop culture scene is ever changing and evolving; however certain indicators and observations will allow one to tackle this beast. This essay will highlight the comic book’s history, its meteoric rise in pop culture and its future. For purposes of analysis, this essay will focus mainly on comic books of the superhero genre, the genre most commonly associated with comic books.

*Comic Books: Origins*

It’s disputed as to when the first comic book was created however the first American comic strip to be published was Richard Felton Outcault’s *The Yellow Kid*, which debuted in 1895, in *The New York World*, and served as a marketing tool to increase sales. *The Yellow Kid* was the first to employ the classic dialogue balloon. Many papers followed suit using, humor to appeal audiences, thus the term “comics” was born. The industry began to expand in the 1930s, comic book *magazines,* began to appear, descending from the “pulp magazine” industry (cheap pulp paper). This medium began to cover stories of mystery, action and fantasy. (Archetypes n.pag.). It’s is here, where to comics, as know by today’s popular culture began to appear.

The comic book industry’s history is often categorized in time period. These time periods are: The golden Age, Silver Age, Iron Age and Modern Age. The “superhero” arose with the creation of Superman in 1938 (Jerry Seigal and Joe Shuster) and later Batman (Bob Kane and Bill Finger). The trend caught on and heroes such as Wonder Woman and Captain America followed suit (Archetype n.pag.). Since then the industry has evolved and was ever changing. Comics were massively popular during WWII, millions shipped to soldiers on the front lines (Yates n.pag.). However, the industry to a hit in the following decade after studies suggested that teen who committed violent crimes often read comic books (Yates n.pag.). Dr. Fredric Wertham’s book *The Seduction of the Innocent* was largely responsible for this accusation. In response this, companies created the Comic Code Authority, a self-policing policy that attempted to win back the public’s favor (Archetype n.pag.). “’You couldn’t be too political, you couldn’t tell a romance story that would arouse the baser instincts – which was romance out the window...story types went out overnight; and all that was left was the superhero’” (Yates n.pag.).

It wasn’t until the 80s that writers began to rebel against the code, creating more adult mature material, with thought provoking ideas (Yates n.pag.). Two of the most notable pieces have to be *The Dark Night Returns* (Frank Miller) and *The Watchmen* (Alan Moore). These comics arose in a period known as the Iron Age (1980-1987), where deep psychological stories appear. Heroes would question their heroism, sanity and morality. “During the Iron Age, the comic book genre turned on itself and nearly dismantled its own genre conventions” (Archetypes n.pag.).

In the Modern Age (1987-Present), Companies began reconstruction it’s dismantle industry, empathizing its Golden and Silver Age roots. The industry also raised prices and marketed itself as a valuable collector’s item. The audience dwindled and the industry focused on who would pay more for these valuable items (Archetypes n.pag.). This trend carried on until the industry exploded at the turn of the century…

*The BOOM*

In 2000, the overall North America Comic Book Market size was estimated at between $255 and $275 million dollars. As of 2013 it is estimated to be at roughly $780 million dollars (Yearly Ranking n.pag.). This doesn’t even account for the 2014 year, for which this number could be arguably four times that of the year 2000. The reason it can be argued that there is such a growth in 2014 is because 2014 included movie blockbusters Captain America: Winter Soldier, Guardians of the Galaxy, The Amazing Spider-man 2 and X-Men: Days of Futures Past. Why mention movies? Because it can be argued that the movie industry is what propelled the comic book industry into the mainstream popular culture spotlight.

While there are several appearances of superhero movies throughout the twentieth century, none were so profitable as to warrant a demand for the superhero comic book genre. That all changed when Hollywood evolved with impressive CGI special effects. Movies back in the day were incapable of delivering a quality depiction of the superhero lore. Take for example:

The Incredible Hulk, a green superhero standing at 8’ tall and 1,400 pounds according to marvel.com, was played by a man painted green. With the advancements made in film and technology, studios are able to produce amazing settings, awe inspiring battles and accurate characters (Hardwick n.pag.).

In the year 2000, *X-Men*, arguably one of the first to start the movement, grossed nearly 300 million dollars according to the International Movie Database (X-men n.pag.). Referred to as the beginning of “the modern Superhero Film renaissance” (Franich n.pag.). *Spider-man* followed in 2002, grossing over 800 million dollars worldwide; with a record opening weekend gross (Spider-man n.pag.). Companies caught wind and the phenomena grew. Assistant professor of Literature Amanda Berry of American University had this to say in 2012:

During the last 5 years, Hollywood studios have released 21 films adapted from comic books...While all but four of the 21 films generated a profit; the amount of money made by extremely successful comic book movies vastly outweighs the small losses by a margin of 8:1” (Barrett n.pag.).

If that isn’t convincing enough, since Professor Berry made such a claim, four of the five movies on the list for largest opening weekend gross are comic book superhero movies. Marvel’s *The Avengers* holds the opening weekend gross record at 207 million dollars. Three superhero movies are in the top five *all-time* total gross list (Biggest Opening n.pag.). Main stream media caught on, “Warner Brothers’ acquisition of DC, and Disney’s buyout of Marvel means the two biggest comic-book publishers now have two of the film corporations behind them…” (Yate n.pag.). Suddenly the underground geek fandom that was comics became pop culture.

It’s this attraction to the movies, with its stellar effects and romantic storytelling, that has lead to a more acceptance of the comic book culture. Vaneta Rogers, explains 2013’s growth in comic sales is partly attributed to pop culture acceptance,

All the retailers we surveyed indicated that comic books are, in the general public, more accepted than they've ever been. And while superhero movies and TV shows may not immediately lead to sales, they act as a positive branding message about comics as a medium. (Rogers n.pag.).

Store owners remarked that less people are looking down on comic books, "There's an awareness out there that some of the best ideas in all media come from comics, and I think that creates something of a magnet to our stores, to find out what's going on with these things" (Rogers n.pag.). “The popularity of these films seems to have removed any stigma about being a comic-book fan” (Yates n.pag.). It appears that the stories of Superman and Batman, have always appealed to audiences…when given a chance…but now thanks to improved Hollywood, the once geek concept of comic books takes its place at the forefront of pop culture.

*To Be Continued…*

As for the future of the comic book (superhero) in cinema, fanboys will get there fill at least up till 2020 if not further. The Big Two, Marvel and DC, have announced plans for at least 10 feature films *each* by 2020 (Yates n.pag.). This assures that comics will be in the mainstream for at least this long. How the public receives them is up for debate.

Some argue that it’s dependent on originality, for the public is tired of hearing the same old Superman origin story (Yates n.pag.). Others, such as Steven Howearth, argue that studio must defer to the creative types in order for the comic book movie to remain successful, “I have hope but with such huge budgets riding on these films it’s going to become more rare that the studios will gamble on filmmaker’s visions over the studios desire to control them and make them the most marketable over creative quality” (Howearth n.pag.). He cites *Ant-man* as an example, where its creative director was dismissed due to some choices that conflicted with Marvel studios. Howearth along with others, fear an oversaturation of comic book movies focusing on profits. It was profits that led to the comic book movie’s rise in the first place. Howearth elaborates:

The ultimate choice is made by the general public and if they keep paying to see [comic book movies] in the theaters and watch them on television we will be seeing as many sequels to them as we did with the Friday the 13th with a whopping 10 sequels, 1 team-up (Freddie Vs Jason) and 1 re-make.

Perhaps the best interpretation of this rise of comic book superhero movies is Darren Franich’s editorial. “Maybe it’s more accurate to say that the Superhero Film is a genre which is still in its early stages of evolution” (Franich n.pag.). Franich goes on to state that the new *superhero genre* is merely “finding its footing” while trying to take on various different attributes. “Most Superhero Films try to make you laugh and then make you cry and make you laugh again…even the best Superhero Films feel like awkward Frankenstein mish-mashes of genres and tones” (Franich n.pag.).

However one might view this budding genre, the mass media sees it as a cash cow, and it will thus dominate the main stream pop culture for quite some time, or at least until the public stops the craze, as Howearth aptly put it.

*Conclusion*

Comic books came to be in the early 1930s, undergoing trials and tribulations and the medium has been ever changing. Its meteoric rise in pop culture can be attributed to its success in Hollywood. The cinema pushed the comic book superhero into the spotlight with its high quality effects and creative story writing. With the box office success came a positive cultural shift in attitude towards the geeky comic book culture. No longer were comic books seen as for the nerds only. As for the future of the comic book superhero in pop culture, it depends entirely on the public’s willingness to embrace the onslaught of superhero movies. However, the comic book’s place in pop culture is set in stone for at least the next decade.

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