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**Comic book superheroes and their Hollywood adaptations in a post-9/11 context:  
the economic and cultural factors**

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Hollywood built its studio system and developed into a true industry in the late 1910s and 1920s while the comic book industry developed in the late 1930s.<sup>i</sup> Both had an established mass audience in the 1940s and at the beginning of the 1950s.<sup>ii</sup> Then, at the end of the 1950s, problems led Hollywood to pay more attention to teenagers who already constituted the bulk of comic book readership. Therefore, it is not surprising that comic book heroes and films eventually came to be associated on the silver screen, as was for example the case in 1978 with *Superman* (Richard Donner) starring Christopher Reeve. *Superman* belonged to the blockbusters that have dominated Hollywood's way of doing business since the 1970s while they have confirmed the importance of the young audience. The paper will first show that adapting comic books and their superheroes is ideal for the film industry: they perfectly fit the prevailing pattern of blockbuster production while they are also adapted to the changes currently brought about in the exhibition business by digital technologies. All this explains why American studios have successfully adapted (and/or distributed) many comic books over the past few years.

But adapting comic books would however be fruitless if the context was not right for their characters, and successful films can tell us a lot about their context:

“Popular films offer a valuable way of examining public responses to the social disorder and dislocations of the Great Depression; the fears of domestic subversion of the late 1940s and early 1950s; the cultural and moral upheavals of the 1960s; and the meaning and significance of the Vietnam War.”<sup>iii</sup>

The paper will thus question the timing of comic book adaptations, and more precisely, it will try to show that if comic book superheroes have important audiences in cinemas, it is probably because they are also in tune with the post-9/11 American mood, when America is no longer facing its well-known arch-enemies, communism and the Soviet Union, in a clearly defined Cold War world, but hidden enemies in an increasingly destabilized world.

**Comic books and their superheroes perfectly fit the blockbusters' formula.**

In the 1950s, the massive arrival of television in American living rooms meant that more and more people stayed home to watch TV programmes<sup>iv</sup> while the so far important number of moviegoers went from 55 millions per week in 1950 to 32 millions per week in 1959; meanwhile the box office that stood at \$1376 million in 1950 declined to \$958 million in 1959.<sup>v</sup> Hollywood tried to react (through technical devices such as 3D or CinemaScope) but did not manage to stop the decline in its

audience. The latter also changed, as teenagers gradually revealed their importance as the audience behind the success of films like *Blackboard Jungle* (Richard Brooks, 1955) or *Rebel without a Cause* (Nicholas Ray, 1955).

The decline in cinema audience, combined with the consequences of the 1948 anti-trust Supreme Court decision that had forced Hollywood studios to divest themselves of their cinema chains,<sup>vi</sup> led to financial difficulties in the 1960s. That decade saw different studios, also called the Majors, taken over by bigger conglomerates, as was the case for Paramount taken over by Gulf+Western in 1966.<sup>vii</sup> Hollywood started changing, and Lew Wasserman, who had taken over Universal in 1962, was at the forefront of the re-organization of Hollywood in the 1960s, creating “the impetus and the model for the modern media conglomerates”.<sup>viii</sup> These conglomerates were controlled by board of trustees and shareholders who wanted financial results, and considered films as mere products whose manufacturing should be processed in the best cost-efficient way. Feeling under pressure for financial results, studio executives went on the look-out for the perfect formula that would satisfy the shareholders while filling in cinemas. The 1970s brought the answer with the release of *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg), the first modern-day blockbuster pioneered by Lew Wasserman in 1975 and that was also the first film in Hollywood history to reach the \$100 million threshold.<sup>ix</sup> Then came *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) with its huge box office and merchandising profits. Both films were tremendously successful<sup>x</sup> over a short period of time, attracting many young people who then went back to the cinemas to watch *Star Wars* over and over again—a new trend at the time.

The media conglomerates that appeared in the 1960s and 1970s have now become bigger, but market-shares and benefits are still the driving force in Hollywood while more and more business graduates have joined the ranks of studio executives. They have kept looking for the next blockbuster that is going to give them a huge opening week-end at the box office, a big market share and balance their budget while also pleasing the young audience that had come in droves to see the adventure of C-3PO and R2-D2 in *Star Wars*. Since the ‘hit-driven’ 1970s, Hollywood has churned out films that follow the blockbuster formula: they are very expensive to produce<sup>xi</sup> and market, are released according to the saturation release system<sup>xii</sup> and often feature simplistic characters, fast-paced action, many special effects and a loud soundtrack. All this can then be translated into all sorts of toys, games and other goods that make up the bulk of merchandising. These costly films, also known as tentpoles, have now become what studios consider as the main solution to save a bad year as far as profits are concerned, and when one looks at the adventures of comic book superheroes, it is possible to see that they perfectly fit the recipe for a potential blockbuster.

First of all, the filmed adaptations of comic books featuring superheroes belong to the category of costly studio blockbusters. For example *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005) cost about \$150

million to produce and *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) \$185 million, *The Fantastic Four* (Tim Story, 2005) \$100 million and *The Fantastic Four : Rise of the Silver Surfer* (Tim Story, 2007) \$130 million while *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002) cost \$139 million, *Spider-Man 2* (Sam Raimi, 2004) \$200 million and *Spider-Man 3* (Sam Raimi, 2007) \$258 million.<sup>xiii</sup>

Some producers may be reluctant to invest so much money, but several aspects entice them to do so. Comic books are already storyboarded on paper and this helps convincing Hollywood producers to finance the projects as they have an idea of what the finished films will look like. Producers are thus somehow reassured as to their investment in what seems to be a safer bet than an entirely new project. Moreover, comic book superheroes such as Superman, Batman or Spider-Man have already lived several adventures in numerous printed issues, which means that if the first filmed adaptation is successful at the box office, it opens up the road for a franchise with sequels and many licensed items—as is often the case for blockbusters.

A look at the American box office results of comic book adaptations also show that they are those of blockbusters:<sup>xiv</sup>

	American box office
Batman Begins	\$205.34 million
Captain America: the First Avenger	\$176.65 million
Daredevil	\$102.54 million
The Fantastic Four	\$154.69 million
The Fantastic Four: the Rise of the Silver Surfer	\$131.92 million
Hellboy	\$59.62 million
The Hulk	\$132.17 million
Iron Man	\$318.41 million
Iron Man 2	\$312.12 million
Spider-Man	\$403.70 million
Spider-Man 2	\$373.58 million
Spider-Man3	\$336.53 million
Superman Returns	\$200.08 million
X-Men	\$157.23 million
X-Men 2	\$214.95 million
X-Men: the Last Stand	\$234.36 million
X-Men Origins: Wolverine	\$179.88 million

Some, like *Hulk* or *Superman Returns*, have failed to break even in America, but their disappointing box office results are nonetheless what many studios would like to get for ALL their films, as in 2007 the average box office per film produced by the big studios was \$45.7 million while the average cost per film was \$70.8 million.<sup>xv</sup>

In fact, the previous figures show that comic book adaptations have become blockbusters and have turned into a very profitable trend: “pics based on comicbooks on average are earning more than

pics based on any other source material, averaging around \$215 million each, according to a study conducted by Variety that surveyed the sources for the top 20 pics for each of the past 10 years.”<sup>xvi</sup> Like many blockbusters, comic book adaptations have also been successful abroad, an important asset in a globalized economy that includes the American movie business—whose films tend to dominate many markets. Moreover, the foreign market has often enabled Hollywood to make up for disappointing domestic figures. This was for example the case with *Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003): the film’s domestic figure of \$132.17 million did not recoup its \$137 million budget, but its foreign box office of \$113.18 brought the total box office to \$245.36 million,<sup>xvii</sup> which relieved the film’s producers.

Like many characters seen in blockbusters, the comic book ones are often caught in extraordinary events that can be perfectly adapted to the screen thanks to the spectacular special effects usually expected by the young audiences of such productions. These young people have very often made up the bulk of the blockbusters’ audiences while representing the most frequent moviegoers by age group:<sup>xviii</sup>

Percent of Frequent Moviegoers by Age Group

	2005	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011
2-11 year olds	n/a	n/a	n/a	8.7%	9%	7%
12-24 year olds	41%	36%	41%	37.8%	39%	35%
25-39 year-olds	26%	29%	25%	19.7%	22%	28%
40-49 year-olds	15%	15%	17%	14%	10%	9%
50-59 year-olds	10%	9%	8%	9.1%	8%	9%
60+	7%	9%	8%	10.7%	12%	12%

(A frequent moviegoer is defined as a person who sees at least one movie in a theatre per month; at the time of writing the MPAA had not released any data for 2008)

Nevertheless MPAA reports show that between 1999 and 2011 young audiences have started declining.<sup>xix</sup> One of the reasons for the decline is that these youngsters now spend a lot of time chatting on the Internet, downloading films or playing video games. Consequently, they have less free time—which is not expandable—and money to spend on films, and this has created a challenge for Hollywood studios as their successes rely on these very demanding youngsters. The Majors have nevertheless found an answer in comic book adaptations featuring superheroes. Their numerous special effects and fast-paced action scenes—such as those showing Spider-Man web-swinging from one building to another— seem to keep young audiences going to the movies, and more particularly the young males who represent a big part of the playstation ‘geeks’ and who will be the ones creating a good word-of-mouth for the so important opening week-end gross. Moreover, the adventures of Superman, Batman, Spider-Man and other comic book heroes have usually been targeting a young readership, and their cinematographic adaptations have tended to

follow that pattern (as it is also their core audience). Comic book adaptations thus aim for the PG (Parental Guidance Suggested) or PG-13 (Parents strongly cautioned, some material may be inappropriate for Children under 13) ratings:<sup>xx</sup>

	Rating
Batman Begins	PG-13
Captain America: the First Avenger	PG-13
The Dark Knight (Batman 2)	PG-13
Daredevil	PG-13
The Fantastic Four	PG-13
The Fantastic Four: the Rise of the Silver Surfer	PG
Hellboy	PG-13
The Hulk	PG-13
The Incredible Hulk	PG-13
Iron Man	PG-13
Iron Man 2	PG-13
Spider-Man	PG-13
Spider-Man 2	PG-13
Spider-Man3	PG-13
Superman Returns	PG-13
X-Men	PG-13
X-Men 2	PG-13
X-Men: the Last Stand	PG-13
X-Men Origins: Wolverine	PG-13

In fact, Hollywood studios see in comic book adaptations the possibility of making films that belong to a very profitable category. Indeed, since 1968 the PG and PG-13 rated films have been among the top grossing films, with a box office ranging from \$322.7 million for *Shrek 3* (rated PG) to \$600.8 million for *Titanic* (rated PG-13), and “since 2003, more than a dozen PG-rated movies based on Marvel characters [like *Spider-Man*] have averaged more than \$400 million in sales”.<sup>xxi</sup> As far as marketing is concerned, comic book adaptations are also interesting as they offer different opportunities: for example they seem easier to market as the comic books they are based on are often well-known and already have a pre-existing, also called built-in, audience. This can be an advantage if it is well handled. Indeed, comic book adaptations may be critic-proof like many blockbusters, but Hollywood studios have to be careful not to disappoint their avid readers as the latter have become suspicious about adaptations and are often the first source of bad or good word-of-mouth—spread in a viral way via the Internet to the rest of the fan community. So, trying to ward off possible disappointment and even antagonism to future comic book adaptations—and in this case fans could become a liability—many studio executives now go to the annual meeting of fans called the Comic Convention or Comic-Con.<sup>xxii</sup> There, Hollywood literally courts the fans,

showing them footage from comic book adaptations before their nationwide releases. For example in 2004, clips from 18 comic-related films were first shown at the Comic Convention—among them an 18-minute clip from *Constantine* (Francis Lawrence, 2005).<sup>xxiii</sup> In July 2008, the producer and the director of *The Spirit* (Frank Miller, 2008) also went to the Comic-Con in San Diego to show the trailer and several scenes from their movie due to be released in December. The growing importance of Comic Conventions on the Hollywood chart of events has thus followed that of comic book adaptations, so much so that for Hollywood studios these conventions have now become important venues, almost on a par with festivals and award shows.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Comic book adaptations also fit the blockbusters' marketing pattern thanks to the possibilities of paid product placements—like for example the \$42,000 fee paid for the Marlboro logos and cigarettes seen in *Superman II* (Richard Lester, 1980)<sup>xxv</sup> or the less affordable Lamborghini cars prominently displayed in *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*.<sup>xxvi</sup> These product placements are part of a marketing campaign that also include tie-ins, that is to say the cross-promotional partnerships usually forged when a blockbuster is going to be released. For example the tie-in for *Spider-Man* signed between the film producers and Reebok allowed the latter to use the character in adverts showing him with Reebok trainers on—while the film benefited from this added marketing. There were also many *Batman*'s toys for children in almost every supermarket and toy shop when *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* were released. For Hollywood, tie-ins are also interesting as licensing films' characters and artefacts earn studios some copyright money from toy manufacturers. As the latter also advertise their products while the films are released, this creates a marketing synergy that enables to market a film in a more cost-efficient way at a time when marketing costs have kept increasing.<sup>xxvii</sup> Comic book publishers, who take part in tie-in marketing campaigns, are also happy with the release of comics-related films as the latter boost the sales of their printed counterparts, especially for lesser known titles: “[says Chris Ryall, publisher and editor-in-chief of IDW Publishing] Everyone in the world knows ‘Superman’ or ‘Spider-Man’. But when ‘300’, ‘Sin City’ or a ‘30 Days of Night’ comes out and people aren’t aware of it, it drives people into bookstores to check them out.”<sup>xxviii</sup>

Another aspect that befits the blockbuster formula is that comic book adaptations featuring superheroes also offer the possibility of extending the characters' lives into videogames. Hollywood studios pay attention to the videogame industry as its sales are getting close to theirs: “in 2005 U.S. box office receipts ... totalled \$9.2 billion; U.S. computer and video game software sales (excluding sales of consoles and accessories) totalled \$7.2 billion’ and in 2007, the global film industry revenue stood at \$25 billion while the global video-game industry revenue was \$18 billion and in America.”<sup>xxix</sup> Sometimes the release of a videogame is even more profitable than a film's: “In the U.S., the \$170 million revenue for first-day sales of Microsoft's *Halo 3* outstripped the film

industry's biggest opening weekend in 2007, *Spider-Man 3*, which took three days to gross \$151 million.”<sup>xxx</sup> Comic book superheroes, with their young audience and eventful adventures, are just the right product for many videogames. Thus, the link between both industries is now quite strong and collaboration on a project often starts at pre-production level. For example, for *Spider-Man*, “Activision had full access to the Spider-Man movie team plus the participation of director Sam Raimi and actors Tobey Maguire and Willem Dafoe.”<sup>xxxii</sup> This collaboration proved fruitful as the game, released in June 2004, had sold over 1.7 million units at the beginning of 2005 for a profit of about \$73 million—which is close to the profits of a blockbuster. Then *Spider-Man: The Movie 2* became the best-selling studio-licensed video game with 7 million units sold before being superseded by *Spider-Man: The Movie 3*.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

Finally comic book adaptations are also interesting for Hollywood as they have a long ‘shelf-life’ in ancillary markets—TV, cable, DVD, downloading, etc. Some films may underperform at the box office, but there will always be renewable young audiences for them at home, ready to buy or rent them on DVDs—that still represent 60% of a film's total revenues—or now to download them, thus allowing unprofitable movie adaptations to make up for their losses.

Comic book adaptations thus offer many possibilities of making profits that please Hollywood studios. All these facts do not however mean that the big studios jumped right away on the comic book adaptation bandwagon. Hollywood is an industry that does not like uncertainty, that has to make profit and, consequently, that will follow a trend rather than create it itself. In fact, it took *Blade* (Stephen Norrington, 1998), a lesser-known comic book than for example *Superman*, to renew Hollywood's interest in comic book superheroes. Produced by New Line, a sub-division of Time Warner, for a medium-budget of about \$45 million, the adaptation had no real marquee name—its star, Wesley Snipe, was not that well-known—and yet made a gross box office of \$70 million. Then followed 20th Century Fox's *X-Men* (Bryan Singer) in 2000, also a success with no real marquee name at the time, and the trend was set.

Now that comic book adaptations featuring superheroes have proved quite successful, Hollywood has felt confident enough to widen the concept and to adapt another type of comic books whose heroes are more human as in *Wanted* (Timur Bekmambetov, 2008 with Angelina Jolie, Morgan Freeman and James McAvoy). Hollywood has also started adapting more adult-oriented graphic novels whose cinematographic versions, with their R rating—“Restricted, under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian”—<sup>xxxiii</sup> target a more mature adult audience that is probably closer to the comic book die-hard fans. Hollywood has thus widened its audience in releasing *Road to Perdition* (Sam Mendes, 2002, rated R), *A History of Violence* (David Cronenberg, 2005, rated R), *Sin City* (Frank Miller, Roberto Rodriguez, 2005, rated R) or the very successful adaptation of



another Frank Miller's graphic novel, *300* (Zack Snyder, 2006, rated R). The film earned about \$211 million in the U.S.A. (\$245 million abroad) for a production budget of \$65 million.

So, in their search for the blockbuster formula, Hollywood studios have found an answer in adapting the adventures of comic book superheroes as the latter clearly fit that formula. This explains why, in 2009, Disney went as far as paying about \$4 billion to buy “comicbook giant Marvel Entertainment”, an uncommon move “at a time when the recession might be expected to have the opposite effect”.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Moreover, comic book adaptations have also turned out to be an asset in a changing exhibition market.

### **The adventures of comic book superheroes are made for the modern exhibition market**

The uppermost importance given by Hollywood studios to big budget productions also led to the gradual reshaping of the exhibition business. Studios and exhibitors became more and more aware that their core young audiences did not really want to watch blockbusters on small screens with poor sound quality. Cinemas had to be modernized if Hollywood wanted to keep youngsters interested in blockbusters while video games were offering more and more thrilling sensations and better images. Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, the blockbusters thus transformed cinemas into a modern version of the bygone movie palaces of the silent era,<sup>xxxv</sup> and more and more exhibitors joined the race for gigantism to welcome the blockbusters and their audiences as befits them. As each moviegoer now expects, this means wide or giant screens in state-of-the-art auditoriums offering digital sound and unobstructed stadium seating with big comfortable seats—that can sometimes accommodate two persons.

It has led to the creation of miniplexes—2 to 7 screens—, then multiplexes—8 to 15 screens— and now megaplexes—16 screens or more—that look like huge supermarkets but are all devoted to cinema entertainment. The total number of screens increased by 55.2% between 1990 and 2001,<sup>xxxvi</sup> but the number of admissions did not follow that pace and only increased by 30.4% between 1991 and 2001. That discrepancy eventually forced some cinemas to file for bankruptcy between 1999 and 2001.<sup>xxxvii</sup> This could happen again as the total number of screens has started increasing again while American admissions have not.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

Studios have been worried as they rely on a healthy exhibition business for the saturation release of their blockbusters. So they need films to keep cinemas open, and comic book adaptations featuring superheroes are exactly the type of films made for the multiplexes and their big screens. Indeed, Stan Lee—who was involved in the creation of many Marvel Comics characters like Spider-Man—, Jerry Siegel and Joseph Shuster—who created Superman— or Bob Kane and Bill Finger—who

created Batman—<sup>xxxix</sup> did not invent action scenes taking place in a living room, but more often on the Golden Bridge, the Empire State Building, the Statue of Liberty, in a huge Gotham city or even in outer space. The only places that can do justice to such comic book scenes are the multiplexes and their big screens. Moreover, most theatres now have a proper sound system—whether Dolby Stereo, DTS (Digital Theater Systems), THX or SDDS (Sony Dynamic Digital Sound)—that can perfectly reproduce the many loud noises read in comic books and that all directors include on the soundtrack of the adaptations.

Comic book adaptations, with their many visual and sound effects, thus fit the exhibition standards of multiplexes, and that is why they are also given the blockbusters' saturation release:<sup>xl</sup>

	Widest US release (n° of screens)
Batman Begins	3,858
Captain America: The First Avenger	3,715
The Dark Knight (Batman 2)	4,366
Daredevil	3,474
The Fantastic Four	3,619
The Fantastic Four: the Rise of the Silver Surfer	3,963
Hellboy	3,043
The Hulk	3,674
The Incredible Hulk	3,508
Iron Man	4,154
Iron Man 2	4,390
Spider-Man	3,876
Spider-Man 2	4,166
Spider-Man3	4,324
Superman Returns	4,065
X-Men	3,112
X-Men 2	3,749
X-Men: the Last Stand	3,714
X-Men Origins: Wolverine	4,099

Advances in digital technology can also give another edge to showing the adventures of comic book superheroes in cinemas.

To begin with, the technological advances launched by *Star Wars* and confirmed in *Terminator: Judgment Day* (James Cameron, 1991) and *Jurassic Park* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) now enable to show flying or web-swinging superheroes in a much more convincing way than before.

Then, some films have been shot with digital cameras (like *Star Wars : Episode II- Attack of the Clones*, George Lucas, 2002 et *Star Wars : Episode III- Revenge of the Sith*, George Lucas, 2005), and more will be so as studios know they can currently save about \$1 billion in print and

distribution costs thanks to digital prints. Consequently, more and more American cinemas are getting digitally equipped: at the end of 2004, there were 324 digital screens in North America (U.S.A. & Canada), 2,014 at the end of 2006, 5,659 in 2008 and 27,469 in 2011.<sup>xli</sup> It means that the audience will be able to watch comic book adaptations and their special effects on more screens displaying a grain-free and noise-free image, thus increasing the entertaining experience.

Digital technology has also enabled the ‘three-dimension gimmick’ of the 1950s to rise from its ashes. Hollywood studios have started paying close attention to it, all the more so as they have noticed that 3D prints perform better at the box office than their 35 mm ‘normal’ counterparts:

“Looking at the first four digital 3D releases [worldwide] — *Chicken Little*, *Monster House*, *The Nightmare before Christmas 3D* and *Meet the Robinsons* — data shows that in opening weekends 3D screens generate around three times more revenues—and 2.4 admissions—compared with standard two-dimensional screens.”<sup>xlii</sup>

Since the release of these films, other 3D features have successfully joined the bandwagon of Hollywood productions shot in 3D and given a worldwide release: *Journey to the Center of the Earth* (Eric Brevig, 2008), *Ice Age : Dawn of the Dinosaurs* (Carlos Saldanha & Mike Thurmeier, 2009), *Up* (Pete Docter & Bob Peterson, 2009), *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009), *How to Train your Dragon* (Dean DeBlois & Chris Sanders, 2010), *Alice in Wonderland* (Tim Burton, 2010), *Shrek Forever After* (Mike Mitchell, 2010), *Toy Story 3* (Lee Unkrich, 2010) or *Pirates of the Caribbean: on Stranger Tides* (Rob Marshall, 2011).

Moreover, at a time when domestic entertainment—notably thanks to big TV screens and home cinema systems—has started competing with cinemas, 3D offers the possibility of a whole new cinema experience as audiences get more visually involved in 3D films whose details are very much enhanced on a very large screen:

“ ‘Digital 3D is a revolutionary form of showmanship that is within our grasp,’ [James] Cameron suggested. ‘It can get people off their butts and away from their portable devices and get people back in the theatres where they belong ... it offers a powerful experience which you can only have in the movie theatre.’ ”<sup>xliii</sup>

There are now TV sets offering a 3D experience, but at the time of writing their size and price cannot compete with that of a cinema screen and a cinema ticket.

For comic book adaptations, 3D is the perfect vehicle to immerse audiences in the adventure of their superheroes. They can web-swing over the Empire State Building with *Spider-Man* or fly in outer space with *Superman*, or be dazzled while seeing debris of walls or other objects blown away and flying right at them in a quite menacing way in *The Fantastic Four* or *X-Men*.

Hollywood rapidly spotted the synergy between comic book adaptations and 3D, that is why *Superman Returns* featured some 3D scenes that amazed moviegoers when they saw it on a 3D

screen—sometimes in an Imax 3D cinema. Christopher Nolan also decided to use an Imax 3D camera to shoot part of *The Dark Knight* that featured several sequences in 3D, that is to say about 30 minutes of its 152-minute running time.

Comic book adaptations have thus been perfect for the blockbuster formula, and now suit the evolution brought about by digital technology. These factors explain why Hollywood has believed in the trend of adapting the adventures of comic book superheroes, but for a trend to be successful and not simply a passing fancy, it means it has to resonate within its audiences, and films can do that: “Cultural historians have treated movies as [...] psychological texts that speak to individual and social anxieties and tensions.”<sup>xliv</sup> Thus, the success of comic book superheroes on screen is not limited to the sole technical and financial aspects of their fabrication. Hollywood can devote all its energy and money in producing and marketing films studied and designed to be successful, but it will come to nothing if moviegoers are not interested in them (and Hollywood story is lined with such unsuccessful examples): “[...] for formulas to succeed, they must also speak adequately to the concerns and expectations of their audience.”<sup>xlv</sup> In fact, comic book adaptations featuring superheroes have also become blockbusters and are financially interesting because their targeted audiences are ready to believe in their adventures for the duration of a film. One does not go without the other, and they are both part of the same equation. Therefore, as “film both affects and reflects contemporary consciousness” and “[...] provide a host of insights into Americans’ shifting ideals, fantasies, and preoccupations,”<sup>xlvi</sup> studying the success of comic book adaptations featuring superheroes also means getting interested in the audiences and society that have brought them back to cinematographic life.

### **A contemporary American phenomenon**

Many young Americans have grown up with comic book superheroes, either while reading comic books or, as the readership has declined since the heydays of the 1940s, while watching TV series, DVDs or playing video games. Therefore, adapting comic books is interesting for Hollywood because the subject matter will be immediately familiar with their core young audience. At the same time, these adaptations can also attract an older American audience who read comic books while they were teenagers—in the 1950s and 1960s—, watched their adventures on TV—for example those of *Batman* or *Superman*—and may thus be tempted to rekindle their interest in comic books with a nostalgic trip to the cinema. This was the case with *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002) that attracted a much wider audience than the one initially intended, and even managed to attract a feminine audience, thus becoming the perfect recipe for success:

“ ‘We hit four quadrants ! ‘ Those words will bliss out a studio executive for weeks ... "quadrant " is a marketing term that divides the moviegoing public into four groups –men and women ; older

and younger than 25 ... ‘If you’re a four-quadrant movie, it means you’re a movie for everyone,’ says Geoff Ammer, president of Columbia TriStar’s marketing group. He should know: Columbia just hit all four quadrants with *Spider-Man* in May.”<sup>xlvi</sup>

The success of superheroes’ adventures on screen also tells us something about their audiences in cinemas. The American moviegoers evidently like these heroes because they were created in the U.S.A. and are part of the American culture: “They are at the heart of the American Dream, creating new mythologies for a land too young to have inherited its own.”<sup>xlvi</sup> For almost a decade now, comic book superheroes have successfully struck a chord on screen with the American society, thus revealing something about its mood, as many films did before. For example, “In recent years, historians have used musicals, westerns, gangster films, and other escapist fare of the 1930s to decode messages about the Depression generation’s hopes and fears.”<sup>xlvi</sup> The increase in successful productions of science-fiction B-films such as *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) then revealed the anti-communist hysteria that plagued America during McCarthyism while successful disaster films of the 1970s such as *The Poseidon Adventure* (Ronald Neame, 1972) or *The Towering Inferno* (John Guillermin, 1974) could tell us something about a disillusioned, doubting and shaken post-Vietnam America. Later:

“a revival of B-movie culture—launched by *Star Wars* and expanded through Reagan’s election—[became] a defining aspect of popular rhetoric in the 1980s, prevalent both in box-office hit movies and presidential politics. Its roots [lay] in a reaction against [...] the nation’s military defeat and withdrawal from Vietnam, a perception of contemporary society characterized by divisiveness, selfishness, and hedonism.”<sup>li</sup> America thus needed the successful Pete ‘Maverick’ Mitchell in *Top Gun* (Tony Scott, 1986) or John Rambo to defeat Communism and its evils under Ronald Reagan’s presidency in *Rambo II* (George P. Cosmatos, 1985) or *Rambo III* (Pete MacDonald, 1988).

Therefore, successful comic book adaptations featuring superheroes also reveal something about post 9/11 America—and maybe about contemporary western society. The post 9/11 wounded U.S.A. needs superheroes to rescue the country from its disarray and to set wrongs right. And contrary to the post-Vietnam era, when it took some time before a superhero was back on screen,<sup>li</sup> *Spider-Man* or *Batman* have quickly reappeared in cinemas, because post-9/11 America is also a post-Reagan one that twice elected George W. Bush to the American presidency and that is no longer ready to be the guilt-ridden nation atoning for ages for the Vietnam sins. That is why the number of successful films featuring superheroes has tremendously increased since 9/11.<sup>lii</sup>

Americans are ready to see *Spider-Man*, *Batman*, *The Fantastic Four* or the *X-Men* fight for justice, capture criminals and set things right. In a post-communist world craving for stability and security, these superheroes rapidly bring a kind of certainty and moral justice in a country that sometimes seems to have lost its bearings—like for example a crime-ridden Gotham where so many

prosecutors and policemen are on the playlist of the underworld that very few citizens dare challenge it before Batman appears. After 9/11, “feeling trapped in a world beyond their control”,<sup>liii</sup> Americans have looked for a caring Superman to return, to be the embodiment of their values and to save his sweetheart Lois from being killed in a burning plane heading straight for an American city and a baseball game—in a visual catharsis for the unfortunate planes that crashed into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center.

While setting things right, these superheroes have however reflected a post 9/11 American society that, in some way, echoes the Vietnam era—when many of them were created. 9/11 and its subsequent events traumatized the U.S.A. where G.Bush Jr. administration’s ‘war on terror’ threatened some basic human rights while it also entangled the nation in the Iraqi quagmire and the Abou Ghraid and Guantanamo scandals—echoing in a way some Vietnam scandals like the My-Lai massacre. This has given birth to successful comic book adaptations where superheroes are no *Rambo II*-like jingoistic 1980s heroes nor are they the self-bashing, guilt-ridden heroes of many post-Vietnam war 1970s films. They are a mixture of both, that is to say post-9/11 true superheroes, but also doubting, angst-ridden and even reluctant ones: “Nos super héros [...] arrivent donc à point nommé, non pour nous sauver dans la réalité, mais pour nous parler de nous, de ce nouveau nous qui a émergé à la fin du XXe siècle, de tous nos sens mis dessus dessous.”<sup>liv</sup>

For example, the X-Men have useful powers but a few of them are uneasy with their burden-like differences, longing to be like everybody else up to the point of thinking that their mutant genes are an illness that needs to be cured. Peter Parker/Spider-Man would like to go back to a normal life,<sup>lv</sup> and does so for some time in *Spider-Man 2*. Superman always feels an emigrant on American soil, longing for his roots on the long-disappeared Krypton. The character called ‘The Thing’ in *The Fantastic Four* would like to shed his stone-like appearance and strength for his old look, before eventually putting aside his own needs for the greater good. Bruce Banner/Hulk struggles with his inner demons and even wants to get rid of his power—before eventually trying to control them in the second instalment—, while the 2005 Bruce Wayne/ Batman, traumatized by his parents’ death, sometimes seems uncomfortable with the day character he has to impersonate so as to hide his night persona—here reprising the already dark tone of the 1989 Tim Burton’s *Batman*, but with an actor who looks more the part. Even Batman’s human counterpart and possible replacement, prosecutor Harvey Dent, falls victim to his crusade and, in his rage to avenge his lost-love and his now horribly defaced appearance, eventually becomes Harvey Two-Face and pushes aside the very values he defended at the beginning of *The Dark Knight*. Industrialist Tony Stark/ Iron-Man<sup>lvi</sup> is also uncomfortable with having sold weapons to whoever wanted them, and then tries to put an end to their misuse.

One can object that this is partly due to the coming-of-age theme featured in many comic book stories, but it also fits the post-9/11 context. In fact, post-9/11 and Iraq-invasion cinematographic superheroes learn that nothing is just right or wrong, that it is not the “either you are with us or you are with the terrorists” uttered by George W. Bush on 20 Sept. 2001 in an address to a joint session of Congress and to the American people.<sup>lvii</sup> Thus, superheroes too can become sinners, like for example Spider-Man who loses himself in pride, overconfidence and self-indulgence that completely cloud his judgement and moral tenets in *Spider-Man 3*. He even ‘accidentally’ slaps Mary Jane, and, after having learned that he punished the wrong man for his uncle’s death, becomes vengeful and kills, or so he thinks, the really guilty one in a very ‘un-Spider-Man’ way —as Aunt May points to him: “Spider-Man doesn’t kill people.”

To all this can also be added that these successful films do not always have a happy ending: for example the main female character dies in *The Dark Knight* and *Daredevil* (Mark Steven Johson, 2003) while Peter Parker/ Spider-Man triggers his best friend hatred for having killed his father and, bound by his promise, cannot tell the truth about the latter’s misdeeds in *Spider-Man*. He then witnesses the death of this once-again best friend who had come to his rescue in *Spider-Man 3*. The superhero does not always ‘get the girl’; Peter Parker/ Spider-Man’s relationship with Mary Jane is quite unstable and strained, Superman has been literally erased from Lois Lane’s life in *Superman Returns* and it is only at the very end of the film that she tells him that he is her son’s father. In *X-Men*, Logan/Wolverine loves Jean Grey/Phoenix but cannot win her over because she is in love with another one (Scott Summers/Cyclops), and in *X-men 3* Logan even has to kill her so as to save humanity from her inner double unleashing utter destruction.

Once again it can be argued that all this was in the comic books that were adapted (especially in the Marvel Comics’ ones), but the American moviegoers have been willing to watch those unhappy endings and to accept them, even if in *The Dark Knight* the female character and love interest of the hero dies an unjust and underserved horrible death while Batman ends up being chased for having allegedly killed Harvey Dent, the prosecutor turned hero of Gotham. *The Dark Knight* thus has a definite sad and downbeat ending, nevertheless the American audience flocked to watch it and liked it so much that it made a box office triumph to the film, propelling it to the second place among the top 50 domestic grossing films of all times.

So, post-9/11 American screen superheroes have reflected a two-sided America, and the success of many comic-book adaptations has been linked to the fact that American moviegoers have found in these superheroes a kind of echo to the mixed demonstration of strength and growing doubt that seems to have characterized the post-9/11 and Iraq-invasion U.S.A..

## **Conclusion**

Comic book adaptations, with their pre-existing audiences, can become blockbusters, and Hollywood has financed such adaptations because they do fit the blockbuster formula: their heroes appeal to the still important young audience, their storylines require many special effects that are perfect for the digital or even 3D screens while these films offer plenty of opportunities for a financially rewarding merchandising. But their popularity in America also reveals something about the society that created them. Indeed, comic book heroes are typically American heroes who believe in their strength and the defense—or re-establishment—of their view of world order and values. But simpler time, if ever there were some, cannot be back nor can be the simple square-jawed, basic superheroes of the 1940s who joined the fight against the Axis as the champions of Truth, Justice and the American way. The current American cinematographic superheroes are still square-jawed, but upholding truth and justice is not that easy when the modern version of the American Dream seems to have veered off track on its way to liberate/invoke Iraq. Understandably shaken by 9/11, American superheroes have used their power to clean up society and the world of their evils, but have also had to cope with doubt and the consequences of their acts.

Thus, American comic book adaptations featuring superheroes are like many other blockbusters. It is true to say that they are just sheer entertainment and they are intended to be so. But at the same time, to dismiss these films just for what they seem to be is a mistake, because: “As far back as Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916) [...], films have reflected society’s attempts to come to grips with contemporary problems.”<sup>lviii</sup> So the success, especially the financial success, of some of these films hides more than just profits and market shares. If people went to see these films in droves, it means they felt like watching them and liked their catharsis function. It means that the timing for these comic book storylines was right while it would have been wrong some thirty years before at the time of the *Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978). In fact, a bit like the success of musicals revealed something about the wish to forget the 1929 crisis and its consequences for the duration of a film,<sup>lix</sup> modern blockbusters tell us something about the mood of the society that has turned them into a success, and comic book adaptations clearly say something about post-9/11 America.



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<sup>i</sup> Gabilliet, 38-39.

<sup>ii</sup> In 1952, there were 43 million moviegoers per week, and the comic book circulation reached about one billion copies (Bordat et Etcheverry, 203 & Gabilliet, 55).

<sup>iii</sup> Mintz and Roberts, ix.

<sup>iv</sup> “[in 1951] television was in more than 25 million homes (more than half the homes in the country), and in 1957, 41 million homes had it” (Pomerance 7). This had an impact on cinema audience as revealed by a study: “Poll results released by Paramount in 1950 revealed that families with television in the home decreased their film-going by 20-30 percent.” (Lev 9).

<sup>v</sup> Bordat and Etcheverry, 203-204.

<sup>vi</sup> Augros and Kitsopanidou, 102-107

<sup>vii</sup> Gomery, 226.

<sup>viii</sup> Gomery, 198.

<sup>ix</sup> Augros and Kitsopanidou, 175.

<sup>x</sup> The 1975 release of *Jaws* earned \$260 million while the 1977 release of *Star Wars* earned \$307.264 million, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com> (accessed May 7, 2010)

<sup>xi</sup> For example in 1996 the production cost of *Independence Day* (Roland Emmerich) reached \$75 million while the average MPAA production cost stood at \$39.8 million, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com> (accessed May 6, 2010) and *2000 US Economic Review*, 14, <http://www.mpa.org> (accessed March, 7, 2001).

<sup>xii</sup> Saturation release means that blockbusters are released on as many screens as possible at the same time. For example *Star Wars : Episode III-Revenge of the Sith* (George Lucas, 2005) was released on 3,663 screens.

<sup>xiii</sup> <http://www.boxofficemojo.com> (accessed in January 2009)

<sup>xiv</sup> <http://www.boxofficemojo.com> (accessed December 10, 2011).

<sup>xv</sup> *2007 Entertainment Industry Market Statistics*; at the time of writing, the MPAA had not released any data for 2008 and 2009, <http://www.mpa.org> (accessed June 5, 2008)

<sup>xvi</sup> Graser, 3.

<sup>xvii</sup> <http://www.boxofficemojo.com> (accessed September 2, 2010).

<sup>xviii</sup> *2007 Movie Attendance Study*, 8 and *2011 Theatrical Market Statistics*, 8, <http://www.mpa.org> (accessed July, 12, 2008 & May 6, 2012).

<sup>xix</sup> *2005 Movie Attendance Study*, *2007 Movie Attendance Study*, *2009 Theatrical Market Statistics* and *2011 Theatrical Market Statistics*, <http://www.mpa.org> (accessed May 8, 2005, July 11, 2008, May 4, 2010 and May 6, 2012).

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<sup>xx</sup> <http://www.boxofficemojo.com> (accessed November 18, 2011).

<sup>xxi</sup> *2007 Entertainment Industry Market Statistics*, 13, <http://www.mpa.org> (accessed June 5, 2008) and Tibken, 2.

<sup>xxii</sup> The initially bad reactions from Batman fans at the casting of Michael Keaton in Tim Burton's 1989 version worried its producers for some time. That is why in 1988, the film's executives went to the Comic-Con in San Diego "to turn around the negative reaction to Michael Keaton's casting as Batman." (McAllister 111).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Gordon, Jancovich and McAllister, ix.

<sup>xxiv</sup> That is why Comic Conventions now feature more than just footage from comic book adaptations, and have included footage from other genre films such as for example *Beowulf* (Robert Zemeckis, 2007), *Wall-E* (Andrew Stanton, 2008) or *The Chronicles of Narnia : Prince Caspian* (Andrew Adamson, 2008) that were shown in advance of their release at Comic-Con 2007, or *Terminator : Salvation* (McG) shown in 2008 in advance of its 2009 release.

<sup>xxv</sup> Segrave, 182.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Stephan Winkelman, president and CEO of Automobili Lamborghini, said about that product placement: "The Lamborghini Murciélago LP640 is the natural choice for Bruce Wayne's other car ... Lamborghini is proud to be associated with one of the greatest franchises in history, especially costarring with the Batmobile." <http://www.autounleashed.com/lambo-lp640-featured-in-the-dark-knight> (accessed September 9, 2008).

<sup>xxvii</sup> In 2007, the average marketing cost for a film produced by a MPAA member was \$35.9 million, but the marketing campaign for *Cars* cost Disney \$53.5 million while the campaign for *Superman Returns* cost Warner Bros. \$45.5 million. *2007 Entertainment Industry Market Statistics*, <http://www.mpa.org> (accessed June 5, 2008) & Teather, 1. At the time of writing, the MPAA had not released any figure for 2008, 2009 and 2010.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Graser, 2.

<sup>xxix</sup> Vargas, 2.

<sup>xxx</sup> Mueller, 20.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Jones, 3.

<sup>xxxii</sup> Seguin, 14.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> <<http://mpaa.org>> accessed September 3, 2010.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Graser, "Disney/Marvel: a Hero Sandwich", 2.

<sup>xxxv</sup> With one big difference though, that is to say less seats. It is indeed much more profitable to build 300-seat auditoriums than 600-or more-seat ones as the first ones are sold out more quickly—which can create a positive word-of-mouth for the films' box office.

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<sup>xxxvi</sup> There were 23,689 screens in 1990, and 36,764 in 2001. (*2001 Economic Review* <<http://www.mpa.org>> accessed July 24, 2006)

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Augros and Kitsopanidou, 197-202. Some studios owned cinemas at the time of the crisis as the deregulation era of the Reagan administration had allowed them to come back in the exhibition business. It is no longer the case.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> *2004, 2005 & 2007 Entertainment Industry Market Statistics*, <http://www.mpa.org> (accessed in April 2005, May 2006 & July 2008). *2011 Theatrical Market Statistics*, <http://www.mpa.org> (accessed May 6, 2012).

<sup>xxxix</sup> Wright, 7 and Gabilliet, 167.

<sup>xl</sup> <http://www.boxofficemojo.com> (accessed May 6, 2010).

<sup>xli</sup> Cohen and Karenteng, 19 & *2011 Theatrical Market Statistics*, 14, <http://www.mpa.org> (accessed May 6, 2012).

<sup>xlii</sup> Horn “Hollywood’s 3-D kick hits a Bump” and Lodderhouse, 27.

<sup>xliii</sup> Hazelton, 5. The box office success of *Avatar* has shown that James Cameron was right to shoot his film in 3D: in January 2010 “3D [had] made up \$335.4 million or 78 percent of the total [box office in America]” while it “accounted for roughly 65% of the total overseas box office”. Part of that box office is due to the “format’s appeal as well as premium pricing”. Gray, 1 and Kay, 7

<sup>xliv</sup> Mintz and Roberts, 2.

<sup>xlv</sup> Wright, xv.

<sup>xlvi</sup> Rollins, 247 and Mintz and Roberts, 1.

<sup>xlvii</sup> Horn “Industry Speak”, 33.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Wells, 2.

<sup>xlix</sup> Rollins, 1.

<sup>l</sup> Sklar, 342.

<sup>li</sup> It is only in 1978 that Superman came back on American screens in a true Hollywood blockbuster.

<sup>lii</sup> Forest, 13.

<sup>liii</sup> Regalado, 121.

<sup>liv</sup> Forest, 250. This is a pattern that befits Marvel heroes (like Spider-Man, Hulk or the X-Men born in the 1960s) more than the older DC ones (who appeared in the 1930s and 1940s). This probably explains why so far, among DC heroes, only Batman, the most anguished, neurotic and tortured one, has made a successful comeback at the box office.

<sup>lv</sup> Like many superheroes, Spider-Man is going through the teenage rite of passage to adulthood

<sup>lvi</sup> The Marvel Comics’s hero had originally been captured in Vietnam but the film script updated that event and located it in Afghanistan.

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<sup>lvii</sup> <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/20/gen.bush.transcript> (accessed July 26, 2010).

<sup>lviii</sup> Samuels, 222.

<sup>59</sup> Until American moviegoers grew tired of the formula and had very little money to spend on movie tickets.

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