

Comic Book Takeover: The Ubiquitous Influence of the Medium in Hollywood

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The transmedia proliferation of superheroes both expands and fractures comic book fandoms. While some of this proliferation is symptomatic of trend towards mining nostalgic intellectual properties, the fact that superheroes are proliferating is beyond reproach. The movies are successful. The games are everywhere. The cartoons are being released steadily. So on and so on. However, this spreading of media has impact beyond making superheroes ubiquitous. As superheroes take over multiple media both they and their fans mutate. Stories and characterization in comic books converge with those on the big screen; people become fans of these bombastic filmic superheroes, people who may have never purchased an actual comic book. For superheroes, then, convergence deals not only with the varying ways they manifest to fans but the fans themselves; much like Loki has *become* Tom Hiddleston or Green Arrow has *become* Stephen Amell, comic readers, movie goers, Tumblr fanatics of Hiddles, and those who play Lego Batman have all become superhero fans. This influx expands the fandom and further invites progressive discussions of gender, race, and sexuality of comic characters and stories; it also challenges existing, traditional fans by exacerbating the hierarchal structure of comic fandom – one based on authoritative knowledge. In short, understanding how transmedia iterations of superheroes affect the original broadens our perceptions of fan engagement, production, and intrafandom discourse.

One of the most immediate and noticeable changes in superhero fandom is its creating a space for female desire, or something like the female gaze. Comic books have long treated female characters as objects to be looked at both in dress and pose, but male figures, while impossibly rugged or handsome, have rarely been positioned to invite the same kind of scrutiny (The Hawkeye Initiative Tumblr uses gender-swapped memes to great effect in highlighting this point). Ironically, the fact that male figures largely dominate superhero fiction means they now dominate the theater. Chris Hemsworth and Chris Evans, portraying Thor and Captain America respectively, have moments in their films where they seemingly cater to female desire. Where some might count the mention of Stephen Strange as fan service, others might count the long shirtless moments of Hemsworth and Evans the same. More surprising might be the case of Tom Hiddleston's Loki—his portrayal has quickly become a fan favorite securing him both a spot in more Marvel films but also an adoring, social media savvy grouping of fans, Loki's Army. These Lokinions, as they refer to themselves, write fan fiction, produce a number of reworked images, and render other traditional fan outputs, but the driving force behind these fan productions is a positioning of Loki/Hiddleston as an object of desire. Not surprisingly, Marvel has recently released a new Loki series; in this series, Loki looks similar to Hiddleston, occasionally poses for the viewer's desire, and

even directly discusses his own fan activities. While one cannot equate Loki's following with all female comic readers, the occasionally vitriolic responses to both 'fangirls' and female readers at large suggests gender is a clear axis on which contemporary fandom now hinges. Such spats and venom may actually be considered a step in a productive direction since, before the transmedia explosion of superheroes, gender wasn't even discussed consistently or viably in superhero fandom circles.

It is not just the increase in comic character's profiles and the resulting convergence across platforms that influence fandom. The act of reading has increasingly become a more filmic experience than the unique panel-scrolling, page-turning mode comics, and thus superheroes, have long enjoyed. The rise of digital distribution, a la Comixology and others, lessens the barriers to entry for engaging with superheroes. No longer is one forced to enter the physical space of the comic store; no longer is one asked to tote books with them on the subway. While digital distribution clearly makes comics more accessible as a product, it also eases the difficulty of reading the unique art form. Panels come sequentially with the swipe of a finger removing the chance for human error in reading particularly complex pages. Stories exist without the ephemera of ads and inserts. The entire process is more cinematic--less a user-controlled stroll through a superhero story and more the easy, steady flow of still images like a film reel. New innovations like Infinite comics and adaptive audio only suggest that publishers of superhero comics wish to further explore this line of production and consumption. As the traditional barriers lessen, the tension between the longtime readers of superheroes and new *engagers* with superheroes will only further throw the fandom into flux. One can hope, as with how the proliferation of superheroes as forced comic publishers to more directly acknowledge their potential female fandom, that such flux will be productive.