

Christiane Hansen

Superheroic Genres, Industries and Aesthetics

Review: James N. Gilmore and Matthias Stork. Eds. *Superhero Synergies: Comic Book Characters Go Digital*. Lanham [et al.]: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

In the last years, superhero blockbusters have not only dominated the box offices, but also moved into the focus of academic attention. In-depth studies of on-screen superhero(in)es stand beside critical assessments of the “aggregate texts” (Arnett 3) generated within the fictional and industrial framework of franchising, meta-franchising and crossfranchising. Through the “labyrinthine vastness of their textual networks” (Parody 213), these allow for multiple points of entry and routes of navigation (ibid.), thus complicating traditional approaches of adaptation, intertextuality and intermediality. A case in point is James N. Gilmore’s and Matthias Stork’s volume *Superhero Synergies* (2014). Comprising thirteen case studies framed by an introduction as well as a brief foreword and afterword, it uses the superhero genre to trace its relationship to digital technology in the 21st century. In this context, the eponymous concept of ‘synergies’ is proposed not so much as a distinctive analytic tool, but as a deliberately open-ended alternative to the ubiquitous academic idiom of transmedial ‘convergence’: The superheroic is seen not only as a “site of converging media” (3),¹ but also as a generic interface offering “multiple points of intermedial exchange” (ibid.). Charting this – admittedly complex – field, the case studies assembled in this volume provide insights into adaptations of seminal comic book hero(in)es for the digital screen, but also consider the repercussions of digital cultures on comic books, multimedial theatre productions, online communities and video games.

The volume has been received favourably in earlier reviews, which have credited its comprehensive insights regarding the evolution of the digital genre, franchising and transmedial formations. Slightly refocusing these evaluations, the following considerations assess this volume’s contribution to research on cultures of the heroic – not least as the precise ‘heroic’ qualities and functions of the all-too-obvious superheroes more often than not pass unquestioned. What does *Superhero Synergies* contribute to our understanding of heroisations, the medial

circulation of hero(in)es and the cultural processing of heroic figurations? How can frameworks of rapid change of medium or the genre itself as well as collapsing genre distinctions be squared with a specific cultural demand for heroic figurations? Can we specify in how far negotiations of the (super)heroic interfere with particular anxieties about the commoditisation of art and entertainment?

Although not expressly ‘heroic’ in focus, the volume stakes out various aspects which prove highly illuminating from this standpoint. The collection is introduced by several papers focusing on spectacular visual effects in the superhero genre and transformations of the ‘image’ in digital media. Tying in with a growing corpus of research on digital effects in contemporary cinema, these papers pinpoint the construction of the (digital) heroic body and the digital construction of space. James N. Gilmore’s article takes his cue from the paradoxical invisibility of photo-realistic digital effects and explores the digital experimentation with the body and space in Ang Lee’s *Hulk*. Hulk’s body, as Gilmore argues, is exposed as a deliberately un-real spectacle, inviting the audience to admire both the hero himself and the technological artifice representing him. This paper is complemented by Matt Yockey’s paper on *Hulk*, bringing into focus questions of emotion and (im)perfection in an emphatically digital environment. Finally, Lisa Gotto focuses on the convergence of the digital and the visual in three-dimensional cinematic films and video games. Claiming that digital 3D serves as a catalyst for “new spatial sensibilities and viewing capacities” (41), these cultural products are read as an exploration of dimensionality in itself. This, as Gotto argues, is complemented by a focus on extraordinary powers of vision as a specifically (super)heroic agency – think X-ray, night or telescopic vision – as well as the preoccupation with looking at, and seeing through a mask, the use of mapping and the process of technological mediation. Superheroes, in this vein, stand out to be looked at and admired, but also comment on the shift from analogue to digital environments:

Photorealistic digital bodies in digital spaces thus link iconic abbreviations of (super)heroism to a continuous expansion of representative possibilities, reflecting more general concerns with digital imagery and virtuality.

Adopting a different perspective, three essays navigate video games as significant entries in a multimedia franchise, drawing attention to their potential in cultural negotiations of the heroic. In doing so, *Arkham Asylum* (2009) is, in Justin Mack's contribution, analysed in its intertextual transformations of the Batman films and comics, showing how video games establish "distinct canonical tracks within transmedia franchises" (138) that are no longer restricted to the narrow audience of the gaming community. In a separate essay on the Batman franchise, Benjamin Beil focuses on the representation of fear in both film and digital interactive games. His close readings compare the distinctive audiovisual aesthetics of both media platforms, especially the stylistic devices conveying experiences of subjectivity and reliable representation in modulations of the point-of-view shot: In *Batman Begins* (2005), 'perception shots' throw into relief the traumatic sequences and effects of Scarecrow's infamous 'fear gas', establishing independent 'fear sequences'. In *Arkham Asylum*, the audiovisual effects of the perception shot are decoupled from a point-of-view structure, a technique which Branigan has described as 'projection': Beyond its mere expressive effect, this audiovisual arrangement is used to obscure the reliability of the image, as it "essentially transforms the effects of character subjectivity into a metaleptic form" (166).

Enquiring into the video game's specific outlook on gender, Martin Hennig shows that (heroic) masculinity seems to manifest itself in individualism, transgressivity and a pronounced autonomy from social institutions, while (super-) heroines display little tolerance for transgressive behaviour. Instead, they often appear as reduced, strongly sexualised versions of the superhero template, never fully independent from their male allies. Video games superficially adopt these patterns, but foster the emergence of less polarised heroic models: *Arkham Asylum*, for instance, entails a sidequest series centred on Catwoman, who is given different attributes and abilities, but not necessarily depicted as inferior. Similarly, in *Mortal Kombat vs. DC Universe*, the conventional visual trends are "counteracted by the actual gameplay" (184), where female avatars have no disadvantages for the player. One may hesitate to concur that gameplay induces the rise of "a digital era [...] which is characterized not only by a convergence of media, but also by an equivocation and convergence

of the sexes" (185). However, Henning's essay justly highlights the possible impact of video games on cultural reconceptualisations of the heroic and its implications for masculinity.

Thirdly, a range of essays in this volume provide much-needed insights into the commercial hero factories, floodlighting the transmedia traffic between comic books, cinematic blockbusters and their paratexts as a co-evolution of economic, narrative and formal aspects. Matthias Stork's chapter focuses on Marvel's *Avengers* as an "emblematic tie-in movie" (79), which tackles the corporate control of popular culture products as a big-budget business strategy. The *Avengers* project is argued to be designed not only as "yet another superhero text battling for market share in the oversaturated Hollywood summer lineup" (79), but rather as an attempt to reconfigure the entire market context: As such, it seeks to initiate a process of regenrification in Altman's terms (62-68), keeping the genre in play both aesthetically and industrially. Meticulously, Stork shows how this specific cinematic creation of a superheroic world is achieved with product shots, distributed across different media platforms and paratexts, redefining an oversaturated mainstream genre.

Russell Backman, in a separate chapter on *X-Men*, takes issue with Jenkins's implication that transmedia narrative worlds are to a large degree premeditated, assuming that "convergence primarily happens as an ad hoc procedure making use of available tools and hampered by residual inheritances from preexisting media conditions" (201). Tracing the "slow development of something like narrative convergence with the increasing adaptability of the *X-Men* franchise" (218), transmedia structures and their overarching narrative frameworks are shown to be *produced* rather than presupposed: Franchises, thus, are not only an effect, but a "crucial figure for developing the bridges between these material media realities" (218). Finally, Andrew James Myers considers the importance of the (gendered) target audience as a catalyst for regenrification, choosing Disney's *John Carter* as a case study. While the transformations of heroic paradigms in these contexts remain mostly implicit, these papers provide a useful perspective for investigating the market rationales of the superheroic genre with practices of heroisation and hero consumption in the 21st century.

The volume does not restrict itself to the more obvious effects of digitalisation on cinematography, but takes into account alternative routes of media transfer and the migration of both content and semiotic vocabulary in the process. This includes M.J. Clarke's study of digital colouring technologies in comic books, and Ben Grisanti's work on "Melodrama, Romance, and the

Celebrity of Superheroes". Slightly off the beaten path, Bremgartner's discussion of the 2011 stage show *Batman Live* integrates an approach to transmedia storytelling in Jenkins's terms with a specifically performative mediality. Describing the show along the lines of contemporary circus dramaturgy, he argues that many of the live-action elements serve the purpose of visual attraction rather than contributing to the narrative, while the combination of the stage setting with comic book images on the LED wall engender the illusion of three-dimensional, undisclosed scenery.

It goes without saying that the articles collected in this volume cannot cover every conceivable aspect of synergetically formatted superheroes. Questions of gender, for instance, are discussed in three essays in the collection, but not explicitly tackled in the broad majority of papers focusing on the more unmarked masculine heroics. The highly productive intersections of genre and gender should thus be revisited in future research, especially as one might wonder how digital superhero franchises reiterate, adapt or possibly redefine the historically resistant articulations of the heroic with the masculine, and how digital technologies provide specific interfaces of negotiating the heroic in a gendered perspective. The same is true for questions of race and class. Moreover, within a range of papers focusing on visibility, narrativity and spectacle, the dimension of sound is almost conspicuously missing.² The interferences of visual and auditive codes thus still warrant in-depth analysis, especially in frameworks of collapsing or diffusing genre distinctions, but also with respect to establishing subjectivity.

Emphatically pluralistic in terms of methodological and theoretical approaches, this volume does not propose a unified perspective on the evolution(s) of the superhero genre. The quality and variety of the individual contributions compensate for this lack of rigid coherence, as they indeed highlight synergetic effects between different media platforms and impressively underline the cultural importance of the superhero genre in these processes. At the same time, the vagueness of the umbrella term "synergies" is slightly frustrating. As Clare Parody has pointed out, it still needs to be clarified how the fictional and industrial frameworks of multimedia franchises, as dominating the contemporary mediascape, are related to – and may indeed be transforming – practices of adaptation.³ *Superhero Synergies* productively reiterates this need to detail the cultural mechanisms behind convergence, adaptation, franchising and entertainment branding. Yet, while the introduction concisely explains the common focus of the book,

an outline of the results – and perspectives for future research – would have been helpful. From a 'heroic' perspective, one might then need to ask how this contributes to our understanding of how specific mediascapes and their internal rationales resonate with cultural practices of heroisation.

Undisputably, *Superhero Synergies* is a strong and relevant contribution to patterns of digital media production. Offering a wide range of material and perspectives, it helps to elucidate the cultural productivity of present-day superhero(in)es, and points out blind spots of hero research through its focus on market imperatives, boundaries of the genre and affective immersion. It might be that precisely by *ignoring* the obvious concern with the representations and functional integration of their hero(in)es, this present volume is a viable contribution to studies of hero production and consumption, paving the way for future research into cultural practices of heroisation and the cultural processing of the heroic in the 'digital age'.

1 All direct quotations are from the reviewed volume, unless otherwise indicated.

2 See Halfyard or Whittington on the use of sound in the superhero blockbuster and in digital cinema.

3 Notably, Liam Burke's recent monograph on the superhero genre also pushes at the distinctions between adaptation and convergence as distinctive medial processes.

Works Cited

- Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. London: British Film Institute, 1999.
- Arnett, Robert P. "'Casino Royale' and Franchise Remix: James Bond as Superhero." *Film Criticism* 33 (2009): 1-16.
- Branigan, Edward. *Point of View in the Cinema: A Theory of Narration and Subjectivity in Classical Film*. Berlin [et al.]: Mouton Publishers, 1984.
- Burke, Liam. *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre*. Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 2015.
- Halfyard, Janet K. "Cue the Big Theme? The Sound of the Superhero." *The Oxford Handbook of New Audiovisual Aesthetics*. Ed. John Richardson, Claudia Gorbman, and Carol Vernallis. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013: 171-193.
- Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York/London: New York UP, 2006.
- Parody, Clare. "Franchising/Adaptation." *Adaptation* 4.2 (2011): 210-218.
- Whittington, William. "Lost in Sensation: Reevaluating the Role of Cinematic Sound in the Digital Age." *The Oxford Handbook of Sound and Image in Digital Media*. Ed. Carol Vernallis, Amy Herzog, and John Richardson. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2013: 61-76.