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The Evolution of Comic Book Movies:
An Exploration and Implementation of
Comic Books in Academia

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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Candidate for B.S. Degree
and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2014

Honors Capstone Project in Television, Radio, and Film

Capstone Project Advisor: _____
    Keith Giglio, Assistant Professor of TV/Radio/Film

Capstone Project Reader: _____
    Karen Hall, Assistant Honors Director

Honors Director: _____
    Stephen Kuusisto, Director

Date: April 16, 2014

Abstract

The following paper outlines my Capstone, which centers on the creation and implementation of a course focusing on the academic study and consumption of comic book movies and the comics they are based on. The study of this medium has been absent from classrooms for too long, and so, in the pages that follow, I have included a syllabus, sample lesson plans, and a detailed exploration of comic books and the films they inspire in an academic setting.

This paper includes research, analysis, and insight detailing the exploits of the class I taught in Fall 2013, HNR 210: The Evolution of the Comic Book Movie, and the aftermath and continued effects of the project today.

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Executive Summary

When picking a Capstone topic, one of the most important things to be sure to do is pick something that really matters to you down to your heart and soul. For my project, I combined the two things I am most passionate about in life: film and comic books. Film has become a love in the later half of my life, as my TV/Radio/Film major dictates the majority of my work here at Syracuse University as well as most of the extracurriculars I choose to participate in. The thrill of writing and creating films fits perfectly with my other love, my first love, comic books. From an early age (I'd say as early as I could read), I've been passionate about the costumed heroes and masked adventurers portrayed in comic books, starting with superheroes like Spider-Man and Batman and eventually branching out to creations like Hellboy and Watchmen. As I grew, so did the heroes on the page grow with me, creating a lifelong passion that trickles its way into every corner of my life.

One aspect of being a "comic book guy" that I've always enjoyed the most has been sharing the vast amount of information with others. I'm proud to have 'converted' a few friends into regular comics readers, including my roommate who you would never in a million years think of as the kind of guy excited to get home and read the latest copy of *She-Hulk*. When brainstorming for my capstone project, it was this desire to teach others that comics weren't just for kids anymore that fueled my foray into the world of teaching and into a year-long research project resulting in my first real paper.

Since I've essentially been studying comic books for the better part of fifteen years, I had a good head start when I began researching for the project, but first I had to decide exactly how I would tie in my desire to spread the comics agenda into my major, satisfying both the Honors and TRF requirements. My research and brainstorms led me to a decision: the design, implementation, and discussion of a class centered on comic book films and their significance in popular culture and society. Thus, I began to design HNR 210: The Evolution of the Comic Book Movie. Through this project, I would research the topic, select a vast array of films based on comic books, and organize them into a week-by-week syllabus. After deciding which films would be included, I also designed specific assignments designed to breed discussion, challenge the way students think, and explore the significance of comic books, graphic novels, and the comic book film community on society. Once the syllabus was complete, I looked into a few different options on how to spread the information. Initially, I had hoped the course could be offered as a TRF course, but without a teaching degree, that proved impossible. I also explored the possibility of teaching the class through iTunes University, an online multimedia-centric program that works like a video podcast and could be made available to the general public via Apple. However, I wanted to be able to directly interact with those I was teaching, allowing discussions to flow freely, and so I turned to Karen Hall to help make the classroom a physical environment rather than a virtual one. Cutting down red tape with might akin to the hammer of Thor, Karen was able to ensure that HNR 210

would be offered as a one-credit Honors course I would team-teach with Karen weekly.

By the summer of 2013, all the logistics had been laid out to prepare Syracuse for the newest class, one finally exploring comic books and culture. All that still needed to fall into place was the research, which took place over the summer break and continued to mount as the class began. Over the summer, I set up any accounts that the class would need to use and made a list of hard copies of comics that needed to be purchased. Karen informed me I'd be working with a budget of approximately $500, so I looked into the best way to obtain the films the class would need to watch as homework assignments, as well as how to best provide the class with the comic books paired with each film. In the end, I was able to find an answer to both problems using digital technology. Instead of working out of physical comic books, I set up a comiXology account which would allow me to purchase and read digital versions of almost any comic book from various companies. Because comiXology doesn't cap a limit on the number of devices that can share an account, I was able to give the username and password to each student, purchasing the books for them using the class budget. The students were then able to download and read the comics on their laptops, phones, and tablets. For the few books that weren't available digitally, I had students individually purchase copies from Amazon. The topic of digital vs. print comics, an important discussion in the industry, thus also became a point of interest to the class, which often preferred the old school paper method as well. As for the films, the majority of them were available for download digitally via

sites like iTunes or Amazon.com, and I was able to purchase the films and share them via Dropbox, a free service for sharing files among colleagues, for my students' access.

Once the actual class began in August, I had to set aside a few hours each week to prepare for that Wednesday's lesson, researching articles, video clips, interviews, and points of discussion for each class period. Using the syllabus as a guideline, I mapped each week out as it approached, swapping out traditional lesson plans for a more fluid approach that allowed the students to guide discussion in directions that most interested them. For example, during a later week of the course we discussed the 2000 film *X-Men*, which centers around Professor Charles Xavier and a group of powerful young "mutants," born with powers for which society persecutes them, and their quest to bring good to the world despite living a life of hatred. The film also features the villainous Magneto, a metal-controlling Holocaust survivor vying for world domination as an escape from persecution instead of Charles' route of peace. Since the X-Men are used so clearly as allegories for racism, sexism, and sexual persecution, it was easy to bring in outside sources and media to foster discussion. I paired the film with the classic X-Men graphic novel, *God Loves, Man Kills* by Chris Claremont, which finds the X-Men a target of religious persecution. Specific clips from the film as well as selected clips from other X-Men films and an interview with *X-Men* director Brian Singer were screened during the class as well. The class period would then consist of going around the room to talk through the subjects, with people jumping in and out of the discussion to make specific points. This all

created an environment of discussion around several different points, ensuring there was never a dull moment in class.

In addition to class discussions, there were also two specific assignments, one of which involved a presentation, as well as a few special occurrences as well. The first assignment centered around taking one of the movies assigned for the first half of the class and recreating its plot and style as if it were created in the 1970s or 1980s. The second assignment, my personal favorite, gave each student the opportunity to pitch to the class an idea for a new comic book movie centered around characters that have yet to be explored on the big screen. Each student presented to the class using powerpoints or other presentations methods to try to "sell" the class on their take on the film. The first special class event came in the form of a Skype interview with Carr D'Angelo, LA-based comic book store owner and former development executive at Universal who worked on projects like *The Hulk*. Students were allowed to ask Carr any questions they had about either industry and discuss Carr's involvement with *The Hulk* and experience owning a comic book store. The second special event was a field trip to Destiny USA, where students had the opportunity to experience *Thor: The Dark World* on the big screen, as well as visit the satellite comic book store "Play The Game, Read the Story." Students connected the sequel with the original, previously watched for class, and had the opportunity to purchase many collectibles and graphic novels.

As may be evidenced from the descriptions above, I considered the class a complete success. It worked not only as a type of in-depth focus group for my

paper, but also achieved the goals I'd set out at the start of the project. Eleven students who, in most cases, previously had little to no experience with comic books outside of popular films like *The Dark Knight*, had the chance to delve into the more academic and adult side of comics, learning that what makes a good story can come in forms other than traditional media. All of the students had positive feedback regarding the class, and many requested I teach a part two of the course. Just knowing that people benefited from the knowledge I imparted on them was a gift enough, and seeing my peers' eyes light up at mention of characters like Gwen Stacy or stories such as *The Killing Joke* is an incredible reward. Comic books are an important part of our cultural identity, and the movies that stem from their influence are an important part of the film industry. The chance to re-introduce these ideas to a college-aged audience was once-in-a-lifetime.

Acknowledgements

Before we embark on the journey ahead, I would like to sincerely thank everyone that has helped me get to this point in my career. Accomplishing this Capstone was not always easy, but it was extremely rewarding. So to Karen Hall, Keith Giglio, my parents, my friends, my grandparents, especially Grampa Chuck, who always inspired me to keep writing, and anyone else who has had a hand in keeping me grounded and keeping me on track to create such an amazing Capstone project- I couldn't have done it without you.

Thank you again and I hope you enjoy the product of four years' hard work. It was worth every second of it.

Advice to Future Honors Students

At some point, your Honors Capstone advisor is going to tell you to begin your project earlier than you think you need to. You will say to yourself, "That sounds like a lot of time, I don't have to start it yet. I'm golden."

You will be wrong.

Hop to it, and godspeed.

Chapter 1

Introduction: A Journey Into Mystery

In the months before my transition from top of the class, top of the world high school senior to overwhelmingly ambitious freshmen at Syracuse University, the coldest place on Earth (and to my mother, it seemed, the farthest from home), I was invited to join the prestigious few in the SU Honors Program. I remember very clearly being psyched about what the program had to offer: the offbeat courses, the experimental teaching styles, the immersion of the program with the rest of campus life- in fact, I was totally excited about everything except one small part. The capstone. To a young me, the capstone project seemed a task so daunting; it was nearly impossible to be accomplished. I remember the Honors department describing the depths that people had gone to for their capstones, everything from researching in Africa to spending hours in a scientific laboratory, and even one case where someone designed and built a new type of saddle as their project.

Saddles? Science? Africa? How could I use my expertise knowledge as a newly proclaimed Broadcast Journalism major to complete any project that even soared anywhere *near* the scope of these things? I was in shock, to say the least, but those who know me know, I've never been one to back down from a

challenge. And so I set course on my Honors journey, knowing the capstone lay in my horizon.

Three years later, and my life and the studies I pursued had changed drastically. No longer was I a confused Broadcast major, but now a confident TV/Radio/Film major, excited at the prospect of a professional screenwriting career, excited by travels afar and abroad, and... *still* intimidated by the idea of the Honors capstone. With a semester of traveling in LA set at the same time most people are beginning the key planning period for their capstones, I knew I had to buckle down, work extra hard, and come up with an idea.

Finding the idea was a tough process at first. If I was going to pour my heart and soul into a project, I wanted it to be something worthwhile; something I not only cared about but that I also felt fulfilled completing. I needed something that would mean as much to others as it did to me. And then, as I took a break from thinking, I knew what topic I would want to study more than any other I'd studied before- comic books.

As a fan of comics for as long as I can remember, my head was teeming with ideas of what I could do with my passion. I knew a key aspect of the project would be to tie the comics idea to my TRF degree, and since films based on comic books have all but conquered the action film market in recent years, plans began to formulate in my mind. Since in my mind a key part of the capstone included helping others, I began to ask myself how I could create a project that was a shared experience rather than something more personal. I knew I didn't *just* want to do research; I wanted to share that research with the world. I got to

thinking about the courses I'd taken at Syracuse, and realized while I've taken

tons of classes using classic novels, scholarly articles, movies, television, and

even YouTube videos as teaching tools, the entire comics medium is almost

completely overlooked. Sure, a few courses used allegorical Holocaust memoir

Maus or the graphic novel format as ways to make the class seem more enticing,

but no one really delved into the medium in a way I always envisioned, noticeably

avoiding the structure of the stories and how they translate to modern audiences.

Even the course I took on The Middle East in Graphic Novels didn't capture the

true essence of the medium. Comics often get a bad rap as being "just for kids" or

lowbrow, but in the modern era, that is not the case. If only there were a way to

help spread the word about the legitimacy of comic books, how they affect our

culture, how they translate into the field of study I plan to make a career out of,

and how we identify with them as people… if only there were some project that

could work as this exact outlet…

Once the idea began to form in my head, the proceedings came to me very

naturally. One way or another, there needed to be a class at Syracuse University

that educated students about comic book culture and introduced them to the

source material behind some of the most popular films of the past decades.

Classes like this exist at other film schools and other universities, and there was

no reason Syracuse should be left out of the field. Film departments at the

University of Western Ontario (Special Topics 1) and UCLA already have

programs exploring comic book culture, but I wanted to take that to the next level

when expanding the class to Syracuse (Scott 1). Comics are a medium that has

been weaved into our culture for decades, and with their leap into the film industry, the influence of comics is stronger than ever. Film classes exist at Syracuse centering on horror movies, *Star Wars*, comedies, and dramas, so it seems almost obvious that one of the most popular genres of modern cinema be given the same amount of dedication. With a rich print background to draw from, the comic book industry was ripe for study.

I knew that no matter how it played out, taking on this project meant it would fall to my shoulders to study the medium academically and to design the way it could be introduced in a classroom. I'd known since freshmen year that a massive capstone paper was in my future… but I never dreamed that part of my project would allow me to teach a course on the subject I am most passionate about as well.

In the early days of my idea, I was quick to bring my concept to Michael Schoonmaker, chair of the TRF department. I knew what I wanted to do would be unprecedented, but, having a decent relationship with Professor Schoonmaker, I thought I might be able to talk him into the ide-

"No."

Before I could even finish the thought, I was shot down. No student has ever been a professor of a Newhouse course, there was no way I could teach it, it sounded like a cool idea, but I should find something new to focus my efforts on.

Not a chance. I had already set my sights on this project, and by this point, I didn't want to stop at just designing a class, researching the subject, and presenting it in a paper- I wanted to implement the course right here at Syracuse. The more I got excited about the project and the topic, the more I pushed my way through people and paperwork to get the ball rolling. Until I was assigned an Honors capstone correspondent, I spoke exclusively to Hannah Richardson in the world of Honors. Hannah directed me to Kate Hanson, who directed me further to someone who turned out to be the perfect match for the project, Karen Hall. Karen was immediately receptive to the idea of my passion for comics manifesting itself in a class, and gave me several possible timelines that might play out. One scenario was to use iTunes U, a type of virtual teaching method accessible to anyone looking to learn about specific topics taught by experts in the field. Karen initially steered me toward this path, hoping that I could jump-start the Honors program's involvement in iTunes U, but the second option she presented to me appealed to me even more. Karen said that there was a small chance the class could be cleared as a 1-credit course offered by Honors, "team-taught" with a professor at the university. In other words, that professor would be the professor of record, was and would mentor me as I became skilled enough to command the classroom. My first instinct was to go to a TRF professor as my co-teacher, linking the project back to my major and bringing my academic advisor on board as well. I approached Keith Giglio with the idea. Professor Giglio was immediately enticed at the idea of co-teaching with me, but unfortunately, the department was again bound by the fact that I do not, nor will I in the near future,

have a teaching degree, or any degree for that matter. Keith agreed to stay on the project as my advisor, but couldn't co-teach the class with me. When I returned to Karen, nervous about the state of the project without a partner, she made me the offer that would turn the hypothetical into reality. And so, Karen went to bat for me with the Honors department, going through whatever red tape she had to and pulling as many strings as blocked our path until finally, we had a plan. HNR 210, The Evolution of the Comic Book Movie came to be, a one-credit fifteen-week quest born of passion and the desire to spread knowledge of one of America's oft-forgotten mediums to the collegiate world. And better yet, at Karen's suggestion, would officially be offered as a Fall 2013 course instead of the initial plan for it to be taught in the spring. Finally I knew that I would have *plenty* to write about.

Chapter 2

Designing a Syllabus: A Tale to Astonish

Once I'd decided that a majority of my project would be based around the design and implementation of a class/focus group, it was time to go hard to work at deciding the specifics of the course. It is important to not that the approach I took with the course design was a personal one, meaning my decisions were highly motivated by what I (as a student) would enjoy learning about. I felt that my perspective as a current student would give me a sort of edge as I would be able to connect with students' interests in a way I might not have as an older individual. Of course, my decisions were far from random. Successful comic book films were put at the top of my list, while less successful films were moved to the bottom. Culturally important films were also given precedence, giving low box-office earners like *Ghost World* an equal shot at the syllabus. Often, my personal tastes aligned with critical perceptions of the films, which I took as another qualification to justify my role as a teacher. With such a vast library of both comic books and movies based on them at my disposal, I had a lot of work ahead of me. In fact, perhaps the most challenging part of the pre-production of the project was narrowing down the amount of sheer information that could be compressed into a course. Since I would only be teaching a one-credit course, I

was limited by the time constraints of one 80-minute meeting each week for

discussion and challenged by creating a course load that was engaging but not

overbearing. I decided to begin by deciding which movies out of the vast array of

choices would be best suited for the class. I discovered a pretty comprehensive list

compiled on ComicBookMovie.com, a site I often frequent for comics news and

clips, which gave me a palate with which to start painting (1). From the hundreds

of movies listed, I was able to narrow the list down to only the most important

films, which turned out to be a whopping sixty-four titles, ordered by year. Once I

compiled the list, I also attempted to find a comic to pair with the film, based on a

variety of sources, from prior knowledge, comiXology.com, and the International

Movie Database. The initial list was as follows:

1. Batman (1966)**
2. **Superman (1979)-** Action Comics #1
3. **Superman II (1980)-** Action Comics #306, Superman: Last Son, General Zod (pair with Man of Steel?)
4. **Swamp Thing (1982**)- Swamp Thing #1-3, Swamp Thing #21
5. Superman III (1983)
6. **Howard the Duck (1986)-** Howard the Duck Magazine #6, Spider-Man: Back in Quack #1
7. Superman IV: The Quest for Peace (1987)
8. **Batman (1989)-** The Killing Joke, Detective Comics #27
9. The Punisher (1989)
10. **Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles (1990)-** Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles Black and White Classics Vol. 1
11. Captain America (1990)- Interview, Clean Air Act 1990 (tie to Cap movie)
12. Batman Returns (1992)
13. The Fantastic Four (1994)- tie to FF movie
14. **The Mask (1994)-** The Mask Omnibus Volume 1
15. Batman Forever (1995)
16. **Judge Dredd (1995)** - clips
17. **Batman & Robin (1997)-** Scathing Roger Ebert Review, A Good Mr. Freeze New 52 Story
18. Spawn (1997)
19. **Blade (1998**)- Blade First Appearance, What Blade Evolved Into

20. **X-Men (2000)-** Article
21. Blade II (2002)
22. **Spider-Man (2002)-** Spider-Man: Death of the Stacys, Spidey's Origin, Stan Lee Interview
23. **Daredevil (2003)-** Frank Miller's The Man Without Fear
24. X2: X-Men United (2003)- God Loves, Man Kills (paired with X-Men)
25. Hulk (2003)
26. **The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen (2003)-** Moore Article, Vol. 1
27. **Hellboy (2004)**-** Hellboy: Seed of Destruction #1-4
28. **Spider-Man 2 (2004)-** Roger Ebert Review, Spidey #3, Spidey #12
29. Catwoman (2004)
30. Blade: Trinity (2004)
31. Constantine (2005)
32. Elektra (2005)
33. **Batman Begins (2005)-** Batman: Year One
34. **Fantastic Four (2005)-** Ultimate Doom, FF#5
35. **V for Vendetta (2005)-** V for Vendetta
36. **Sin City (2005)-** Sin City
37. X-Men: The Last Stand (2006)- (with X-Men)
38. Superman Returns (2006)- clips
39. Ghost Rider (2007)
40. Spider-Man 3 (2007)- (with Spider-Man 2)
41. Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer (2007)- clips of cloud vs galactus
42. **300 (2007)-** 300
43. **Iron Man (2008)-** Modern Iron Man
44. **Wanted (2008)-** Wanted Vol. 1
45. **The Incredible Hulk (2008)-** Hulk: Gray
46. Hellboy II: The Golden Army (2008)
47. **The Dark Knight (2008)-** Batman: The Long Halloween
48. Punisher: War Zone (2008)
49. **Watchmen (2009)-** Watchmen
50. X-Men Origins: Wolverine (2009)
51. **Scott Pilgrim Vs. The World (2010)-** Scott Pilgrim Color Vol. 1
52. **Kick-Ass (2010)-** Kick-Ass #1-8
53. Iron Man 2 (2010)
54. Jonah Hex (2010)
55. Cowboys and Aliens (2011)
56. **Thor (2011)**-** ???????
57. **X-Men: First Class (2011)-** Article, Review, Uncanny X-Men #161 (If Available)
58. **Green Lantern (2011)-**
59. **Captain America: The First Avenger (2011)**-** Avengers #4
60. **The Avengers (2012)-** Avengers #1, Joss Whedon Comics
61. The Amazing Spider-Man (2012)
62. **The Dark Knight Rises (2012)-** The Dark Knight Returns, Batman #497
63. Dredd (2012)

64. Iron Man 3 (2013)- Extremis
65. Kick-Ass 2 (2013)
66. The Wolverine (2013)
67. Man of Steel (2013)- Superman: Birthright

After considering the list and remembering that I would be restricted to a fifteen-week course, I realized that including all of these films would mean the students would have to complete over four films a week, plus the assigned reading attached to the films. Even for an Honors course, this would not be viable, especially not for a one-credit. The elimination period had to begin, but where to start? Would I limit the class to superhero comics? How far back should I start? Would I include films like *300* or *Ghost World*, based on graphic novels outside the superhero genre? Where did movies like *Blade* or *Howard the Duck* fit into our area of study? The very fact that these questions came up is yet another testament to the expansive nature of study available in the field of comics. Historical dramas like *300* can mix with indie explorations of everyday life in *Ghost World*, and they can all be stuck together with Spider-Man's webs and Superman's cape. In few other mediums is there such a vast freedom from rules and conventions that allows for an unlimited jolt of creativity.

In the end, I decided to go with a mix of genres, a mix of time periods, and a grouping of films I thought would elicit different types of conversations in the classroom and beyond. Because the goal of the class included a learning environment for my students as well as for me as a teacher, it was important to include as wide a range of topics as possible. The goals of the class orbited around furthering the study of the medium through learning about the how

of comics, the why of comics, and the what of comics, which meant we would study the books and movies both academically and from the viewpoint of an audience. Personally, I was interested in learning how well I could connect with people on the subject and what I could learn about the academic consumption of the genre by looking at it as an educator, thus distancing myself from the fandom and being more objective. The study of comics is hard to justify, but this class would reflect that it is indeed a worthy cause. Perhaps Angela Ndalianis put it best at the opening of her article in Cinema Journal.

Asking the question 'Why Comics Studies?' is like asking the question 'Why Cinema, Television, Game, or Media Studies?' As a medium, comics are older than film, television, and video games, and yet there has been resistance from within the academy to the serious study and analysis of this medium" (Ndalianis 13).

Through my class, I would attempt to prove that the more difficult path, although less traveled, could be the most fruitful. Thus, the syllabus needed to embody the very idea of comics, and I initially decided that a good way to bookmark the course would be to open and close it with a Superman movie, since his image is perhaps most universally associated with the genre. Narrowing it down to twenty-three of the best comic book movies, I sent my preliminary list and comics pairings off to Karen for evaluation.

1. **Superman (1979)-** Action Comics #1
2. **Howard the Duck (1986)-** Howard the Duck Magazine #6, Spider-Man: Back in Quack #1
3. **Batman (1989)-** The Killing Joke, Detective Comics #27
4. **Batman & Robin (1997)-** Scathing Roger Ebert Review, A Good Mr. Freeze New 52 Story
5. **Blade (1998)-** Blade First Appearance, What Blade Evolved Into
6. **X-Men (2000)-** Article
7. **Spider-Man (2002)-** Spider-Man: Death of the Stacys, Spidey's Origin, Stan Lee Interview

8. **Hellboy (2004)**-** [Hellboy: Seed of Destruction #1-4](#)
9. **Spider-Man 2 (2004)-** [Roger Ebert Review](#), [Spidey #3](#), [Spidey #12](#)
10. **Batman Begins (2005)-** [Batman: Year One](#)
11. **Sin City (2005)-** [The Hard Goodbye](#), [That Yellow Bastard](#)
12. **300 (2007)-** [300](#)
13. **Iron Man (2008)-** [Modern Iron Man](#)
14. **Wanted (2008)-** [Wanted Vol. 1](#)
15. **The Incredible Hulk (2008)-** [Hulk: Gray](#)
16. **The Dark Knight (2008)-** [Batman: The Long Halloween](#)
17. **Watchmen (2009)-** [Watchmen](#)
18. **Kick-Ass (2010)-** [Kick-Ass #1-8](#)
19. **Thor (2011)**-** ???????
20. **X-Men: First Class (2011)-** [Article](#), [Review](#), [Uncanny X-Men #161 (If Available)](#)
21. **The Avengers (2012)-** [Avengers #1](#), [Joss Whedon Comics](#)
22. **The Dark Knight Rises (2012)-** [The Dark Knight Returns](#), [Batman #497](#)
23. **Man of Steel (2013)-** [Superman: Birthright](#)

Once again, my over-eagerness had gotten the best of me. As Karen pointed out, the current plan would require that my students would have to watch and discuss two movies each week, which, when combined with a full schedule, can be a lot to ask. I decided to drop a few of the films and combine some weeks so that, for example, clips of *Batman & Robin* would be viewed in class the same week as *Batman* was assigned as homework. This would help to even out the pace of the class as well as make the classroom itself a multimedia experience.

Eventually, I was able to narrow down which works would make it to the final syllabus. I included mostly superhero films, but also some indie films based on comics, a fantasy/horror film, and a noir. I wanted to cater the films to a diverse group of people to keep the class interesting. As the great director Frank Capra said, "Film is one of the three universal languages; the other two mathematics and music." Math isn't for me, and music isn't my specialty, but

by choosing what films to expose to a group of young people, I would be able to make an impact on both their lives and the industry. With that in mind, I created my final syllabus, which remained mostly intact throughout the class. The basic design of the syllabus follows the following format. For each week of the class, I mapped out a movie and a paired reading, usually linking to comiXology or available for purchase on Amazon. I also incorporated the descriptions of two papers required for the class, a field trip to see a current comic book movie (November's *Thor: The Dark World*), and the criteria for how the class would be graded by Karen based on my evaluations of their effort at the close of the semester. The syllabus is not overly detailed, but rather serves as a brief overview of what each week will entail. This allowed the class to flow and change according to students' interests and needs. The initial syllabus is as follows:

The Evolution of the Comic Book Movie

HNR 210 M003: Wednesdays, 12:45-2:05
Instructors Mike Rogers (mcrogers@syr.edu) & Karen Hall
(kjhall@syr.edu)

Course Description: Engage in a world of wonder and creativity as we explore the cultural, social, and entertainment values of prominent films based on comic books. From the carefree 1970's *Superman* to the politically charged *Iron Man* and even the dream movie *The Avengers*, this course seeks to offer students a broader knowledge of how comic books are successfully adapted into feature films. Students will develop the skills to critically read a comic book through the study of key issues and selected graphic novels, as well as how to deconstruct comic book films from the 1970's to today. The course will also explore politics, changing audiences, special effects, and cultural-societal shifts throughout the duration of the semester.

Unit 1: The Birth of Legends

For Week 1.
- Introductions and Prologue
- How to Use ComiXology

For Week 2.
- Read Action Comics #1, *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud (available as pdf on Blackboard)
- Watch **Superman (1979)**

For Week 3.
- Read Spider-Man: Back in Quack #1
- Watch **Howard the Duck (1986)**

For Week 4.
- Read The Killing Joke, Detective Comics #27
- Watch **Batman (1989)**
- Watch clips from **Batman & Robin (1997)-** Review and Ice Puns

Unit 2: Earning Some Respect
For Week 5.
- Read Article, God Loves Man Kills
- Watch **X-Men (2000)**
- Watch clips from **X2: X-Men United** and **X-Men: The Last Stand**- Plastic Prison, Juggernaut, and The Dark Phoenix

For Week 6.
- Read Ghost World
- Read Article on Indie Comics
- Watch **Ghost World (2001)**

For Week 7.
- Read Death of the Stacys, Spidey's Origin, Stan Lee Interview
- Watch **Spider-Man (2002)**
- Watch clip from **Spider-Man 2 (2004)-** Train Scene

For Week 8.

- Read Hellboy: Seed of Destruction #1-4
- Watch **Hellboy (2004)****

For Week 9.
- Read That Yellow Bastard
- Watch **Sin City (2005)**

Assignment #1: Choose from one of the movies above and write a short 500-word paper on what the movie might have looked like had it been conceived sometime between 1970 and 1985.

Unit 3: Connected Worlds in a Modern Age
For Week 10.
- Read Modern Iron Man Vol. 1
- Watch **Iron Man (2008)**

For Week 11.
- Read The Dark Knight Returns,
- Watch **The Dark Knight (2008)**
- **Viewing**- **Batman: Year One (2011)**

For Week 12.
- Read Watchmen
- Watch **Watchmen (2009)**

For Week 13.
- Read Kick-Ass #1-8
- Watch **Kick-Ass (2010)**

For Week 14.
- Read Article, Review, Uncanny X-Men #161
- Watch **X-Men: First Class (2011)**

For Week 15.
- Read Avengers #1, Joss Whedon Comics
- Watch **The Avengers (2012)**

Final Project: Research a comic book property that has not yet been turned into a film. Then, create a proposal for how to translate the property from the page to the screen! Be sure to reference specific inspirations and explain why you think your film would be a good addition to the super hero film canon.

Field Trip! (November 7)
- Watch **Thor (2010)**
- Dinner & A Movie: Watch **Thor: The Dark World (2013)** at midnight showing in Destiny USA

Grading

Because of the nature of this course along with the constraints of the meeting times, it is doubly important that you **come prepared to participate**. Since a majority of the discussions in this course pertain to movies and readings assigned outside the classroom, please make sure to have watched and read all assigned work **before** each week's class.

Remember, with great power there must also come great responsibility- and as long as you take on that responsibility, I am confident we will have an amazing semester.
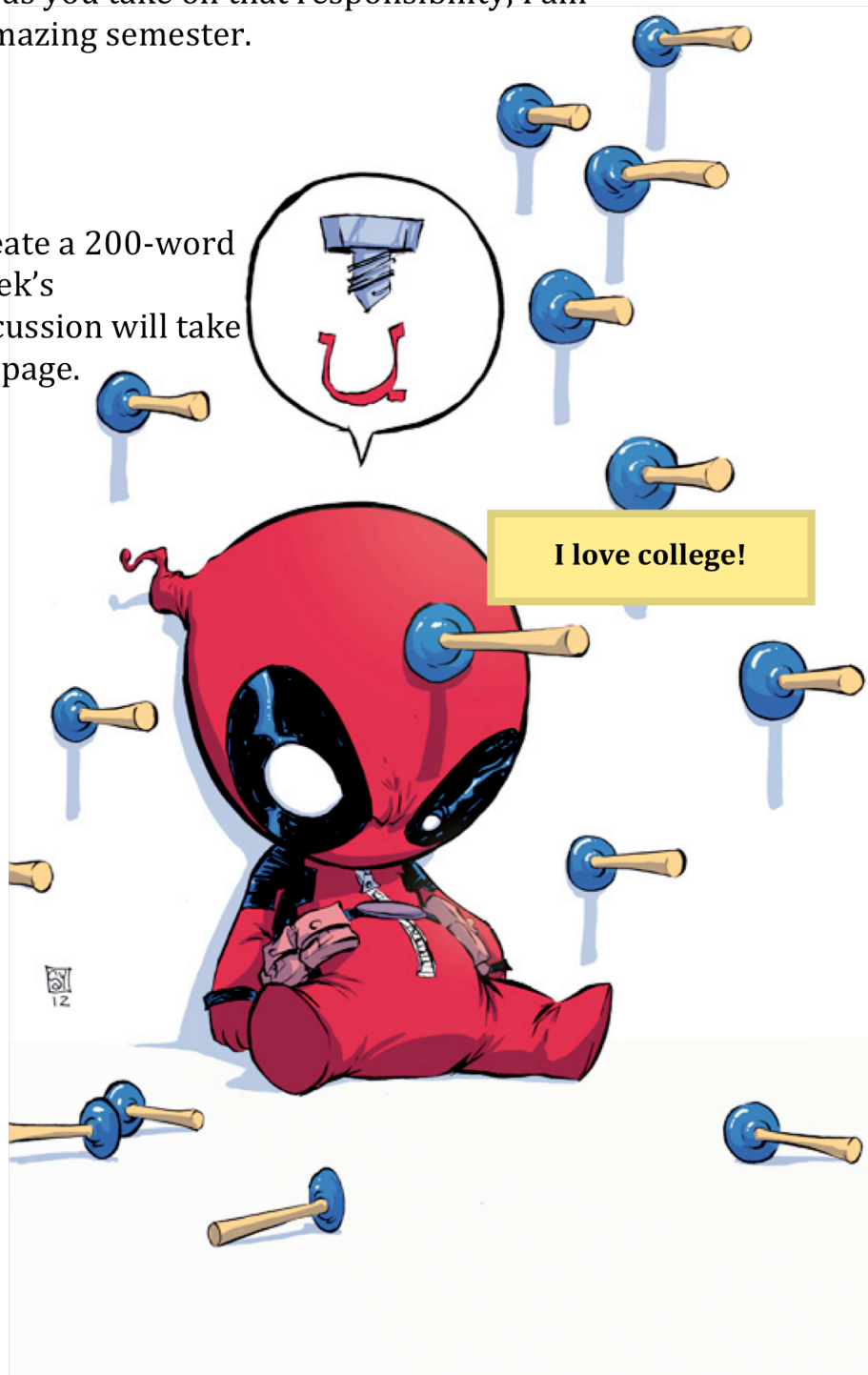
Participation- 40%

Weekly Blog Posts- 30%
Each week, students will create a 200-word blog post reacting to the week's films and readings. This discussion will take place on the class Facebook page.

Assignment #1- 10%

Final Project- 20%

Chapter 3

Research: Tales of Suspense

After deciding that my project would be based around the academic study of comic books and their film counterparts, it became clear that a massive job was ahead of me- research. Although I pride myself on holding a great deal of comic book knowledge from a lifetime of dumping less important information (like math skills) to make way for secret identities and back stories, that would only get me part of the way. With that in mind I began my investigations into the academic world of comic books. Although fruitful, this research proved to be the most difficult part of my journey, as knowledge of the subject academically is significantly more limited than more traditional media studies. Textbooks upon textbooks have been written about film studies and television tropes, but to research comics, a different source is needed. The interesting thing about comic book history is that a simple Google search won't result in the type of valid research needed for an academic paper. While sites like Marvel.com or ComicBookResources.com certainly proved to be useful tools for teaching about characters, news events, and general discussion, to get to the academic side I had to venture to a place I haven't physically entered since the dawn of the Internet Age- the library.

Sometimes our generation forgets how easy they have it in regards to research and general access to knowledge. Upon digging deep into the databases at the library, I was reminded what it must have been like to live without Google. Card catalogues, database searches, and human interaction were key components to finding the types of articles and databanks necessary to make my work more official. Upon conferring with the Honors department, I met with one of the Honors librarians in Bird Library, Abby Kasowitz-Scheer, as well as the Communications librarian, Michael Pasqualoni. Abby was especially helpful and pointed me in the direction of a few different journals and "SULinks" that helped me easily discover articles for the class to discuss. For example, Abby pointed me toward discussions I hadn't previously considered. For example, the debate between digital and print comics has been raging throughout the community, but I would never have thought I'd be able to find scores of pages written in a thesis paper about it. Studying "Do Fans Own Digital Comic Books?: Examining the Copyright and Intellectual Property Attitudes of Comic Book Fans," a thesis from the University of Colorado at Boulder, I had a whole new lecture topic to work with (Bell 1). Not only could I explain the differences between the two forms, which are quite large, considering they display the same content, I could also discuss the value of comic books and the collector's role in the industry. Think about the uproar from society about the introduction of the Kindle and it might be easier to picture how different a feel digital comics have than print material. Gone are the days of two-page spreads, as the tablet's format is much more suited to reading one page at a time. The suspense of turning a final page, the placement of

advertisement breaks in print, and just about every other physical difference

creates an utterly unique experience for digital readers. In fact, some comics, like

Marvel's "Infinite" line are released only in digital format and cater to the

transitional effects that comiXology's technology offers (Yehl 1). The differences

between print and digital also matter significantly to the collector. Comics can

often be valued at high prices, especially books that came out before 1970. This

collector factor disappears completely with digital comics, as there is no physical

product sold, and thus, no limitation on how many issues may be printed.

Unlimited products make for a poor supply and demand. In fact, purchasing a

digital comic does not even imply ownership of the comic, but just the right to

read a downloadable version of it, as per many digital comics sites' terms and

conditions (Brothers 1). Thus, print comics, especially #1 issues or older books,

are much more desirable to collectors. Interestingly enough, the recent marketing

tactic of labeling books as "first issues" is a clear sign of an exploitation of this

phenomenon, as parodied by Robert Kirkman's *Invincible #101*.

Source: Invincible 101, © Image Comics

Since we would be working with both digital and physical copies of reading

material, an article like Bell and Steven's thesis served as support for the lesson

plans I had already scheduled.. Using the idea of these "fan identity politics",

discussed heavily in the research paper, I was able to use my class as a focus

group to explore collector attitudes to comics. For example, I found that a handful

of my students had no opposition toward digital comics reading, especially when

using a tablet rather than a laptop. The majority of them, however, much preferred

reading physical copies of the books. Some of the students enjoyed having the

books as part of their collection on a physical bookshelf rather than in a digital

realm, while others found the art simply "worked better" on paper, especially in

regards to art taking up two pages ("two-page spreads"). All of this discussion in

the classroom was possible because I found a single article that branched my

thinking off into directions it might not have gone without it.

Other works served to help me construct my style of teaching and my

approach on comics as an academic medium. For example, Thomas Lamarre, fan

culture expert and Major Undergraduate Program Director in the Department of

East Asian Studies at McGill, warned that many academic studies of comics

"rather than grapple seriously with the 'how' of comics tend to dwell on the

'what' of comics" (Smith 138). The stories in comics mean more than just a

superhero fighting a supervillain. Deeper issues fill the pages of comics and need

to be explored. Take the cover of 1941's *Captain America Comics #1* for

example. A casual observer might only see a silly costumed hero punching Adolf

Hitler in the face, but it's so much more than that. A comics scholar needs to think

about what that punch means, not just to the story culturally as well. 1941 was the

start of World War II, and Captain America was a character largely created to

instill morale and patriotism in the American people, much like war bonds were used to support the troops. That punch, which occurred about nine months before America officially entered WWII, says a lot about the cultural opinions of the American people at the time and their support for the cause. Captain America represents America, and the punch to the face serves as a sort of call to action for the American people. If Captain America could take out the biggest real-life villain of the century with a punch, then surely America's involvement in the war could put an end to the Nazi threat. The fall in sales and ultimate cancellation of *Captain America* in the 1950's is evidence of the cultural effect that interlocks comics with public opinion (Jourdain 1). Topics like this were now definitively on the table for discussion in class.

Source: Marvel.com

Smith's snarky interview with Lamarre and fellow scholars Scott Baukatman and Thomas Andrae helped to put in perspective some of the problems with comics study and also helped me to separate my fandom from my

duty to academia. It also influenced the way I would attempt to focus on the balance of studying artwork with writing. As a writer, the writing in a comic book has always been most important to me. If the story is there, it keeps my interest. However, the artwork is often just as important to the story as the words. In fact, especially in the 1960's, the artist sometimes created entire characters, such as the Silver Surfer, titular star of the 2007 Fox film *Fantastic 4: Rise of the Silver Surfer*. In the Surfer's case, Jack Kirby drew his character into several panels without Stan Lee ever writing it into the script (Parker 1). The difficulty of critically discussing such artwork, which I anticipated facing, was also discussed by Baukatman in Smith's interview:

> I can describe a shot in loving, evocative language far more easily than I can a comics sequence… Then there's the problem of the denotative level, which is to say that all this fabulous artwork and dynamic layout and design is at the service of a battle scene between Iron Man and Submariner. It's difficult to make that matter in a work of scholarship— much safer to write about the political allegory of *Civil War…* Perhaps McCloud was on to something when he opted to theorize comics in comics form. (Smith 141-142)

Within Baukataman's proposed problem lay an answer that had been in the back of my mind all along- Scott McCloud. With that in mind, I dug up my old syllabus from an ETS class I enrolled in my junior year, The Middle East in Graphic Novels. While the course focused more on the Middle East's history than it did on the graphic novel format, I did come away with one useful piece of information from it, and that was the knowledge imparted onto me by McCloud's *Understanding Comics*. McCloud's graphic novel has the unusual gift of explaining a medium through the very same medium, using illustrations and descriptions that couldn't be completely understand through text alone. McCloud

does a masterful job at explaining how to read a comic book for pleasure as well
as for study. McCloud lends to the class the introduction to the artistic aspects of
comics I personally focused on less, and often we would draw back to the work as
a source of discussion when discussing works where the artwork played the most
important role. McCloud reminds us that "simple elements can combine in
complex ways, as atoms become molecules and molecules become life"
(McCloud 45). In the two following pages, McCloud creates a highly visual
representation of comics and the interlacing nature of words and art that truly
helps break the boundaries between the two. McCloud places words into places
on the page a reader wouldn't expect, using text to build images, and vice-versa.
By mixing up the traditional methods of comics, he is able to show their
versatility and the creative potential that lies within the medium, in images like
the one below.
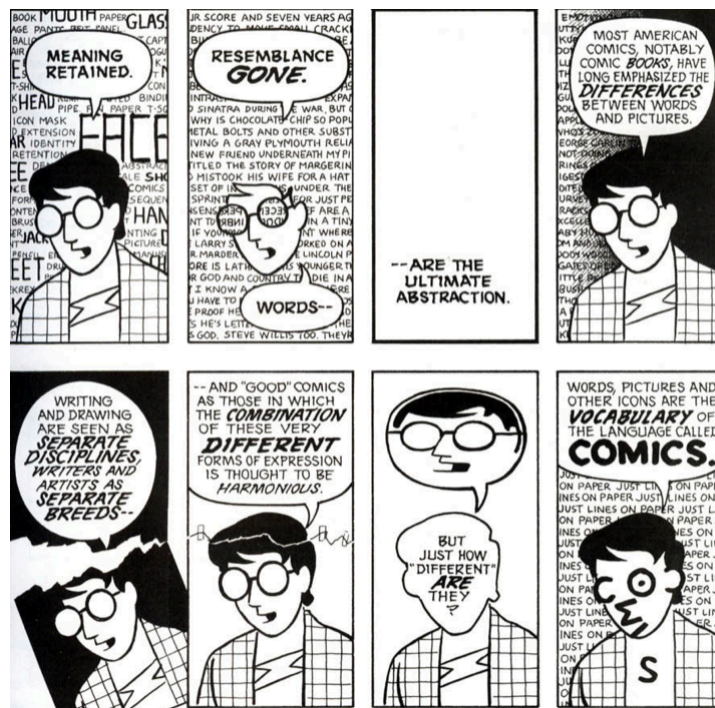
As a scholar of comics, these pages (McCloud 45-47) were groundbreaking, revolutionizing the way I read comics critically and enhancing how I read them for pleasure.

By searching through databases, I was able to harvest a variety of resources with which to teach, including documents on the transition from comics page to screen, background on origins of characters, and critical readings of specific books. Using a combination of background knowledge, research, and the films and comic books themselves, I was able to compile a vast amount of sources that influenced the way my class functioned and the reflection on the project that followed.

Chapter 4

The Class: Avengers Assemble!

The syllabus had been planned, the research done, and finally, on August 28, it was time for the class itself to begin. Dressed smartly and briefcase in hand, I nervously washed my face in the bathroom of Tolley Hall minutes before class was to begin. I approached the door, and as my future students began filling the eleven seats of the room, I felt the first day nerves dwindle and the professionalism arrive. The tingle of "But I'm just a student!" gave way to a burst of "I know this! I've done the research! This is why I'm here! I'm wearing a sports coat, for gods' sakes!" And with that, the class had begun. Although for the majority of the class I simply used clips, interviews, and specific scenes to plan out the sessions, my first lesson plan looked something like this:

Lesson Plan 8/28/13

Introductions

- Introduction to course
- Introductory Game- Two Truths and a Lie
- Review of the syllabus

ComiXology Review

- Introduction to comiXology

- How to Read a Comic

- Guided View

<u>Understanding Comics</u>

- Key points

- Favorite panels

- Ensure everyone "understands" *Understanding*

<u>Syllabus</u>

- Review of the Syllabus

- Course Expectations

- Discuss Movies, Readings System

- Give choice of 1/11th cost or sharing

<u>Questions/Concerns</u>

<u>Assign Homework</u>

- *Superman*, Action Comics #1

For a first lecture, I'll admit the class went surprisingly well. I had taken the foresight to send out McCloud's *Understanding Comics* to the class before the first meeting so that we would have a topic of discussion from the very start, setting the precedent that this would be a class where we would maximize as much time as possible. Much of the first class was spent, for me, figuring out exactly how to balance that time effectively, getting to know the students and garnering an idea of their personalities, and trying *very* hard to impress both

Karen and myself. In these aspects, I was met with near complete success. I made

a seating chart and had learned everyone's names by the next week

(miraculously), gauging their interest level and their knowledge of comic books

by their introductions. This was crucial to the class as it molded the way I taught

in the future, as a need for further explanation into characters, events, and comics

lingo proved necessary to include some members of the class in the conversation.

I was surprised to find that initially all but one student were not regular comic

book fans. In fact, a few students were only vaguely familiar with many of the

films on the syllabus. While this was a shock to me, it just meant that I had a lot

more room to drive discussions based around subjects foreign to my students,

about which they were eager to learn. For at least one student, *Understanding*

Comics was the first actual comic book they had read, and so I was very happy to

have started them off with a sort of "manual" for navigating the course. I also

spent a portion of the first lesson discussing how to navigate comiXology, a

crucial portion to the class, which everyone seemed to catch onto pretty quickly.

In addition, I addressed the method of acquiring the films needed to be watched in

the class, giving the students the choice to utilize two separate iTunes accounts

and paying a small fee to view some of the films, or using one account and

scheduling what computers could use the account and at what time. They chose

the sharing route, and eventually, the students even began sharing their own

copies of DVDs and digital films with the rest of the class, simplifying the

process. After giving out all the essential passwords and assigning their first

homework assignment (1979's *Superman* paired with Action Comics #1), I

dismissed the class. Although the first class concluded about fifteen minutes early, I was surprised how quickly, starting even with the second class, discussion could be fostered, resulting in the first class being only one of two instances where the class didn't almost run over its time limit.

Feeling energized by the first week's course and by Karen's reassurance that I had a knack for teaching the subject, I began preparing for the first time I would really lecture. As I did for each week, I watched and re-read the material as the students did, ensuring that I could catch as many, if not more, minor details in the films. I also used the time between each week's meetings to continue to research the topics, picking out specific clips for each film and introducing any articles I came across that related to the character in question. For example, while watching *Superman*, I was reminded of the Internet-famous scene where an African-American man dressed like a pimp compliments Superman for his "bad out-fit," and decided to show the clip in class to begin a conversation on race. The issue of race often came up in class, whether we were discussing Superman or Luke Cage, Hero For Hire, the first African-American superhero. Race is important to discuss as it is tied to our society culturally, socially, politically, and in terms of comics sales, economically. Comics often succeed when they are relatable (just think about Spider-Man's teenage woes) and including racially diverse characters is just one way that comics can open up to a mass audience. Issues like race were open for exploration through the clips from the films and the panels on the page. These clips and spotlights on specific panels proved to be

good kindling for academic discussions, and often, critical discussions on failures

of a movie that resulted in unintentional laughter.

Week two began my initial discussions of movies compared to comic

books, and I was surprised to find that not only were the students unafraid to

speak, it was sometimes impossible to get them to stop. While it was easy to peg

which students were more talkative than others, almost every week found

everyone participating in discussions, and the level of discussions grew as the

weeks went on. Most of the class really enjoyed *Superman* despite its age and

obvious visual effects drawbacks, but Action Comics #1 was met with a different

reaction. A majority of the class didn't appreciate the old style of comics initially,

seeking something more realistic, a desire that would be satisfied a few weeks

into the class. The context behind the art and style of comics from the 1950s and

early '60s made the simplicity of Golden Age comics more understandable to the

class, and once again I deemed the class a success. The reaction to the assignment

for the second class, however, went in a very different direction.

For the students (and in fact for anyone who has seen the film), *Howard*

the Duck was the bane of their existence. For those not familiar with *Howard the*

Duck, I strongly advise against watching it for entertainment's sake. The film is a

crude attempt at a sci-fi-action-comedy and a poor adaptation, starring a

hodgepodge cast of second-stringers, including Lea Thompson and Jeffrey Jones,

and Ed Gale in a tiny duck costume. The plot is convoluted, the acting horrible,

the visual effects disastrous, and the comedy a bizarre mix of G-rated and gags

and strange borderline-bestiality jokes. Despite all of this, *Howard the Duck* holds

a very important place in the world of comic book movies because for some reason, Howard was chosen to be the first character to represent Marvel Comics on the big screen. Since Marvel seems to dominate the superhero movie market today, I thought it was important to expose the students to their first foray into film as a way to reveal how far the company has come, as well as to illustrate what qualities make a comic book movie a poor film. I will admit that even I was ill prepared to deal with *Howard the Duck*, unable to watch it in one sitting, and the students uniformly agreed. However, *Howard* is still one of the most important films of the class. Despite its critical and commercial failure, the film had every reason to succeed. *Howard the Duck* the comic was a political satire, utilizing a parody of Donald Duck to make crass jokes and bring the reader into a ridiculous world much like our own where the smartest person around was actually a talking ball of feathers. The comic was extremely popular, with the creator, Steve Gerber, earning a fame of his own in the comics community. As if that wasn't enough, George Lucas- yes, *the* George Lucas of *Star Wars*- was attached to the film. At one point, this started as a good idea, but sadly, the final product somehow became a miserable failure (Latino Review, 1). While *Howard* had indeed illustrated the point I had intended, looking back I feel it was the weakest point of the class. Introducing such an unmarketable film to the class at just week three of the course was not the right time, as I think it made many of them reluctant to complete the assigned work. The outcry, both on the weekly assigned Facebook discussion posts and in class, was much stronger than I expected, and despite the importance of the film to the study of the class, I was

momentarily worried that the pure hatred the students exhibited toward the film would stunt the level of interest of the class. Praying I wouldn't have another week like this, I entered week 4 of the course, which brought us to *Batman* and *The Killing Joke*, and perhaps the most successful lesson of the entire semester.

Easily bouncing back from the blow dealt by a tiny anthropomorphic duck, the class dove headfirst into 1989's *Batman* and the literary classic, *The Killing Joke*, coming back with a reaction that honestly nearly brought me to tears. Batman was met with positive reviews, as the students enjoyed seeing a different take on the characters than in Chris Nolan's uber-popular *The Dark Knight*, but The *Killing Joke* brought down the house. The graphic novel, written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Brian Bolland, is often considered the greatest Joker story ever told and for many, it is this book that encourages a continued foray into the world of comic books. *Killing Joke* represents a shift in comics and a shift in the style of books for the course, as it presents a more realistic world of Batman and his villains than existed in the past. The Joker brutally murders, he rapes, he drives people insane. With Moore's depiction, gone are the days of Joker selling fish with his face on it for a laugh or the Penguin running Batman across a giant typewriter maze. Along with Frank Miller's *Batman: Year One* and *The Dark Knight Returns*, Moore helped to shift comics into the "not-just-for-kids-anymore" state they exist today- and that's what really hooked my students. This state was truly ushered in starting in 1986, when *TDKR* was published, which also happened to be the year *Maus* and *Watchmen* first hit shelves, as well as the thirtieth anniversary of the beginning of the Silver Age with the Flash's

first appearance in *Showcase #4*. With thirty years of cultural shifts and a slow

build in the 1970s with books like Alan Moore's *Swamp Thing* and the legendary

social commentary that was Denny O'Neil and Neal Adams' *Green

Lantern/Green Arrow*, the late 80s were set as the perfect time for comics to move

in on the older generations. Kids that grew up in the Silver Age were more

mature, comic book writers, mostly comprised of baby boomers, were more

troubled by the world around them, and audiences were clamoring for more

relatable and realistic works. This change spread across the industry, not just

affecting superhero books, but working its way through indie comics and

inspiring stories like *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Daredevil*, and even original,

progressive graphic novels from the classic team of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, such

as *Silver Surfer* (Sanderson 1).

   The students were even more enthralled by *The Killing Joke* when I

presented to them the long-debated theory that Batman actually kills the Joker at

the end of the book.

Source: *The Killing Joke*, © DC Comics

Prominent comics writer Grant Morrison proposes that Batman snaps the Joker's

neck in the final panels of the book, reminding readers that Moore's story was

supposed to take place outside of the Batman universe's continuity, acting as a standalone 'final' Batman story (Hughes 1). In the final pages, the Joker attempts to poison Batman with a slow-acting Joker toxin, which Batman deflects. However, because of the angles of the art and the eerie sudden drop-off of sound effects in the final panels, it is theorized that Batman chose to poison the Joker to finally end their dangerous dance. The class spent a long time debating what actually happened, paying specific attention to the final pages of the graphic novel, and the silence of the final panels that implies, to some, the Joker's death.

With the realism expressed in *The Killing Joke* piquing so much interest in the class, I was able to gauge what they would and wouldn't enjoy better. Since realism appealed to them, I tended to gear my lecture material, outside articles, and clips to fit their interests, connecting stories by the modern greats with much of the media we consumed through the syllabus. *The Killing Joke* lesson was also the first time that Karen confided in me that she thought I was ready to teach without her being present. This pushed me to be a better instructor and also created a more open environment in the classroom, since students were more outspoken when no 'adults' were present. The teacher-student bond I made with the class was an important dynamic of the effectiveness of the course.

Although it would be impossible to highlight each lesson I taught, several weeks were especially important to the nature of the class and the progression of my research. One lesson that stood out from the others was the class time spent exploring indie comics, specifically Daniel Clowes' *Ghost World*. One of the few works included in the syllabus that I hadn't read prior to designing the class,

Ghost World, a late addition to the syllabus at the suggestion of my father, proved especially hard to teach. While the comic and the resulting film are considered cult classics, my passion for the genre was put to the test by what I found to be quite a boring story, nonsensical and unlikeable characters, and in fact a side of the industry I am less familiar with. *Ghost World*'s lesson required the most research, as I tried to work other indie comics into the lesson to account for the fact that several students expressed disinterest to the book and only stuck with the movie for Steve Buscemi. In fact, Karen seemed to be one of the only people to really enjoy *Ghost World*. (Perhaps we should chalk it up to the generational gap?) This lesson was extremely important to me as it marked the only time during the semester that I wasn't completely comfortable with the material, and the only time I feel I didn't truly succeed professionally, as my failure to fully engage the students seemed to me a reflection on the poor choice of *Ghost World* to reflect on and introduce the indie comics movement. I chose *Ghost World* because of how different it was from other comics and movies the class was to study, but in retrospect, I think another choice would have made for a stronger lesson on indie comics. *Ghost World* dug into the deepest trenches of the indie comics world, and a more accessible work might have been a better choice. For this lesson, I brought in a few of my favorite indie books put out by Image Comics and IDW Comics that strayed from the superhero genre but still had strong linear stories that seemed to interest the class. I also introduced an article about indie comics writers that work on both creator-owned and work-for-hire projects that helped to explain that indie books can be just accessible to mass

audiences (Johnston). Not even the article was enough to get the bad taste of

Clowes out of my students' mouth. I learned that when teaching - especially when

teaching a subject as academically delicate as comic books – it is incredibly

important to pick what works are included on a syllabus with utmost care. One of

the few changes I'd make to the syllabus would be the removal of *Ghost World*

for another, more engaging example of the indie comics world. While this may

seem as if it is a reflection of popular tastes, it is actually a change I'd make based

on the fact that *Ghost World* may not be the best example of an indie comic when

introducing the subgenre. While Clowes' work certainly merits study, it is so far

from the mainstream that I believe it would work better to first familiarize

students with some content that is slightly more accessible, easing them into the

indie world and saving *Ghost World* for later discussion. One potential idea for an

alternative this could be *American Splendor*, the autobiographical comic series

written by Harvey Pekar. The critical acclaim for the series as well as the film of

the same name would make it a more enjoyable and relatable foray into indie

comics. Pekar's work, as an explanation of his life in the comic book industry,

could serve as both an introduction to indie comics and a look into the behind-the-

scenes of the industry, a rare taste that a book like *Ghost World* could not provide

(Heater 1).

     Now for perhaps the most exciting lesson of the year- the once-in-a-

lifetime chance to Skype in with guest speaker Carr D'Angelo. Carr, a contact I

made through my screenwriting professor and advisor Keith Giglio, owned and

operated a comic book store in Los Angeles that I frequented during my semester

studying "abroad." But Carr had a more impressive past than just being owner of a highly successful comics store, with a background in film and a resume far more impressive than the average person, including a position as a high-ranking executive at Universal Studios, where he was in charge of overseeing the 2003 blockbuster *Hulk*. The opportunity to talk in length to Carr was a dream come true both in terms of research and entertainment. Carr had tons of stories to tell about the film industry, the comics industry, developing *Hulk* and the fallout of its box office failure, as well as tons of other interesting tidbits relevant to the class. Carr agreed to Skype into the class, giving a full lecture, answering questions and providing personal insights on *Hulk* and other projects that could be found nowhere else. If I were to teach this class again, I would absolutely reach out to Carr again, and if possible, try to convince a second class speaker to Skype in as well. Little enhancements like the guest speaker and the field trip to see Thor 2 were icing on the cake for the course, transitioning the academic connections between comics and movies to the real-life entertainment connections. Carr's speech allowed a commercial spin to be placed on the class, allowing students to think not only how studios had worked on comic book movies in the past, but also how they would continue to create them in the future. This reflected in the students' final projects, where they pitched their own takes on films based on undeveloped comic book properties. The field trip allowed the students the chance to experience a comic book film on the big screen, and also let them explore the physical comic book store and compare it to the digital space of comiXology. In short, as cliché as it may sound, my class made learning fun.

While I mentioned earlier that the research aspect of my project was the most difficult, I can absolutely say that the teaching aspect was the most fun and the most rewarding. From a focus group standpoint, the class served as an excellent forum to discover to what type of study comic books best lend themselves. I think incorporating the comic book films as a core part of the class was incredibly important, as the films gave the comics context in our pop culture based society. Gauging the students' reactions to individual books and films allowed me, an individual who has been highly passionate about comics for his entire life, to understand which works translated well to the general population and which ones were more personal to me. The students' feedback, both in class and on their weekly posts online, also allowed me to see the fruits of my research, while providing me with more evidence to the need for comics to be taken seriously in academia. At the close of the course, the students all filled out course evaluations regarding the class as well as my teaching abilities. I was pleased to find that the results were 100% positive, with almost every student suggesting that the course be taught again. Many students approached me inquiring about whether I would be open to teaching a "sequel" class exploring comics and films that I hadn't been able to squeeze into one jam-packed semester. This is a clear indicator of a true need for a class exploring comic books as a medium. Putting aside the popular demand for a class like this, an industry that has been a staple of American entertainment since the 1930s deserves to be explored in academia. Comics and comic book films show us cultural impacts, reflecting the times in which they are written and the attitudes of the people in the world around them.

It's the reason why the 1978 *Superman* film is riddled with camp and colorful scenes whereas 2013's *Man of Steel* has a much darker tone. As audiences crave different things, genres adapt (or at least try their best to) in order to fit with the culture. As real-world events, for example, in the case of Captain America, WWII in the Golden Age and the NSA Scandals in the Modern Age, unfold, so do storylines reflecting the social ideas in the comics. Comics today aren't just for kids anymore- rather, they are for everyone- including college educated young adults interested in the study of popular culture. The level of success of the course is not a coincidence. It is due to a calculated, well-thought-out syllabus that centers on a subject matter that is as interesting and entertaining as any and deserves exploration. There is much to be learned from comics socially, politically, and culturally, and without a course that offers young adults a chance to explore the medium, those mysteries will forever remain untouched. This course only scratched the surface of the possibility of comic book studies in academia; with full funding and support behind a comics research-based project, the possibilities could be endless.

Chapter 5

The Aftermath and Application: The Brightest Day

The class was over, but my work was far from complete. As a stipulation to complete both my Honors capstone and my TRF capstone, a crucial part of my project would be the very paper you are reading today. Once again, I found myself facing a difficult task, the thing that had haunted my dreams since freshmen year- the 40+ page paper explaining my project and expanding on its importance. At the crux of the project is a study of a medium too often forgotten by the academic world and a conclusive proof that the comic book world, along with the equally important genre of comic book movies, has as rightful a place in the multimedia classroom as Tolstoy does in an English course and Hitchcock does in a cinema studies class. My project explored the comic book medium in comparison to the film industry, using a more established area of study to usher in a more obscure. However, many academics that work as comics scholars make the argument that a comic book film class is only the first step. Greg Smith expresses this opinion in another *Cinema Journal* article entitled "It Ain't Easy Studying Comics." Smith repeatedly expresses to readers the difficulty of studying comics alone but also the importance. He proposes that in order to allow comic book studies to mature as a field, "academics need to assert they can study

comics (as complex texts, as industrially produced objects, as culture in circuladon) without making excuses for their devalued status" (111). Smith explains the idea of "Comics and…" as a useful tool to study the genre, but one that also sometimes inadvertently belittles the academic nature of the field. Comics, he believes, should be able to stand on their own in academia. It was for this reason that I tried to study comics and comic book movies in a dual manner, first exploring the texts separately and then comparing them. However, I think my class is a huge step away from the problem, putting a twist on the "comics and…" philosophy by using comics as a way to justify film studies rather than using films to justify comic book studies. That is to say, comics were my primary text, whereas the films we explored were very much viewed as derivatives of the original, giving comics a higher place of honor in the classroom. The Evolution of Comic Book Movies allotted for the study of both comics and cinema, and in my opinion, served as an excellent introductory course to the comics medium as well as a way to shift current comic book readers into an academic mindset. It is my goal for this course, especially the syllabus I designed, to go further than just the Honors classroom in which I had the privilege of teaching. As I prepare to graduate from Syracuse University and enter the working world of the media industry, my syllabus (and consequently the paper I wrote around the entire project) are tools that I intend to keep with me throughout my career in order to further myself in the industry. As a writer a television/film professional, one of my goals is to work with one of the two comic book film companies that I've explored so thoroughly through this project, particularly Marvel Studios. For me,

this experience is not just a project to cap off my education, but a talking point useful to the industry I will soon enter. After teaching the course, I am able to introduce myself as an instructor of comics, giving a sense of credibility to my knowledge on the lore of comics and the industry itself. Without a comic book class offered at Syracuse or most colleges in America, it is difficult to establish any sort of 'proof' of expertise in the medium, but this class will change that. At the very least, if I ever find myself in a position where I have the opportunity to talk to someone working at Marvel or DC, this class would be a useful point of discussion. If just one person in the comics or comic book movie industry thinks what I've done here is as cool as I think it is, it could lead to a longer conversation and even an introduction into the company. In a business that is all based on who you know at the right place and the right time, my capstone project could be as valuable (if not more valuable) than even my degree.

In addition to being an extraordinarily useful talking point, my capstone is the perfect layout for a chance to bring my syllabus and class to other educational opportunities, whether they are virtual or physical. Now that the initial trial class has run its course and experienced clear success, it will be significantly easier to bring back the class at Syracuse or another institution in the future. The opportunity to teach a class comprised solely of my peers, without a degree and without any professional expertise to back up the validity of the study was incredibly rare. Without the aid of Karen Hall, Keith Giglio, and the whole of the Honors and TRF Departments, I would never have been able to succeed in this goal- but now that I have, a world of doors have appeared in front of me. It is

much more likely that a college or university would consider offering a class that has already been tested and positively reviewed. While my immediate career goals include delving into the world of television and film production, working my way into the creative side of the industry as a writer, I also have a strong passion for education and would love to give back to the next generation of filmmakers. I would love to give new life to this course in the future, especially at universities like Syracuse, UCLA, and other institutions that place a strong emphasis on media studies. As many of my former students have suggested, I would also love to develop a companion class expanding on more comic book movies throughout the ages, digging deeper into the bank of Marvel, DC, and independent comics companies, perhaps even expanding the class to include television adaptations as well. Once I am able to justify myself as a creative professional in the film industry, I plan to pitch this class to universities as an adjunct professor. Some of the best courses I took both outside and inside my major were taught by industry professionals working part-time to educate America's youth and pass on their knowledge. I've always been a fan of paying-it-forward, and as a professor of comics at SU, I was able to do this on a small scale by impacting the interests of a dozen Syracuse students. It is my hope that this paper will reach even more, and in the future, the expansion of the project will open the doors of the comic book world to scores of eager newcomers.

Chapter 6

Epilogue
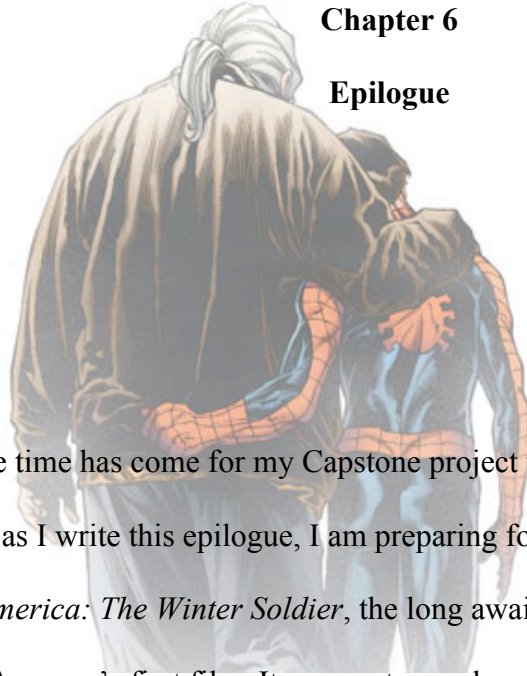
The time has come for my Capstone project to take its final bow. Ironically, as I write this epilogue, I am preparing for the theatrical release of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, the long awaited sequel to the Star Spangled Avenger's first film. It seems strange knowing that there will be no class discussion on the film to come back to next Wednesday, as even months after my course has come to a close I still find myself subconsciously preparing for the next lesson. However, all good things come to an end, and I can only hope that my project has made as much of an impact on my students as it has on me. I was happy to know that it has on at least one student that I ran into the other day, who informed me that she's already bought her Cap 2 tickets and has thoroughly converted her sister and father into the world of comics as well. To think, not even a year ago said student had barely seen one Marvel movie, let alone picked up a comic book before, and I was still in the planning stages of a dream I wasn't quite sure I would be able to accomplish. But I fought and I fought, never giving up, and lo and behold, my Honors project (at least this stage of it!) is complete.

It was in the pages of *Amazing Fantasy #15* that Stan Lee immortalized the phrase "With great power there must also come great responsibility." Over the

course of the last year on this project, and the last four years I've spent in the

Honors and TRF programs at Syracuse, I have worked hard to be worthy of the

great power I seek in my life. Whether I am breathing life to characters on a page

through a screenplay or lecturing on an academic take of Kraven the Hunter, I

have taken on an enormous amount of responsibility in my college career, and I

have tried my best to live up to the goals I set for myself. This project has helped

me learn the discipline necessary to go forth into the real world, while cementing

an unforgettable experience in my college career. I sincerely thank everyone who

has helped me along the way for the incredible support, as I couldn't have done it

without you. As we part ways for now, I leave you with the words of esteemed

comics writer Grant Morrison to keep the flame of the comic book industry

steadily ablaze in all your hearts:

> The 'medium' is unaware of its attractiveness, that's all. Everyone loves comics. I've proven this to my own satisfaction by handing them out to accountants, insurance brokers, hairdressers, mothers of children, black belts, pop stars, taxi drivers, painters, lesbians, doctors etc. etc. The X-Files, Buffy, the Matrix, X-Men - mainstream culture is not what it once was when science fiction and comics fans huddled in cellars like Gnostic Christians dodging the Romans. We should come up into the light soon before we suffocate. (Ellis 1)

For now, I take leave of you. I'm the honors student this university deserves… but

not the one it needs right now. Stay thirsty, my friends. Keep reading, keep

writing, and above all, keep dreaming.

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Appendices

The following pages include a sample of students' work on the midterm assignment and final pitch project. The first is an example of a midterm assignment designing a Spider-Man film that could be shot in the 1970's, while the second is a final pitch project for a film version of *The Flash*. All names have been removed.

Sarah Hosie

Assignment #1

Spiderman in the 1970s

Looking back at the movies we've watched in the past two units (starting with the earlier stuff and making our way to current films), there are startling contrasts between not only the writing, costumes, and special effects, but also the overall feel of the movies. The word that immediately comes to mind is "campy," but unrealistic and a little wacky could also be used. Those movies certainly have their charm ("Superman" and "Batman" are good examples.) However, "Spiderman" probably would not have been as successful had it be conceived earlier; clearly, the 2002 film would have been entirely different had it come out in 1972 or 1982.

One obvious reason behind this that must be stated is that special effects were just not advanced enough in the 1970s to allow for a man to throw webs and fly between buildings in the New York City skyline. Though their attempt may be rather entertaining, it wouldn't have the effect that it should on audiences; the audience should feel as though they are swinging with Spiderman. Special effects can often make or break a movie; when they're less than satisfactory, the movie tends to be as well.

Another aspect of "Spiderman" that would change if it were conceived in the 1970s would be the film's aesthetic. "Spiderman" feels very modern; his costume is cool, the laboratory looks high tech, and it feels very realistic. This is very different from some of the 1970s movies we watched, such as "Superman." That movie feels very much like a comic; the dialogue is cheesy, the colors very bright and overdone, and parts of it are comedic where they probably weren't intended to be. If "Spiderman" were older, chances

are it would have had a very similar feel to "Superman." His costume would probably consists of some sort of tights and unitard, the city would appear more cartoonish, and the dialogue would be as cheesy as it is in the "Spiderman" comic books.

All of that being said, we are all very lucky that the "Spiderman" movies were not envisioned until the 2000s. Had it been a movie that was released among the likes of "Superman" or the original "Batman," it would have been an entirely different movie. Although it's hard to say for sure that it would have been terrible in 1970, there are many reasons to support that idea. "Spiderman" is such a good movie because of it's realness and the audience's ability to relate to the character, his environment, and his story. Had it been made in the 1970s, those characteristics would have been replaced by bad special effects, over the top writing, and a very different feel to the entire film.

Bridget Brian
HNR210
11/20/13

The Flash

Much like Man of Steel, The Flash will begin from the very start – what catalyzed the events that would lead to the Flash, the death of his mother, and false conviction of his father. A young Barry Allen, age 11, stands in front of a tombstone of his mother during the funeral as the camera pans to show the newspaper headline – WIFE BRUTALLY MURDERED BY HUSBAND, CHILD ORPHANED. However, as the crowd begins to disperse, comments about his mother death float around, finally prompting him to say, "My dad didn't do it! I'm going to find out who did!"

Flash forward - enter the adult Barry Allen, a forensic scientist at Central City Police Station, running late to work. As he runs into the lab, the officers and other forensic scientists good-naturedly joke about Barry's tardiness. The movie slows into an introductory pace as Barry calls his girlfriend, Iris West, an introduction to the hero's love interest, that he'll be late to dinner. It cuts to later that night, storming loudly with flashes of lightning coming frequently, rain pouring into the laboratory through an open window. As Barry continues his work, there's a flash of lightning that hits a shelf of chemicals next to the windows and covers him. Barry strips off his coat and goes into the safety shower to wash himself off, the perspective shifts to Barry's point of view, and he finds his world slowed. However, as the camera moves back to a third person perspective, it shows Barry moving faster and he's the one moving faster, which he soon comes to realization as he takes a quick shower, gets dressed, and cleans the spill.

The next series of clips show Barry opening a box in his bedroom, revealing a stash of comic books, particularly a large collection of the adventures of Jay Garrick Flash, another speedster. He dons his hero's title and begins experimenting with his power every night in the lab. Similarly to the Amazing Spider-man, a montage or clips will show Barry discovering the full extent of his abilities are, including clips with surprising Iris as he vibrates through walls or loud crashes. Iris surprises Barry with a suit designed to fit in a ring made by her father. This begins the Flash's superhero streak as he chases off to save fellow citizens of Central City from thugs and criminals, one of which will give Flash a murderous look as he is pushed away.

The police will treat the criminal roughly, laughing now that they have the Flash in Central City. The man, Leonard Snart, begins doing his research in order to deal with the Flash. He comes across the idea of absolute zero, and begins to plan accordingly. A short backstory will reveal that Snart was abused as a child, and only treated well by his grandfather who owned an ice cream truck. When his grandfather passed away, he and his sister lost their emotions and developed cold, detached personalities.

Snart will then break out of prison, followed by a series of robberies the Flash hears about too late. The city becomes terrorized by a wintry storm at banks and locations, and oddly enough, no one reports it fast enough that the Flash can arrive. Soon, winter comes on Central City, as the streets become barren. There will be a series of clips of his investigation, displaying the intelligence and forensic background that makes up part of Barry Allen. As he digs deeper into the snow, he discovers bodies, and comes to a realization that people are being frozen in time. However, while working at the police department, Snart comes to him. He terrorizes the officers that mistreated him and ridiculed him, saying Flash would put all the criminals in jail.

Flash finds himself in a bind, but uses his vibration abilities to phase through the walls and change into his suit. A fight ensues, and Snart finally pulls out his secret weapon, a freeze ray, pausing Allen due to its absolute zero temperatures. Snart explains the reality of Central City – how criminals are people too, and some never did anything wrong, and were a victim of unfortunate circumstance – striking a chord with Barry, reminding him of the angry and hurt boy, desperately trying to prove his father's innocence. However, Flash, with his mind moving still a high speeds, devises a plan where he vibrates his molecule at a speed that will cause an exothermic reaction and melt the ice enough that it will free him from suspended animation.

Snart offers him a position – he wants to make a league of supervillains and he would be an excellent addition. Flash refuses, uses witty dialogue, brushing off his feelings towards his father's imprisonment and later death. The fight ends in Flash setting a series of chemical reaction that greatly increase the temperature of the room to prevent the freeze ray from working. Then uses his human tornado technique to remove the air in the room, causing Snart to pass out, and puts out the fire in the room.

Snart is arrested, swearing vengeance on Flash. As Snart is being put into his cell, a group of villains crowd around a nearby hill overlooking the prison, setting itself up for another sequel with the Rogues. (Also – I would love for this movie to have aspects of Professor Zoom, Flash's primary villain.)

The Flash would be an excellent addition to the comic book movie line up, because Flash is the wholesome, human superhero. Unlike Superman, Flash is human, and unlike Batman, Flash is relatable. He retains his morality and the faults that make him a normal, average man, but also contains a fair reason for what he does – he wants to find a conclusion to crimes, which his father did not receive. In addition, Flash is a fun superhero; he's human, and his spirit makes him a vital founding member of the Justice League. It gives him a wide range of emotions to contend with, but also a wholesome, relatable image that not many of the superheroes these days, with the exception of Spider-man, can portray. Also, once you bring in Kid Flash, there's potential for mentorship that is a necessary aspect of the DC continuity, and another side of a character that other superheroes, whether it be it, Marvel or DC, do not display.