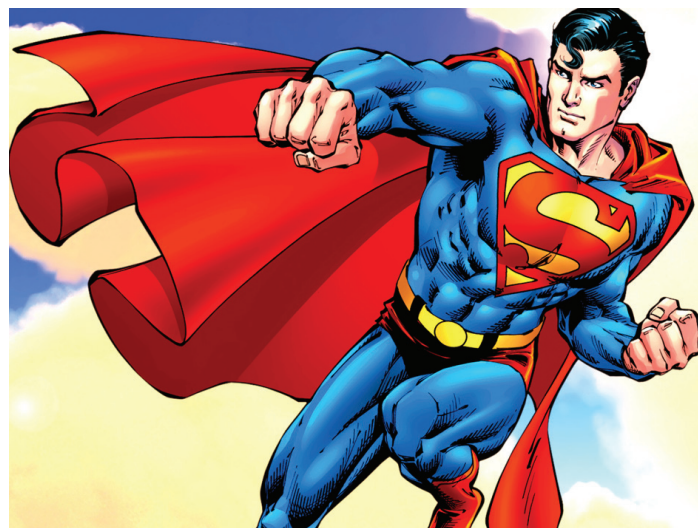# Superheroes: A Genre Case Study

The superhero film has proved to be one of the most financially lucrative genres in modern Hollywood. *Avengers Assemble* (2013) made over $623m at the box office and this is just one of many examples of highly profitable films in this genre. The genre has been popular for many decades - in comic books and games; in film and on TV both live-action and animation. Some of the more popular superheroes have become iconic figures in western culture.

Http://blog.tastebuds.fm/12-superhero-songs-you-need-to-hear/http://blog.tastebuds.fm/12-superhero-songs-you-need-to-hear/

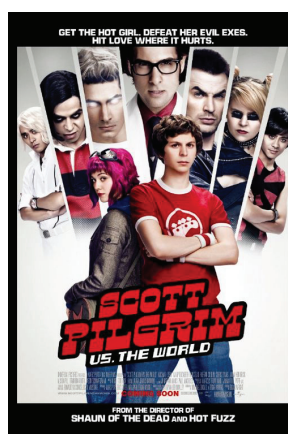http://blog.tastebuds.fm/12-superhero-songs-you-need-to-hear/

The aims of this factsheet are to:
- provide an overview of the superhero genre
- show how media concepts can be used when analysing genre
- to consider the way the genre has changed over time and why

Two comic books publishers, Marvel and DC, dominate the superhero genre - Marvel are now a film production studio and in partnership with Disney, have produced some of the most successful Hollywood blockbusters of the past few years. Another comic-book publisher, DC, has licensed their heroes to Warner Brothers and both studios have produced successful superhero franchises. Some writers of comic books have become famous and have become 'brands' within the genre. The writer Stan Lee appears in Marvel superhero films but other writers have had less comfortable relationships with Hollywood. Frank Miller's films have often received mixed reviews and Alan Moore has disowned the film versions of his work.

Television has a long history of success with the genre both in animation and live action with a version of *Superman* being offered to each generation since the 1950s and the 1960s *Batman and Robin* remains one of the most famous of all TV programmes across generations. Currently Sky broadcasts DC's *Arrow,* Marvel's *Agents of Shield* is on Channel 4 and *The Flash* on Sky 1 HD, at the time of writing, *Gotham* is about to be shown on Channel 5 focusing on the history of Gotham City before Batman.

http://www.comicvine.com/forums/battles-7/superman-vs-guardians-of-the-universe-1532563/

Lower budget/independent cinema has also put its own spin on the genre and often takes an unusual approach. *Scott Pilgrim* (2010) is an unlikely superhero whose battles are presented via the visuals of 80/90s Nintendo games, *Chronicle* (2012) and *Super* (2010) both deconstruct the superhero and consider what would happen if an ordinary person found they suddenly had extraordinary powers (*Chronicle*) or show the behaviours of a superhero are not far removed form those of a deluded, dangerous sociopath (*Super*).

***Scott Pilgrim vs The World* (2010)   *Super* (2010)**
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scott_Pilgrim_vs._the_World
http://movieboozer.com/movie/super-2010-drinking-game

The fact that independent film producers, TV broadcasters and Hollywood studios return time and time again to the genre speaks of its potential for success. It is a genre that is loved by audiences and institutions.

Just Some Recent Superhero Films and Franchises

Marvel (Disney)	DC (Warner Brothers)	Alan Moore	Frank Miller	Independent
The *X Men* Franchise (7 Films since 2000 – 4 more planned)	*Superman* (2 Films since 2000; 5 films in the 70s/80s – 1 more planned)	*V for Vendetta*	*300*	*Scott Pilgrim vs the World*
The Avengers and its franchise including: *Iron Man, Thor, Captain America, The Hulk* etc. (11 Films since 2000 – 3 more planned)	*Batman* (3 Films since 2000; 4 films in the 80s/90s – 2 more planned)	*Watchmen*	*Sin City (*2 Films since 2000*)*	*Chronicle*
*Spiderman (*5 Films since 2000*)*	*Green Lantern*	*The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*	*Daredevil*	*Super*
Guardians of the Galaxy	*Gotham* (TV series)	*From Hell*	*Elektra*	*Safety Not Guaranteed*
Agents of Shield (TV Series)	*Arrow* (TV Series)			*Kick Ass (2 Films)*

Genre - Institution and Audience

Genres provide a clear framework for production so institutions find them useful. Genres use codes and conventions and so institutions can write their stories and create the look and feel of their products with an awareness of what has gone before.

Activity

What do most audiences expect when they access a superhero text? What are the codes and conventions of the genre?

	Conventions of Superhero Texts
Media Language Codes	
Narrative Conventions: Structure and Roles	
Conventional Representations	
Themes and Ideological Codes	

Audiences like the familiarity that genres provide as being able to predict the way a film or TV series will play out can be reassuring. However, institutions can find themselves in a tricky situation when creating a genre text. If the codes are repeated and followed too closely, audiences may find the product clichéd and boring. On the other hand, if the institution subverts the codes and conventions to provide the audience with something unexpected, they could fail to meet the audience's expectations and cause disappointment.

The Changing Face of Superman

http://www.supermanhomepage.com/multimedia/Wallpaper-Images3/shachar-montage-tb.htmlhttp://www.supermanhomepage.com/multimedia/Wallpaper-Images3/shachar-montage-tb.html

http://www.supermanhomepage.com/multimedia/Wallpaper-Images3/shachar-montage-tb.html

Neale says that genres exist within the context of 'economic relations and practices' so institutions are always tying to find a balance between familiarity and innovation when creating genre texts. This is to try to maximise the possibility of success. This creates a relationship between institution and audience and the way a genre is approached by the audience and the institution is based on a negotiation between the two.

Activity

Consider a recent superhero text that you have seen. What did it do that was typical of the genre and in what ways did it try to offer something new?

A Little History

Superhero comics first became popular in the 1930s. The mass media saw how popular superheroes were with audiences and superheroes appeared in animated and live action serials at the cinema as early as the 1940s. TV also retold superhero stories.

In the 1950s George Reeves became a household name for his role in *Superman*; the 1960s *Batman* is still seen as one of the classic TV shows of its time and Superman was reintroduced to audiences in the 90s via *Lois and Clarke: The New Adventures of Superman* and a decade later in the highly successful *Smallville*.

George Reeves
http://waytofamous.com/6026-george-reeves@imagegeorge-reeves-05.jpg.html

Genre and Context

At each period of time we can see the superhero offers slightly different narratives. He faces different villains, has to overcome different obstacles and has different types of relationships with the women in his life. The superhero genre has to fit in with the dominant values of the day if audiences are going to be able to relate to such a fantastical story. Genres replicate cultural myths and fears and by addressing them within stories a culture is able to play out those fears and concerns. Genres offer ideological reassurance when the narratives offer a resolution that addresses these fears and especially when the fears are overcome. Conventional superhero texts tend to show the hero defeating the enemy so this is often seen as one of the more reassuring of genres.

Consider how each of these narratives addresses a specific cultural fear

Textual Example	Context of Production
In the 1940s, *Superman* was shown needing to battle European bad-guys who threatened the peace and security of Metropolis. Even though he only wanted to live a quiet life, he was forced into conflict for the greater good.	WW2 began in 1939 and the US people saw it at first as a European issue. As the war got underway, the US government saw that they might have to get involved – even if many of their population did not want to. Episodes of the early Superman serials can often be seen reinforcing the need for America to be prepared to fight to protect its culture and values.
Superman battles against Lex Luther who is a wealthy businessman and media magnate. This character appears first in the 1930s and then again in the 1978 film. It is also significant that Superman was raised in the rural community of Smallville. This sets him up in conflict with greedy, city values.	Both timeframes suffered economic depressions. In the 1930s, the blame for the Great Depression was put on the greed of capitalists and the media was identified as being untrustworthy as wealthy capitalists ran it. This anti-corporate feeling was also around at the end of the 70s as industrial disputes put managers and workers in conflict and the West continued the process of industrialising agriculture and de-industrialising manufacturing... both leading to unemployment in the working classes.
One of Batman's enemies in the 1995 film *Batman Forever* is Two-Face and the on-going internal battle for the superhero is the tension between his light and dark sides. This binary plays out in a number of ways in the 80s/90s series.	The latter half of the 20th Century saw the secure knowledge and understanding of previously stable binaries become eroded. Ideas of good and evil/hero and villain/ right and wrong become less clear and less certain. Comparing the 80s/90s Batman to its 60s version or the 70s version of Superman shows that the idea of 'hero' and 'villain' was being challenged and questioned in the later films.
In *X Men* (2000), Mutants are outsiders who are seen as freaks by 'normal' people - so much so that many mutants seek to hide their difference. Some join with other mutants to react violently to discrimination whilst others try to work with humans in an attempt to fit in.	Superhero films are often seen as reactionary and conservative. The first X Men film has quite progressive values and foregrounds tolerance, community and communication. The series is based on a collective rather than an individual so will inevitably deal with problems differently to the more conventional 'lone wolf' superheroes. The problems the mutants face are often seen as metaphors for the intolerance of racism and/or homophobia. Although things for non-white/straight groups were improving in the 00s discrimination of all types was (and is still) an issue in western culture.
Spiderman 3 (2007) gives Spiderman several different enemies – Sandman - a man made of sand and Venom, created by an oily substance that infects from within and turns people into monsters. Like *Batman Forever*, it also deals with the duality of a hero being both 'light' and 'dark'. http://www.fanpop.com/clubs/spider-man/images/34793155/title/spidrman-photohttp://www.fanpop.com/clubs/spider-man/images/34793155/title/spidrman-photo	The film offers a not too hidden metaphor for the conflict the US found themselves in during the 00s. Wars had been fought in desert regions with the main prize being the control of oil. The binary opposition between good and evil is still a theme that is present in the genre.

The Dark Knight Rises (2012) shows the billionaire Bruce Wayne saving Gotham from its own people who have been taken in by a promise of power. The instigator, Bane, traps the police underground so that the people have to police themselves. Sadly, this goes horribly wrong and the city falls into a state of anarchy so the wealthy elite represented by Batman needs to step in and save the city from itself.

The Amazing Spider-Man (2012) took a quite different approach. The citizens of New York (crane drivers) help a wounded Spider-Man travel through the city to help defeat the rogue scientist threatening their safety. In Gotham the people are stupid and easily manipulated, in Spider-Man's New York they are brave and resilient. In Gotham, Batman helps the police. In Spider-Man the police initially attack the hero as he is seen as a threat.

In 2011 the Occupy movement began their sit-ins in various cities around the world including London and, of course, New York (Gotham). Occupy protested against the transfer of global wealth from the increasingly impoverished 99% of the population to the increasingly wealthy 1%. They identified the way corporations were legally reducing their tax-burdens and how low wages and job insecurity are widening economic inequalities.

Activity
Context - why might the events of 9/11 have led to the continued success of the superhero genre in the early 21st Century.

V for Vendetta – a post-9/11 film?
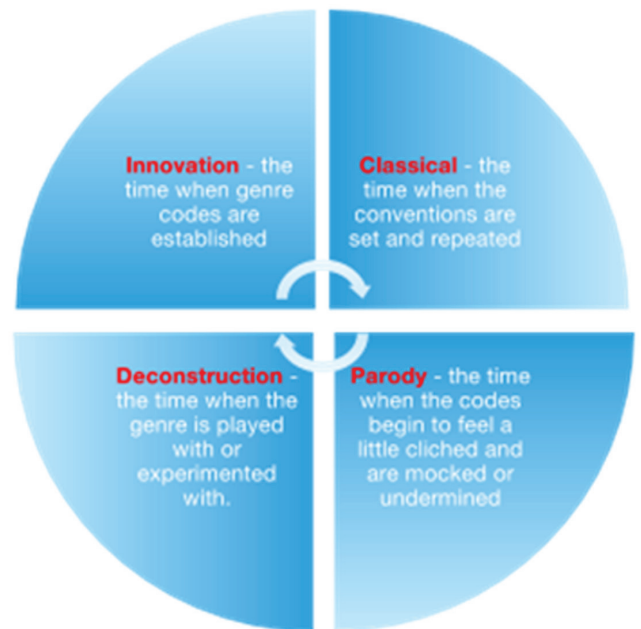https://www.google.co.uk/search?

Audiences receive more than simple reassurance in the familiarity of genre texts. They receive ideological closure when the source of their fear is vanquished as this reinforces their perspective but also offers a solution to what worries them. This helps the producers too as the generic formula promotes the preferred reading of a text and prevents audiences from 'reading against the grain' (Fiske).

The Cycle of Genre Development
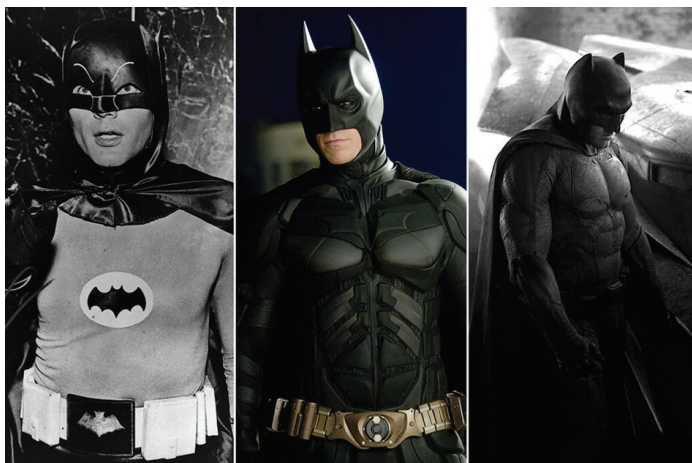
The changing face of Batman

Several theorists observe that genres tend to follow the same pattern of development. Schatz, for example uses the following terms to show how genres are dynamic and that they go through a cycle.

Innovation - the time when genre codes are established

Classical - the time when the conventions are set and repeated

Deconstruction - the time when the genre is played with or experimented with.

Parody - the time when the codes begin to feel a little cliched and are mocked or undermined

The Theory Applied to the Superhero Genre

- **Innovation:** The visual codes for the superhero genre were largely established via the comic books. As soon as film and TV began to use the comic book characters other codes and conventions regarding the presentation of the genre in moving image were set. This can be seen in the early superhero shorts of the 1940s.

- **Classical**: By the 1950s the superhero genre could be seen to be in its classical stage with the codes and conventions being replicated in the film and TV programmes of the time.

- **Parody**: *Batman* (1966) was intentionally funny and camp and wouldn't let its audience take the superhero too seriously. It had an ironic tone that flagged up the daft nature of the genre and allowed the audience to enjoy the awareness of that. After *Batman,* the classical and parodic versions of the genre were largely located in children's animation, from *Spider-Man* whose animated adventures were on TV from the late 1960s, to the less than serious versions of the genre in *Mighty Mouse* (a perennially popular cartoon first made in the 1940s), *Atom Ant* (from the late 60s), *Captain Caveman* (from the late 70s) amongst many, many more.

- **Deconstruction**: *Superman* (1978) started a new cycle in the superhero genre with technology leading the innovation with special effects creating more realistic visual 'miracles'. Both the Superman series and Tim Burton's Batman franchise treated the fantastic world of the superhero seriously as in the classical era but they also used the camp comedy and a tongue-in-cheek approach of parody showing how the genre had been deconstructed and repackaged in an attempt to revitalise the genre and help it find a new audience - successfully in the case of these two franchises. This brings the genre back to a period of innovation when new ideas and new developments create interesting new ideas within the genre

- **The Cycle Continues**: After 1997's *Batman and Robin* received a less than positive reception, the genre again needed to deconstruct and re-innovate. The next stage of the genre's development was the rise of Marvel Studios with *The X Men* (2000) and *Spider-Man* in 2002 and DC's return with *Batman Begins* in 2005 and *Superman Returns* in 2006. These series have themselves been deconstructed once again. DC's *X-Men: First Class* (2011) introduced a new generation of X-Men and offers a different tone to the first three films. *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) recast Peter Parker and changed his love interest whilst Chris Nolan's Batman offers a much darker, visceral superhero than the one in the 60s and the 90s. Perhaps the parody and deconstruction of indie superheroes has moved the genre on more quickly than in the past although Marvel can be seen to be playing it safe with its relatively conventional and classical *Avengers* series - particularly the *Captain America* films – but they also offer some parody within *Iron Man* (2008) and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014).

> **Exam Hint:- Use this case study as a model for approaching independent research aspects of your Media course.**

Schatz says that during the innovative and classical parts of a genre's development, genres are 'transparent' - that is the audience does not see the genre, rather they 'look through it' to the story being told. During the parody and deconstruction phases genres become 'opaque' - audiences look at the form itself. They are aware of the genre rather than just the story being told. Deconstruction is a crucial time because if there is no successful deconstruction of the genre there cannot be a return to innovation and the genre may (sometimes temporarily) disappear as it cannot move beyond parody, Sometimes a genre disappears for a while and then comes back at the innovation stage (horror has done this many times). Sometimes a genre struggles to re-innovate itself and then it can struggle to find an audience. The Western is often used as an example of a genre that has never really made it past the parody stage other than in a few single examples and it struggles to innovate in a way that allows it to become a genre that modern audiences want to see.

Activity
What approaches to the genre have changed when considering these different versions of superheroes? What might this tell you about audience needs and expectations of the genre or the context of production?

'Old'	'New'	What has been done differently when comparing the 'old' and 'new' versions of these series?	Why?
X Men (1, 2 and 3)	**X Men** (*First Class* and *Days of Future Past*)		
Wolverine (1 and 2)			
Spider-Man (1, 2 and 3)	*The Amazing Spider-Man* (1 and 2)		
Batman, Batman Returns, Batman Forever, Batman and Robin	*Batman Begins, The Dark Knight, The Dark Knight Rises*		

In Summary
Superhero films offer a range of pleasures for the audience from empathy, catharsis and escapism to narrative and ideological reassurance and the simple gratifications of the visual spectacle and visceral reaction. The fact that we continue to go to see them at the cinema, tune in to TV programmes and buy the DVDs means that media producers will continue to provide us with more and more superhero products. Of course, once we get bored and if institutions fail to deconstruct the genre in ways that appeal to us the genre will go into decline. The swift and almost constant reinventions of the genre we have seen since the early 2000s, it is clear that media institutions are working hard to try to make sure that doesn't happen.

Activity
This approach to genre can be applied to any genre in any form.

Select another genre and replicate this thought process. How could you apply these ideas to horror, soap operas, the action film, the rom-com, sci-fi...?