



## Superheroes for Adults

The aim of this Factsheet is to analyse the development of the superhero genre using the theoretical framework identified in the 2017 Media Studies specifications.

Using contemporary superhero media products as examples, this Factsheet will consider:

- The institutional context of recent developments in the genre.
- The audiences' relationships with the genre.
- The way the genre attempts to build new audiences.
- The way the genre creates complex narratives and representations in specific examples of the genre.

The superhero genre is one of the most successful and long-standing of all genres across media forms. From its origins as a comic-book narrative device, the superhero has become one of the most successful Hollywood film genres, and is now currently developing further storylines in television, long-form dramas.



### Institutions

Media institutions like the superhero genre as it is using what is called existing **intellectual properties**. These are existing stories that use characters and storylines that have already proved to be popular. Media institutions are prepared to invest large sums of money in the construction of superhero stories because there is already an established audience who are fans of, or are interested in the characters. This creates a relatively safe economic opportunity because there is a strong likelihood that a superhero text will find an audience and make money for the media institution producing it.

There are two main media institutions that produce superhero texts. One is **Marvel** and the other **DC Comics** (see Factsheet 126 for more details).

**Marvel** titles include *Spider-Man*, *The Avengers*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Deadpool* and *X-Men*. They also have TV shows such as *Marvel's Agents of Shield* (ABC), *Legion* and the Netflix programmes *Jessica Jones* (see Factsheet 152), *Luke Cage*, *Daredevil* and *Iron Fist (The Defenders)*.

**DC** comic characters include Superman, Wonder Woman, Batman, Green Arrow, The Flash and the Joker. DC superhero stories are also told in both films and television programmes - sometimes in conventional ways (*Arrow*) but, as in the case of Fox's *Gotham* and AMC's *Preacher*, in ways that subvert the audience expectations and tell more adult stories. The long-standing success of these two companies as comic-book publishers and (in the case of Marvel) film production companies means that products created from Marvel and DC stories have large existing audiences and receive good levels of investment into their productions. Superhero films have proved to be very profitable. *Deadpool* made \$760 million at the box office making it a huge success. The two Avengers films, *Avengers Assemble* and *Age of Ultron*, made over \$1.4 billion each.

Some superhero products like *Arrow* and *The Flash*, for example, are created and originally broadcast by network television producers. The shows are broadcast on channels that are freely available to anyone in the US with a TV set and are bound by many rules and regulations that constrain the types of stories that are told and the images that can be broadcast. For example, a network television show will not be able to use bad language or much in the way of violent or sexual imagery. Network shows are freely available to audiences and, whilst late-night scheduling may allow their programmes to touch on more adult themes and representations, they do not have the freedom that subscription broadcasters such as Netflix and Amazon have.



Audiences need to actively subscribe to streaming services and so the responsibility for ensuring that children or vulnerable people don't have access to images that may disturb them, is with the subscriber not the broadcaster. This means that products available for streaming on a subscription service can take a more adult approach to the stories they tell.

There is currently a strong market for superhero stories. Superhero TV shows attract good sized audiences, and the genre dominates the Hollywood summer blockbuster film releases. Hollywood's loyalty to the genre has attracted a certain amount of criticism as some commentators see this as creating an environment where scripts featuring less familiar titles struggle to get made.

### Top Grossing Movies of 2016

Rank	Movie	Release Date	Distributor	Genre	MPAA	2016 Gross	Tickets Sold
1	<b>Finding Dory</b>	6/17/2016	Walt Disney	Adventure	PG	\$486,295,561	56,219,140
2	<b>Rogue One: A Star Wars Story</b>	12/16/2016	Walt Disney	Adventure	PG-13	\$424,987,707	49,131,526
3	<b>Captain America: Civil War</b>	5/6/2016	Walt Disney	Action	PG-13	\$408,084,349	47,177,381
4	<b>The Secret Life of Pets</b>	7/8/2016	Universal	Adventure	PG	\$368,384,330	42,587,783
5	<b>The Jungle Book</b>	4/15/2016	Walt Disney	Adventure	PG	\$364,001,123	42,081,054
6	<b>Deadpool</b>	2/12/2016	20th Century Fox	Action	R	\$363,070,709	41,973,492
7	<b>Zootopia</b>	3/4/2016	Walt Disney	Adventure	PG	\$341,268,248	39,452,976
8	<b>Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice</b>	3/25/2016	Warner Bros.	Action	PG-13	\$330,360,194	38,191,929
9	<b>Suicide Squad</b>	8/5/2016	Warner Bros.	Action	PG-13	\$325,100,054	37,583,821
10	<b>Doctor Strange</b>	11/4/2016	Walt Disney	Adventure	PG-13	\$230,107,790	26,602,056

Hollywood's main motivation is to maximise profits on its investment and, although films in this genre can be very costly to make, they are also potentially very profitable. *Suicide Squad* cost an estimated \$175 million to make and, despite receiving largely negative reviews, according to *Business Insider* it made \$745 million globally at the box office. Of course, Hollywood makes films in many genres but it clearly likes to produce films using scripts based on existing, successful titles. In 2016, 5 of the 10 highest grossing movies were based on superheroes and 8 of the 10 were based on older films or successful books. The only films based on new characters and situations in the top ten were *Zootopia* and *The Secret Life of Pets*. Hollywood is often criticised for being 'out of ideas' or 'playing it safe', but if audiences did not go to see superhero films, Hollywood studios would not continue to make them.

Figures are based on the US box office profits.

#### Activity

Go online and research how many superhero films and superhero TV shows have been made in the past 5 years. A Google search for 'tv superheroes' and 'film superheroes' will take you to this information.

- Why do media institutions fund so many examples of this genre?
- What is the appeal of the genre for the audience?

#### Audiences

Superhero films have attempted to appeal to two distinct, and often quite different audiences. One audience group is the existing fan base for the title. Comic-book fans are already committed to the characters and are knowledgeable of the fictional histories of the characters and the universes they inhabit. This makes them an incredibly important group as they initially provide the financial safety net for the film producers, but they can also be difficult to please. Avid fans often express their dislike of decisions made by film makers if they feel the characters have been misinterpreted or misrepresented. However, avid fans can help provide invaluable viral marketing and, according to **Jenkins**, many audience members are behaving more like 'fans' in the way they engage with the cross-platform nature of modern media products by getting engaged in social media discussions and accessing marketing and related products online. Teaser trailers are often released very early in a film's production, aiming to encourage the fanbase to spread the word about the film and create a pre-release anticipation. Avid fans are likely to attend early release screenings of the film and so help bolster the first weekend box office takings. After release, avid fans use social media, web sites, YouTube, etc. to review, comment on and discuss the films, and so help spread the word further.

In addition to the existing fan base, media producers wish to broaden the audience. Films such as *The Avengers* and *Age of Ultron* broke box office takings, not just by attracting the existing fan base, but by tapping into the mainstream, blockbuster audience too. The two Avengers films had been preceded by the standalone superhero films featuring Iron Man, Captain America and Thor – bringing in three sets of avid fans and the mainstream movie audiences they had attracted. The Avengers films introduced new characters (such as Hawkeye) that were familiar to fans of the comic book, and then constructed a fast paced, visually spectacular story with witty dialogue and the expected dramatic battles between 'good' and 'evil' - elements that helped it draw in new audiences who came to see a blockbuster movie rather than just the fan base who wanted to see the comic book on screen.

Once a genre can be identified through its repeated codes and conventions, many audience members go to recreate the enjoyment the genre previously provided. However, the problem with the familiar is that too much repetition means a genre can quickly become clichéd. **Neale** argues that pleasure is derived from '**repetition and difference**'; there would be no pleasure without difference. As the superhero genre has developed it has had to provide the audience with familiar pleasures, but also new experiences that keep the genre fresh and appealing. Existing audiences need to be offered different experiences and this can also help producers appeal to new audiences.

Television audiences act differently to film audiences. Even the basic idea of watching programmes at home over an extended amount of time makes audience expectations and experiences different to audiences watching two hour stories in a cinema. Television has created new challenges and opportunities for producers. Close analysis of recent superhero products shows how the genre has been developing in a number of ways to provide different experiences for its audiences.

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The three products that follow, demonstrate approaches to the genre that acknowledge the maturation of their target audience by offering complex stories and representations.

## Examples

**Logan (2017: 20th Century Fox: Marvel Entertainment)**

*Logan* is the third installment of X-Men films based on the character Wolverine. The general critical consensus is that the first two films (*X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009) and *The Wolverine* (2013)) were Hollywood cash-ins that were ‘bloated’, ‘worn out’ and ‘contrived’ (from reviews in *The Guardian*).



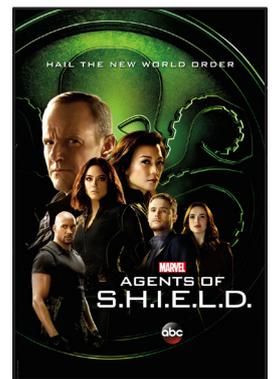
*Logan*, on the other hand, was described by *Empire* magazine as ‘the best Wolverine movie yet’ and as being ‘moving and grown-up’ by Common Sense Media. *The Guardian* gave the film four stars and said this was ‘the movie that fans have been waiting for’. Logan tells a darker story that is more viscerally violent than the previous films in the series. Its darker and more adult tone is reflected in the fact that it was given a 15 certificate (X Men films are usually certified by the BBFC as 12).

It is not just the violence and swearing that makes *Logan* a more adult film, but its themes and references are not aiming specifically to please a youth/teen market. The film uses references to the western genre in its narrative and the way it uses visual codes and conventions. Wolverine has (as the name implies) been a lone wolf hero in a work where being part of a team (The X Men themselves) has been prioritised. **Schatz** would identify that the main role of the ‘hero’ (**Propp**) during the **disrupted equilibrium** (**Todorov**) of this film places it in the ‘**genre of order**’. Logan’s role is to act alone to protect a family group from outside attacks. This is typical of the genre of order where violence is used to solve problems and the hero remains isolated even when all the problems are solved. In *Logan*, Wolverine is isolated through most of the film and, like many western heroes before him, his isolation is a choice he makes so he can protect Professor X and, later, Laura. His role within the ‘family group’ is as a father protecting his ‘daughter’ and as a son caring for his elderly and ill ‘father’. This is a mature role and the representation of Logan reflects aspect of aging. He is going grey, he needs glasses to read, and his power to heal is not as effective as it was when he was younger. Age has been cruel to Professor X, who is slipping into dementia and is depicted as being physically frail. These are typically not the concerns of a young audience and, through Logan himself, the film asks the audience to identify with a character who is getting old and who must deal with the responsibilities associated with being middle aged. Of course, the inclusion of younger characters means that the film offers something to younger audiences, but the main themes within the film are focused on appealing to an older, adult audience.

The western is not a genre that is particularly popular with younger audiences and so the direct references to the genre in the film (for example, the characters watch *Shane* (1953) on the TV in the Las Vegas hotel room) may not resonate with younger audiences. The director of *Logan* (James Mangold) describes *Shane* as a ‘fever dream of American aspirations, values and character’ (empireonline). *Logan* has these same qualities and, like any western, Logan focuses on a world where the structures of our civilisation (phones, the internet, a police force that ‘protects and serves’) are not enough to ward off evil villains.

**Marvel’s Agents of Shield (ABC)**

*Marvel’s Agents of Shield* is broadcast by ABC in the US - a conventional network channel. It is broadcast in the UK on E4 – a mainstream channel with a focus on a youth audience. It has been running for four seasons and is part of the Avengers universe. The programme was moved in the schedule in 2017 and was broadcast at 10.00pm instead of the usual 9.00pm. This institutional decision reflected that the programme appealed to older audiences and the move allowed the writers to present more complex stories with more adult themes and representations of violence.



The fourth season told several distinct stories – for example, one featuring the character Ghost Rider, and another the invention and use of LMDs (life model decoys... convincingly human androids). Artificial intelligence and robotics are common thematic conventions in the sci-fi genre, and over the past few years the largely technophobic stories, told about power crazed computers or rebellious robots, have become more of a reflection of a potential near- future rather than fantasy fictions.

With current developments in driverless cars and other types of automation, robotics is a real issue for viewers. *Agents of Shield* also moves into a story about a virtual reality world – again a technology that is no longer fictional. In the virtual world, some characters have been reprogrammed and act in ways that contradict their personalities in the ‘real’ world. The focus on androids and virtual reality experiences reflects **postmodern** concerns about the way that reality is defined in a technological and media saturated (Baudrillard) age.

The virtual world is the setting for the third story, *Agents of Hydra*. The world within the virtual reality environment is a dystopia where a military organisation (Hydra) has taken over and controls the population by demonising a minority group. It uses propaganda (described as ‘alternative facts’ and ‘fake news’) as well as a militarised police force to keep the population in line. Members of the minority, and anyone resisting the power base, are taken to prison camps euphemistically called ‘enlightenment camps’.



Although the scenario is an extreme one, using images and ideas from totalitarian regimes such as Soviet Russia, Nazi Germany and North Korea, the language use clearly uses these **representations** to create connections to reality, and the negative representation of this fictional repressive regime creates **connotations** that act to make subtle criticisms of current political situations.

### Other Superheroes with more ‘grown-up’ approaches

**Luke Cage (Disney-ABC: Marvel Television: Streamed by Netflix)** is set in Harlem and the politics of this largely black community is focused on. It looks at the way black politicians use social inequality for their own gain, how criminal gangs act to destroy black neighbourhoods and how the ideas from the civil rights movement of the 1960s can be seen to be dying out with the generation who fought for racial equality.

**Preacher (AMC: DC Entertainment: Sony: Streamed by Amazon)** is set over three time periods and features a preacher whose best friend is a murderous vampire and who used to rob banks with his (now ex-) girlfriend. The programme deals with domestic abuse and corporate land grabbing, amongst other adult themes.

**Iron Fist (Disney-ABC: Marvel Television: Streamed by Netflix)** focuses on power and corruption within large corporations. The programme also makes it difficult for the audience to identify the ‘villain’. Some characters make bad decisions for good reasons, and logical reasons often explain what are clearly bad decisions. The series presents characters who appear to be taking the role of the main villain, but then the narrative allows audiences to be sympathetic towards them. The narrative roles are not clear-cut and fixed, and audience responses to characters have to change as situations develop and more information is made available.

#### Activity

This Factsheet makes specific reference to the following theorists/theoretical ideas.

Research the following theorists and see how you feel their ideas relate to the genre.

Theorist	Ideas applied to the genre
<b>Genre Theory</b>	
Neale	
Schatz	
<b>Audience Theory</b>	
Jenkins	
<b>Narrative Theory</b>	
Propp	
Todorov	
<b>Postmodern Theory</b>	
Baudrillard	

### Web References for Images

*Deadpool* - [http://www.impawards.com/2016/deadpool\\_gallery.html](http://www.impawards.com/2016/deadpool_gallery.html)

Box Office Figures - <http://www.the-numbers.com/market/2016/top-grossing-movies>

*Logan* - <https://www.amctheatres.com/movies/logan>

Hydra Propaganda Poster - [www.comicbook.com](http://www.comicbook.com)

*Agents of Shield* - [marvelcinematicuniverse.wikia.com](http://marvelcinematicuniverse.wikia.com)

*Gotham* - [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gotham\\_\(TV\\_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gotham_(TV_series))