

8-1-2013

# From Panels to Primetime: Made-for-TV Movies Adapted from Marvel Comics Properties

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## Recommended Citation

Burnham, Jef, "From Panels to Primetime: Made-for-TV Movies Adapted from Marvel Comics Properties" (2013). *College of Communication Master of Arts Theses*. 22.  
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**From Panels to Primetime**

Made-for-TV Movies Adapted from Marvel Comics Properties

**By**

**Jef Burnham, B.A.**

**Thesis**

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

DePaul University

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

**Master of Arts**

**in**

**Media and Cinema Studies**

DePaul University

July 2013

For Alistair.

## Acknowledgements

I may have found inspiration for this thesis in my love of made-for-TV movies adapted from comic books, but for the motivation to complete this project I am entirely indebted to my wife, Amber, and our son, Alistair.

With specific regard to the research herein, I would like to thank Ben Grisanti for turning me onto *The Myth of the American Superhero*, as well as authors Andy Mangels and James Van Hise for their gracious responses to my Facebook messages and emails that ultimately led me to Jack Mathis' book, *Valley of the Cliffhangers*. I am additionally deeply indebted to the students that took my "Studies in Film Genre: Superheroes" course at Columbia College Chicago in Fall 2012. Their feedback in our weekly group discussions confirmed for me the legitimacy of the concepts presented throughout this thesis, especially as those discussions leaned ever more toward the cultural relevance of the movies screened in class.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the faculty of DePaul University's Media and Cinema Studies program, whose influence on my work has been incalculable. Specifically though, this thesis is indebted to my advisor, Blair Davis, who agreed to advise me through this process within two minutes of our first meeting and who has politely listened to me prattle on endlessly about Reb Brown and mythic structures ever since. I am also grateful to my other committee member, Paul Booth, for his consistently generous feedback on my work and for overseeing my research into online fan criticism of *Captain America* (1979), which unfortunately didn't make it into the thesis but *did* make a great conference paper. Lastly, thanks to Kelly Kessler and Michael DeAngelis, in whose courses I conducted much of the research that informed my introduction and first two chapters.

## Abstract

### From Panels to Primetime

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DePaul University, 2013

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Committee: Dr. Paul Booth

With Marvel Entertainment commanding worldwide audiences and saturating marketplaces with licensed merchandise through complex, multimedia brand awareness campaigns, understanding popular culture in the present moment demands that we trace the company's rise from a simple comic book publisher to a powerhouse of the film industry. Yet, virtually nothing has been written in academia about the transitional phenomenon of made-for-TV movies adapted from Marvel Comics properties. These texts, although numbering only thirteen to date, dominated the company's live action, feature-length output in audiovisual media prior to the success of *Blade* in 1998. In an effort to identify a suitable framework for the study of these neglected texts, this thesis engages with Marvel TV movies in case studies of *The Amazing Spider-Man* (CBS, 1977), *The Incredible Hulk* (CBS, 1977) and *Dr. Strange* (CBS, 1978) in order to evaluate their relative adherence to the conventions of the TV movie as prescribed by scholars, and subsequently highlights the limitations of that model. This analysis

results in an exploration of alternative methods for identifying sociopolitical value in Marvel TV movies through case studies of *Captain America* (CBS, 1979), *Generation X* (Fox, 1996) and *Nick Fury: Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (Fox, 1998), which stress the ways in which they reflect upon contemporary social issues as cultural artifacts and perpetuate the national mythos.

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## Introduction

Prior to the box office success of *Blade* (1998), adaptations of Marvel Comics properties in non-comic book media predominantly appeared on television in the form of ongoing, often animated, series. However, thirteen live action, feature-length, made-for-TV movies adapted from Marvel comic books have also been produced to date. The bulk of the Marvel TV movies aired on CBS between 1977 and 1979, during which time the network premiered seven TV movies featuring four of Marvel's most recognizable heroes. These titles include *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1977), *The Incredible Hulk* (1977), *The Incredible Hulk: Death in the Family* (a.k.a. *Return of the Incredible Hulk*, 1977), *Dr. Strange* (1978), *The Incredible Hulk: Married* (1978), *Captain America* (1979), and *Captain America II: Death Too Soon* (1979). The remaining six Marvel TV movies include *The Incredible Hulk Returns* (NBC, 1988), *The Trial of the Incredible Hulk* (NBC, 1989), *The Death of the Incredible Hulk* (NBC, 1990), *Generation X* (Fox, 1996), *Nick Fury: Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (Fox, 1998), and finally, *Blade: House of Chthon* (Spike, 2006), the only Marvel TV movie to have premiered after Marvel's success with *Blade*.<sup>1</sup> Virtually nothing has been written specifically about the Marvel TV movies in scholarly texts. Yet, with Marvel drawing in and influencing worldwide audiences in a variety of media from comic books and video games to television and film, understanding the company's history has become more important than ever.

After all, in the years following the 2008 release of *Iron Man*, Marvel Entertainment has proven itself to be a juggernaut of the film industry alone. From 2008–2013, the company produced a series of six tie-in films based on Marvel Comics characters, constituting Phase One of the so-called "Marvel Cinematic Universe." The first five of these films grossed over \$2.2



billion globally, combined.<sup>2</sup> Phase One culminated in Marvel's *The Avengers*, which opened in North American theaters on May 5, 2012. In the build-up to *The Avengers*, Marvel pursued a complex, multimedia brand awareness campaign to familiarize viewers with the characters featured in the Marvel Cinematic Universe through a wide array of straight-to-video animated feature films, animated television series, and video games.<sup>3</sup> Having thus laid the groundwork for the success of the film, *The Avengers* exceeded even Disney-Marvel's expectations when it raked in an unprecedented \$207.4 million at the box office in its opening weekend. By comparison, the previous record holder for highest-grossing opening weekend, 2011's *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 2*, made 23% less than *The Avengers* in its opening weekend with \$169 million in box office receipts.<sup>4</sup> *The Avengers* would go on to dominate box offices in its second and third weekends to become the highest grossing film ever for Marvel's parent company, Walt Disney Co.<sup>5</sup> The final figures for *The Avengers* found the film atop *Variety*'s list of 2012's "Top International Grossers" with over \$1.5 billion in box office receipts worldwide,<sup>6</sup> making it the third highest grossing film of all time.<sup>7</sup>

Scholars and journalists have written much about Marvel Entertainment's history as a comic book publisher, the revamping of Marvel Studios' business structure in the new millennium, and the filmic adaptations of Marvel properties since 1998's *Blade*, which was Marvel's first major box office success.<sup>8</sup> Yet the topic of the Marvel TV movie remains untouched by these authors. Even those writers who have chronicled the development of the TV movie as a broad category and outlined its conventions have excluded adaptations of comic book properties from both their historical chronicles and analyses of the TV movie as a codified genre.<sup>9</sup> The little that has been written about the Marvel TV movies relies heavily on plot

synopsis as well as unsubstantiated claims and suppositions about the productions, not to mention some purely inaccurate information.<sup>10</sup>

A few historians, however, have capably explored various aspects of *The Incredible Hulk* television series that spawned from those first two Hulk TV movies. Patrick Janciewicz's book, *You Wouldn't Like Me When I'm Angry: A Hulk Companion*, for example, provides an in-depth chronicle of *The Incredible Hulk* series' production history, drawing heavily on interviews with members of the cast and crew.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, Joanne Cantor, Glenn G. Sparks, and Cynthia Hoffner's "Calming Children's Television Fears: *Mr. Rogers* vs. *The Incredible Hulk*" examines children's emotional reactions to the character of the Hulk as he appeared in the live action series and TV movies.

The purpose of this thesis is to fill the academic void regarding Marvel TV movies on the whole, and I begin with an analysis of these texts according to their basic presentation/industrial format: the TV movie. In doing so, I will explore through a series of four case studies how the introduction of Marvel TV movies into the corpus of texts scholars used to classify the TV movie as a genre calls into question the validity of that generic model. In chapter one, I outline the prescribed conventions of the TV movie model and subsequently examine the Marvel TV movie pilot that most closely adheres to those conventions: *The Incredible Hulk*. This study will show that although *The Incredible Hulk* observes many of the principles outlined by scholars of the TV movie, it deviates from the model in ways that are necessary for it to succeed as a pilot and spawn a series. Chapter two then centers on case studies of Marvel TV movie pilots (*Dr. Strange*, *Captain America* and *The Amazing Spider-Man*) that violate a multitude of the TV movie model's conventions. This chapter will reveal that the discourse surrounding the TV movie in academia not only fails to account for the industrial function of TV movie pilots, but it

also precludes the possibility of identifying a TV movie's social relevance subtextually, which is necessary when discussing Marvel TV movies. As such, chapter three establishes alternative methods for dissecting Marvel TV movies as cultural objects, wherein they reflect specific cultural trends during the eras in which they were produced and perpetuate the national myths of the United States, dubbed the "American monomyth" by John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett. Thus, this analysis will reveal that Marvel TV movies resist the notion of a singular TV movie genre insofar as that generic model prescribed by scholars fails to account for the metaphorical social relevance of these texts.

## **Literature Review**

This brief literature review will provide an introductory survey of the various industrial factors integral to understanding the production of Marvel TV movies prior to the overhaul of Marvel's business practices in the new millennium. It will outline the history of the TV movie as chronicled by Elayne Rapping and other TV movie scholars, as well as put forth a preliminary history of comic book adaptations on television in order to establish a historical context in which the Marvel TV movies might be viewed. The literature review concludes with a brief examination of the ways in which Marvel's pre-2006 licensing practices conflict with the business model of rival publisher DC Comics, emphasizing the limited control Marvel typically maintained over their licenses when adapted as TV movies.

### **A Brief History of the Made-for-TV Movie**

Throughout the thesis I use the term "made-for-TV movie" interchangeably with the terms "telefeature" and, more commonly, "TV movie." These terms, where employed, refer to a

program produced specifically for television that fills a two-hour time slot, the form of which resembles a narrative theatrical film save for certain aesthetic and structural differences, including the repetition of key plot information to ensure that audiences retain information through commercial breaks.<sup>12</sup> While TV movies may depict a non-fiction narrative, as in a documentary, the TV movies referred to throughout this text are categorically fictional in nature.

According to Rapping, the origin of the TV movie can be traced all the way back to the invention of film, and arguably further.<sup>13</sup> Numerous scholars, however, including Rapping herself, have also asserted that the made-for-TV movie, although resembling a feature film and certainly a by-product of Hollywood's intervention in the medium of television, should not be framed within any agenda of the motion picture industry.<sup>14</sup> Yet the development of the TV movie resulted more directly from changes in network business practices caused by the rapid inflation in licensing fees for Hollywood films in the 1960s.

In the late 1940s, television stations began purchasing/leasing feature-length films in order to fill large programming slots, with the added benefit of allowing these slots to then be marketed as event programming. The practice began with the purchase of twenty-four films from British producer Alexander Korda by independent New York station WPIX in 1948, with many "Poverty Row" studios subsequently profiting from the sale of their B-grade pictures to television throughout the early 1950s.<sup>15</sup> However, it was not until 1955 when RKO auctioned off their pre-1948 library to individual stations that the major studios began to offer up their wares for broadcast.<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately, given the propensity of networks to market the broadcasting of feature films as "events," these Hollywood productions consistently garnered high ratings. Moreover, Hollywood studios profited immensely from the exchange; MGM, for example, conducted their

single largest business day ever when, in August 1956, the studio signed contracts with CBS and seven other stations to the tune of twenty million dollars for the broadcast rights to their pre-1948 library.<sup>17</sup> This made the purchase/leasing of feature films a popular and profitable practice among networks and studios alike. By 1964, however, the number of films bought by the networks rose to nearly 10,000 a year, and as television drew increasingly larger numbers of viewers away from the movie theaters, Hollywood began to rely more heavily on the income from these television sales. As such, the rates studios demanded of the networks rose rapidly into the early 1960s,<sup>18</sup> and as Douglas Gomery notes, “Million-dollar price tags became commonplace.”<sup>19</sup> Network executives quickly realized that it would be more profitable for the networks to produce their own movies for broadcast than to rely on Hollywood.<sup>20</sup>

Consequently, the first movie produced specifically for television broadcast, *See How They Run*, aired on NBC on October 17, 1964 and rival networks ABC and CBS would soon follow suit with TV movies of their own.<sup>21</sup> The in-house and independent production of TV movies significantly cut network costs, as TV movies were produced for an average of \$750,000, although others such as ratings sensation *Brian's Song* (ABC, 1971), cost as little as \$400,000 to produce.<sup>22</sup> The ratings of the more sensational TV movies, such as *Helter Skelter* (CBS, 1976) and *A Case of Rape* (NBC, 1974), rivaled those of any televised Hollywood picture.<sup>23</sup> Although the broadcast of Hollywood features remained a staple of the networks' programming even after the development of the TV movie, the TV movie added further “spice” to their weekly routines, offering feature-length content unseen in theaters.<sup>24</sup>

The limited potential returns of developing feature-length material specifically for the television medium made the format far less attractive to Hollywood studios and their television-dedicated subsidiaries than to independent producers, except where the potential for serialization

of a property presented itself.<sup>25</sup> To this end, when the ratings proved high enough, networks and producers benefitted from the production of TV movies in that they could also serve as feature-length pilots for projected series. The practice of utilizing TV movies as pilots originated with ABC's first telefeature: the 1966 western, *Scalplock*. As a result of its ratings success, *Scalplock* subsequently spawned the series *The Iron Horse* (ABC, 1966–1968). This model of TV movie production allowed independent producers of TV movies the potential to recoup additional funds on their initial investment even after the movie's single, guaranteed broadcast.<sup>26</sup> As such, independent producers and the television subsidiaries of Hollywood studios treated TV movies as pilots wherever possible, and the tactic served them well, as evidenced by the long runs of *The Waltons* (CBS, 1971–1981) and *Wonder Woman* (ABC, 1975–1976; CBS, 1977–1979) for example, both of which originated as TV movies. In fact, with the exception of the five follow-up *Hulk* TV movies and *Captain America II*, all Marvel properties produced as TV movies served as pilots for prospective series, although only two successfully gave rise to a series.

Todd Gitlin, in *Inside Prime Time*, reveals that TV movies became so popular among viewers and producers alike that during the 1982–83 season, the three networks underwrote approximately 90 TV movies, financing more original features than the major Hollywood studios combined; that number, he tellingly reveals, was in fact down from previous years.<sup>27</sup> As such, the late 1970s and early 1980s marked the peak of the TV movie's popularity with the three major networks of the Network Era: CBS, NBC and ABC. During the 1986–87 season, the networks broadcast nearly 300 TV movies including repeats of previously aired programs while broadcasting fewer than 100 films originally produced for theatrical release.<sup>28</sup> However, the popularity of event programming on network television, including TV movies, declined rapidly into the late 1980s/early 1990s. By 1996, the broadcast networks aired less than 50 original TV

movies a year<sup>29</sup> and did away with regularly scheduled, weekly movie nights entirely in the 2006–2007 season, marking the first time broadcast schedules had been without such weekly feature programming since 1961.<sup>30</sup> Still, the TV movie format continued to flourish in the original programming of cable networks, even after its all-but-total disappearance from broadcast network schedules, due to the low cost of production and the opportunity such original programming afforded cable networks in generating brand identity.<sup>31</sup>

### **The Precedent for Comic Book Adaptations on Television**

Live action adaptations of comic book properties on television pre-date the development of the TV movie by more than a decade. When *The Adventures of Superman* radio program vanished from the airwaves in 1951, National Comics (later DC Comics) sought to re-develop the series for television and negotiated a thirty-year distribution contract for the property with Flamingo Films.<sup>32</sup> With great insight, National co-owner Jack Liebowitz instigated this re-development in order to capitalize on the popularity of television even as the medium's foothold in the entertainment industry had only just begun to infringe on comic book sales nationwide.<sup>33</sup> The move ultimately allowed National to alleviate a significant portion of the financial blow that would have resulted from television's growing presence in the market while synergistically promoting their property and boosting sales of *Superman* comic books.<sup>34</sup>

Television's *Adventures of Superman* premiered on ABC in 1952 with actor George Reeves in the series' title role. It proved to be such an immediate success that Phyllis Coates, who played reporter Lois Lane, had to dye her hair within two weeks of the premiere to avoid being mobbed on the street.<sup>35</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* reported that in 1959 over 35 million Americans, 48 percent of whom were adults, watched *Adventures of Superman* each year.

What's more, *Superman* also achieved worldwide popularity. It became one of the top-rated television programs in the Japanese market and Reeves claimed to have received fan mail from the nation's Emperor himself.<sup>36</sup> *Adventures of Superman* ran for six seasons, but production on the series' slated seventh season was halted by the suicide of George Reeves. Even after the actor's death, however, episodes of the series proved to be a salable commodity with stations nationwide.<sup>37</sup>

One year after *See How They Run* provided networks with a cost-effective alternative to Hollywood features in the form of the TV movie, ABC premiered another live action superhero series, this time featuring DC Comics' dynamic duo: Batman and Robin. *Batman* (1965–1967) proved to be an even more effective promotional tool for comic books than *Adventures of Superman* before it had and sent sales soaring on DC, Marvel, and Independent News titles alike.<sup>38</sup> At the same time, *Batman* further highlighted the profit-making potential of live action comic book adaptations on television through a multi-million dollar merchandising campaign. As Avi Santo relates in his essay on "The Merchandisable TV Text," *Batman* producer William Dozier and Twentieth Century Fox Television allocated more than 500 merchandising licenses in 1965 alone, resulting in the manufacturing of some \$75 to \$85 million in Batman merchandise that year.<sup>39</sup> In 1969, merchandise for Batman and James Bond accounted for a combined 25 percent of estimated licensing business in the United States. *Batman* merchandising campaigns ultimately became so integrated into the series' business model that the production team habitually wrote new Bat-gadgets into the series with the express purpose of subsequently merchandising them.<sup>40</sup> According to the merchandising model established by the *Batman* team, the profit-making potential of comic book properties on television appeared limitless, thus ensuring future live action forays into comic book licenses for the networks.



In 1966, the stage musical, *It's a Bird... It's a Plane... It's Superman*, opened on Broadway. Nearly a decade later, Romeo Muller, writer of the Rankin/Bass Christmas specials, adapted the musical into a teleplay for a one-shot TV movie for ABC's *Wide World Special*. Future *Brady Bunch Variety Hour*-director Jack Regas shot the movie over three days and it aired on February 21, 1975 opposite NBC's *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*. The final product deviates significantly from the 1966 Broadway show, but as Superman historian Bruce Scivally points out, there exists no closer record to the Broadway production than this rushed adaptation from ABC.<sup>41</sup>

One year earlier, Wonder Woman became the first comic book character to debut on television in a live action, feature-length TV movie pilot. The 1974 ABC pilot for *Wonder Woman* depicted the character as a 1970's super spy and was notably never green-lit for a series. However, a second Wonder Woman TV movie pilot for ABC, dubbed *The New, Original Wonder Woman*, premiered on November 7, 1975. Set during World War II, the pilot subsequently spawned a series that ran on ABC for one season, after which the series was picked up by CBS.

Of the three networks, CBS attracted the largest number of viewers at the beginning of the 1970s through its system of rural affiliates. Therefore, the network geared much of its programming toward its core audience with rural-themed, family-friendly series such as *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962–1971) and *The Waltons*.<sup>42</sup> As ABC began to dominate the ratings in the mid-1970s, disgruntled CBS executives derided ABC for its “tits and ass” programming with series such as *Charlie's Angels* (1976–1981) and, of course, *Wonder Woman*.<sup>43</sup> Yet these series, which capitalized on the public's heightened awareness of Women's Liberation by placing women in traditionally *male* action hero roles, proved instrumental in propelling ABC into a

position where the network could at last compete with rivals CBS and NBC.<sup>44</sup> In fact, overall ratings for the 1976–1977 season (during which *Charlie's Angels* premiered) found ABC leading with a 20.9 rating and CBS bumped all the way down to third with an 18.7 rating.<sup>45</sup> As such, when Warner Bros. approached CBS with the opportunity to pick up *Wonder Woman* for the 1977–1978 season, they jumped at the chance in spite of their earlier castigation of such programs. CBS retitled the series *The New Adventures of Wonder Woman*, changed the setting from the WWII-era to the modern day,<sup>46</sup> and thus it ran until 1979, when CBS cancelled the program.

Prior to purchasing the franchise rights to *The Incredible Hulk* and producing the final three Hulk TV movies between 1988 and 1990, NBC's sole foray into live action adaptations of comic book properties, *Legends of the Superheroes*, aired for two nights from 8 p.m. to 9 p.m. on January 18 and 25, 1979. The first of *Legends'* two episodes, "The Challenge," in fact aired the evening prior to the premiere of CBS's *Captain America* TV movie.<sup>47</sup> Produced by Hanna-Barbera, *Legends of the Superheroes* featured 14 heroes and villains from the DC Universe, and allowed *Batman* stars Adam West and Burt Ward the opportunity to reprise their roles as Batman and Robin, respectively. Thereafter, nearly a decade would pass before Warner Bros. would develop another DC property into a live action adaptation for television. With DC's three most popular characters (Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman) already developed into successful television series by the mid-1970s, producers turned to Marvel for fresh material.

### **Marvel vs. DC**

Marvel Comics' business model prior to their attempt to fashion themselves into a media conglomerate in the 1990s afforded them negligible control over their properties once licensed.<sup>48</sup>

During the development of *The Incredible Hulk* pilot and television series, for example, the character's creator and Marvel Comics Chairman, Stan Lee, challenged series' developer Kenneth Johnson over numerous details, but lost almost every battle. Lee protested the changing of central character Bruce Banner's name to David Banner; asserted that the Hulk should not be portrayed as mute as Johnson had written him;<sup>49</sup> proclaimed that the bear in the second TV movie, *Death in the Family*, must be a robotic bear;<sup>50</sup> and refused to allow Johnson to change the Hulk from green to red, a color Johnson rightly identified as more commonly associated with anger.<sup>51</sup> While the Hulk remained green in the series, David Banner indeed became the series' central character, the Hulk remained mute, and the bear the Hulk battled in *Death in the Family* was ultimately just a bear.

Additionally, Marvel Entertainment consistently recouped paltry earnings from the licensing of their properties until an overhaul of the company's business strategies under the leadership of Avi Arad in the new millennium. In January 1944, Marvel, then Timely Comics, made their first foray into motion pictures when Republic Pictures released a 15-part serial featuring Captain America. The serial went over budget \$40,283 and in total cost the studio \$222,906, more than any other serial produced by Republic.<sup>52</sup> Republic's *Captain America* was ultimately financially successful enough that the studio later determined to rerelease it, which they did in 1953 under the title *Return of Captain America*. When Republic licensed the character from Timely in 1943, the publisher signed a seven-year contract with the studio that provided them the rights to the character for a single 15-episode serial, afforded them both television and foreign market distribution rights for the serial, and even allowed them to re-edit the serial for release as a feature film. Timely provided Republic with these rights at no cost to the studio. Only in 1949, when Republic sought to extend their contract by an additional five

years, did Timely raise the issue of monetary compensation. However, instead of requiring payment for the license outright, the publisher merely obliged Republic in the new contract “to place one-half page of advertising within six months of the signing in the licensors’ Marvel Comics Group [Red Unit] at a sum not to exceed \$1980.”<sup>53</sup> Little had improved for the company by the end of the 20th century, when Marvel earned a mere \$25,000 off of the film *Blade*, which pulled in an impressive \$133 million at the box office.<sup>54</sup> Not until 2008, when Marvel Studios under CEO Avi Arad began releasing their own studio-independent, in-house productions,<sup>55</sup> was Marvel able to recoup more than ten percent of the box office receipts of any film featuring a Marvel character.<sup>56</sup>

By contrast, DC Comics and/or its parent companies have always maintained at least a modicum of control over their licenses on television going back to *Adventures of Superman*, when National Periodical Publications, National Comics’ parent company, bought Flamingo Films’ controlling interest in the license in 1952.<sup>57</sup> Subsequently, Kinney Services President Steve Ross, future CEO of Warner Communications, acquired National Periodicals in 1967, and the company was thus later incorporated into Warner Communications.<sup>58</sup> Since that time, DC Comics has remained horizontally integrated with Warner Bros. Studios, which develops their properties for film and television. Owned by the same parent company as DC Comics, Warner Bros. at least has a vested interest in developing material that is faithful to the characters and narratives created by DC,<sup>59</sup> whether or not they indeed ultimately fulfill their duty as a sister company in faithfully adapting these properties.<sup>60</sup>

Until Disney purchased Marvel in 2009, Marvel Comics had no such model of distribution, and they maintained little control over their intellectual properties in other media until 2006, when Marvel Studios announced their intentions to produce their own filmic

adaptations of Marvel properties.<sup>61</sup> Thus, prior to changes in Marvel's business model in the early and mid-2000s with revised licensing contracts and the founding of Marvel Studios, Marvel sold its licenses to producers with little to no investment in their characters or narratives, as evidenced by the aforementioned conflict between Stan Lee and Kenneth Johnson.<sup>62</sup> To this end, Derek Johnson relates, "the licenses sold by Marvel had effectively given away the comic book company's position of creative authority and industrial authority over talent and labor."<sup>63</sup> And this reflects the "strategic compromise" of comic book publishers, as discussed by Terrence R. Wandtke, in which a publisher such as Marvel would allow for major conceptual revisions to their established franchises by film and television producers in order to merely gain exposure for their properties.<sup>64</sup> Although Marvel could thus hope to profit only marginally from licensing fees, such strategic compromises hinge on the possibility that the licensed product might generate enough interest in the original property to subsequently drive up comic book sales or result in further licensing. This paradoxically places the promotion of a publisher's property in the hands of those aforementioned producers with little to no investment in the property as it has been developed in comic books.

### **Adaptation and Fidelity Criticism**

The majority of writers to have approached adaptations of comic books and graphic novels on film and television have identified the individual adaptations' fidelity to its source material as the foremost consideration in their analyses. Indeed, professional and lay critics alike tend to constrain discussions of the comic book adaptation in other visual media, especially film, to intertextual readings of the text's relationship to the source material, often focusing predominantly on discrepancies in character, aesthetic, narrative, and theme in the adaptation of

the comic book source to the screen.<sup>65</sup> As H. Porter Abbott illustrates, however, critics who disparage a cross-media adaptation for being “a poor ‘translation’ of the original may miss the fact that adaptation across media is not translation in anything but the loosest sense.”<sup>66</sup> The process of adapting a work into another medium fundamentally transforms it, and the analyses of comic book adaptations that result from fidelity criticism often fail to account for the vast authorial intervention and interpretation necessary to adapt texts across media,<sup>67</sup> not to mention the distinct formal characteristics of the media to which the source text and adaptation respectively belong.<sup>68</sup> As such, this section details how the inherent subjectivity of faithfulness in adaptation and the intentions of producers and Marvel executives demonstrate the inviability of fidelity criticism as an approach to the Marvel TV movie.

### **Critical Subjectivity and Perceived (Un)Faithfulness**

Common fan criticisms of comic book adaptations across media identified by Pascal Lefèvre include complaints about superficial differences between the source material and the adaptation. These complaints focus on alterations to characters’ costumes and personal motivations in Twentieth Century Fox’s *X-Men* franchise and the introduction of organic webshooters in Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man* (2002).<sup>69</sup> Similarly, professional critics often take the adaptation’s medium-specific characteristics into consideration only when elements of the adaptation’s production create noticeable rifts between the characters and narratives of the source material and those presented in the adapted work.<sup>70</sup> For instance, critics lampooned *X-Men* (2000) for its depiction of the Holocaust in the opening sequence, declaring it to be far too “horrific” for a film adapted from what they saw as the distinctly children’s medium of comic books.<sup>71</sup> Through this example, it becomes apparent that even in discussions of fidelity in

adaptation there are disagreements among critics and fans alike as to what elements are required to achieve fidelity: whether producers must include such elided minutiae as that cited by the above noted fans or adhere to the cultural perception of comic books' target audience.

Regardless, such discussions work to inexorably tie the cinematic/televisual adaptation of the comic book to the formal qualities of the medium of comics. These criticisms arise predominantly from the viewer's preconceived notions of what the adaptation should look like based on his/her wholly subjective prior interactions with the source material/medium.<sup>72</sup>

As such, Lefèvre urges writers to evaluate comic book adaptations as the product of a separate medium, certainly owing to, but not subordinate to the formal attributes of comic books.<sup>73</sup> Comic books are, after all, fundamentally different from film or, where the subjects of this thesis are concerned, television. A primary difference between comics and other visual media such as film, according to Lefèvre, appears in "the material shape of the images."<sup>74</sup> Comics rely on still, silent images compartmentalized in multiple frames on a page to relate their narratives, while film and television employ photographed movement presented sequentially in the confines of a single frame (the screen) and often accompanied by sound.<sup>75</sup> This fundamental difference between the media makes fidelity to the formal characteristics of comic book source material virtually impossible.

As Scott McCloud illustrates in *Understanding Comics*, comic books require the reader to perform a substantial portion of the work required to construct narrative action. The "gutter," or blank space between panels, in a comic book serves as a space in which the reader must mentally bridge the spatial and temporal gaps between still panels to infer action, and through this process the reader comes to understand the whole of a comic's narrative while experiencing only its parts.<sup>76</sup> The speed at which film and television relate images, by contrast, is so fast that

the gaps between images become almost if not entirely imperceptible, requiring far less subjective viewer engagement to discern action.<sup>77</sup>

As a result of the fundamental subjectivity of each comic book reader's interaction with the "gutter," precise repurposing of comic book visuals for the screen often fails to resonate with viewers as it had on the page, a phenomenon Roz Kaveney details in her discussion of negative audience reactions to the death of Elektra in the 2003 filmic adaptation of *Daredevil*.<sup>78</sup>

According to Kaveney, the minimum requirement for filmic adaptations of comic books should be that the filmmakers honor the "emotional truth" of iconic moments lifted from the comic book. This minimal fidelity, she argues, will create good will among the comics' core readership and thereby facilitate the positive word of mouth that builds a film's audience. However, Kaveney's "emotional truth" is also inherently subjective and, as she explicitly states, nearly impossible to achieve in a major theatrical release, much less under the budgetary constraints of TV movies.<sup>79</sup>

### **Producer Intentionality in Adaptation**

Given the fundamentally transformative nature of adapting narratives across media boundaries as discussed above, Abbott insists that critics consider whether or not fidelity to the source material was in fact the express goal of the adaptation's producers before ever pursuing such fidelity-based criticism. If it proves not to be the case, then the critic should seek other, more appropriate methods of analysis, ones that might *incorporate* comparisons to the source material rather than *rely* upon such comparisons.<sup>80</sup> To this end, until the overhaul of Marvel Entertainment's business practices in the new millennium, as previously discussed, Marvel retained little control over the presentation of their properties in other media and therefore



knowingly optioned their properties to producers with often little to no interest in remaining faithful to the source material.

In fact, returning to the 1944 Republic Pictures *Captain America* serial, Timely Comics signed a contract with the studio permitting them to “base their photoplay [for the serial] either wholly or partly upon, or suggested by the Captain America character” and allowed them “the latitude to effect any format changes at their discretion, including the use of entirely original material.”<sup>81</sup> As such, Republic’s Captain America resembled the Captain America of Timely Comics in costume only, and even there Republic made significant alterations including the removal of the wings from Cap’s cowl. Although Timely publisher Martin Goodman complained about the extensive liberties the studio took with the character, Republic’s executives refused to revise the serial in any way as it would have been far too costly on an already over-budget production, and since they had not been contractually obligated by Timely to depict the character in any specific manner.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, Jankiewicz reveals in *You Wouldn’t Like Me When I’m Angry* that Kenneth Johnson, the producer of the highly-successful *Incredible Hulk* series that accounts for six of the thirteen Marvel TV movies, resisted the source material at every turn.<sup>83</sup>

Furthermore, faithfulness in adaptation would not prove to be a determining factor in the adaptations of Marvel properties in other media even *after* Marvel transitioned from licensor to producer of their own in-house adaptations in 2005.<sup>84</sup> As the list of Marvel TV movies presented in the opening of this introduction indicates, Marvel Studios has moved away from live action television production in recent years, instead focusing their licensed production in other visual media on film and video games. Johnson relates in his essay on media convergence during the era of Marvel Studios’ pre-Disney buy-out independence that:

In overseeing the production of licensed video games based on Marvel characters, Marvel Studios executive Justin Lambros explained that following the logic of comics was less central to licensed production than ensuring conformity to emerging film styles and strategies. [...] ‘We take the lead from where the film is going, then take stuff from the comics for the game and filter it through the film.’ Lambros proposed a creative hierarchy in which Marvel’s filmmaking operations trumped anything developing in other markets—largely as a result of cinema’s ability to command larger audiences and build greater exposure for Marvel characters.<sup>85</sup>

In discussing Marvel’s video game licenses, Lambros does not refer specifically to the considerations filmmakers give source material when producing those films upon which his team draws inspiration for their video games. However, it reveals a fundamental economically-driven shift in priorities at Marvel: a shift away from the fan audience’s agenda toward a privileging of filmmakers’ subjective interpretations of Marvel properties. As Matt Hills notes, “capitulating to the fans’ agenda [...] effectively terminates any economic viability for the text beyond its fan ghetto of ‘preaching to the converted.’”<sup>86</sup> Given that the goal of producers is to make money, deviating from the core fan base’s interpretation of a property offers producers the opportunity to reach a wider audience and therefore make more money than if they allowed the text to wallow in the inherently limiting “fan ghetto.”

Executives at Marvel Studios thus reveal that fidelity to the comic book source material in licensed adaptations is not their primary consideration, favoring instead fidelity to the products that reach the greatest number of consumers: Marvel Studios’ films. In fact, Johnson goes on to detail how, in addition to video games, Marvel’s straight-to-video and television productions were intended to build brand recognition for the Marvel Cinematic Universe in the build-up to

the release of *The Avengers* rather than gain brand recognition for the comics.<sup>87</sup> Further evidencing the company's overriding dedication to the filmic adaptations of their long-standing comic book properties, notable deviations in character and costume from source to screen have subsequently filtered back into the comic books. For example, in November 2011, prior to the release of *The Avengers*, Marvel debuted a new in-continuity costume for Hawkeye "influenced by" the filmic Hawkeye's costume.<sup>88</sup> What's more, Marvel timed the premiere of their 2012 comic book series, *Avengers Assemble*, to coincide with the release of *The Avengers* in theaters. Under series writer Brian Michael Bendis, who had been called on by Marvel "to be part of an Avengers book that was more movie focused, but in continuity,"<sup>89</sup> *Assemble* brought together a lineup of Avengers never before assembled in comics: the same lineup featured in the blockbuster film. Thus, they privilege the filmic adaptations of their properties to such an extent that the adaptations are thereafter allowed to inform the content of the comic books from which they had been loosely adapted.

As such, while Marvel executives asserted during the company's transition from licensor to producer that they will always be in the service of comic book fans, the company's practices in many ways contradict that sentiment. After all, in "filtering" material from Marvel comic books through their filmic adaptations as Justin Lambros describes, Marvel distances their licensed adaptations from the values of the hardcore comics consumer base, who champion fidelity to the very source material that producers and Marvel executives alike resist. Thus, Marvel acknowledges that comic book fans constitute but a small portion of the potential audience for the products of Marvel Studios, a potential audience that by and large does not regularly read Marvel comics.<sup>90</sup>

Thus, faithfulness to source material has not necessarily been a concern of producers who purchased Marvel licenses prior to Marvel Studios' in-house film production, nor has it been the primary consideration for Marvel Studios executives, for whom the filmic adaptation has achieved primacy over the comic book source material. As Abbott suggests, then, the discussion of faithfulness in adaptation will not guide the analysis conducted in the following chapters. Where references to the faithfulness of a particular adaptation appear, they will do so only in service of the subject at hand, be it a text's relationship to the prescribed conventions of the TV movie, its cultural context, or its perpetuation of the American monomyth. My interests lie not in scrutinizing these movies in order to identify every single alteration made by television producers in their adaptation of Marvel Comics properties or in asserting the legitimacy of my own inherently subjective experience of the source comics. Instead, I seek herein to identify workable alternatives to this mode of analysis and reveal these movies' relationships to broader trends in the medium of television and United States culture.

## Chapter 1: The “Generic” Expectations of TV Movies

As discussed in the introduction, the genesis of the TV movie in the 1960s arose out of the networks’ attempts to alleviate the financial burden of purchasing/leasing feature-length films from Hollywood studios, as the studios came to rely on the income from television and rapidly increased the rates associated with these contracts. However, scholars situate the made-for-TV movie not just as an industry-specific mode of production, but as an “established genre with fixed structural components,”<sup>1</sup> codified as early as 1966.<sup>2</sup> To that end, Elayne Rapping discusses in her book, *The Movie of the Week*, how the TV movie had, since its inception, come to serve a very specific social purpose. Rapping claims that the TV movies that “resonate with personal and social meaning and warrant thought and debate” account for a surprisingly high percentage of output in the genre, making it particularly worthy of study.<sup>3</sup> In her assessment, TV movies, “more than any other fictional form, call upon us to think and act as citizens in a public social sphere” by connecting our personal lives with our public lives.<sup>4</sup> For Douglas Gomery, the form similarly “fulfilled a particular cultural need: topical entertainment reaffirming basic values and beliefs.”<sup>5</sup>

However, as Rick Altman recounts, genre criticism, as a rule, relies on the establishment of a limited corpus intended to be seen as characteristic of the whole of a genre, which is an inherently exclusive process.<sup>6</sup> In keeping with this methodology of corpus creation, critics of the TV movie including Rapping, Gomery and Gary Edgerton, to name a few, have in turn established a limited corpus of texts to represent the format as a whole in order to situate it as an “established genre” unto itself. Even Rapping admits that the TV movies she “singled out to analyze, are actually a small percentage of all telefeatures.”<sup>7</sup> As such, the majority of scholars

who have written about the development of the TV movie and outlined its conventions have notably excluded TV movies adapted from comic book properties from both their historical chronicles and their analyses of the mode as an established genre.

Yet, it's not as though a lack of public awareness of such live action adaptations of comic books on television resulted in their exclusion from this corpus. As discussed in the introduction, superhero programs had been wildly popular on network television since *Adventures of Superman* premiered in 1952 and even saturated multiple markets in part through the revolutionary licensing strategies of *Batman*'s producers in the 1960s. In fact, the production of live action adaptations of superhero comics peaked in the late 1970s as some two dozen characters from Marvel and DC Comics appeared in various TV movies and live action series on the three major networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC). This accounted for a significant portion of the spectacle programming necessary for the three networks to not only compete with one another, but with the up-and-coming independent and cable networks as well. As such, live action adaptations of comic books were a major presence on television during the height of the TV movie's popularity and commercial viability for the networks, thus highlighting the egregiousness of their exclusion from the corpus of TV movies used to define the format. In response, I will here begin the process, which I continue in chapter two, of examining what the introduction of these texts into the TV movie corpus reveals about these scholars' conclusions regarding the form and function of the TV movie. In this chapter, I outline the model of the TV movie prescribed by the prevailing academic discourse surrounding the form and subsequently explore the ways in which *The Incredible Hulk* (1977), being the Marvel TV movie that most closely exemplifies this model, both adheres to and resists these generic expectations.

## The Form and Function of the TV Movie

The unique narrative structure of the TV movie resulted from the translation of the film form into the medium of television, which differed from film not only in the shape and size of the image, but also in the networks' reliance on commercial interruptions. In order to ensure that audiences could easily follow TV movie narratives, writers and producers developed a storytelling style separate from that of the theatrical film in order to specifically accommodate the inevitable gaps in narrative that resulted from commercial breaks. TV movies in which the particulars of the plot are obvious, oft repeated, and lacking in complexity ensured that audiences would retain key information during these breaks, which is essential given that producers must maintain audience investment throughout a sizable, two-hour time slot.<sup>8</sup> To this end, Gomery's analysis of the form situates the TV movie narrative as a simplified, highly-repetitive version of the classical Hollywood narrative, wherein all televisual techniques are "subordinated to the story" to preserve audience investment.<sup>9</sup> Rapping echoes this assertion, stating that producers must subordinate all other formal qualities to the story so as not to detract from the narrative already fractured by commercials. The TV movie model specifically necessitates that all dialogue relate information about theme, plot, and character, and that all scenes further the plot in order to appeal to the "lowest-common-denominator" audience.<sup>10</sup> Such repetition becomes necessary not only to accommodate commercial breaks but to accommodate dominant industry beliefs about the nature of the television viewer. As related by Todd Gitlin, industry wisdom maintains that television viewers (synecdochally characterized by Rapping's "lowest-common-denominator" audience) must be hooked quickly, for they are characteristically fickle, confuse easily, and stand ever-ready with fingers "poised near the dial, so all salient elements must be established with breathtaking haste."<sup>11</sup>

Yet, in spite of the medium-specific requirements imposed on the TV movie, Jeremy Butler notes that “there are more similarities than differences between the narrative structure of the made-for-TV film and that of the theatrical film.”<sup>12</sup> In fact, as indicated above, Gomery compares the form of the TV movie to that of the 1930s Hollywood feature, specifically drawing on David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s work on classical narrative cinema.<sup>13</sup> According to Gomery, as in classical narrative cinema, the action in a TV movie should result from characters acting as causal agents. Although external natural and social forces serve as “preconditions for narrative action” in the TV movie (which I elaborate on in the next section) the protagonists’ decisions, personality traits, and desires, which necessarily conflict with those of the antagonist, inevitably propel the narrative forward, thereby positioning the protagonist as the *primary* causal agent.<sup>14</sup> Gomery also asserts that the plot must relate only events necessary to understand and motivate forward narrative progression, and, most significantly in the discussion of Marvel TV movies, that “all narrative puzzles must be closed at the finish. Leaving no loose ends, classical narrative films clearly seal up all questions or enigmas. We learn the fate of each major character, the answer to each mystery, and the outcome of each conflict.”<sup>15</sup> When a TV movie adheres to the classical narrative form, it allows viewers to enjoy/follow the movie in spite of the commercial breaks or the requisite accelerated establishment of plot precisely because they had already theoretically been preconditioned to respond to such classical narratives.<sup>16</sup>

### **“Small” Stories**

Through this formal simplicity the TV movie has “excelled in telling small stories.”<sup>17</sup> Yet these small stories are sensationalized as a result of their narrative employment of often controversial social issues, pulled “straight from the pages of a daily newspaper.”<sup>18</sup> Scholars



have established the resultant broad social relevance of these otherwise “small stories” as the basis from which the TV movie may be identified as an “established genre with fixed structural components,”<sup>19</sup> a fundamental assumption underpinning the works of Edgerton, Gomery, Gitlin and Rapping alike.

The TV movie genre then is defined by scholars according to its presentation of social issues in a formally simplistic docudrama<sup>20</sup> format that outwardly addresses typically timely and contentious social issues drawn from popular news media. For John Ellis, this defines television fiction in general as he discusses how TV movies, among other television formats, “are entangled in a world of fact. They gain their dramatic strength and bond with their audience as a result” of their verisimilitude.<sup>21</sup> Since TV movies are typically expected to air but once lest ratings prove strong enough to warrant a repeat, the producers can take greater risks, addressing the most contentious topics of national headlines and selling them back to the public in the form of a feature-length primetime spectacle.<sup>22</sup> Such an emphasis on sensationalism provides benefits to networks, producers, and stations alike. Fundamentally, sensationalism, be it in TV movies or elsewhere on television, often results in higher ratings for the networks; the more prominent and provocative the social issue, the better chance the TV movie will have of drawing in viewers.<sup>23</sup> From an artistic standpoint, though, broaching risqué social issues in TV movies allows producers to explore the darker sides of human nature that are not typically presented on network television, much less during primetime.<sup>24</sup> What’s more, by explicitly confronting serious social issues, TV movies also came to fulfill network-affiliated stations’ commitment to public service as dictated by their FCC licensing agreements.<sup>25</sup>

However, this highlights a significant contradiction in the prescribed TV movie formula: that being the tension between the TV movie’s small stories and the necessary address of

nationally-recognizable, broadly-relevant social issues. TV movies negotiate this tension in a specific way. As Tom W. Hoffer and Richard Alan Nelson relate, a docudrama, whether on television or in film, necessarily reflects a restructuring of the real-world issues and events on which it is based to suit the intent and/or limitations of its producers.<sup>26</sup> In the case of the TV movie in particular, Rapping reveals that the real-world issues appropriated from the news media are negotiated narratively through explorations of these issues only as they relate to *family*, as:

all other matters are subsumed into that never-questioned, ideal institution. [TV movies] begin with a problem or crisis that threatens, or at least has an impact on, the functioning of a nuclear family or the values that generally accrue to that idealized structure.

Midpoint, the crisis escalates, but by the end of the movie, it is, one way or another, resolved and family values are reinstated as inalienable and transcendent.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, despite drawing inspiration from national politics and exploring social issues with far-reaching implications superficially, the TV movie ultimately positions these broader social issues within intimate portraits of individuals within a family. In doing so, these movies situate the family's struggle against whatever social forces plague them as an affirmation of the American family. Such personalization of social issues in TV movies inevitably, and perhaps intentionally on the part of many producers, limits the scope of the movie's exploration of the issues addressed. Since social issues are invariably subordinated to family in this model, the "correct" stance on any issue is not an objective one, but whatever one would result in the best possible outcome for the specific family at the center of the narrative.<sup>28</sup>

Further complicating any notion of objectivity, the TV movie family, although ever-present, does not adhere to a constant model and is in constant flux. As a result, according to Rapping, TV movies become "sites upon which representations and ideologies of 'the family'"

are struggled over,”<sup>29</sup> and this becomes the primary function of the genre. As such, producers perpetually redefine the family unit to suit the needs of the specific stance on the particular social issue adopted by their TV movie.<sup>30</sup> To that end, the TV movie family need not necessarily triumph over adversity. There exists in the model a real possibility of failure, which in and of itself can make a statement regarding the correct stance on a social issue as in *The Burning Bed* (NBC, 1984), in which the dissolution of the Hughes family through violence serves as a condemnation of domestic abuse.

To that end, Rapping asserts that even if the family at the center of a TV movie cannot overcome the forces that afflict them and does not survive intact, family values are inevitably “reinstated as inalienable and transcendent” at the end of the program.<sup>31</sup> TV movies are able to do so primarily by naturalizing human suffering and constantly redefining the term “family” in order to perpetuate “the myth that all personal problems in a capitalist society may be resolved by individuals who view themselves, essentially, as family members.”<sup>32</sup> In essence, the TV movies Rapping writes about insinuate that only those who unite as families can succeed in American society. Presumably then, any character who dies in a TV movie as a result of a drug overdose, drunk driving, AIDS, etc. simply hadn’t properly aligned themselves with their family, and their deaths then serves as an affirmation of that “ideal institution.”

Although TV movies liberally adopt female subject positions, the form itself is otherwise ideologically conservative.<sup>33</sup> After all, TV movies are, as Rapping points out, “part of an essentially stabilizing, conservative institution charged with keeping order and preserving the status quo.”<sup>34</sup> TV movies then outwardly advocate family values that are intrinsically conservative in nature, using those female subject positions to assert, for example, that a woman’s role in society is predominantly that of wife and mother.<sup>35</sup> Although the following case

studies will reveal a pervasive absence of central families framed by conservative ideologies in Marvel TV movies, chapter three will show that the TV movie's conservatism persists subtextually in Marvel TV movies through their perpetuation of a broader national mythos.

Returning to the TV movie model, however, TV movies perpetuate this myth about the ascendancy of family in a capitalist society as they:

neutralize all contradictory elements that cannot be reconciled to the dominant family ideology by excluding them from the constructed world in which the ideal families live or by naturalizing the causes of these problems so they seem fatally 'tragic' rather than historical or political.<sup>36</sup>

In doing so, TV movies strip these issues of their nuance in order to perpetuate the dominant ideologies surrounding any given issue at the same time as they espouse the dominant family ideology. For Rapping, these politically shallow, yet distinctly personal stories of "hope and endurance" centered on the family unit exemplify what she refers to in her book as "the best of the form."<sup>37</sup>

Gitlin's approach to the TV movie as a space in which social issues are explored only as they relate to individual characters closely resembles the model detailed above, but is also predicated largely on the concept of "television realism." His analysis is guided by the perception among television executives that viewers who have chosen to stay home rather than go out to the theater must be intrinsically drawn to "stay-at-home figures."<sup>38</sup> As such, public issues become private issues, as in the above model. In Gitlin's analysis, the television-specific approach to realism presents viewers with identifiable characters who serve as "unequivocal moral emblems" (i.e. the television family) wrapped up in sensational stories that are not so high concept as to appear irrelevant to the private lives of viewers (hence, drawing on nationally-

recognizable social issues).<sup>39</sup> Gitlin maintains that even the most topically-unconventional TV movie adheres to the rule of television realism, thereby affirming the codification of the form as a “genre” even if he never explicitly employs the term himself.<sup>40</sup>

Finally, exploring social issues through the lens of a single, fictional(ized) family’s experience provides viewers from a wide demographic (arguably the entirety of the nation) with the impression that, through TV movies, they have experienced the issues on a more personal level. In doing so, TV movie producers make the specific stance they have adopted on any given social/political issue more palatable to the broadest possible audience.<sup>41</sup> The TV movie thus reflects the equalizing potential of television, a medium in which producers, through their furthest-reaching efforts, interpolate entire nations.<sup>42</sup>

In the following case study of the Marvel TV movie pilot, *The Incredible Hulk*, I dissect the formal and narrative components of the movie according to the above model of the TV movie. Through this study, I will show how the movie adheres to many of the model’s expectations, including those regarding narrative transparency through repetition and the emphasis on the transcendence of family, even as its producers fail to use that family as a means of exploring a significant social issue and the movie resists narrative closure. By further detailing the ways in which these substantial deviations from the prescribed model are intrinsically linked, I will begin to call into question the validity of the above model as a means of understanding Marvel TV movies, particularly as a determining factor in the success of these movies as pilots for projected series.

### ***The Incredible Hulk (1977)***

With regard to the narrative expectations of the TV movie, *The Incredible Hulk's* protagonist, Dr. David Banner, indeed serves as the movie's primary causal agent, fulfilling one of the most basic requirements of the classical narrative form. From the opening to closing moments of the movie, every constituent event in the film's narrative results from David's decisions and desires. As the movie opens it is revealed that David's obsession with understanding why he could not save his wife Laura, who died in a car accident, drives the scientific research he and his partner Elaina conduct into "supernormal strength." He searches for the biological key to this strength, which is exhibited by mothers who single-handedly lift cars to save their children, in an effort to understand why that same strength failed to materialize in him when Laura's life depended on it. This research, thereby spurred by his desire to understand his personal failure, in turn finds David recklessly exposing himself to an overdose of gamma radiation when he discovers a link between a certain genetic marker he possesses, supernormal strength events, and natural spikes in gamma radiation. As a result of his actions, he is cursed with the unconscious ability to transform into the monstrous, green Hulk whenever he becomes angered.

Subsequently, his belief that the Hulk assaulted a hunter and his daughter results in David turning tabloid reporter Jack McGee away from his laboratory. McGee then breaks in to David and Elaina's laboratory to spy on them and, while hiding in a closet, knocks over a jug of chemicals that causes a massive explosion killing Elaina. McGee ultimately believes David to have been killed in the explosion as well, and pins the pair's death on the Hulk, not realizing he had caused the blast. David's flight from town in search of a cure for his condition concludes the movie. Granted, David is not consciously responsible for the Hulk's actions, given that his

personality recedes whenever he transforms into the Hulk, and McGee in fact causes the explosion that kills Elaina. However, David's actions notably create the conditions under which the Hulk is created and McGee causes the explosion, making him culpable for these events, if not *directly* responsible, and positioning him once more as causal agent.

Additionally, per the TV movie model's requirement of repetition to contend with commercial breaks, the constant reinforcement of key plot points including Laura's death, David's inability to save her, his overdose, etc. works to ensure narrative retention. David's failure to save Laura is explicitly referenced eight times throughout the movie, either in flashback or in conversation between David and Elaina. Moreover, David and Elaina specifically discuss supernormal/"hidden" strength on no fewer than thirteen occasions throughout, with nine references in the first twenty minutes alone as they interview numerous characters who themselves had exhibited such strength. Additionally, the majority of these references to supernormal strength cite emotions, specifically anger, as a significant contributing factor to the exhibition of such strength, thereby legitimating and naturalizing elements of David's later transformations into the Hulk when angered. The connection between DNA and supernormal strength crops up five times, and David asserts three times in the last half of the movie that he believes the monster to be dangerous and to have already committed a crime by assaulting the hunter and his daughter. In this, the movie constantly refreshes the audience's memory of constituent narrative events, plot points that are key to understanding David's decision-making process as the movie's primary causal agent.

Yet, even when the dialogue and scenes reiterate information already related a half dozen times or more in *The Incredible Hulk*, these elements not only work to ensure narrative retention, but also consistently reveal new information regarding theme, plot and characters. A basic

example emerges when reporter Jack McGee details the Hulk's confrontation with the hunter to David and Elaina. Although his recounting of events appears redundant at a glance, given that the event was far more explicitly depicted by onscreen action earlier in the movie, this repetition provides David and his assistant Elaina with valuable information about the Hulk's behavior patterns, thereby allowing their research, and the plot, to move forward. A more complicated sequence in this regard appears earlier in the movie and depicts David and Elaina interviewing numerous people in rapid succession who claim to have exhibited supernormal strength in highly stressful situations. Rather than merely reiterating for viewers who may have stepped out of the room about the importance of supernormal strength to the narrative, these interviews also propel the plot forward and reveal important elements of both character and theme. Evident in the performance of Bill Bixby as David and in the dialogue between David and Elaina after the first onscreen interview, the stories related by each successive interviewee who had successfully saved themselves or a loved one using supernormal strength amplifies David's pain and frustration at having been unable to save Laura. Moreover, these interviews lend support to one of the movie's core themes: that of the futility of dwelling on the past, as David's obsession with achieving supernormal strength becomes a tangibly unhealthy one through his interactions with the interviewees and his consequential gamma overdose. Significantly, this theme also ties directly into the movie's presentation of the transcendence of family as an ideal institution, which is explored in greater detail in the next section.

In these ways, *The Incredible Hulk* displays an adherence throughout to the elements required for narrative transparency according to the prevailing model of TV movies in academia. The narrative is personally motivated by the decisions and desires of the protagonist, key plot points are oft repeated, and in that repetition, elements of character, plot, and theme are revealed.



The following section of this case study further explores *The Incredible Hulk*'s adherence to the prevailing model of the TV movie through the central role of family in the overall narrative, specifically through its treatment of the primary familial bond between David and his research assistant/long-time friend Elaina.

### **A Family-Focused Personal Drama**

Given that David properly functions as the movie's primary causal agent and that his decisions are so heavily informed by his desire to cope with Laura's death, it naturally follows that *The Incredible Hulk* functions as an intensely personal drama. Indeed, the prominent scientific research he conducts (which ultimately leads to the creation of the Hulk) stems not just from events in his personal life, but from events specifically related to the destruction of his immediate family unit. Therefore, the entirety of the narrative which eventually finds David transformed into the Hulk and later presumed dead by authorities is subordinated to "that never-questioned, ideal institution" of the American family.<sup>43</sup>

The movie's focus on family emerges in the prefatory montage, which begins in the opening shot of the movie with an image of David and Laura walking through tall grass in each other's arms, and continues with a series of similarly conventional images of a happy couple. However, we also learn through this montage that David and Laura were incapable of having children, and in this *The Incredible Hulk* defines family, which is ever in flux in the TV movie, as a simple, man-woman family unit. The montage concludes with Laura's death, when a blown tire causes the couple's automobile to overturn and catch fire. Although this tragedy brings about the dissolution of the established family unit of the movie's opening moments, David's

consequent research, which owes to his guilt over having failed to save Laura, in fact asserts the primacy of family in the development of the movie's narrative.

However, this depiction of family as having an overwhelmingly negative influence on David's life runs contrary to those "inalienable and transcendent" values discussed by Rapping, and would, as an isolated depiction of family, incite viewers to question what should, in a TV movie, be a "never-questioned, ideal institution."<sup>44</sup> As such, the bulk of the narrative revolves around yet another family unit, which consists of David and Elaina and notably mirrors the simple, man-woman dynamic that defines family in *The Incredible Hulk*. Unlike the relationship between David and Laura, however, David and Elaina's love ultimately goes unrequited, as David's obsession with Laura's death prevents him from becoming officially romantically entangled with Elaina. The two therefore never marry as David and Laura did. Yet they form a subtly redefined family unit rooted in their subtextual romance, with the familial bond between them authenticated by Elaina's adherence to key facets of Rapping's model for the role of women in the TV movie family discussed below.<sup>45</sup>

In keeping with her prescribed role as the central female figure in this family unit, Elaina, though not committed to David through marriage, "stands by her man" even though his behavior may have been immoral or criminal.<sup>46</sup> After all, David believes his actions as the Hulk to have been criminal in nature, having nothing but McGee and the hunter's accounts of his actions as the Hulk to go on. Yet, Elaina tells David after he locks himself in a pressure chamber to protect her from the Hulk, "You may be in there alone, but we're in this together." Elaina, not David, strives to ensure the continued functioning of their family unit, which echoes Rapping's assertion that the *mother* is the key figure in ensuring the unity of a television family.<sup>47</sup>

Ironically, Elaina, as Laura before her, dies in a fire, and David, although possessing the strength he had previously lacked, is ultimately powerless to save her. Elaina confesses her love for David to an uncomprehending Hulk before her death and David subsequently declares his love for Elaina at her grave, which reaffirms the transcendence of family values even in the face of the family's destruction. We can infer from the events that led to the conclusion that this tragedy resulted from David's rejection of the movie's primary family unit (consisting of himself and Elaina) and not the institution of family itself. In this, the movie naturalizes David's suffering by framing it within his obsession with past trauma, and uses that suffering as a means of perpetuating "the myth that all personal problems in a capitalist society may be resolved by individuals who view themselves, essentially, as family members."<sup>48</sup> Family values, then, are reaffirmed at the conclusion of the movie by the realization that David would not have become the Hulk and Elaina would not have died tragically had he simply devoted himself to that primary family unit instead of dwelling on the events of his past.

Here infidelity to the comic book source benefits *The Incredible Hulk's* adherence to the TV movie model substantially. In the comic books, Bruce Banner too tenders an unrequited love, but for the character of Betty Ross, the daughter of a General in the U.S. Army sworn to destroy the Hulk. However, their love remains unrequited primarily as a result of external forces, not the least of which is her father's quest to kill him. As the TV movie reveals, however, the story of the Hulk becomes far more personal and family-oriented by removing the external forces that serve as an obstacle to the primary comic book couple's relationship and replacing them instead with obsessions born of personal trauma. Thus, *The Incredible Hulk* became increasingly more compatible with the TV movie format through the producers' deviation from the source material.

### **Hulk Smash Prescribed TV Movie Model!**

These very same deviations from the source also work to distance the story from the TV movie model with specific regard to the requisite emphasis on social issues. While *The Incredible Hulk* offers closure where the primary family unit is concerned through Elaina's death, significant narrative "puzzles" are left unresolved at the conclusion of the movie. This directly contradicts what Gomery identifies as a key element of the TV movie as informed by the classical narrative form: the requirement that TV movie narratives leave no loose ends and resolve all conflicts.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, the credits roll on *The Incredible Hulk* following a conspicuously open ending in which David, presumed dead and still plagued by the results of his gamma overdose, flees on foot in search of a cure for his malady even as Jack McGee sets out to capture the Hulk and land "the story of the century." In this, not only do we not learn the fate of each major character, we don't learn the fate of the *protagonist*. Nor, for that matter, do we learn the outcome of the conflict between David and Jack McGee.

In addition to resisting the TV movie model by defying narrative closure, *The Incredible Hulk* fails to use its central family unit as a means of explicitly addressing any topical issue of social and/or political contention. However, I asserted in a 2012 presentation that like those numerous TV movies Rapping and Edgerton cite that focus on masculine violence toward women, David's rage problem can be read as *akin* to a social issue, albeit one that results in his transformation into a literal monster. The manifestation of the violent, irrational Hulk when David becomes enraged might thus be interpreted as the product of a sort of "faux" social issue, as the manifestations of his rage resemble, but do not directly correspond to, a real world issue.<sup>50</sup> In this, the movie's writer/director/producer Kenneth Johnson was able to use the TV movie to explore a darker side of human nature through the metaphorical simulation of a social issue.<sup>51</sup> Yet, this reading entailed a search for social issues on a subtextual rather than superficial level as

required by the TV movie model, making such an attempt to align the text with the model futile from the outset.

However, in that the comics' Bruce Banner transforms into the Hulk only after a mishap during testing of the gamma-powered G-Bomb, the source material overtly addresses a timely social issue that Kenneth Johnson conspicuously absented from his adaptation. After all, published by Marvel at the height of the Cold War and the public's obsession with the atom bomb in 1962, *The Incredible Hulk* #1 was "Marvel Comics' reaction to the nuclear age," weaving a tale of nuclear science gone awry that paralleled Bert I. Gordon's 1957 film, *The Amazing Colossal Man*.<sup>52</sup> With Bruce Banner serving as "a comic-book stand-in for the father of the atomic bomb, Dr. Robert J. Oppenheimer,"<sup>53</sup> the story indeed approaches a then timely social issue, one that *remained* timely even as the Cold War persisted into the 1970s. Arguably, then, incorporating the G-Bomb into the TV movie would have allowed it to more adequately meet this particular demand of the TV movie model that Gomery asserts was in place eleven years before *The Incredible Hulk* pilot came into being.<sup>54</sup> However, these comic book origins were altered in the adaptation of the character to television and the emphasis on nuclear science removed, leaving the movie sans social issue.

But do these deviations from the model situate *The Incredible Hulk* as a failure of a TV movie? According to the model outlined at the beginning of this chapter, it may indeed seem that way. However, that model fails to account for the inherent open-endedness of the TV movie intended to function as a pilot. As Jeremy Butler acknowledges, TV movies "that do double duty as pilots for projected television series cannot tolerate the narrative closure [inherent in the classical model]. Instead, they serve to open the narrative of the series that follows."<sup>55</sup> The conventions of serialized television lead viewers to assume that closure will be achieved in the

next episode, if not the current one; therefore, a lack of closure at the conclusion of a TV movie's narrative directs viewers' assumptions toward the potential for subsequent serialization.<sup>56</sup> To put it another way, to solve all narrative puzzles in a TV movie is to instruct viewers not to expect further serialization, thereby defeating the purpose of a pilot. After all, were David no longer able to transform into the Hulk at the conclusion of the movie and his conflict with Jack McGee satisfactorily resolved, there would remain no drama to carry over into a series—a fact that, in spite of industry wisdom, viewers would at least recognize unconsciously.

Arguably, this deviation from the TV movie model served the producers and network well as, within a month of the premiere of *The Incredible Hulk*, a second Hulk TV movie debuted, continuing where the first left off. *The Incredible Hulk: Death in the Family* aired on November 28, 1977 and duplicated its predecessor's ratings success.<sup>57</sup> CBS subsequently greenlit an *Incredible Hulk* series and it began airing weekly less than a year later, on March 10, 1978.<sup>58</sup> It ran for five seasons before cancellation and was followed by three additional TV movies (*The Incredible Hulk Returns* (1988), *The Trial of the Incredible Hulk* (1989) and *The Death of the Incredible Hulk* (1990)), which were produced for NBC and in-part directed by series star Bill Bixby himself.

Furthermore, omitting the G-Bomb from the Hulk's comic book origins allowed *The Incredible Hulk* to focus more explicitly on marriage and family than the comics did with their focus on the Hulk's flight from the military, which in itself would pose inherent logistical problems for the producers given the financial constraints of the TV movie. Deviating from the source material in this way also stripped the story of its central social issue (that of the fears of nuclear energy), but Rapping, as detailed earlier in the chapter, situates family as the transcendent topic to which even social issues must be subordinated in the TV movie, making

social issues a *secondary* concern.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, the removal of the G-Bomb from the origin story in adapting the tale from comics to television may have stripped *Hulk* of its broad social relevancy, but it allowed the movie to more successfully meet the model's most fundamental requirement: the depiction of family values as "inalienable and transcendent."<sup>60</sup>

These deviations in form from the prescribed TV movie model then are not without their advantages to *The Incredible Hulk* as both pilot *and* TV movie. Yet, the ability of *The Incredible Hulk* to succeed financially as a TV movie<sup>61</sup> in spite of the rifts between it and the model discussed at the outset of this chapter, raises a significant question regarding the relationship between the Marvel TV movie and the model of the TV movie prescribed by scholars. To begin with, it forces us to consider whether or not the success of *The Incredible Hulk* in allowing Kenneth Johnson and studio Universal TV to recoup additional returns on their investment when it went to series can be attributed to the movie's relative adherence to the TV movie model in any way. Moreover, is *The Incredible Hulk*'s failure to narratively incorporate and address broadly-relevant social issues evidence of that particular text's isolated failure to adhere to the TV movie model, or is it endemic of a broader trend among Marvel TV movies that exempt them from consideration according to this model? In chapter two I will show that the success of a Marvel TV movie as a pilot appears entirely dissociated from whether or not that movie closely resembled the "best of the form" during the peak of that very form's popularity, and that these movies by-and-large resist the model's specific social issue requirements, thereby challenging the validity of such an approach to the Marvel TV movie.

## Chapter 2: Challenging the TV Movie Model

The success of *The Incredible Hulk* (1977) as a pilot in spawning a series may be interpreted in such a way that its success is credited to its adherence to the TV movie model. After all, the model describes what Elayne Rapping refers to as the “best of the form,” which accounts for those movies that resonate most with viewers.<sup>1</sup> With that in mind, a text that adheres closely to that model is theoretically more likely to be successful. However, we cannot decisively attribute the relative success or failure of any Marvel TV movie to that model based upon the conclusions of an analysis of a single text alone. As such, I provide in this chapter a response to this potential interpretation through case studies of *Dr. Strange* (1978) and *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1977), as well as a brief address of *Captain America* (1979) as it relates to the study of *Dr. Strange*. In addition to being produced during the height of the TV movie’s popularity as *The Incredible Hulk* had been, these three movies resist the TV movie model to a far greater extent than *The Incredible Hulk*, and yet achieved varying degrees of success in spawning sequels and ongoing series. Through these case studies, I intend to show that the prevailing discourse surrounding the TV movie in academia fails to properly address the industrial, as well as social, function of Marvel TV movies and that the inability of this model to adequately account for these texts necessitates a reconsideration of the model’s standing in scholarship as *the* model to which all TV movies must adhere.

### ***Dr. Strange* (1978)**

Where *The Incredible Hulk* succeeded in meeting the basic formal expectations of the TV movie format, *Dr. Strange* fails in almost every respect. Turning first in this analysis to the



movie's titular protagonist, psychiatric physician Dr. Stephen Strange retains little agency throughout the narrative. His most significant actions are spurred not by his drives or desires, but by a series of either/or ultimatums presented to him by his would-be mystical master, Lindmer, and the evil sorceress Morgan. These ultimatums center on Stephen's comatose patient Clea, and Lindmer and Morgan alternately offer one option that will invariably save Clea and another that will result in her death. Rather than pursue scientific methods of resuscitation, Stephen responds to their life-or-death ultimatums by uncharacteristically placing his faith in magic over medicine (for narrative convenience?). Moreover, while his decision-making in this respect may be interpreted as evidence of his free will (he could just as easily have chosen to let her die, after all), Clea's malady arises out of the movie's central conflict between Lindmer and Morgan, a conflict in which Stephen only takes actions explicitly prescribed by others until one hour and eighteen minutes into the movie, when he at last stands up to Morgan of his own accord.<sup>2</sup> Of course, we later discover that he was being manipulated by Lindmer into taking action, which deprives him of agency in his climactic victory as well. In this, then, the narrative progresses not as a result of Stephen's actions, but as a result of the actions of those *around him*, or of their inability to take action without making use of his innate magical abilities.<sup>3</sup> Thus, Stephen fails to live up to his prescribed role as the primary causal agent, lest we consider his "destiny" a facet of the character capable of propelling the narrative forward.<sup>4</sup>

Stephen's passivity as protagonist extends beyond his failure to serve as primary causal agent. In fact, even after successfully venturing to the astral plane to save Clea's soul,<sup>5</sup> Stephen still refuses to acknowledge the existence of magic and evil and therefore rejects Lindmer's offer to serve as his apprentice; he decides instead to go about his life as though nothing had happened. Thus, Stephen actively resists involvement in the narrative's primary conflict until

Lindmer's willing inactivity in Morgan's subsequent attack on Clea *forces* Stephen to venture into the astral plane once more. Stephen's ineffectuality is even referenced deigetically when Lindmer tells him after Morgan's defeat that "You have been brought to this moment by forces beyond your control."

Only at this point in the narrative, less than ten minutes from the credits, does Stephen make a choice/take action seemingly free of the manipulation of Lindmer and Morgan. His choice, however, as Lindmer puts it is to "serve yourself or all of mankind"; in other words, he can return to the world as a free man or relinquish himself to those forces beyond his control. Stephen chooses the route which offers him less agency and thereby perpetuates his servitude to the forces that have manipulated him throughout the entire movie. The placement of such a passive character at the center of what should, according to Douglas Gomery, be a classical narrative by virtue of its status as a TV movie stunts the development of the plot and leaves the audience without that chief object of identification: the goal-oriented protagonist through which they become invested in the narrative.<sup>6</sup>

Additionally, Rapping stresses that "to deal in ambiguity or nuance [in a TV movie] is to risk losing ratings,"<sup>7</sup> hence the TV movie model requires information to be explicitly repeated throughout in order to ensure narrative retention.<sup>8</sup> Yet, *Dr. Strange* fails to achieve the same level of narrative transparency as *The Incredible Hulk* through its complete lack of repetition with regard to major plot points. While cryptic, indirect references to earlier plot points abound, no single constituent event is explicitly referenced more than twice.<sup>9</sup> This renders its narrative virtually unintelligible except to the most attentive viewers, even when viewed *without* commercial interruption as it is currently available.

An ambiguous, rushed, and exposition-heavy, two-minute conversation at the outset of the movie between Morgan and her master, the Ancient One, exemplifies the folly in this strategy. This conversation relates a brief history of the ongoing conflict between the Ancient One and Lindmer, and serves as the motivation for the entire plot in that the Ancient One therein orders Morgan to destroy Lindmer and/or Stephen within three days, which in turn spurs the battle over Clea's soul. Whereas *The Incredible Hulk* referenced David's failure to save Laura on eight occasions and supernormal strength on thirteen, this vital information regarding *Dr. Strange*'s narrative impetus is repeated but once, and even then only partially and in passing. Moreover, the specific placement of that vital two-minute conversation within the narrative risks alienating any viewers who may have tuned in late to the program, as it occurs *immediately* following the opening titles. The failure on the part of writer/producer/director Philip DeGuere to further reference this crucial information makes understanding the motivation behind narrative events in *Dr. Strange* exceedingly difficult. The abundance of scenes that do little to advance the plot, and the movie's predominantly non-revelatory dialogue characterized largely by social pleasantries, only exacerbate the issue.

### **Narrative Stagnation in *Dr. Strange***

Strikingly, although Rapping asserts that "every scene must further the [narrative] action,"<sup>10</sup> two entirely superfluous scenes surface in the first half hour of *Dr. Strange* alone. A short scene approximately sixteen minutes in finds Clea, whose role in the central conflict is not actually explained until the following scene, making tea and watching television. The scene reveals nothing of her character, except that she watches television, like most people, and drinks tea, which is also not uncommon. Nor does it further the plot. Similarly, a scene two minutes

later follows Stephen as he says good night to a nurse (representing the sort of shallow chitchat that constitutes much of *Dr. Strange's* teleplay), flips through some magazines, and also watches television to the same non-revelatory ends. Ultimately, that the two watch the same Abbott and Costello movie on television appears to be significant given that we later discover they share a “psychic bond.” However, the pair’s shared dream sequence in the following scene more unambiguously speaks to their psychic bond than their television viewing habits do, especially since their viewing options in 1979 would have been limited to some half dozen stations.

Additionally, no fewer than five resolution scenes follow the climactic confrontation between Stephen and Morgan.<sup>11</sup> In these scenes, Stephen (1) accepts his apprenticeship under Lindmer, (2) attends a meeting at the hospital where he works, (3) receives a visit from by Clea at the hospital to discuss her amnesia, (4) takes Clea for a walk during which they glimpse Morgan on television, and (5) watches a magic show in a park. According to Michael J. Porter, Deborah L. Larson and Allison Harthcock, the resolution scene in a television text functions *solely* to impart information to the audience regarding the results of the narrative’s crisis.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, given the brevity of a television narrative’s resolution and its placement at the end of the text, it follows that the TV movie need not repeat the information revealed in the resolution as it does earlier plot points in order to ensure narrative retention.

Yet, of *Dr. Strange's* resolution scenes listed above, scenes 2 and 5 reveal no information that is not also thoroughly covered by earlier scenes in the movie or by resolution scenes 1, 3 and 4. Scene 2 echoes earlier scenes establishing a conflict between Stephen and his superiors at the hospital and does not clearly address the results of that narrative conflict in any way, while scene 5 merely reiterates the fact that Stephen can freely use magic, which had been well-established during both the climax and resolution scene 1. Thus, scenes 2 and 5 do little more than pad out

the already more than 10-minute resolution. The presence of (at least) these four superfluous scenes in *Dr. Strange* highlights the extent of the producers' failure to repeat key plot points throughout, as it was obviously not for a lack of expendable screen time that *Dr. Strange* deviates from the prescribed TV movie model in this way.

### **The Absence of Family and a Rejection of Social Issues**

Critics have notably touted *Dr. Strange* as one of the most faithful of the late-1970s Marvel adaptations.<sup>13</sup> The character's creator Stan Lee was reportedly afforded significant influence on the teleplay, star Peter Hooten looked the part of Stephen Strange, and comic book artist Frank Brunner contributed set designs from the comics for an authentic aesthetic presentation. However, DeGuere made significant alterations to the character's origin when adapting it across media, but whereas *The Incredible Hulk* was able to meet the TV movie model's requirement of family by altering the protagonist's origin from source to screen, the transformation of Stephen Strange's origin across media resulted in the addition of but a passing reference to family.

In the Marvel comics, Doctor Strange (his title is spelled out in the comics) suffered nerve damage in a car accident, rendering him incapable of performing surgery. Unable to find an adequate treatment for his condition, Doctor Strange turned to alcohol before travelling to Tibet in search of yet another treatment. There he found his calling in magic and trained under an ancient sorcerer to become the Sorcerer Supreme. The origin of the TV movie's Stephen Strange similarly finds him turning to magic only when unable to treat a patient using conventional medicine (although not due to personal injury), and the denouement too finds Stephen training under an ancient sorcerer, although in New York instead of Tibet for obvious budgetary reasons.

However, instead of actively seeking out magic as the goal-oriented protagonist, like Doctor Strange of the Marvel comics does, magic comes *to* Stephen in *Dr. Strange*. Stephen's apprenticeship under Lindmer had in fact been agreed upon years earlier by Stephen's father. In this, DeGuere allocates a significant portion of the causal agency stripped from Stephen to a narratively-absent father. As a result, the forward narrative progression of *Dr. Strange* can indeed be credited to an emphasis on family, but only at the expense of Stephen's narrative agency. What's more, given that Stephen's mother and father are conspicuously absented from all onscreen events, the Strange family is not the central focus of the narrative, per the requirements of the TV movie model. In this instance, then, family hinders to the movie's adherence to the TV movie model on a basic formal level.

Although in *The Incredible Hulk* a second, similarly-structured family unit replaced that destroyed by the opening car crash, Stephen's mother and father are replaced only by his eventual "master," Lindmer, and Lindmer's pupil, Wong, who attempt to recruit Stephen to their cause. When Stephen becomes Lindmer's apprentice, he is welcomed not into a family, but into a small squad of sorcerers engaged in an endless battle against evil. Unlike *The Incredible Hulk's* David and Elaina, who have been close friends since university in addition to research partners, Stephen and Lindmer exhibit a purely professional relationship perpetuated solely by Lindmer's need to take on an apprentice before his death. Even then, however, their relationship is distinctly tentative as Stephen occasionally voices an enmity toward and mistrust of Lindmer. To then define such a group as a "family" would require that the producers redefine the TV movie's family unit to encompass any and all groups of people who converse on a regular basis regardless of whether or not affection exists between them, thereby conflating private/personal and professional/working relationships and destabilizing the generic notion of family as an "ideal

institution” by virtue of an unrestricted inclusiveness.<sup>14</sup> Thus, *Dr. Strange* rejects the personal, family-oriented narrative essential to the model of the TV movie genre, and goes so far as to make this rejection of family explicit when Stephen becomes Lindmer’s apprentice. In the first of the movie’s five resolution scenes, Lindmer declares that as Sorcerer Supreme Stephen must “renounce such pleasures as are given to Earthly men who are only mortal.” This includes renouncing offspring and even love (save for the love of the universe itself), which are key components of many TV movie families, though not mutually exclusive as *The Incredible Hulk*’s definition of family as a childless man-woman unit revealed.<sup>15</sup>

While *Dr. Strange*’s deviation from the source material provided it with at least the aforementioned *passing* reference to the influence of family on the character, these same deviations notably stripped the narrative of the one genuine social issue broached by the comics: the alcohol abuse which preceded Doctor Strange’s journey to Tibet. As with the removal of the G-Bomb in the adaptation of the Hulk’s origin story in *The Incredible Hulk*, no explicitly-named substitute for alcoholism was provided in the reworked narrative of *Dr. Strange*. In fact, as Lindmer states, Stephen’s *only* problem is that he “cares too much”—hardly the stuff of headlines. Thus, the story of Stephen Strange that made it to screen was presented with neither a sensational social issue as its core subject matter, nor a family unit through which such an issue might have been explored per the generic requirements of the TV movie.

### ***Strange Conclusions***

Unlike *The Incredible Hulk*, which benefitted from deviating from the source material where the TV movie model is concerned, the near-total rejection of the model in *Dr. Strange* would not have occurred had DeGuere adhered more closely to the comic book source. After all,

the comic book origins of Doctor Strange showcase a distinctly personal story, even if it lacked that core family element. Moreover, Doctor Strange's battle with alcoholism and his attempt to cope with a newfound handicap by seeking spiritual enlightenment in Tibet ultimately communicate a message of "hope and endurance"<sup>16</sup> as he becomes Sorcerer Supreme in spite of this handicap. By contrast, Stephen's journey in the TV movie hinges on a distinctly impersonal pact between his dead father, whom we never see, and Lindmer, whom he has never met—a pact Stephen therefore had no hand in creating. Thus, where adhering to the model of the TV movie outlined by scholars is concerned, the producers of *Dr. Strange* would have been better served by adhering more rigidly to the source material.

Like *The Incredible Hulk* before it, however, *Dr. Strange* too resists the narrative closure of the TV movie as prescribed by Gomery's application of classical narrative expectations to the format.<sup>17</sup> Although *Dr. Strange* boasts an overabundance of resolution scenes, the movie leaves a significant number of narrative puzzles unresolved at its conclusion. For example: it is unclear whether Stephen will pursue a relationship with Clea, or if doing so would interfere with his duties as protector of Earth, given Lindmer's insistence that he renounce the pleasures of mortal men. Moreover, no explanation is given with regard to what constitutes Morgan's "LeFay Method," which is discussed on television in resolution scene 4. And finally, the narrative does not make provide any details regarding how Morgan came to be on Earth once more in spite of her falling out with the Ancient One.

As discussed in the previous chapter, though, the TV movie that also serves as a pilot "cannot tolerate the narrative closure" inherent in Bordwell and Thompson's classical narrative formula.<sup>18</sup> This reveals that strict adherence to the TV movie model can in fact have adverse effects on a TV movie pilot, given that such closure precludes the possibility of further narrative



development in a series. As such, that Stephen has only just begun his training and Morgan has mysteriously resurfaced at the conclusion of *Dr. Strange* opens up potential avenues for narrative development beyond that reflected in the movie's narrative, even if *Dr. Strange* never made it to series.

The *Captain America* pilot movie violates the TV movie model in many of the same ways that *Dr. Strange* does. It centers on a passive protagonist who actively resists involvement in the narrative and who is ultimately sidelined due to a lack of medical training during the movie's climax as a secondary character saves the day. The producers of *Captain America* not only often fail to remind viewers of essential plot points, but they also often fail to provide motivation for narrative action. This lack of motivation most prominently characterizes the depiction of a seemingly unmotivated attempt on Steve Rogers' life prior to either his involvement with the antagonist's criminal plot or his transformation into Captain America.<sup>19</sup> What's more, deviations in narrative from the source material similarly provide the movie with a passing reference to family (Steve Rogers' deceased father synthesized the TV movie's version of the Captain America super soldier serum before his death), even as it strips the story of its superficial address of a social issue: the rise of the Nazis as a global threat.

History reveals that the *Dr. Strange* and *Captain America* production teams' efforts to develop the properties into series were ultimately unsuccessful.<sup>20</sup> Given that both movies egregiously failed to meet the generic demands of the TV movie model detailed in chapter one, this would seem to support the notion that a TV movie's success as a pilot can be predicted based on its relative adherence to the generic expectations of said model. Were this the case it would position the generic model of the TV movie as a useful and appropriate tool for analyzing these long-neglected texts. However, the following case study of *The Amazing Spider-Man* will show

that a TV movie pilot might fulfill its industrial purpose of successfully spawning a series in spite of making significant departures from these generic expectations.

### ***The Amazing Spider-Man (1977)***

In comparison to *Dr. Strange*, the pilot for *The Amazing Spider-Man* at least achieves a modicum of narrative transparency. The central conflict in the movie involves a plot to extort \$50 million from the city of New York by Edward Byron, a self-help guru with the power to control the minds of his followers. After a string of daring robberies by average citizens who promptly commit suicide, Byron anonymously claims responsibility for the crimes and threatens to use the very same mind control powers to force ten New Yorkers to “destroy themselves” on his command.<sup>21</sup> That the ability to control people’s minds is possible within the fictional world of *The Amazing Spider-Man* is verbally iterated eight times throughout, while six separate, specific references reinforce the fact that ten people have been programmed to kill themselves by Byron. Although neither number compares with the thirteen explicit verbal references to supernatural strength in *The Incredible Hulk*, these key plot points do resurface at regular intervals throughout the narrative to ensure viewers retain information vital to following the narrative.

However, notably absent from the above plot synopsis is any mention of the movie’s titular protagonist, Peter Parker/Spider-Man. This marks the movie’s most significant split from scholars’ basic formal requirements of the TV movie. For as the first of the Marvel TV movies, *The Amazing Spider-Man* instigated the trend of focusing on passive protagonists that would continue in *Dr. Strange*, the *Captain America* movies, and, in some respects, *Nick Fury: Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* as well as all post-pilot *Hulk* TV movies with the exception of *Married*.<sup>22</sup> Byron’s

scheme is in fact well under way by the time Peter is introduced, and Peter's involvement in the narrative is ultimately not that of causal agent.

Peter's introduction to the mind control dilemma arises out of his interaction with J. Jonah Jameson, owner and publisher of the *Daily Bugle* newspaper, from whom Peter repeatedly attempts to solicit money as a freelance photographer in spite of Jameson's complete rejection of his work on multiple occasions. That Peter has no money serves as the topic of six separate conversations, which numerically makes the knowledge of his poverty as important for audiences to remember as the ten people programmed to kill themselves. In this, Peter's financial destitution becomes his defining characteristic, his narrative drive. It trumps both his vague and unmotivated compulsion to perform heroic deeds and his general interest in science, which is never explicitly stated but related visually through his sporadic use of scientific equipment. After all, of the three character traits, only his financial situation is ever extensively verbally addressed. It therefore logically follows that his involvement in the mind control narrative would spring from his financial distress, and indeed it does.

In fact, only through a complex string of coincidences and chance encounters stemming from Peter's constant scrounging for cash do we gain access to the central mind control/extortion narrative. As a would-be professional photographer and struggling graduate student, Peter attempts to sell a stack of artful photographs to the *Daily Bugle* in his first onscreen appearance, but Jameson has no need of his work. So when he chances upon one of Byron's mind control victims who commits suicide by driving his car into a wall, Peter sees a prime opportunity to make some freelance dough and snaps photos of the wreck to sell to the *Bugle*, which Jameson also does not buy, as it happens. Motivated again by his dire financial situation when Jameson asserts that he would buy a picture of the so-called "Spider-Man" (the now super-powered Peter

Parker) who had been spotted climbing walls in the city, Peter dons the iconic red and blue tights that also defined the appearance of the superhero Spider-Man in the Marvel comic books. Peter then provides Jameson with pictures of Spider-Man, which Jameson also does not pay him for, but *is* consequently sent out on an assignment for the *Daily Bugle*, during which he meets Judy Tyler, the daughter of one of Byron's victims. Through Judy, he not only secures the \$46 he had been trying to raise to buy condensers for his transmitter, but he also connects the extortion plot back to Byron. As a result of this complex chain of coincidences and chance encounters, Peter ends up using his Spider-Man persona to stop Byron and, in the process, shoots a series of Spider-Man photographs that amaze even the irascible J. Jonah Jameson.

Notably, while Peter's desperate search for money allows us access to the mind control/extortion plot, he in fact propels this narrative forward in no way until he, as Spider-Man, destroys Byron's mind control transmitter with six minutes left in the movie, and thereby resolves the city's crisis. In the scene immediately prior, however, Peter is under the influence of Byron's mental conditioning and prepares to kill himself by leaping off the Empire State Building. Until blind chance frees Peter from Byron's mind control and he subsequently destroys the transmitter, Peter exhibits no agency with regard to the central narrative that is not ceremoniously undone by Byron's mental reprogramming of Peter at approximately an hour and ten minutes into the movie. This reprogramming causes Peter to forget everything he had learned about Byron and his plans, and although Peter subsequently relearns how to jam Byron's signal, it is unclear if Peter actually starts to regain his memory or if he acts on his "spider sense" alone.

Thus, Byron serves as the movie's primary causal agent, when in fact that role is prescribed by the TV movie model to the protagonist, who in this case is Peter Parker, the titular Spider-Man. Additionally, although Peter, as Spider-Man, confronts Byron in the climax of the

movie, Byron hardly qualifies for consideration as the antagonist of the piece. After all, apart from the fact that Peter is vaguely good and therefore wants to help people, Byron's desires do not directly conflict with Peter's, as necessitated by Gomery's claim that TV movies adhere to the tenets of classical narrative cinema.<sup>23</sup> To this end, if Peter's perpetual lack of funding defines him as a character as his constant begging and scrounging suggests, Peter's desires (for money) are only fulfilled narratively by the criminal actions of Byron. Byron's plot ultimately results in Peter securing his first assignment for the *Daily Bugle*, meeting Judy who gives him \$46, and, finally, compiling a portfolio of Spider-Man photos that impress Jameson. Granted, Byron eventually forces Peter to attempt suicide, but apart from that, the effects of Byron's actions are largely beneficial with regard to Peter's driving concerns.

#### **"With Great Power Comes Great Responsibility"**

In the Marvel comic books, these words imparted by Peter Parker's Uncle Ben shaped the person that Peter would become as the character matured into manhood.<sup>24</sup> His selfless heroism spawned not from a vague sense of goodness or a desire to impress J. Jonah Jameson for the sake of \$46, but from the message thus imparted by his late uncle that it is the responsibility of those with the power to help others to do so. This shift in Peter Parker's values in the TV movie ultimately can be traced back to the producers' complete omission of the character of Ben Parker from the *The Amazing Spider-Man* pilot. Similar to the way in which removing Doctor Strange's alcoholism from the TV movie stripped the character's origin of its inherent social relevance, deviating from Spider-Man's origins in this way adversely affected the movie's relationship to the TV movie model by stripping it of its central focus on family. By removing Ben Parker from Spider-Man's origin, the producers trivialize the character's motivations by replacing his

distinctly personal incentives for becoming a hero in the comics with the TV movie Peter's shallow, financially-motivated transformation into Spider-Man.<sup>25</sup> What's more, this deviation from the source material deprives the TV movie origin of the comic book's inherent family focus, despite the TV movie model's prescribed generic predilection toward family-focused dramas.

As if highlighting the exclusion of the source material's basic family dynamic, Peter's Aunt May (Ben's widow in comic book mythology) actually appears in the TV movie, although no mention is ever made of the notably absent Ben. What's more, she only appears twice: once to remind Peter to take his allergy medicine and once to needlessly inform him that he received *no* phone call from Judy. Significantly, Peter's allergies function as a plot convenience which causes him to sneeze while following Byron's mind control signal with a tracking device, thereby dropping and breaking the device. This in turn forces Spider-Man to confront Byron's squad of kendo stick-wielding martial artists as he blindly searches the building for the signal's source, which he would have otherwise easily uncovered with the aid of his tracking device. Peter's allergies thus serve as a means of stunting, and therefore prolonging, the film's narrative and justifying the producers' need to indulge viewers with an action scene. His allergies recede from the narrative entirely after that fateful sneeze, never to be mentioned again. That Aunt May's primary service to the narrative involves her verbally reinforcing such a trivial and fleeting narrative contrivance stresses the character's overall narrative superfluity, and, by proxy, the superfluity of *family* to the movie.

Additionally, if it is indeed the charge of the TV movie to superficially-explore issues making national headlines in order to "call upon us to think and act as citizens in a public social sphere,"<sup>26</sup> *The Amazing Spider-Man* fails to live up to the expectations of the TV movie in that

respect as well. While city-wide extortion may command headlines, it's hardly the sort of material that directly affects the day-to-day lives of countless American families as more conventional TV movie issues such as disease or domestic abuse do. Nor, for that matter, do newspapers routinely report on forced suicide via mind control or the inability of graduate students to sell photographs to newspapers for \$46.

Thus, like *Dr. Strange*, *The Amazing Spider-Man* lacks the prescribed family-focused approach to a newsworthy social issue in addition to featuring a predominantly passive protagonist. Yet, unlike *Dr. Strange*, which failed to spawn a series, *The Amazing Spider-Man* was green-lit to move forward as a limited series in spite of its resistance to the fundamental requirements of the TV movie model. CBS ran two limited series of *The Amazing Spider-Man* between 1977 and 1979, resulting in a combined total of thirteen, hour-long episodes in addition to the feature-length TV movie pilot.<sup>27</sup> That a TV movie pilot might succeed in spawning a series even as it flagrantly violates many of the conventions of the TV movie model undermines the validity of the model as a useful tool with which to analyze these texts.

### **In Opposition of the Singular TV Movie Genre**

Of the four Marvel TV movies discussed thus far, including *Captain America*, *The Incredible Hulk* most closely adheres to what scholars have deemed the generic conventions of the TV movie; in fact, no other Marvel TV movie, apart from other movies in the *Hulk* series, bears any significant resemblance to this family/superficially social issue-centered format. Yet, even *The Incredible Hulk*, with its failure to overtly depict its characters struggling with a timely social issue, does not reflect Rapping's "best of the form" precisely. How, then, can we hold these movies to this standard? As Erin Copple Smith relates, the specifically "one-time nature"

of TV movies allows them to deal with controversial social issues long before series television can,<sup>28</sup> and therein lies a fundamental flaw in this model. For as Butler points out, not all TV movies are one-shot programs set apart from serial television given that many serve as pilots—a fact that the very scholars who established said model recognize in their own writing even if they do not make specific provisions for those texts.

Additionally, as Todd Gitlin's exploration of the television industry in *Inside Prime Time* reveals, executives cared less about adhering to a model wherein the TV movie must serve a specific social purpose than they did about ease of marketing.<sup>29</sup> In an interview with Gitlin, former vice president for movies at both ABC and NBC, Deanne Barkley, summed up industry wisdom on the subject when she asserted that *Jaws* (1975) would have been a perfect TV movie because it could be sold to viewers in a single line of advertising.<sup>30</sup> Even Gomery recognizes the unmatched importance of marketing in the development of a TV movie when he discusses how ABC in particular "sought seventy-five minute tales that could be comprehended in thirty seconds."<sup>31</sup> Thus, on a production level, producers of TV movies value high concept over specific content. Through action and spectacle, then, not through a specific focus on family or social issues, producers deemed that they could secure a broad demographic to sell to advertisers. It follows then that there exist many exceptions to the TV movie model as prescribed by scholars that assuage either the prerequisite of family as the central focus or the overt exploration of social issues, or both.

Rapping also recognizes that TV movies fall into a variety of categories, but specifically refers only to the categories of "disease of the week, disaster of the week, social issue of the week, [and] whitewashed history of the week," referring only to TV movies that superficially address social issues and ignoring any TV movies that might translate genres from other media



into the television format.<sup>32</sup> To that end, although she acknowledges *Scalptlock* (1966), for example, she makes no affordances in her discussion of the codified TV movie for the characteristics of the TV movie western, specifically. Thus, although few in number, Marvel TV movies (and superhero TV movies in general) are not alone in their exclusion from the TV movie canon. Exemplifying this, David Deal's *Television Fright Films of the 1970s* reviews nearly 150 made-for-TV movies produced in the 1970s alone that more closely adhere to the conventions of the horror genre than to those of the TV movie genre prescribed by scholars. Even Erin Cople Smith, whose view of the TV movie echoes and even references the work of Edgerton, Gitlin, Gomery and Rapping, points to the pervasiveness of external, typically Hollywood, genre influences on the earliest TV movies in particular.<sup>33</sup> However, especially in the early days of the TV movie, women were the primary shoppers and therefore more appealing to advertisers.<sup>34</sup> This makes scholars' specific focus on "women's pictures" logical, but not entirely inclusive or comprehensive, since TV movies embrace a multitude of generic formulas and are often used as pilots. That many TV movies thus resist the fundamental principles of the singular TV movie genre established by scholars reveals that the conventions of the TV movie require renewed exploration.

Thus, the TV movie model not only fails to account for the necessary formal deviations of pilots from one-shots and the varying degrees of success these formally deviating pilots achieve, but it also fails to acknowledge any potential social relevance therein. After all, the social relevance of the TV movie described by that model is necessarily apparent on a superficial level through the narrative depiction of an intrusion of social forces (inspired by news headlines) on family life. For Rapping, those TV movies which "warrant thought and debate" explicitly "resonate with personal and *social* meaning" [emphasis added] through precisely such

personalization of social issues.<sup>35</sup> This, of course, insinuates that a TV movie that fails to explore a prominent social issue through the lens of a central family unit is inherently unworthy of our thought and debate.

In this, positioning the TV movie described by this model as *the* TV movie genre rather than *a* TV movie genre limits our ability to identify the relative social merits of TV movies adapted from comic book properties, not to mention TV movies adhering instead to the conventions of the horror and western genres, for example. Indeed, simply because Marvel TV movies do not “resonate with personal and social meaning” in precisely the same way as those movies discussed by TV movie scholars does not mean that they are inherently not worthy of thought and debate or specifically *not* imbued with social meaning. To that end, the following chapter will explore the specific, non-superficial social relevance of Marvel TV movies in order to show that they not only provide modern viewers with insight into the social climate of the United States at the time of their production, but that they also perpetuate the prevailing attitudes regarding the ideal, mythic, American hero.

### Chapter 3: Marvel TV Movies as Cultural Artifacts

As shown in the previous chapters' case studies of *The Incredible Hulk* (1977), *Dr. Strange* (1978), and *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1977), Marvel TV movies conspicuously fail to address social issues in the manner prescribed by the TV movie model. *The Incredible Hulk*, for example, can be read as *metaphorically* tackling domestic violence, but in order for a TV movie to attain social relevance according to the TV movie model, the text must *outwardly* explore such social issues. However, in their introduction to *The 21st Century Superhero*, Richard J. Gray II and Betty Kaklimanidou defend the study of superhero narratives as they appear in film and television by arguing that, in general, "popular culture [...] produces multilayered narratives that contain and spread ideological and political messages to a wide audience."<sup>1</sup> They further stress that 21st century superhero narratives "resonate with specific events in the globalized world and could be used as starting points for a discussion about contemporary sociopolitical conflicts."<sup>2</sup> By focusing specifically on the relevance of contemporary texts to our global society in the 21st century, the authors reveal that the particular sociopolitical issues broached by any superhero narrative are intrinsically timely in nature. Thus, not unlike the TV movies that characterize Elayne Rapping's "best of the form," superhero narratives on television serve as cultural artifacts that "negotiate, respond to and/or defuse some of the most significant socio-political [*sic*] issues" of the eras in which they are produced.<sup>3</sup> Looking to the example of *The Incredible Hulk* and domestic violence, however, it becomes apparent that unlike the TV movies canonized by scholars in the development of the TV movie model, the social issues underpinning superhero narratives are not necessarily superficially apparent. Marvel TV movies therefore require more

thorough dissection, specifically focused on the metaphorical and subtextual implications of a given narrative, in order to elucidate their broader social relevance.

In the revelation of this broad social relevance lies what Gray and Kaklamanidou and Matthew Pustz identify as the educational value of superhero narratives,<sup>4</sup> which can provide audiences with a greater understanding of historical events as well as the mechanisms whereby our cultural memories of those events are formed.<sup>5</sup> However, Gray and Kaklamanidou refer almost exclusively to the value of superhero narratives in film, and Pustz to those in comic books. Except perhaps in Patrick A. Jankiewicz's *You Wouldn't Like Me When I'm Angry*, wherein *The Incredible Hulk* (1977) achieves value as a pilot that successfully spawned a television series, nowhere has the value of superhero TV movie as cultural artifacts been advocated. In this chapter, then, it is my goal to reveal the educational value of viewing Marvel TV movies as cultural artifacts, drawing specific inspiration in this regard from Douglas Gomery's framing of *Brian's Song's* (1971) thematic concerns within the sociopolitical climate of the early 1970s.<sup>6</sup> Thus, I will frame *Captain America* as a reflection of sociopolitical concerns in the late 1970s through an alternate, positive reading of narrative components therein that defy the TV movie model, with specific regard to the movie's passive protagonist and the failure of producers to provide motivation for certain narrative events. This study will then conclude by identifying a broader, unifying trend in the corpus of Marvel TV movies whereby they subtextually perpetuate a specific mythological construction of the American superhero.

### **Reflections of the American Sociopolitical Climate**

In his essay on "America's Malaise as Demonstrated in Comic Books of the 1970s," Pustz positions comic books of the 1970s as cultural artifacts that embody and provide insight

into the “mood of pessimism” that plagued the United States during that era.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the decade, a pessimism had developed amongst the American people regarding the nation’s future. President Jimmy Carter referred to this mood of pessimism in his prime-time, television and radio address to the nation on July 15, 1979 as a “crisis of confidence,” one that Pustz asserts resulted from numerous factors including “the military defeat in Vietnam, ‘stagflation,’ the Arab oil embargo, Watergate, and even the kidnapping of Patty Hearst.”<sup>8</sup>

According to Pustz, comic books of the 1970s would come to illustrate Americans’ despair or “malaise” during that era through their depictions of malaise-stricken superheroes. To this end, the five major symptoms of this crisis of confidence identified by President Carter<sup>9</sup> ultimately translated into comic books in:

four primary ways. First, superheroes of this period frequently suffered from their own ‘crisis of confidence’ and often ended up abandoning their costumed secret identities. Second, it was common to find superheroes suffering from a lack of direction—much like Americans who were uncertain about the future. Third, superheroes in the 1970s were frequently faced with overwhelming power, problems and threats that seemed impossible to overcome. The final demonstration of malaise is personified by superheroes who lost their powers...<sup>10</sup>

Pustz goes on to identify manifestations of these trends in titles of the 1970s as varied as *Superman*, *Inhumans*, *The Incredible Hulk* and *Captain America*. What’s more, he pinpoints specific historical events for which many of the fictional events portrayed in these titles served as metaphors or otherwise subtly referenced. For example, the assassination of a Nobel Peace Prize winner in a 1970 issue of *Teen Titans* draws on the real-life assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy two years earlier, while the 1973–1974 Secret Empire storyline in

*Captain America* clearly evokes the Watergate scandal.<sup>11</sup> Thus, these comic books reflect the sociopolitical climate of the late 1970s in much the same way that the 1979 Marvel TV movie pilot of *Captain America* reflects the crisis of confidence facing the American people in the 1970s and metaphorically speaks to their distrust of the oil industry.

### ***Captain America* (1979)**

According to Pustz, America's malaise in the 1970s was defined primarily by "a feeling of being powerless in the face of change while also not really understanding the forces that were transforming the world."<sup>12</sup> This feeling of powerlessness clearly underscores the journey of *Captain America*'s Steve Rogers through the movie's narrative, a journey that finds him grappling emotionally with his distrust of the American government and later physically with the vilified oil industry. In many ways Steve's dilemmas mirror the bouts with despair that characterize the era's comic book heroes as detailed by Pustz. As such, when analyzed according to Pustz's manifestations of America's malaise in superhero comic book narratives of the 1970s, *Captain America* employs not one, but three of the four tropes identified by the author.

In capturing the mood of the 1970s, however, the TV movie's depiction of Captain America's origin significantly deviates from the comic book source material. After all, *Captain America* #1, published by Timely Comics in 1941, explicitly addresses the sociopolitical concerns of people in that era as the cover famously depicts Captain America punching Hitler in the face. That the *Captain America* TV movie does not retain this focus on the conflicts of the 1940s reinforces Gray and Kaklamanidou's claim that an adaptation of a comic book, when "produced and released with a delay of several years and/or decades, [...] is used as a comment

on the contemporary sociocultural circumstances and does not respond to the time period in which the source was written and/or published.”<sup>13</sup>

To that end, the TV movie’s Steve Rogers is plagued not by the Nazi menace but by an overwhelming malaise that finds him on “the path that leads to fragmentation and self-interest,” against which President Carter warned the American people six months after *Captain America* debuted on January 19, 1979.<sup>14</sup> The movie begins with Steve visiting a friend who questions why he has not seen Steve since his release from the Marines two weeks earlier. Steve here conveys that his absence owes to the self-interested, fragmentary lifestyle he has adopted (“I’ve been comin’ down the coast slow and easy. You know, kickin’ back.”), then voices plans to spend the next couple years living on the road in his conversion van. Although Steve must become a superhero dedicated to the defense of democracy by the narrative’s end, in this he expresses a disinterest in social conventions wherein one is expected to work and contribute to society, and thereby exhibits the “lack of direction” that defines Pustz’s second manifestation of malaise in superhero narratives.<sup>15</sup> Like the Hulk of Marvel Comics in the 1970s<sup>16</sup> and David Banner of CBS’s *The Incredible Hulk*, Steve envisions himself as a nomad adrift. Only, he *chooses* this lifestyle of his own volition, motivated by the symptoms of America’s malaise rather than by necessity.

Indeed, Steve’s decision to live on the road ultimately results from an overwhelming sense of purposelessness, a crisis of confidence reminiscent of Pustz’s first manifestation of malaise whereby superheroes abandon their responsibilities in favor of a policy of noninterference. As a result, when Dr. Simon Mills offers to administer the FLAG (Full Latent Ability Gain) formula to Steve and make him a super powered crime fighter for the government, Steve declines, expressing disillusionment with national service. To this end, further highlighting

his desire to withdraw from society, he tells Simon, “I just want to get out on the road [...] I don’t want to report in or check out. I don’t want to look forward to weekends. I want every day to be the same. I just want to kick back and find out who I am.” Even after Simon uses FLAG to save Steve’s following a motorcycle accident, Steve remains adamantly self-interested, again declines a position working for the government, and staunchly refuses to express any gratitude. In these scenes, the movie additionally demonstrates a principal marker of malaise as identified by President Carter. Although once a devoted Marine, Steve has since lost faith in his “ability to have a positive impact on the government” and feels “powerless to initiate change or stop the country’s downward spiral” no matter how powerful FLAG might make him.<sup>17</sup>

*Dr. Strange*’s protagonist, Stephen Strange, similarly refuses to battle evil alongside the sorcerer Lindmer in spite of his virtually unmatched, innate magical abilities. While *Dr. Strange* may not specifically refer to the government, in both cases the protagonist’s refusal of his powers stunts narrative progression and results in the failure of the movie to meet Gomery’s requirement that a TV movie protagonist serve as the narrative’s primary causal agent.<sup>18</sup> Importantly, however, when viewed as cultural artifacts of the 1970s rather than TV movies expected to adhere to a fixed model, the characters’ apathy toward the “greater good” and refusal to participate in their movies’ central conflicts are clear manifestations of America’s malaise. This positions these TV movies as *successful* reflections of the era in which they were produced rather than mere narrative *failures*.<sup>19</sup>

Additionally, Steve’s apathy toward the needs of the American people is complicated by the intervention of an “overwhelming power,” one that, in keeping with the third manifestation of malaise in superhero narratives identified by Pustz, seems impossible for the hero to overcome.<sup>20</sup> Although an adamant non-interventionist, Steve’s wanderings are put on hold when



he becomes ensnared in a plot by oil tycoon Lou Brackett to destroy Phoenix, Arizona with a neutron bomb and abscond with \$1.4 billion in gold bullion from the International Gold Repository there. The sheer complexity of Brackett's plan coupled with the incredible number of resources and murderous henchmen at his disposal place Steve at a seemingly insurmountable disadvantage, even with his super powers. So overwhelming is Brackett's power, in fact, that neither Steve nor any government employee, including Simon Mills, has the faintest inclination about Brackett's plot until well over an hour into the movie. Moreover, when it comes to finally defeating Brackett, Steve proves grossly ineffectual and triggers the neutron bomb himself in the movie's climactic moments, thereby requiring Simon to step in and undo his error.

Pustz explains that such depictions of superheroes as powerless against their enemies were quite common in superhero narratives of the 1970s, identifying powerless comic book characters in the Hulk, Deathlok, and the humans of Jack Kirby's *Eternals* to name a few.<sup>21</sup> What's more, in addition to *Captain America*, powerlessness served as a central narrative and thematic force in other Marvel TV movies of the era as well. In the movies discussed at length thus far in this thesis, David is powerless to control the Hulk or save the women he loves in *The Incredible Hulk*, Stephen is powerless to stop Morgan and save Clea without the direct intervention of Lindmer in *Dr. Strange*, and Peter Parker nearly commits suicide during the climax of *The Amazing Spider-Man* while rendered powerless by Edward Byron's mind control. In the follow-up *Captain America* and *Hulk* movies, powerlessness also functions as a central narrative conceit. In the conclusion of *Captain America II: Death Too Soon* (1979), the villainous General Miguel holds Portland, Oregon hostage, having doused the city in a cellular aging compound to which he holds the only antidote.<sup>22</sup> *Captain America* ultimately triumphs over Miguel only as a result of the General's miscalculation when throwing a vial of said aging

compound. Furthermore, in *The Incredible Hulk: Death in the Family* (1977), David is powerless to prevent Julie, a young, crippled girl, from being murdered by her family without first transforming into the Hulk and thereby losing conscious control of his body. And in *The Incredible Hulk: Married* (1978), David is once again incapable of saving the life of a woman he loves, even when transformed into the Hulk.

### **The 1970s Energy Crisis**

Pustz notes that within comic books of the 1970s, it was far more common for superhero narratives to focus on heroes who had lost their way or otherwise suffered from a crisis of confidence than to broadly focus on the problems of American society,<sup>23</sup> hence the previous section's almost exclusive focus on the *character* of Steve Rogers. Yet, *Captain America* also addresses issues plaguing America as a whole during the 1970s. Namely, through its incorporation of an oil tycoon as antagonist, *Captain America* speaks to the nation's ongoing energy crisis in the 1970s and ultimately offers a solution to the crisis similar to that proposed by President Carter in July of that same year.

The United States experienced a severe energy crisis early in the decade when the Arab oil embargo of 1973–1974 sent the price of oil skyrocketing. And as noted in *Time* in March of 1979, “five years after the Arab embargo gripped the nation in petroleum paralysis, the economy remains as vulnerable as ever to upheavals in faraway lands.”<sup>24</sup> Cue four months of revolution by Iranian oil workers in 1978 which forced the country to “cut its export production from 5.5 million barrels a day to zero.”<sup>25</sup> The effects that such an oil shortage as that facing Iran moving into 1979 would have on the world economy were well-documented following the crisis sparked by the embargo of 1973–1974. As *Time* reported, “the danger is that rocketing fuel prices will

aggravate inflation, force governments to fight back by clamping down on domestic growth, and for the second time in a decade plunge the world economy into an oil-greased slide.”<sup>26</sup>

Americans were faced with no way to accurately predict the actions OPEC would take in the face of the Iranian shortage and the declining value of the dollar,<sup>27</sup> not to mention articles such as the *Times* piece quoted above that emphasized worst-case-scenarios and the “crisis propaganda manufactured by the Department of Energy.”<sup>28</sup> As a result, Americans panicked, began stockpiling oil and gasoline, and thereby *created* the energy crisis they had so feared in 1979.<sup>29</sup>

The same fear of the oil industry that led Americans to needlessly waste 150,000 gallons of gasoline in 1979 as their cars idled in lines at gas stations around the country informs the central conflict of *Captain America*, as reflected in the positioning of oil tycoon Lou Brackett as the antagonist.<sup>30</sup> It follows then that, as the narrative’s synecdochal representation of the oil industry as perceived by Americans, Brackett proves to be wholly irrational and unpredictable in his plot to nuke a major American city as part of a robbery. Furthermore, Brackett’s plan represents an exploitation of the American people for financial gain not unlike the price-gouging strategies of OPEC, while the unprovoked attack on pre-Captain America Steve Rogers by Brackett’s men utilized a staged oil spill to embody perceptions of the industry’s flagrant disregard for Americans on a personal level.

Tellingly, Steve makes no mention of this attempt on his life to the authorities until he and Simon finally link Brackett to the neutron bomb later in the movie. In failing to report this crime/“accident” to the police, Steve further reveals his loss of faith in the government and in his ability as a citizen to improve the nation through his actions, much like the American people President Carter addressed six months after the movie’s primetime premiere.<sup>31</sup> In this, a revised reading of Steve’s failure to serve as the narrative’s primary causal agent reveals it not to be a

deficiency, but instead a central component of the movie's ability to address social issues subtextually, as his passivity comes to represent American malaise in the 1970s. However, Steve eventually realizes that he can in fact make a difference as Captain America and joins forces with Simon Mills' government team to serve as Captain America on a permanent basis. Thus, *Captain America* accomplishes more than merely reflecting the energy crisis and public sentiment toward it; it offers a solution to the crisis.

### **"The American Ideal: It's a Little Tough to Find These Days, Isn't It?"**

Elayne Rapping asserts that TV movies "construct dramas within which our 'unrealized political ideals' are most explicitly represented and negotiated."<sup>32</sup> As clearly detailed in chapter one, however, the social issues explored by a TV movie, according to the model put forth in academia, must be explicitly addressed and framed within the context of the American family.<sup>33</sup> Yet this chapter has already shown that social issues can also be poignantly explored in a TV movie subtextually, as *Captain America* does America's malaise in the 1970s. Therefore, the negotiation of political ideals in a TV movie need not occur on a narratively superficial level as the TV movie model detailed in chapter one suggests, and can in fact occur at a purely subtextual, thematic level. As such, the Marvel TV movie can perpetuate or suggest specific "unrealized political ideals" regarding social issues, thereby potentially shaping public perception of those very issues without ever having explicitly evoked them.

Pustz suggests superhero comic books are capable of shaping public perception in precisely this way as he identifies a productive reading of Watergate in the conclusion of *Captain America's* Secret Empire storyline. He asserts that Captain America's crisis of confidence in the conclusion of the Watergate-inspired narrative "reminded citizens how fragile

the country and its ideals really are,”<sup>34</sup> and as such, Captain America’s resolve to fight for the American ideal was strengthened by this realization. In this way, Pustz argues, superhero narratives reveal to audiences that a crisis of confidence can be productive if interpreted as an affirmation of the need for citizens’ continued involvement with their government rather than becoming disillusioned with it.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, Steve Rogers’ reaction to Brackett’s scheme in *Captain America* provides a productive solution to the concerns of the malaise-stricken American people in the face of another severe oil shortage. In his “Address to the Nation on Energy and National Goals” in July of 1979, President Carter asserted that “we are the generation that will win the war on the energy problem and in that process rebuild the unity and confidence of America.”<sup>36</sup> He called on the American people from the collective members of Congress to the individual United States citizen to come together in an effort to conserve energy in whatever ways possible.<sup>37</sup> Through collective action, by uniting as a nation, President Carter proposed that Americans might overcome their crises of confidence and find a solution to the energy crisis at hand.

As Steve joins forces with government representative Simon Mills, *Captain America* depicts precisely such a unification of citizen and government in an effort to prevent the oil industry from corrupting the “American ideal”—a task that neither an individual nor the government could perform independently of the other. Significantly, Steve’s staunch refusal to cooperate with Simon throughout the bulk of the movie not only stunts the forward progression of the narrative, but also the government’s efforts to stop Lou Brackett. Only when Steve (the individual American citizen) heeds the message of the government as espoused by Simon do they make any headway in thwarting Brackett’s plan. In this, as in President Carter’s address to the nation, the movie asserts the necessity of abandoning isolationism and self-indulgence to

cooperate with the government. To this end, the climactic failure of Captain America to take on Brackett and prevent the detonation of the neutron bomb without Simon's direct intervention both reflects the powerlessness felt by the American people, and stresses the need for the people and the government to unite behind a common goal in order to overcome the looming energy crisis and restore "American values."<sup>38</sup>

Thus, the *Captain America* TV movie prefigured the energy crisis of 1979 in its reflection of the American people's fears of the oil industry, as well as President Carter's proposed response to the crisis in July, 1979. Of course, as noted in chapter two, *Captain America* fails to *superficially* address broadly relevant social issues as required by the TV movie model put forth by scholars and is thereby rendered valueless within that framework. However, abandoning that rigid model of the TV movie in favor of analyzing the text as a cultural artifact exposes social relevance at a more subtextual, thematic level instead. Moreover, as the analysis of *Captain America* herein reveals, framing Marvel TV movies as cultural artifacts need not result in a reading of the text as it merely *reflects* the sociopolitical climate of the era in which it is made. Such an analysis can also reveal a *productive* approach to the era's issues as the text narratively negotiates the political ramifications of viewers' actions in the real world.

What's more, the approach may prove useful when applied to texts produced during other eras as well. That *Blade: The House of Chthon* (2006) opens with the return of Krista Starr from Iraq, scarred by memories of the war, indicates the potential for a productive analysis of the movie within the context of post-9/11 America. And *The Incredible Hulk Returns* (1988) might be analyzed according to its reflection of the contradictory populist and elitist ideologies of Reaganomics,<sup>39</sup> given that the altruism characterizing David Banner's actions in the 1978–1982 series is here replaced by flagrant self-interest. However, the social relevance of Marvel TV

movies is not limited to the ways in which they reflect upon significant historical events and prevailing cultural attitudes. They also perpetuate a unifying national fantasy about the role of the hero in society as illustrated by the case studies of *Nick Fury: Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (1998) and *Generation X* (1996) in the following discussion of the American monomyth.

### **The American Monomyth**

Although Marvel TV movies fail to adhere to the expectations of the TV movie model, Rapping's broad assertion that the conservative medium of television is "an important public sphere within which social meanings and myths are constructed and circulated" accurately illustrates one of the primary function of these texts.<sup>40</sup> In Rapping's examination of the TV movie, the social meanings being constructed and circulated relate specifically to a "dominant family ideology."<sup>41</sup> However, as the case studies in chapter two reveal, family does not serve as the central focus of all Marvel TV movies. Instead, they perpetuate conservative ideologies relating to the role of the powerful individual in society through the constant reinforcement of a pervasive mythic structure which John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett refer to in *The Myth of the American Superhero* as "the American monomyth."<sup>42</sup>

Responding to psychoanalyst Rollo May's claim that there exists no mythic system in the culture of the United States,<sup>43</sup> Lawrence and Jewett identify a widely accepted myth rooted in "motifs of superheroic redemptive violence" underpinning a myriad of popular culture artifacts and news media responses to political events.<sup>44</sup> The authors acknowledge slight variations on the model in specific case studies throughout their book, but as they initially describe it, in narratives drawing on the American monomyth:

A community in a harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to contend with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisiacal condition; the superhero then fades into obscurity.<sup>45</sup>

According to Lawrence and Jewett, this mythic structure permeates popular culture and informs the narratives of such varied texts as *The Matrix* (1999), the *Star Trek* franchise, *Touched by an Angel* (CBS, 1994–2003), *The Lion King* (1994) and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977).

They reveal that the American monomyth is the product of an ever-increasingly less religious society and thus reflects a secularization of the “Judaean-Christian dramas of community redemption [...] combining elements of the selfless servant who impassively gives his life for others and the zealous crusader who destroys evil.”<sup>46</sup> As such, superheroes and their brand of violent redemption have displaced religious symbols in popular culture,<sup>47</sup> resulting in the development of a “mystical consciousness shaped by the American monomyth.”<sup>48</sup> Evidence of this new “mystical consciousness” crops up in the discourse of fan communities as early as 1940, when author E. E. Smith described the bonds between those in attendance at the First International Science Fiction Convention in distinctly religious terms.<sup>49</sup> In this, the American monomyth fulfills Americans’ latent spiritual needs by displacing religious icons with superheroes.<sup>50</sup>

Although the monomyth thus fulfills an obvious function within society, Lawrence and Jewett find it inherently problematic in its undermining of the foundational principles of American democracy. After all, although depicted in monomythic narratives as the saviors of the American people and their way of life, monomythic superheroes “are never elected to public office, never submit to the restraints of law or constitution, and never contribute to the discussion



that is the very stuff of democracy. The behavior of macho heroes is typically fascist, despite all claims to redeem democracy.”<sup>51</sup> This ideological emphasis of the inherent rightness of the superhero by virtue of his/her powers is what Gray and Kaklmanidou refer to in a description of superhero narratives echoing the American monomyth as the “cult of the individual.”<sup>52</sup> For Gray and Kaklmanidou, the cult of the individual spreads a positive message about the capacity of the individual to effect change in society and the “necessity of a government with limited authority.”<sup>53</sup> Yet Lawrence and Jewett cast the monomyth in a far more negative light given its fascist bent and the tendency of public discourse to advocate “total, violent solutions” to crises as a result of the monomyth’s prevalence.<sup>54</sup>

***Nick Fury: Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. (1998) and Generation X (1996)***

Whether its effect on society is positive or negative, the American monomyth clearly informs the narratives of the Marvel TV movies as demonstrated by *Nick Fury* and *Generation X*. Both Nick Fury and the mutant teenagers that would be collectively known as Generation X<sup>55</sup> act in the interest of the United States of America in spite of their outsider statuses.<sup>56</sup> When Nick Fury first appears, he is but a former agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. (here short for the Supreme Headquarters International Espionage Law (Enforcement) Division), and has long since isolated himself from society by retiring to a remote location in the Yukon. In the America of *Generation X*, genetic mutations resulting in super powers have been declared illegal by the United States government, even though the genetic “X Factor” manifests naturally and randomly during puberty and in no way constitutes a conscious choice on the part of those graced with mutant abilities. As such, the mutants of Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters reside there in order to

isolate themselves from society and in turn avoid compulsory imprisonment in one of the internment camps established by the government for the indoctrination of unregistered mutants.

Nick Fury and Generation X ultimately prove to be the only people capable of redeeming their respective societies against the evils that threaten them. Yet, in part due to their outsider status, they do so without democratic approval. In the opening of *Nick Fury*, S.H.I.E.L.D. calls Fury out of retirement to take on the newly revitalized forces of the terrorist organization known as HYDRA. In order to prevent HYDRA from releasing the untreatable Death's Head virus on Manhattan, Fury must ultimately defy S.H.I.E.L.D. directives as well as the express orders of his incompetent superiors led by Director General Jack Pincer. In doing so, his actions reflect the very anti-democratic behavior that Lawrence and Jewett assert defines the monomythic hero.<sup>57</sup> Similarly, as unregistered mutants, Generation X defies United States law by virtue of their very existence and, without the permission or knowledge of the American people, the mutants form an elite fighting force to act on the nation's behalf and stop the megalomaniacal Dr. Russell Tresh, who plots to take over the "dream dimension" from whence he can control people's minds. Thus, both Nick Fury and Generation X act outside of the parameters of a democracy and take fascistic control over the future of society.

This begs the question: if they violate the principles of the very system they seek to redeem, how do they qualify as heroes? According to Lawrence and Jewett, monomythic heroes are able to transcend the democratic process in these narratives by virtue of their selflessness and their ability to resist temptation as they carry out their redemptive quests. This selflessness arises in *Nick Fury* when the fatally-poisoned Fury determines to personally infiltrate HYDRA's base even though physical activity only exacerbates his deteriorating physical condition. The actions

of Generation X exhibit an even nobler selflessness as the mutants fight to protect a society that has categorically vilified and discriminated against their kind for simply existing.

Additionally, Fury displays the monomyth's prescribed "sexlessness" as he resists the sexual advances of a beautiful INTERPOL agent and then permanently stays a climactic kiss with his former lover. He resists temptation in both instances in favor of discussing the conflict at hand (his redemptive task). In *Generation X*, Banshee, Skin and Refrax all resist significant temptation. Banshee makes no sexual advances toward Emma Frost in spite of the sexual nature of their banter; Skin pursues a relationship with a non-mutant "townie" in the dream dimension where anything is possible, but he chooses only to dance with her; and Refrax calls off a make-out session with Buff when his X-ray vision unexpectedly flares up while kissing, so as not to look through her clothes. In these ways, the Marvel TV movie's "monomythic heroes suppress their needs in order to achieve a selfless perfection that requires no personal fulfillment."<sup>58</sup> In essence, the monomythic hero's selflessness proves the purity of his/her cause, and the ability to resist temptation as he/she confronts the challenges inherent in this cause establishes the hero's moral infallibility, which in turn justifies the hero's violation of democratic processes.<sup>59</sup>

*Generation X* thus adheres to the structure of the American monomyth in spite of its focus on a group of heroes. After all, the monomyth specifically relates to the role of the individual in society and this would seem to exempt it from consideration as a monomythic text. Yet Lawrence and Jewett stress the structure's fluidity throughout *The Myth of the American Superhero* by highlighting its various manifestations in popular culture. Therefore, just as the "harmonious paradise" in which a monomythic tale is set may be run by "chaotic, irrational, and dishonest [institutions], incapable of coping with reality" much less an invading evil, I contend that *Generation X* marks a similar deviation in the model that further highlights the broad

applicability of the American monomyth.<sup>60</sup> According to *Generation X*'s iteration of the structure, the monomythic superhero might be represented by a *group* of heroes, so long as they are collectively isolated from the society for which they fight, as required of all monomythic heroes.

Furthermore, such permanently selfless, isolated and sexually unfulfilled monomythic heroes define Marvel TV movies as a whole, not just *Nick Fury* and *Generation X*. Of course, all Marvel TV movie heroes risk their lives to save those who have not requested assistance or even democratically approved of the hero's existence. As a half-human/half-vampire, Blade belongs to neither society and only forms allegiances that aid him in his quest to rid the world of vampires in *House of Chthon*. Peter Parker never expresses romantic or physical interest in a woman in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, nor does he appear to have any friends whatsoever. Stephen Strange's charge as Lindmer's apprentice in *Dr. Strange* explicitly compels him to renounce those pleasures afforded mortal men, including the love of women. And although *Captain America*'s would-be nomad Steve Rogers kisses Dr. Wendy Day once, their relationship goes no further as Steve soon becomes engrossed in defeating Lou Brackett.

Furthermore, David Banner is able to journey down the back roads of America righting the wrongs he encounters only after having witnessed the death of his unrequited love Elaina in *The Incredible Hulk*, and again at the conclusion of *The Incredible Hulk: Married*, following the death of his second wife, Carolyn. The final three *Hulk* TV movies again find David briefly involved with two more women, but those relationships too fail to produce a blissful union as he inevitably abandons them in order to fulfill those narratives' respective redemptive quests. David's endless string of aborted relationships throughout the series as well as the TV movies highlights the necessary displacement within the monomythic structure of romance with the

journey to single-handedly restore order to, and thereby redeem, democratic societies.

Additionally, *all* these characters' journeys are assigned to them outside of any democratic process, including Steve Rogers, who is chosen for a top secret position as a governmental crime fighter sanctioned *only* by the president.

Thus, Marvel TV movies achieve social relevance unrecognized by the TV movie model. Rather than tackling social issues superficially through the framework of dominant family ideology as the model asserts all TV movies must, the social relevance of Marvel TV movies can be found only in subtext as they address timely social issues metaphorically (and even then, not necessarily through the framework of dominant family ideology). To that end, in addition to potentially serving as reflections of the sociopolitical climates of the eras in which they were produced, all Marvel TV movies achieve social relevance through their perpetuation of the American monomyth.

## Conclusion

As of the writing of this thesis, Marvel's *The Avengers* (2012) and *Iron Man 3* (2013) respectively hold the third and fifth spots on boxofficemojo.com's list of highest worldwide grosses of all time.<sup>1</sup> With Marvel commanding worldwide audiences and saturating marketplaces with licensed merchandise through complex, multimedia brand awareness campaigns, understanding popular culture in the present moment demands that we trace the company's rise from a simple comic book publisher to a powerhouse of the film industry. Yet, until now, no single scholarly text had ever addressed the transitional phenomenon of the Marvel TV movie, which dominated the company's live action, feature-length output in audiovisual media until the success of *Blade* in 1998. And even though a small handful of writers have indeed published material that acknowledges the existence of some of these texts,<sup>2</sup> it seems Marvel themselves would have the TV movies fade into obscurity. With the exception of *Blade: The Series* (Spike, 2006), which spun off from the successful film franchise, Marvel.com's "TV Show Index" lists none of the Marvel TV movies or resultant series discussed herein.<sup>3</sup> The purpose of this thesis has been to discuss what Marvel themselves will not, to introduce Marvel TV movies to academia and reveal the inherent value in these texts to the study of popular culture. In doing so, I hope to find Marvel TV movies are given consideration in future studies of Marvel's filmic output as vital precursors to the current Marvel Cinematic Universe.

In an effort to identify a suitable framework for the study Marvel TV movies, this thesis began with an exploration of these texts according to that which separates them from all other audiovisual texts adapted from Marvel Comics properties: their production for television within the industry-specific format of the made-for-TV movie. Chapter one, then, detailed the ways in

which the TV movie has been perceived as a codified genre by prominent scholars on the subject. This preceded an exploration of the Marvel TV movie that most closely resembles that model, *The Incredible Hulk* (1977), which showed the text to both adhere to and resist the model's conventions. Chapter two employed case studies of *Dr. Strange* (1978), *Captain America* (1979) and *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1977) to revealed the inadequacy of the TV movie model as it fails to account for the necessary open-endedness of series pilots, allows for texts to display only superficial social relevance, and ignores industry wisdom underpinning the production of TV movies, which values marketability over content.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, further exploration of the subject in a more comprehensive, dedicated work is required, but this study shows that the notion of the TV movie as a genre rather than an industrial format characterized by *numerous* genres demands reexamination. One TV movie genre may well be the sort of social issue picture of which Elayne Rapping and other TV movie scholars write.<sup>5</sup> However, that model certainly does not accommodate the glut of TV movies hinted at by Erin Cople Smith or explicitly referenced by David Deal in *Television Fright Films of the 1970s* that owe to more traditionally filmic genres.<sup>6</sup> In that regard, it would logically follow the conclusions drawn herein to frame the superhero TV movie as its own genre or an action subgenre—one that would ideally incorporate into its canon those TV movies adapted from Marvel and DC properties alike as well as original works such as the Roger Corman-produced *Black Scorpion* (Showtime, 1995).

Furthermore, that Marvel TV movies fail to explore social issues through the lens of dominant family ideology as prescribed by the TV movie model by no means signifies that they are inherently without sociopolitical value. After all, Rapping herself asserts that, for all its shortcomings, television as a medium “succeeds more than other forums in hailing us as citizens

with interests in common and in embodying a version of public debate on matters of common concern that has credibility and authority.”<sup>7</sup> In this regard, chapter three detailed how Marvel TV movies have the potential to connect with a wide audience by appealing to their common concerns. As in *Captain America*’s address of the 1970s energy crisis, such texts can offer practical solutions to timely social issues and, when viewed retrospectively, afford modern viewers a glimpse into the processes whereby society’s political ideals were negotiated in bygone eras. And indeed, as that chapter suggests, this approach may be taken in exploring the significance of any superhero TV movie, Marvel or otherwise.

Marvel TV movies achieve additional social relevance in that all thirteen of them reflect the American monomyth, perpetuating a unifying, if fallacious, national fantasy about the role of the powerful within a democratic society. Where Marvel is specifically concerned, by presenting broadcast television audiences as early as 1977 with versions of their characters informed by the American monomyth, Marvel TV movies set a precedent in audiovisual media that primed viewers for the equally-monomythic superheroes of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. For indeed, the Marvel heroes that have dominated box offices since the release of *Iron Man* in 2008 are every bit the monomythic, temptation-resisting outsiders their televisual predecessors had been.<sup>8</sup> In this way, Marvel TV movies not only *relate* the origin stories of many Marvel characters, but they are in part the originators of Marvel’s current success as well.

However, as John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett reveal, the perpetuation of the American monomyth in popular cultural has ominous, extra-textual implications. After all, the creation of morally infallible characters can be achieved only by positioning them in a universe without ambiguity. Therein right and wrong must be easily identifiable by viewers even when the central conflict is set against the backdrop of societies run by the ignorant as in *Generation X*



(1996) or *Nick Fury: Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (1998). As a result, people who genuinely believe in the political efficacy of such monomythic heroes, as Lawrence and Jewett indeed argue Americans by-and-large do, tend to support “total, violent solutions” to whatever problems face the nation.<sup>9</sup> And these violent solutions troublingly pose no moral dilemma for those indoctrinated by the American monomyth, for it breeds in them “certainties about the special and favored place of America in the world.”<sup>10</sup> Although undoubtedly minor culprits in the overall perpetuation of the American monomyth when compared to, say, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) or any given Arnold Schwarzenegger film, Marvel TV movies indeed contribute to these beliefs in American supremacy and the potential redemption of democracy through violence.

In conclusion, reading Marvel TV movies as politically and/or mythically significant cultural artifacts proves to be a productive and revelatory approach. It reveals that they not only challenge the validity of the notion that the TV movie constitutes a codified genre, but that they also construct dramas wherein our political ideals and perception of the United States as a world power are negotiated. From this perspective, then, Marvel TV movies indeed “resonate with personal and social meaning and warrant thought and debate,” not unlike the TV movies that constitute Elayne Rapping’s “best of the form.”<sup>11</sup>

## Notes

### Introduction

<sup>1</sup> The relationship between *Blade: House of Chthon*, the other Marvel TV movies and the format of the TV movie in general is complicated by the movie's standing as a spin-off of the popular *Blade* film franchise. Although a dedicated study might negotiate the tension between its televisual presentation and its filmic origins, such a study is outside the purview of this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Graser, "The Marvel Method" 12.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, "Cinematic Destiny" 8.

<sup>4</sup> Stewart.

<sup>5</sup> White and Saraiva.

<sup>6</sup> "Top International Grossers 2012."

<sup>7</sup> Graser, "'Avengers' Fuels Disney, Sequel Plans."

<sup>8</sup> For a history of Marvel as comic book publisher, see Jones; Raviv. For information on Marvel Studios' revamped business structure, see Johnson, "Cinematic Destiny"; Hammer. For analyses of Marvel's post-*Blade* filmic adaptations, see Gibson; Graser, "The Marvel Method"; Johnson, "Will the Real Wolverine Please Stand Up?"; Kaveney.

<sup>9</sup> Rapping; Gomery; Edgerton.

<sup>10</sup> Hofius and Khoury; Scott and Weiner.

<sup>11</sup> Jankiewicz's *You Wouldn't Like Me When I'm Angry* offers the most in-depth history of any Marvel TV movie to date. It not only chronicles all six *Hulk* TV movies, with in-depth behind-the-scenes studies of the first three in particular, but chronicles the production of *The Incredible Hulk* series as well.

<sup>12</sup> Gomery; Rapping.

<sup>13</sup> Rapping 4.

<sup>14</sup> Browne 179; Edgerton; Gomery 85; Rapping 4.

<sup>15</sup> Davis 132; Gomery 81.

<sup>16</sup> Davis 135; Rapping 11.

<sup>17</sup> Gomery 82.

<sup>18</sup> Gomery 86; Rapping 11–12.

<sup>19</sup> Gomery 83.

<sup>20</sup> Gomery 83; Rapping 12; Butler 31.

<sup>21</sup> Edgerton 116.

<sup>22</sup> Gomery 84–85.

<sup>23</sup> Edgerton 125; Gomery 84, 86.

<sup>24</sup> Gitlin 157; Rapping 23.

<sup>25</sup> Rapping 23.

<sup>26</sup> Edgerton 116–17.

<sup>27</sup> Gitlin 157. *Inside Prime Time* was originally published in 1983, hence the focus on that particular season's TV movie output.

<sup>28</sup> Butler 31.

<sup>29</sup> Smith 141–143.

<sup>30</sup> Dempsey 14.

<sup>31</sup> Smith 143–144; Dempsey 14.

<sup>32</sup> Scivally 45.

<sup>33</sup> Jones 258.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 260.

<sup>35</sup> Scivally 52.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.* 58.

<sup>37</sup> Jones 260.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 303.

<sup>39</sup> Santo 69.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 70.

<sup>41</sup> Scivally 70.

<sup>42</sup> Williams 69.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 82.

<sup>44</sup> Clark 437.

<sup>45</sup> Slater 261.

<sup>46</sup> This alteration to the series may have been motivated by a desire to compete with *Charlie's Angels*, a “tits and ass” program also set in the modern day.

<sup>47</sup> Torrez.

<sup>48</sup> Johnson, “Will the Real Wolverine Please Stand Up?” 65.

<sup>49</sup> Jankiewicz 56.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 85

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 95–96.

<sup>52</sup> Zone 136; Mathis 255.

<sup>53</sup> Mathis 255. Evidencing the widespread neglect of older comic book adaptations in academia, I had to come by the source of this information, Jack Mathis’ *Valley of the Cliffhangers*, in a terribly roundabout way. I first read of Timely’s failure to require a fee of Republic for the rights to Captain America in Andy Mangels’ entry in *The Superhero Book* on “Captain America in the Media,” but found no source cited therein. Through Facebook messaging I learned from Mangels himself that he had found said information in James Van Hise’s book, *Serial Adventures*. An Amazon.com shipment later and I found that there too the source of the information was not cited. Through a subsequent exchange of emails with Van Hise, however, I at last learned of Jack Mathis’ writings on the 66 serials of Republic Pictures, which, although incredibly detailed, still do not cite the *specific documents* from which any of the information was drawn. That said, Mathis at least compellingly details his methodology in an “About This Book...” section. Therein, he reveals that the book was the result of six years of “comprehensive work” with “many thousands of hours [...] spent in research”: interviewing Republic personnel, comparing treatments and shooting scripts to the studios’ final products, and culling together “original contract, legal and production files plus other Republic organizational papers compiled on each title to extract information invaluable to the fan and historian alike” (viii). Given the extreme difficulty I had in uncovering the source of this information and the fact that the lack of specificity therein ultimately required such lengthy qualification, this reveals to me that there exists a serious lack in media industry studies where the licensing practices of comic book publishers is concerned.

<sup>54</sup> Hammer.

<sup>55</sup> Derek Johnson provides an extensive, detailed account of Marvel’s transition to independent film production, drawing on more than 500 trade articles, in his essay, “Cinematic Destiny, Marvel Studios and the Trade Stories of Industrial Convergence.”

<sup>56</sup> Hammer.

<sup>57</sup> Scivally 52.

<sup>58</sup> Jones 312–313.

<sup>59</sup> Johnson, “Will the Real Wolverine Please Stand Up?” 70.

<sup>60</sup> This is not to say that DC’s properties make it to the big screen without significant alterations to characters, narratives, or even core mythology. As Derek Johnson later points out in “Cinematic Destiny,” executives at Warner Bros. maintain greater control over the presentation of DC characters in filmic adaptations than DC themselves do (17).

<sup>61</sup> Johnson, “Will the Real Wolverine Please Stand Up?” 72; Hammer.

<sup>62</sup> Hammer.

<sup>63</sup> Johnson, “Cinematic Destiny” 14.

<sup>64</sup> Wandtke 30.

<sup>65</sup> Gibson 102; Lefèvre 5.

<sup>66</sup> Abbott 112.

<sup>67</sup> Hayward 13–14.

<sup>68</sup> Lefèvre 3–4.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>70</sup> A prime example of this approach can be found in the fidelity criticism-saturated essay, “Blockbuster Meets Superhero Comic,” by Matthew P. McCallister et al.

<sup>71</sup> Gibson 105.

<sup>72</sup> Rae and Gray 87; Gibson 107.

<sup>73</sup> Lefèvre 5.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 3. Lefèvre does not include television in his analysis, but the fundamental differences he highlights between film and comic books apply equally to television and comic books, as both film and television employ moving photographic images and sound, where comics do not.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid. 5–7.

<sup>76</sup> McCloud 63–67.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 65.

<sup>78</sup> Kaveney 228.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 227.

<sup>80</sup> Abbott 113.

<sup>81</sup> Mathis 255.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Jankiewicz 56, 85, 95–96.

<sup>84</sup> Johnson, “Cinematic Destiny” 9.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 2.

<sup>86</sup> Hills 38.

<sup>87</sup> Johnson, “Cinematic Destiny” 8.

<sup>88</sup> Sunu par. 13.

<sup>89</sup> Richards par. 53.

<sup>90</sup> Johnson, “Cinematic Destiny” 19. The same executives who claimed to be embracing film cultures over comic cultures, as Johnson relates, softened the blow of such potentially polarizing declarations by asserting their own fanboy status in order to assure the fans of the comics that they indeed only have the best interest of the properties in mind.

### Chapter 1: The “Generic” Expectations of TV Movies

<sup>1</sup> Rapping xxxix. Although it may seem that Rapping set out to define a very specific “subgenre” of the TV movie rather than the TV movie as a whole, she indeed set forth “to address the form in general” in her book, not just “women-oriented TV movies” as she reveals on page 29.

<sup>2</sup> Gomery 87.

<sup>3</sup> Rapping xi.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. xii–xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Gomery 87.

<sup>6</sup> Altman 17.

<sup>7</sup> Rapping xi.

<sup>8</sup> Gomery; Rapping; Butler 32.

<sup>9</sup> Gomery 89.

<sup>10</sup> Rapping 36–37.

<sup>11</sup> Gitlin 161.

<sup>12</sup> Butler 32.

<sup>13</sup> Gomery 87–88.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 88.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. Butler provides a list of seven elements that define the narrative of the bulk of TV movies, which closely mirror those defining characteristics as outlined by Gomery drawing on Bordwell and Thompson. Butler’s list stipulates that TV movies include a “single protagonist;” exposition that “establishes character and space;” story catalyzed by the protagonist’s desires; a central enigma toward which the narrative progresses, delayed by conflict the antagonist that peaks in a climax; and again, assured closure in the resolution (32).

<sup>16</sup> Gomery 87.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Rapping xxxix.

<sup>20</sup> Docudramas are dramatic reenactments of historical events in film or television, which can be subject to varying degrees of fictionalization (Hoffer and Nelson 65).

<sup>21</sup> Ellis 116.

<sup>22</sup> Rapping 23; Smith 140, 149.

<sup>23</sup> Gomery 88.

<sup>24</sup> Rapping 23–24.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Hoffer and Nelson 65.

<sup>27</sup> Rapping 33–34.

<sup>28</sup> As such, TV movies in the model put forth by Rapping fail to depict the reality of whatever issue(s) they address, condensing often complex political issues into easily discernible problems filtered through the inherently subjective lens of the problems of a single American family. In doing so, they create the false impression that the solution to these problems is really quite simple, when they are often anything but (Rapping 35–36).

<sup>29</sup> Rapping xvii.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. xl.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 34.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. xl.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 98.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. xii.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 97.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. xli.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 63.

<sup>38</sup> Gitlin 161.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 161–162.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 162.

<sup>41</sup> Rapping 30.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. xxxiv.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 33.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 33–34.

<sup>45</sup> At a more basic level, the movie positions David and Elaina through revelatory dialogue as being as close to one another as family might be. In one scene, David and Elaina reveal that they have not only known each other since they studied together at college, but also that Elaina had been well-acquainted with David's mother before her death, explicitly linking her to the Banner family.

<sup>46</sup> Rapping 78.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 60.

<sup>48</sup> Rapping xl.

<sup>49</sup> Gomery 88.

<sup>50</sup> Burnham.

<sup>51</sup> Per Rapping's indication of the major benefits for producers of addressing social issues in TV movies (23–24).

<sup>52</sup> Jankiewicz 32.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 31.

<sup>54</sup> Gomery 87.

<sup>55</sup> Butler 33.

<sup>56</sup> Kaminsky and Mahan 35.

<sup>57</sup> Jankiewicz 109.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 160.

<sup>59</sup> Rapping 33.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 33–34.

<sup>61</sup> We might consider *The Incredible Hulk* a success as a TV movie, given that TV movies have often served as pilots for projected series since 1966 (two years after the inception of the form), insofar as it garnered ratings high enough to warrant subsequent serialization.

## Chapter 2: Challenging the TV Movie Model

<sup>1</sup> Rapping 63.

<sup>2</sup> All time codes indicated throughout this text refer to specific points in a TV movie's running time when viewed *without* commercial interruption, given that these movies, as presented on DVD or online, are primarily presented in this way. Obvious exceptions include Hulu and other such websites which do feature commercial interruptions, but also notably do not factor those commercials into the time code of the movie as it appears along the bottom of the site's video player.

<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, we might more accurately point to Morgan as the protagonist, given that her actions propel the narrative forward and that Lindmer and, by proxy, Stephen are only *reacting* to her movements throughout. However, not only does the title directly point to Stephen as the central character, but Morgan's subservience to a demonic master known as the Ancient One throughout the narrative undermines any potential reading of the sorceress as primary causal agent as well. To then ascribe primary causal agency to the Ancient One, however, would be to identify a character with less than five minutes of total screen time as the protagonist.

<sup>4</sup> Even in that, however, Lindmer tells Stephen at the end of the movie that it is ultimately *his choice* whether or not to become the new defender of Earth, making it virtually impossible to prescribe any action in the movie prior to *that* decision to a facet of Stephen's character.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen notably embarks on this mission 52 minutes into the movie, yet it constitutes his very *first* heroic act within the narrative.

<sup>6</sup> Gomery 89.

<sup>7</sup> Rapping 36.

<sup>8</sup> Gomery; Rapping; Butler 32.

<sup>9</sup> To be clear, this means that information in *Dr. Strange* is referenced once upon its initial revelation and then explicitly (i.e. verbally or through the use of text) repeated *no more than once*.

<sup>10</sup> Rapping 36.

<sup>11</sup> *The Incredible Hulk*, by contrast has but two post-climax, resolution scenes (three if you count Elaina's death, which is to my mind part of the climax). In the first, Jack McGee informs one of David and Elaina's colleagues that he plans to track down the Hulk. In the second, David professes his love for Elaina at her grave before going off in search of a cure.

<sup>12</sup> Porter, Larson and Harthcock 26.

<sup>13</sup> Hofius and Khoury; Roach.

<sup>14</sup> This is not to say that personal and professional relationships are mutually exclusive within the TV movie genre as prescribed by scholars. In fact, *Brian's Song*, which serves as the focus of the Douglas Gomery essay cited throughout this thesis, finds its pair of protagonists developing a close personal friendship out of their professional association. Stephen and Lindmer, however, merely develop a functional mutual respect in their professional relationship as master and apprentice by the movie's end and have yet to become "friends" as such.

<sup>15</sup> Note however that even though David and Laura in *The Incredible Hulk* never had children, it was not for lack of trying as the movie's opening montage insinuates that they were in fact incapable of having children. Even for them, then, the ideal family included offspring.

<sup>16</sup> Rapping 34.

<sup>17</sup> Gomery 88.

<sup>18</sup> Butler 33.

<sup>19</sup> Some motivation for this event is provided much later in the movie when the villain, Lou Brackett, laments that Steve Rogers will become a superhero sooner or later and get in his way. However, unless Brackett had somehow gained access to the surely highly classified government research which revealed that only Steve's genetic makeup would respond to the TV movie's version of the super soldier serum, this is pure guesswork on his part. And one character's wholly uninformed guess about another character's future hardly constitutes justifiable motivation for such a complicated assassination attempt as that depicted in the movie's opening.

<sup>20</sup> B. Donald "Bud" Grant, then Vice President of Programming at CBS, had required producer Kenneth Johnson to prove the continued ratings viability of an *Incredible Hulk* series and demonstrate what the average episode would look like by releasing a follow-up TV movie less than a month after the pilot. *Captain America* received a similar follow-up movie in 1979: *Captain America II: Death Too Soon*. However, unlike *The Incredible Hulk*, *Captain America* was not green-lit for weekly serialization. Therefore, although more successful than *Dr. Strange* in that it was afforded a sequel, *Captain America* ultimately failed in spawning a series as well.

<sup>21</sup> I refer to the character of Edward Byron by his last instead of first name throughout, as that is how he is predominantly referred to in the movie itself. Where this occurs elsewhere in the thesis, as with the character of Lou Brackett in my discussions of *Captain America*, it is done for this reason as well.

<sup>22</sup> However, where the *Hulk* movies are concerned, the series quickly settled into a formulaic routine following the pilot that found David stumbling into some new dangerous scenario in each installment wherein he would be torn between his morals (which demanded he help those in need though it would inevitably result in his transformation into the Hulk) and his desire to retain anonymity whilst searching for a cure for his condition. Per the demands of B. Donald “Bud” Grant, series creator Kenneth Johnson in fact produced the second *Hulk* TV movie, 1977’s *Death in the Family/Return of the Incredible Hulk*, back-to-back with the pilot in order to illustrate for the network precisely what an average episode of the serialized program might look like if green-lit. Therefore, although the overarching *series narrative* is motivated by the events of the pilot (of which David was the primary causal agent) and David’s subsequent pursuit to cure himself, the events in any given post-pilot episode/movie are typically outside of David’s control and run contrary to his series-long aims, positioning the entirety of American society as the series’ antagonist with Jack McGee at the forefront.

<sup>23</sup> Gomery 88.

<sup>24</sup> Although “with great power comes great responsibility is now attributed to Ben Parker in the comics, it was originally confined to a passage of narrational text in Spider-Man’s origin story in *Amazing Fantasy* #15.

<sup>25</sup> Admittedly, the comic book character’s initial transformation into Spider-Man is motivated by money as well, however even after the TV movie Peter becomes involved with the troubled Judy, he pesters her for the \$46 he needs. Had she not given him the money, it’s anyone’s guess whether this version of Peter Parker would have helped her uncover Byron’s plot or gone right back to peddling his pictures to Jameson instead, given that money is his only outward concern.

<sup>26</sup> Rapping xii–xiii.

<sup>27</sup> I should note that some web sources discuss “The Chinese Web,” the two-parter that concludes *The Amazing Spider-Man*’s second and final limited series, as a TV movie unto itself while others indeed delineate it as a two-parter. IMDb contradictorily lists the two episodes on separate pages as though they had been two distinct episodes yet provides the same original airdate for both, which only further confuses the matter. I’ve yet to uncover any evidence in trade publications that could confirm or deny this. However, in my experience of the series, these episodes were clearly separated into two parts. Notably, though, these episodes *were* edited together as a feature film and released theatrically as *Spider-Man: The Dragon’s Challenge* in 1979, and perhaps the confusion stems from that. I can only speculate. Although I would love to say that it is the fourteenth Marvel TV movie, I have only contradictory evidence to go on.

<sup>28</sup> Smith 140.

<sup>29</sup> Gitlin 163–164.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 159.

<sup>31</sup> Gomery 88.

<sup>32</sup> Rapping 33.

<sup>33</sup> Smith 140.

<sup>34</sup> Rapping 27.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. xi.

### Chapter 3: Marvel TV Movies as Cultural Artifacts

<sup>1</sup> Gray and Kaklamanidou 5.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 5. Given that the focus of *The 21st Century Superhero* is on texts produced in the 21st century, this quote specifically refers to superhero narratives on film and television produced during the new millennium. Whilst Gray and Kaklmanidou may be correct in their assertion that superhero narratives in the new millennium are more sociopolitically charged than those produced in other eras, it is my intention to show that the dissection of even a Marvel TV movie pilot that failed to spawn a series or even achieve basic narrative coherence (namely, *Captain America* (1979)) reveals an inherent, timely social relevance. This approach is supported by Gray and Kaklmanidou’s methodological framing of superhero adaptations in the 21st century as specifically relevant to the exploration of sociopolitical issues in the 21st century, not to the era in which the source material was produced (2–3). However, my specific inspiration for exploring the Marvel TV movie as cultural artifact came from John Shelton

Lawrence and Robert Jewett's *The Myth of the American Superhero*. Quoting William G. Doty, the authors employ "artifacts of popular culture" as tools for exploring how "rituals, symbols, and myths establish conservative benchmarks [and] anticipate *forms of the future* as they determine and shape ideals and goals for both individual and society" (9).

<sup>4</sup> Gray and Kaklmanidou 3; Pustz, "Comic Books as History Teachers" 2–4.

<sup>5</sup> Pustz, "Comic Books as History Teachers" 4; Muller 47, 59. Christine Muller here draws on Marita Sturken's *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* to derive her methodology for identifying the mechanisms of "shared meaning formation" in *The Dark Knight*, as superhero narratives become a "technology of [cultural] memory" (59).

<sup>6</sup> Gomery 91–92.

<sup>7</sup> Pustz, "Paralysis and Stagnation and Drift" 136.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 136–137.

<sup>9</sup> As Pustz summarizes them, the five symptoms of the crisis include the American people's loss of "faith in their ability to have a positive impact on the government," as well as their "diminished expectations for the future," materialism, and "distrust of all manner of institutions" ("Paralysis and Stagnation and Drift" 137).

<sup>10</sup> "Paralysis and Stagnation and Drift" 138.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 139. Pustz asserts that, in addition to merely mirroring the Watergate scandal on a metaphorical level, the storyline is "filled with allusions to Richard Nixon."

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 145–146.

<sup>13</sup> Gray and Kaklamanidou 2–3. Gray and Kaklmanidou here are working from Brian McFarlane's conclusions about sociocultural circumstances in adaptation in *Novel to Film*, and in doing so substitute the literary medium of the novel with the comic book, highlighting the universality of this principle of adaptation theory. In the same way, although Gray and Kaklmanidou are discussing the adaptation of comics to film, the principle holds true to the transition of material from comics to television, as my subsequent analysis of *Captain America* will confirm.

<sup>14</sup> Carter par. 49.

<sup>15</sup> Pustz, "Paralysis and Stagnation and Drift" 138.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 141–142.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 137.

<sup>18</sup> Gomery 88.

<sup>19</sup> This is not to say, of course, that the movies specifically succeed at a narrative level. The majority of structuralist approaches would indeed find these movies intrinsically narratively flawed. To emphasize a movie's failures, however, results in an appraisal of negative value (i.e. it serves as an example of what *not* to do) and such analyses often preclude the possibility of positive value as a result, *especially* when the positive value of a text is located in alternative readings of the very same elements that give it negative value, as in the case of these Marvel TV movies.

<sup>20</sup> Pustz, "Paralysis and Stagnation and Drift" 138.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 141–144.

<sup>22</sup> In this, the people of Portland also reflect the sense of powerlessness experienced by Americans in the 1970s as their rapid aging prevents any of them from being able to participate in the plan that ultimately results in the reversal of their imposed malady.

<sup>23</sup> Pustz, "Paralysis and Stagnation and Drift" 141.

<sup>24</sup> "The Oil Squeeze" par. 1.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. par. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. par. 3.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. par. 9.

<sup>28</sup> Deutsch 423.

<sup>29</sup> Leggett 150.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Carter par. 34.

<sup>32</sup> Rapping xxxii–xxxiii.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 33–34.

<sup>34</sup> Pustz, "Paralysis and Stagnation and Drift" 140.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Carter par. 48.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. par. 65.



<sup>38</sup> Ibid. par. 50.

<sup>39</sup> Feuer 12. Exploring the tension between the populist and elitist components of Reagnist ideology as it manifested on television during the 1980s serves a central focus of Jane Feuer's book on Reaganism and television.

<sup>40</sup> Rapping xvii.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. xl

<sup>42</sup> Quoting William G. Doty, Lawrence and Jewett assert that all "myths establish conservative benchmarks" (9).

<sup>43</sup> Lawrence and Jewett 6.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 5.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 44–45.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 46.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. Given that the texts to which so many fan communities are drawn owe to the American monomyth, the employment of the term "cult" to describe texts and the communities that spring up around them appears particularly precise.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 351.

<sup>52</sup> Gray and Kaklimanidou 4.

<sup>53</sup> Gray and Kaklimanidou 5.

<sup>54</sup> Lawrence and Jewett 338–340.

<sup>55</sup> They were known as Generation X in the Marvel comic books of the same name, but the TV movie ends before referring to them as such and was ultimately never green-lit for a series. However, for brevity's sake, I refer to them collectively as Generation X herein.

<sup>56</sup> Lawrence and Jewett 47.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 351.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 357.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 47.

## Conclusion

<sup>60</sup> Lawrence and Jewett 347.

<sup>1</sup> "All Time Box Office: Worldwide Grosses."

<sup>2</sup> Jankiewicz; Hofius and Khoury; Scott and Weiner. See also Misiroglu and Roach's *The Superhero Book*.

<sup>3</sup> Not even *The Incredible Hulk* series gets a mention on Marvel.com.

<sup>4</sup> Gitlin 163–164.

<sup>5</sup> As noted in chapter two, Rapping herself identifies a list of subgenres within the social issue-driven model she proposes for the TV movie (33).

<sup>6</sup> Smith 140.

<sup>7</sup> Rapping xxxi.

<sup>8</sup> While exploring the application of the American monomyth in every film in the Marvel Cinematic Universe is most certainly beyond the scope of this text, I feel obliged to qualify my blanket statement regarding the Cinematic Universe's heroes as monomythic by briefly touching on Tony Stark of the *Iron Man* films. Tony may not be able to resist physical temptation exactly, but there is, as Lawrence and Jewett demonstrate throughout their book, a bit of wiggle-room in the monomythic model. To that end, Tony does tender an unrequited *love* for Pepper Potts throughout the bulk of the first two films (before finally committing to her) while the combination of his unmatched wealth and intellect position him as a perpetual loner who spends countless hours tinkering with inventions in his basement.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence and Jewett 339.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 15.

<sup>11</sup> Rapping xi.

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