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Drawing Expansive Narrative Boundaries*

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Jeffrey A. Brown. *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television: Popular Genre and American Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

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Abstract

Review of Jeffrey A. Brown. *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television: Popular Genre and American Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Keywords

Superheroes, pop culture, media studies, film, television

Jeffrey A. Brown. *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television: Popular Genre and American Culture*. New York: Routledge, 2016. 190 pp.

Like many people, I go to the movies to enjoy the newest superhero film. I purchase my ticket, grab some popcorn, and head into a crowded theater, expecting to be blown away by the latest Marvel or DC installment. But increasingly, I find myself wandering out of the theater in an underwhelmed state of distrust: did the heroine really have to be in skin-tight spandex, again? Does Hollywood need another white, straight, muscular male lead? Why are the people of color always the sidekick or villain—even worse, why do they always die? These are all concerns Jeffrey A. Brown addresses in *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television: Popular Genre and American Culture*, a compendium of filmic superhero culture.

Hollywood superhero films have come to dominate worldwide box offices and the general public's imagination. Put simply, superheroes are immensely popular and profitable. In his critical study of superhero films and television shows, Brown discusses the rise of the superhero genre in the twenty-first century and critically examines how these films and television serials have come to embody cultural attitudes about race, gender, nationalism, and consumerism. The success of the modern superhero genre is ultimately the result of changing social, economic, technological, and political issues.

In chapter 1, "Hollywood Superheroes: Commercial Economy, Spectacle, and the Universe," Brown breaks down the nuts and bolts of the comic book movie industry. "Universes" such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) have become the commercial trend as entertainment conglomerates seek profit not only in ticket sales, but in promotional merchandise like comic books, clothing, toys, and collectibles. These items cater to a variety of consumer groups of all different ages and backgrounds. Brown asserts that if superhero movies continue to generate revenue for Hollywood, the big blockbusters are here to stay.

Chapter 2 considers the consequences of a genre that, like the comics industry, caters to a young male audience. "Supermen and Wonder Women: Gender Ideals and Live-Action Superheroes" deals with the inherent sexism and gender inequality prevalent in contemporary superhero movies like *The Avengers* (2012) where women are valued for their sex appeal and exist either as the outmoded archetypes of the "damsel in distress" or the "trophy" for the hero. While superhero cinema is slow to provide strong and realistic depictions of powerful women, Brown cites television shows like *Agent Carter* (2015-2016), *Jessica Jones* (2015—), and *Supergirl* (2015—) in discussing how these series provide more necessary and complex representations of female agency. Though superheroines still require more nuanced narratives in film and television, Brown

acknowledges that American networks like ABC and the CW are making positive changes.

Chapter 3, “Superheroes Rewriting 9/11 and Remasculinizing America,” and chapter 4, “America, Nostalgia, and Exceptionalism,” consider how American nationalism and masculinity are intertwined. Films like Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* (2008) and Joss Whedon’s *The Avengers* (2012) normalize “hardened” male bodies—figures that are capable of enduring immense pain and torture. Though actors like Christian Bale, Chris Evans, and Robert Downey Jr. had to follow intense diet and exercise regimes for filming, their image is heavily enhanced by costuming (special suits designed with sculpted muscles) and the use of computer-generated imaging technology. As these hyper-masculine bodies are valorized, they also become a symbol for enduring American patriotism in a cultural moment when political unrest occurs at home and abroad. As superheroes win great battles in cities, these films reflect a post 9/11 culture where America can reimagine the events of that tragic day. Brown argues that the reinforcement of American exceptionalism occurs primarily through the white male superhero as he, through feats of hyper-masculine strength and will, saves a crumbling city and its innocent people.

Brown’s last two chapters deal with representations of race and ethnicity and how the superhero genre has become self-reflexive through parody. In chapter 5, “Diversity and Marginalization,” Brown acknowledges the limited presence of people of color within superhero films or television shows. If they do appear, they are usually the villainous racial “other” as seen in Magneto’s multiethnic entourage in *X-Men: First Class* (2011). Nevertheless, Brown remains optimistic and cites, among others, Samuel L. Jackson’s Nick Fury as a relatively positive depiction of black masculinity. Yet, as Brown indicates, there is a need to see more of these positive cinematic representations of people of color. To survive, the industry must continue to change and reflect the demands of its expanding and diversifying audience, as Brown suggests in his concluding chapter, “Superhero Fatigue.”

Put simply, Brown’s text is an impressive index of information. He covers a wide breadth of issues and has a careful array of research (both archival and contemporary sources). While Brown engages with critical minds such as Susan Bordo, Umberto Eco, and Frederic Jameson, he also pulls perspectives from professional reviews, fan blogs, and scholarly articles. In an age when new superhero films and television shows are consistently released, Brown’s contemporary text includes an awareness that the genre will continue to expand and grow beyond the book’s archive. Moreover, his text inspires readers that there is still more to be achieved within the production of superhero cinema, especially with regards to representations of women and people of color.

Brown's careful analysis and self-reflexivity make this an engaging read for those passionate not only about comic books, but also comic book movies. *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television* is essential for anyone interested in learning more about the modern superhero in mainstream filmic culture.

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