

The Traumatic Revision of Marvel's Spider-Man: From 1960s Dime-Store Comic Book to Post-9/11 Moody Motion Picture Franchise.

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The Traumatic Revision of Marvel's *Spider-Man*: From 1960s Dime-Store Comic Book to Post-9/11 Moody Motion Picture Franchise

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

The Traumatic Revision of Marvel's *Spider-Man*:

From 1960s Dime-Store Comic Book to Post-9/11 Moody

Motion Picture Franchise

Joseph Michael Sommers (bio)

In the early 1960s, under the eye of Stan Lee, chief editor, art director, and head writer at Martin Goodman's Timely Publications (Wright 201),¹ New York City became a place where on any given day a "timid teenager" might be bitten by a radioactive spider and metamorphose into a "teen-age idol" named Spiderman²; or where two scientists, both also irradiated through separate incidents, would become, paradoxically, the patriarch of a family of celebrated superhumans (Reed Richards, Mr. Fantastic of the Fantastic Four) and a hunted, gray-skinned pariah known to the public only as the Hulk.³ This was a time, then, when such unfortunate exposure to large volumes of radiation could be considered empowering. For Goodman's Timely Publications, now far better known for its Marvel Comics, New York City was literally a landscape of possibility for his creations, a virtual blank canvas for his artists and writers to articulate the nefarious plots of megalomaniacal villains and for those potential disasters to be narrowly averted by a legion of crime fighters and superheroes. Such melodrama, more often than not, played out as comedy: New York City held up pretty well, despite innumerable threats against it, through the so-called Silver Age of comic books. Nearly a half century later, however, and over a decade past the events of 9/11, comic books are no longer the dominant medium for the popular consumption of these heroes and villains who had once populated the twelve- and fifteen-cent monthlies. Today, comic-book characters are far more culturally prominent within cinema multiplexes.

Comics shifted away from books as their established popular medium into the realm of celluloid and digital motion pictures, expanding from the West Coast epicenter of Hollywood into the greater world of the global superhero franchise.⁴ Just as Timely Comics formally became Marvel Comics in 1961 in **[End Page 188]** order to resuscitate life into what had become a stagnant company, Marvel Comics in turn became Marvel Enterprises in 1998 to avoid bankruptcy. The company

transitioned into the new millennium by becoming a “licensor of characters” to film studios that would reinterpret, retcon,⁵ and generally update the figures of a once popular cultural medium into the dominant discourse of the movie industry and the tenor of the current American cultural moment (Johnson 69). The financial returns, adjusted for inflation and compared to the decades of prior Hollywood treatments of superhero franchises, spoke favorably of Tinseltown’s newfound territory.⁶

While Marvel and its partners found considerable success with the bottom line, its characters and their histories underwent significant evolution at the hands of studio writers, who, in reintroducing these almost half-century-old characters to an expanded audience via film, sought to bring them into the zeitgeist of the post-9/11 moment.⁷ This adaptation seemed founded on a sort of self-loathing of the comic book’s colorful past. The effects of this modification might be exemplified best by an exchange in Bryan Singer’s film *X-Men*, in which the characters Wolverine and Cyclops, reflecting on the dire severity of their upcoming confrontation with Magneto at the foot of the Statue of Liberty, have the following rather self-reflexive, if not metatextual, exchange regarding their full-body black leather uniforms:

Wolverine: You actually go outside in these things?

Cyclops: Well, what would you prefer? Yellow spandex?

X-Men scriptwriter David Hayter’s point is both indicative and reflective of an innate twenty-first-century loathing of the Silver Age source material. Whereas the comics of the 1960s once used these flawed and otherwise self-doubting superheroes as a vehicle for a reading populace’s escape from the reality of their very localized, very American time and space, Hollywood screenwriters writing for a larger transnational audience chose to reinterpret these characters with respect to a global community that resonated and identified with the sober tone of the global post-9/11 moment. The paradigm did not merely shift; it rotated 180 degrees away from a fantastic...

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Joseph Michael Sommers is Assistant Professor of English at Central Michigan University, where he teaches courses in children's and young adult literature, pop culture, and assorted Americanist business. Recently, he brought out his first scholarly collection on comics, *The Sexual Ideology of Alan Moore* (McFarland & Co, 2012). When his head is not otherwise buried in funny books, he's probably playing with his little girl, Maggie, who is far more wise and learned in most of the things he is supposedly expert in.

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