

Film Remakes, Adaptations and Fan Productions

Remake | Remodel

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FILM REMAKES

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12 Spoonin' Spidey—Rebooting the Bat: Immersive Story Worlds and the Narrative Complexities of Video Spoofs in the Era of the Superhero Blockbuster

Daniel Stein

Looking back at the *Batman* television series that had aired from 1966 to 1968 on ABC, Bob Kane wrote in his 1989 autobiography, *Batman and Me*:

I've received many letters from comic book fans who didn't appreciate Batman being parodied in the TV series.... My own opinion is that it was a marvelous spoof,... but it certainly wasn't the definitive Batman. Since the seventies, those who have worked on the series have returned to my original conception of Batman as a lone, mysterious vigilante. (135)

Kane's words come across as the benevolent judgment of an author whose claim to being the creator of Batman had withstood decades of contestation and whose autobiography was published to coincide with the release of the equally contested first movie version of the caped crusader, Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989). Burton was featuring Kane as a production consultant, but he also disclaimed any sense of responsibility towards the professed interest of the comic fan community to ensure the film's fidelity to its comic book sources: "This is too big a budget movie to worry about what a fan of a comic would say" (qtd. in Uricchio and Pearson 184).

Yet notions of authorial intention and comic book fidelity never quite went away, as actor Christian Bale's statement about *Batman Begins*

(Christopher Nolan, 2005) reveals. Promoting this new release as a work that differed substantially from earlier filmic incarnations of Batman, Bale expressed a desire to tie the rebooted, darker and more mysterious, protagonist of *Batman Begins* to Kane's authorial vision, perhaps in order to emphasize the marked departure from the campy aesthetics for which the television series had come to be known and which director Joel Schumacher's two *Batman* movies (*Batman Forever*, 1995; *Batman & Robin*, 1997) had updated for a new generation of viewers. *Batman Begins*, Bale noted, "is what Bob Kane intended when he first created the character... I spoke with his wife, and she said that he was appalled when the (1960s) TV series spoofed what he had intended" (qtd. in Gordon et al. viii).¹ Kane's distinction between his "definitive" Batman and ABC's television series as a "marvelous spoof" and Bale's understanding of the series as a spoof that violated Kane's authorial intentions raise questions about narrative and discursive authority: who can authoritatively enter the fictional universe of specific superheroes and tell stories involving these iconic characters? Who determines which stories are legitimate continuations of a series and which are illegitimate, or at least non-definitive, spoofs? And what role have parodies and spoofs played in the recent extension of "the superhero comic book aesthetic" into "the wider cultural consciousness" (Ndalianis 4), including the transmediation of comic book superheroes into Hollywood cinema?²

John Cawelti has suggested that a proliferation of parodies indicates a genre's stage of final exhaustion:

One can almost make out a life cycle characteristic of genres as they move from an initial period of articulation and discovery, through a phase of conscious self-awareness on the part of both creators and audiences, to a time when the generic patterns have become so well-known that people become tired of their predictability. It is at this point that parodic and satiric treatments proliferate and new genres gradually arise. (200)

Accordingly, the current boom of comic book blockbuster video spoofs posted on YouTube and other online sites would indicate the end of either the superhero comic book or the superhero blockbuster. If, however, we understand superhero parodies and spoofs in Linda Hutcheon's sense as "trans-contextualizations" (8) that cover a "range of intent... from the ironic and playful to the scornful and ridiculing" and offer a mode of intertextual and intermedial engagement that can be described as "repetition with critical distance" (6), then their

proliferation may also indicate something else: a substantive change from the kinds of fears and anxieties that shaped the transmediation of comic book superheroes into early blockbusters like Burton's *Batman* (2008) and *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002) as raw material for critical mocking and creative remaking. Instead of angry fan rejections of casting choices (Burton's decision to use Michael Keaton as Bruce Wayne) and vocal complaints about the protagonists' characterization (Batman and Robin's homoeroticism in Schumacher's films), we are now seeing the creative exploitation of blockbuster movies by an increasing number of productive viewers whose spoofs perform vital cultural work as alternative (mostly unauthorized) reboots that keep franchises topical and native (mostly unauthorized) reboots that keep franchises topical and appeal to heterogeneous audience interests that the blockbuster format cannot accommodate.³ The results of this cultural work are twofold: we are seeing more and more professional spoofs, and more often than not, individual spoofs are presented as installments in an overarching spoof series.⁴

In order to test these hypotheses, I want to discuss two of the most successful Hollywood superhero franchises, *Batman* (Warner/DC Comics) and *Spider-Man* (Columbia/Marvel Entertainment), in terms of their status as comic book transmediations and as evidence of a trend that may be described as the serialization of the Hollywood blockbuster.⁵ This trend has sparked a substantial number of video spoofs as much as it has been supported by such spoofs, which keep audiences engaged between movies and allow them to write themselves into expanding movie metaverses. These parodies and spoofs range from amateurish productions to elaborate mini-films and animated cartoons, and they show that the distinction between amateur productions and professional productions is increasingly hard to make on a purely aesthetic level. They also suggest a growing self-consciousness and self-awareness among producers of professional, semi-professional, and amateur materials about the kind of convergence culture in which they operate and in which their productions are received.⁶ My primary sources will be a *Batman* spoof produced by the *Key of Awesome* comedy group, the MTV Movie Awards Special Presentation of *Spider-Man* (Joel Gallen, 2002; available on YouTube), and the animated cartoon spoof *Spider-Man 3: How It Should Have Ended*.⁷ In various ways, these productions are motivated by the "narrative complexities" (Jason Mittell) and "immersive story worlds" (Sam Ford) that have come to shape not only US American quality television but superhero comics as well (especially the more adult-oriented graphic novels). What is more, they incorporate and also

comment on these characteristics and thereby illustrate the degree to which fan practices—or self-described fan practices by an increasingly diffuse allotment of cultural producers with professional tools—have moved into the heart of American media culture as a pervasive mode of engagement with serially organized popular narratives.

Hollywood comic book superhero movies have come to occupy a central place within the “modern blockbuster era,” whose beginnings can be dated with the release of the first *Superman* film in 1978 (Richard Donner (Gordon et al. viii)).⁸ This process has been driven by the re-orientation of Marvel and DC Comics from comic book publishers to intellectual property developers and licensing corporations, and it has resulted in successful franchises like the *X-Men* (a trilogy and two prequels; Bryan Singer et al.), *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi’s trilogy and Marc Webb’s 2012 reboot), and *Batman* (seven films since 1989). Even though these franchises do not constitute a serial narrative in the same way in which television narratives unfold in weekly progression across multiple seasons, I would argue that a film like *The Dark Knight* is more than just a sequel to *Batman Begins* but can indeed be watched as one episode in an unfolding filmic *Batman* metatext made up of successive reboots by different directors.⁹ As Luca Somigli has argued, the very basis of superhero film adaptations is the serial nature of the superhero itself, and the fact that such films have to incorporate different elements of previous articulations—including various remakes and reboots—of particular characters and plots makes every movie adaptation “always already a remake” (286). This goes double for superhero video spoofs, which are always already remakes of an existing media text as well as remakes twice removed: they remake (that is, spoof) remakes (that is, superhero blockbusters) of comic books which are themselves composed out of a long series of remakes so that every new episode is essentially a remake of existing stories. In that sense, superhero video spoofs should not be viewed as derivative exploitations of an original source text but must rather be regarded as an integral part of a larger process—the serialization of popular entertainment in today’s transmedia environment—that can be usefully discussed in terms of the “narrative complexities” and “immersive story worlds” it both displays and produces.

Mittell has suggested that many contemporary American television series adhere to a “distinct narrational mode” (29) that follows an “operational aesthetic” (a term introduced by Neil Harris), a metareflexive viewing according to which audiences “care about the story world while simultaneously appreciating its construction” (35). He elaborates:

“This operational aesthetic is on display within online fan forum discussions of the techniques that complex comedies and dramas use to guide, manipulate, deceive, and misdirect viewers, suggesting the key pleasure of unraveling the operations of narrative mechanics.” This differs from the bombastic aesthetics of Hollywood blockbusters in that it presents “narrative spectacles” that are “akin to special effects” but have viewers “marveling at the craft required to pull off such narrative pyrotechnics,” asking not only “what will happen” but also “how did he do that?” Narratively complex television favors long and intricate story arcs, complicated character constellations, “in-jokes and self-aware references,” and “parodic media references.” Moreover, it “convert[s] many viewers to amateur narratologists, [who] not[e] usage and violations of convention, chronicl[e] chronologies, and highlight... both inconsistencies and continuities across episodes and even series” (34, 35, 38).

These observations mesh well with the concept of “immersive story worlds” that Ford proposes in his analysis of popular narratives. Immersive story worlds are defined first and foremost by serial storytelling. Since no single person is ultimately capable of mastering, say, 70 years’ worth of multiple monthly Batman comics (plus movie serials, live action television, animated cartoon series, video games, and Hollywood movies), such narratives offer a rich space for interaction among the producers of a text, the text itself, and its recipients. A second element of immersive story worlds is that they usually extend beyond the control of a single author. Both *Batman* and *Spider-Man* were created by teams of artists and writers from the very outset, and they have since then been continued by generations of creative teams. A third characteristic is long-term continuity. At least since the 1970s superhero comics have thrived on the premise that previous stories have a bearing on the stories of the present, that the stories of the present will have a bearing on future stories, and that the stories in different series are interconnected because they take place in a single overarching fictional universe.¹⁰ Ford’s fourth and fifth characteristics, character backlog and deep history, follow from the principle of long-term continuity. Serial characters and plot lines tend to grow more and more complex over time as each new installment adds new facets to an increasing backlog of information. Among the practices that follow from the extensive story archives produced by long-running series are the policing of continuity, the checking of character consistency, the indexing of character constellations, the documentation of chronologies, and so on.

So how do the notions of “narrative complexity” and “immersive story worlds” play out in recent video spoofs of superhero blockbusters?

My first example is a spoof of Nolan's *The Dark Knight* titled "The Dark Knight Is Confused" by the *Key of Awesome*.¹¹ Rather than pick up where the movie left off and continue the narrative, it casts a metareflexive glance on Nolan's blockbuster and issues its comical critique of the movie's weaknesses in just two minutes and forty seconds.¹² Revisiting the final scene of the film, it uses Commissioner Gordon's words to his son as its starting point and narrative impulse:

- Son: "Batman! - Why is he running, Dad?"
 Gordon: "Because we have to chase him."
 Son: "Why?"
 Gordon: "Because he can take it. Because he is not a hero. He is a silent guardian, a watchful protector, the dark knight."
 Son: "I don't get it."
 Gordon: "Neither do I, son, but it sounds cool."

This is clearly a critique of the cliché ending of the blockbuster. It mocks the re-branding of Batman as the dark knight of Frank Miller's comics, and it faults the privileging of franchise logic over plausible plot resolution by insinuating that creating a satisfying dramatic ending was less important than setting the stage for a potential sequel. The dialogue redeployes the commissioner's son as a stand-in for the producers and the viewers of the spoof. He sees through the film's overblown rhetoric and compels viewers to retract their willing suspension of disbelief and get ready for the dose of comic disbelief that the spoof will dish out in the ensuing performance. Thus, while one may argue that Nolan's *The Dark Knight* might have failed in handling the narrative complexities following from its complicated relationship with the deep comic book history of the source material and its earlier translations into film, one could also argue that it was successful in converting viewers into producers who cast themselves in the role of Mittell's amateur narratologists.

Furthermore, the producers of the spoof translate their puzzlement about the faulty plot into their depiction of the characters from the movie. The opening dialogue is followed by a jump cut to actor Mark Douglas, who, dressed up as Batman, is riding a motorcycle towards the viewer and raps: "As I ride on my bike at the end of *Dark Knight* / There's a few plot points that just don't feel right / Like, why the hell did I agree to take the rap / Harvey Dent killed those people / Who gives a crap?"; and in the sappy chorus: "This movie of my life just doesn't hold together"; "Is it too much to ask that it all makes sense?" Here and later on, Batman, Alfred, and the Joker are transmuted from

the authorized diegesis of the film (Douglas plays all of them) into the diegesis of the unauthorized music video. What we are seeing here is a type of engagement with the film that in some ways resembles the performing (role-paying and costume-wearing) fans that Kurt Lancaster describes in his analysis of *Babylon 5* audiences. It is, however, also different because the spoof uses these popular fan practices as raw material for the creation of a serial popular narrative.¹³ Moreover, the cast of the *Key of Awesome* consists of professional actors who spoof a different media text every week (including parodies of Lady Gaga, Kanye West, Justin Bieber, Katy Perry, Ke\$ha, Eminem, and so on), produce behind-the-scenes videos in which they answer fan comments ("Gaga vs Batman, or Taylor Swift? Behind the Awesome"), and deconstruct, rather than reenact or extend, their source material. Thus, they participate in the "commercial development of performative spaces for audiences" that Henry Jenkins allocates in the "new interactive culture" in which "participatory impulses are transformed] into a new marketing strategy" (Foreword xix), yet they do so not as fan producers prodding the culture industry towards creating new forms of entertainment but as commercial players who occupy a middle ground between the owners of the Batman franchise and their own fan following.¹⁴

The heightened metareflexivity that Mittell diagnoses in narratively complex television shows is particularly obvious in "The Dark Knight Is Confused," which ranks *The Dark Knight* within the serial history of the franchise in a language we know from fan discourses and online commentaries: it "beats the crap out of *Batman Forever*," "at least they got rid of Joel Schumacher," and so on. More remarkable, however, are the metamedial references that appear in the final third of the spoof, when the Joker brings the DVD of *The Dark Knight* so that he, Batman, and Alfred can watch it in order to untangle the convoluted plotting of the film. "Rewatchability" is the catch phrase here, according to which narrative complexity is rewarding because it offers the pleasure of decoding complicated story arcs, understanding obscure intra-serial allusions, and catching cross-references to competing series (cf. Mittell 31). In "The Dark Knight Is Confused," however, Batman, Alfred, and the Joker appear as clever narratologists exasperated by movie's lack of narrative complexity.

The depiction of characters as amateur narratologists leads to the type of in-jokes that Mittell lists as integral elements of narrative complexity. For instance, Batman cannot figure out the plot of his own movie and needs his arch enemy, the Joker, to make sense of it, and butler Alfred almost reveals the secret identity principle that *Batman*

and other superheroes have inherited from their comic book origins. It takes a good amount of suspended disbelief to accept the fact that Bruce Wayne cannot be spotted under his bat mask. Therefore, when Alfred turns to the Joker, asking, "Joker, are you busy? Let's call a truce, I need you to help explain the plot to ... Batman" (that is, Bruce), he is pretty much stating the obvious: that Batman is Bruce Wayne in his civilian life and that Gotham's best-guarded secret makes sense only when it is read as an effect of deep character backlog and long-term continuity (Burton had angered fans when he allowed Vicky Vale, played by Kim Basinger, to learn the secret). Another in-joke depends on the viewer's ability to decode the logic of serial storytelling. The Joker's final question, "Did I ever tell you how I got these scars?" winks at the obsessive return of superhero comics to the origin stories of central characters. These origins stories function as foundational myths that hold expanding narrative universes and increasingly complex story arcs together. But, as Batman's disgruntled answer, "Yes, several versions!" indicates, they also produce redundancy. Even rebooted versions of the narrative tend to reiterate the basic elements of origin stories, and for those who are familiar with the deep history and character backlog of the series, they might become so tedious that unauthorized versions hold greater attraction because they are not bound by the sanctity of the franchise: "I was **working** at an **exotic pet store**, and the **owner** bet me **five bucks** I wouldn't **French kiss a pms-ing ocelot**," is *MAD Magazine's* version of how the Joker got his scars (Devlin and Richmond 177).

"The Dark Knight Is Confused" is a particularly evocative superhero blockbuster spoof, and it can be usefully contextualized with the professionally produced MTV Movie Awards Special Presentation of *Spider-Man* starring Jack Black and Sarah Michelle Gellar.¹⁵ This is a "semi-authorized" media text because it splices together original footage with new material and thus depends on the approval of Columbia Pictures and Marvel Entertainment, the copyright and trademark owners of *Spider-Man*, without being completely restricted by the narrative universe of the film. The spoof places the notion of an immersive story world at its center. Black and Gellar actually immerse themselves in the diegesis of Sam Raimi's film; like fans who dress up as their favorite superheroes and restage scenes from comic books and movies, they enter the world of the film in new scenes that director Joel Gallen intersplices with original footage in a seamless continuum of moving images. The spoof's focalizer is Peter Parker, who appears as the stereotypical comic book fanboy. Instead of completing his transformation from skinny high school geek into the muscular and heroic Spider-Man,

teen idol Tobey Maguire is substituted with a substantially older and substantially chubbier Jack Black, which creates humorous discrepancy between spoof and movie and foregrounds the illusory nature of fan-boy fantasies.

One of the more notorious stereotypes about comic book fans is that they have no sex life. Thus, it is not surprising that the MTV Special Presentation spoofs the sexual subtext of the movie's romantic love plot: Peter's infatuation with Mary Jane Watson, the girl from next door who only in time comes to see Peter's superheroic nature. While movies like *Spider-Man* tend to project a sanitized image of heterosexual love that stays above the waistline, Black and Gellar's semi-authorized performance has more leeway when it comes to the depiction of sexuality. When Peter ogles Mary Jane through the bedroom window, he represents a male gaze that both acknowledges and parodies the pubescent perspective of a major segment of the blockbuster's target audience: male teenagers. This gaze literally climaxes in Peter's discovery of his web-shooting powers and thereby remodels the movie's initiation plot into a masturbatory fantasy. Obviously, this Spider-Man will not comply with the "coming-of-age" narrative from "adolescent 'abjection' to adult 'agency'" that Martin Flanagan finds in Raimi's film (137). He will not follow the conventional "teen trajectory" and will not become the responsible citizen-hero celebrated by the official byline of the movie, "with great power comes great responsibility." Not only does he stuff a pair of socks into his pants in order to "transform" himself from an "ordinary average guy" into what he believes is an omnipotent superhero, but when he is called upon to save a baby from a burning house, he shows no interest in heroism: "I'll pass." This Spider-Man uses his superpowers to seek sexual gratification, which is made explicit in the scene in which his spider sense does not warn him of oncoming danger but signals the appearance of his prime sexual fantasy: Mary Jane in a see-through top, looking for a "man-tastic" co-host for the MTV Movie Awards: "I'm getting a tingling sensation in my arachnads," he states with a horny grin.

It is important to recognize that the spoof is simultaneously critical and affirmative. It appeals to an older and sexually more knowledgeable MTV demographic, thereby extending the movie's recipients from the blockbuster's target audience to a group of viewers who may feel intellectually superior to Raimi's narrative but will nonetheless indulge in it by watching the parodic remake. As such, it performs the "reassessment and acclimatization" function typical of modern parody (Hutcheon 2), and it does so by enlisting its viewers in the act of decoding the

repressed sexuality of Raimi's movie. Earlier in the spoof, Peter sketches various "gay" versions of his superhero costume, ranging from a sailor's outfit to S&M leather attire to the final Spider-Man costume, which is "just the right amount of gay." Here, the spoof taps into a discourse that has a long history in American comics: the homoerotic subtext and troubled heterosexuality of superheroes, both of which have inspired countless examples of superhero slash fiction and have added to the narrative complexities of these series. Batman's potential homosexuality was famously alleged by psychologist Fredric Wertham, who argued in *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954) that Bruce Wayne's love for his youthful ward Robin was of a sexual nature.¹⁶ Often denied by industry professionals, this homoerotic subtext was supported by the nipple suits and crotch/butt shots of George Clooney and Chris O'Donnell in Schumacher's *Batman & Robin*. In many of the spoofs I have surveyed for this chapter, however, it is Spider-Man who is associated with notions of homosexuality and homoeroticism. One example is the second segment of the two-volume spoof "Superlunch" (Tarik Alherimi, 2009; available on YouTube), where Spider-Man confesses to Superman and Batman that he cannot satisfy Mary Jane sexually ("when I'm about to, you know, my spider-sense goes crazy, and I can't") and is confronted with Batman's conclusion, "You're gay." Apparently, Nolan's attempts to reboot Batman as a dark knight successfully downplayed the homoeroticism of Schumacher's films, while Raimi's melodramatic depiction of Peter Parker as a teen heartthrob triggered them.

While most of the English-language spoofs on YouTube are rather tame in terms of their depiction of Spider-Man's homosexuality, an Argentinean fan trailer, which was posted in January 2008 and has received almost five million clicks, is much more explicit. Its title is already a pun on Peter's alleged homosexuality; instead of "El hombre araña" (Spider-Man), it reads "El hombre que araña" (the man who fondles/caresses). Using digitally altered scenes from the original movie, the spoof launches a series of explicit homosexual references: Mary Jane asks Peter repeatedly when he will finally have sex with her ("Cuando me vas a garchar?" "Chúpame la concha!"), but he declines ("Ay, ni loca!"); Peter comes out to Aunt May ("Abuela, soy putazo!"); Spider-Man poses for a series of naked butt shots for Eddie Brock, the photographer of the *Daily Bugle*; the voice-over's double entendre portrays Peter as "¡un superhéroe que sí se rompe el culo por la justicia!"; a superhero who will bust his ass (but maybe not just for justice?). These kinds of homoerotic fictions by unauthorized producers are, of course, not new. Indeed, they stand in a tradition of queer rewritings of serial narratives such as *Star Trek*

and many others. Yet the cultural work they perform within the trans-media shift of superhero narratives from comic book stories to blockbuster movies is new. They make movie superheroes like Batman and Spider-Man palatable for a highly diverse audience, sections of which will hold contradictory views of the characters, and they do so not by inventing entirely new scenarios but by tapping into narrative possibilities already prefigured—or repressed—in the superhero movies.

In terms of Mittell's "parodic media references," spoofs generally have a field day. They are by nature parodic, their whole purpose being to establish humorous references to the media text they remake and remodel. Frequently, they follow from the spoof producers' narratological expertise and their decision to depict superheroes as amateur narratologists. The animated web video "Spider-Man 3: How It Should Have Ended" (HISHE), for instance, delivers a running meta-reflexive commentary on the structural weaknesses and formulaic storytelling of the *Spider-Man* film.¹⁷ It begins with a cartoon version of the opening shots of the movie, Spider-Man swinging through the New York skyline and addressing his audience through voice-over: "Hey there, it's me, Peter Parker, your friendly neighborhood, you know [that is, Spider-Man]. I've come a long way after being bit by a spider. Before, nothing went right for me. Now, people really like me. I keep the city safe, I'm the top of my class, and I'm even in love with the girl of my dreams," he chatters away, only to be interrupted by a little boy who wears a Spider-Man t-shirt and pleads, "Spider-Man, will you stop narrating, please?" This is essentially a comical take on what Margaret Rose has called parody's "shock destruction of expectations" (23) since Parker's lines are reproduced verbatim and because the young boy is based on the group of kids who appear in the movie. But the boy in the spoof differs from the kids from *Spider-Man 3* (Sam Raimi, 2007) in that he acts as a knowledgeable fan who does not succumb to the interpellation of screen images but reflects critically on them from an outside perspective. He also expresses frustration with the redundancy of the initial voice-over. "You're narrating; it's kind of unnecessary," the boy notes, and to Spider-Man's question, "How are people gonna know what I've been up to all this time?" (that is, between movies), he responds: "We're not idiots."¹⁸

The MTV Special Presentation is even more versed in the practice of parodic-media referencing. It remakes Tobey Maguire and Kirsten Dunst's upside-down kiss by turning the romantic love scene into a mash-up fan fiction in which a goofball Spider-Man woos Mary Jane by impersonating Yoda from George Lucas' *Star Wars* (supported by a

snippet from John Williams' title melody). Another parodic media reference appears when Mary Jane, upon seeing Peter, exclaims: "the creep from *Pleasantville* is back." This is not just a reference to Gary Ross' 1998 film, in which Maguire plays the male lead, but also an implicit reflection on the spoof's mocking of teen fantasies on television. While *Pleasantville* involves two teenagers who are sucked into their television set, where they become part of a 1950s-style television show, the *Spider-Man* spoof immerses its actors in a comic book fantasy (that is, the storyworld of the movie). By combining new material with original footage—and thus by becoming actively involved in the remaking of the movie—the fan (here: Black) gets to play his favorite superhero, and he even gets the girl—and not just any girl, but Wonder Woman from the 1970s television show (ABC/CBS, 1975–9), into whom Mary Jane turns by spinning around. In that sense, it is not just the male adolescent viewer of *Spider-Man* who is transformed into a superhero, but also the female object of his fantasies. The spoof thus represents an intercompany crossover story—Marvel's *Spider-Man* falls for DC Comics' Wonder Woman—but goes one step further. It enacts an additional transmedia narrative in the sense that the movie *Spider-Man* (and actor Jack Black) encounters the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003, WB/UPN) through the person of Sarah Michelle Gellar, whose roles include hosting MTV Movie Awards, playing a spoof version of Mary Jane as a stand-in for Kirsten Dunst, and transforming into Wonder Woman as a stand-in for Lynda Carter.

To conclude: parodies and spoofs play a substantial role in the current transmediation of comic book superheroes into serialized Hollywood blockbusters. They contribute to the continued relevance of superhero narratives by offering a double perspective—the "dual drives of conservative and revolutionary forces" Hutcheon defines as a crucial element of parodies (26)—that matches the twin dynamics of both film remakes and popular seriality: "reliability (repetition) and novelty (innovation)" (Verevis 4). As viewers become more and more skilled at decoding the narrative complexities of contemporary American television series, they tend to approach superhero blockbusters with an increasingly critical eye and comedic sensibility. Parody may be "a method of inscribing continuity while permitting critical distance" and a form of engagement with authorized texts that can "function as a conservative force in both retaining and mocking other aesthetic forms," but it also poses "transformative power in creating new syntheses" (Hutcheon 20). In that sense, deconstructing the faulty plot of *The Dark Knight* or mocking the redundancy of the *Spider-Man* 3 opening simultaneously

raises awareness of superhero stories and conventions but also offers a transformative space for the potentially cathartic expression of comic disbelief. This expression certainly works to contain feelings of dissatisfaction and discontent with the bombastic aesthetics of blockbusters, and it implicitly authorizes the transmediation of comic book superhero narratives into Hollywood film. In doing so, however, it also creates new syntheses in the form of creatively convincing and commercially viable remakes of these narratives that counterbalance the narrative weaknesses of serialized superhero franchises and tap into their productive potential to unfold their very own transformative power.

Notes

1. Kane had passed away in 1998.
2. These and related questions are also the subject of a larger research project conducted by Frank Kelleter and myself. The project examines the generic development of American superhero comics and is part of the Research Unit on "Popular Seriality: Aesthetics and Practice" at the University of Göttingen (funded by the German Research Foundation). I use "transmediation" to foreground the transposition of material from one medium to another but also in reference to Jenkins' conception of "transmedia storytelling" as "stories that unfold across multiple media platforms" and as "a more integrated approach to franchise development than models based on urtexts and ancillary products" (*Convergence* 334). Not much scholarship on the role of parody and spoofs in American comics exists, even though they are "one of the medium's most common forms" (Pustz 139; see also Groensteen). On the spoof as a film genre, see Gehring.
3. My usage of "cultural work" follows Jane Tompkins' classical analysis of nineteenth-century American fiction, in which she writes: "Rather than asking, 'what does this text mean?' or, 'how does it work?,' I ask, 'what kind of work is this novel trying to do?'" (38). The idea is to turn to the functions of blockbuster video spoofs in the transmediation of comic book material to the big screen and to think about the larger effects of these transmediations on the evolution of (American) popular culture.
4. This cultural work is supported by decisions of American courts "to protect 'transformative' unauthorized uses against copyright owners' allegations of infringement" (Tushnet 61). Parodies and spoofs are transformative because they "add new material that reflects critically on the original" and urge viewers to reconsider their understanding of the parodied and spoofed source (67). If "the legal concept of transformative use denies the author the authority to control all interpretations of his text" (70), it allows previously unauthorized authors to present their productions beyond the legal grasp of multimedia corporations.
5. My understanding of "serialization" does not differ substantially from the term "sequelization" that Jess-Cooke and Verevis propose in their *Second Takes* essay collection (4), but it places my analysis within the wider context of comics superheroes as a phenomenon of popular seriality.

6. Jenkins defines "convergence" as "an ongoing process or series of interconnections between different media systems" and as "a situation in which multiple media systems coexist and where media content flows fluidly across them" (*Convergence* 322).
7. This focus seeks to reduce the source material to a manageable corpus and is not meant to suggest that the same kind of analysis could not be conducted with other examples (Superman, the X-Men, Wonder Woman, and so on). A more extensive analysis of superhero spoofs would have to consider the male bias in the superhero genre (mostly male creators, mostly male characters) and address questions of gender in spoofs of franchises based on female superheroes.
8. Sequels were released in 1980, 1983, and 1987. These films are rarely discussed in connection with the current superhero blockbuster boom despite Bryan Singer's commercially successful *Superman Returns* (2006). Transmediations of comic book content began early: the Fleischer Studios produced the first Superman animated cartoon in 1941; around the same time, audiences could watch movie serials such as *Adventures of Captain Marvel* (dir. John English and William Witney, 1941) and *Batman and Robin* (dir. Lamber Hillyer, 1943). A more extensive analysis of blockbuster serialization would have to account for George Lucas' *Star Wars* franchise, the *Star Trek* movies, and many other film series.
9. These blockbusters cannot compete with the tightly woven plot structures, complex character constellations, and intra-serial references that characterize long-running contemporary quality television series such as the *Sopranos* or *The Wire*, but Meehan had a point when she wrote in 1991 that the \$30 million production costs for Burton's *Batman* were "the root costs of a film series" (54).
10. Most earlier superhero comics, Eco noted in his analysis of *Superman*, "develop in a kind of oneiric climate—of which the reader is not aware at all—where what has happened before and what has happened after [each particular story] appear extremely hazy" (153).
11. According to their website, the *Key of Awesome* is a weekly program of film and music spoofs produced by Mark Douglas, Jake Chudnow, and Rusty Ward and hosted by *barely-digital.com*.
12. All of the spoofs discussed in this chapter are relatively short, ranging from about two to seven minutes.
13. The *Key of Awesome* has produced a whole series of Batman spoofs, including "Pimp My Automobile," which is modeled on the MTV show *Pimp My Ride* and shows how Batman's "piece of crap Hyundai" is transformed into the batmobile; "Batman Gets Pwnd," "Batman: Pwnd at E3," and "Batman vs. Wolverine," which show a protagonist-turned-fan who is outmatched by the complexities of contemporary computer gaming; and "Batman vs. Mr Freeze," "Batman vs. the Joker in New York," "Batman vs. Poison Ivy," "Man-Bat vs. Lady Cat," in which Batman works for the New Yorker *Red Flag Tours* agency (all clips are available on www.barelydigital.com). On fan practices, media fandoms, and fan studies, see Hills; Jenkins, *Fans*; Gray et al.
14. The music video format of "The Dark Knight is Confused" follows in the footsteps of "Weird Al" Yancovic, who popularized music video spoofs in the 1990s. It also parodies the practice of selling movies through theme songs

- and soundtracks, for instance Prince's *Batman* album and his "Batdance" music video for Burton's movie. "The Dark Knight is Confused" features Batman as lead rapper/singer, guitarist, and DJ.
15. Black and Gellar starred in a second movie spoof presented at the 2002 MTV Movie Awards, "Lord of the Piercing" (dir. Joel Gallen).
16. On the homoerotic subtext of *Batman* and its reception, see Brooker, chapter 2.
17. The members of HISHE are Daniel Baxter, Tommy Watson, and Tina Alexander. In my nomenclature, their "parody animation" is an unauthorized text because it uses little original material and does not depend on the legal sanctioning of Columbia/Marvel.
18. The spoof ends with a parodic depiction of the final showdown between Spider-Man and villain Eddie Brock/Venom which further deconstructs the conventions of serialized superhero blockbusters: "This is my third movie. *Spider-Man Tres*, amigo. You think they're gonna kill me off?"

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