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The Desirable Traits of the Comic Book Medium

With about an 80 year history, comics have told and retold countless stories of superhero adventures, hugely influencing Western culture. For example, G. Willow Wilson's "Ms. Marvel: No Normal," introduces the fourth main iteration of the Captain Marvel/Ms. Marvel character as a modern "remediation," a term used by Bolter and Grusin in their article "Remediation: Understanding New Media" that focuses on the idea that new mediums evolve from aspects inspired by older mediums. Within the past 18 years, there has been an undeniably huge resurgence in the adaptation of comic books to film, with the model used by the ever successful Marvel Studios becoming "the most innovative development in Hollywood filmmaking of the past quarter century" (Beaty 319). However, comics, defined as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" by Scot McCloud, still falls under a moderately niche audience (9). So what is it about the comic book medium that allows movie adaptations, particularly ones based off superhero storylines, to turn a profit in the hundreds of millions? In his article "Superhero fan service: Audience strategies in the contemporary interlinked Hollywood blockbuster," Bart Beaty theorizes that the success of comic book movies comes not only from the remediation of content from the source material, but also by directly remediating comic book publishing strategies when crafting films. For example, in "The Tears Of Doctor Doom," Martyn Pedler notes that the use of continuity has "developed frighteningly dense histories" for comic book characters, yet these characters still remain as popular as ever due to his idea of the "focus on visual iconography" (35). In the article "The "Origin Story" is the Only Story: Seriality and Temporality in Superhero Fiction from Comics to Post-Television," Federico Pagello compares and contrasts comic book narratives to TV serial narratives, in which time seems to endlessly

loop as we follow our protagonists put in situation after situation. While Pagello's argument can lead one to infer that comic book narratives would fit perfectly on TV, Drew Morton argues that isn't particularly the case in " "Watched any good books lately?": The Formal Failure of the Watchmen Motion Comic," in which Morton examines the motion comic medium as a remediation of comics, ultimately expressing that there is an "aesthetic incompatibility of comics, animation, and film" (132). While all of the aforementioned articles take a look at the unique traits of the comic book medium, there is little information about comic books contextualized within Bolter and Grusin's concept of remediation, aside from Morton's examination of the motion comic medium. This article will examine how these traits allow comic books to become so successfully remediated in a wide array of mediums, as well as taking a look at the frequent use of "refashioning within the medium," with Wilson's character of Ms. Marvel playing as a major example (Bolter and Grusin 49).

When examining lists of universally recognizable symbols, amongst the golden arches and peace signs, a certain superhero's icon can be found; Superman's red "S". While a decent percentage of people may not necessarily know the mythology behind Superman, many are able to recognize his symbol and connect it to the red caped hero of justice. This is Pedler's theory of "the power of branding" at work, in combination with his examination of the absorption of "the basic details" (35). A core concept of every superhero character is the focus around their flashy logo, dubbed as "visual iconography" by Pedler, akin to how every major company or business similarly places huge emphasis on their own "visual iconography" (35). Often, the audience is introduced to a character by first being introduced to their logo; a well designed logo has the power to completely define the character behind it. Thus, techniques such as minimalism,

recognizable shapes, and a colour palette representative of the thematic roots of the character are used, and through these techniques, the audience subconsciously infers basic details of who the character is; Batman's dark bat symbol can be seen in all of his equipment as a hint to his origin and the thematic tones of the character. Pedler argues that these basic details are absolutely essential to superhero characters due to "decades of cumulative storylines," thus instead of reading 50 years worth of comics, audiences "know these characters… having absorbed the basic details" (35). This argument can be supported by Pagello's observation that while superhero stories contain an "increased variety of situations to be found in the "main" narrative, the fundamental elements of the series would never change" (728). Willow's Ms. Marvel is an excellent example of what Pagello is trying to convey. Originally, a Superman-like figure was owned by DC Comics under the name of Captain Marvel, but due to licensing rights, this DC character evolved into the hero Shazam, while Marvel Comics claimed the name of Captain Marvel for their own male cosmic hero of fictional Kree origin. Carol Danvers was a female assistant to Captain Marvel's human counterpart, and due to a series of events, she eventually gained the cosmic powers of Captain Marvel and fought crime under the name of Ms. Marvel, becoming one of Marvel Comic's first female leads, albeit heavily overshadowed by Captain Marvel due to the lacklustre stories she was put in, amongst other factors. The character didn't gain much traction until 1980, where she was raped in a highly controversial storyline. This was later spun as a traumatic event that lead to the loss of Ms. Marvel's powers, who renamed and remediated herself as Binary, and eventually Warbird. As Pagello states, "the fundamental elements of the series would never change - or, in any case, could always be brought back to their previous form after some time had passed," and after several decades and various story arcs

of course-correcting, Ms. Marvel would find herself with her cosmic powers yet again (728). With the death of the original male Captain Marvel in a 2012 story arc, Carol Danvers would take on the mantle of Captain Marvel in respects of her old friend. This is where Willow's story comes in; with the mantle of Ms. Marvel now empty, Willow has created an entirely new character representative of a new generation to take up, or remediate, the name of Ms. Marvel with Kamala Khan. Although there are clear distinctions between Carol Danvers and Kamala Khan's representations of the character, Khan's devotion to Danver's work and ideology allows the two characters to have very similar thematic roots, and even as extremely complicated as the character's history is, Pagello's "fundamental elements," and Pedler's "basic details" have remained intact (728, 35). Furthermore, Pedler and Beaty have observed that this process is only able to happen due to the unique storytelling techniques comics implement through their serial nature.

In the 21st century, TV series have begun to adapt a "short-form serial narrative" model that involves telling episodic stories that link to an overarching narrative within a season; this happens to be the exact same narrative model comics have used for decades, with comic book issues serving as episodes (Pagello 725). Live action superhero films have also remediated this comic book publishing strategy as seen in how Marvel Studios releases their films in phases; each phase contains about 6 movies that tell separate but interconnected stories building up to the next Avenger's film, and each phase is building up to an even higher overarching narrative of Infinity War and Avengers 4, which serves to end the current Cinematic Universe and start anew. The use of a huge event to restart a universe is another frequently used plot device in comics for various reasons; to increase interest and profits; to allow a place for newcomers to enter into the

narrative; and to continue serial storytelling. Pagello cites Umberto Eco's analysis of "the fundamental paradox" within superhero fiction, which states that superhero stories are "aimed to produce a mythic, that is, [an] immutable universe… [however,] this fictional world [has] to change endlessly in order to satisfy the modern… taste of its readership" (727). By converting superheroes into mythic figures in a serial narrative, characters are able to escape the "irreversible consequences" of linear time, bypassing death, as well as allowing "alternative realities" or "What-If narratives," with serials often representing "static world[s] in which the passing of time [is] abolished" (Pagello 727, 728). If we recall McCloud's definition of the comic as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence," we can conclude that comic book stories exist "in a space outside of time," both narratively and physically (McCloud 9, Pagello 728). This is an extremely desirable trait in terms of business because, as described by Pedler, although a desire for the end moves the narrative forward, the desire for repetition of our experiences with these characters implies that the end of the narrative serves as a potential begining for a new narrative, and thus these "stories are in no danger of coming to an end" (35). Again, Khan's version of Ms Marvel is a perfect representation of this. She is a character made to fit with "the modern… taste of its readership," while cementing the mythical status of the Ms Marvel character by essentially immortalizing it as Khan continues it's legacy "through multiplication of [Ms Marvel's] symbolic identity" (Pagello 727, 735). However, the end result of this is an 80 year old medium constantly retelling similar stories over and over again. To combat this, comics, as well as other mediums, have used the power of continuity within "modular" serial storytelling to give birth to "an active fandom" (Beaty 323). "Modular story development" is described by Beaty as having a narrative be a piece of a larger puzzle, and is

assisted by "easter eggs, … crossovers, … [and] linked repercussions"; Kamala Khan receives

her power's due to the repercussions of a Terrigen Mist that was released during a previous

comic event, Infinity, connecting Khan's world to the larger Marvel comic universe, and this

little tidbit rewards hardcore fans for their knowledge and dedication, while not affecting new

readers in any negative way (Beaty 322, 323). Arguably, one of the reasons why comic book

remediations have become so successful is because of this idea of an "active fandom" (Beaty

323). Live action Marvel and DC works have included all elements of Beaty's "modular story

development," with the addition of post credit scenes to further attract fans (323). This

encourages the general audience to search for meaning behind these little puzzle pieces, which

additionally rewards hardcore fans by allowing them to contribute to the fandom by posting

articles and videos about topics such as *10 things you missed in this film* or *The post credit scene

of this film explained*. While Marvel Studio has successfully incorporated this technique into

their films as a means of promoting future projects, the technique has not yet been entirely

successful for DC and Fox, with the latter "proceed[ing] with a continuity in which characters

have different ages and races because [Fox] seemingly perceive[s] these issues to be unimportant

to the central thrills presented in their films;" Fox has chosen to instead rely on Pedler's "basic

details" (Beaty 324, Pedler 35). However, just being a comic book remediation doesn't credit a

work with instant success, as argued by Morton in his examination of the failed motion comic

medium. Bolter and Grusin cite and disagree with Steven Holtzman's argument that every

medium has "unique qualities" that are best "exploit[ed]" within the original medium a work was

made for (49). However, Morton sides with Holtzman, arguing that the uniqueness of the comic

book medium is its ability to be "sequential in space," while film and animation are "sequential

in time," additionally citing McCloud's argument that "juxtaposition demands that the reader perform an act of closure - a spatiotemporal, narrative hypothesis - to decipher the sequence of panels… the viewer of the typical narrative film… does not need to perform the same cognitive gymnastics" (134). Thus Morton concludes that there is ultimately an "aesthetic incompatibility of comics, animation, and film" (132). I believe that Morton is both right and wrong with his final statement; if a work remediates both the content and the way the content is presented, with comics being "sequential in space," then the work will be hard pressed to find success, as evident in the failure of *Watchmen: Motion Comic,* the near disappearance of the motion comic medium as a whole, and the mixed reaction to Zack Synder's 2009 *Watchmen* live action movie, which incorporated slow motion to replicated comic book panels, as well as Ang Lee's 2003 movie, *Hulk,* which made creative use of actual comic book panels in a live action environment (Morton 134). However, if a new work remediated the content of the original while making changes to fit the new medium, as Marvel Studios has drastically done with their characters, then Morton's description of an "aesthetic incompatibility" may not be as evident, as seen in how far the comic book medium has entrenched itself into other mediums, from TV and film to novels, video games, music, and even fashion (132). Our own Captain Marvel is about to see herself similarly entrenched into these other mediums, as the recently announced Captain Marvel movie from Marvel Studios will launch Carol Danvers into the minds of the main stream audience, and her evolution as a remediated character will definitely be an interesting case study of how the comic book medium can find wide success in remediation.

     With the superhero genre growing larger and larger by each year, we have found that there may be some simple reasoning behind this. Their easily recognizable "visual iconography,"

the fact that we only need to know "the basic details" to witness these narratives, the creation of myths, the bypassing of time, and the use of the "short-form serial narrative," "modular story development" and continuity (Pedler 35, Pagello 725, Beaty 323). Each trait may not be exclusively unique traits to the comic book medium within the superhero genre, but one would be hard pressed to find another medium that contains every single one of these traits. However, this essay has only just scratched the surface in regards to remediation and the comic book medium. How does this widespread remediation affect, and perhaps influence, the original works? Do the traits and techniques noted in this essay apply to works that exist within the comic book medium but are not defined under the superhero genre? And why has manga, a Japanese medium very similar to the comic book medium, not found much success in live action Western and Asian adaptations, instead finding huge success in creating a remediation loop between three particular mediums: light novels, manga, and anime, with anime beginning to enter popular culture as strongly as the superhero genre has. Ultimately, the larger success of the remediated work compared to the original further cements Bolter and Grusin's theory of remediation, however, time will tell if the rise of live-action superhero movies is due to a passing fad or is part of something even larger.

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