

Mental Movies and Action Heroes:  
The Adaptation of Comics to Film

by

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To preface this paper, I feel it is necessary to inform you of a particular passage that focused this project for me during the research phase. While reading a review of the film *Ghost World*, which was adapted from a lengthy comic book form referred to as a *graphic novel*, the author made a contention that I found particularly interesting. Author Michael Dean wrote, “Some of the comic’s air of aimless mystery has been paved over with the semblance of a Hollywood plot and to that extent, the movie is a lesser work than the comic. But it’s still a far better movie than we had the right to expect.” This, of course, raises the question, “What should we have expected of it?” Frankly, the implication that viewers do not have a *right* to expect something of a film is what caught my eye and led me down the path that this paper ended up taking. When analyzing any adaptation the critic has to take into account the “original” text or the analysis is not complete. However, adaptations are texts in themselves, with their own set of sensibilities, vocabulary and devices that separate them from the form of the original. This paper is attempting to discover the devices that make comic books unique from movies and vice versa, but at the same time exploring the major dilemmas arising from their similarities. I approach this project with the ultimate question, “What do we have a right to expect from an adaptation and how have the existing adaptations dealt with those expectations?”

### **Justification and Assumptions**

Comic books provide a fertile field for discussing that question because of the fact that comic books can be seen to cross more traditional media. In one sense, they are very much like a film in that they are a visual medium that tells a story through a succession of images. In another sense they are like novels because they are static and rely on words and the reader’s imagination to propel the story forward. Comic books are both static and dynamic and therefore raise a set of questions never asked of the adaptation of written works.

Comics are an increasingly popular source of material for films as well. Films (and television shows) such as *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Dennis the Menace*, *Men in Black*, *X-Men*, *Blade*, and *From Hell* all enjoyed a great degree of success as films and were adapted from comic books. Several upcoming films including *Spiderman*, *Daredevil* and the *Road to Perdition* are also adaptations of comic books. For some reason, Hollywood is tapping into the comic market for ideas. In fact, several years ago three Hollywood executives formed Awesome Entertainment, a company that launched comic books as “the building blocks for feature films, TV programs, interactive games and toys” (“Awesome Shows in the Works” 54). Though Awesome was not very successful, its formation did show where Hollywood was heading with adaptations, especially comic ones.

With the great number of comic book adaptations out there, it is surprising that there is not a great body of critical literature devoted to it. In fact, the subject of adaptations in general is not a hugely popular subject in scholarly film publications at all, though it has enjoyed a fairly steady stream of analysis over the history of film studies. There is a good deal of study done on comic books and comic characters, however, and some attention is paid to their films, but never has there been a comprehensive overview of the problems and issues involved in adapting a film from a comic book.

In order to deal with those issues, I have selected three comics and their corresponding adaptations to examine in detail. First I will discuss *Dick Tracy* and its 1990 film of the same name, directed by and starring Warren Beatty. Second I will examine *Superman* and the 1978 Richard Donner film *Superman: The Movie*. Finally, I will explore *Batman* and the 1989 film *Batman* directed by Tim Burton.

I have selected these three comics for a variety of reasons. The first reason is that they all provide multiple film and television adaptations. Though I will focus primarily on the

blockbuster Hollywood films that most readers will be familiar with, it is important to note that all these characters had success in previous feature motion pictures as well as serials and Superman and Batman were both portrayed in television series, both animated and live action. The second reason is that there is a great deal of history behind all these characters. Unlike Awesome Entertainment's goal of launching characters simply for adaptation and licensing, all three characters in this paper have existed for at least seventy years (Batman, being the youngest, first appeared in 1939). Because of all the history the changes in the portrayal of the characters over the years can be brought into account when discussing their adaptations, unlike a novel or short story, which has only one incarnation. Next is that they cross different forms in the comic world. This is a major reason behind the selection of *Dick Tracy*, which was a newspaper comic strip and not a comic book at all. Dick Tracy lived from day to day in four panel installments, rather than the twenty page monthly comic book form of Superman and Batman. Finally, I selected all these characters because they are recognizable cultural icons.

This leads me to the major assumption I must make in this paper. I should be able to show a picture of any of these characters to someone and they should be able to identify them without ever having read one of their comic books. Dick Tracy is perhaps less recognizable, not having any sort of identifying icon such as Superman's "S", but the style *Dick Tracy* is drawn in, with the squared off jaw and trench coat, is easily identifiable by most adults. The importance of this assumption lies in the marketing phenomenon that surrounds any adaptation of a popular character. Even if someone has never picked up a Batman comic book, the culture is so saturated with Batman texts that people have some sort of idea of who he is or what he looks like, whether it is from a television show, cartoon or print medium that references him.

Even if a viewer has never read a comic book, they know the form of the comic, whether it be through newspaper strips or the presence of their children's reading material on the kitchen

table. So the next assumption I will make is that the reader has at least a cursory understanding of the comic form and its conventions, including panels, captions and thought balloons, and the illusion of movement through editing or artwork (lines, blurred backgrounds, etc.). This understanding only has to be basic, but it is necessary because I do plan on discussing the problem of adapting one medium to another.

### **Why Comic Books?**

As I just pointed out, familiarity with comics is necessary to understand this paper, but most people who watch a film adapted from a comic book may have never read the comic book or even have known it was a comic book at all. Though Superman, Batman and Dick Tracy are fairly well known characters, *Barb Wire*, *Blade*, *Tank Girl* and *Men in Black* may not be highly circulated comic books. In fact, comic readership is very low, especially in comparison to movies. So why are comics adapted?

I spoke to Richard Early, owner of Paradox Comics and Cards in Fargo, ND about the business end of adaptations, and he contends that comic book movies do very little to increase the sales of comics. "It gives people who don't want to buy the comic book a reason not to," he says. Furthermore, he also points out that the number of people who bought tickets to the *Batman* movie was almost ten fold greater than the number of people who were reading *Batman* at the time. So clearly companies do not produce films from comic books because they want to draw an established readership.

However, the established readership is important. Early argues that comic books essentially serve as a test market for characters and story lines. If a comic book is successful then the movie can also be successful, especially with some big names and a summer marketing budget behind them. Furthermore, comic books visual nature gives a creative team a place to start when producing the film, but plenty of leeway to make their own stories and twists. The fact

that comics have a language that is so similar to films is a major selling point for many studios and directors.

### **Adaptations and Characters**

Before I move into comic and film language, however, there is a more general area that needs to be explored when studying the transition of comic books to film. This is the broader theme of the adaptation and the characteristics inherent in an adaptation. It is important not to forget that though comic books are not novels and short stories, they are *adapted* into film, a term usually reserved for written works.

I reviewed the literature very carefully in an attempt to find a definition for the word “adaptation” in the context in which I am referring to it, with only limited success. It seems that most scholars simply assume that the explanation is self evident, but when dealing with such well known characters and properties, the self evident definition often gets one into trouble. Simply defined, an adaptation is the use of one text in another form or medium (Grindstaff). This definition has some pitfalls, as I pointed out earlier. The major problem with this definition is that there really are no original stories. In fact, the most popular stories are classic archetypes repeated throughout a culture’s history. For example, many believe that *Star Wars*’ popularity comes from the fact that it is essentially the classic story of western culture. Many comic books fit into this category as well. *Batman*’s story can be included in the same category as *The Three Musketeers*, *Zorro*, and *Don Quixote* and Superman is similar to the great heroes of Greek myth whose great abilities to serve their people made them legends. Another problem is that the repeated adaptations of the comic books I selected lead to the dilemma of what is an adaptation of what. For example, though Batman is a comic book, most people will most readily identify with the television show of the 1960s. Will Brooker contends that the third and fourth Batman

films in the most recent franchise are not adaptations of the comic book at all, but rather of the television series

In one sense, as this reaction suggests, *Batman Forever* (like *Batman and Robin*) is actually a very close adaptation of an earlier text: the 1960s TV series. From explicit in-jokes like Robin's exclamation 'Holy Rusted Metal!' in *Batman Forever* to the eye wateringly gaudy costumes, the emphasis on spectacle and the very style of the performances from the guest star villains, *Forever* and *Batman and Robin* are 'adaptations,' then, but adaptations from the small to the big screen, bypassing the comic book: adaptations of what was then and adaptation (196).

If Brooker is right, then it muddles the whole problem of adaptation entirely because certain generations will identify certain texts as "original" and lash out against adaptations and remakes that do not fit their standards. This is, in fact, what happened to the television series when critics derided it for not fitting their memories of the earlier comic book and to the movie when a new generation of critics attacked it for not conforming to the more "pure" text of the television series (Spigel and Jenkins 141).

It is precisely this expectation that every author of an adaptation must deal with. The most evident question when adapting any text is what does the new author owe to the original? Grindstaff cites Thomas Leitch in arguing that implicit in the concept of a remake is the expectation of improving on the original text. Even if "improving" is not the right word, then finding something that separates the new text from the original is important. Grindstaff goes further to state that "the remake exposes originality as a relative, not absolute, concept." An example is the Gus Van Sant remake of *Psycho* in 1998. The primary criticism of this film is that it is a shot by shot remake of the original, making it essentially pointless for anyone who has

seen the original to watch. Though it is hard to say that any remake of *Psycho* would have been adequate, the criticisms reveal the importance of something to separate the two texts. Of course, even if there is something new in the adapted text, Imelda Whelehan tells us the problem of analyzing any adaptation, “for many people, the comparison of a novel and its film version results in an almost unconscious prioritizing of the fictional origin over the resulting film” (3). This leads to sentences like “I think the book is better,” or, as Michael Dean put it in the article I referenced at the beginning of the paper, “to that extent, the movie is a lesser work than the comic.” Perhaps it is not fair to compare the original text to the adaptation, especially when the adaptation crosses media, but nevertheless, it is done often.

However, the fact that the comic books I selected have been remade so many times and the fact that they are pervasive cultural icons helps avoid the problem of the original text being better or worse because the original text has so many years of changing elements and so many different ways to identify the characters that there is actually very little comparison to the original comics at all. Still, the question of whether these films are good or bad adaptations is a question I plan to deal with and hopefully answer in the course of the paper.

### Film and Comic Language

If adaptations deal with the broader problem of keeping something of the original text in the remake, then the problem of film and comic language deals with how to get that something to the screen. Film and comic books actually use very similar sets of conventions to tell a story, as Earle Coleman points out, “Those who speak of architecture as frozen music might also describe the comics as frozen film. The comic strips or comic book, with its series of panels, is a kind of visual pun on the film or celluloid strip with its succession of frames. In both arts, individual segments are ordered for a cumulative effect. Typically, both employ sequentially arranged elements for narrative purposes” (90). The similarities between the two mediums jump out

immediately. In fact, comic books are often compared to film in the sense that they both use a shot/scene structure as well as editing to move the story forward. Coleman continues by discussing some of the specifics of these similarities, “As contrasted with literature, the comics and the movies are intensely pictorial and lend themselves to a dynamic vocabulary of art criticism; the close-up, flashback and montage are at home in either medium, as is the adoption of a roving, subjective camera” (90). Of course, the two mediums are not the same. They differ on one major point, movement. Comics simply do not move, but it is up to the comic artist to create that movement. Francis Lacassin explores this dilemma in great detail in his study of comic language, pointing out several different ways of creating movement. The two major ones are *montage*, or editing static images together in such a way that movement is created in the minds of the viewers, or by creating movement by manipulating the frame or the image, drawing lines behind a moving character, for example. David Carrier’s study of comic book aesthetics goes one step further and puts the reader in an interesting place: “Motion in the movies is made possible by the projector; in the comics, motion appears through our becoming, so to speak, human projectors. The successive images are connected only when the reader connects them” (56).

It should also be noted that movies are, perhaps, the most involved sensory experiences that human beings can artificially create. While watching a film, the viewer is immersed in images, sounds and music while in an environment that is specifically manipulated to heighten the experience (the theatre). It is this “suspension of disbelief,” as I once heard it called, that give films their unique power to transport us to where the film is going. Comic books, on the other hand, exist in whatever environment we choose to bring them into (the same could be said of VHS, TV, or DVD movies, but even those require certain special equipment) and are therefore at

the will of outside factors. Not only are they affected by outside factors, they only possess words and pictures and the rest is left for the reader to fill in.

When examining the separate films, the use of different editing or camera techniques will help reveal how the director approached the adaptation of a comic books visual language.

### **Dick Tracy: The Granddaddy of Comic Detectives**

Actually, that statement is not entirely true. The fact is that *Dick Tracy* is just another comic strip in a line of detective comic strips that includes such staples as *Little Orphan Annie*. However, *Dick Tracy's* staying power and culture impact is very important. Born out of the Depression's need for heroes and the government's freshly labeled, if now passé, "War on Crime," *Dick Tracy* is a strip that spawned many take offs and a whole new genre. According to Arthur Berger, "Queen argues quite conclusively that Dick Tracy was 'the world's first procedural detective of fiction, in the modern sense'" (120-21).

*Dick Tracy* is important for more than just creating the procedural detective later portrayed on radio in *Dragnet* and on television in *Law and Order*. He is important in comic history as well. Drawn by Chester Gould and first appearing in 1931 in the Chicago Tribune *Batman* would later draw on Tracy's square jaw and grotesque villains. The comic itself is quite an achievement as well. Robert Harvey, in his history of newspaper comics, discusses Chester Gould's work in *Dick Tracy*,

"Gould's achievement as a cartoonist arises from his pictures as much as from his stories. His drawing style is deceptively simple. Backgrounds are rendered with geometric precision and have a ruler-and-pen linear quality; figures are outlined with a single bold stroke. Wrinkles in clothing are indicated with but a few lines...Every panel has a huge black area. Ceilings, walls, streets, the sides of buildings or furniture—any of these might be black if there were no other

opportunity for using black in a panel. Tracy always wore a black suit, which Gould presented as a solid shape, virtually a silhouette...The strip is an exercise in black and white both graphically and philosophically. There are no grays in Gould's moral convictions either" (107-8).

The strip would be portrayed in four serials and four feature films before the Warren Beatty version of 1990, and the moral black and whites would be honored throughout, mostly through the grotesque villains that were an integral part of the strip. Berger argues that "the grotesque facilitates a kind of 'guilt-free aggression' on the part of the readers. They are so repulsive and so easily identifiable that we can release our hostile antipathies against them with little feeling of remorse" (127). It is these villains that truly set *Dick Tracy* apart from other strips of the time, which dealt with simple criminals and detectives. Perhaps the obvious lapse into fiction was not only appealing, but used the possibilities of comics fully.

These villains are also what identify the screen versions of the comics. In fact, in the final feature of the 1940s, *Dick Tracy Meets Gruesome*, the villain is not only gruesome (obviously) but is played by the ultimate grotesque movie monster actor, Boris Karloff. Warren Beatty also makes the grotesque villains such as Pruneface, Flat Top and Big Boy an integral part of his film, incorporating several talented character actors in the roles to enhance them (including an excellent performance by Dustin Hoffman in the small part of Mumbles). Warren Beatty also deals with the problem of adapting a black and white comic strip into color by utilizing red, blue, yellow and green in the film, but in bold set and costume design, such as the green of Dick Tracy's office and the red of Junior's suit. The colors are all bold and have little in the way of gradations, reflecting the lack of shading in the *Dick Tracy* comic strip.

Warren Beatty is also constantly framing things in the film, in doorways, windows, or stage prosceniums. In fact, the Madonna character is most identified by her "frames" while on

the stage singing one of the many Stephen Sondheim songs composed for the film. The film also has several montage sequences, which have the characteristics of a comic frame, the quick shots give the illusion of a still frame. One shot in the sequence of Tracy's crackdown on the Big Boy syndicate comes to mind immediately, of three police officers standing near a car and shooting machine guns at the bad guys. This frame is a staple of not only *Dick Tracy* but of all detective and action comics.

Beatty makes no bones about the fact that he is trying to make *Dick Tracy* look like the comic strip. The miniature sets are very cartooney, despite the sophisticated model work he had access to at the time. Beatty is trying to recreate a time and the nostalgia associated with it. In this sense *Dick Tracy* is not only a remake of the comic strip, it is a nostalgic look at the time the comic strip represents.

### **Superman and Cinematic Technique**

If *Dick Tracy* is the grandfather of the procedural detective then *Superman* is the father of the modern comic book and comic book superhero. First appearing in *Action Comic #1* in 1938, *Superman* was an instant hit, launching a toy line, a radio show and his own comic title just a year later. According to Bradford Wright, Superman may be the most important character in comic history, "It is difficult to overstate the importance of the character. Superman established the essential vocabulary of comic books...Costumed superheroes became the defining fantasy of comic books, largely because it was a fantasy this medium could indulge better than any other" (14). Indeed, in 1938 this was true and Superman became the defining character of the comic book industry, creating many spin-offs, as well as many superheroes that are still with us, Batman among them. However, with the advent of television and the increasing technological achievements in cinema, Superman could be portrayed in many more ways. He would appear in two serials and several television series. In the serials Kirk Alyn was the first man to play a live

action Superman and the first man that they attempted to fly on screen, with a limited degree of success. Eventually the crew resorted to animation, which was fairly effective, especially with the children in the audience. Alyn would also appear in a cut scene of *Superman: The Movie* (1978) as the young Lois Lane's father with his serial co-star as the mother (the scene can be seen in the DVD expanded version of the film). With the success of the *Superman vs. Atom Man* serial in 1950, DC decided to continue their success on television, premiering *The Adventures of Superman* the same year. The show starred George Reeves, who would come to be identified by a whole generation as Superman. Curt Swan, the comic artist behind *Superman* at the time, is supposed to have considered adopting Reeves' look in the comic book, but decided against it, saying, however, "I think I did get his profile from time to time" (42-3).

Though Superman would later be portrayed in several more television shows, including *Superboy* in the late 1980s and *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* in the mid-1990s, as well as at least five animated series, the stand out screen portrayal is still in Richard Donner's 1978 movie *Superman: The Movie*. What makes the film unique, however, is not that it looks or feels like a comic book, but rather that it looks and feels like a movie. Donner takes full advantage of cinematic technique to make a good *film* and not just a good adaptation. The film is full of moving camera, special effects and widescreen composition to heighten the action and improve the characters. An example is the Norman Rockwell look of Clark Kent's boyhood home, Smallville, where the Kansas farmstead is shown through long shots of golden wheat fields and a small country home. Even as Clark is about to depart his home, the crane shot moving behind him and over his head is an excellent example of the cinematic technique Donner employed.

Another important decision in the making of *Superman: The Movie* was the casting of Christopher Reeve as the title character. Though to get the movie off the ground the producers

had to bring in the big names of writer Mario Puzo and stars Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman, Reeve stole the show in *Superman* and would come to be identified as Superman by the *next* generation. Not only does Reeve look like Superman, his dual performance as the bumbling Clark Kent and the heroic Superman is excellent.

Though *Superman: The Movie* has its problems as an adaptation, namely the character of Lex Luthor as a comedic part rather than the mad scientist he is in the comic, it is still the best film of the three examined here, and stands apart because of its use of cinematic technique and strong performances, two things that can't exist in a comic book but are used well in the film.

### **Batman and the Modern Hero**

Though Batman was spun off of Superman's success in 1939's *Detective Comics* #27, he stands apart as a superhero. The same concept is there, a costumed and caped hero who fights crime and has a secret identity, but the characters are radically different. Dennis O'Neil, the editor of *Batman* comics in the 1980s called him "an obsessed loner" (Pearson and Uricchio 19). Beyond the fact that they are both heroes there is no similarity at all. First, Batman is not super; he is a normal man who just happens to be rich, a great chemist and an expert at martial arts. Second, his intentions are not noble; Batman is out to avenge the murder of his parents. Third, the world Batman lives in is radically different than the world Superman lives in. The differences between Superman's home, Metropolis, and Batman's home, Gotham, are best described by Bill Boichel,

"The difference between Gotham and Metropolis succinctly summarizes the differences between the two superheroes. As current Batman editor Dennis O'Neil put it: 'Gotham is Manhattan below Fourteenth Street at 3 a.m., November 28 in a cold year. Metropolis is Manhattan between Fourteenth and One Hundred and Tenth Streets on the brightest, sunniest July day of the year'" (9).

These differences are especially key when discussing the style of the two films and the corresponding success of their adaptations. Finally, Batman has changed very much over the years while Superman has stayed the same, at least in appearance. Certainly Superman's powers grew as the years went by, he gained the ability to fly, see through walls and travel through time, but the basic themes stayed the same. Batman, on the other hand, had the elements of his mythos established very early. The Batmobile, the Batcave, the utility belt and the character of Robin are all introduced within the first several years of the Batman comics, however, the character changed radically through the years.

Batman began as a rather dark and macabre figure that inhabited the shadows and fought crime. Wright describes the early *Batman* comics drawn by Bob Kane as innovative and unique, calling them, "the *Citizen Kane* of comic books" (17). After a short time, however, Kane began to subcontract out the artwork and writing, simply overseeing the process and the quality began to decline. Over the years Batman changed with the times. In the 1940s and into the post war period, Batman was the same morally upstanding and righteous superhero that all the superheroes at the time were. By the Vietnam era, however, *Batman* had turned into a cartoon, with the character hunting Martians and using ray guns. This perhaps reflected the death of the hero in American culture, or perhaps it was simply a lack of talent or creativity in the comic book industry.

Even as *Batman* was becoming campy, much to the dismay of long time readers, DC was planning a *Batman* television show. The show would, however, be campy on purpose. According to Spiegel and Jenkins ABC actually promoted *Batman* as pop art in a swank debut for New York celebrities, including Andy Warhol, at the New York Theater (123). Warhol, of course, was the major figure in the pop/camp movement in the 1960s, famous for his colorful prints of Superman and Batman (along with Roy Lichtenstein). However much of a joke the television

series was meant to be, Arthur Berger points out that it established itself in American culture as a dominate text,

“For adults and for sophisticated types, who saw *Batman* as ‘camp,’ it was one more example of the death of the heroic. There were no heroes, and anyone who pretended to be one was not taken seriously. Still, for thousands of youngsters and less sophisticated adults, heroism was still possible, and Batman, despite his self mockery, was still a legitimate heroic figure” (169-70).

The importance of the series when discussing the changes in *Batman* that occurred later cannot be understated. Following the success of the *Superman* movie in 1978, Warner Brothers, who owned DC, decided that *Batman* was the next franchise to be made into a movie. The first step was to remake Batman for the children who watched the television series and who were now adults. In 1986 DC released *The Dark Knight Returns*, a radical reinterpretation of Batman by Frank Miller, a star artist known for his work on *Daredevil* at Marvel. Miller’s Batman was truly a dark knight, a retired, fifty five year old alcoholic in a Gotham overtaken by violence. The new Bruce Wayne is borderline psychotic and certainly obsessed. But *Dark Knight* did more than remake Batman, Eileen Meehan contends that it tested a new look for him,

“By issuing *Dark Knight Returns* in comic form, WCI [Warner Communications Incorporated] essentially test marketed a dark reinterpretation of Batman with an adult readership whose experience with the character would include the camp crusader of the 1960s” (53).

It is this reinterpretation of Batman that paved the way for the popularity of *Batman* in 1989, directed by Tim Burton. From the films’ opening scenes Burton establishes a Gotham that is never bright or sunny and a Batman whose primary weapon is fear, not clever gadgets or a

smarmy sidekick (though he does have a high tech and much promoted Batmobile). Gotham City is portrayed primarily through matte paintings, which show smog and a compliment the art deco set design that dominated the film (in every place except Wayne Manor, which was much more traditional). The films' superstar cast propelled it to box office records that summer and ushered in a decade of comic adaptations.

The decidedly Tim Burton look of the film is certainly important, especially in the opening scenes where we are introduced to a dark Gotham full of crime and a Batman who terrorizes two criminals who just stole the wallet of a man with his son and wife (a parallel to what happened to Bruce Wayne as a child). However, Tim Burton is not a particularly dynamic director, focusing more on art direction than on camera work or interesting editing. In this respect the film is very static and uninteresting and does not stand out as a good film like *Superman: The Movie* does. The leather clad Batman certainly does not bear much resemblance to the Batman of the 1960s, but he also bears little resemblance to the original Batman either, keeping the yellow circle and discarding the gray and black costume for all black. Burton does another thing that sets his interpretation apart as well; he ties The Joker and Batman's origins together, claiming that it was the Joker who killed Bruce's parents. This new take on the origin story of Batman, as well as the new look for many elements of the mythos (including the suit and the Batmobile) are what set *Batman* apart from other adaptations and one of the reasons it was so popular.

The Batman franchise did not stop there. Burton would later direct *Batman Returns* in 1992, which was, perhaps, a better film than the first, avoiding some of the campy effects and bad dialog of the first film. Joel Schumacher took over the franchise for two more films in 1995 and 1997. Also emerging out of "Batmania," as it was called, was the animated television series *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992), a critically acclaimed series that

incorporated Tim Burton's look into half-hour animated adventures. The series won an Emmy in 1993 for Outstanding Animated Program but soon brought on a new creative team and became decidedly more juvenile. The original seventy episodes standout as achievements in animation, however.

All the different takes on *Batman* even within one decade show Batman's depth as a study in this paper. The four films of the franchise that began in 1989 exhibit the powerful traits of auteur cinema according to Brooker, who points out that "*Batman* and *Batman Returns* are Tim Burton films before they are adaptations of any comic, while *Batman Forever* and *Batman and Robin* define themselves firstly as 'not a Tim Burton film'—Schumacher exhibiting less of a distinctive auteuristic style" (192).

The casts of characters throughout the films also create interesting questions. It seems that the casting of the latest *Batman* movie has taken on the excitement that James Bond once had. Who will play the next Batman and who will play the villain? Of course, the debate rages over whether the decisions were correct, especially when Michael Keaton, a comic actor, was cast in the role of Batman, an uncomic character. Unfortunately, the excitement has become so much so that the process has degraded into, as Richard Early puts it, "putting names into suits." Of course, animation overcomes many of these problems, allowing a character to look just like the comic book, but the variety of *Batman* texts that exist seems to make this as much of a problem as it does with live actors. Suffice it to say that no one will be entirely happy with Batman, but he will continue to be made.

### **Other Problems in Adapting a Comic Book**

The issue of casting is the next major problem in adapting a comic book. As I have discussed above, how does one arrive at an actor who will look like the comic character, or do they even need to? Animation would seem to solve those problems, but the different *Batman* and

*Superman* animated series all have distinct, if similar, character designs. Warren Beatty did not seem to fit the role of Dick Tracy, especially considering his age and the scandal that always seems to surround him. However, Christopher Reeve quickly became *the Superman* for a whole generation, maybe even two. And when casting a *Batman* movie, who will play the role of Batman seems as much a topic of debate as who will play the next villain. However, this problem seems inherent when adapting any visual medium, especially mass ones. It is the strength of the text that makes it stand out. Certainly Alan Alda does not look like Donald Sutherland, but they both successfully portrayed Hawkeye Pierce in two separate but both popular versions of *MASH*. If the actors are strong and the adaptation distinctive, the roles will fill themselves.

The next problem is that comic books are changing as time goes on. All the characters I have selected are at least seventy years old and all of them have undergone changes as they have aged. Certainly Bob Kane's *Batman*, television's *Batman* and Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns* all have a distinctive character in the role of Batman, but they are all Batmans. When adapting novel there is only one novel and it is done when it is published. Any reader can go to a bookstore and pick up a copy of *The Great Gatsby* and read the same book as one who read it in 1925 when it was originally published. However, if I pick up a current copy of *Detective Comics* at the comic book store, I am not reading the same *Batman* as someone who read it in 1939.

This leads to another problem that I have already discussed, which is the definition of adaptation. If we are to say that an adaptation is one text used in another form it implies that the text will be integrated on a variety of levels. This means that when a director adapts a novel he adapts the characters, story, locations, themes, and emotions in the film. Since the stories of the three characters reviewed here range over such a wide period of time and social changes, there is no one story that could be identified when writing a *Superman*, *Batman*, or *Dick Tracy* film. In

fact, any given adaptation may reflect the character as portrayed at the time. The 1950s *Superman* television show certainly reflected the sensibilities in comics in the 1950s, superheroes that responded in measured, formulaic ways and conformed to the rest of society (Wright 185). The *Batman* television show of the 1960s reflected distaste with the idea of heroes at all, while the *Batman* movie in 1989 seemed to come directly from Frank Miller's *Dark Knight Returns*. However, *Superman: The Movie*, with its heroic message and glossy production value, did not reflect the changes in comic books in the late 1970s, where Marvel Comics had followed Hollywood in depicting the tragic hero, much like Batman had been in 1939. All of this draws the idea of adaptation into question, as Brooker points out, "the recent film versions of Batman, like those before them, must strictly be regarded as free interpretations built around a basic framework, rather than adaptation as we currently understand the term. All of them, I will argue here, owe at least as much with regard to visual style, characterization and theme to their surrounding cultural context as to the actual Batman comics of their period" (186).

### **Conclusion...**

...Or lack thereof. The question of what an adaptation is and how to define it is one that may never be answered. Going into this paper with a clear idea of what it was and leaving with a significantly more muddled answer raises a whole new set of questions to be answered at another time. However, I did set out to discuss the problems inherent in an adaptation and how different films have dealt with the problems of comic language, casting characters, changing story lines and character portrayal, and adapting adaptations. Certainly *Superman: The Movie* proves that not trying to make a film a comic book is a successful strategy, as opposed to the more static direction style of Tim Burton in *Batman*. Burton, however, provides an interesting twist on creating a successful comic book adaptation, giving the viewer something they have never had before. What made Burton's film so popular is not only its superstar cast and Prince soundtrack,

but its new twist on an old story. The nature of comic books as a series of stories strung together makes it possible for a new author to give the viewer a new story and not have the viewers walk away feeling cheated, as they would if the author changed the end of a popular novel to suit the film. Ultimately, a successful adaptation comes down to the strength of not the adapted text, but of the final version. In an interview on the *X-Men* DVD Bryan Singer, the director of *X-Men* (2000) puts it best, “When adapting anything I think the most important thing is to take it seriously.” Ultimately the final product will speak for itself, but if the original is taken seriously, then not only will fans of the original be happy; people who come see the film without being familiar with the original can also enjoy it.

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