Crisis of Infinite Intertexts!

Continuity as Adaptation in the Superman Multimedia Franchise

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Abstract

Since first appearing as a comic book character over three quarters of a century ago, Superman was not only the first superhero, spawning an entire genre of imitators, but also quickly became one of the most widely disseminated multi-media entertainment franchises. This achieved a degree of intergenerational cultural dissemination that far surpasses his comic book fandom. Yet despite an unprecedented degree of adaptation into other media from radio, newspaper strips, film serials, animation, feature films, video games and television, Superman’s ongoing comic books have remained in unbroken publication, developing a long and complex history of narrative renewal and reinvention. This thesis investigates the multifaceted intertextuality between the comic book portrayals of Superman and its many adaptations over the years, including how such retellings in other media have a generally stronger cultural impact, which exerts in turn an adaptive influence upon these continuing comics’ internalised narrative continuity. I shall argue that Superman comics, as a case study for the wider phenomenon in the superhero genre, demonstrate via their frequent revisions and relaunches of continuity, a process of deeply palimpsestuous self-adaptation. The Introduction positions my research methodology in relation to intertextual theory, with an emphasis on providing terminological clarity, while Chapter 1 expands into a literature review on pertinent key scholarship on adaptation studies and the comics studies field specifically. Chapter 2 explores the history and application of adaptation to other media in the Superman franchise, and how this has progressively manifested in ‘feedback’ processes in the comics that are the notional source material, an increasingly problematised textual designation. Chapter 3 refocuses on Superman’s comic book diegesis and unpacks the definitions and internal methodology of continuity and its revision, with a particular focus on the pertinent writings of Umberto Eco regarding the “oneiric” nature of Superman comics’ temporal narratology, and I weigh in on debates involving his later critics. Finally, Chapter 4 delves into the history and theoretical implications of comics’ process of perpetual and accelerating cycles of continuity revision, and their increasingly intertextual lines of influence with past and concurrent adaptations to other media within the wider franchise. Using Gerard Genette’s conception of the textual palimpsest, I argue that comic book continuity has become a highly iterative succession of self-adapting rearticulations of their core narratives, utilising much the same intertextual processes as adaptations between different media expressions, in search of a constant generational renewal and creative renegotiation.
Declaration

This is to certify that

(i) the thesis comprises only my original work towards the PhD,
(ii) due acknowledgment has been made in the text to all other material used,
(iii) the thesis is fewer than 100,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, maps, bibliographies and appendices.

Signed:

Date: 20th November, 2015
This thesis has referenced two pieces of my work previously published during the research process, in the following forms:


These publications have been cited on four occasions, with a few sentences from the *ImageTexT* article repeated in this thesis. Citations from the chapter in the Darowski collection are included as a suggestion for further reading.
Acknowledgements

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis argues that comic book continuity, particularly the phenomenon of the diegetically-justified continuity ‘reboot,’ is a process of internalised adaptation within a serialised medium. This idiosyncratic form of adaptation will be examined through a case study of the Superman franchise, demonstrating how this process is comparable to (and draws upon) other forms of transmedia adaptation, yet is ultimately a unique form of evolving intertextuality.

The choice to focus on the Superman transmedia franchise in particular is due to its comic books featuring not only the first superhero character, but moreover being the one with the longest uninterrupted history of perpetual re-adaptation. Superman is a particularly meaningful case study because the Man of Steel is the superhero most widely, repeatedly, and consistently adapted into other media for over 75 years. Beginning with a decade-spanning adaptation to radio within the first two years of his comic book debut, Superman has gone on to feature in dramatised adaptations via at least one other concurrent medium per decade for the length of his existence. This has included radio, audiobooks, film serials, theatrical animated shorts, stage musicals, multiple “Saturday morning” cartoon series, over two dozen direct-to-video animated films, four long-running live-action television series, and, as of 2016, eight feature films, as well as television series and films starring his supporting characters, with Superman having been portrayed by over a dozen actors in live-action media alone.

Even in his original comic book medium alone, Superman’s diegesis has been the most frequently and obsessively reworked of any comparable superhero, with generations of different writers and artists building upon the original iteration created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. Subsequent notable comic professionals such as Mort Weisinger, John Byrne, Alan Moore, Geoff Johns, and many others had hands in defining Superman’s textual identity anew for different eras, by rearticulating its past.

The analysis of how these particular forms of metatextual interplay operate in a heightened manner throughout Superman narratives both within and beyond comic books has wider application to the study of other serialised narrative forms, and most especially transmedia franchises, which seek to disseminate their intellectual property simultaneously via multiple different media.
Issues which this study will examine in detail will include some fundamental assessment of how comic book continuity functions as both continuous and shared diegesis, and the distinctions between fan terms ‘retcon’ and ‘reboot’ and how they differ from similar literary mechanisms in other narrative forms, especially in their highly complex diegetic permutations. Analysis of how these alterations to continuity are influenced by issues of cultural shifts in audiences, continuous production, corporate ownership and nebulous collective authorship will be addressed, as will questions of cultural dissemination of the narrative through transmedia adaptations.

The argument for treating these continuity revisions as themselves being a form of internal adaptation will be explicated through comparison to the processes by which the same Superman myth-narrative is adapted in parallel to other media forms, as well as associated questions of the decreasing demographic significance of comic book audiences compared to those of film and television. This not only destabilises notions of the comic text as ‘primary,’ but also is demonstrable in terms of the influence with which these adaptations re-inscribe themselves on the comics in turn. This view of the Superman franchise as a perpetually re-inscribed textual entity, most especially but by no means exclusively in regards to the comics, shall be unpacked by drawing parallels to more traditional literary cases of dense intertextuality such as the "Robinsonade" adaptations of Daniel Defoe’s 1719 novel Robinson Crusoe, and other examples of frequently re-adapted texts.

Also to be explored are comparisons to narratives such as those of Shakespeare and myths or fairy tales whereby the most culturally influential iterations of a story are not necessarily the earliest ones. The very notion of isolating a discreet, primary ‘original’ text for the Superman mythos will be explored and problematised, demonstrating how the accumulation of still-visible intertexts has made many later adaptations of Daniel Defoe’s famous novel of marooned survivalism. The term was coined in 1731 by one such adaptor, Johann Gottfried Schnabel, and became the collective term for such works, ranging from alternative retellings, parallel stories, postcolonial and queer re-inscriptions, sequels, prequels, pastiches, transpositions of its plot and themes into new narratives, and myriad other forms of intertextual play. Some even apply the term more broadly, to include all related forms of survivalist fiction concerning marooned protagonists’ progressive assertion of ‘civilisation’ and technology over wilderness with either utopian or dystopian themes, even including works predating Defoe’s own.

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1 Although I shall discuss the diegetic implications of narrative continuity and shared storyworlds at greater length in Chapter 3, for a basic definition of diegesis I find Gérard Genette’s perfectly serviceable, that “diegesis is the spatiotemporal world designated by the narrative… the world wherein the story occurs” (or, in other words, the ‘reality’ of the story, as opposed to surrounding textual elements or alternative adaptations that present contradictory retellings). Gérard Genette, Palimpsests: Literature in the second degree, Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (trans.) (Lincoln NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), pp. 294-295.

2 An identified subgenre of literature comprising of the extraordinary number of divergent adaptations of Defoe’s famous novel of marooned survivalism. The term was coined in 1731 by one such adaptor, Johann Gottfried Schnabel, and became the collective term for such works, ranging from alternative retellings, parallel stories, postcolonial and queer re-inscriptions, sequels, prequels, pastiches, transpositions of its plot and themes into new narratives, and myriad other forms of intertextual play. Some even apply the term more broadly, to include all related forms of survivalist fiction concerning marooned protagonists’ progressive assertion of ‘civilisation’ and technology over wilderness with either utopian or dystopian themes, even including works predating Defoe’s own.
additions and revisions essential to what is now widely regarded as an ‘iconic’ portrayal of the mythos, although this notion will be questioned in turn. This will be filtered through intertextual theory regarding how successive adaptation often makes prior adaptations as much the subject of their rearticulation as the ‘original,’ if any such original can be identified.

The intertextual significance of Superman's popular dissemination will be considered via Bazin's conception of characters whose cultural saturation transcends the necessity for direct exposure to source material. This is the process whereby an example of popular culture can become so widely disseminated via different adaptations and re-articulations that the majority of potential audience members will react to their first direct exposure to any sustained piece of the relevant fiction with a degree of pre-formed familiarity to the narrative’s major tropes.

This plays a not insignificant role in the ‘multi-track’ reading strategies implied for different types of ‘engaged viewers,’ that is, audiences who possess foreknowledge of various prior iterations of telling the same stories across the wider Superman franchise, and bring it to play in their appraisal of new rearticulations of these stories. It is this kind of engaged viewer/reader for whom negotiating their reception of densely inter- and metatextual iterations of the Superman franchise becomes key to a deeper, more multifaceted reading of texts such as *Smallville* and comic reboots which are, at face value, notionally intended to garner uninitiated audiences rather than pander to an established fanbase. This thesis examines the significance of the fact that Superman, more so than any other character, experiences continuity reboots that have been occurring with increased frequency over the decades, in addition to a proliferation of pastiche versions of the character as a form of commentary.

**Issues of Terminology: Intertextual Theory from Kristeva to Genette**

Crucial to my analysis of Superman, both as a transmedia franchise and a locus of particularly complex treatments of interwoven and shifting diegetic continuities, will

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4 The application of the term “transmedia” is somewhat contested within academia, and for the sake of clarity I use it in the most basic sense. As media scholar Henry Jenkins states, “Transmedia, used by itself, simply means ‘across media’.” He seeks to clarify, however, that “transmedia storytelling” is a distinctly more specific practise concerning “the flow of content across media,” through the use of complementary storytelling to further a single narrative across multiple media forms, typically, but not necessarily, attempting to do so within a unified diegetic continuity. As the Superman brand is heavily
be the use of terminology relating to intertextual theory, with particular focus on issues of adaptation and appropriation.

The term “intertextuality” was coined by the French theorist Julia Kristeva in 1966, in an attempt to combine the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roland Barthes into her own particular Poststructuralist view of textual dialogism, or the manner in which separate texts can be observed to be addressing prior ones. In developing a model for relationships between texts, Kristeva aimed to debunk post-Romantic assertions of texts’ unique originality by arguing for a destabilisation of objective knowledge. Kristeva sought to use this study of textual interrelation to argue ultimately for all meaning to be contextually contingent, open to a variety of ‘readings’ that reject authoritative hierarchies of stable facts.

Although Kristeva later rejected the term intertextuality in favour of “transposition,” it was the earlier wording that endured. Her argument for a radical pluralism in textual meaning, however, was not fully embraced by all. Subsequent theorists such as Michael Riffaterre and Gerard Genette challenged the idea that a structuralist approach to intertextuality allows for ambiguity, yet contend that dialogic relationships between texts can be used to determine stabilised determinations of significance and some measure of objectivity.

As described by Kristeva translator Leon S. Roudiez and discussed at length by Graham Allen, Kristeva’s term has been to some measure debased by others through conceptual overextension, much like the vagueness of meaning evoked today reliant on cross-media dissemination, yet rarely engages in diegetically unifying one medium’s narratives with another, transmedia storytelling per se is of little relevance to my thesis, as distinct from consideration of Superman as a transmedia franchise. See Henry Jenkins, “Transmedia 202: Further Reflections,” henryjenkins.org, August 1, 2011, http://henryjenkins.org/2011/08/defining_transmedia_further_re.html.

Although widely cited as such, the precise attribution of Kristeva’s 1966 coining of the term “intertextuality” is both nonspecific and inconsistent across different secondary sources. Although her 1969 article “Word, Dialogue, and Novel” has been cited with a misattributed date, annotations on later reprinted versions of the article itself refer to her own later 1974 article “Le Révolution du langage poétique” as where she properly defines the term. She used the term “intertextuality” in her 1966 doctoral thesis, which was seemingly the basis for “Le Révolution” in 1974. So, although it would appear that Kristeva did coin the term in 1966, she did not use it in a published work until 1969, and did not publish a definition of it until 1974.


For a concise yet comprehensive discussion of Riffaterre and Genette’s structuralism in regards to intertextuality, see Chapter 3 of Graham Allen, Intertextuality (Routledge, New York, 2000), pp. 95-132.


Allen, Intertextuality.
when something is described as ‘postmodern.’ Intertextual theory has been widely adopted and co-opted by fellow poststructuralists and structuralists alike, invoked by postmodernists, feminist and postcolonial theoreticians, even redefined with narrower meaning by Genette, all to the point of becoming worn down as the servant of too many masters.

Genette in particular shall be a significant theoretician for my study in terms of defining much of the conceptual and especially terminological subcategories of intertextuality, from his 1982 book *Palimpsests*. And, although in many cases I ultimately choose to reject or modify his intended usage of many terms, his is a framing of many of the nuances of intertextual language that demands close examination.

Given that my thesis is chiefly concerned with the analysis of far more specific subsets of intertextual theory concerning modes of textual influences and transmission, and the complexities of applying these to the study of as densely interconnected and multifaceted a transmedia text as the Superman franchise, rearticulating the vast aforementioned field of intertextuality is outside the general purview of my thesis. Due to the large number of more targeted terms available to describe many of these specific textually-appropriative processes, I shall choose to employ the most generally accepted definition of intertextuality: the study of the observable interrelation of texts to other texts, both surrounding and precursor, whereby influences and interconnectedness can be meaningfully analysed.

To the extent that I wish to engage at all with these broader theoretical issues, this study does not aim to identify strictly with either side of the key structuralist/poststructuralist debate. I adopt instead a methodology situated somewhere between poststructuralism’s radical destabilisation of meaning in favour of infinite different readings and ambiguities, versus the structuralist acceptance that some certainties of meaning can be reached through clear tracing of intertextual relationships.

If anything, my approach will generally lean towards the latter in something akin to Genette’s ‘open structuralism’ or, as Allen puts it, a pragmatic structuralism.\(^{10}\) This approach seeks to pin down what definable meaning can be gleaned through the close analysis of textual relationships, acknowledging their fluidity and constant re-
inscription but without subscribing to poststructuralism’s extreme destabilisation of meaning. Texts shall be approached with a strong awareness of their frequent reinterpretation through their many interrelations and re-articulations through the ongoing intertextual process, yet not going so far as to ascribe to them an infinitely polysemous state.

My choice of this midway path, particularly in approaching a topic for which adaptation comprises a central point of analysis, is echoed by David L. Kranz in his rather excoriating appraisal of the postmillennial state of formal adaptation studies. He contends that the discipline risks condemning itself to academic irrelevance through clinging to insular poststructuralist tenets and perpetuating unexamined truisms regarding the supposed former dominance of “fidelity criticism,” which he argues can be useful in moderation.¹¹

Overviewing much of recent theory in the field, Kranz expresses concern about what in his view is the anachronistic dominance of “relativistic post-structuralist theories which are currently being abandoned elsewhere.” Kranz views this as ignoring the wider rejection of postmodern theory and hardline poststructuralism’s “attack on rationality” in other academic disciplines, and risks ghettoising adaptation studies.¹² Describing excessive poststructuralism as “Criticism Made Too Easy,” Kranz intrinsically questions the methodology such positioning generates, allowing staunch poststructuralists to dubiously exclude contradictory research and excuse their own biases merely by declaring them. In his view this allows for some potentially spurious reasoning, all under the auspices of the view that renders any objectivity impossible, leaving poststructuralist scholars of adaptation “less obliged to consider opposing arguments and contrary or qualifying evidence in hermeneutical endeavors.”¹³

Kranz’s plea for a rational sense of allowing an open view of textuality without embracing totally destabilised objectivity is appealing, in that:

I recommend that we filter out the relativistic excesses of postmodernist theory, such as its attack on rationality, its denial of any objectivity (that is, its ironic totalization of subjectivity), and its assumption of the virtue or necessity of infinite ambiguity (with simultaneous demonization of the essential, hierarchical, and probable), before using it to guide needed changes in adaptation theory. The filtering devices I suggest are (1) the application of

¹² ibid., pp. 78, 86-88, 98.
¹³ ibid., p. 90.
probability to the infinite play of signifiers so championed by deconstruction and (2) the rational attempt to be objective by trying harder to reduce subjectivity, however impossible that empirical ideal is to achieve. It is only through filters like probability and the attempt at objectivity that a rational discourse community can maintain itself, avoiding both marginalization by the mass public and balkanization into numerous partisan niches.¹⁴

This perspective is very much in line with my own, which embraces a certain relativism in interpretation and allowing for a degree of unknowability when it comes to tracing influences and ultimate meaning, whilst wishing to still apply what Kranz rather flatly describes as “common sense”¹⁵ when it comes to reaching reasonably firm conclusions derived from the textual evidence at hand. I shall return to more specific methodological considerations presently.

From the outset, one of the challenges confronting any discussion of intertextuality and the adaptive process is the plethora of competing terms used to describe the various identifiable subcategories and definable components involved. Without wishing to provide a personalised academic glossary per se (although a glossary of terms more specifically related to the field of comics is available in the appendix), it is worthwhile to outline at this juncture some of my choices of usage regarding the varied and conflicting terms to be used hereafter.

Gerard Genette, as mentioned earlier, was a major voice in this regard, having outlined many subdivisions of intertextuality,¹⁶ or “transtextuality” as he attempted to rename it, reducing the term intertextuality to a more specific definition, yet this terminological reconfiguration did not catch on in wider academia. Genette’s revised definition of intertextuality was essentially analogous to direct quotation, a “copresence between two texts or among several texts [requiring] the actual presence of one text within another,”¹⁷ excluding more allusive and referential methods of textual interrelation as he wished to create more specific terms for such varying nuances of his new umbrella conception of intertextuality as “transtextuality.”

This intended substitution and redefinition of the term intertextuality is one which I shall ignore, as have most others (such as Julie Sanders, Jonathan Gray, Linda Hutcheon and Henry Jenkins to name but a few), in favour of the more widely-accepted usage of ‘intertextuality’ -- however vague and contested. In the spirit of an

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¹⁴ ibid., p. 88.
¹⁵ ibid., p.89.
¹⁶ Genette, Palimpsests, pp. 1-7.
¹⁷ ibid., pp. 1-2.
‘open structuralism,’ I contend that it still holds far more traction than transtextuality, and is more generally understood than Genette’s narrowed rebranding.

This will not be the only instance in which I shall ultimately disagree with Genette’s choices of terminology, and yet Genette’s views on the topic of intertextuality are nevertheless very influential to my study. His conception of subdividing the broader inter/(trans)textual concepts of dialogism and textual transmission into various conceptually discreet subcategories -- which I shall address below -- is highly useful to an analysis of such dense and multifaceted forms of adaptation and allusion present in my decade-spanning, transmedia subject matter of the Superman franchise.

Any text that has been in unbroken serialised publication for three-quarters of a century, and subject to successive new adaptations across several other media over each decade of this existence, is a site of multiple forms of intertextual influence and readings. So even though I depart from the strictures of several of Genette’s definitions or choose to substitute several of his terms with others for greater nuance or clarity, much of his conceptualisation and the terminology he coined are valuable tools.

Perhaps the two conceptual units with the greatest variety of differing terms amongst the wider scholarship are those which would most traditionally be referred to as the ‘source’ or ‘original’ text upon which subsequent adaptations draw, and that of the ‘adaptation’ itself. Both forms are encompassed by Genette’s conception of hypertextuality, defined as any relationship between a prior and subsequent text which is not that of commentary. However, this narrow definition has not endured, as the term is both widely used now in computing language to refer to branching virtual texts, and scholars such as Jenkins use the term both as a literal internet reference, and to describe the transmedia impulse whereby modern audiences have a “hypertextual relationship to existing media content,” an inherent questing awareness of any given narrative’s relationships to other surrounding texts. I would argue that Genette’s definition fails to account for all adaptations being by necessity some form of commentary upon their sources, however subtle or even unintentional.

 Taken more broadly, Genette’s two subcategories of hypertextuality are certainly of some use -- defining a hypertext as being the appropriative text

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18 ibid., p. 5.
(adaptation), while the hypotext is that which is being adapted (source). The term hypertext has a particular efficacy as it evokes an open awareness of other, prior texts, and I shall use it primarily as a hyponym of adaptation. Thus ‘hypertext’ shall generally refer to cases of textual appropriation within the same medium, as somewhat distinct from ‘adaptation’ being employed for more traditional trans-media appropriations such as comics translated into film.

Allen notes, however, that Genette’s term hypotext is synonymous in usage to the more widely adopted ‘intertext’ or simply ‘original/source.’ Hutcheon prefers to designate this more simply as the “adapted text,” arguing that this carries less of the aforementioned intrinsic literary bias, as similarly does Naremore with “precursor text.” While I find both terms appealing due to the extreme multiplicity of prior texts informing any new version of the Superman mythos, and the lack of a single, clearly definable ‘original,’ they nevertheless lack specificity. Instead, I shall similarly employ hypotext as a distinguishing hyponym for an intertext, that is, any text that can be identifiably regarded as a source of signification for an adaptive or appropriative hypertext.

My usage will posit a hair-splitting distinction, whereby precursor texts that are more temporally removed, narratively defunct iterations (including diegetically ‘erased’ continuities, such as ‘Golden Age’ Superman stories from the 1930s-1950s) shall generally be designated hypotexts. This is in deliberate contrast to intertexts, which I shall delimit as closely proximate instances of textual transmission that approach simultaneity in seeking ‘synergy’ between different media platforms.

More specific textual relationships include metatextuality, described by Allen as among Genette’s least-developed terms. In fact, his original definition as a text performing commentary on another text yet strictly in a non-fictional capacity has been widely disregarded by later scholars, who treat the term as virtually interchangeable with that of metafiction, being fiction about fiction, especially stories that selfconsciously acknowledge their own fictitiousness. This has in turn sparked the increasingly common fanspeak term, such as “That’s so meta,” amongst the fan

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20 Genette, Palimpsests, p. 5.
23 Allen, Intertextuality, p. 102.
24 Genette, Palimpsests, p. 397.
intelligentsia, to refer to comics or television episodes replete with winking references to their own fictional nature, up to and including breaks in the fourth wall.

Comic studies scholar Richard Reynolds, for example, speaks of a hypothetical comic “metatext” as comprising the entire contents of the Marvel or DC universes, presumably including all multiple variations.25 Adam C. Murdough in his thesis cites Reynolds extensively, using the term metatextual(ity) synonymously with metafiction, demonstrating considerable definitional shift from Genette’s original conception.

Going forward, I shall adopt the term ‘metatextual’ in a slightly broader sense than Genette’s, to encompass examples of commentary within the fiction itself. Yet conversely a narrowing distinction must be made in my usage between metatextual and metafictional, as the use of them as virtual synonyms is unhelpful.

I shall reserve describing works as metatextual for when they are inspired by or alluding to, but not openly announcing, issues regarding their fictional status -- such as providing diegetic explanations for continuity alterations, as most notably seen in Marv Wolfman’s Crisis on Infinite Earths.26 This sprawling comic book maxiseries portrayed a villain’s destruction of parallel Earths as a diegetic method by which to justify DC Comics’ editorial decision to revamp its characters’ backstories and shared history, especially regarding Superman, the mechanics and implications of which shall be discussed further in my Chapters 3 and 4.

Thus, in contrast to this more diegetically metaphorical implementation of what I am designating ‘metatextual,’ I shall, in turn, reserve the term ‘metafictional’ to describe a different nuance, that of texts which actively explore their own fictionality on a more overt, substantive basis, such as with the Superman-related works of post-modernist comics auteur Alan Moore. This will be explored in my brief case studies of two of his key works in Chapter 4, especially with the metafictionally-rich Supreme,27 a pastiche version of not only Superman as a character, but also as a fictional construct whose constant stylistic revision over many decades, is rendered literal through metafictional (and metaphysical) narrative devices.

However, although Reynolds’ prior definition of an entire comic company’s narrative (multi-)diegesis as a “Metatext” has a certain fanspeak appeal, it is too

26 Marv Wolfman (w) and George Pérez (a), Crisis on Infinite Earths #1-12 (DC Comics, 1985-86).
27 Alan Moore (w) and Rick Veitch et al. (a), Supreme (Awesome Comics et. al. 1996-2000). See Chapter 4 for the full, rather complex citation.
broadly inclusive a concept for the term which, in adjectival form, I would be using far more narrowly. Instead, I considered both Jim Collins’ use of the term “array” in discussing the broad web of texts that inform the hyperconsciousness of Batman audiences and Angela Ndalianis’ articulation of Alan Moore’s “aleph” as a text which functions as a vantage point to such a wide intertextual array.

I found, however, that both of these terms contained nuances of meaning beyond the simple yet elusive definition I was seeking for the totality of Superman’s intertextuality as a unit, and these shall themselves be discussed in more detail when considering scholarship in the comics studies field. Instead, in the spirit of appropriation and adaptation, I shall propose my own redefinition of an extant term -- ‘supertext.’

Coined by John G. Cawelti in his writings on crime and mystery fiction as something of a synonym for genre, his specific phrasing inspires my intended usage:

Because it is a consolidation of many texts created at different times, the supertext is one way of conceptualizing artistic traditions… Thus the supertext can also be treated like an individual text; its history can be constructed; its impact and influence can be explored.

While certainly not Cawelti’s intent for the term, his description of what makes a ‘supertext’ speaks to the diverse textual components spread across time, media and different creators which have collectively come to form the fractured yet interwoven diegesis of the Superman franchise, not just across different iterations of comic continuity, but across all media. Frankly, in the absence of a clearly superior extant term, referring to it as the ‘supertext’ is just too delicious an opportunity to pass up.

Another useful term popularised by Genette is “palimpsest,” used as the title of one of his major works on textuality, after Philippe Lejeune’s reference to “a palimpsestuous reading.” The term is inspired by the literal meaning of the word, an

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31 Philippe Lejeune, Moi Aussi (Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1986), p. 115. The attribution of the term is rendered somewhat confusing by the fact that Genette’s text credits Lejeune for the term but without direct citation, and predates the publication of Lejeune’s text by four years. Gérard Genette, Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré (Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1982), p. 452. This explanation for this bibliographical oddity of seemingly transtemporal terminological coinage was discovered by Sarah Dillon, via direct correspondence with Lejeune himself, that in 1980 Genette was privy to a then-unpublished manuscript of Lejeune’s in which the term palimpsestueuse was used, yet Genette’s own
archaic practice by which durable manuscript media such as vellum or parchment would be effaced for re-use. With their original words washed off or scraped away and then written over, a palimpsest is thus an example where the prior text is still discernable beneath the new, overwritten version. In this way two or more texts can remain co-present in a single document, the earlier texts having never been truly erased.

Clearly then, the word palimpsest holds an attractive metaphorical appeal when discussing intertextual theory, as essentially a synonym for a hypertext. Genette uses it to describe the notion whereby any pastiche, parody or other type of hypertext can be seen to be quite perceptibly superimposed on a precursor text, yet one that nevertheless remains ‘visible’ through the present adaptation. This intra-visibility of adapted texts brings their textual co-presence to the fore, being conceptually interconnected by definition, and invites a highly relational reading, unlike the medieval practice of a physical palimpsest parchment. As Dillon puts it:

Since the texts inscribed on a [literal] palimpsest bear no necessary relation to each other – one text is not derived from the other, one does not serve as the origin of the other – the figuration of the text as palimpsest does not describe the relationship between a text and its sources. The palimpsest is not a metaphor of origin, influence, or filiation; it is not a synonym for intertextuality as that term has come to be used and abused in contemporary critical discourse. There is, however, a productive relationship between the concept of the palimpsest and the concept of intertextuality as coined by Julia Kristeva and as it functions in poststructuralist theory.

Similarly, Linda Hutcheon uses the term to evoke the intertextual awareness triggered when reading adaptations, even for those audiences not directly exposed to the prior hypotexts, describing how watching an adaptation consciously as an adaptation rather than wholly at face value is itself an act of palimpsestic doubleness. This sense that prior adapted texts can never be truly supplanted or erased by later iterations is highly attractive to my study, concerned as it is with densely layered texts that have undergone many different forms of adaptation and revision over the decades of continuous production. Superman comic books continually draw upon, discard and

book citing his colleague ended up preceding Lejeune’s own path to publication. Sarah Dillon, The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory (Continuum, London, 2007), pp. 4, 128. As Dillon points out, the first English-language coining of the word as “a palimpsestuous reading” (as opposed to the more linguistically correct “palimpsestic”) thus derives from Newman and Doubinsky’s translation of Genette, Palimpsests, p. 399.

32 Genette, Palimpsests, pp. 374, 398-399.
33 Dillon, The Palimpsest, p. 85.
34 Hutcheon, A Theory of Adaptation, pp. 7-8, 120-122.
overwrite past story content, and as each new film, television or animated iteration of the Man of Steel both homages and innovates based on what has come before, this palimpsestic visibility of earlier versions ever-present.

My usage of the term shall be relatively in line with both Genette’s and Hutcheon’s, relating mainly to a palimpsestic mode of reception rather than excessively describing texts as palimpsests themselves. This is due in part to the inherently cumulative nature of serialised fiction itself, of which most of my primary source material is concerned, much of which could be easily described as ‘palimpsestuous’ simply by virtue of the sheer weight of accrued tropes, characters and allusions to past narrative episodes.

Seeking a more precise language of textual transmission, I shall largely use the aforementioned definitions of hypo/hyper/inter- texts, with adjectival descriptions of ‘palimpsestuous’ texts limited to ones in which the foregrounding of their layered intertextuality evoking prior iterations seems particularly intentional, such as in comic book ‘reboots’ that draw selfconsciously on prior versions.

“Paratext” is another of Genette’s terms that has undergone some redefinition. It describes textual elements on the “threshold” of a text proper, which serve to frame and direct reception, such as titles, prefaces, interview and reviews, and with further subdivisions being autographic (authorial) or allographic (external) paratexts, peritexts (such as prefaces) or epitexts (including reviews, interviews). Jonathan Gray’s study of paratexts35 does not particularly contradict Genette’s definition in this case, but rather expands upon it. Gray defines them as a subset of intertexts (or hypertexts, as Genette would put it) which are peripheral, working to frame the main text, but unlike traditional intertexts are inclusive of ‘fragments’ of the framed text. Using this conception, Gray argues for the inclusion of texts such as spinoffs and even fanfiction under his definition of paratextuality.

Gray’s broader conception of paratexts is certainly of interest to my study, and I shall return to various aspects of his work that are useful to me, but in terms of my own terminology, designations of paratextuality are problematic. Although I do not disagree with Gray’s model, certain aspects are simply outside the scope of my thesis, such as the paratextuality of fan-generated works. While fanfiction, fan-films, and other forms of fan-interaction with corporately-owned transmedia narratives are an

important avenue of study in relation to comic book readership and communities, this is a large topic in and of itself which has already been extensively studied, such as in Henry Jenkins’ seminal work *Textual Poachers* and later in his *Convergence Culture*. By another token, Brian Swafford and Jeffrey Brown call for an ethnographic approach to fan spaces and behaviours, while Matt Hills seeks to complicate the theoretical models of Jenkins’ and other prior (especially medium-specific) scholarship with more transmedia modes of reception, as well as problematise the academic ‘othering’ of fandom, and complex positioning of fan and academic cultural identities when intermingled in scholarship, especially on the topic of fandom itself.

While aspects of fan culture certainly do have some relevance, I have to draw the line at non-official fan narratives. Studies such as those by Matthew Pustz and Mila Bongco involve pertinent discussions of how comics engender “knowing audiences” as Hutcheon would put it. The manner in which these ‘knowing’ comic fandoms operate their textual reception, and the resulting importance of continuity are quite essential to my work. When dealing with such extensive and complex interactions of intertexts as shall be outlined in the case of the Superman franchise, fanfiction and the like are simply beyond the scope of what can, or arguably should, be considered as a component of the supertext.

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38 The latter arguing that the analytical model is essential for understanding that Superheroes as a “genre is also fundamentally intertwined with a subculture of devoted consumers to such an extent that consideration of the fans is an essential element for understanding the cultural significance of the genre.” Jeffrey A. Brown, “Ethnography: Wearing One’s Fandom,” in Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan (eds.), *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods* (Routledge, New York, 2012), p. 280. Ethnographic approaches may be helpful in a quantified understanding of the wider operation of fan culture, however it is a methodology that is ill-suited to the specifics of textual operation at play in this thesis. See also Brian Swafford, “Critical Ethnography: The Comics Shop As Cultural Clubhouse,” in Smith and Duncan, *Critical Approaches to Comics*, pp. 291-300.
43 Another aspect of Gray’s work which is of scant applicability to this study is his extensive focus on the use of official multimedia paratexts such as spinoff TV shows and online ‘Alternate Reality’ promotional games, operating as textual ‘fragments’ which are intended to fit in with the diegesis of the primary text they are designed to frame, to be considered part of the same unified narrative. Diegetic distinctions are a major issue in this thesis, yet these kinds of ‘fragment’ paratexts which Gray discusses in depth are actually very rare in my subject matter, whereby virtually all transmedia adaptations of the Superman property take place in entirely discreet, separate diegeses.
Certainly, there is a difficulty in applying the term ‘paratext’ to many Superman texts at all, since even within the comics medium there are diegetically-discontinuous intertexts, yet for the most part in comics any stories set within the same narrative continuity are essentially considered equal parts of the same wider collective text. Although at a stretch the *Supergirl* comic could be considered something of a fragment or paratext of the ‘core’ titles starring Superman himself, they are not ‘ peripheral’ texts in the sense that Genette or Gray would view them, no more so than *Superman* is to *Action Comics*, nor, for that matter, is *Batman*, due to shared diegesis.

As such, it is problematic to designate either adaptations in other media with separate diegesis or related comics within the same diegesis as paratexts, given their equal weight, as opposed to them merely being intertexts or hypertexts. As a result my usage of the term will be sparing, although I will raise the spectre of paratextuality when discussing some of the more ‘ peripheral’ comic book iterations set in unique continuities, such as so-called ‘Elseworlds’ tales. There are also a few rare instances in which Gray’s definition will apply, such as when discussion turns to the paratextual tie-in comics and novels produced during the decade-long run of the *Smallville* television programme and, in particular, its recent narrative continuation in the pages of a ‘sequel’ comic published after the show’s cancellation.

One other usage of Gray’s extension of the term will be his discussion of the “paratextual perimeter.”\(^44\) This refers to how the intertextual associations of the prior work by creative personnel involved in producing new adaptations of a property can be used to invoke associations that paratextually frame and shape which intertexts the audience will access. This includes employing more ‘ serious’ filmmakers and actors to tackle a revised version of a franchise that has been deemed to have previously become frivolous, thus imparting a preconception of quality by association.\(^45\)

**Overview of the Following Chapters**

\(^45\) I shall briefly address two other of Genette’s terms in this field that I will not be utilising. As discussed earlier, much as Genette’s definition of intertextuality has a narrower meaning than is more widely accepted, relating to direct textual ‘copresence’ (such as allusion, plagiarism and direct quotation), his own term transtextuality is, as Allen puts it, essentially synonymous with the general usage of intertextuality itself. I find this unhelpful, and as such will eschew the term transtextuality entirely. Furthermore, Genette’s umbrella term architextuality, referring to the entirety of literary study pertaining to formal categorisation of genre and modes of discourse is simply beyond the scope of my thesis. A few other, highly specific terms such as pastiche, metalepsis, *bricolage*, transmotivisation and transpragmatisation are nevertheless useful, and shall be detailed as the specific need arises.
Having covered the major aspects of terminological usage in this introductory section, Chapter 1 provides a literature review, to elucidate the methodological position this thesis will take in regard to major theoretical considerations regarding adaptation and intertextuality in approaching comics and their cross-media translations. This is followed by an overview of some major issues already covered by pertinent texts in the burgeoning field of comics studies, before examining the scant academic texts pertaining to Superman specifically.

Chapter 2 will cover questions of adaptation, examining how the Superman property has operated as a transmedia franchise from virtually its earliest days. The notion of a ‘positive feedback loop’ whereby influence from comic hypotexts to media intertexts and back to comics in turn will be explored, and these complex metatextual lines of influence outlined. The elasticity and conformity of these adaptational processes will be discussed in comparison to Batman as the nearest equivalent superhero franchise, and one subject to more flexible interpretations.

Chapter 3 takes the focus back to comic books and delves deeply into the issue of diegetic continuity, its development across the different eras of the superhero genre, and the difficulty of isolating a definitive hypotext. Seeking to formalise usage for terminology specific to comics studies, this chapter engages in exploring fan-originated terminology relevant to issues of continuity and franchise supertextuality, in order to afford academic rigour to key terms and concepts such as ‘recon’ and ‘reboot.’ Also covered are debates regarding the fan-derived classification of superhero comics’ history into several ‘ages’ with parallels to genre cycle theory, suggesting further preferred usage for these contested and often arbitrary terms.

Having settled on field-specific terminology, this chapter continues with an in-depth engagement with Umberto Eco’s theory of the “oneiric climate” of how superhero comic books (and using Superman as his example, no less) utilise a particular form of semi-stagnant narratological time.\textsuperscript{46} Engaging with both Eco and later scholars’ critiques of his theory, the oneiric theory of comic book storytelling is thoroughly examined for its pertinence to the concept of comic book continuity and its complex operations in relation to relative narrative homeostasis. Finally, Chapter 3 will outline and discuss the existence of continuity outliers in the form of ‘official

apocrypha’ and unlicensed pastiche, and make the case for their meta-oneiric function in counterpoint to mainstream canon.

Building upon these issues, Chapter 4 shall question how and why continuity and the revision thereof has become an obsession with DC and the Superman franchise specifically. Issues include the inherent conflicts which arise from the crosscurrents of nostalgic impulses and the genre’s reliance on the status quo, yet conversely its need for innovation and renewal, as well as the ever-present drive to attract new audiences. Questions of fan literacy and the engaged reader will be covered, as well as contrasting the differing continuity strategies of DC Comics and their biggest competitor, Marvel Comics. Landmark moments of transition in Superman’s history will be examined for their intertextual ripples in the franchise, and questions of character consistency and reinvention will be compared again to similar yet often more radical cycles in the portrayal of Batman.

Having thoroughly covered processes of ongoing transmedia re-adaptation and internalised perpetual re-adaptation through continuity reboots, Chapter 4 shall bring this intertextual analysis to a head in a consideration of how the comic book industry and the superhero genre have come to invoke, critique, and even parody these issues both within and without the official Superman diegesis. Two further case studies shall be used, examining the densely layered work of comics auteur Alan Moore on both official and pastiche versions of Superman, investigating his embedded metacritique on the use and abuse of continuity in comics.

Critically, this final chapter explores how these increasingly complex and frequent continuity operations, through the mechanisms of retcons and reboots, have taken on a palimpsestuous quality. Re-engaging with Genette’s conception of the literary palimpsest, this chapter shall examine how such analytical appraisal of these frequent iterative rearticulations of Superman’s origin narrative necessitates a deeply intertextual reading of comic texts, not just in relation to each other but the vast array of their transmedia intertexts. The argument will be made that continuity revision is in itself a complex, unique form of internalised adaptation, drawing on a web of intertextual influences from within and without the problematically hypotextual ‘parent’ medium.
Chapter 1
SUPERMAN AND TRANSMEDIA ADAPTATION

Adapting a Methodology from Adaptation Theory

This chapter will examine the textual operation of the Superman supertext as a transmedia franchise, with particular focus on the methods of textual transmission and rearticulation at play in the process of adaptation of comic book tropes and continuity elements in different media. These adaptations to be analysed primarily encompass cinema and television as high-dissemination mainstream avenues for narrative expression, in marked contrast to the increasingly niche audience for comic books. This dissonance of exposure, and the resulting cultural capital between the notionally hypotextual yet continuously published comic book diegesis and its notionally adaptive hypertexts, will be examined for its problematising effect on applying traditional models of textual derivation. This will be questioned especially in light of the reflexive effect to which comic books themselves re-adapt content transmuted or even originated in these cross-media iterations of the supertext. This process of intertextual feedback will be given particular focus in this chapter for the effect it has on the ongoing transformations of continuity in the comic diegesis.

Having established in the previous chapter my intended usage of the various terminological issues pertaining to the scholarship I shall be addressing, I now turn to a consideration of some methodological principles as presented by some relevant works in the field of intertextual and adaptation studies, especially as pertaining to the production and reception of popular culture.

In the broader context of viewing pop-culture artefacts such as Superman, I take some cues from Jim Collins’ work.1 Despite being published 24 years ago and thus well before the rise of internet culture and the rapid postmillennial acceleration of multiple media forms, it lays out useful key principles. Although in some cases Collins’ theories may seem to have become so widely accepted as to have become internalised and seemingly self-evident in subsequent scholarship, they are nonetheless worth covering. While Collins’ argument is exacting and his text excessively detailed

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for my own purposes, his core recurring argument is that contemporary culture, and
most especially as viewed through the lens of popular culture, has become “decentred,”
with homogenising impulses towards any kind of monoculture of taste or officialdom
have been irrevocably overturned, and need to be understood as being so.

Using the metaphor of exiting the “Grand Hotel” of unified prior cultural
hegemony, Collins argues that the products of these fragmented, specialised and
decentred (sub)cultures have to be viewed as having fundamentally “discourse-
sensitive” modes of reception. For example, he briefly cites a comic-book example,
whereby Frank Miller’s *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* needs to be viewed as a text
that problematises cultural hegemonies of not only justice and law-enforcement, but
also prior depictions of the character’s relationship to such authority.²

Collins stresses the importance of recognising the multiplicity of aesthetic
discourses relating to popcultural productions, as well as the accompanying
heterogeneity of audiences receiving and interpreting such texts, a state which creates
multiple cultural hierarchies that measure and define meaning on the basis of both
internal discourses and relationally to other genres and prior iterations.³ Post-modernist
culture and its texts, he argues, seek not just to decentre “master systems” of High Art
but to champion the key importance of recognising a diverse array of such discourses,
often ideologically competing for similar semiotic territory in the wake of fracturing
notional mainstream.⁴

This is the basis for Collins’ critique of prior studies of intertextuality as being
overly concerned with the positioning of the audience, arguing instead for the
importance of how texts position themselves relationally to other texts. The relevance
of this view to my study is rather nicely illustrated in some of Collin’s own phrasing:

In other words a given text labours to create a fictional universe and also an accompanying
fictional arena which surrounds it. A text’s relation to other texts and to its reader is never
unmediated, if for no other reason than the fact that the text constantly tries to affect the
mediation on its own terms by supplying an already mediated set of circumstances as its own
intertextual arena.⁵

Naturally this formulation is rather evocative of how the interaction of comic book
caracters such as Superman and his DC stablemates were the first to popularise the

² *ibid.*, pp. 32-33.
³ *ibid.*, p. 43.
⁴ *ibid.*, pp. 64, 112.
⁵ *ibid.*, p. 42.
now widely-used term ‘universe’ to refer to a shared fictional diegesis of many narrative media franchises.

Moreover, Collins’ perspective is persuasive in that popcultural texts, particularly of the interconnected multimedia variety examined by this thesis, strive very observably to frame their own contexts through dialogic relationships between other prior and current texts at varyingly close levels of diegetic harmony. Gray similarly discusses the efforts whereby texts attempt to mediate their own context through the selective invocation of paratexts which they do or do not wish to evoke in the minds of the prospective audience, a point likewise made by Hutcheon in her observance of the selectivity with which audiences will relate to intertextual allusions outside the narrative, such as the past work of contributing artists or actors.

Of course, while accepting Collins’ critique of monocultural models and excessive focus on audience positioning, this is not to say that consideration of who receives these texts and how is by any means irrelevant. On the contrary, it is still important to direct some analysis toward any popcultural narrative’s audience base and their expected levels of textual awareness or ‘fan literacy,’ in order for these self-mediating textual contexts to operate effectively. This will be discussed at greater length in my analysis of the operation of continuity in Chapter 3.

This type of literacy is perhaps most evident when it comes to awareness of what Umberto Eco described as “the already said,” a self-reflexive textual awareness of antecedent tropes. Collins contends that the essential difference in the treatment of the ‘already said’ between modernist and post-modernist texts is key. He describes the dialogic nature of modernism’s view of cultural production as invariably surpassing earlier iterations, to become “an asemiotic zero-sum game.” Collins instead champions the “polylogic” relationship between post-modernist texts and a plethora of ‘already saids,’ with “the copresence of previous representations persisting through mass media…concentrating on synchronic tensions rather than diachronic breaks,” an intermingled coding of different forms and eras rather than a direct rejection of one by a later successor.

Although returning briefly to issues of terminology to say that I do not reject the usage of ‘dialogic’ wholly in favour of ‘polylogic,’ Collins’ larger argument here
holds considerable relevance for a viewpoint on the nature of how cross-media textual interaction operates in as complex a supertext as those of superhero comics. Yet while supersession and rejection are by no means entirely absent from the history of perpetual adaptation and revision in the Superman narrative, my analysis in Chapter 4 of the accelerating cycle of diegetic ‘reboots’ in the comic text specifically shall demonstrate how this vision of a multi-track, polylogic mode of textual discourse and influence has come ever more strongly into play over the decades.

The heterogeneous multiplicity of Superman texts have become so complex and ‘decentred’ in influencing each new iteration, and likewise Superman fans are so intergenerationally varied and favour such an array of different medium-expressions, that Collins could just as well be talking about the fruitlessness of fans seeking a ‘definitive’ version of Superman when he says:

> Within decentered cultures, no Zeitgeist can emerge as dominant; nor can any one institution – whether the university or prime-time television – be considered the sole “official” culture responsible for establishing aesthetic and ideological standards for entire societies.10

This broad, encompassing view of differing, non-hegemonic cultural discourses as explicated by Collins synchronises rather well with my own approach to studies on adaptation. Examining various sources discussing adaptation more specifically, scholars such as Hutcheon, James Naremore11 or James M. Welsh and Peter Lev12 seek to legitimise adaptations as not being inferior to their precursor texts. Primarily attempting to quash prejudicial attitudes in the field of traditional literature studies and extant bias for maintaining the sanctity of ‘canonical’ classics, they aimed to reconsider the process of adaptation in a wider intertextual context, and to remove the condescending assumptions behind describing texts derived from earlier sources as pejoratively ‘derivative.’

This is a position that my thesis strongly endorses, yet one I will not seek to engage with on such a traditional ‘lit crit’ basis, predominantly since this opposition to traditional canonical thinking about literature has become somewhat antiquated, and very much falling into the kinds of restrictive dialogic relationships and cultural hierarchies that Collins’ post-modernist approach convincingly argues that we have moved beyond in our cultural analysis.

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10 ibid., p. 141.
11 Naremore, Film Adaptation.
Moreover, it has become in my view an increasingly self-evident perspective in the ever more widely mediated nature of contemporary entertainment that is at the core of my study. Multiplatform dissemination of transmedia entertainment franchises has radically accelerated, particularly as we are now into the second decade of the new millennium, in which small children can be readily seen operating smartphones and e-readers as though it were second nature, and comic book companies make more money through producing screen adaptations of their characters than through actual printed comics.

I intend with my thesis to look past this somewhat outmoded argument as to the intrinsic value of adaptations and focus instead on unpacking these textual relations, processes, and outcomes, while essentially taking as read the validity of studying adapted texts and supposedly ‘derivative’ transmedia narratives. This stance is all the more a necessary precondition of my study when one considers that the subject matter and media platforms that constitute my topic -- superheroes as they appear in comic books, mainstream film and television -- are inherently so far outside the wheelhouse of canonical literature studies that addressing such elementary questions of the material’s suitability for academic study is not my purpose here, and in any case is a battle already fought elsewhere.13

Welsh, and many of the scholars collected in his and Lev’s book The Literature/Film Reader: Issues of Adaptation, contends that the interdisciplinary field of adaptation studies has for too long been mired in ‘banal’ questions of legitimacy from outmoded fidelity criticism pertaining to ‘canonical’ hypotexts, and argues for the consideration of new perspectives, particularly that of intertextuality.14 Welsh is somewhat equivocal, however, questioning whether any degree of priority can be given towards questions of fidelity to literary sources or even the ‘truth’ of history when considering the inherent artifice of filmmaking, while also noting the instinctive absurdity of totally abandoning any such considerations.15 Conversely acknowledging

13 It is even a point of criticism against some comics scholars such as Peter Coogan and Ana Merino as being too concerned with legitimising Comics Studies as to “risk reaffirming high-low hierarchies” of their material’s cultural and academic worth. Jeremy Stoll, “Review of Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods,” in ImageTEXT Vol. 7 No. 2 (Department of English, University of Florida, 2013), http://www.english.ufl.edu/imagetext/archives/v7_2/stoll/.
15 ibid., pp. xix-xx.
the persistence of some issues of fidelity criticism, he notes that “A good adaptation doesn’t necessarily have to be ‘by the book,’ but any will expect it to be at least close to the book and not an utter betrayal.”  

Welsh even makes the cynical suggestion that Hollywood probably does not care about adaptational fidelity for any intrinsic value, but rather out of financial concern for turning off viewers with expectations of resemblance to a popular novel. He cites “the uninspired literalness of the first Harry Potter movies” as a negative example, and quotes Bazin that “Literal translations are not the faithful ones.” This sense of lifeless fidelity was similarly a common criticism of Zack Snyder’s film adaptation of Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons’ seminal graphic novel Watchmen, but is a rare example in the subject matter of my study. Very few transmedia versions of comic book superhero properties are ever directly adapting a single specific, discreet story arc, so much as origins, plot threads, and memorable narrative beats, what Coogan calls “resonant tropes,” which shall be discussed at greater length in the next chapter.

The multiplicity of intertexts that can inform an adaptation is key to Lev’s call for “greater hybridity” in adaptations studies, noting that even films ostensibly based on a single discreet ‘source novel’ or play are usually influenced as well by a plethora of other aesthetic and conceptual sources, such as “Paintings, photographs, news articles, historical events, [other] films, television shows, and so on,” and that “one loses some of the richness of this impure art” by focusing solely on the key hypotext alone. This is highly pertinent to the wide array of even just Superman-related intertexts informing any new iteration of the franchise, and not just in terms of what is included.

In relation to an analysis of how Joseph Mankiewicz’s 1963 film Cleopatra purposefully eschews conforming to Shakespeare’s famous dramatisation of Julius Caesar’s assassination, Lev discusses this exclusion as what “might be called a ‘negative influence’.” Indeed, the “negative influence” of choosing to discard

16 ibid., pp. xxiii-xxiv.
21 ibid., p. 336.
elements of then-diegetic continuity when embarking on a reboot in comics is almost as central to how such revisions frame their own intertextual perimeter as is what they choose to retain, or import from other transmedia incarnations. It serves as a useful analytical counterpoint to Hutcheon’s description of the “creative and interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging,”22 as writers of rebooted comics or new transmedia adaptations try to ‘salvage’ what is deemed to still ‘work’ from otherwise discarded or overwritten iterations of continuity. These exclusions of negative influences contrasting with the simultaneous inclusion of ‘salvaged’ materials are ever-present factors in any reinscription of the supertext for a new iteration. Lev’s advocacy of “screenplay studies,” however, is of little practical use in my methodology, due to the general unavailability of comic book scripts (a problem he notes even with cinema).23

Related issues of medium-specificity are central to Brian McFarlane’s critique of literary studies, and the need to escape the trap of fidelity criticism. His contention is that those in the literature field are not adequately trained to analyse the methods by which complexity can be expressed through film as distinct from those of prose. This consequent failure to understand that any novel or film is “the result of two different processes of articulation”24 is reinforced by the underlying conviction that books are intrinsically superior forms of narrative artistic expression.

Describing with disdain this “middle-class, middle-brow criticism,” 25 McFarlane contends that an ignorance of the technical processes of mise-en-scène, editing and soundtrack by which any film constructs its narrative form, underlies much of scholarship’s lack of questioning as to whether fidelity to the perceived fixed meaning of a hypotext from a different medium “is either possible or desirable – or what it might mean.”26 It is an attitude he believes is reinforced by its commonplace discourse outside of academia, as faithfulness to a known source is a relatively obvious criterion of assessment in discussion by the general public.

McFarlane makes the valid point that much of academic language concerning fidelity criticism takes on loaded language evoking chastity, with “Violation, tampering: the sorts of terms used suggest deeply sinister processes of molestation.”27

25 ibid., p. 4.
26 ibid., pp. 6-7.
27 ibid., p. 9.
It is a point Naremore concurs with, describing such terminology as betraying “certain unexamined ideological concerns because it deals of necessity with sexually charged materials and cannot avoid gendered language associated with the notion of ‘fidelity’.” Furthermore, McFarlane argues that overly literal representations “can cripple the adaptation… an embalmment of a famous work … without any apparent point of view on its material.” Instead, he champions ‘bold’ adaptations, creative transformations of adapted texts that provide “a radial reworking of the precursor text, a kind of commentary on its great antecedent, a new work,” which can be judged in their own right as films first, and adaptations as only one of their constituent points of assessment. McFarlane argues that literary hypotexts should be regarded as “only an aspect of the film’s intertextuality, of more or less importance according to the viewer’s acquaintance with the antecedent work.”

While McFarlane’s argument against fidelity criticism is tied up in his wider plea for throwing off the yoke of “high culture/popular culture hierarchy or even dichotomy,” as stated previously this is an issue I prefer to take as read. However, McFarlane’s discussion of the necessity for awareness of adaptation’s “commentative power” is pertinent. As shall be argued in Chapters 3 and 4, an implicit assessment/rejection/improvement process motivates the continual process of both transmedia and internalised adaptation at play in the supertext of the Superman franchise’s many reboots and reimaginings.

On a similar note, Thomas M. Leitch bemoans the evaluative approach of much academic writing on adaptation, contends that it has a tendency to “ignore fifty years of adaptation theory in uncritically adopting the author’s intention as a criterion for the success of both the novel and any possible film adaptation …preferring evaluation to analysis when considering films in general and adaptations in particular,” largely due to their disciplinary training owing more to aesthetic literary studies than analytical filmic studies.

Rejecting this focus on canonical authors, Leitch makes the provocative argument that fidelity lacks validity as a criterion when its premise of the superiority of

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28 Naremore, *Film Adaptation*, p. 8.
30 ibid.
31 ibid., p. 9.
32 ibid., p. 12, 13.
the ‘original’ can in fact be easily undermined. In Leitch’s view the importance of fidelity criticism can be rendered reductive, using the example that major filmmakers such as Alfred Hitchcock can get away with significant divergence in his adaptations due to having a greater ‘canonical’ status as a film auteur than the lesser reputation of many of the novels he uses as hypotexts.\textsuperscript{34} This is something Naremore considers a deliberate strategy by an auteurist filmmaker wishing to be seen as having improved upon originals of low cultural worth, and furthermore to be received as such by adherents of auteurist theory.\textsuperscript{35} Leitch even contends that such a theoretical focus has in turn marginalised adaptation studies from both film and literature studies, which have increasingly abandoned auteurism models.\textsuperscript{36}

Auteurism and fidelity models are actually of little use when tracing the textual fluidity of influence in the Superman franchise, as even if comics are viewed as the primary hypotext, they are themselves a highly collaborative medium with many simultaneous writers, artists and editors shaping the franchise and its many cross-pollinating iterations. This is not to say that, as Leitch would put it, ‘evaluative’ readings of influence are without their uses when discussing reboots. Nor that rare cases of particularly auteurist creators can be observed to have made significant contributions to the redevelopment of Superman’s mythos, as shall be discussed in relation to John Byrne and Alan Moore in Chapter 4, and shall presently be addressed again in this chapter, in terms of Comics Studies in particular.

Contending that adaptation studies has the potential to “dethrone English departments’ traditional emphasis on literature”\textsuperscript{37} and act as a forerunner for a wider new discipline of textual studies,\textsuperscript{38} Leitch argues that a key flaw in current theory lies in viewing source texts as ‘readerly’ authoritative works rather than ‘writerly’ texts, whereby “texts remain alive only to the extent that they can be rewritten and that to experience a text in all its power requires each reader to rewrite it.”\textsuperscript{39} Thereby Leitch sees far more mileage in redefining adaptation studies into questions of intertextuality, asking, “how has a given adaptation rewritten its sourcetext? Why has it chosen to

\textsuperscript{34} ibid., pp.19-21, 26.
\textsuperscript{35} Naremore, Film Adaptation, pp. 6-7.
\textsuperscript{36} Thomas M. Leitch, “Where Are We Going, Where Have We Been?,” in Welsh and Lev, The Literature/Film Reader, p. 328.
\textsuperscript{37} ibid., p. 332.
\textsuperscript{38} Leitch, “Literature vs. Literacy,” p. 32.
\textsuperscript{39} ibid., p. 16. However, it should be noted that the distinction between readerly and writerly texts was first expressed by Roland Barthes, The Pleasure of the Text, Richard Miller (trans.) (Hill and Wang, New York, 1975).
select and rewrite the sourcetext it has? How have the texts available to us inevitably been rewritten by the very act of reading?” And, in preferring writerly texts, finally asks, “How do we want to rewrite them anew?”

The objection to an evaluative, ‘readerly’ approach whereby “whenever we watch an adaptation as an adaptation – we treat it as an intertext designed to be looked through, like a window on the source text’ (as per Hutcheon) seems hostile to the potential intertextual merit of viewing adaptations as adaptation. However, Leitch’s comments must be seen in the context of decrying the kind of 1:1 fidelity criticism comparing adaptations to a single hypotext.

While I prefer Welsh’s more agnostic allowance for the efficacy of a moderated degree of fidelity criticism and evaluative comparison, the point remains that strict fidelity criticism is virtually impossible in any case when considering subject matter with such a plethora of competing hypotexts and intertexts as in Superman’s varied media expressions. Donald M. Whaley goes even further, pondering the efficacy of viewing texts in terms of the “history of ideas” that encompass the many diverse intertexts viewable in any adaptation, from the directly textual to broader cultural influences, suggesting that “Historians of ideas define text broadly.”

Taking the example of the 1979 film Apocalypse Now, Whaley conducts a detailed analysis of the vast number of textual and cultural influences on both director Francis Ford Coppola and screenwriter John Milius, far beyond the notional ‘primary source’ in Joseph Conrad’s 1899 novella Heart of Darkness from which it takes its plot and characters. Citing diverse references to the classics, Conrad’s literary contemporaries, multiple cinematic antecedents, Vietnam War journalism, real-life observances of the hippie movement, and the prior careers of Coppola and Milius themselves, Whaley suggests that historians of ideas go beyond typical simple questions of fidelity by “exploring all the sources of the text, not only earlier texts but social sources as well.”

In an ideal world, Whaley’s ‘history of ideas’ approach could well be a preferable goal when tackling adaptation studies. For example, it is informative to be

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40 Leitch, “Where Are We Going, Where Have We Been?,” p. 332.
41 Hutcheon, A Theory of Adaptation, pp. 120-121.
44 ibid., pp. 35-50.
45 ibid., p. 46, 48.
aware how Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s Jewish heritage and life during the Great Depression influenced their creation of Superman, or how Canadian John Byrne’s experience of immigrating to America informed his emphasis on Clark Kent’s status as an alien ‘immigrant’ when rebooting continuity in the 1980s. Or, as a more concrete example, it is useful to know that the precipitating diegetic cause for said reboot -- the maxi-series Crisis on Infinite Earths -- was itself conceived as the result of various editorial and economic pressures at play for DC Comics at the time.

However, given the vast multiplicity of contributors to the Superman mythos covered in my study, tracing such influences beyond the strictly textual proves insurmountable, and frequently verging on unknowable, as in the historical approach of Brad Ricca also demonstrates in his fascinating yet speculative analysis of Siegel and Shuster. Highly relevant cultural influences shall be mentioned in rare cases such as the above, but given that even just wrangling the intense array of cross-pollinating official intertexts at play within the Superman franchise is relatively prohibitive, Whaley’s call to become a broader ‘historian of ideas’ shall be outside the scope of my methodology.

As Kranz contends, while it is all well and good to attempt to determine such influences as Whaley would have us do, a more traditionally comparative view to the observable primary hypotext should never be eschewed as a result. Making the ‘common sense’ argument that both filmmakers and audiences would view primary hypotexts as by far the greatest sources of artistic (and economic) significance in adaptation over any other traceable intertext, he argues,

Probability suggests that only intertextual connections which were sustained or foregrounded will be recognized and possibly have a significant effect on the understanding of any given

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48 Brad J. Ricca, “History: Discovering the Story of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster,” in Smith and Duncan, Critical Approaches to Comics, pp. 198-199.
film. The post-structuralist vision of infinite connections to other texts and contexts is, from a practical standpoint, the height of academic silliness.49 This holds true for my methodology in general terms, at least insofar as chasing obscure extratextual influences on the multitude of creative personnel involved in the Superman franchise. However, I take a somewhat broader view than that of only deeming significant those intertextual connections which are “sustained or foregrounded,” simply because they may not be primarily formative to the meaning-construction presented to a (potential) majority of any Superman text’s prospective audience. As I shall demonstrate in chapters 3 and 4, and as argued by Angela Ndalianis in “Enter the Aleph,”50 a multi-track reading of many such texts and their often diverse references to transmedia intertexts, even just within the franchise, are often a major source of signification to a ‘fan’ reader in ways which are not necessarily foregrounded or sustained to the extent that they would be noticeable to an uninitiated reader.

Kranz cuts to the quick of how so-called fidelity criticism can be useful without automatically championing the ‘original,’ asking for the respective iterations to be considered within their own media, and simply reasoning that “there’s no necessary or inherent reason why fidelity criticism must include an evaluation of the relative quality of an adaptation with respect to its source. Why evaluate at all? We’re not reviewers.”51

The perspective of Sarah Cardwell is also useful here, at least in broad strokes, although not necessarily in terms of the ultimate focus she gives to aesthetics. Discussing the seemingly perennial problem between, as she puts it, of “the core conundrum of the field: comparative versus noncomparative approaches,”52 Cardwell makes something of a recantation, or at least modification of her prior work that had uniformly called for a noncomparative approach,53 finding herself torn between the two perspectives of either ignoring or accepting some consideration of the usefulness of comparing adaptations to their hypotexts.

49 Kranz, “Trying Harder,” p. 89.
She argues that, “At worst, comparison leads us to false expectations about the film’s intentions and form… judging it by the standards of the book. At best, our close attention to the novel is restrictive … leading us to focus too narrowly on some aspects over others and to ignore other relevant contextual factors,” such as a film or television adaptation having its own separate agenda or artistic climate from its source novel. Cardwell contends it is important to consider an adaptation’s potentially distinct generic context, which can be framed by both “intratextual” (content) and “extratextual” (advertising and contributing reputations, what Genette would deem peritexts and epitexts) factors. Cardwell makes the compelling point, when discussing the television adaptation of a costume drama, that “Most viewers will know this genre better than they know the source book. They will have preconceptions [and thus] The adaptation’s compliances with, differences from, and contrasts with generic norms give us clues for interpretation.”

As I shall emphasise, one of the aspects that inform so many of the adaptational permutations of Superman is the likelihood of any given audience’s extant familiarity with the generic tropes associated with not only the character specifically but also the superhero genre conventions in general, as this was the character that codified these very conventions. The influence on audience preconceptions from varying media and their re-inscription into the wider supertext via adaptation will be discussed in Chapters 2 through 3.

Cardwell points out that one value for a comparative approach lies in its applicability to raising considerations of aesthetics; that while adaptations should be able to eschew fidelity criticism and be artistically judged on their own merits, comparisons of texts across differing media invite useful analysis of the differences in media. Inviting scholars to ask if an adaptation to another medium “raises its own questions – ones that are unrelated to the source novel because they arise from its own aesthetic specificities,” Cardwell sees a great deal of potential in the use of comparative studies of revealing these aesthetic differences of meaning-construction across different media iterations of the same core stories. However, as she frames this primarily in terms of deepening an appreciation of the aesthetics of distinct media expressions, rather than an intrinsic consideration for how the content in question may

54 Cardwell, “Adaptation Studies Revisited,” pp. 52
55 ibid., pp. 55-56.
56 As shall be discussed in my appraisal of Peter Coogan’s work.
be rearticulated, I would argue that Cardwell’s perspective still places little real value on comparative approaches in and of themselves so much as more broadly in terms of how different media and art forms operate.

For my purposes, it is still very much a consideration of how the supertext of this franchise is manipulated, reconfigured and disseminated on narrative as well as formal terms. While fidelity criticism is a flawed methodology, and almost inapplicable in the traditional 1:1 sense, comparative studies more generally are vital to tracing strands of intertextual influence in the analysis of how and why Superman’s perpetual self-adaptation functions.

That said, while I may not find directly useful Cardwell’s call for an aesthetics-centric model, I do agree with her assertion that a “very loose, uncritical, sloppy or unengaged pluralism” of theoretical approach is unhelpful, and that adaptation studies can benefit from combining the perspectives and analytical approaches which scholars of literature, film, and other forms have to contribute to mutual understanding.\(^{58}\) While considerations of comparative aesthetics may not be a major methodological tool for my study, it is worth noting where relevant the way different media forms have shaped aspects of the developing supertext. Examples include the technical and budgetary limitations of 1950s television precluding the use of traditional supervillains and monsters in the George Reeves TV series *The Adventures of Superman* (1953-1958); how radio was instrumental in creating key franchise elements such as Kryptonite and Jimmy Olsen; or, to use the Cardwell’s point about the influence of genre conventions in adaptation, how the narrative presentation in later television series *Lois & Clark: the New Adventures of Superman* (1993-1997) and *Smallville* (2001-2011) were shaped by romantic sitcom and teen drama tropes, respectively. Also relevant is the consideration of the greater audience base and thus cultural impact that most non-comic book iterations enjoy, and thus the way narrative innovations and story tropes developed in transmedia adaptations often reflexively influence the notionally ‘core’ hypotext of the comics, as shall be discussed at length in Chapter 2.

Issues of fidelity can perhaps be in some respects summed up by Kranz, who also agrees that a comparative approach can have its uses, but also questions whether the battle his colleagues have waged over rejecting or reclaiming elements of fidelity criticism may all be rather a storm in a teacup over something that was never really as

\(^{58}\) *ibid.*, pp. 60-62.
dominant a mode of discourse as has been claimed, at least within serious academia. Citing various examples from scholarly texts, Kranz argues that such critiques in recent publications are actually few and far between and asks if it is “possible that post-structuralists have caricatured what is really more diverse than it appears” when it comes to considerations of fidelity in adaptation studies.\(^{59}\)

In rejecting the ‘dangers’ of poststructuralist and postmodern theory’s potential for “solipsistic practices” in adaptation studies, Kranz instead makes a cautious defence of fidelity’s usefulness, echoing Cardwell to some degree, stating,

Moreover, there is no reason to replace the comparative analysis at the heart of fidelity criticism; ultimately one can’t understand an adaptation without a comparison to the named or most likely literary source or sources; that [is] what we mean by adaptation. …This reformulation probably means changing the name of fidelity criticism to comparative criticism …making the issue of fidelity (still important for economic, audience-response, and hermeneutic reasons) only one of several related questions in the comparative equation.\(^{60}\)

Other scholars offer a differing approach to the obsession with fidelity, which focuses more on the multilayered view of adaptations’ palimpsestuous qualities. For example Julie Sanders,\(^{61}\) while still largely enmeshed in the pro-adaptation argument that I wish to move beyond, does so in a way less concerned than many of the aforementioned with debating fidelity criticism than by arguing how adaptations impart an intertextual diversity that enriches their hypotexts rather than ‘robbing’ them. She describes a model for analysing adaptation as webs or processes of filtration “rather than simplistic one-way lines of influence from source to adaptation,”\(^{62}\) arguing that new adaptations are often based as much on prior, intermediate adaptations as they are on the story’s very earliest iteration, as part of an ongoing process.

This ‘multi-track’ view of adaptation Sanders describes is highly pertinent to the palimpsestuous nature of adaptation constantly at play in the frequent re-adaptations of the Superman franchise. Her descriptions of adapted texts in a state of constant flux as they undergo perpetual retellings, being concerned as much with adapting prior adaptations as they are any notional original,\(^{63}\) seem an almost tailor-made description of how the franchise’s supertext operates.

\(^{60}\) ibid., pp. 98-99.
\(^{61}\) Julie Sanders, Adaptation and Appropriation (Routledge, New York, 2006).
\(^{62}\) ibid., p. 24.
\(^{63}\) ibid., p. 62.
Sanders’ discussion of Genette’s *Palimpsests* in relation to Shakespearian adaptation speaks to this layered viewing of texts, and the necessity for a fully engaged reader/viewer to have significant foreknowledge to appreciate adequately the interplay of similarity and difference mobilised by adaptive texts. This is a view that is compatible with Hutcheon’s discussion of how such ‘knowing audiences’ experience an enriched perception of such texts’ ‘palimpsestic doubleness,’ digesting an adaptation “as an adaptation,”64 and in notable contrast to Leitch’s aforementioned rejection of such readings. As compared, naturally, to an ‘unknowing audience,’ this heightened experience of the present text mentally ‘oscillates’ one’s awareness of the intertextual connections it evokes with prior texts in the process of watching or reading this new adaptation as we consume it.

Of course, with widely-adapted comics (and even just within comics themselves), it is perhaps even more evident that there will always be limits to the depth of knowledge held by a ‘knowing audience’ due to the sheer breadth and quantity of material composing the supertext. As Hutcheon points out, the best adaptations work equally well for both knowing and unknowing audiences alike, having a strong, face-value story that can still be appreciated with minimal foreknowledge.65 As I shall argue in Chapters 3 and 4, this tension between the rewards of referencing continuity for knowing audiences and the quest to perpetually court new, ‘unknowing’ readers into a shrinking medium is at the very crux of DC Comics’ obsessive rebooting of the Superman comic franchise.

In looking further at the grey area between highly ‘knowing’ and less deeply ‘continuity-literate’ audiences, I find some value in Sanders’ study of how myth and fairy tales operate in a state of perpetual re-adaptation.66 This has clear relevance to any study of long-running comic book heroes, although not so much as in the cliché of ‘Superheroes are our modern pantheon,’ despite the titular ‘modern mythology’ of Richard Reynolds’ comics scholarship, which shall be discussed presently. Rather, my focus is on the sense of cultural awareness of mythic paradigms, and how audiences’ responses to their perpetual re-invention are governed by their prior knowledge of earlier texts.

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64 ibid.
As I shall argue in Chapters 2 and 4, this is more true of Superman than perhaps any other superhero character, including even Batman, due to his mass dissemination across multiple media forms over the longest and most consistently intergenerational period of time. In this sense, the overarching supertext of the Superman franchise can be taken as an unconventional example of how Sanders describes ‘canonical’ literature, myth, and fairy tales, in terms of possessing the wide cultural saturation required for ‘engaged audiences’ to experience the pleasure of adaptation.\(^\text{67}\)

A lot of this requirement for an engaged or at least somewhat ‘knowing’ audience is facilitated by what has been argued as a culture increasingly proficient at intertextual readings, with popular television such as The Simpsons (1989- ) rife with pastiche, parody and allusion.\(^\text{68}\) Sanders is hardly alone in this view, as Naremore similarly describes our contemporary, media-saturated culture as perpetually awash with cross-references and adaptations that ricochet between different media and iterations of a familiar story.\(^\text{69}\) It is a phenomenon very much at the core of Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture*, particularly his third chapter, which covers transmedia storytelling.\(^\text{70}\) The problematic applicability of this concept to the Superman franchise shall be discussed in more detail in Chapters 2 and 4.

This ‘knowingness’ is all the more true of comic book fans, for whom a literacy in the operation of intertextual appropriation and allusion are central to an understanding of the increasingly frequent practice of continuity revision, something now seeping into the wider culture through not only prevalent ‘remakes’ of nostalgic film and television properties, but also with active ‘reboots’ of the narrative diegeses of scarcely-dormant comic-based movie franchises, such as with *The Incredible Hulk*\(^\text{71}\) and *The Amazing Spider-Man*,\(^\text{72}\) each appearing within the space of five years since their previous incarnations.

As stated, I do not wish to engage excessively in the debate that champions the cause of adaptation as do Sanders, Naremore and Hutcheon, or as is implicit in the

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\(^\text{67}\) ibid., pp. 97-99, 120. This phenomenon is never more apparent than in varying levels of ‘fan literacy’ at which the television show Smallville can be appreciated. This shall be explored at greater length in my next chapter.

\(^\text{68}\) Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, pp. 154-155.


\(^\text{70}\) Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, pp. 93-130.

\(^\text{71}\) Louis Leterrier (dir.), Marvel Studios/Universal Pictures, 2008.

work of various contributors to Welsh and Lev’s volume. However, one articulation Sanders makes in seeking to debunk the greater value of an originating text is useful in a different regard. This is her description of how the “filtering and mediation” of an adaptive text’s appropriations via other intermediate adaptations “is further proof of this web of intertextuality that once again resists the easy linear structures of straightforward readings of ‘influence’ that seem to presume a greater value in whatever comes first.” Sanders’ view is useful when considering an aspect of how comic book continuity is profoundly palimpsestous in its intertextual referencing. Not only is the past always visible through progressive iterations, but the myriad traces of prior comic adaptations, and other media translations as well, produce a climate in which the earliest ‘original’ versions by no means necessarily retain a dominance of value as definitive primary texts.

On the contrary, I shall argue in Chapter 3 how difficult it is in such a collaborative and continuous medium as comics (and in the case of Superman, still continuous to only a somewhat lesser extent in other media) to define meaningfully an ‘original’ or otherwise discreet primary hypotext. Furthermore, I shall demonstrate how this lack of a firm connection to a canonical (in the non-comic sense of the word) original version is instrumental in generating such an endless cycle of re-inscriptions of the character’s origin and status quo.

André Bazin described the marginalised importance of a true ‘original’ long before the intensely mediatised environment in which we live today. In his 1948 article, Bazin observed how the dissemination of great characters such as Don Quixote …dwell in the consciousness of millions of people who have never had any direct or complete contact with the works [they originated in] …Insofar as the style of the original has managed to create a character and impose him on the public consciousness, that character acquires a greater autonomy, which might in certain cases lead as far as quasi-transcendence of the work. Characters subject to constant adaptation and re-articulation by subsequent generations such as Don Quixote or Sherlock Holmes become something of an entity in themselves, existing seemingly independently, untethered to any single textual iteration.

At its most extreme, this concept takes on a quasi-mystical notion of a character as a “tulpa,” an imaginary being willed into reality, as was claimed of Superman.

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73 Sanders, Adaptation and Appropriation, p. 159.
74 Bazin, “Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest,” p. 46.
specifically in the rather outlandish and quasi-spiritual memoir of Golden Age Superman writer Alvin Schwartz. 75 Similarly, the present-day Superman writer and esoteric iconoclast Grant Morrison has opined that:

Superman is a character who was around long before I was born, he's a character who'll be around long after I'm dead. So, what is he? He's more real than I am, he's more part of the world than I can ever hope to be. And the idea of getting to work on something like that, what is that imaginative thing that's able to reproduce itself each decade and uses generations of talent to refresh its potency? It's a very weird cybernetic entity, a superhero in a long-running universe, because so many people have worked on it, and they've outlived their own creators, even. And yet somehow always a new generation comes along and says “I want to keep Superman alive.” And I find that very interesting, almost magical. 76

What Bazin far more mundanely illustrates is precisely true of a franchised character such as Superman, in fact all the more so, due not only to the diffuse and accruing collection of hypotexts which inform any given new iteration, but because unlike Holmes’ Conan Doyle or Don Quixote’s Cervantes, it is very problematic to define clearly Siegel and Shuster’s earliest version of Superman as ‘definitive’ or ‘canonical’ in any traditional sense.

In this respect, perhaps, literacy of Superman texts is something more akin to Sanders’ aforementioned view of how broad audience awareness of core narrative tropes and conventions can create a de facto cultural ‘canon’ in terms of Arthurian myth or Shakespearian narrative. 77 This eschews the need for close readings of earlier hypotexts, much less those that are an obscure or largely ignored ‘original’ where subsequent retelling and embellishments have become far better known. Hutcheon also describes the palimpsestic nature of how frequently re-adapted characters and narratives gain a common cultural memory, in a way deeply reflective of the intergenerational dissemination of Superman’s mythos. 78

The multi-iteration longevity of such characters and their narratives is not merely the province of myth and literature from one or more centuries ago, as many comic characters such as Superman have now existed for the better part of a century themselves. As Lynn Spigel and Henry Jenkins noted in regards to the Man of Steel’s only fractionally later contemporary Batman: “we are now encountering popular texts

75 Alvin Schwartz, An Unlikely Prophet: Revelations on the Path Without Form (Divina, Denver CO, 1997).
77 Sanders, Adaptation and Appropriation, pp. 62-81, 97-99, 120.
78 Hutcheon, A Theory of Adaptation, p. 122.
that endure, in transformed states, for multiple generations. These texts provide clues to a shared, collective past that runs parallel to and often intersects with our own life histories.”

Indeed, they argue that it is this state of continual intergenerational reinterpretation that allows such characters to maintain a cultural significance, likening it to the narrativisation of history within cultural memory and the potential for divergent accounts. This is most certainly true of Superman as well, although as I shall argue in Chapter 4, his myriad adaptations and revisions have been generally less disparate in tone and content than those of the Batman. It is this intergenerational shift of audiences that perpetuates this kind of continual variation on the generalised ‘myth’ or broad cultural perception of a character as Bazin and Sanders would put it, potentially divorced from direct engagement of any essentialised locus text.

This kind of approach to viewing the (re-)iterations of a franchised entertainment character as a function of cultural memory is intriguing. As Spigel and Jenkins discuss in relation to the memory of decades-old television, the act of recollection is often less about the specifics of the subject matter than the romantic act of remembering the past, coining the term “re episodic” to refer to the memory of nonspecific recurring imagery, remembering “not the single episode, but rather a prototypical text, a repisodic memory that reflected the generic qualities of the series.”

The essential quality of nostalgia, or at least recognition which underlies this repisodic impulse is important to recognise as a major factor, but not the only factor, in the palimpsestic nature of multiply re-adapted intertexts. Attention to past versions is key, as Hutcheon describes the waning primacy of a notional ‘original’ when adaptations become as much about prior adaptations that can be viewed in parallel rather than necessarily in succession, whereby “Multiple versions exist laterally, not vertically” in cases such as the plethora of Dracula films or translations of Shakespeare to the screen.

80 ibid., p. 142.
81 ibid., pp. 131, 135-136.
82 Hutcheon, A Theory of Adaptation, pp. XIII, 21, 125.
A significant balancing act when creating these kinds of palimpsestic adaptations is the question of not so much as “repetition without replication” but rather “as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation,” the process of retelling always changes the content, and the reception of such will always be mitigated by the individual viewer’s prior exposure to other iterations. In this process Hutcheon describes the adaptor(s) as “the relay” of information in which “memory and change, persistence and variation” always leaves something of themselves, their ‘commentary’ on the subject matter, as McFarlane would have it.

This interplay of new and old is described by Hutcheon as how “the conservative comfort of familiarity is countered by the unpredictable pleasure in difference – for both creator and audience [whereby] What we might, by analogy, call the adaptive faculty is the ability to repeat without copying, to embed difference in similarity, to be at once both self and Other.” This could hardly be a more apt description for the challenge, and one undertaken with increasing and obsessive frequency, with which the Superman franchise tasks itself in repeatedly reworking its lead character’s history, status quo and especially his origin. And nowhere is this more prominent than in the 70 plus years of continuous internalised re-adaptation that has taken place in the unbroken publication of his comic book iterations.

Comics Studies and Methodology
On that note, I must now turn my methodological considerations away from the more broadly theoretical approaches to adaptation, and towards an assessment of the state of comics studies specifically, and questions of their adaptation.

There have, of course, been noteworthy academic studies of comics as a formal art, including by practitioners such as Scott McCloud’s Understanding Comics, and Will Eisner’s Comics and Sequential Art. A consideration of the aesthetics of the medium itself is an important grounding for any detailed consideration of the form, but unlike Cardwell’s exhortation for an aesthetics-grounded analysis, my methodology is not overwhelmingly concerned with formalist issues. In principle I would concur that

83 ibid., pp. 7-8.
84 ibid., p. 173.
any close analysis of a single comic text or the career of any particular comic creator certainly should involve scrutiny of their visual style. This is even applicable in the case of writers with a particular attention to layout, who dictate strong, thematically-driven visual conceptualisations in their scripting, as discussed in Matthew Smith’s analysis of Alan Moore.\textsuperscript{88} That said, I cannot go so far as to agree with Pascal Lefèvre’s contention that formal readings of the visual style of any comic text approached is such that “Without considering formal aspects … any discussion of the content or the themes of the work is, in fact, pointless.”\textsuperscript{89}

Considerations of the individual formal qualities of Superman’s comic appearances are impractical given the vast number -- literally hundreds -- of different artists who have worked on the character over three quarters of a century. Moreover there is no single definitive artistic representation of Superman, either on the printed page or in other media, as this study considers the entire franchise. Particularly noteworthy examples of formal considerations will be noted where relevant, however, including the noteworthy shift in \textit{mise-en-scène} between the last two cinematic representations of Superman in terms of cinematography and other visual aesthetics.

Since adaptation is one of the cornerstones of my study I must also acknowledge Lefèvre’s other work, on the difficulties of adapting comics to other media, notably film. While allowing for the inherently closer similarity of comics to film than, say, to novels, in that both mediums having a strong visual, demonstrative mode of communication, Lefèvre breaks down many of the problematic “visual ontologies” of the two art forms.\textsuperscript{90} On a similar tack is Michael Cohen’s case study of how closely the film adaptation of \textit{Dick Tracy} attempted to replicate comic book aesthetics is illuminating,\textsuperscript{91} as are several case studies analysed by Luca Somigli.\textsuperscript{92} Conversely, for a reversed examination of how cinematic adaptations of comics are reflecting back on and altering in turn the aesthetics of the comic book medium, Liam

\textsuperscript{91} Michael Cohen, “Dick Tracy: In Pursuit of a Comic Book Aesthetic,” in Gordon, Jancovich and McAllister, \textit{Film and Comic Books}.
Burke provides some compelling if perhaps slightly overstated analysis, providing a more formalist focus to the phenomenon of cross-medium adaptational ‘feedback,’\textsuperscript{93} which I shall discuss at length in Chapter 2.

While these predominantly formal considerations are again more focused on direct aesthetic issues than is appropriate for my primarily narratological study, Lefèvre does raise some useful points regarding narrative issues affected by adaptation. Noting as I have myself earlier that comic-based films are rarely direct adaptations of specific isolated comic-book stories,\textsuperscript{94} Lefèvre notes the common objection by fans towards narrative changes from the comic hypotexts, viewed as a form of betrayal essentially a question of fidelity criticism rearing its head once more. This tendency to ‘consecrate’ comic hypotexts -- despite their generally low public regard as a serious artistic endeavour -- is observed in counterpoint to the reality of the need for such expensive adventure films to attract a wider audience from the general public than that of the dwindling ranks of comic book readership.\textsuperscript{95}

Similar to Leitch’s observation of Hitchcock’s preference for adapting hypotexts perceived to be of low canonical worth compared to his own status as a major auteur, this speaks to the issue of the disjunction in cultural capital between the ‘original’ or at any rate ongoing ‘primary’ hypotext of Superman comic books, and the much wider audiences of his ‘secondary’ adaptations to film and television, as shall be discussed in Chapters 2 and 4. However, as I have already signposted, the very lack of a single ‘primary’ hypotext, even within the comic medium, is one of my major issues in analysing the textual transmissions within the Superman franchise. As Lefèvre puts it in relation to the stylistic variability shown in the comics of Superman’s contemporary, Batman:

Because Batman is multifaced a reader of a certain period can have a particular idea about Batman that is not necessarily shared by readers from other periods, or even another contemporary reader. Moreover, as Bennett and Woollacott (1987:59) have demonstrated in their study of James Bond, there is no stable meaning of such a popular figure. Bond or Batman can not be abstracted from the shifting orders of intertextuality through which their actual functioning has been organized and recognized.\textsuperscript{96}


\textsuperscript{94} Lefèvre, “Incompatible Visual Ontologies,” p. 4.

\textsuperscript{95} ibid., pp. 1, 5, 12.

\textsuperscript{96} ibid., p. 10.
While I will argue that Superman is a character who has enjoyed a less dramatic degree of variation in portrayal than Batman, this analysis certainly holds true, and its wider implications shall be expanded upon at length in Chapter 4.

So while questions of medium specificity will certainly be addressed where relevant, the more narratological focus of this thesis shall not enter into broader considerations of comics as a general artform, so much as to how they act as the locus of how diegetic continuity is expressed in the Superman transmedia franchise, and the superhero genre. To this end, the scholar who has probably spent the most time explicating how analysis of superhero stories (primarily, but not solely in comic form) might be formalised as a genre with its own conventions is Peter Coogan, who repeatedly draws on the genre theory of film scholar Thomas Schatz.

Although genre theory itself is not one of my core concerns either, it is pertinent to consider some of Coogan’s analysis as it pertains to issues that touch on my own study, such as questions of the cyclical nature of comic narratives. Additionally, Coogan discusses questions of how the treatment of continuity and tendency towards self-reflexivity has waxed and waned in different eras of superhero comics, and what this means for the genre itself.

Coogan’s core concern lies in seeking to put forward a formal, academic definition of the superhero and the tenets of the genre that they inhabit, definitions which prove seemingly elusive at various points of his study. In particular, Coogan argues at length for a particular axis of criteria by which to define a superhero as opposed to a super hero, being a superior hero such as Beowulf or Luke Skywalker.\(^{97}\)

He isolates these as being “mission, powers, [costumed] identity,”\(^{98}\) while allowing for exceptions which lack one or more of this trinity such as the non-superpowered Batman, the uncostumed Zatanna or the missionless Hulk, due to the preponderance of factors which impart “generic distinction.”\(^{99}\) He essentially boils this down to the fact that they exist in a shared universe with other superheroes and, for example, often fight supervillains, stating that:

> If a character basically fits the mission-powers-identity definition, even with significant qualifications, and cannot be easily placed into another genre because of the preponderance of superhero-genre conventions, the character is a superhero.\(^{100}\)

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\(^{97}\) Coogan, *Superhero*, pp. 30, 48-49.

\(^{98}\) *ibid.*, 30-39.

\(^{99}\) *ibid.*, pp. 39-40.

\(^{100}\) *ibid.*, p. 40.
This is largely a workable methodology for my purposes, although I take some issue with Coogan’s semanticism, and would argue for greater latitude to define certain characters as simply genre outliers. It seems more fitting to categorise characters such as the gun-wielding vigilante the Punisher or trenchcoated magician John Constantine as simply being vigilante and magician protagonists respectively, who just so happen to exist within the wider diegesis of shared superhero universes, rather than struggling to define them as compromised examples of superheroes \textit{per se}. Furthermore, I would disagree that such characters cannot necessarily function in other genres,\footnote{ibid., p. 52. After all, Coogan does not attempt to shoehorn in obviously non-superheroic characters who populate the genre such as supporting cast members like Lois Lane or Commissioner Gordon. It thus seems unnecessary to contend that all characters who display some of his trinity of criteria within a superhero narrative should, ergo, be identified as liminal examples of superheroes.} as evidenced by the film adaptations of both properties that manage to completely ignore the existence or generic trappings of superheroes.\footnote{ibid., p. 52.}

In seeking to define a superhero in formal terms, Coogan takes a strongly historical approach, and puts considerable effort into not only outlining the many precursor elements from pulp novels, adventure stories and science fiction which contributed to the development of superhero tropes,\footnote{ibid., Chapter 8. See also, pp. 24-60, 199.} but especially in seeking to identify the first superhero, the wellspring for the entire genre.\footnote{ibid., pp. 175-176. For similar analysis, see also Reynolds, \textit{Super Heroes}, pp. 8, 10-17.} As has long been the general consensus, Coogan reaffirms that Superman is this figure, even making the compelling claim that:

\textit{Action Comics} #1 contains the majority of the conventions of the superhero genre. In fact, the issue’s one-page origin of Superman presents the primary triad – mission, powers, identity – as well as several others. …The rest of the Superman story in \textit{Action Comics} #1 includes nearly every other major convention of the superhero genre with the exception of the supervillain.\footnote{ibid., pp. 175-176. For similar analysis, see also Reynolds, \textit{Super Heroes}, pp. 8, 10-17.}

What is more noteworthy in Coogan’s writing on the topic is the considerable lengths he goes to in attempting to make this widely-held view academically watertight, and in doing so raises a considerable number of pretenders to the throne in the form of several examples of characters predating Superman, who could lay claim to the title of the first superhero.

As he seeks to debunk each in turn, however, Coogan’s argument becomes precariously hair-splitting at times, particularly when he comes to the final figure, the
titular costumed hero of Lee Falk’s comic strip *The Phantom*. With considerable similarities to Batman, the character is one which, even by Coogan’s own admission “If he were created today, the Phantom would likely be considered a superhero, but he was not at the time of his debut.”106 Coogan argues that the character fails to qualify as the originator of the Superhero genre on the technicality that his globetrotting, often jungle-bound adventures, as opposed to the almost universally urban setting of Superman and those who followed, constitutes less of a break with the costumed ‘mystery men’ of the pulp era than did Superman, coupled with a lack of other elements of ‘generic distinction’ even after the advent of the genre proper, such as fighting supervillains.107

While I find this debunking of the Phantom as the first superhero to be less than compelling, Coogan’s argument is somewhat cumulatively convincing through his additional observations that it was Superman, not the Phantom, who spawned a legion of imitators, which helped codify the new genre. Conversely the prior existence of the Phantom seemingly paved no easier a road for Siegel and Shuster in their notoriously difficult journey to bring Superman to publication. Furthermore the Phantom was never singled out in various early cases of parody and legal action which all focused on similarities to Superman.108 As Coogan argued, when compared to Superman: “None of the other candidates for the title of the first superhero debuted with so much generic density, particularly a density of conventions that were imitated and repeated and have become endemic to the superhero genre.”109

I find Coogan’s research does almost as much to undermine Superman’s claim to originating the genre as his diffuse, at times grasping arguments convincingly manage to reaffirm this historical title. Nevertheless, his conclusion is one which I ultimately accept. It is not the purpose of my study to further this claim, and I shall somewhat take for granted Superman’s trendsetting status in this regard, but it is important to acknowledge Coogan’s thorough and meticulous study so that such assertions are not unsupported or frivolously made.

Coogan would later make an additional caveat that while Siegel and Shuster were responsible for creating the first superhero in Superman, it was the Detective Comics editor Vin Sullivan who should technically be considered the originator of the

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107 ibid., pp. 181-184.
108 ibid., pp. 184-185.
109 ibid., p. 176.
superhero genre, having seen the catalytic potential of Superman and then asking Bob Kane to create another superhero in turn. It is a fair point, as Coogan expounds upon how parody, imitation and repetition by peers is key to the formation of any genre, and it is this demonstrable familiarity with the conventions of other works within a genre (as opposed to real life) by which we largely judge examples of said genre.\footnote{Peter Coogan, “Reconstructing the Superhero in All-Star Superman,” in Smith and Duncan, Critical Approaches to Comics, pp. 203-204; and Coogan, Superhero, pp. 27-28.}

In this regard, Coogan argues that part of the ‘purpose’ of genre is to operate as a means of production parameters, guidelines for creators to satisfy or confound audience expectations of a genre articulation, based on mutual prior understanding of the genre conventions in question. This leads to a perpetual balancing act between innovation and progress versus repetition and familiarity. As he puts it “If a story is too conventional, readers will be bored; too inventive and readers will be confused and put off.”\footnote{Coogan, “Reconstructing the Superhero in All-Star Superman,” pp. 205-207.} Certainly, attempting to balance this essential tension in genre is one of the fundamental aspects informing the development of the continuity system and, as I shall argue in Chapter 3, for the Superman franchise especially.

More pertinent to the substance of this thesis, however, is Coogan’s discussion of the broad history of mainstream superhero comics (almost exclusively the output of publishers Marvel and DC Comics), and his attempts to identify and formalise it into distinct eras. By his own admission this is a difficult and at times arbitrary task,\footnote{Coogan, Superhero, pp. 193, 198, 209.} made all the more awkward by seeking to graft Schatz’s definitions of the genre cycle onto the often vaguely-defined eras put forth by comic book fandom, and adopted by the industry with little precision or consensus. It is a problematic endeavour, for while Coogan’s methodology is sound, his determinations are at various points rather unconvincing, involving a considerable amount of overlap and some rather questionable examples upon which to hang his analysis of watershed moments in the industry that signalled transition points between these ages.

Part of Coogan’s difficulty, of course, is that the comics industry does not work as a cohesive entity, and individual comic titles can be argued to have entered and exited these eras at different points, just as different creators respond at their own pace to changes in the industry zeitgeist.\footnote{ibid., pp. 209-210, 214, 219.} At times his analysis focuses too much on the extraordinary examples of different ages’ pioneers or luminaries such as Alan Moore...
(whose work I shall discuss in Chapter 4), Mark Waid or Grant Morrison, rather than considering how these trends did or did not filter down to the more quotidian bulk of published output.\textsuperscript{114}

Although it may not be an ideal application of auteur criticism, as a partial benchmark for outlining the phases of the ‘ages’ of superhero comics, there is certainly a place for it. I shall be applying some of Smith’s guidelines on auteur criticism when I approach a consideration of Alan Moore’s work on the Superman franchise in Chapter 4, and how they both provide metacommentary on questions of continuity and generational renewal to be discussed in the intermediate chapters. Smith asserts a key tenet of auteur criticism; avoidance of the “intentionalist fallacy” of speculating on the authorial intent.\textsuperscript{115}

While certainly accepting of the folly in attempting to psychoanalyse comic creators to inform a reading of their work or air purely speculative subtexts, I do find an analytical reading of texts working at the levels of multilayered complexity as those of Moore inevitably require a certain consideration of narrative purpose. Such densely intertextual work is commentative by its nature, yet its reference points and oftentimes satirical mechanisms are always open to misidentification when not explicitly narrated by the author. If the subject of a work such as Moore’s is parodic, or otherwise deeply metatextual, it is reductive to entirely discount questions of the author’s intent, and by extension other discursive articulations, particularly those present in works containing notable elements of metafiction. Nevertheless, wherever possible I shall corroborate such analysis with relevant creator interviews.

My methodology owes something to Coogan’s, and I shall make reference to his work when discussing my own identification of comic eras as pertaining to Superman in Chapter 3, but in terms of his broader adoption of Schatz, I remain sceptical, or in any case argue that while it is a viable model of analysis for the earlier eras of comics’ history, the ‘cycle’ model becomes untenable as stated, the closer one

\textsuperscript{114} Coogan does later address in 2012 the tendency of the genre criticism model to focus on comparatively auteurist comic creators who are regarded as moving the genre forward. He notes this as being due to their superior clout engendering greater creative autonomy within industry strictures, and counsels the importance of viewing their practices as relative to those of their contemporaries in the industry more broadly. Coogan, “Reconstructing the Superhero in All-Star Superman,” pp. 207-208. It is good advice, but if intended to serve as an acknowledgement of a narrower focus in his own past scholarship, it is a fairly muted one. As Coogan’s editor Matthew J. Smith noted in his own contribution to the same volume, “not every creator is necessarily worthy of such an investigation.” Smith, “Auteur Criticism: The Re-Visionary Works of Alan Moore,” p. 181.

comes to the present day. In fact Schatz’s theories of genre evolution used by Coogan, as well as the broader underpinnings of tenets espoused by Schatz and other fellow genre theorists, have come under some strong criticism for too narrowly viewing genres as “closed and continuous rather [than] open and intermittent systems”\textsuperscript{116} situated within pan-generic social and industrial contexts, and for scholarly shortcomings in overlooking and devaluing the sophistication of hyperconsciousness evident in earlier phases of a genre’s output “in order to bolster a specious argument …perhaps due to a more deeply endemic flaw in their methodology.”\textsuperscript{117} Instead, I shall demonstrate in my study that while superhero comics’ continuity most definitely demonstrate characteristics of a cycle, this is often simply a consideration of content, even of relatively superficial elements, as much as being necessarily reflective of more profound trends in the rearticulation of a living genre. I shall discuss this, particularly in relation to current developments in Superman’s most recent “New52” reboot and latest film adaptation, in Chapters 2 and 4.

Aside from the question of genre cycles, however, I do largely concur with Coogan’s broader view that it is important to view comics studies through the lens of genre. For example, in a later piece he makes the straightforward but excellent point that any close analysis of superhero texts should always take into account which ‘age’ of the genre cycle they were produced in, thus factoring in the likely creative and industrial limitations and expectations dominant at the time which may have influenced the creators’ choices to conform or subvert the conventions of that era.\textsuperscript{118}

Coogan also notes, for example, that the reception of the intertextuality of many modern works in the superhero genre rely on an intertextual understanding of the genre’s tropes, archetypes and history, particularly those less common examples which do not take place within a shared universe, typically such as work by independent publishers or original films.\textsuperscript{119} I shall discuss in Chapters 3 and 4 how this is particularly pertinent to Superman who, more than any other character, is the direct

\textsuperscript{117} For a comprehensive takedown of the genre theories of Schatz, as well as Will Wright, John G. Cawelti, Leo Braudy, Philip French, Frank D. McConnell, Jack Nachbar and Robert Warshow, see Tag Gallagher, “Shoot-Out at the Genre Corral: Problems in the “Evolution” of the Western,” in Barry Keith Grant, ed., \textit{Film genre reader III} (University of Texas Press, Austin, 2003), p. 272.
\textsuperscript{118} Coogan, “Reconstructing the Superhero in \textit{All-Star Superman},” pp. 208-209.
\textsuperscript{119} \textit{ibid.}, p. 205.
subject of many pastiches and analogues used by comic writers to deconstruct and explore the boundaries of the superhero genre.\textsuperscript{120}

Another influence in considering my methodology comes with the earlier, somewhat different approach to issues of continuity from Richard Reynolds. As similarly observed by other scholars who shall be discussed in Chapter 3, Reynolds holds up continuity as the “most crucial aspect of enjoyment for the committed fans.” Furthermore, he contends that:

Continuity is a familiar idea for all followers of soap opera, but, as practiced by the two major superhero publishers, continuity is of an order of complexity beyond anything to which the television audience has become accustomed. An appreciation of the importance of continuity is an essential prerequisite to a fully-engaged reading of superhero comics, especially those published post Silver Age.\textsuperscript{121}

Much as Coogan attempted to wrangle fan terminology of comic book ‘\textit{Ages}’ to form more rigorous definitions, Reynolds took a rather idiosyncratic approach to the common comic book notion of continuity, trifurcating it into what he terms “serial continuity,” “hierarchical continuity,” and “structural continuity.”\textsuperscript{122}

Reynolds defines serial continuity as simply representing the more traditional aspect of narrative story continuity, akin to his aforementioned example of TV soaps whereby past events count towards the ongoing diegesis, and contradicting established events is to be avoided. He makes the added observation that comics, being less ephemeral than television, make the consultation of their own prior details easier for fans, although this is now a somewhat dated point of distinction in the age of DVD, digital recording, internet piracy and fansites.

Hierarchical continuity, by comparison, is what Reynolds describes as the intertextually-indicated ‘ranking’ of superheroes by their apparent power levels, despite what little bearing this may have on the popularity of less powerful or non-superhuman characters like Captain America or Batman, and excluding the uncostumed characters that populate the same stories, such as Batman’s ally

\textsuperscript{120} Coogan applies an additional genre model to analysing superhero texts, viewing their composite conventions as bifurcating into semantic and syntactic elements. He outlines these categories as pertaining to content and structure respectively, the semantic encompassing “character, setting, and icon,” with the syntactic comprising of “plot… points of view, theme, and effect.” Coogan, “Reconstructing the Superhero in \textit{All-Star Superman},” p. 205. In other words, the semantic elements of the superhero genre are largely those of the heroes, villains and locations that populate the narrative, while the syntactic is the narrative conventions and familiar tropes of said narratives. Although a perfectly viable genre model to utilise, I shall employ these concepts sparingly, as these particular distinctions do little to elucidate the operation of diegetic continuity operates in a transmedia franchise.

\textsuperscript{121} Reynolds, \textit{Super Heroes}, p. 38.

\textsuperscript{122} \textit{ibid.}, pp. 40-41.
Commissioner Gordon. Although very faintly touching on a similar ground to Coogan’s later attempts to define the traits that separate superheroes from other characters within the same universe, it seems an oddly pedantic point that scarcely deserves to be qualified as a subset equal to serial continuity.

Thirdly and more significantly, however, is Reynolds’ conception of structural continuity as a combination of serial and hierarchical continuity, the diachronic and synchronic respectively, using similar terms to Collins. From this fusion of elements Reynolds posits a rather impractically holistic view of the content of shared comic book diegesis of DC and Marvel, including the sundry implied aspects of the ‘real world’ present in these universes. This conception of an ‘ideal metatext,’ (mentioned earlier in relation to Murdough as part of my discussion of terminology) is unwieldy even by his own admission, as this notional entirety of all published content deemed to be canonical is unlikely to have ever been all read by any actual person, nor can it ever be deemed finite due to the constant rate of addition.\textsuperscript{123}

Reynolds expands his view of structural continuity to include issues of problematic narrative time, which shall be discussed along with the concept of a ‘floating timeline’ in Chapter 3,\textsuperscript{124} as well as trying to incorporate issues of authorship. Describing wider “metatextual structural continuity” as “a langue in which each particular story is an utterance,”\textsuperscript{125} Reynolds attempts to tease out how the often individualised interpretations of reader-fans as well as writers and artists (increasingly often former fans themselves) can represent significantly divergent, identifiable presentations of the same superhero characters, yet still conform to the same continuity.\textsuperscript{126} As he puts it:

\begin{quote}
\ldots continuity is also something malleable, and constantly in the process of being shaped by the collective forces of artists, writers, editors, and even the critical voices of the fans.\textsuperscript{127}
\end{quote}

Reynolds describes quite accurately how the different ‘direction’ or ‘take’ on a character by successive creative teams can represent something of a shift in presentation, whereby for example ‘Neal Adams’ Batman’ can be narratologically distinct from ‘Frank Miller’s Batman,’ yet which ultimately seek to coexist in maintaining broader continuity. This is, of course, intrinsically the nature of collective

\textsuperscript{123} ibid., pp. 42-43.
\textsuperscript{124} ibid., pp. 43-45.
\textsuperscript{125} ibid., p. 45.
\textsuperscript{126} ibid., pp. 45-48.
\textsuperscript{127} ibid., p. 47.
authorship with effectively never-ending properties, especially characters with many decades of unbroken publication such as Superman and Batman.

However, the shortcoming of Reynolds’ analysis for my purposes is in his lack of attention to the operation of continuity changes. While acknowledging the continuity conditions which led to metatextual continuity events such as Crisis on Infinite Earths, Reynolds either fails to recognise these ‘reboot’ breaks in continuity for what they are, or is unsuccessfully implying that his ‘ideal metatext,’ or what I have termed the supertext, renders such distinctions insignificant. This may be in part due to the time in which he was writing, as by 1992 only one such major continuity shift had to that point occurred, although if so, this is a lack of foresight on his part as Crisis was and remains the most significant watershed moment in this regard.

For my own methodology, I find Reynolds’ analysis informative in places, but his three-tier model of continuity impractical. Hierarchical continuity seems an insignificant point, which can easily be subsumed by the fabric of serial continuity. His diffuse and at times even faintly obtuse conception of structural continuity is best split into being part of the simply narrative aspects of serial continuity, while issues of both diegetic and non-diegetic metatextuality as pertaining to continuity should be discussed as a separate issue.

Reynolds also makes some observations in regards to the adaptation of comics to the screen, in particular regarding supervillains functioning as the “engines of diachronic continuity” to drive forward narratives. This is particularly in contrast to the reactive, status-quo-upholding nature of superheroes (both narratively and diegetically), the comparative passivity of which he perceives as “a severe problem for screenwriters engaged in transferring superhero material to the movie screen,” and yet that it may only be through adaptation to film that superheroes may escape continuity and “ascend the cultural ladder and become established as suitable vehicles for ‘high art’.” Moreover, Reynolds suggests it may be a sign of the genre’s limitations that “[t]he rules of continuity and audience’s expectations may mean that nothing further can be achieved” with superheroes in the comic medium.

This is a severely dated perspective, and an oddly snobbish conclusion to Reynolds’ study. Questions of assessing ‘high art’ shall not be entered into, however

\[128\] ibid., p. 50.
\[129\] ibid., p. 51.
\[130\] ibid., p. 118.
tempting it may be to engage in a discussion of how the post-millennial expansion of superhero adaptations having yielded both Academy Award-winning *The Dark Knight*, seen by many as an elevation of its source material of various Batman comics, versus the film of *Watchmen* being widely deemed a pale translation of the revered graphic novel, despite or perhaps as a result of its slavish fidelity. However, it is in analysing the operation of adaptation and continuity, not an assessment of its artistic merit, which is key to my methodology.

In some respects though Reynolds is correct, whereby the expectations of fans and the compulsion towards continuity -- be it to broadly maintain it as with Marvel or perpetually revise it as does DC -- can be seen to provide certain limitations on the further development of the genre. This ties in to some regard with Coogan’s inconclusive analysis of whether the genre has stalled in the terms of Schatz’s genre cycle model, although Reynolds in particular did not foresee the vastly increased prominence of not only screen adaptations of the genre, but also DC’s increasingly obsessive focus on continuity revision. These matters shall be discussed further in Chapters 3 and 4.

Another scholar dealing with problems of comic-to-film adaptation is Pascal Lefèvre, who discusses issues pertaining to the question of whether drawn images are inherently unsuited to screen adaptation. While acknowledging popular perceptions that certain inherent similarities between comic and film as a media depicting sequential visual narrative action are at any rate closer than other adaptation pairings such as film and novels, Lefèvre seeks to highlight the differences. Not just in modes of production and reception, but also particularly in what he deems as fundamental disjunctions in presentation, such as comics being “a more spatial medium than film,” in terms of the layout and interplay of panels versus the generally consistent framing and use of montage in film.

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132 *ibid.*, pp. 2-3. One might add also that comics bear a particular similarity to the common filmmaking technique of pre-visualising planned filmshoots with drawn sequential panels, known as storyboards.

133 *ibid.*, pp. 3, 5-6.

134 Lefèvre further engages in a fairly technical discussion of the inherent difference between the moving, photographic nature of film in contrast to the static and stylised but also limitless possibilities of the drawn image, even when factoring in the new capabilities of integrating computer generated imagery into live-action films. His is a concise yet detailed discussion of the separate visual ontologies, the distinct perceptual implications of photographic versus rendered images and how this effects the participatory function of the reader/viewer and thus their function as artistic media. However, as aforementioned, my thesis does not engage with such formalist readings. *ibid.*, pp. 6-10, 12.
Something which Lefèvre touches upon that is of greater relevance, however, is in his observation that while rare examples exist of highly stylised films closely matching the visual precedent of a specific comic hypotext (such as *Sin City*),\(^{135}\) part of the difficulty with producing satisfying adaptations of many superhero properties lies in the inherent diversity of the source material, both visually and narratively, and the absence of a stable version. Pertinently, I quoted Lefèvre much earlier in relation to the problem of producing a notionally ‘faithful’ adaptation considering the ‘multifaced’ nature of Batman, a character who “can not be abstracted from the shifting orders of intertextuality through which their actual functioning has been organized and recognized.”\(^{136}\)

In addition to this discussion of how such a character, which applies equally to Superman, can function as a shifting signifier, what Lefèvre is emphasising here is, of course, the old spectre of fidelity criticism, and his rejection of it is clear. Speaking with some degree of disdain for the notoriously picky responses of comic fans, he argues that they are often more inflexible towards adaptive changes than the original creators, often viewing narrative changes and adaptive alterations to character in terms of “some kind of betrayal. Moreover such filmic adaptations give superheroes [sic] fans a unique opportunity to show off their almost autistic-savant knowledge” of comic canon.\(^{137}\)

Noting the simultaneous lack of critical praise or cultural credibility afforded to most comic adaptations,\(^{138}\) Lefèvre argues instead for a less ‘purist’ approach whereby such films are judged on their own merits, and not as adaptations.\(^{139}\) I have previously discussed at some length my position regarding fidelity criticism with the positions of Welsh, McFarlane, and Leitch, arguing to retain a degree of evaluative comparison beyond Cardwell’s largely aesthetic perspective that takes elements of Kranz, and especially Sanders’ palimpsestuous approach in which source and adaptation show signs of mutual influence in both directions. I believe this more complex approach is needed, accounting for both the significance of superhero narratives on screen as complex sites of inter- and even metatextual negotiation and feedback, and greater acknowledgement of the comic-book hypotexts as themselves sites not only of shifting

\(^{135}\) *ibid.*, p.10.
\(^{136}\) *ibid.*, p.10.
\(^{137}\) *ibid.*, pp. 1, 4-5.
\(^{138}\) Noting again that this was written prior to the release of the critically lauded film *The Dark Knight* and, to a somewhat lesser extend, *The Avengers*.
signification, but also their own closely-interwoven sites of transmedia adaptation and feedback.

**Comic Book Adaptations and Filmic Intertextuality**

When it comes to the issue of adapting comics to film, a good place to start is with Ian Gordon, who has written on televisual adaptation of comics, and Superman specifically, as well as co-editing the anthology *Film and Comic Books* with Mark Jancovich and Matthew P. McAllister. In their joint introduction, this same issue of appealing to the comic-reading fanbase is raised, noting both that adaptation of comics to film predates even the superhero genre, and that Hollywood has sought to “use comic book texts and comic book authorial intention in an attempt to add authenticity to comic book films” since at least the first Donner *Superman* film in 1978.

However, while they are quite correct in their observation that emphasising fidelity to comic sources at fan-oriented media events such as San Diego Comic-Con has long been a marketing strategy, Gordon *et al.* overstate the significance of courting the comic-reading demographic, being a relatively insignificant proportion of the mass audience required to carry such ‘tentpole’ films. Conversely, when discussing motivations for ‘authenticity’ to comic hypotexts, they do not adequately acknowledge any such impulses deriving from the personal fandom of the filmmakers themselves, such as Sam Raimi (*Spider-Man* trilogy, Sony, 2002-2007), Robert Rodriguez (*Sin City*, Troublemaker, 2005), or Mark Steven Johnston (*Daredevil*, Fox 2003, and *Ghost Rider*, Sony, 2007) wishing to honour material for which they themselves had pre-existing fondness.

As Jeffrey Brown notes, “perhaps more than any other genre, comic book superheroes are not restricted to a single medium.”

Gordon *et al.* cite differing attitudes from Marvel and DC comic creators towards the proposition that comic books increasingly function as the testing ground for the wider entertainment industry rather than being an artform that is an end in and

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141 *ibid.*, p. viii.
142 Citing this phenomenon as far back as the pre-release promotion of 1989’s *Batman* film, which included a SDCC trailer to alleviate fan outcry over hitherto fore largely comedic actor Michael Keaton in the grim title role. *ibid.*, pp. ix, xi.
143 A trend which has perhaps reached its zenith after the time of Gordon *et al.*’s writing with ‘fanboy’ directors Zack Snyder (*300* [2007], *Watchmen* [2009], *Man of Steel* [2013]), and Joss Whedon (*The Avengers* [2012], *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* [pilot, 2013]), a ‘geek god’ and himself an occasional comics scribe.
of itself.\textsuperscript{145} While the tensions at play with these demographic and industrial forces are naturally significant and shall be considered further, it is primarily the textual transmissions at play in these acts of adaptation that are of key interest to this study.

It must also be acknowledged that Gordon’s anthology is somewhat out of date, having been published the year before Marvel began producing their own films and exerting tighter creative control and transmedia synergy, with \textit{Iron Man} (Marvel Studios, 2008, dir. John Favreau) being the first film directly produced under the auspices of Marvel Studios, as well as Marvel’s parent company being bought out by the Walt Disney Company in 2009. This began an interconnected ‘Marvel Cinematic Universe,’ an unprecedented shared diegesis for many subsequent films and also television projects, that functions identically to the continuity model of a comic book universe, a model Time Warner is belatedly following with the DC characters, starting with the most recent cinematic reboot of Superman, \textit{Man of Steel} (Dir. Zack Snyder, Warner Brothers, 2013).\textsuperscript{146}

However, less overt creative synergies long predate the rise of Marvel Studios, and the complex interrelation of comics to their extramedia adaptations shall be discussed at greater length in Chapter 2. Nevertheless, Gordon, Jancovich and McAllister make the pertinent observation that long-running comic characters, particularly those with a long history of transmedia adaptation such as Superman specifically, engender diverse groupings of fans who bring their own interpretive preferences formed by a multitude of prior exposures to the character in different incarnations. This spectrum of past media expressions add to the weight of intertextual expectation brought to bear on new adaptation, as

\begin{quote}
…different fans of the same comic character will have different views, and with a character such as Superman, who has been through numerous incarnations, competing expectations of different fans will further complicate the problems of adaptation... Of all characters from
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{145} Gordon, Jancovich and McAllister, “Introduction,” pp. ix-x.
\textsuperscript{146} Although minor examples of filmic superhero crossovers have occurred before on television such as the guest-starring of non-DC characters The Green Hornet and Kato from \textit{The Green Hornet} (ABC, 1966-67) on the March 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} 1967 episodes of the Adam West \textit{Batman} series, or the infamous \textit{Legends of the Superheroes} variety show (NBC, January 18–25, 1979), the only significant prior example prior to Marvel Studios was that of the ‘DC Animated Universe.’ Beginning with \textit{Batman: The Animated Series} (Warner Bros. Animation, 1993-1995), between six and nine successive and occasionally concurrent cartoons (depending on whether one considers ‘relaunched’ shows such as \textit{The New Batman Adventures or Justice League Unlimited} to be distinct entities as opposed to retitled continuations) were produced by Warner Bros. Animation were explicitly set within the same shared diegesis, lasting from 1993 to 2006. However, Marvel Studios’ films represent the first sustained attempt to maintain ongoing and intersecting continuity between multiple live-action superhero adaptations, and the first ever in cinema.
comics, Superman has surely appeared in more incarnations across different media forms and as licensed product.\textsuperscript{147} Gordon also writes of the influence of nostalgia and cultural influence in the ideological reception of Superman, viewing him to be a figure that is as much myth as commodity, constantly reimagined for different eras and audiences.\textsuperscript{148} In seeking a definition, Gordon draws on the work of Clifford Geertz, Christopher Lasch, Susan Stewart and others to arrive at a loose formulation of nostalgia as expressing a longing for, valorisation and frequently performative re-articulation of the subjective past for the purposes of cultural comfort and attempting to stabilise identity. With an emphasis on creating a ‘narrative’ of the past, Gordon contends that “In effect nostalgia is a construction that also denies the past except as narrative mediation,” to shape it and impart a desired interpretation rather than objectivity.\textsuperscript{149}

For my own methodology, this is a generally workable summation, as I do not seek to delve into abstractions of the nature of nostalgia itself, being but one factor in this thesis’ analysis of Superman’s textual operations. Gordon goes on to parse out the tensions between nostalgia and reinvention when it comes to Superman, agreeing with Otto Friedrich that there is some inherent paradox in a character for whom nostalgia plays a significant role to be forever undergoing reinvention and thus the potential erasure of the qualities that may inspire nostalgic identification. Yet Gordon adds to the mix the fact of Superman’s significant mythic resonance as an archetype bears close relation to being an open-ended narrative which can be remoulded to suit the times, which he overviews in the ideological transitions from his reformist early days to staunch patriotism and defence of capitalist American values, mirrored by his own extradiegetic increase in value as a marketable commodity.\textsuperscript{150}

How this mythic dimension is deployed by Gordon comes chiefly in his analysis of how Superman has been used to represent certain values with shifting emphasis over time, discussing John Byrne’s 1986 comic overhaul and its focus on American identity from the perspective of an immigrant while drawing on his own nostalgia for George Reeves’ incarnation. Gordon contrasts this to the symbolic and somewhat literal devaluing of Superman as a commodity in the wake of the comic market speculation boom and bust in the early-to-mid 1990s intertwined with the

\textsuperscript{147} Gordon, Jancovich and McAllister, “Introduction,” pp. xi, xiv.
\textsuperscript{149} ibid., pp.178-179.
\textsuperscript{150} ibid., pp. 180-186.
infamous “Death of Superman” storyline, and further still to the biblically-themed 1997 miniseries *Kingdom Come.*

On that more literal level of devaluation, Mark Rogers makes a compelling argument against the view that the “Death of Superman” stunt triggered the legendary near-downfall of the mainstream American comic industry after thousands of non-fans purchased a massively overprinted special issue under the misapprehension of it dramatically accruing in value. Using a Political Economy analysis, Rogers contends that the immense public hype and massive over-printing of 1993’s *Superman [vol. 2]* #75 ‘death issue’ was symptomatic of rather than directly causal in the bursting of the comic book speculator bubble in 1993-1994 and subsequent severe downturn in the comic industry. Although various industrial factors were at play outside of this specific event, the “Death of Superman” event could nonetheless be argued to have been “the pin the that burst the bubble.”

It was, however, a notable real-world expression of Superman’s public significance to an industry where he was not necessarily the star of its most popular selling titles.

The presentation of Superman’s symbolic ‘devaluation’ in 1996’s *Kingdom Come* (an ‘Elseworlds’ story, the diegetic framing of which shall be discussed in Chapter 4) through the narrativised loss and reassertion of his moral authority as an embodiment of human or rather American virtue, is presented in direct contrast to a younger generation of superheroes who serve to parody the notably amoral tone of comics then in vogue. The central ideological theme of the text in essence champions Superman’s nostalgic significance over his would-be successors, in both the narrative diegesis and the marketplace.

In a later piece Gordon takes this point further, discussing how viewing Superman’s articulations as part of a culture of consumption in which his wartime repositioning into a defender of ‘Truth, Justice and the American Way’ imparted a symbolic dimension. He argues that this in turn can be interpreted as not only a defence but also normalisation of the capitalist valuation of consumption as a means of societal fulfilment, and that the consumption of Superman material itself -- particularly when factoring in nostalgic elements -- can render the character a locus of “displaced

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meanings” for the consumer.\textsuperscript{153} Noting that for DC Comics there is a resulting tension between maintaining the commodity value of Superman’s symbolic status and the history of his diverse portrayals across different media and eras, Gordon argues that the inconsistencies revealed therein can be a useful method of considering not just Superman as a symbol himself, but the inconsistencies of the values and society he is positioned to symbolise.\textsuperscript{154} It should be noted, however, that this conceptually dovetails with the analysis of Uricchio and Pearson in regards to Batman’s hegemonic function in his defence of private property.\textsuperscript{155} As my thesis is more chiefly concerned with questions of diegesis and narratological treatment of metatextual issues, I shall largely leave these concerns here.

However, it is worth noting, as Gordon pointed out in his aforementioned earlier writing on \textit{Lois & Clark}, that there is a rare diegetic example in which questions of Superman’s relationship to capitalism were fielded, in an early episode of that show. It portrayed Superman as initially unwilling to be a subject of merchandising until consenting on the stipulation that profits go to charity, the story itself a rearticulation of a 1938 Siegel and Shuster comic story which displayed the early Superman’s greater scepticism of capitalist excess.\textsuperscript{156} It is also worth noting that the issue of Superman’s corporate ownership, and the consequent disenfranchisement of his creators, was given a symbolic exploration in Rick Veitch’s comic series \textit{The Maximortal}, featuring dark pastiches of both the character and his creators.\textsuperscript{157}

Gordon also writes elsewhere in greater detail about issues of legal ownership of such franchises, using Superman as a case study, and the many ways in which Warner and DC have sought to enforce proprietary rights over the character and his canon from claims by creators and fans alike. While my thesis is neither a history nor examination of the Superman franchise from a business perspective and thus leaves issues of this complex legal wrangling largely untouched, it is important to note at certain junctures how questions of corporate strategy have effected narrative choices regarding brand cohesion across different media platforms. As Gordon observes:

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{153} Ian Gordon, “Culture of Consumption: Commodification through Superman: Return to Krypton,” in Smith and Duncan, \textit{Critical Approaches to Comics}, pp. 157-166.
\textsuperscript{154} ibid., pp. 164-165.
\end{flushleft}
The polysemic nature of much of comic strips and books, televisions shows, and movies is a deliberate construct to appeal across audiences and so with meanings left to different audiences to construct for themselves, producers of this material will always find it hard to prevent interpretations that stray from the creators’ accepted vision. Gordon goes on to discuss how this influences the production of online fansites and DC’s relative permissiveness regarding fanfiction in contrast to that of Lucasfilm and similar fan-generated content regarding Star Wars. While as previously mentioned, fan culture, particularly non-official content produced by fandom is outside the remit of my study, it is important to also keep in mind the variety of fan and casual audiences which consume the various media expressions of Superman as a piece of evolving popcultural meaning, meanings very much framed by the variable receptions of such expressions.

This diversity of fan responses has, as Gordon would argue, had a direct influence on the increasingly diversified approach to Superman by DC/Warner:

And with Superman even at the level of “core product,” the comic books, the industry is copying fan practices by consciously moving away from attempts to produce a unified narrative in favor of a messy never ending open story where beginnings, middles, and ends are free floating. Moreover Superman exists through a range of products and these in turn each give rise to a set of fan practices. …Indeed, the Superman brand is so strong that it can carry a multitude of nuances and attract a variety of fans.

Leaving aside the seemingly rather casual allusion to Umberto Eco’s contention of Superman’s ‘unconsumed’ mythic status (which shall be discussed much further in Chapter 3), Gordon’s point is well taken in its summation of diversity. I shall argue, however, in Chapter 2 that while Superman is unquestionably subject to diverse interpretations even in comparatively simultaneous other media, this is so to a lesser extent in terms of tonal flexibility than Batman. Also to be considered are more recent developments in the post-New52 rebranding of the DC comic book universe, and how aesthetic changes to Superman’s iconic costume have been consistently applied across different media yet with an unprecedented allowance for subtle variation.

159 Although this article was written before both companies were acquired by the Disney corporation in 2009 (Marvel Entertainment) and 2012 (Lucasfilm) respectively.
Conclusion

This chapter has positioned my approach and methodology relative to key scholarship in the literature, especially that pertaining to adaptation studies and theories of intertextuality. Having further explicated my work’s relationship to that of pertinent scholars in the existing comics studies field, my next chapter shall put these theoretical considerations into practice in applying them to my case study of the Superman franchise. In this second chapter I will chiefly deal with the history and myriad issues of textual transmission and dialogism in the history of Superman’s highly iterative adaptations to other media, and focus in particular on the principle of intertextual ‘feedback,’ which breaks down clear relational lines of textual hierarchy in the process of adaptation both from and back into the notionally hypotextual comic book medium as a mutable and ongoing diegesis.
Chapter 2
INTERTEXTUAL ADAPTATION

To a greater extent than any other comic book superhero,\(^1\) Superman has been the subject of a tremendous quantity of adaptations into other media for essentially his entire existence.\(^2\) As a marketable property, the dissemination of the comic book character’s story into other media evidently has a predominantly financial impetus, but the intriguing effect for the purposes of this study is how the perpetual reinvention of Superman as a transmedia franchise has created a progressively complex relationship of continuous textual transmission between adaptations and source material intertexts.

While the transmedia adaptations of Superman are necessarily shorter-lived than the unending, continuously produced comic book narratives from which they are derived -- yet typically reaching much wider audiences than said comics -- a relationship emerges whereby new or altered tropes originating in adaptations come to hold dissonantly greater resonance and cultural capital than the ‘original’ ongoing hypotext. Consequently, subsequent media adaptations increasingly draw to differing degrees not only on comics but also upon other past adaptations. This cherry-picking of resonant tropes form increasingly elaborate, inter-referential reconfigurations of Superman’s broad supernarrative becomes increasingly palimpsestuous in the process. The resulting effect ultimately engenders a type of feedback loop, whereby tropes from these diversely-influenced adaptations come full circle, by migrating back to the ongoing diegesis of the comic intertexts from whence they ultimately came, creating the most densely ‘meta’ hypertests to date in franchised popular fiction.

Textual transmission between adaptive intertexts within the Superman franchise not only reproduces existing material across different media, but serves other intertextual

\(^1\) The only serious contender to the title would be Batman, who has had a spread of media incarnations in film, television, animation and radio comparable to Superman since the 1940s, with roughly alternating decades of media dominance (for example, Superman on television in the 1950s compared to Batman’s cult show in the 1960s, a Superman film series from the late 1970s to mid 1980s versus a Batman film series in the late 1980s to mid 1990s, the Superman prequel TV show Smallville throughout the 2000s followed by a Batman prequel series Gotham debut in 2014, and so forth). A close third would be Spider-Man who, despite having debuted almost a quarter century later than the Man of Steel, has amassed an astonishing number of transmedia adaptations, with the superhero team the X-Men (and member Wolverine in particular) coming a distant fourth, and almost entirely since the 1990s.

\(^2\) “Of all characters from comics, Superman has surely appeared in more incarnations across different media forms and as licensed product.” Gordon, Jancovich & Mcallister (eds.), Introduction by the editors, Film and Comic Books, p. xiv.
functions as well. As I shall discuss in this chapter through an examination of the unconventional television prequel *Smallville*, a layered, multi-track reading of the material yields different levels of embedded meaning in their adaptational choices. These adaptive variations not only update and elaborate the Superman mythos for new generations, utilising tropes external to the superhero genre for attracting new viewing demographics, but also cater to highly comics-literate, and indeed broadly franchise-literate viewers on a different level. The liberal use of ‘Easter eggs,’ designed to trigger recognition in these ‘knowing audiences’ as Hutcheon describes them, is a key appeal to courting the established Superman fanbase, taken to even more nuanced levels by intentionally confounding and subverting expectations elicited by the evoked intertexts from Superman comics and prior Superman transmedia adaptations, described by Ndalianis as a multifaceted intertextual ‘game’ for such mythos-steeped viewers.

Also of significance to the study of adaptational variance is the process by which diverse intra-franchise intertexts’ constituent narrative events, characters, characterisations, and points of thematic emphasis are transmitted and reconstituted in new transmedia adaptations for the notional goal of refining the franchise property through re-adaptation. This is of particular significance to this chapter, given the history of transmedia intertexts derived from comics shows that they rarely are direct adaptations of individual, discreet narratives from specific consecutive comic hypotexts, but rather are typically original narratives drawing together recombinations of previously published characters, images, and kernels of story premises from often widely dispersed material, as well as concepts pioneered in other prior adaptations. The use and re-use of these specific nodes in the supertext is considered via Coogan’s conception of ‘resonant tropes,’ with discussion of its viability as a primary criteria for assessing the success of transmedia adaptations.

The significance of feedback mechanisms over time will also be discussed, especially noting the inconsistent yet large impact which the greater cultural capital of Superman transmedia incarnations assert upon the frequently revised and rebooted continuity of comic book diegesis, given their demographically far smaller audience. Specific case studies will demonstrate instances whereby major character and narrative tropes which, although initially adapted from comic book hypotexts, took on such greater resonance in later transmedia manifestations that these came to influence not only

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1 Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, pp. 120-122.
3 Coogan, *Superhero*, pp. 6-7.
changes to ongoing comic intertexts, but also multiple subsequent iterations of transmedia adaptation.

Through coming to a fuller understanding of the process of adaptation to different media articulations across the supertext of the franchise, I shall set the groundwork for the next chapter’s examination of how continuity changes within the ‘parent’ comic medium itself produce a unique form of progressive, internalised self-adaptation. A process oftentimes influenced by the feedback of cross-media intertexts discussed in this chapter.

**Franchise**

The Superman property has been a transmedia franchise from its earliest days. A veritable sea of merchandising opportunities was realised within a year of the character’s successful debut in *Action Comics,* but it is Superman’s varied portrayal in narrative fiction of other media that is of particular interest to this study of the Man of Steel’s evolving mythos, as these transmedia adaptations have progressively generated into sites of ongoing textual transmission within the franchise. Richard Berger would concur, stating that “From its very inception, *Superman* was deployed across several different media simultaneously, and I would suggest that the continuing appeal of the character owes its success to this transmedia presence.” To best understand the development of this intertextual process, some overview of the history of the Man of Steel’s adaptations into other media is required.

Within two years of his debut in 1938, Superman had his first appearance outside of comics on February 4th 1940 in *The Adventures of Superman,* a popular radio show starring Bud Collyer, who also went on to voice the Man of Steel in animated form over subsequent decades. As the first performers to portray these characters off the printed page, the radio cast established several conventions such as Collyer speaking in a

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6 According to Lauren Agostino’s conference paper, delivered as part of the panel “The (Strange) State of Siegel and Shuster Scholarship,” at the 17th Annual Comic Art Conference, hosted at the San Diego Comic-Con, July 25, 2009 (attended in person).

7 Richard Berger, “‘Are There Any More at Home Like You?’: Rewiring *Superman,*” in *Journal of Adaptation in Film & Performance* Vol. 1, No. 2, 2008, p. 91. Note: although I have proceeded to cite Berger in several instances as I generally concur with his theoretical analysis of the intertextual principles regarding adaptational issues in the Superman franchise, I disagree with several of his interpretations of specific lines of textual transmission regarding particular adaptations. Moreover, his article contains a slew of glaring factual inaccuracies regarding the history of the franchise across multiple media, resulting in many dubious assertions.

8 Technically, Superman comic strips in newspapers appeared earlier, in late 1939. However, to regard this as ‘outside comics’ would invite a semantic argument of format vs. medium, one rendered further problematic by the fact that Siegel and Shuster originally pitched Superman as a comic *strip* character in any case.
different octave for Clark Kent to distinguish him from his superheroic alter-ego, as well as Joan Alexander giving a sassy voice to Lois Lane.\(^9\) Notably, the long-running (1940-1951) radio programme was the first form in which Superman’s adventures encompassed a serialised format with ongoing story arcs, as the comics of the time were exclusively anthologies of short stories with little to no appreciable continuity between them.\(^10\)

Superman’s licensors were quick to branch out into further media, first with cartoons in a series of seventeen exquisitely animated theatrical shorts produced at great expense by the Fleischer (1941-1942) and Famous (1942-1943) studios. Featuring the voice of Collyer reprising the title role, the animated shorts were largely devoid of dialogue for all but the most vital exposition and character beats, primarily expressing itself through the visual strengths of the medium.

These cartoons were followed five years later by two movie serials\(^{11}\) starring Kirk Alyn, the first actor to portray the Man of Steel in live-action.\(^{12}\) Although limited in special effects technology yet ambitious in scope,\(^{13}\) these serials provided the first of many live-action adaptations of the Superman story and, although less seen in subsequent decades, it established that audiences responded strongly to a human embodiment of the formerly purely visual or verbal character. The serials also introduced Noel Neill as Lois Lane, a role she would reprise for the majority of the later television series,\(^{14}\) and Lyle Talbot as not only the first Luthor,\(^{15}\) but also the only live-action Luthor to appear for 28 years until Gene Hackman took the role for the 1978 feature film. Although the most

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\(^{9}\) Although the longest-serving actress to play Lois on the radio serial, Alexander was not the first, having been briefly preceded by Rolly Bester and Helen Choate.

\(^{10}\) Unusually, Australia had its own version of the Superman radio series, using the same scripts as the American programme and affecting their accents, starring veteran Australian actors Leonard Teale as Superman and Margaret Christensen as Lois Lane. The series ran from 1949-1954 on 2GB, Sydney.

\(^{11}\) *Superman* (Columbia Pictures, 1948) and *Atom Man vs. Superman* (1950).

\(^{12}\) Again, a semantic argument could be made that the first person ever to portray Superman in the flesh professionally was an actor credited as Ray Middleton, who performed the role of Superman as part of the New York World’s Fair ‘Superman Day’ on July 3\(^{rd}\), 1940. However, Alyn was definitely the first person to portray Superman in a recorded live-action medium. Brad Ricca, *Super Boys: The Amazing Adventures of Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster – the Creators of Superman*, (St. Martin’s Press, New York, 2013), pp. 187-189; Les Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History, the life and times of the Man of Steel* (Chronicle Books, San Francisco CA, 2004) pp. 44, 47; and Tom De Haven, *Our Hero: Superman on Earth* (Yale University Press, New Haven CT 2010), p. 59.

\(^{13}\) Stock footage of natural disasters was extensively used in the second serial *Superman vs. Atom Man*, and in both stories Superman’s flying was portrayed to novel effect by replacing Alyn with an animated proxy against live-action backgrounds for the duration of the short airborne sequences. Nevertheless, due to their cinematic budget, the Alyn serials had generally more impressive special effects and action sequences than the average episode of *The Adventures of Superman* television series, even compared to the latter seasons filmed almost a decade further on.

\(^{14}\) Replacing Phyllis Coates, who initially played Lois Lane in the first season, Neill co-starred in the remaining five seasons of the show, making her the primary Lois Lane opposite the first two live-action incarnations of Superman, and thus unquestionably the most prominent face of the character across two decades.

\(^{15}\) The character did not acquire the now familiar first name ‘Lex’ until 1960, in *Adventure Comics* #271.
financially successful movie serials ever made, the cultural impact of the Kirk Alyn incarnation of Superman paled in comparison to what followed a little over a year later in the relatively new medium of television.\footnote{Although a certainly holding a place in the cultural consciousness of his own time, Kirk Alyn’s iteration was quite generationally specific, and eclipsed by the even more ubiquitous presence of George Reeves’ television version. This lack of enduring popular recognition of Alyn’s Superman in the popular consciousness despite its record-breaking box office takings was also likely due in part to a lack of re-releases or television re-runs. Although available on home video in the late 1980s, they were apparently not widely disseminated, making their 2006 release on DVD the first time the serials have been available to mass audiences in over fifty years. \textit{Saturns with Superman}, 2006 featurette included on Warner Bros. DVD release of the complete Superman film serials. See also Roy Kinnard, \textit{Science Fiction Serials} (McFarland, Jefferson NC, 1998), pp. 5-6, 120, 136-141, 156-159.}

Sponsored by Kellogg’s, who had also been behind the radio series of the previous decade, \textit{The Adventures of Superman} (1952-1958) was a highly successful, long-running family television series that gave Superman his widest public exposure to date.\footnote{Launched with a 58-minute theatrical film \textit{Superman and the Mole Men} (1951) as a ‘backdoor pilot,’ which was subsequently re-edited into the series’ only two-part story, “The Unknown People (Parts One and Two),” screened late in Season One.} Starring George Reeves as the Man of Steel and a far less timid Clark Kent than depicted in the comics of the time, the series ran for six years and enjoyed high ratings. If there was any doubt that it had not already happened through radio, animation and film, there could be no question that Superman had now truly transcended his native medium of comics to the extent that it was entirely possible for the character to have a sizeable demographic of fans familiar with his primary tropes who had never picked up a comic book.\footnote{An observation similarly noted by Reynolds: “Created as comic-book heroes, [Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman] remain more widely known through television, the movies and (in the case of Batman and Superman) through a vigorous presence in American and European popular culture that ensures their recognition by millions who have never read a Batman comic or seen a Superman film.” Richard Reynolds, \textit{Super Heroes}, p. 7.} One measure of the impact that the series had was the well-documented shockwave experienced by an entire generation of children when the news hit of Reeves’ death by alleged suicide, leaving many deeply affected, as though Superman himself had died rather than an actor.\footnote{Reeves career as Superman and the subsequent mystery regarding multiple theories of his death was dramatised in the film \textit{Hollywoodland} (Dir. Allen Coulter, Miramax, 2006).}

Perhaps as a result of the tragedy, a sense of generational overexposure or other factors, Superman did not return to live-action media adaptations for almost twenty years, and even longer for television specifically. However, these decades were not bereft of transmedia incarnations of the Man of Steel, such as the 1960s animated TV series \textit{The New Adventures of Superman} (once again starring the voice of Bud Collyer) with the...

Arguably the most prominent cross-media incarnation of Superman to date appeared in 1978 and carried through into the mid-1980s, in the form of Superman: The Movie and its sequels and spin-offs, produced by Ilya and Alexander Salkind. Although the further instalments were of progressively diminishing critical and box office success, the first film was considered not just a high bar for comic adaptation, but a bona fide watershed cinema classic in the emerging blockbuster trend. Both the first and to some extent the second film were sensational hits and helped revitalised the Superman franchise into the early 1980s.

In particular, Christopher Reeve’s performance as the title character and his sharply-delineated dual identity was highly praised and has come to be seen by many as perhaps the definitive live-action portrayal of Superman, even after his various successors on the large and small screen. This, combined with the pioneering, Academy Award-winning special effects and impressive production design have contributed to these films having an enduring influence on subsequent portrayals of the character and his mythos in various media.

As George Reeves on television had been to generations prior, the Reeve/Donner/Salkind retelling of Superman’s mythos became a true example of that

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20 This series of 6-minute cartoons has a somewhat complicated broadcast history, with its 68 instalments all produced by Filmation Studios but having been screened as part of three different anthology shows: The New Adventures of Superman (1966), The Superman-Aquaman Hour of Adventure (1967), and The Batman-Superman Hour (1968-1969).


22 Although their official credits vary from film to film, the father and son Salkind team initiated and shepherded the Superman film series starring Christopher Reeve. Technically this encompasses Superman (1978, aka Superman: The Movie), Superman II (1981), and Superman III (1983), but not Superman IV: The Quest for Peace (1987), which although featuring Christopher Reeve and the rest of the recurring cast from the first three films and clearly presented as a further sequel in the same diegesis, was independently produced by Canon Films after they had bought the rights from the Salkinds. However, the Salkinds had additionally produced the spin-off film Supergirl (Dir. Jeannot Szwarc, producers Ilya and Alexander Salkind, 1984) and the television series Superboy (1988-1992, retitled The Adventures of Superboy for the third and fourth seasons), although this show did not hold any narrative continuity as a prequel to their feature films.

23 See BoxOfficeMojo.com statistics for the steady decline: http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=superman.htm
http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=superman2.htm
http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=superman3.htm
http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=superman4.htm
much-abused term: iconic. Its aesthetic, tonal and narrative content became core tropes that have stuck to the character and influenced the development of the notional hypotext of Superman’s ongoing publication in comics, in some cases re-emerging to greater prominence even decades later. These are key examples of what Coogan discusses as ‘resonant tropes’ in other media,24 as well as key to my own description of a ‘positive feedback loop’ within the wider supertext of the transmedia franchise, both of which I shall return to presently.

Five years after the end of their involvement in the film franchise, the Salkinds produced a live-action TV series, the first since the 1950s, not of Superman, but Superboy. Featuring the adventures of a college-age Clark Kent and his Superboy identity, the 1988-1992 Superboy series starred John Haymes Newton for one season before being replaced for the subsequent three by Gerard Christopher. The show, inexplicably set in Florida for production reasons, drew some aesthetics from the cinematic lore yet established a canon of its own which also drew significantly from the comics, or at least more so than previous live-action versions.

With some scripts written by comic writers,25 the show featured the first ever live-action appearances of many classic Superman villains who had hitherto only been seen in animation, such as the contemporaneous animated series Superman (1988) produced by Ruby-Spears Productions, which also had many links with the comics, being story-edited by the then current Superman comic writer Marv Wolfman and broadly conforming to recent continuity changes therein.

Further films failed to emerge after the dwindling success of the sequels to Superman the movie, and were eventually precluded altogether by the tragic 1995 accident that left Christopher Reeve paralysed. The mid-1990s brought a new television series that took the Superman franchise in a novel new direction, that of a romantic comedy-drama. Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman (ABC/Warner Bros. Television, 1993-1997) de-emphasised the traditional action-oriented side of the character and instead focused on another core element of the Superman mythos that had been present since the beginning, the character drama inherent in the romantic triangle of Lois Lane and the hero’s twin identities. Whilst not a drastic deviation from established lore in other hypotexts, this adaptive shift in stylistic emphasis serves to reposition the show for relational reading by different audiences, attracting not only fans of Superman

24 Coogan, Superhero, pp. 6-7.
25 Including Denny O’Neil, John Francis Moore, Andy Helfer, and DC editor Mike Carlin.
from comics or past screen adaptations, but generating a paratextual association with the separate ‘rom-com’ and ‘dramedy’ genres that would appeal to a wider non-fan audience base, and potentially with a broader gender split than the then stereotypically male-dominated demographics of comic book readership and action-adventure movie audiences.

Gordon writes with particular interest in the comparatively greater popularity in Australia of the television series Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman (Warner, 1993-1997), seeking to identify likely prior transmedia hypotexts of the character that would have generated what he views as to some degree a nostalgia-driven popularity, drawing on the resonance of intertextual childhood memories of George Reeves on television in the 1950s or Leonard Teale on radio in the same era, in a locally-produced version. Gordon skews his analysis towards this nostalgic reaction of mostly Baby Boomer viewers rather than the young adult, teen and child Generations X and Y who also consumed the show as, in some cases, their first significant exposure to Superman in transmedia, or in any case as live-action television, an exploration of which would have brought to the fore the multi-track reading strategies that the show employed for multiple demographics of comic aficionados, prior screen-adaptation fans, and new audiences unversed in the details of prior diegeses.

Nevertheless, Gordon makes many strong observations of the show’s own narrative innovations, illustrating for example how the portrayal of Superman’s romance with Lois Lane shifted with the mores of their times from entirely chaste on 1950s television, to sexually liberated in the Christopher Reeves films of the 1970s and 1980s, to a no longer all-or-nothing, somewhat less contrived sensitivity of approach in the 1990s show.27 Similarly, Jennifer K. Stuller argues through a feminist reading that the shifting portrayal of the show’s foregrounded titular role for Lois Lane on the show and in comics has served as a “unique marker” to illustrate mainstream society’s views of women, even to a greater extent than Wonder Woman.28

28 Jennifer K. Stuller, “Feminism: Second-wave Feminism in the Pages of Lois Lane,” in Smith and Duncan, Critical Approaches to Comics, pp. 240-249. I would concur, adding that despite Wonder Woman’s important status as a signifier of changing gender attitudes -- being the genre’s most iconic female superhero -- her lack of ‘everywoman’ status (even compared to other superheroines, given her mythic origin) and inconsistent use of a secret identity renders her pertinence to representations of ‘average’ women problematic. By comparison, and although an atypically adventurous career woman often caught up in fantastical scenarios, Lois Lane’s particular usefulness as a barometer of societal currents lies in being debatably the most prominent ‘civilian’ character regularly appearing in the superhero genre, and inarguably the most frequently-portrayed female example. Indeed, with the exception of Wonder Woman,
Gordon concludes that nostalgia is only one of various ideological significances that a continually reinvented media property can be infused with, revising our past to us in ways inextricably linked in a character like Superman to marketability and commerce. A “disembodied commodity,” as he puts it, “Nostalgia has become the pleasure of consumption,” a view that may seem rather cynical, yet is hard to dispute. While pouring over details of corporate ownership and marketing strategy are very marginal to my study, there can be no denying that there has never been any point at which the complex path that the supertext of the Superman franchise has taken was devoid of a profit motive. This economic reality is both independent of and inextricably linked to the potent ideological and nostalgic significance Superman has often stirred in audiences and creators alike.

Lois & Clark lasted four seasons with great popularity before a gradual decline in ratings led to an abrupt cancellation. Over its run the show managed to accomplish something which, although simultaneously occurring in the comics, was essentially unprecedented -- after fifty-two years of a perpetually unresolved status quo, the central relationship was actually advanced as Lois and Clark got together, resolved the obstacle of the dual identity, and eventually even wed. Despite Umberto Eco’s assertion that such a step away from an unchanging status quo towards the ‘consumption’ or ‘death’ of an advancing timeline could never happen in the oneiric climate of a narrative such as Superman’s, it ultimately did take place in a then-ongoing major cross-media diegesis. Moreover, in a not unique but unusually pronounced instance of transmedia synergy within the franchise, the wedding of Clark and Lois took place simultaneously in the diegetically separate narrative of the comic books published in the same week that the wedding episode aired. But more on both of these issues in the next chapter.

29 For a detailed discussion of the early repositioning of Superman from a simple character to a commodified asset, see Gordon, “Nostalgia, Myth and Ideology,” p. 191.
31 And actually somewhat earlier, as Clark and Lois seriously began to date in Superman [vol. 2] #44 (1990).
32 Although multiple out-of-continuity ‘imaginary stories’ had featured wedding scenarios before, the first time Superman and Lois ‘officially’ got married in any sort of ongoing continuity was in Action Comics #484 (1978). However, this was a story set on Earth-2, a parallel universe which served as a sporadic continuation of the essentially defunct Golden Age continuity (see Chapter 4).
34 The wedding took place in a special one-shot Superman: The Wedding Album (DC, 1996), co-written by five major Superman comic writers of the day, Dan Jurgens, Karl Kesel, David Michelinie, Louise
As further film incarnations of the Man of Steel became mired in a now infamous series of missteps that virtually redefined the industry term ‘development hell,’35 outside of comics36 Superman lived out the rest of the 1990s and into the new millennium in animated form through various Warner Brothers series. Beginning with Superman: The Animated Series (1996-2000) voiced by Tim Daly, this incarnation of Superman continued through his role in the shared-continuity series Justice League (2001-2004), and its excellent continuation Justice League Unlimited (2004-2006), where George Newbern took over the role. Another ensemble cartoon from this era to feature Superman37 was Legion of Super Heroes (2006-2008), voiced by Yuri Lowenthal, while the character has also guest-starred in The Batman (2004-2008),38 and continues to appear in a recent series of direct-to-video (actually DVD and Blu-ray) animated features, which are almost unique in that they are predominantly adaptations of specific comic book storylines.39

In live-action, the 2000s brought to television the most long-running adapted media version of the Superman mythos that has appeared to date which, ironically, did not actually feature either the name or full iconic costume of Superman at all until its 218th, and final, episode. Smallville debuted in 2001 and ran for ten seasons until 2011. Simonson and Roger Stern, and featuring pages drawn by thirty different notable living artists from the history of Superman comics.


36 It should also be noted that Superman has starred in a variety of video games, such as Superman (for Atari 2600, 1978), Superman (Taito arcade game, 1988), Justice League Task Force (Super Nintendo, 1995, and DC Universe Online (a Microsoft ‘massively multiplayer online role-playing game’ or MMORPG, 2001), to name but a few. However, due to their scant narratological content or intertextual influence on the rest of the supertext, Superman’s history in this medium is largely beyond the scope of this thesis.

37 To all intents and purposes the character was Superboy, as befits the classic association of the younger version of the character with this youthful team, however he was referred to as simply a young Superman. This was due to ongoing litigation with the Siegel estate which for a time brought a renewed legal focus on the Superboy incarnation as opposed to the adult Superman. For a period of roughly 2006-2008 DC conspicuously desisted using the name ‘Superboy’ in print for any of its associated characters. See Ian Gordon, “Comics, Creators, and Copyright: On the Ownership of Serial Narratives by Multiple Authors” in Jonathan Gray and Kerek Johnson, eds., A Companion to Media Authorship, First Edition (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), pp. 225, 233; Gordon, “The Comic Book,” pp. 131-135; and Gordon, “When Old Properties Enter New Media: Superman, Intellectual Property, Fans, and the Media,” Fourth International Conference on Multimodality, Singapore Management University, August 1, 2008.

38 Once again voiced by George Newbern, Superman appeared in four episodes bookending the fifth season (2007-2008) of this non-DCAU series.

39 Superman was the star of the first in this series of direct-to-video features collectively known as the ‘DC Universe Original Animated Movies’ (despite the films generally not overtly sharing continuity with each other), Superman: Doomsday (2007), a considerably simplified adaptation of the year-long consecutive Death of Superman, World Without a Superman, and Reign of the Supermen storylines from 1992-1993. The Man of Steel has appeared in a dozen entries in DC’s Original Animated Movies series to date, including five OAMs featuring the Justice League, two co-starring with Batman, and a further three solo Superman films.
The series presented a somewhat radical reinterpretation of the Superman mythos, an ostensible prequel to the familiar legend of Superman, but also a significant departure from any identifiable extant version. Explicitly set in the present day despite its prequel status, the show detailed the exploits of an angst-ridden young Clark Kent and his (very) gradual journey towards superheroism -- if not initially in blue tights -- through a series of adventures that draw on both familiar and original elements. Filled with innumerable winks to past comics and film tropes whilst forging its own unique canon, *Smallville* was an intensely metatextual incarnation. On the one hand departing most drastically from established versions of the Superman myth, it did on the other undoubtedly contain more references to a variety of past continuities than any other adaptation before it.

With *Smallville* continuing its largely independent existence either side of it, the debacle involved in bringing Superman back to the silver screen was finally resolved by the production of *Superman Returns* (2006) which, surprisingly, was to all intents and purposes a continuation of the Salkind films of two decades earlier rather than an original take on the franchise. The film, starring Brandon Routh, was only a modest success financially, critically and within fandom, and ultimately failed to garner any direct continuation.

In the wake of the popular and commercial success of director Christopher Nolan’s reboot of the moribund cinematic Batman franchise with the retroactively-named *Dark Knight Trilogy*, and also significantly following the massive success of Marvel Studios’ aforementioned ground-breaking ‘Marvel Cinematic Universe’ films, the filmic Superman was relaunched again. Helmed by Zack Snyder, director of previous comics-based films *Watchmen* and *300*, and produced by Nolan, *Man of Steel* (Warner Bros., 2013) represented the first major cinematic reboot of the Superman franchise, and

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40 Or, more specifically, the first two, while ignoring the content of *Superman III* and *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace*. As such, the film forms an alternate sequel to *Superman* and *Superman II* (one might even call it a divergent timeline, to employ comic-book terminology), advancing the story continuity established by the Donner/Lester films in an original direction.


43 Given that 1951’s *Superman and the Mole Men* was intended as a television pilot rather than a cinematic series, and as discussed *Superman Returns* was, although an attempted relaunch, directly tied to the continuity of the Salkind film series.
served as the first entry in the new interconnected diegesis of a cinematic “DC Extended Universe,” to be followed by *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*.\(^{44}\)

Starring Henry Cavill, *Man of Steel* presented a new retelling of Superman’s origin which consciously departs in many respects from prior cinematic incarnations whilst retaining others, adopting many traceable points of inspiration from comics hypotexts, and offering its own innovations. With a strong emphasis on the more modern resonant trope of Krypton as a stagnant, cold society incompatible with Superman’s human values (as discussed by Peter Coogan, to whom I shall return presently), \(^{45}\) *Man of Steel* adapts concepts from John Byrne’s 1986 comic reboot of the same name \(^{46}\) such as artificial population control, offspring gestated in pods, and the genetic manipulation of society, combined with the concept of a rigidly-enforced Kryptonian caste system as detailed in the *New Krypton* storyline spanning most Superman-related titles from 2008-2010, chiefly written by Geoff Johns, James Robinson, Sterling Gates and Greg Rucka.

These concepts are expanded into innovations in the mythos which drive the plot of the 2013 film, designating Kal-El to be Krypton’s first natural birth in centuries as an act of rebellion by free-thinkers Jor-El (Russell Crowe) and Lara (Ayelet Zurer), in contrast to the film’s unwavering villain General Zod (Michael Shannon), genetically programmed to preserve and restore Krypton’s way of life. Stealing the repository of all potential future Kryptonians’ genetic information known as the Codex and imprinting its data into his son’s body, \(^{47}\) Jor-El creates a new plot ‘MacGuffin’ \(^{48}\) to motivate this revised adaptation of Zod beyond the straightforward megalomania of his cinematic precursors. Other story beats, such as the conclusion in which Superman feels he has no other option than to kill Zod\(^{49}\) to prevent the villain enacting a promised genocide,

\(^{44}\) Dir. Zack Snyder, Warner Bros., scheduled for a 2016 release. In production at the time of this writing, the film will co-star Ben Affleck as a rebooted Batman for the new “DC Extended Universe” feature films, as distinct from the Dark Knight Trilogy version, and is also to feature an appearance by Wonder Woman, played by Gal Gadot. As the film’s subtitle suggests, it will serve as a lead-in to a series of *Justice League* movies projected to begin in 2017, which Snyder is also slated to direct.

\(^{45}\) Coogan, *Superhero*, pp. 8-10.

\(^{46}\) As well as his 1987-1988 miniseries *World of Krypton* (art by Mike Mignola), which served to elaborate on the backstory of Superman’s homeworld in post-*Crisis* continuity.

\(^{47}\) In an atypical action sequence for Jor-El, possibly inspired by a similar chase-and-fight scenario in which he seeks to evade Brainiac, from the pilot of *Superman: The Animated Series* (Warner Bros. 1996).

\(^{48}\) Although likely based at least conceptually on the Eradicator, a post-*Crisis* Kryptonian artefact (created by writer Roger Stern in *Action Comics Annual* #2, 1989) which contained all the computerised historical records of Krypton but also with a weaponisable function. With a directive to preserve Kryptonian culture, it eventually gained sentience and attempted to force Superman to remake Earth in Krypton’s image, in a similar way to how in *Man of Steel* Zod planned to use the Codex to recreate Krypton on Earth, which would cause the genocide of the human race in the process.

\(^{49}\) Although it is technically debatable whether Superman by implication kills Zod and his cronies in the theatrical cut of *Superman II*, as they are last seen being hurled down a chasm of indeterminate depth after being stripped of their superpowers, and their fates beyond that are left unstated. In a long-unavailable
despite the character’s typical vow against taking a life,\(^{50}\) also had precedent in Byrne’s early post-\textit{Crisis} comics,\(^{51}\) while Metropolis being beset by an invasion of Kryptonian warriors from the Phantom Zone had resonances in the respective conclusions of both Mark Waid’s ‘soft reboot’ \textit{Superman: Birthright}\(^{52}\) and Johns’ and Donner’s storyline “Last Son.”\(^{53}\) Thus \textit{Man of Steel} stands in striking contrast to the previous Salkind/Donner/Reeve series of Superman films using comic book hypotexts as an adaptation basis that was faithful in the generalities of its mythos yet innovated considerably, taking very little from specific past stories other than the broad strokes of the origin, as well as Singer/Routh’s curtailed continuation of the screen franchise, drawing from no intertexts other than the preceding Reeve films. By adapting from a multitude of comic and transmedia intertexts from across decades of the wider franchise supertext, Snyder’s filmic reboot engenders a multi-track reading, engaging multiple audiences from the media spectrum of Superman’s varied prior diegeses. Utilising much the same techniques as the comic book continuity reboots to be discussed in the next chapter, \textit{Man of Steel} serves to both re-adapt and redefine the core mythos for a new generation of cinemagoers, whilst simultaneously seeking to appeal to ‘knowing audiences’ literate in the many iterations of both comic and transmedia Superman lore.

For while the new film does indeed draw more heavily on diverse comic hypotexts than previous cinematic adaptations, it retains an obvious mark of the previous iconic films upon it, in the hopes of utilising the appeal of these resonant tropes in evoking those films seminal cultural capital. Featuring an extensive opening sequence on Krypton that sets up Zod as the major villain for late in the movie while dealing with Clark Kent’s youth and discovery of his alien origins in the interim, in some respects \textit{Man of Steel} inevitably resembles something of a combination of the first two Christopher Reeve films in terms of plot. The film reboot also repeats other tropes invented or popularised in those prior adaptations such as Jonathan Kent (Kevin Costner) extended television cut of the film broadcast in 1984 on ABC-TV, the Kryptonian villains are actually shown being led away from the Fortress of Solitude in handcuffs, whereas in \textit{Superman II: The Richard Donner Cut}, the Man of Steel reverses time so that they retroactively never escape the Phantom Zone.

\(^{50}\) One which typically also applies to Batman, yet who, curiously enough, is the direct cause of many (at times understated, yet unambiguous) deaths in his film career, including many henchmen and a few major villains, most notably the Joker in Tim Burton’s 1989 \textit{Batman}.


\(^{52}\) Art by Leinil Francis Yu, 12 issues, 2003-2004.

\(^{53}\) Art by Adam Kubert, \textit{Action Comics} #844-847, 851, Annual #11, 2006-2008. Note that the storyline did not actually span three years of active publication, but was predominantly released in late 2006-mid 2007, before being belatedly concluded in mid 2008 due to Kubert’s ill health.
tragically predeceasing Martha (Diane Lane), or Superman learning about his Kryptonian origins from a holographic ‘ghost’ of Jor-El’s consciousness.

What is interesting, however, is also what the film leaves out.\footnote{Recalling Lev’s aforementioned theory of ‘negative influences.’ Lev, “The Future of Adaptation Studies,” p. 336.} While each new adaptation of the central Superman origin is selective in its narrative emphasis, \textit{Man of Steel} is unconventional in its choice to use a partially nonlinear story structure, which cuts from moments before Kal-El’s baby rocket lands in Kansas to the present day, and then progressively fills in the blanks with key scenes of his upbringing. What is omitted, however, is the iconic scene of the actual crash and discovery by the Kents, as well as the gradual discovery of most of his powers, or even overtly outlining what they all are individually. Snyder’s film makes the confident choice that Superman’s mythos has been sufficiently disseminated across generations of comics, film, cartoons and television intertexts that a beat-for-beat elaboration of Clark Kent’s childhood is unnecessary, that it is not necessary to assume that all audiences will be equally literate with specific versions as a prerequisite to comprehending this film.

Instead they take the safe bet that the vast majority of the audience will simply already know these broad strokes, from some prior version or another,\footnote{As per the previously discussed concepts of mass dissemination of familiar content leading to ‘knowing audiences,’ such as in Hutcheon, \textit{A Theory of Adaptation}, pp. 120-122.} it is unimportant, and this frees them to employ a narrative shorthand, focusing instead on the thematic and character beats they deemed of particular importance to their version, such as the more hesitant, cautious advice of Jonathan Kent, and the formative experience of Clark fearing his emerging powers, passive resistance to bullying, instinctive childhood heroism, and the traumatic discovery of his alien heritage. Tied at either end to the emphasis on the uncommonly elaborate Kryptonian opening of the film and the eventual appearance of Zod’s Kryptonian antagonists, the film stakes its claim to its own particular interpretation of a rebooted cinematic Superman as deeply curious about yet ultimately rejecting of his origins beyond Earth, which he reaffirms as his home. It is not a unique theme or characterisation, and owes a great deal to John Byrne’s reboot of the same name, yet is structurally, tonally and narratively innovative in its execution and pointedly distinct from, rather than re-treading the particulars of, the Christopher Reeve iteration. As a new rearticulation of the supertext, and the first true reboot of the character in the feature film medium, \textit{Man of Steel}’s creators seek to both conform to and deviate from established
lore and tropes in a process of intertextual adaptation, not only of specific prior textual expressions, but also from the mythos as a whole.

In doing so, as has been the case with virtually all of Superman’s transmedia incarnations before it, the film seeks to establish its own unique adaptational identity through innovating new narrative additions to the wider franchise’s ongoing supertext. These include the aforementioned notion of Superman’s body containing the Codex to potentially restart the Kryptonian race yet choosing not to in favour of protecting Earth,\(^{56}\) or Jor-El being personally murdered by Zod prior to his sentencing to the Phantom Zone, rather than his traditional death beside Lara in the explosion of planet Krypton, as seen in all prior versions of transmedia continuity.\(^{57}\) Another innovative break with long tradition shared by most of its intertexts involved having Lois Lane actively use her journalistic skills to discover Clark Kent’s alien origins before meeting him as Superman, and thus becoming complicit in keeping (and even constructing) his secret identity prior to any prolonged romantic relationship with either persona. Although arguably somewhat preceded in this on television by *Smallville*,\(^{58}\) by circumventing the central Clark/Lois/Superman ‘love triangle’ trope *Man of Steel* was to all intents and purposes making a fairly radical departure from one of the most familiar elements of the mythos from any past iteration of Superman’s story.

This reveals not only a dialogic relationship with hypotexts and intertexts within the wider Superman franchise, but also invites multi-track reading strategies for knowing audiences, who will be triggered to engage in a highly relational reading of such adaptational deviations, of the type I shall further explore. The narrative impetus may have been either reflecting a more realistic sensibility whereby Lois is not fooled by a pair of glasses, or perhaps cutting to the chase of the eventual status quo of Lois

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\(^{56}\) Although thematically similar situations of Superman rejecting the implementation of Kryptonian culture in dominance over Earth have been portrayed previously in the aforementioned comics featuring the Eradicator as well as story arcs on television in *Lois & Clark* and *Smallville*, never has it been so dramatically represented before as the literal birth of a new Kryptonian population at the genocidal expense of humanity.

\(^{57}\) It is also the only mainstream version of Superman’s origin story in which there is any significant passage of time between the launching of the infant Kal-El’s rocket to Earth and the death of his homeworld, which have always been portrayed in the past as directly consecutive if not virtually simultaneous events.

\(^{58}\) Due to the conceit of the show being a prequel to Clark Kent’s career as Superman, Lois becomes romantically involved and does technically learn his secret prior to adoption of the full Superman identity in the final episode. However, since *Smallville*’s format was also predicated on Clark engaging in superheroeic action every week, he gradually progressed from anonymously saving people in his hometown in early seasons, to eventually moving to Metropolis and adopting a progression of outfits bearing Superman’s traditional S-Shield emblem. Thus, for the latter seasons of the show, Clark was a superhero with a secret identity, engaging in the traditional love-triangle relationship with Lois as both Kent and the Superman-in-all-but-name-and-costume hero dubbed ‘The Blur.’
belatedly being in the know, as shown in past decades’ adaptations on television and comics,⁵⁹ the end result is a new filmic continuity that breaks with the kinds of immutable premises that Eco viewed as the classic love triangle, yet unlike both the comic book and television hypotexts that preceded it in this regard, Snyder’s version leapfrogs this iconic phase entirely, staking its claim to a new, unpredictable status quo, if any.

Much like Smallville and comic book reboots before it, Man of Steel demonstrates a deeply palimpsestuous⁶⁰ appropriation of tropes and story elements recognisable to fans from a variety of both comic and adapted media hypotexts, while adding to the ongoing supertext with original variations on the familiar Superman mythos, seeking not just to yet again retell the familiar, iconic story, but to also attempt to generate new interest through depicting unprecedented levels of cinematic action while simultaneously satisfying and confounding expectations of continuity, in something of a metatextual game for the engaged viewer. This stands also in particularly marked contrast to its immediate cinematic predecessor Superman Returns, which sought in its own way to give the cinematic hero an unprecedented evolution through its story of fatherhood, yet in many other respects felt like a creative throwback in its quest to draw only from the singular prior source of the Donner/Reeve films.

While the franchise has waxed and waned in exposure and was, in the 1990s, rather overshadowed by Batman’s transmedia dominance, Superman and his mythos has nevertheless been adapted into drama in some form or another during each decade since the character’s inception, and largely to considerable success. The prominence of these varied incarnations in the cultural consciousness has been due in no small part to their rearticulation of familiar tropes which resonate with existing audiences as iconic or even essential to the characters in the adaptation process. This leads to a disjunction of cultural capital that defies typical adaptational hierarchies of hypotextual ‘source’ vs. intertextual ‘adaptation,’ and leads to a process of intertextual feedback and unconventional lines of transmission within the franchise upon which I shall further elaborate.

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⁵⁹ Although, surprisingly enough, no longer in the then-contemporaneous comics, as during the time of Man of Steel’s production DC had relaunched its entire comic line with The New52, in which Superman’s rebooted continuity portrays him as having never yet dated (much less married) Lois Lane, nor does she know his secret.

⁶⁰ See Chapters 1 and 4 for my fuller discussion of adaptive palimpsests.
Influence, Transmission and Resonance

While it may seem folly to champion the primacy of one medium in which Superman appears over others, there is an unavoidable tendency to regard the comics as a ‘primary’ or otherwise authoritative text. There is some logic to this perspective, as comics are not only the medium in which Superman originated, but also the sole medium in which the character has appeared without interruption for his entire history. Thus the sheer quantity of original story content produced in comic form far outweighs that of all the adaptations, even considering their great number.

Nevertheless, it is film and television adaptations that gain the most significant public recognition, leading to a particular dissonance of cultural capital within the franchise and collective supertext. Although exacerbated by the ever-dwindling audience of comic books and their aging average readership increasingly leaving new generations behind, the wider dissemination, superior accessibility and inherently greater demographic impact of film and television on the popular consciousness inevitably creates a disparity of apparent significance within the larger Superman franchise. As Burke similarly observes, “it is the more widely seen adaptations that tend to dictate content” when it comes to lines of textual transmission between different media.

Nostalgia for these popular past media incarnations is naturally a powerful factor in assuring their longevity in the popular consciousness. As Gordon would argue, this process is inherently tied into the franchise’s perpetuation of a cycle of consumption, a sense of “owning the past.” And so it is these derivative works, the adaptations into other media which have increasingly reached the widest audience and left the most lasting impressions in the larger consumer culture, while the comics upon which they are based exert a far less prominent influence upon Superman’s broader public recognition.

To some extent, this has most likely always been true. Although exact statistics are hard come by, even at the peak of popularity in the early 1940s, comics only sold hundreds of thousand copies, compared to millions of listeners to Superman on radio. This is, of course, instrumental in Superman’s ascent to the status of a cultural icon and the consolidation of almost universal familiarity with his core tropes. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that the comics themselves have taken on a lesser degree of cultural

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62 It is worth noting that this was written before the debut of Smallville and the recent influx of nostalgic continuity elements into the mainstream Superman comics, which perhaps only serves to reinforce his argument. Gordon, “Nostalgia, Myth and Ideology,” pp. 178-192.
capital in the mainstream consciousness than the transmedia narratives that have been adapted from them.

This dissonant sense of comics’ lower significance is particularly evident in two manifestations of the adaptation process. Firstly, there is an observable trend in Superman’s televisual adaptations to reference not only comics but also to increasingly take elements of other prior adaptations as being of equal if not greater influence. Secondly, there is a clear extent to which comics themselves have been progressively informed by successful adaptations in other media, with original content from these other versions reflected by comics on which they were originally derived, forming a kind of intertextual feedback loop. These two processes will be discussed in more detail presently.

One of the things that makes comic book adaptation a rather unusual process, and is perhaps more so in the case of Superman than even for most other comic characters, is that there is no singular stable hypotext from which to draw inspiration. While 1938’s *Action Comics* #1 by Siegel and Shuster is Superman’s first published appearance and contains a significant proportion of the key narrative tropes that would define the character, its presentation of Superman is by no means definitive, given that modern perceptions of the franchise would view its presentation of the mythos as significantly incomplete. Moreover, despite Superman’s comics’ status as the only text in continuous production, they by no means comprise a consistent canon, but rather have undergone considerable changes in style, influences and story continuity over the decades.

Settings, tropes, and even characters that would be now considered definitive components of the franchise’s supertext were absent from not only the initial instalments of Superman’s comics, but in some cases did not emerge for years, or even from within the comic medium. Somigli would agree, opining that *Action Comics* #1 “can make the claim to be the (chronologically) ‘first’ version of Superman, but not the original, since the character has profoundly changed in its fifty-year career, and the version that [screenwriter of 1978’s *Superman: The Movie*] Newman looked at for inspiration was as far from Siegel and Shuster’s as that of today’s comics is from either.” 63 This problematic nature of identifying a core hypotext for the supertext of the Superman franchise will be further detailed presently, and continued in Chapter 3. 64

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64 It is also central to some of the highly complex, decades-spanning legal battles between DC Comics and Jerry Siegel, Joe Shuster, and their estates, as much of the disputed ownership of Superman legally hinges on the content specifically appearing in his first appearance from *Action Comics* #1. The problem,
This is actually an important issue when adapting long-term serialised fiction, making the approach of fidelity criticism discussed in Chapter 1 particularly ill-suited here. Berger would agree, stating that, “The main problem with this comparative position, however, is the assumption that there is a single source text and a beneficiary target. Comic book adaptation therefore poses particular challenges to the adaptation theorist, as most comic book narratives have no secure and permanent source text.”

Similarly, Coogan has discussed this notion, illustrating how superhero films require a fundamentally different approach to the process of adapting novels. However divergent from their source novel, the source and the final adaptations are still both ‘discreet, specific texts,’ and as a result remain directly comparable. By contrast, dramatisations of superhero comics are rarely an adaptation of a single primary text, even in the form of a particular sequence of published issues or an identifiable storyline, other than the many retellings of a character’s origin, of course. Instead, they generally utilise the entire history of the character’s publication.

Coogan is correct in this assertion, although it requires deeper examination and the parsing out of certain subcategories. One should not skirt over the issue of origins, for as Reynolds contends these are in many instances the single most memorable ‘fixed points’ and well-recognised narratives from a superhero’s canon, and thus the most prone to repeated adaptation. In most cases adapting the hero’s origin stories to the screen forms either the entire basis or a significant portion of their first films, with rare

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65 Berger, “‘Are There Any More at Home Like You?,’” pp. 89-90.
66 To which definition I would add plays, historical events, and remakes of earlier films. Significant distinctions between remakes and similar forms of rearticulating comic book narratives will be covered in Chapter 3.
67 With the notable exceptions of the aforementioned recent animated direct-to-DVD ‘movies’ based on specific storylines or limited series from DC Comics. Another example based on what could technically be described as a ‘superhero comic’ is Watchmen (Dir. Zack Snyder, Warner Bros., 2009); however, this probably does not qualify as it was a direct adaptation of a work that was a finite story to begin with, conceived of as a ‘graphic novel’ rather than an ongoing series. Other films directly based on finite comic storylines/ graphic novels such as Ghost World (Dir. Terry Zwigoff, United Artists, 2001), Sin City (Dir. Frank Miller and Robert Rodriguez, Dimension Films, 2005), V for Vendetta (Dir. James McTeigue, Warner Bros., 2005), and A History of Violence (Dir. David Cronenberg, New Line, 2005) would also fall outside of Coogan’s conceptualisation since, although they are adaptations of American comic books, they are not superhero stories.
68 Coogan, Superhero, p. 6.
69 Reynolds, Super Heroes, p. 48
70 Examples of films in which the origin story of the hero reaching their fully-realised superheroic status quo comprises the bulk of the film’s runtime include: Fantastic Four (Dir. Tim Story, Fox, 2005), Batman Begins (Dir. Christopher Nolan, Warner Bros., 2005), and Iron Man (Dir. Jon Favreau, Marvel Studios, 2008).
exceptions. Generally, it is only after the superhero origin narrative has been discharged that superhero movie franchises have the option of telling new stories, and the extent to which they employ significant pre-existing material varies. For many superhero movie adaptations this entails featuring character dynamics and specific villains already established across many years of comics to tell essentially original narratives, which neither directly adapt nor are easily reconcilable with specific pre-established comic storylines. In addition to featuring original plots, a few film adaptations have even created entirely new antagonists, ones which did not debut in any prior story, from comics or otherwise.

Conversely, some superhero films do utilise pre-existing plot elements, yet still contain significant enough proportions of other content as to be far from direct adaptations. For example, both the films Spider-Man 3 (Dir. Sam Rami, Sony, 2007) and The Amazing Spider-Man 2 (Dir. Marc Webb, Sony, 2014) draw subplot threads from the same Green Goblin/Gwen Stacy story arcs spread across many 1970s Spider-Man comics, yet these movies also incorporate original main plots concerning other villains uninvolved in the original comic storylines, as well as tertiary subplots involving major adaptive deviations from any pertinent comic hypotexts. Other films even combine multiple identifiable comic book storylines with new material to form familiar yet ultimately unique narratives, such as X-Men: The Last Stand (Dir. Brett Ratner, Fox, 2006), The Dark Knight Rises (Dir. Christopher Nolan, Warner Bros., 2012), or

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71 Films which devote a significant ‘first act’ to their hero’s origin story but then diverge into a largely unrelated plot for the majority of their runtime include: Superman (Dir. Richard Donner, Warner Bros., 1978), Spider-Man (Dir. Sam Rami, Sony, 2002), and Daredevil (Dir. Mark Steven Johnson, Fox, 2003).

72 Films in which the hero’s origin story is only dealt with in short flashback scenes include: The Punisher (Dir. Mark Goldblatt, New World Pictures, 1989), Batman (Dir. Tim Burton, Warner Bros., 1989), and Blade (Dir. Stephen Norrington, New Line, 1998). Liminal examples include X-Men (Dir. Bryan Singer, Fox, 2000), which deals with a few characters’ backstories yet everyone essentially has the same ‘origin’ of being born a mutant, and The Incredible Hulk (Dir. Louis Leterrier, Marvel Studios, 2008), which as a reboot only shows brief flashbacks to indicate the irreconcilable differences in narrative detail which demark its intentional diegetic discontinuity with the 2003 Ang Lee movie’s lengthy telling of the Hulk’s origin.


74 Examples include Superman III (Dir. Richard Lester, Warner Bros., 1983), Supergirl (Dir. Jeannot Szwarc, TriStar, 1984), and Blade II (Dir. Guillermo del Toro, New Line, 2002).

75 In particular, Spider-Man 3’s (Dir. Sam Raimi, Marvel, 2007) retconning of its own cinematic continuity to reveal that the villain Sandman was involved in the death of Spider-Man’s Uncle Ben and thus Spider-Man’s origin story, and The Amazing Spider-Man 2’s elaboration of a complex backstory linking Spider-Man’s long-dead parents with the villainous Norman Osborn.

Captain America: The Winter Soldier (Dir. Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, Marvel Studios, 2014), the latter being the first superhero film to adopt its adapted storyline’s title verbatim.

Similarly, William Proctor discusses how Batman Begins “does not borrow or adapt an ur-text, as such, but is influenced and informed by several enunciations within the Batman matrix,” identifying various specific comic book hypotexts, yet noting that “the plurality and abundance of texts oscillating within and across the cultural circuit make it difficult, if not impossible to identify accurately any one source as signifier,” with many prior texts always playing a contributive role. Proctor elaborates how having “no static, explicit origin point” means that comic adaption “is an altogether more complex interaction of intersection and interrelation, with a multiplicity of texts cannibalising and feeding each other in an interminable sphere of influence, appropriation and improvisation,” with many prior iterations and recreations “grafted onto one another in a palimpsestuous fashion.”

Perhaps uniquely, Superman is in a position of such frequent cross-media adaptation over his history that his successive iterations are prone to adopting elements which, as discussed, can encompass characters, aesthetics, tropes and story beats drawn not just from the wealth of his comics publication, but from the intertexts of various prior media adaptations as well. Although Coogan is correct that a significant aspect of many comic book screen adaptations is their lack of a single discreet hypotext in favour of a

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77 This film has several distinctly identifiable story influences, most notably the coming-out-of-retirement premise of Batman: The Dark Knight Returns #1-4 (w./a. Frank Miller, DC Comics, 1986), the character of Bane, his reign of terror on Gotham city and his breaking of Batman’s back from the “Knightfall/Knightquest/KnightsEnd” crossover trilogy encompassing all the major Batman titles across 1993-1994, earthquake imagery, and the concept of Gotham descending to chaos after being cut off from mainland America, was adapted from the consecutive 1998-1999 multi-title crossovers “Cataclysm” and “No Man’s Land.” The ultimate villain being Talia al Ghul and her relationship to Bane borrow from both the graphic novel Batman: Son of the Demon (w. Mike W. Barr, a. Jerry Bingham, DC Comics, 1987), and the miniseries Batman: Bane of the Demon #1-4 (w. Chuck Dixon, a. Graham Nolan, DC Comics, 1998), and the concept of a pre-superheroic ‘Robin’ character deducing Batman’s true identity derives from the storyline which introduced the third Robin, Tim Drake, in “A Lonely Place of Dying” from Batman [vol. 1] #440-442 and New Teen Titans #60-61 (w. George Pérez & Marv Wolfman, a. Jim Aparo, Tom Grummett & George Pérez, DC Comics, 1989).

78 Taking its title, titular antagonist and part of its mystery premise from “The Winter Soldier” storyline from Captain America (vo. 5) #8-9, 11-14 (w. Ed Brubaker, a. Steve Epting, Marvel, 2005-2006), yet the core premise of the film’s main plot derived from the storyline “Nick Fury, Agent of Nothing” in Secret Warriors #1-6 (w. Brian Michael Bendis and Jonathan Hickman, a. Stefano Caselli, Marvel, 2009).

79 Followed the next year by Avengers: Age of Ultron (Dir. Joss Whedon, Marvel Studios, 2015), although the film narratively borrowed nothing other than the title (and, obviously, the titular villain) from the 2013 Age of Ultron comic miniseries and crossover.


81 ibid., pp. 1-2.
vast history of content, it must be said that while this is true for many films, it is nonetheless increasingly prevalent for more extensive narrative elements to be adapted from specific comic texts.\textsuperscript{82}

Rather than focus on larger adapted plot threads, Coogan posits that the chief method by which superhero films adapt their source material is by the repetition of ‘resonant tropes,’ which he describes as:

\begin{quote}…familiar and repeated moments, iconic images and actions, figures of speech, patterns of characterization – that have resonance; that is they embody or symbolize some aspect of the character, and have gained this resonance through repeated use by storytellers.\textsuperscript{83}\end{quote}

Examples provided by Coogan include the repetition of specific imagery such as the tearing of the pearl necklace from Batman’s mother’s neck moments before her murder, or more thematic recurrences such as Superman’s ambivalence towards his Kryptonian heritage in later incarnations of the story, starting with Richard Donner’s 1978 film.\textsuperscript{84}

Although essentially a form of microcosmic fidelity criticism, and thus subject to the contentious problems with that approach discussed in Chapter 1, Coogan’s description of ‘resonant tropes’ is useful for discussing not only the adaptation of comics to film, but also \textit{vice versa}, and further, with the wider migration of story elements, of tropes from one medium to another within the wider Superman franchise.

Coogan implicitly goes on to include television adaptations as being subject to this technique, despite not being ‘discreet, specific texts’ either. This expansion of his stated definition seems workable, even though adapting comics to the similarly ongoing, serialised medium of television is clearly not quite the same process as the reworking of a vast quantity of comics into a single, finite film. Of course, the goal with most superhero films is increasingly \textit{not} to be single and finite, but merely instalments in a series of sequels and, since the rise of Marvel Studios, preferably part of the shared diegesis of a ‘cinematic universe’. Regardless, the process of using an accumulation of resonant tropes from a wide variety of hypotextual stories as the foundation for an adaptation remains the same.\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{82} Although several of the films following this trend have been released since the time of Coogan’s writing.
\textsuperscript{83} Coogan, \textit{Superhero}, pp. 6-7.
\textsuperscript{84} ibid., pp. 7-10.
\textsuperscript{85} Although one could well argue that even superhero feature films can nevertheless be considered serialised after a fashion, as most go on to spawn sequels sharing the same story continuity established by the first movie, and some film series based on popular characters such as Batman, the Hulk, and Spider-Man have even had their filmic continuity ‘rebooted’ much like their comic counterparts. This phenomenon is not limited to comics-derived properties and has recently been seen with other long-running film franchises such as James Bond (\textit{Casino Royale}, Dir. Martin Campbell, Eon Productions, 2006), and Star Trek (\textit{Star Trek Into Darkness}, Dir. J. J. Abrams, Paramount, 2009).
Coogan further argues that the success of any given superhero comic adaptation relies in large part on the sufficient deployment of resonant tropes, and that it is the absence of such which causes certain films to fail. Although instinctively a tempting piece of reasoning like that of much fidelity criticism, this is a debatable assertion. To begin with it is framed rather vaguely, at least in terms of whether the ‘success’ of an adaptation is to be judged purely in terms of positive acclaim within fandom -- something difficult to measure, and in any case representing a minority of the total audience -- as opposed to any consideration of box office earnings or the balance of mainstream critical response. For example, one could easily juxtapose how the movie Blade (1998) and its sequels enjoyed moderate commercial success but was only fairly loosely based on its comic book source material, with the reasonably successful Watchmen (2009), which was on the whole extremely (some felt excessively) faithful to its source material. Yet neither could even begin to approach the stellar financial and critical triumph of The Dark Knight (2008), a film with an ostensibly original storyline yet influenced not just by many resonant tropes, but by adapting more extensive textual aspects from a variety of identifiable comics sources, but no central one in particular.

Additionally, Coogan’s citing of Ang Lee’s film Hulk (Universal, 2003) as a case of a film failing due to its abandonment of resonant tropes is flawed. His argument that the “central resonant trope” missing from Lee’s version -- Bruce Banner’s heroism in saving a life at the moment of his gamma exposure -- fails to account for the fact that this trope is equally absent from the successful television series The Incredible Hulk (CBS, 1977-1982, plus telemovies in 1988, 1989, and 1990), which would also prove to be the case with the somewhat more successful and well-received 2008 ‘reboot’ film of

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86 Coogan, *Superhero*, pp. 6, 10-12.
87 Coogan’s assertion is unclear as to its criteria, describing the first two Batman films directed by Tim Burton as “fairly successful” compared to the two Joel Schumacher-directed sequels that followed being “less successful” (ibid., p. 6). Although this would probably be an accurate reflection of general fan consensus over time and does roughly correlate to the aggregated-review statistics asserted by RottenTomatoes.com, it would not be an accurate reflection of the four films’ box-office performances, with the third film in the series Batman Forever (Dir. Joel Schumacher, Warner Bros., 1995), considerably outperforming the far more critically well-received second film, Batman Returns (Dir. Tim Burton, Warner Bros., 1992). Even the critically-disastrous fourth film, Batman & Robin (Dir. Joel Schumacher, Warner Bros., 1997), which, although the least financially successful Batman film to date, was by no means a box office bomb, raking in only 10.7% less money in worldwide revenue than the ‘successful’ Batman Returns -- a film which in turn had actually made 35.1% less than Batman (1989), the first film.
the same name. Although it could be argued that it was the abandonment of other resonant tropes or the introduction of new, unprecedented elements of backstory which by necessity held no resonance of their own, Coogan’s example as stated is unconvincing.

More cohesive, and more relevant to this project, is Coogan’s aforementioned singling out of Superman’s reluctance to embrace his Kryptonian heritage as an example of a resonant trope which was not tied up with the origin story of a character (or at least, none of the early tellings of the origin), but rather one that developed in later iterations of the myth, and more to the point of this study, an iteration of the myth that originated through adaptation to other media. This kind of trope is particularly prevalent in the supertext of the Superman franchise, and demonstrates the particularly fluid nature of transmission between transmedia intertexts. It is not quite to the level of overtly cross-media storytelling within a unified diegesis, yet its capacity to feed back into the ongoing comic texts is a particular trait of transmedia properties with a highly iterative adaptational legacy. I would propose to refer to this type of influential latter-day development through different media as an ‘emergent trope.’

Ultimately, Coogan’s general point is certainly viable, that resonant tropes play a major role in the process of adaptation when it comes to comic book superheroes, and his term will be used herein as it succinctly describes the wider net of story, character and minor continuity elements and how they are transmitted across different media incarnations of franchises, which is of primary concern to this study. They will not, however, be regarded as of automatically greater or lesser significance than more detailed adaptations of storylines and themes, nor shall I subscribe to the uncomplicated view that their mere presence or absence for ‘knowing’ audiences are necessarily of key significance to a ‘successful’ superhero adaptation.

In fact, the argument for the significance of resonant tropes or even resonant plotlines has been perhaps dealt its most significant blow by the recent stellar success of Guardians of the Galaxy (Dir. James Gunn, Marvel Studios, 2014) with its $94.3 million domestic opening weekend and lashings of critical praise, despite being based on a

90 Although the latter film had not been released as of the time of Coogan’s writing, the observation stands. In point of fact, his claim that the resonant trope is abandoned is itself rather debatable, as although the circumstances presented in Lee’s film are quite different and do not involve the character of Rick Jones, Banner nevertheless does save a fellow scientist from gamma radiation at the cost of his own exposure. This is actually far closer to the Rick Jones scenario from the comics than the origins depicted in the 1970s television series or 2008 film (which was strongly influenced by said series) in which Banner deliberately experiments on himself, albeit for quasi-altruistic reasons.
highly obscure and recent comic book property. Clearly the appeal of the film lay in its offbeat concept and strong execution -- in other words, despite being a Marvel movie, its overwhelming reception bears little plausible connection to issues of adaptive resonance.

**Adaptation**

This tendency of the many successive media adaptations of Superman to draw on not only comics, but also other past media incarnations, has varied over the years, but increasing intertextuality of multiple influences has become progressively prominent in the last two decades. The trend which has emerged is for adaptations to ‘cherry-pick’ preferred tropes from different (sometimes discontinuous) comics sources, and particularly from their ‘predecessors’ in earlier transmedia adaptations. This diverse range of intertexts being drawn upon as part of the adaptational process create transmedia incarnations that are not only at times highly unique rearticulations of pre-existing narrative tropes, but also complex recombinations that defy conventional notions of direct adaptations of discreet hypotexts. The resulting hybridisation of intertextual influences on producing these transmedia adaptations, as well as their accrued multiplicity over time, leads to media texts that encourage highly relational readings.

Appealing to multiple demographics becomes part of the adaptational process, targeting the material to be comprehensible to the larger majority of the non-comic-reading potential audience, whilst also creating reference points for those ‘knowing viewers’ for whom detecting these diverse lines of textual transmission and identifying hypotextual precedents forms an important part of the appeal. Such multi-track reading strategies are essential for approaching the analysis of these transmedia forms of the Superman franchise, as the more densely-layered examples take this ‘spot-the-reference’ to a sometimes textually subversive, almost game-like level.

The earliest adaptations -- the radio series, Fleischer animation and Kirk Alyn movie serials -- reflected the comics on which they were based in only fairly general terms. This included recounting the core origin story, major characters, and a general

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91 It should be clarified that although the characters featured have individually existed since the 1960s and 1970s, and a team named the ‘Guardians of the Galaxy’ was created in 1969, the assemblage of these particular heroes as a team, adopting the name of this earlier, unrelated group, did not debut until *Guardians of the Galaxy* [vol. 2] #1 in 2008, by which time the Marvel Cinematic Universe itself was already launching with the first *Iron Man* film that same year.

92 The Superman radio series presented an anomalous version of the origin in its first episode, dramatising Jor-El’s tribulations on Krypton and the familiar launch of the baby Kal-El in the rocket, only to have a radical departure from his usual earbound upbringing in the following episode, whereby Superman arrives on Earth having aged to adulthood in transit, and concocts his Clark Kent identity on the spot with the assistance of some helpful passers-by he rescues. However, this drastically abridged origin’s exclusion...
reflection of the early types of adversaries Superman faced in comics of the same era, such as gangsters, criminal masterminds, the occasional mad scientist and agents of the Axis powers. If anything these early versions had more of an influence on the comics than vice versa, as I shall explore momentarily.

The 1950s *Adventures of Superman* on television depicted a now-familiar origin story and a well-established core of characters in Superman/Clark Kent, Lois Lane, Jimmy Olsen and Perry White, but unlike the film serials of the previous decade that had featured Luthor, the Reeves series never used any of the recurring supervillains that were then becoming prevalent in the comics. Unlike the projects of the prior decade which had certain broad similarities to the type of adventures in which Superman was engaged in contemporaneous comics, the TV incarnation of Superman diverged -- or more simply did not keep up with -- the development of the current comics, which had become far more outlandish and immersed in pulp-inspired science fiction.

One simple explanation for this is that the intrinsic limitations of its television budget and special effects technology made the ever-increasing superpowers and space opera tendencies of the comic book Superman simply not viable to replicate on screen. Instead the television show depicted the Man of Steel typically facing simple crooks and mere swindlers, with occasional detours into the tropes of other genres of early television, and an overall light, almost semi-comedic tone designed to be child-friendly. Yet even taking this into account, there seemed little attempt to utilise content from the comics, or previous adaptations, as even the characterisation of the leads was markedly different. On some occasions Superman even displayed unique, one-off superpowers never seen before or since.

The implications of this are an intersection of competing concerns. On the one hand, budgetary limitations simply prevented verisimilitude to comic book tropes, yet on the other hand, even despite the involvement of DC comic book writers and editors on

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93 In fact the Krypton scenes in the opening instalments of the radio, film serial and television versions respectively are extremely similar, with Jor-El’s speech to the Kryptonian ruling council being almost verbatim in each case.
94 Most notably with a less nosy and aggressive Lois, a rather hapless and comedic Jimmy, and a more assertive Clark Kent and paternalistic Superman, who was also presented with far less differentiation of behaviour between his superheroic and civilian identities.
95 Such as the power of splitting himself into two independent Superman duplicates (“Rescue,” Season 1), and the ability to pass intangibly through solid barriers (“The Mysterious Cube,” Season 6).
the show, this disjunction betrayed a fundamental lack of priority in direct adaptation of specific hypotextual narratives. While the origin and broad premise of the comic book character were definitely conformed to, the comic themselves were seemingly not regarded as having sufficient merit or cultural capital to warrant any measure close adaptive adherence on an ongoing basis. While not long after comics, and Superman comics in particular, had been at their all-time highest demographic reach, by the 1950s the superhero genre in print had undergone a severe decline, as shall be discussed in Chapter 4. Thus it is likely that seeking to pander to comic book fans specifically with ‘Easter eggs’ or other such multi-track reading strategies was not seen as a priority, or perhaps even desirable for a show aimed at broad family audiences.

In stark contrast, the aforementioned cartoon incarnations of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s were essentially freed of the budgetary considerations that hampered live-action adaptations, due to the comparatively near-limitless scope of the hand-drawn medium. These animated shows thus presented fantastical stories that mirrored the general style of the comics in their respective decades, yet still without being direct adaptations of specific narratives. However, by including many traditional comic villains that had otherwise not been seen outside the parent medium, these animated transmedia adaptations demonstrated a valuation of comic hypotexts that had been evidently deemed either infeasible or undesirably outlandish in their live-action equivalents. Conversely, they offered little in the way of developing any significant new story tropes of their own that had any lasting influence, marking them as highly relational in their hypotextual appropriation, yet only marginally resonant in terms of lasting cultural capital of their own.

The Salkind feature film series of 1978-1983, beginning with Superman (also known as Superman: The Movie), presented a version that took various cues from the now 40-year history of the franchise but interpreted them in fairly original ways. Lex Luthor, for example, appears as a ‘criminal genius,’ but unlike the mad scientist of the comics and early serials has far more prosaic goals (if no less grandiose in execution) of obtaining valuable real estate. Elements previously only appearing in comics made their cross-media debut such as the Fortress of Solitude, General Zod and the Phantom Zone, and the most detailed version of Krypton and Clark’s childhood yet depicted on screen.98

96 Including producer and co-developer Whitney Ellsworth, and story editor Mort Weisinger.
98 Barring the Superboy half of the 1966 New Adventures of Superman cartoon.
Yet it was with these very comic book inclusions that the film displayed some of its greatest and most influential originality, such as portraying a wholly different interpretation of Krypton and a rather biblical rendition of Jor-El as played by Marlon Brando; the death of Pa Kent (Glenn Ford) without the corresponding death of Martha (Phyllis Thaxter); the representation of the Phantom Zone as a physically two-dimensional rather than ethereal prison; and the Fortress as an abstract crystal palace spontaneously grown from Kryptonian technology instead of a hand-built bunker inside a snowy plateau. While in some cases the influence of these adaptive innovations to the wider franchise’s supertext took years, even decades to manifest through adaptive rearticulations in subsequent transmedia and comic book intertexts, the very fact of such delayed re-emergences of these new inclusions in the Superman mythos -- as shall be further discussed -- were testament to the singularly profound cultural capital that this film and some of its subsequent sequels would engender.

Examples include the portrayal of the ‘love triangle’ between Lois, Clark and Superman followed the long-standing comics scenario closely, but took the relationship to a then-unprecedented level by having Lois discover Superman’s secret identity and then consummate their relationship in Superman II, only for the status quo to be reinstated by the film’s end thanks to a convenient new ability to induce amnesia via the now infamous super-kiss. Christopher Reeve’s performance as the highly disparate personae of Kent and Superman owed little to any of his predecessors and was, if anything, closer to the comic roots, while conversely Hackman’s Luthor had little in common with any prior interpretation of the character other than an intellect surpassed only by monumental arrogance. Donner and uncredited script re-writer Tom Mankiewicz’s approach of stressing verisimilitude and a non-satirical approach to the material (at times in defiance of the Salkinds’ preferences) demonstrated a certain hypotextual ambivalence -- priority to replicating comics material either closely (Reeve)

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99 This has become a major recurring trope, but initially the Golden and Silver Age Kents were always both dead by the time of Clark’s adulthood, initially from natural causes though eventually explained as a rare disease via retcon in Superman [vol. 1] #161 (1963). Conversely, in post-Crisis comics they were portrayed as being both still alive and ongoing supporting characters, through two soft reboots and across 22 years of comics until Jonathan was killed off in 2008, in a feedback of the trope popularised in cinematic adaptations. This shall be addressed later in this chapter.

100 Gordon argues that the portrayal of Superman engaging in sexual relations was an important generational shift in the portrayal of the character as a modern man existing in a post-sexual revolution world, yet notes that the liaison was problematised by the fact that Superman was required to relinquish his powers and mission to do so, a decision he ultimately reverses. Interestingly, Gordon notes that the potential message that Superman is unmanned by commitment to Lois and in embracing his own sexuality was countered in the later series Lois & Clark, wherein Superman is seen to benefit positively from and be strengthened by the relationship with Lois. Gordon, “Nostalgia, Myth and Ideology,” pp. 185-187.

or divergently (Hackman) was conditional on the ultimate goal of presenting the broader concept in a fashion that cinemagoers unaccustomed to the idea of taking a comic book character seriously would accept as a form of realism, in all its epic aspirations.

Thus issues of transmedia synchronicity that would come into play in later decades were clearly still in their relative infancy. The movie did not seek to market itself via targeted intertextual association to its comic book and prior screen hypotexts, as it clearly did not presume that fidelity to comic book antecedents necessarily had positive market resonance, or that courting the demographic of comic fandom was a key part of its marketing strategy. Conversely, there was little reflection in the diegesis of contemporaneous comic book publications, although this would change radically with some highly targeted feedback decades after the fact, as I shall detail in further discussion. One can see therefore that at this point in time the supertext of the franchise supported narrative expression in each medium quite independently, and without the kind of highly iterative self-conscious intertextuality that sought out multi-track readings which would later become the norm for screen adaptations and comic book reboots alike.

The first live-action television incarnation of the hero since George Reeves’ series thirty years prior was *Superboy* (1988-1992), which enjoyed a four-season run but later fell into relative obscurity due to DC legally blocking television reruns or availability on home video. Although produced by the Salkinds, it bore no continuity links to their film series, which had precluded any superheroic career for the teenage Clark Kent. This may have been a simple reality of being stuck with its narrative inconsistency to Superman’s life story as already presented on film, or merely a disinterest in maintaining any notion of a cross-media ‘Salkind continuity’ in-house, as such a prospect would not even be attempted until Marvel Studios, from the late 2000s onwards. Whatever the motive, this continued what has been the case for virtually the entirety of the franchise’s history -- comic book canon remains continuous yet evolving, while each new transmedia articulation stands alone as a self-contained diegesis. They may influence other intertexts adaptationally, yet do not contain direct cross-media continuations of the same continuous narrative.

*Superboy* thus carved its own continuity out of original, unprecedented elements (Clark Kent attending college in Florida, later working for a *X-Files*-esque agency),

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102 Glen Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken NJ, 2013), p. 242. This was mostly as a result of legal issues with the Salkinds and, more recently, the lawsuits from the Siegel estate. Season One was eventually made available in 2006, before a long hiatus until the remaining three seasons were finally released through Warner’s manufacture-on-demand service in 2012-2013.
whilst also featuring Lex Luthor and Lana Lang, and making some comparatively faithful (and Silver Age-skewing) adaptations of classic comic characters never before seen in live action, such as Bizarro, Mr. Mxyzptlk and Metallo. This was in no small part due to the employment of actual comics writers on the series,\(^{103}\) a contribution that has been absent from many other transmedia adaptations of Superman.\(^{104}\) An irony of the series was that it depicted the adventures of a young Clark Kent in the guise of Superboy, an element of the character’s backstory which had recently been written out of continuity in the comics of the time. Much like the Salkinds’ prior big-screen adaptations, this again demonstrated a distinct lack of intentional intra-franchise synchronicity, whereby despite having a greater volume of comic book content directly adapted, there was little attempt to mirror even the broadest continuity principles of contemporaneous Superman comics’ diegesis. Marketing directly to a crossover demographic of comic book readers was given little apparent priority at this stage. This was, however, all about to change.

In the shortest turnaround from any live-action incarnation to another within the same medium, the Salkind/Viacom-produced *Adventures of Superboy* was effectively cancelled by obstruction from DC, in order to make way for Warner’s plans to produce a new Superman-based series in-house,\(^{105}\) which became *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* (1993-1997). Unlike its immediate predecessor it sought to conform to the current comics by observing the broad principles of the post-*Crisis* reboot,\(^{106}\) in an evident attempt at closer transmedia brand synergy. As such, Clark Kent is portrayed by Dean Cain as a more confident professional, yet without the macho forcefulness of George Reeves, and predominantly as the character’s genuine personality rather than an affected persona of a bumbling coward (as had Christopher Reeve), while Superman, if anything, is more of a performance.\(^{107}\) One subtle yet intriguing method by which this notion was emphasised was by inverting the usual hairstyles of the dual

\(^{103}\) *ibid.*, pp. 237-238, 240-241.

\(^{104}\) The short-lived 1988 *Superman* animated series by Ruby-Spears Productions employed Marv Wolfman, one of the major contributors to Superman’s post-*Crisis* comic reboot, as a writer and story editor, as that series loosely reflected the new comics continuity. A year into its run *Smallville* hired experienced Superman comics writer Jeph Loeb (who had a dual career in screenwriting and television producing) to serve as a Consulting/Supervising Producer on between 2002-2005, as well as personally writing four episodes. Another significant Superman comics writer, Geoff Johns (responsible for Superman ‘soft reboot’ *Secret Origin*) wrote an episode apiece for *Smallville*’s final three seasons (2009-2011), introducing to the show’s continuity other DC comics heroes such as the Justice Society of America and the Legion of Super-Heroes.


\(^{107}\) The writers of *Lois & Clark* took this element even further than John Byrne, going so far in the Season Two episode “Tempus Fugitive” as to have Kent declare “No, Lois. Superman is what I can do. Clark is who I am.”
identities -- here Superman has the more ‘artificial’ slicked-back hair traditionally displayed by his newspaperman ‘disguise,’ while it is Kent who wears his hair more naturally, as the superhero typically does, albeit without the iconic spitcurl.

Despite portraying a more assertive Clark Kent, Cain maintained an appreciable distinction between the two personae, unlike George Reeves, and yet the series nevertheless contained references to its 1950s near-namesake. These included portraying a similarly hectoring Jimmy Olsen/Perry White dynamic, a fleeting reference to Inspector Henderson and, despite its conscious modernity, while also striving for ‘timelessness,’ via a somewhat retro production design, including 1920s and 1940s-inspired fashions.\(^{108}\) And, as Gordon contends, the show arguably espoused a certain nostalgia for 1950s moral values.\(^{109}\)

Other elements that mirrored contemporaneous comics continuity included Clark having adopted his superhero identity in adulthood and therefore having never had a career as Superboy; the survival and continuing influence of his adoptive parents into Clark’s adulthood; the inclusion of the newly invented post-\textit{Crisis} supporting characters Catherine ‘Cat’ Grant and Dr. Gretchen Kelley; and especially the portrayal of Lex Luthor as a mastermind made initially untouchable by his position as a respectable corporate magnate.\(^{110}\) With its greater emphasis on interpersonal drama than adventure, and placement of Lois Lane as an equal lead character, the series inevitably formed a continuity of its own, with original recurring characters not derived from the comics,\(^{111}\) adding unique idiosyncrasies to existing characters,\(^{112}\) as well as the occasional fairly altered versions of secondary comics villains such as Metallo and Toyman. Yet again, a balancing act was being played between drawing on resonant tropes to appeal to ‘knowing audiences’ in a relational reading of the show that can identify the lines of


\(^{109}\) Gordon, “Nostalgia, Myth and Ideology,” pp. 186-187. However, it should be noted that Gordon incorrectly describes the series as having identified both of the title characters as virgins in contrast to how “in the movie versions Lois clearly had a past.” Although Lois is not portrayed as consummating relationships with any of the other men in the course of the series (notably including a chaste engagement to Lex Luthor in Season 1), in the Season 3 episode “Virtually Destroyed” where Clark reveals his own virginity, she clearly states that she has slept with other men in the past.

\(^{110}\) Played with relish by John Shea, this version of Luthor took other cues from post-\textit{Crisis} comics such as having no shared history with Clark Kent, and harbouring romantic designs on Lois Lane. A significantly non-traditional element, however, was that he was not portrayed as being bald for the majority of his time on the show, apart from some fleeting later appearances in Season 2 and 3.

\(^{111}\) Including S.T.A.R. Labs scientist Dr. Klein, Luthor’s trusty fixer Nigel, Kryptonian noblewoman Lady Zara to whom Superman was betrothed at birth, and time-travelling villain Tempus, to name but a few.

\(^{112}\) Such as Perry White’s obsession with Elvis Presley, Jimmy Olsen’s father being a Bond-like spy, Lois’ father portrayed as an inventor, and an original take on a colony of other Kryptonian survivors analogous to the Kandorians.
textual transmission to its comic book intertexts, while also seeking to strike out on its own, to innovate and recompose the material to suit its own adaptive voice, which would go on to have influence in turn.

Animation started to draw upon a more diverse range of intertexts in this period, with *Superman: the Animated Series* (and continuations of the same internal ‘DCAU’ continuity in *Justice League* and *Justice League Unlimited*). Although primarily aimed at children, these series were written and produced by committed fans-turned-professionals engaging in a sophisticated intertextuality. The resulting adaptive recombinations sought more overtly than ever to cherry-pick resonant elements from across a variety of sources of both comics and prior screen adaptations. The goal was to create a new iteration which would in time elaborate its own relatively sophisticated accretion of internal continuity, for ‘children’s’ animation. This came about through the adaptors choosing which elements of many prior intertextual options they deemed most viable for a vibrant new mythos, one not shackled by direct cross-media continuity strictures, while also being enriched by its nearly limitless contributive options.

The series favoured a Silver Age-inspired interpretation of Krypton with some Byrne-derived imagery, a largely post-*Crisis* construction of Superman himself (lower powers, more assertive Kent, no Superboy), and a sardonic Lois Lane as much beholden to the performances of Margot Kidder and Terri Hatcher as the comics. The series’ Luthor fit the post-*Crisis* businessman model before eventually reverting to a more Silver Age mad scientist mode, as well as a host of villains whose portrayals hailed from a variety of different sources. This cartoon also created various innovations of its own which have proved to be influential in turn, reappearing through subsequent adaptive feedback.\(^{113}\)

Undoubtedly though, the most diversely influenced adaptation of the Superman franchise to date is the live-action series *Smallville*. Although initially formulaic and with seemingly scant reference points to hypotexts beyond its rearticulation of the classic origin story, the programme progressively evolved into easily the most unique major

\(^{113}\) For example, the comic books later adopted Lois’ habit from *the Animated Series* of referring to Clark by the teasing nickname ‘Smallville,’ and in turn the later TV series *Smallville* employed the same reference when it introduced their version of Lois in Season 4. The villain Livewire, created for the series was later introduced into the comics, albeit with considerably lesser impact than her equivalent from the sister show *Batman: The Animated Series*, Harley Quinn. Additionally, *Smallville* replicated the core concept behind *Superman: The Animated Series*’ radically different interpretation of Brainiac as an artificial intelligence designed on Krypton rather than an invader who pillaged it. Late post-*Crisis* continuity changes in the Superman comics also borrowed from this popular *Animated* version of Brainiac’s motivation being the accumulation and destructive monopolisation of all knowledge, which has also carried through to yet another iteration of the character in the *New52* continuity relaunch.
iteration of the franchise’s supertext, in no small part due to the metatextual perversity of ultimately being an inordinately long-running Superman show without actually featuring Superman, or even Superboy per se, in any traditional sense of the iconic costumed superhero. Beyond simply being one of a rising millennial wave of prequels, Smallville was the most densely intertextual transmedia rearticulations of Superman that had yet appeared. It was not merely evoking and recombining hypotextual influences from a wide array of comic continuities and prior adaptations to create a conceptually rich teenage drama for mainstream television audiences. It also simultaneously played with them to deliberately evoke, subvert and even pervert the expectations that such intertextual referencing triggers when subject to multi-track readings by comic-literate ‘knowing’ audiences.

The evolving fictional ‘universe’ of Smallville drew on various elements of continuity. Presenting its expansive backstory/origin for Clark Kent as a fusion of the pre- and post-Crisis continuities. The show’s diegesis incorporated comics tropes such as Byrne’s gradual development of Clark’s powers and lack of a Superboy identity, mixed conversely with a busy career as an initially anonymous hero in his hometown similar in purpose to the erstwhile Boy of Steel. Similarly, the show revived the then long-discarded pre-Crisis history of Lex Luthor and Superman having a shared youth in Smallville prior to becoming nemeses, mixed in with elements of Lex’s post-Crisis billionaire persona by making him heir to a corporate empire via the hithertofore non-existent character of his father, the devious Lionel Luthor, a character who, in turn, was attributed some of the post-Crisis backstory of Lex himself.

Action sequences were initially facilitated by a regular stream of generic superhuman villains supplied via a new plot-generating device created for the series, that of a large shower of Kryptonite with unprecedented mutating properties, a device progressively dropped in later seasons. Gradually, various familiar villains from

114 The show’s latter seasons invented the entirely unprecedented notion of Clark having a career as a proto-superhero in Metropolis, wearing his iconic S-shield on makeshift costumes but not yet willing to show his face, gaining the nickname of ‘The Red-Blue Blur,’ and later simply ‘The Blur,’ due to his identity-preserving use of super-speed.

115 In contrast to the post-Crisis Lex who was a self-made billionaire who had risen from poverty in Metropolis’ Suicide Slum, where he had grown up as friends with Perry White, further establishing the generational difference between Superman and his enemy in that continuity.

116 Also noted in Ndalianis, “Enter the Aleph,” p. 276, Lionel Luthor’s character additionally appeared to contain a visual reference to his son’s post-Crisis continuity, as his beard and long hair closely resemble ‘Lex Luthor II,’ a false identity assumed during a long story arc from 1988-1992 in which Lex, dying of Kryptonite-induced cancer, faked his own death, had his brain removed and a new, younger body cloned around it, and then passed himself off for a considerable time as his own adult son, supposedly having been raised secretly in Australia. See also Weldon, Superman: The Unauthorized Biography, p. 244.
Superman’s ‘mythology,’ were introduced, usually in radically reconceived versions, such as a deviously intelligent Bizarro, Doomsday with an alter-ego, Brainiac as a liquid metal humanoid computer, a human Mr. Mxyzptlk, or General Zod as an initially non-corporeal spirit who possesses Lex, and later as a clone of the younger Major Zod, as well as other reconceived versions of comic characters Metallo, Toyman, Darkseid and so forth.

Additionally, tweaked versions of other DC superheroes such as Aquaman, the Martian Manhunter, and eventually several members of the Justice Society became recurring guest stars or, in the case of Green Arrow, a regular cast member. Although the show keenly developed its own original content, characters and unique mythology, it became increasingly peppered with fleeting appearances and references to supporting characters and entities that only dedicated fans would notice, such as Maggie Sawyer, Morgan Edge, Lucy and Sam Lane, Emil Hamilton, Ron Troupe, Connor Kent, Cadmus Labs, LexCorp, Checkmate, the Legion of Super-Heroes, Earth 3 and many, many more.

The series continued to refine this formula over the course of its ten-season run, selecting resonant tropes and desired pieces of continuity regardless of their source, and combining it with a considerable dose of both innovation and deviation from established continuity conventions to create a mélange of identifiable reference points and a unique mythology of its own. Ndalianis examines this phenomenon in detail for the earlier seasons, discussing how in drawing on such a wide range of sources the show engaged in a kind of intertextual game with its viewers, whereby the deployment and recognition of these varied references become an integral part of the appeal to the segment of the audience well-versed in decades of Superman lore.117

Of course, a well-versed audience is vital for such games to be effective, and is a prime example of Hutcheon’s ‘knowing audience.’118 The ‘game’ as Ndalianis describes it, is a perfect example of the type of textual ‘oscillation’ experienced by viewers literate in the material being adapted, which Hutcheon frames as a simultaneous perception of both the hypotexts and the lines of textual transmission to the adaptation. Along similar lines, Berger posits that “Texts oscillating and rewiring each other in transmedia adaptation, I would argue, could be both source and target at different moments.”119 This heightened palimpsestic awareness when consuming a text such as Smallville implies a constant awareness of the work as adaptation rather than simply experiencing it as

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118 Hutcheon, A Theory of Adaptation, pp. 120-121.
119 Berger, “Are There Any More at Home Like You?,” p. 89.
prequel series or original stories, much as these too encompass a significant element of the show. And as Hutcheon contends, it is preferable and even necessary for a successful adaptation to work as entertainment for both ‘knowing’ and less hypotextually literate viewers.\textsuperscript{120}

*Smallville* had the advantage of working on other levels as well, possessing genre traits that evoke other millennial high school television shows. It is an example what Gray terms as the “paratextual perimeter,”\textsuperscript{121} of texts invite comparisons to other texts, without direct narrative reference but via associational links to similar material produced by certain creators, actors, companies or timeslots. In much the same way that *Lois & Clark* in the previous decade had paratextually attracted fans of the romantic comedy genre, *Smallville*’s associational styling evoked semi-rural teen melodramas like *Dawson’s Creek* (The WB, 1998-2003), and in particular supernatural teen-hero narrative *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB/UPN, 1997-2003).\textsuperscript{122} Yet fundamentally the show taps into the prevalence of cultural foreknowledge of Superman’s general supernarrative amongst the general public. Highly pertinent here is Sanders’ analysis of how fairy tales, mythology, Arthurian legend, as well as the works of Shakespeare, have all been so frequently re-adapted in popular culture as to be cumulatively familiar in their broad strokes to wide audiences. This encompasses audiences who may not all have seen the same adaptations, much less their often ill-defined ‘originals’.\textsuperscript{123}

Even those who may have never read a Superman comic book would by no means necessarily fall into the category of an ‘unknowing’ audience. The chances of having been exposed to virtually any previous film, cartoon or television incarnation over the previous six decades would engender sufficient preconceptions of Superman’s associated tropes to allow them to follow the general premise of *Smallville*. Even if the frequent referencing of minutiae of comic lore or the replication of ideas from previous adaptations passed undetected, a more than adequate basic intertextual recognition would be evoked. While one might consider such a show as being optimised for highly ‘knowing’ audiences, it is clearly designed to appeal to viewers anywhere on the spectrum of fan-literacy.

\textsuperscript{120} Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, pp. 120-122.
\textsuperscript{121} Gray, *Show Sold Separately*, pp. 132-135.
\textsuperscript{122} Denison notes contemporary press articles made comparisons to *Dawson’s Creek*, *Buffy* and also *Twin Peaks*, contending that “Smallville is clearly framed as ‘non-comic book,’ whether teen melodrama, horror, or mystery.” Rayna Denison, “It’s a Bird! It’s a Plane! No, It’s a DVD! *Superman, Smallville*, and the production (of) melodrama,” in Gordon, Jancovich and Mcallister, *Film and Comic Books*, p. 170.
\textsuperscript{123} Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, pp. 62-81, 97-99, 120.
Ndalianis observes that *Smallville*’s deployment of intertextual references are often made in an almost taunting manner, as the divergences from established character traits and plot developments have the effect of inciting certain nostalgic expectations in attentive fans, only to undermine these anticipated outcomes through developments contrary to established Superman lore in various prior diegeses. These include ‘teases’ such as introducing a superpowered dog that appears it may be the *Smallville*-continuity incarnation of Krypto the Superdog, only for this prospect to be completely repudiated, or for the mysterious Kawatche Caves to provide a link to Clark Kent’s Kryptonian heritage in a fashion akin to the Fortress of Solitude, before the Fortress proper was introduced in Season 5, its visual design identical to the crystal lattice of the Donner/Salkind version.

Replacing the Caves’ story function with the actual Fortress was by no means the only instance in which the show seemed to revise even its own continuity after a fashion. The Season 3 episode “Covenant” similarly ‘teased’ an ersatz Kara (Supergirl’s Kryptonian name), before later introducing the ‘real’ version of the character as Clark’s canonical cousin in Season 7 (“Bizarro”). Or, in another example, replacing an earlier villainous ‘Dr. Hamilton’ with a separate, more traditionally heroic Dr. Emil Hamilton several seasons later.

Perhaps most metatextually outrageous was the death of Jimmy Olsen at the climax of Season 8. This event presented a seemingly irreconcilable departure from the notion of *Smallville* acting as a prequel to any vaguely recognisable version of the Superman mythos -- even just in terms of status quo generalities -- only to immediately undercut this seeming deviation in a following scene. This was done via the implication that Olsen’s previously unrevealed younger brother may in fact be the ‘real’ Jimmy Olsen destined to become ‘Superman’s pal,’ as opposed to the character the audience had accepted as such for the past three seasons. Indeed, the flashforward sequence which

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124 Ndalianis, “Enter the Aleph,” pp. 274-278.
125 In all fairness, this may have as much to do with poor forward-planning and sub-par writing in general, as the series often provided ‘revelations’ in its mythology which seemed at best to have little set-up and at worst appear vaguely contradictory, with major plot elements and characters being summarily dropped or manifesting out of nowhere, and many longstanding, convoluted mysteries (such as ancient Kryptonian intersections with Earth’s history) which were never clearly explained or resolved.
126 A point made clear at ‘Jimmy’s’ funeral, where it is revealed that the established character’s full name is Henry James Olsen, as opposed to the traditional James Bartholomew Olsen, whom viewers are led to infer is in fact his bowtie-wearing younger brother attending the graveside. This unexpected development not only allowed the established ‘Jimmy Olsen’ character to be written out of the show in an unexpectedly dramatic fashion, but also retconned away the implicit problem that *Smallville*’s Jimmy was clearly of an approximately similar age to Clark, when the characters have always been portrayed as at least a decade
concluded the final episode of the entire series later confirmed this to be the case, with Aaron Ashmore briefly ‘reprising’ the role, now as the ‘real’ Jimmy having grown up.

Even aside from such direct cases of confounding audience expectations, Smallville was replete with simply counter-intuitive occurrences such as (an initially blonde) Lois Lane getting to know Clark in rural Smallville before either of them become Daily Planet journalists in Metropolis; familiar villains fighting our hero for the first (and sometimes seemingly last) times as an anonymous Clark Kent rather than Superman; an ambiguously motivated simulation/spirit of Jor-El appearing alternately benevolent and sinister; and Supergirl appearing more advanced in the use of her superpowers than her cousin, to name but a few.

Smallville offered viewers literate in the history of the wider Superman franchise a complex and playful remixing of the tropes and continuity touchstones of much of the length and breadth of the franchise that has preceded it, and its success has led to it exerting a degree of influence upon other media in turn. This goes some way to countering Coogan’s argument that adaptations tamper with the resonant tropes at their peril, and on the contrary suggests that even fairly radical departures from the established myth-conventions are possible given the right context. If anything, in seeking to draw such a diverse range of intertexts without strongly hierarchical paratextual framing, the dense hypertextuality of Smallville indicates a distinct lack of privilege afforded on the part of the producers towards prior transmedia adaptations over comic books, or vice versa.

I might posit instead that while Coogan’s contention regarding resonant tropes is broadly correct, cases like Smallville demonstrate that the wider audience base for transmedia adaptations in turn produce emergent tropes of their own which can take on even greater resonance and exert an influence back upon the continuous development of some of their notional hypotexts. This will be discussed further in the next section on ‘feedback’.

In striking comparison to the dense intertextual negotiation of Smallville, the 2006 live-action feature film Superman Returns, produced during but wholly independently from the show’s run, was in many respects both the most and least intertextual adaptations in the Superman franchise. Yet perhaps the film shows more than

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127 Gray, Show Sold Separately, p. 192.
128 And the aforementioned 2008 Incredible Hulk film.
any other adaptation the dissonant sense of cultural capital enjoyed by extra-media versions of the mythos. Uniquely,\textsuperscript{129} this film, directed by Bryan Singer, used only one prior incarnation of Superman for its adaptation, the Salkind films, and only the first two at that. Although made twenty-three years later (and yet ostensibly set in the present day), \textit{Superman Returns} serves as a direct sequel to the Richard Donner/Richard Lester movies, and as such is an alternate sequel, as it ignores the events of \textit{Superman III} and \textit{IV}.

Singer’s film does not deviate from the established elements of the Donner/Lester continuity in the slightest,\textsuperscript{130} faithfully recreating iconic production design elements, and recycling unused footage of Marlon Brando as Jor-El. Furthermore, Singer presented all the characters as though portraying the same interpretations as did the original actors, especially through casting the young Brandon Routh’s eerily close resemblance to Christopher Reeve. And although the film does not contain excessive references to the Donner/Lester films, a major plot point concerning Lois’ memory of having consummated her relationship with Superman being erased in \textit{Superman II} is seemingly treated as assumed knowledge for the audience.

The filmmakers clearly did not look to comics or any other past or contemporary media adaptations of the franchise for inspiration whatsoever, seeking to make no innovations other than furthering the established Salkind series continuity in a new and relatively unprecedented direction within the boundaries of its own fictional universe. This serves as a prime example of what Gray describes as a deployment of paratexts to focus the audiences’ reception of new adaptations on specific intertexts whilst implicitly dispelling others, in this case evoking the author/aura of Richard Donner over that of later work in the Salkind film series, let along other comic or transmedia intertexts.\textsuperscript{131} By thus seeking to define which intertexts his audience would access, Singer demonstrated -- perhaps not entirely successfully, given the film’s muted reception -- that the Superman transmedia franchise has such recognition that it was at the very least possible to further adapt single pre-existing adaptations without casting a wider net to other sources and

\textsuperscript{129} Unless one counts the radio series, which being the first transmedia adaptation had nothing to go on other than the earliest comics.

\textsuperscript{130} Although its timeline is somewhat bizarre, as even aside from the issue of the ignored jump in the ‘present’ from the apparent late 1970s to the apparent 2000s, the film casts even younger actors than those featured in the original film to portray the same characters five year later on in fictional time from \textit{Superman II}. These inconsistencies between the passage of real-world and diegetic timeframes in \textit{Superman Returns} provide a rare cinematic example of the common phenomenon in animation, cartooning and especially comic books of a ‘floating timeline,’ which shall be discussed in Chapter 3.

\textsuperscript{131} Gray, \textit{Show Sold Separately}, p. 141.
media. However, it is perhaps in part for this very reason that Superman Returns failed to revive the moribund film series, in marked contrast to the preceding, parallel, and subsequent success of Smallville, for which the utilisation of diverse comic and adapted-media tropes from intertexts plucked from the entire franchise’s supertext had created a dynamic and original interpretation of the myth. Running for ten seasons, it became by far the longest running screen version of Superman and was the second longest-running transmedia adaptation of the Man of Steel to date, trailing behind only the 1940s radio series, and by merely one year.

In the massively multi-authored creative output of the Superman franchise, the process of adaptation is rarely simple or linear. Tropes migrate between past and parallel textual expressions, transmedia rearticulations collect such material like bower birds of metanarrative continuity, recombining, discarding, innovating and falling back on past innovations, be they from comic hypotexts or other adaptive intertexts, some of the moment, others unexpected re-emergences of concepts seemingly discarded, but in reality only hibernating. What becomes evident upon studying not only these adaptations in transmedia manifestations, but also the comics from which most notionally draw their primary influence, is that this is not a one-way process.

Feedback
Textual transmission within the wider supertext of a superhero franchise is not best viewed as tracing the branching of a tree so much as it is like exploring a web, or the “negotiation of the [intertextual] array,” as Collins put it, in which lines of influence can be clearly observed not just traveling from notionally hypotextual comic books to transmedia derivations, but also transmitting back to their conceptual sources. This is a unique intertextual manifestation -- or unique in scale and duration at any rate -- due to the ongoing nature of monthly comic texts in continuous production, and for none more so than Superman. Changes in volume numbering and brief pre-planned hiatuses aside, Action Comics, Superman and other titles which have followed have provided a regular, never-ending platform for Superman’s ongoing diegesis, a supernarrative which was predated, run parallel to, and outlasted every single appearance of the Man of Steel in another medium, from the first World’s Fair spokesmodel, radio broadcast or lunchbox merchandise, through to the current dawning of the “DC Extended Universe.” Radio, cartoons, movies, TV shows -- these come and go, rarely outlasting a decade, yet

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whatever twists and turns continuity makes, however smaller their audience may be, the comics are a constant against which all transmedia adaptations are on some level a derivation, and for none has this been a longer, more consistent process than for Superman. What they are not, however, is immune to being influenced in turn.

As Liam Burke observes, “novels and other similarly inert texts are less affected by audiovisual interpretations than episodic texts.”

Certainly, it is generally not the case with such instances of direct adaptation, those with discreet, finite narratives taken from theatre and literature which provoke the kind of inevitable 1:1 comparisons that underline the approach of fidelity criticism, as discussed in Chapter 1. Comic books, running in continual and parallel publication to their varied successive transmedia adaptations, are almost inevitably subject to deriving their own adaptational re-appropriation of tropes, stories, and visuals pioneered in other media. In no small part this is due to a simple demographic reality, as the larger audience-base for transmedia adaptations produce a greater cultural capital behind popular newly-developed tropes than ideas which remain unique to the comics, even if that is where the seed of such concepts may have originated.

As much as committed comic book fans may on some level justifiably regard their comic book texts as ‘primary,’ be it through a sense of historical precedence and originality or by dint of their ongoing nature, there can simply be no denying that the images of George Reeves crashing through a plaster wall or Christopher Reeve taking off from a crystalline Fortress of Solitude have passed in front of more human retinas than have the pencils of Wayne Boring or Curt Swan depicting equivalent scenes. The cultural capital attached to these more widely-disseminated adaptations is both inevitable, and influential upon their less-popular yet more continuous comic intertexts. As Richard Berger succinctly puts it, “This change in authority, and a decentering of the comic books, is largely due to an imbalance in the status between cinema and comic books.”

A result of this dissonant sense of cultural capital is that the transmedia adaptations of the original comic material often end up having a direct effect on the content of the comics themselves, as form of intertextual ‘feedback.’ In the same way that the Superman comics periodically change their content and continuity to incorporate

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134 Even if it were possible to equitably compare the nature of printed comic book content to the more linear duration of a cartoon episode or theatrical runtime, it would be inarguably self-evident that the collective volume of comic book material devoted to Superman would dwarf that of even his own unmatched collective transmedia output, even despite decade-spanning runs on radio and television.
new ideas and (increasingly) reincorporate previously discarded concepts from past eras of the comics -- which themselves that have retained a resonance with creators and/or fans -- it has become increasingly common for narrative tropes, characters and continuity elements from other media incarnations of the Superman mythos to make their way into the ongoing diegesis this theoretically ‘primary’ comics source. Burke illustrates this with several brief Superman franchise examples, positing that “Whether it is a corporate dictum, or publishers that are eager to exploit mass media exposure, this trend has intensified in recent years as levels of adaptation increase and franchise-minded studios strive to achieve brand consistency.” Cases of overt moves to enforce such ‘brand consistency’ have been rare in the wider Supertext, as opposed to more transitory elements of feedback which ebb and flow with passing adaptations and reboots, often working in parallel, but rarely in lock-step.

A seemingly superficial yet prominent example in the last decade has been the apparent enforcement of an unstated ‘no underpants’ mandate from DC/Warner -- that is, the excision of the iconic red ‘underpants-on-the-outside’ from Superman’s costume design being reflected across virtually all cross-media products of the franchise launching between 2011-2013, and continuing for the foreseeable future. This was particularly unusual, as for the first time his multimedia history, Superman was simultaneously appearing in multiple media expressions wearing subtly yet noticeably different variations to the design of his once-iconic costume across all brands -- yet the one thing they all had in common was the undeviating absence of red underpants. Consistency through minor differentiation, it seems, had become the branding watchword for the Superman franchise in the 2010s.

Key to a better understanding of this process by which the comics rearticulate their narratives through incorporating reflexive adaptations of this textual feedback from their own transmedia adaptations is a study of a few specific instances of feedback loop processes across the history of the franchise.

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137 Including DC’s New52 line-wide relaunch of its superhero comic books, direct-to-DVD animated features both adapting New52 storylines and also original stories, as well as in digital comics continuing the concluded Smallville television series, Superman Family comics aimed at younger readers, a Bugs Bunny parody cartoon, Fisher-Price action figures marketed at small children, and most prominently the 2013 Zack Snyder-directed feature film, Man of Steel and other forthcoming films -- all despite none of these expressions of the character occurring within the same diegetic continuity. It is unknown whether the decision to ‘ditch the trunks’ originated with Snyder’s pre-production designs, with Jim Lee’s redesign of the costume for the New52, or possibly some arbitrary corporate mandate from on high, but the synergistic branding intent behind the same specific sudden change across several non-identical costume designs after seven decades of high consistency is undeniable.
While a particularly large amount of this has been going on since the millennium, it is by no means something new. In fact, the early days of Superman’s publication were clearly influenced by ideas and characters that were originally conceived of and debuted in other media. Indeed, the earliest transmedia adaptation, the radio series, pioneered several major elements that are today considered core constituents of the wider Superman mythos, such as the major supporting character Jimmy Olsen first debuted in the radio series\(^{138}\) (on April 15\(^{th}\), 1940) before being incorporated into the comics in *Superman* [vol. 1] #13 (1941).\(^{139}\) Additionally the radio series introduced Kryptonite,\(^{140}\) which has gone on to become a cornerstone of the Superman mythos.

Direct influence of media adaptations onto the comics was less obvious for the next several decades, with the late 1940s Kirk Alyn film serials and the popular 1950s television series *The Adventures of Superman* starring George Reeves seemingly having little impact on the comics of the same era, which tended to depict increasingly epic and outlandish adventures of the hero in stark contrast to the comparatively prosaic, earthbound escapades that were possible on a television budget of the time.

*The New Adventures of Superman* cartoons of the later 1960s were fairly simple reflections of the comics and originated no real innovative tropes of their own, and while the popularity of the major 1978 film adaptation *Superman* starring Christopher Reeve was significant and featured several unprecedented continuity innovations, these had little immediately appreciable effect.

However, the first and perhaps still most significant of many major reboots of the comics’ continuity took place in 1986, and once again prior transmedia adaptations had a major influence on some of the changes. In the first significant examples of cross-media feedback within the wider supertext since the radio series, John Byrne took Donner’s conception of Krypton as a sterile, isolating and far more ‘alien’ society than had ever been depicted in the comics and utilised it in a way that, although aesthetically quite dissimilar in detail, was clearly inspired by Donner’s stark vision. While one might have

\(^{138}\) Although an unnamed *Daily Planet* copy boy who appeared in *Action Comics* [vol. 1] #6 (w. Jerry Siegel, a. Joe Shuster, DC Comics, 1938) may have been a prototype for Olsen.

\(^{139}\) Additionally, it is noteworthy that the Olsen character actually disappeared after a few issues of the comics and was only reintroduced a decade later in 1953 to reflect the character’s prominence in the then-popular George Reeves television series, as portrayed by Jack Larson.

\(^{140}\) Although long claimed to be introduced as a device to allow Bud Collyer to have time off (such as by Daniels, *Superman: The Complete History* p. 57), this is disputed by Weldon, *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, pp. 58-59. Both scholars, however, agree on the less-commonly-known theory that radio scriptwriter Gorge Lowther was inspired by a 1940 Jerry Siegel story, “The K-Metal from Krypton,” which DC had refused to publish due to its oneric-climate-shattering scene in which Lois Lane learns Superman’s secret identity. Although not naming it “Kryptonite,” Siegel had essentially invented the same concept, for which the radio series has since been widely credited for innovating.
expected Byrne to have been similarly inclined to tailor the characterisation of Superman and Clark Kent to mimic Reeve’s portrayal in the film, Byrne instead made what was widely seen as a radical reinterpretation of the Kent/Superman dynamic and took it almost as far away from Reeve’s as he could go. Byrne has made it known that his inspiration for the far more assertive and less performative conceptualisation of Kent was none other than George Reeves’ portrayal from the 1950s.141

Although Byrne has cited influences from the comics of earlier eras as well, the fact remains that some of the most important changes wrought in this reboot were examples of cross-media feedback, influenced by the two major screen incarnations of the Superman story over the previous decades, rather than comics. Following the post-Crisis reboot came a period of relatively tight continuity, as a result of which further transmedia adaptations held lesser sway over the comics for roughly the next decade and a half, with very little direct feedback. If anything, the inverse was true, with textual transmission into new adaptations broadly reflecting the new status quo of the comics rather than vice versa. The Ruby-Spears Superman cartoons and the successful live action series Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman reflected changes in the comics to the Kent/Superman balance, reduced superpowers and Luthor as a corrupt corporate mogul.

Apart from changing Lois Lane’s hairstyle in the comics to reflect that worn by Terri Hatcher, there was little substantive influence back on the comics in terms of continuity or character portrayal, and yet the show was the direct behind-the-scenes cause of the comics’ infamous “Death of Superman” event, as was the synchronicity of the 1996 wedding of Clark Kent and Lois Lane in both media four years later.142

Early in the new millennium the flow between comics and their adaptations became increasingly fluid and cross-pollinating, especially with the advent of Smallville,

142 The comic books of this era featured tight weekly continuity shared between all the Superman titles, with long-running subplots including advancing Clark and Lois’ relationship to an unprecedented degree, such that a wedding storyline was planned for 1992. However, with the imminent Lois & Clark television series debuting in 1993 it was felt by DC and Warner higher-ups (according to editor Mike Carlin) that it would be undesirable for the couple to be married in the comics before the romance-themed new TV series was ready to do so as well. The comic writers were thus tasked with creating a storyline that would delay the wedding, which became the (in)famous “Death of Superman” arc, putting off the nuptials for four years. Weldon, Superman: The Unauthorized Biography, pp. 241-243; Requiem and Rebirth: Superman Lives!, documentary included on the special edition DVD of the direct-to-video animated film Superman: Doomsday. See also Daniels, Superman: The Complete History, pp. 165-167.
with its previously-discussed mix of Silver Age and post-Crisis continuity elements\textsuperscript{143} from which it went on to weave its own unique and progressively elaborate mythos.\textsuperscript{144} Although the Donner/Salkind films were clearly the largest single reference point, I would strongly disagree with the simplification of Denison’s assertion that “The origin text for \textit{Smallville} is probably not the DC comic books starring Superman, but \textit{Superman: The Movie}.”\textsuperscript{145}

In addition to its notable quantity of references to comics continuity, \textit{Smallville} was also the first transmedia adaptation\textsuperscript{146} to make considerable reference to an array of past media adaptations, periodically guest-starring former actors from across the franchise\textsuperscript{147}, deploying old musical motifs\textsuperscript{148}, catchphrases\textsuperscript{149}, and obvious design aesthetics\textsuperscript{150} from Superman’s long history on screen, even including tropes and characters originating in some of the animated series.\textsuperscript{151} The popularity and longevity of \textit{Smallville}, which at ten seasons became the longest-running screen adaptation of Superman, ironically, did not feature the costumed identity of Superman himself \textit{per se}, until its final episode. Thus it has unsurprisingly had a feedback onto comics continuity. A somewhat under-promoted and ultimately short-lived ‘soft-reboot’ (see the following chapter) \textit{Superman: Birthright} (2003-2004) retold Superman’s origin and in doing so introduced various minor changes to the by

\begin{itemize}
  \item Most notably in that from the outset the show used the post-Crisis notions of Clark’s powers slowly evolving over his teen years and having never assumed the costumed identity of Superboy, mixed with Silver Age notions of nevertheless having superpowered adventures in Smallville and an initial friendship with fellow resident Lex Luthor. The destined villain’s connection to Clark’s hometown and comparable age had been eliminated in the post-Crisis comics continuity being emulated, yet the television version still retained major defining elements of that rebooted Luthor’s corrupt businessman role.
  \item The show also introduced various completely original characters such as Lionel Luthor and Chloe Sullivan, as well as some fairly unprecedented interpretations of Jor-El and Krypton.
  \item Denison, “It’s a Bird! It’s a Plane! No, It’s a DVD!,” p. 165.
  \item Not counting \textit{The Adventures of Superman}’s TV use of Jimmy Olsen, who had originally debuted in radio, or kryptonite by the same token, but these pale in comparison to the plethora of influences used by (and, by that point, available to) \textit{Smallville}.
  \item Including Margot Kidder, Christopher Reeve, Helen Slater, Marc McClure, Dean Cain, Teri Hatcher, Lynda Carter of the \textit{Wonder Woman} television series (Warner Bros. Television/ABC/CBS, 1975-1979) and even series regular Annette O’Toole had intertextual significance for their prior Superman-related roles. Ndalianis posits that the casting of former Zod actor Terence Stamp as the voice of Jor-El was a strategy to mislead audiences into questioning Jor-El’s benevolence. Ndalianis, “Enter the Aleph,” pp. 277-278.
  \item Refrains from John Williams’ \textit{Superman} movie score were initially used in the Season 2 episode “Rosetta” in which Clark Kent first learns of his planet of origin from Dr. Virgil Swan, played by guest star Christopher Reeve, in a symbolic passing of the torch.
  \item Such as Lois’s aforementioned nicknaming Clark ‘Smallville.’ \textit{Smallville}’s Lois also displayed the Margot Kidder version’s penchant for bad spelling.
  \item Kryptonian technology from Season 5 onwards replicated the crystalline aesthetic previously unique to the Salkind films, and appearances of the Superman ‘S-shield’ emblem changed from the standardised version trademarked by DC in 1945, to employing the redesign from \textit{Superman Returns} from Season 6 (2007-2008) onwards, with occasional inconsistencies in seasons 9 and 10.
  \item Such the Season 9 episode “Idol” featuring Zan and Jayna the Wonder Twins, characters created for the 1977 \textit{Super-Friends} cartoons.
\end{itemize}
then seventeen year old post-\textit{Crisis} continuity. Perhaps most notably it reintroduced the notion of Lex Luthor and Clark Kent having a shared history in the town of Smallville, in an obvious bid to somewhat more closely conform to the titular television series.\textsuperscript{152} In fact, so long-running was the show that it was in turn an influence on the \textit{next} comic ‘soft reboot’ \textit{Superman: Secret Origin} (2009-2010), which introduces yet another variation on Clark and Lex’s youths in the town of Smallville, as well as references to Clark having a career of non-costumed teenage heroics similar to those depicted in the eponymous television series.\textsuperscript{153}

Coogan similarly describes the phenomenon as a feedback loop, and provides a good example in the Superman franchise via his analysis tracing the origins of later iterations of Superman displaying a conflicted reaction to his own alien heritage. Coogan attributes this shift in Superman’s attitude to an earlier change in the overall portrayal of Kryptonian culture as being a more ‘alien,’ antiseptic and less romanticised a society for Superman to pine after.\textsuperscript{154} Accurately tracing the origin of the cold, aloof version of Krypton to the reinterpretation presented in the Richard Donner film,\textsuperscript{155} Coogan furthermore makes the same observation that Byrne was inspired by Donner’s Krypton, but adds that a further development was introduced at this point, the depiction of Superman feeling little allegiance to and even outright rejection of Kryptonian culture (which was not particularly evident in Donner’s films), feeling that to accept Kryptonian values would rob him of his much-prized sense of humanity. Going further, Coogan observes that this new (emergent) resonant trope fed from film to comics and then back out into television, as contact with Kryptonian culture being portrayed as deeply problematic in both \textit{Lois & Clark} and later \textit{Smallville}, describing the tension between the human, Midwestern upbringing of Clark Kent and the alien, potentially sinister legacy of being Kal-El as “the focus of a long story arc on the first show and a central tension of the second.”\textsuperscript{156}

\textsuperscript{152} This rather rough ‘running change’ narrowed the previously considerable age gap between the post-\textit{Crisis} Clark and Lex, implicitly retconning away Lex’s childhood relationship with Perry White, as well as rendering several major storylines’ canonicity questionable, such as the entire ‘Lex Luthor II’ era, discussed in Chapter 4.

\textsuperscript{153} These continuity elements pertaining to the 2009-2010 reboot were gradually introduced over the two years preceding the actual retelling of the origin story in \textit{Superman: Secret Origin}.

\textsuperscript{154} Coogan, \textit{Superhero}, pp. 8-10.

\textsuperscript{155} \textit{ibid.}, p. 8.

\textsuperscript{156} \textit{ibid.}, p. 10. This is an accurate appraisal of the portrayal of Krypton in the two television series, although his description of a “long story arc” is somewhat inaccurate, as the storyline in question only lasted four episodes.
I would concur, and taking more recent developments into account can further note that the reuse of the resonant tropes continues to realign, with the second most recent continuity reboot in the mainstream comics reconceptualising Krypton and Superman’s feelings towards it yet again. Drawing more heavily on the Donner portrayal of Krypton than ever before, this *Secret Origin* version also to some extent evoked elements of the rosier Silver Age Krypton and considerably softened the negative portrayals that had become increasingly prevalent over the previous two decades. It seems that just as emergent tropes appear to have solidified, even older resonant tropes re-emerge to supplant them.

Following the *New52* reboot in 2011, Krypton has been reinvented yet again, although has yet to be extensively featured outside of sporadic backup tales and one-shot issues. Aesthetically, the latest continuity iteration portrays an extravagantly complex futuristic culture with only fleeting visual cues to Silver Age designs, while Kryptonian society is portrayed in some respects the furthest away from the Donner and Byrne visions of antiseptic rigidity in modern times, and more like a dystopian revision of the Buck Rogers-style space fantasy of quite early iterations. Once again, older resonant tropes reassert themselves in the increasingly short reboot cycles. What this demonstrates is that feedback is an ongoing, never-ending process of iterative rearticulation. As much as successive adaptors and comic writers may seek to try and refine each new redevelopment of the Superman mythos towards what they view as an optimised interpretation, the character and his vast history mean different things to different creators and audiences alike. In the struggle for perpetual reinvention, what is resonant for the purposes of one creative revisioning will differ wildly from the next, be it to draw entirely on one specific hypotext such as Bryan Singer, a diverse array as did the creators of *Smallville*, or very little at all beyond the core premise, as did most of the earlier transmedia adaptors. One trend however seems clear, that the role transmedia textual feedback of resonant tropes is growing progressively more intense and complex as creators seek to produce layered, palimpsestuous texts that can support multiple readings by varying levels of ‘knowing’ audiences across Superman’s wide cross-media fanbase.

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157 As well as in many other respects -- for example note then-current Superman artist Gary Frank’s use of an unmistakable likeness of Christopher Reeve in his illustrations of Superman.
Kneel Before Stamp!

To better illustrate the progressively significant role of textual feedback between transmedia and comic intertexts, I will now consider briefly a particular case study, that of the villain General Zod. It has long been a generally acknowledged truism that Superman has a ‘rogues gallery’ of recurring villains which is uncharacteristically weak for a superhero of his stature. With the exception of the ‘big two’ of Luthor and Brainiac, and second-stringers Metallo and Bizarro, most other recurring Superman villains such as the Parasite, Toyman or the Prankster, lack an iconic status and are relatively underexposed in transmedia adaptations, especially compared to the well-trodden and widely recognised cache of villains attached to Batman.

Newer, post-Silver Age villains are therefore constantly being put forward, often with little staying power, and even initially memorable villains such as Doomsday or Gog/Magog seem to operate on a basis of diminishing returns. In the absence of any interesting reinterpretations, they lose their initial power (in both examples being characters who ‘killed’ Superman) and rely purely on the resonance of their initial effect rather than providing new stories of much merit.

One interesting example that runs contrary to this trend is General Zod, a character who originated in the comics but gained a far greater recognition through a largely original media adaptation and has been repeatedly invoked in the comics ever since but with an unstable approach. Initially, General Dru-Zod was a character introduced in 1961 (in Adventure Comics #283) as a rogue Kryptonian military leader who had survived the planet’s destruction along with other Kryptonian criminals, due to having been exiled to the extra-dimensional prison the Phantom Zone as punishment for an attempted coup. Zod was the first example of this device, one of many from the era in Superman comics wherein an increasing number of other Kryptonian survivors were cropping up, revealed to have escaped their planetary holocaust by means such as other rockets (Supergirl, Krypto the Superdog), residents of the Bottle City of Kandor (shrunken down and stolen by Brainiac before Krypton’s destruction), and other such means.

Phantom Zone criminals were a particularly efficacious device for providing worthy opponents for Superman, as being fellow Kryptonians they automatically matched him in power upon escaping to Earth, as well as providing a poignancy for the hero in being forced to fight his own people. That said, however, General Zod was not an especially major villain in his original comics incarnation, appearing on only a handful of
occasions. By the time of the Bronze Age Zod had all but disappeared from significance and may well have become one of various obscure pieces of old Superman lore, were it not for his use in the first two Salkind Superman films in 1978 and 1983.

The cult classic General Zod who appeared in the two interlinked Donner/Lester movies was in truth only fairly loosely based on the Zod from the comics, much like the films’ radical reinterpretation of Krypton itself. Wholly different in appearance and depicted with a more idiosyncratic personality, the filmic Zod was given a modified backstory which allied him with two associates Ursa and Non and, significantly, establishing animosity with Jor-El in order to give the villain a personal reason to clash with Superman/Kal-El, thus pursuing a vendetta against the father by proxy.

For whatever else one may wish to say about the relative merits of the first two Superman films, Zod made a lasting impression on pop culture, in large part due to the memorably arch performance by Terence Stamp that took the arrogance of the part as written and propelled it to a new level of alternately volatile and bored sociopathic entitlement. With his oft-quoted catchphrase of “Kneel before Zod” entering the popular lexicon, it was inarguably Stamp’s movie portrayal which gave the character any measure of longevity in the franchise’s wider supertext.

As a result, there have been several attempts to revive the character of Zod in the comics that, for decades, met with little success. What is notable, however, is the fact that until recently these revivals have not attempted to evoke the film version specifically. They lacked sufficiently resonant tropes. Initially, while the original Zod was still in-continuity there were few attempts to revive the character and capitalise on the exposure of the film, other than a 1982 limited series The Phantom Zone, perhaps due to the lack of a strong similarity between the film and comics versions. Upon the changes wrought by the Crisis reboot, Zod became a character who, like Supergirl, Krypto and all other pre-Crisis Kryptonians, was initially not allowed to be used in the new continuity due to Byrne’s mandate that Superman once again be the sole survivor of Krypton. However, after only two years Byrne himself used the character for a brief reappearance in “The Supergirl Saga” through the continuity ‘cheat’ of introducing a short-lived pocket universe that contained an alternate version of Earth and an alternate Krypton which was, to all intents and purposes, a replica of the Silver Age version, complete with identical

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versions of Zod and fellow Phantom Zone criminals Faora and Quex-Ul. In this storyline the then current post-Crisis Superman is transported to this pocket universe and witnesses that these three alternate universe Kryptonians have laid waste to this version of Earth, having committed planetary genocide and compelling Superman to take the (virtually) unprecedented action of carrying out their cold-blooded execution.

Nevertheless, in deference to the significance of the storyline, Zod would not appear in Superman comics again for over a decade. The next version of Zod to come into being was part of the 2001 “Return to Krypton” storyline, which started with an apparent retcon of the post-Crisis Krypton to a version that again was a simulacrum (as it turned out, quite literally) of the Silver Age Krypton, complete with a visit to the planet before its destruction. There, Superman encounters another Zod who is again broadly identical to the original version and who again does not outlast the storyline to become a recurring villain.

A third, unrelated post-Crisis Zod appeared within the same year, featured as a mystery character in comics across 2001 including the large company crossover Our Worlds At War. This incarnation of General Zod proved to have no connection to the traditional character other than sharing his name as a means to invoke terror in Superman. This in itself was a bit of intertextual trickery, as it teased the readership with the idea of a new version of the ‘genuine’ Kryptonian Zod purely on the resonance of the name. Yet another transitory version of Zod appeared in the 2004-2005 12-issue storyline “For Tomorrow” (Superman [vol. 2] #204-215), who claimed to be from Superman’s

159 Zod being accompanied by two lackeys (one male and one female) was clearly inspired by his association with Non and Ursa in Superman II, although the film character of Ursa was clearly inspired in turn by the original pre-Crisis version of Faora. This looped around again in 2007’s Action Comics #845 with the introduction of Ursa into mainstream comics continuity. Feedback cycles ever onwards, however, with another rearticulation of this composite character appearing in the film Man of Steel (Dir. Zack Snyder, Warner Bros., 2013), named Faora (played by Antje Traue) yet with an appearance and sadistic warrior persona resembling the previous filmic Ursa. A new comic Faora debuted in DC’s New52 continuity with Superman/Wonder Woman #4 (2013), directly based on Traue’s screen portrayal, yet paired with a new version of Zod who remains more closely based on Terrence Stamp’s portrayal of Zod. This looped around again in 2007’s Action Comics #845, featuring a new version of Zod who remains more closely based on Terence Stamp’s portrayal of Zod.

160 In the interim there were two transmedia appearance of Zod, albeit in an analogue forms. The three episodes “Big Girls Don’t Fly,” “Lord of the Flies,” and “Battleground Earth,” spanning the transition from the third to fourth season (1996) of Lois & Clark featured the Kryptonian Lord Nor, a pathologically arrogant, thin-bearded aristocrat who led thuggish lackeys and treated humans as contemptible insects -- all tropes firmly associated with Terence Stamp’s portrayal of Zod. The 1997 Superman: The Animated Series episodes “Blasts From the Past (Parts I and II)” featured another ersatz Zod, using the name of a different pre-Crisis Phantom Zone criminal Jax-Ur, once again resembling Stamp’s renegade general, along with a loyal Ursa/Faora analogue, Mala.

161 Undermined in a sequel arc as a diegetic falsehood when the story proved unpopular, with ultimately the sole consequence of reintroducing Krypto the Superdog into post-Crisis continuity.

162 A mutated Russian, this ‘Zod’ adopted the name after being whispered to by the spirit of the earlier ‘pocket universe Zod.’
own Krypton. However, the character’s origins were ultimately inconclusive and, much like the other ‘placeholder’ Zods, was never referred to again after the conclusion of the storyline in which he debuted. After the continuity changes of the partial-reboot Birthright (see next chapter), which may or may not have impacted on the canonicity of the previous four Zods, and the subsequent and as then ill-defined “Secret Origin” soft reboot, a new Zod finally appeared in Action Comics #845 (2007). This iteration was notably different to all previous versions to appear in the comics, and his debut apparently overwrote the existence of all previous Zods in all but the most metatextual sense.

The result of this highly iterative, trial-and-error approach to the portrayal of Zod in post-Crisis continuity, culminating in a hard retcon to bring the character more in line with the cinematic incarnation, was to demonstrate the disjunction of intertextual weight given to the more demographically influential textual utterance from another medium in the wider supertext. The idea of authenticity to Zod’s Silver Age comic book was progressively erased in favour of the greater recognition and iconic impact of Terrence Stamp’s portrayal onscreen of a character who, although a Superman villain with high name recognition, never achieved remotely commensurate significance on the page, even within comic fandom. What the quest to continually reinvent the comic book Zod demonstrated, however, was that DC was well aware of the strong intertextual draw of the character due to its prior successful rearticulation on film, and thus spent decades in largely floundering attempts to capitalise on this greater cultural recognition, while making it fit into the then-restrictive rules of their diegetic continuity.

For what was indeed strikingly different about this latest iteration of Zod was that it dispensed with all reference to the original Silver Age version of the character and instead presented an almost direct recreation of Zod as he appeared in the Superman films. Although differently attired and with a more detailed backstory, this Zod was to all intents and purposes the 1978-81 film version, down to his obsession with Jor-El, being partnered with Ursa and Non as opposed to Faora and Quex-Ul, and the trio were even drawn to pointedly resemble the actors Terence Stamp, Sarah Douglas and Jack O’Halloran.

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163 Which began to be more comprehensively detailed in Action Comics [vol. 1] #850 (DC Comics, 2007).
164 See Chapter 4 for a discussion of the variable diegetic literality of Superman’s reboots.
Of course, the fact that the comics that introduced this new version of the character were co-written by original film director Richard Donner cannot be ignored. Clearly, however, the same logic was being employed as that of a few years earlier, whereby the reintroduction of the Kara Zor-El Supergirl was mandated by Senior VP and Executive Editor Dan DiDio and Editor Eddie Berganza, due to the belief that the only version of Supergirl that the ‘man on the street’ (that is, a non-devotee) recognised was Superman’s cousin. Thus the only version of Zod that had any enduring cultural capital was the movie version, even though he had never before existed in the comics in such a form. The reality of this became evident, as non Stamp-based Zods have fallen away, and clearly been abandoned going forward, not just in comics but the wider supertext of the franchise.

While this was part of the wider soft-reboot of Superman’s continuity which in significant part utilised the aesthetics and character portrayals of Donner’s films, the specific use of the movie-style Zod was significant, because unlike the previous versions, this Zod stayed for the remainder of that phase of continuity, continuing to be a recurring major villain in the Superman comics for the first time since the Silver Age. This was coupled with contemporaneous transmedia appearances of Zod in a recurring and eventually co-starring role for the penultimate season (2009-2010) of Smallville. While this television Zod took an entirely original approach to prior narratives and character development, yet nevertheless it was clearly another Stamp-inspired portrayal of the character in general tone, appearance and his obsession with kneeling. Moreover this version also drew on recent comic book intertexts, such as the then-recent portrayal of the Zod and Jor-El as former friends, and even directly copying a new comic design for Kryptonian military uniforms, in an unusually tight case of cross-media feedback, verging on the synergistic.

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165 It should be noted that Richard Donner’s co-writer was his former production assistant turned popular comic writer Geoff Johns, and was part of a campaign to rehabilitate Donner’s involvement in the Superman franchise, some two decades after being unceremoniously fired from his directing duties on Superman II. This resulted in Superman II: The Richard Donner Cut in 1996, which re-incorporated the large quantity of his footage removed and re-shot when Richard Lester took over directing.

166 In the interim there had been multiple permutations of Supergirl, none of whom were Kryptonian, due to the then-intact policy that Superman was the only post-Crisis survivor of his home planet.

167 General Zod had first appeared as an incorporeal spirit possessing Lex Luthor in episodes bridging the fifth and sixth seasons (2005-2006), which, when briefly visible, was computer-generated with Stamp’s likeness and voice. The new ‘Major’ Zod who appeared as the primary antagonist throughout Season 9, was younger clone of Zod, portrayed by Callum Blue in a performance clearly beholden to Stamp’s. The Season 10 episode “Dominion” featured a now traditionally-bearded Blue reprising the role, as a composite of this cloned Major Zod inhabited by the earlier disembodied consciousness of the original General Zod.
This axis of intertexts in the mid to late 2000s, centering on the belated re-emergence of the first two Salkind/Reeve films as a powerfully influential form of adaptive feedback, was unusual. In fact, it was relatively unprecedented in the history of the Superman franchise, part of a drive decades after the fact to laud the legacy of Richard Donner’s 1978 re-envisioning of Superman. Doing so thereby revived and re-framed these films’ diegesis as a supremely resonant touchstone intertext for postmillennial creators and knowing audiences, and for a few years there was a tight web of dominant Donnerisms through all Superman’s then-current media forms. These appeared in film with the release of Superman Returns and Superman II: The Richard Donner Cut; through the insertion into Smallville of narrative and aesthetic tropes directly from these Donner-centric films; and the alteration of comic book continuity to reflect direct feedback of uniquely filmic intertexts. Several of these comics were co-written by Donner himself, and were otherwise modelled after the prior innovations of his films, including artist Gary Frank drawing Superman with an atypically direct likeness of Christopher Reeve.

These were not, however, the work of an auteurist creator being given sway over multiple media forms within a franchise -- Richard Donner was neither an established comic book writer, nor by that point still a prolific or currently successful film director. Rather, this was a push spearheaded by Geoff Johns and Bryan Singer to elevate a particular intertext, long since passed by other versions of the mythos, back into prominence, attempting to assert its primacy across the franchise. It was still not, however, true cross-media storytelling, as comic, television and film intertexts remained diegetically separate and irreconcilable as always. It was, however, uncommonly synergistic for the typically diverse lines of textual transmission across the array of the franchise. When writing in 2008, Berger would have seemed broadly correct in observing that this trend “had framed the Christopher Reeve movie adaptations as a central text in Superman’s transmedia narrative” and that “A text becomes canonical by virtue of its

168 Ironically, Richard Donner’s recut version of Superman II was not narratively compatible with Superman Returns’ continuity, despite Singer’s overt intention to ape Donner’s vision for the first two films whilst excluding those which followed. This is due to the Donner cut reusing (or rather transplanting) the time-rewind concept from the climax of Superman: The Movie. While this superficially achieves the same result of Lois Lane forgetting Superman’s secret identity as per the infamous ‘Super-kiss’ memory-wipe from Lester’s theatrical cut, Donner’s resetting of time also renders Lois and Superman’s relationship unconsummated. The Donner version invalidates Singer’s chief plot twist of Lois having unwittingly borne Superman’s son, as it was entirely predicated on the Lester ending, whereby Lois has slept with The Man of Steel but does not remember it. In this regard, although a much-vaunted official release, Superman II: The Richard Donner Cut has a curiously apocryphal status in terms of the continuity of either the original Salkind film series or Singer’s divergent continuation of it.
continuing adaptation and translation. Several elements of the Superman mythos that the 1978 movie rewrote had now become a fixed part of that mythos.\footnote{Berger, “‘Are There Any More at Home Like You?’,” p. 98, also p. 99.} For while at the turn of the decade the temptation was certainly strong to view Donner’s vision as having become re-emergently \textit{definitive} to the supernarrative, it was not to last. The 2010s have brought divergent new reboots of both comic and filmic diegesis, and the brief yet intense \textit{trans-textual} dominance of this ‘Donner revival’ has faded in lieu of new interpretations and recombinations of tropes hailing once again from diverse intertexts. Donner’s influence was not lost, however, and although currently muted continues to provide feedback as a significant hypotext, albeit once again only one of many, going forward -- especially via the portrayal of General Zod.

So although comic continuity was rebooted again in 2011, the \textit{New52} version of Zod remains in the Stamp mould. Although given a new origin story with an unprecedented level of detail to provide some measure of explanation for his psychopathic tendencies,\footnote{Action Comics [vol. 2] #23.2 (w. Greg Pak, a. Ken Lashley, DC Comics, 2013). Part of ‘Villains’ Month,’ in which ongoing titles used interstitial numbering for one-off issues showcasing a pertinent villain, often telling their \textit{New52} origin stories.} and despite being paired with Faora and costumed in a way loosely reminiscent of the recent heavily-armoured Michael Shannon portrayal in the \textit{Man of Steel} film, Stamp’s appearance and persona remains the template for the current Zod.

The varied unsuccessful attempts to reincorporate the character of General Zod into the ongoing Superman comics ever since his original elimination provides a demonstrative case study of not only the dissonant cultural capital of the adaptational ‘movie’ Zod over the hypotextually ‘original’ comics’ Zod, but furthermore of how the superior resonance of the film version was clearly motivating these various attempts to reintroduce the character. Yet it is abundantly clear that despite this driving motivation, it was the omission of the specific tropes associated with the filmic Zod (chiefly, Stamp’s performance and likeness) that was the core reason why these earlier re-adaptations failed to find purchase with either comics readers or creators.\footnote{In all fairness, these earlier Zods were hampered by the editorial prohibition on using ‘genuine’ Kryptonians, but should not have necessarily precluded using tropes associated with Stamp.} The markedly greater popularity of Johns’ Stamp-inspired version is a clear case of a successful, or as I would posit ‘positive’ feedback loop, whereby the migration of tropes taken from a media adaptation back into the comics have proved more resonant that the original material from which they were previously adapted.
A second case study which particularly illustrates the intertextual feedback within the franchise being reintegrated in the comics again stems from the most prominent live-action incarnations of yesteryear -- the portrayal of the death of ‘Pa’ Kent, Superman’s adoptive father.

Originally, Superman’s kindly adoptive parents the Kents were not featured characters in the comics, and in the Golden Age were essentially just a footnote in early versions of his origin story, stated to have raised him well and inspired his heroic mission, and having both died of natural causes by the time of his adulthood and superhero career.\(^{172}\) It was not until after the introduction of the Superboy retcon (which proved the first point of major divergence for the Man of Steel’s continuity -- see Chapter 3), and the launch of the ongoing *Superboy* title in 1949 that Jonathan and Martha Kent were featured as significant characters on any regular basis.

This came to be the dominant Silver Age continuity status quo, as the Superboy stories take place in the past,\(^{173}\) maintaining the earlier tenet that the Kents have both passed away prior to his ‘current’ life as Superman. By contrast, when John Byrne reworked Superman’s continuity from scratch after *Crisis*, this scenario was reversed, and for the next twenty-two years the Kents were depicted as being alive and well in the present day, instrumental in helping Clark conceive of his Superman identity and dual personae, and as a source of ongoing comfort and counsel.

In contrast to these two dominant comic book continuities and splitting the difference between them conceptually, the 1950s George Reeves television series *The Adventures of Superman* created an original take on the Kents’ longevity in its debut episode “Superman on Earth.” In this retelling, Clark’s adopted father Eben Kent\(^{174}\) dies of a heart attack on Clark’s 25\(^{th}\) birthday, or rather, the anniversary of having been discovered in his rocket. Clark’s elderly mother Sarah later persuades him that he must venture forth and use his powers to benefit mankind, stating that he need not worry, as a cousin Edith will be coming to live with her. Clark sets out for Metropolis and his mother is never seen in the series again.

\(^{172}\) This version of events is portrayed quite similarly in “Superman Comes to Earth,” the first chapter of the 1948 Kirk Alyn movie serial. Following a montage of Clark Kent’s childhood and developing powers, his adoptive parents (father Eben, mother unnamed) give him a talk about the need for him to leave the farm to use his powers “in the interests of truth, tolerance and justice.” Clark is then seen leaving the farm as narration simply informs us that “shortly after this, Clark’s foster parents passed away.”

\(^{173}\) In marked contrast to television’s *Smallville* (and the *Superboy* TV series before it), clearly set in the present day and thus projecting Clark Kent’s Superman career as something yet to happen.

\(^{174}\) The names ‘Jonathan’ and ‘Martha’ were not consistently employed until 1951, having previously included the variations Eben, John, Sarah, Marta and Mary.
Although it is unknown whether the many screenwriters on the 1978 Superman movie were directly referencing the television series, it seems highly probable as the film employs the same scenario of depicting Jonathan predeceasing Martha. In this version, Jonathan’s death is again due to a heart attack, this time in an especially poignant sequence that served to confront a teenage Clark with an epiphany about human mortality and the limits of even his own extraordinary powers. After a touching farewell as Clark goes off to begin his quest, Martha Kent does not appear again in the Christopher Reeve films, she does not appear when Clark visits Smallville in Superman III, and although her death is not depicted, has evidently passed away by Superman IV: The Quest for Peace. However, Martha is still depicted as being alive in the ‘alternate sequel’ Superman Returns.

It is unknown if either Martha’s survival in the television and film versions influenced Byrne’s decision to have both parents live on in post-Crisis continuity, although it seems unlikely given their depiction of Martha having no ongoing influence on Clark after he leaves Smallville. In any case, the trope of Jonathan predeceasing Martha was a concept that seemed to have not caught on after its use in the film series. Neither the comics, nor subsequent television series Superboy, Lois & Clark or Superman: The Animated Series, adhered to this formula.

Yet such is the power of this dissonant cultural capital that, unexpectedly, this trope saw a major resurgence between 2006-2008, in which three major versions of Superman revisited the notion, as did a one-off animated iteration. Firstly, in 2006 Smallville killed off Jonathan with a heart attack in Season 5 (“Reckoning”), and in a telling comment in an interview actor John Schneider related that the producers “explained that in the story of Superman, Jonathan Kent dies, so it was an inevitable event that had been set up so long ago,” reflecting a perception amongst the creators of the show that the prior film and television versions of the death retained a dominant resonance.

Whether given any impetus by Smallville or more simply reminded by it of the film/TV scenario, writer Grant Morrison used the same ‘Jonathan dead, Martha alive’ schema in his high profile, out-of-continuity miniseries All Star Superman (2006-2008),

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175 Clark visits Smallville for the purpose of selling the now clearly abandoned Kent farm. According to co-screenwriter Mark Rosenthal’s 2006 DVD commentary, one of the many scenes cut from the film involved Clark visiting the graves of both his parents.

176 Additional supernatural factors were involved, but the direct cause of death was still heart failure.

depicting Jonathan Kent’s death, once again by heart attack, as the focus of a poignant issue (#6, 2006). In a stand-alone continuity, the direct-to-video animated film *Superman: Doomsday* (2007) also depicts Martha as a widow with Jonathan having been dead for some years, which was not the case in the story on which it was based. Building on this momentum in the wider supertext of the franchise, the mainstream Superman comic titles finally followed suit. Despite having already undergone more than one continuity revision since *Crisis*, the ongoing comics had, up to this point, nevertheless maintained John Byrne’s concept of keeping both Kents alive into the present day. But in 2008, they too joined the bandwagon and had Jonathan Kent succumb to a heart attack and pass away in *Action Comics* #870 (2008).

It is difficult to say whether this cluster of different versions of the Superman narrative taking on a specific story element, introduced in the 1952 TV pilot and carried over decades later to the 1978 film, all in such proximity to each other is a deliberately synergistic corporate strategy, coincidence, cross-influential, or merely all caught up in the hype of *Superman Returns* and the re-release resulting in a resurgence of interest in the Donner/Reeve/Salkind films. It is entirely possible that due to the prominence of the Reeves and Reeve versions of Superman being the two most prominent incarnations of the character in live-action adaptations -- which thus reached the widest audiences -- that two or more generations of creators (and presumed audiences) came to find this shared version to be the most resonant iteration of the Kents’ story, despite it having been subsequently ignored in further adaptations over the intermediate decades.

In any case the fact remains that a trope, originally found in only two live-action adaptations, returned after thirty years and came to be incorporated into all the other major Superman sources of the time within the space of three years. Whether by editorial mandate or creative synchronicity, one element of the Superman mythos that originated in extramedia adaptations has come to be perceived as the dominant resonant trope for that story element, to the extent that other media including the ‘primary’ comics have been altered to conform.

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178 See Chapter 4.

179 Although the trope of Pa’s death had been teased twice in the interim: in 1993’s *Superman: The Man of Steel* #21, Pa suffers a heart attack soon after Superman’s ‘death.' Secondly, following the *Our Worlds at War* crossover in 2001, Pa was missing, feared dead, for several issues in the wake of a disaster.

180 The coronary was brought on by stress from being a bystander to a large battle with Brainiac.

181 Such as the aforementioned creation of *Superman II: The Richard Donner Cut*. 
Subsequently, the New52 reboot has reverted back to the version that both Kents are dead prior to Clark moving to Metropolis and beginning his career as Superman, for the first time since Golden and Silver Age canon. However, the 2013 film Man of Steel once again utilised the trope of Jonathan predeceasing Martha, although in an unprecedentedly dramatic fashion -- being sucked away by a tornado while ordering Clark not to save him and thus reveal his powers in front of a crowd of witnesses. Although this sacrificial overtone gave the scene quite a different thematic subtext from Jonathan’s death by heart attack in the 1978 film or Smallville TV series, the general trope of Pa Kent’s death as a key moment in developing young Clark’s acceptance of the limitations and responsibilities of his powers, remains resonant through adaptive repetition.

**Conclusion**

Although the past two decades have shown an unprecedented degree of the self-reflexive reuse of resonant tropes in film, television and animation, recent developments have shown rapidly increasing instances of resonant tropes being reintegrated back into the mainstream comics than seemingly ever before. Influences range from many different sources across the entire Superman franchise, yet a particular emphasis on the Salkind film series and Silver Age comics as major sources of resonance has become increasingly evident, despite earlier cycles’ determination to jettison them. Describing the franchise as “now an assemblage of utterances,” Berger contends that, “As Superman became heteroglossic, the status and authority of pre-existing versions altered with each new attempt to realise the character and his world in another form.”

Going somewhat further, Somigli argues that:

> …the Superman films are not adaptations: like the many rearticulations of the story within the comics medium, they take the basic elements that over time have come to constitute the construction blocks of a Superman narrative and reassemble them in terms of the new medium, to tell a story that adds one more layer to the ‘myth.’ Once this new version begins circulating, it becomes one of the many possible stories involving the character named Superman, one of the possible ‘sources’ of any of his future narratives.

While I would concur with this broad assessment, and consider his view that “the ‘myth’ of Superman includes all its versions in a number of different media” as being functionally compatible with my conception of the supertext, I nevertheless disagree that

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182 Although uniquely having died in a car accident with a drunk driver.
Superman’s translation into other media are ‘not adaptations,’ nor take up his call for “adopting a new paradigm that is not that of the remake nor that of the adaptation.”

As I have sought to clarify in this chapter, operations of influence, feedback and other aspects of intertextual transmission within the supertext may be more complex and nuanced than the limits of traditional fidelity criticism focused on 1:1 hypotextual translations, ‘adaptation’ is still a flexible and robust enough term to encompass these lines of textual transmission across different media and back. Remakes, however, are something of a different issue, as they contain significant distinctions from both sequels, serial adaptations, and reboots unaddressed by Somigli, which I shall cover in the next chapter as part of a border yet more conceptually targeted examination of how these kinds of adaptive processes discussed here can be related to the exploration of continuity -- and moreover the adaptive process of continuity revision -- within comic books. Because one must ask: are these complex recombinations of textual sources in film adaptations really so different to the diverse comics, television and film sources which John Byrne drew on for his 1986 reboot, or have the comics themselves equally become an ‘Aleph’ (to borrow Ndalianis’ term) like Smallville, a kind of intertextual portal through which the entirety of the transmedia franchise can be viewed?

Perhaps the ongoing process of re-adaptation within and without the comic diegesis, especially the many re-articulations of the origin story across different media is an ongoing quest to refine the mythos in such a way as to encompass so many of these varied adaptations into a notionally cohesive whole. One could view this process as an attempt to create some manner of exegesis for the Superman story, to find what are the most resonant, lasting tropes that its entire collective history has to offer, grasping for an essentialised manifestation of supertext itself. Having examined the textual transmissions of feedback and resonance in transmedia adaptation, such an assessment, however, requires a deeper analysis of Superman’s specific comic book continuity, and to reconsider its complex permutations and reboot cycles as a process of internalised adaptation, with the many confounding, often deeply metatextual twists and turns that have been undertaken in their accelerating cycle of revision. Exploring this argument shall be the subject of my next two chapters.

\(^{185}\textit{ibid.}, \text{pp. 289-290, 291.}\)
Chapter 3

UNDERSTANDING ONEIRIC CONTINUITY

In examining the Superman transmedia franchise, one of the most intriguing issues is that of the complex treatment of narrative continuity, particularly in the comic books, which constitute the core ongoing medium in which the character appears. While I have explored the complex intertextual issues regarding adaptation to, and feedback from, other media in the previous chapter, this chapter and the next refocus on the issues concerning the comics series which have been in continuous publication throughout the character’s entire 75-plus year history, and as a result have faced by far the most sustained and complex ongoing textual development.

In this chapter I shall more comprehensively analyse these continuity processes, and in doing so it is first necessary to clearly delineate the nature and framing of the concept and operation of continuity itself. To this end I shall be proposing more academically salient definitions for the relevant fan-derived terminology than has been previously put forward, in the hope of formalising the discourse. This will include a similarly definitional discussion of the history of the superhero genre in cyclical ‘ages,’ as watersheds in continuity management and stylistic emphasis have typically reflected pivot-points in the transition of such eras.

With consideration of the works of Eco, Genette and more recent scholars writing on comics studies specifically, the nature of comic book time, seriality, and relative degrees of narrative homeostasis will be teased out in regards to their conceptual overlap with more overt issues of continuity such as the reboot. Crucially, Eco’s conception of the ‘oneiric climate’\(^1\) as underpinning superhero storytelling’s relative lack of narrative development and its reassessment by later scholarship will be thoroughly explored, and assessed for its continued relevance to the discussion of diegetic continuity and its management.

Finally, this chapter shall consider how non-canonical works from the comics field, both via out-of-continuity official stories and unlicensed pastiches by rival publishers, serve as a not only an extrapolation of characters and narratives, but also function to create oppositional readings of canon precepts, in turn serving to help define continuity by demonstrating what it is not.

What is ‘Continuity,’ and Why Does it Matter?

By its most simple definition, ‘continuity’ refers to the notion that successive works of fiction, that utilise the same characters and settings, accrue a shared fictional history with their preceding instalments, much as a chapter in a book will refer to events in the prior chapters. In turn, works of fiction that involve a tight continuity will generally strive to avoid making statements or depictions which contradict those in earlier material. Thus serialised works of fiction such as series of novels, television shows, radio serials, comic book runs and film trilogies can refer to events and characters from previously-published stories.

This is particularly relevant to serialised works that may continue to be produced by a variety of different authors over sometimes many years or even decades, as the accumulation of such a long fictional history can require increasing amounts of authorial or editorial management to avoid the development of contradictions. As Felan Parker contends, “The dominant discourse in transmedia franchises is one of canon: questions of authenticity, continuity and legitimacy are foremost for both the industry and fans,” as “Canon and continuity are powerful discursive constructs that are mobilized by various groups of users to structure the fictional universes articulated by franchises.”

Continuity can also become particularly complex in cases of a ‘shared universe,’ a fictional setting which encompasses various different characters existing and interacting within the same unifying diegesis, such as the expansive storyworlds of DC or Marvel Comics’ respective plethora of characters, who exist within the same collective fictional reality. Comics, especially superhero comics, are a site of heightened attention to continuity, largely due to both their often extraordinary longevity and this tendency to take place within a large shared universe with other characters owned by the same publisher.

It was not always so, however. As Pustz notes:

In the comics of the 1940s, continuity was not important. With a few exceptions, stories did not continue from issue to issue. By the 1950s and 1960s, though, the repetition of stories starring characters such as Superman and Batman had created a limited continuity centred on characters and basic plots.

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3 Pustz, Comic Book Culture, p. 130.
Early superhero stories were almost exclusively contained to a single published comic book issue with little awareness of past stories other than the acknowledgement that an occasional recurring villain had fought the hero before. It could be argued then that the development of tighter continuity in comics came less from the accumulation of an individual hero’s own adventures as the advent of stories which demonstrated the strategy of world building, a shared universe created through depicting superheroes interacting.\footnote{The earliest instance is generally agreed to have been the debut of the first superhero team, the Justice Society of America, in \textit{All Star Comics} #3 (w. Gardner Fox, a. Bernard Baily \textit{et al.}, DC Comics, 1940).}

The watershed for superhero continuity, as it pertains to this study, came with the emergence of continuity ‘problems’ -- the appearance of notable contradictions between established ‘facts’ within the characters’ diegetic histories -- and through the attempts of those producing comics to ‘solve’ these problems. Without a fanbase concerned by inconsistencies in the diegesis of the product they were consuming, and in turn writers and editors sensitive to addressing these concerns, management of continuity would be a moot point. In seeking to unpack the increasingly elaborate and progressively self-conscious metatextuality of their approaches to dealing with their evolving diegesis -- which, as I shall demonstrate, has inevitably led to the creation of further continuity ‘problems’ in turn -- I will argue that continuity became one of the chief running concerns of DC Comics over the last several decades. This chapter will demonstrate how the Superman franchise in particular has become the prime exemplar and thus optimal site for analysing these textual processes.

\textbf{Adopting Fan Terminology}

These questions of comics’ continuity problems and solutions led in turn to varying approaches, techniques, and systems of management, as well as a vocabulary all of its own. As with any subgenre of the arts, fans of superhero comics have developed their own terminology with which to discuss many of the concepts explored within this chapter. It seems appropriate to use these terms rather than to impose either ill-suited academic ones, or to propose an entire raft of neologisms of my own, at least insofar as dealing with this comics-specific usage. However, as the exact meanings of these terms remain somewhat fluid, arbitrary and occasionally contested, I will nevertheless take a moment to clarify briefly my own usage of them in this thesis. This is not an attempt to
put forward definitive interpretations, but merely to make clear how I will be employing these concepts.

**Canon** is a term deriving from the biblical and literary term regarding textual authenticity or authorial sanction, in the fanspeak of superhero comic books (and many other genre franchises) the term refers to the totality of unified continuity as officially recognised by the creator and/or publisher. Although roughly synonymous with the term ‘continuity,’ it refers more specifically to determinations of inclusion and exclusion, such as delineating the separation of different elements of a broader franchise.

For example, *Star Trek* novels, although authorised publications that could be said to comprise part of the larger Trek supertext, are not considered to officially ‘count’ as part of the continuity of the unified film and television canon, even despite being written to conform to said canon. As such, new internal continuity created by the writers of *Star Trek* novels can be ignored and contradicted without consideration by writers of ongoing film or television instalments. Conversely, the wide array of *Star Wars* ‘Expanded Universe’ of novels, comics and video games existed within a complex system of tiered continuity, in which virtually everything was officially deemed to be canonical unless it was contradicted by a higher level of continuity, such as a cartoon series or, paramountly, a film.

Importantly, canonicity is a term with an implied temporality of evolving presentism, as it also refers to a sense of ‘current’ continuity, reflecting the most recent changes, thus repositioning earlier, revised details as ‘no longer canon.’ This is highly pertinent to the above examples -- the 2009 relaunch of *Star Trek* ambiguously renders the canonicity of most of the franchise’s history as potentially non-canon going forward; and following The Walt Disney Company’s buyout of Lucasfilm Ltd., it was declared in 2014 that once the projected new *Star Wars* films, television and cartoons debut in 2015, all prior Expanded Universe material will be rendered canonically null and void. Moreover, all future novels, comics and such are planned to be subject to tight editorial control in order to maintain unambiguous unified canonicity going forward, thus

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5 These are not always necessarily the same thing. For example, Frank Miller regards all his various work on Batman as belonging to an internally consistent canon, whereas DC Comics’ official stance held some Miller stories such as *Batman: Year One* as mainstream canon, while designating others such as *Batman: the Dark Knight Returns* with out-of-continuity or ‘Elseworlds’ status. Peter Sanderson, “Comics in Context #119: All-Star Bats,” *IGN*, 6 February 2006, http://au.ign.com/articles/2006/02/06/comics-in-context-119-all-star-bats.

representing a clear example of how not only a franchise’s canon can change, but even its canon policy.\(^7\)

Retcon is a commonly used portmanteau of ‘retroactive continuity,’\(^8\) the term that in its most general use refers to the act of a writer introducing new or intentionally contradictory facts into the established backstory or previously portrayed events of the fictional work in question. It encompasses a fairly broad meaning and I propose that it should ideally be subdivided into three different types.\(^9\)

Insertion Retcons involve the addition of new information which does not create any conflict with previously established facts or depictions, yet is still clearly retroactive in nature. This is perhaps the most common form of retcon outside of comic narratives, such as the revelation of a previously unknown ‘long lost sibling’ often deployed in soap operas or other serialised drama series. For example, tying together the previously unconnected characters of Jack and Claire from Lost (w. Damon Lindelof et al., ABC Studios, 2004-2010) who are belatedly revealed to be half-siblings in the third season. Another common type of insertion retcon is exposing a well-established character to be a spy or traitor a long way into an espionage or science fiction narrative, such as the third season cliffhanger revelation in the remake of Battlestar Galactica (w. Ronald D. Moore et al., Sci-Fi, 2003-2009) that several major characters had been Cylon androids ‘all along,’ despite not having been planned as such during the writing of the first several seasons.

Soft Retcons make alterations to smooth over inconsistencies with previously stated facts. These usually involve providing an extended or alternative retelling of previously depicted events, to explain any discrepancy in such a way that nevertheless does not overtly contradict so much as append diegetic ‘reality.’ This is sometimes employed in other forms of serialised action/sci-fi/fantasy genres. One of the most notable early examples was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s 1903 story The Adventure of the Empty House, in which he explains that Sherlock Holmes faked his own death in 1893’s The Final Problem, in which he had originally intended to kill the character in earnest.\(^10\)

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\(^10\) As also noted in Proctor, “Ctl-Alt-Delete,” p. 2.
Similarly, this type of retcon is frequently used in comics to allow a previously killed-off villain or hero to return, to such an extent that it has now eroded audience perceptions of the permanency of death for superhero characters. A typical example was when long-dead seminal Spider-Man villain Norman Osborne, the original Green Goblin, was revived after 23 years. Although not altering the facts of the Goblin having been ‘fatally’ impaled as originally depicted, the retelling explains that Osborne subsequently awoke in the morgue to discover he possessed (entirely unprecedented) superhuman healing abilities.

**Hard Retcons** are examples of a revision which irreconcilably contradicts or ignores prior established diegetic ‘facts’ and depictions, such as indicating that a previously published story ‘never happened,’ or by substituting some of the characters or narrative elements involved with an alternate retelling which supplants the canonicity of the original. Such revised retellings may either be portrayed outright, or their details merely implied. Relatively rare outside of comics, I propose that hard retcons should in turn be subdivided, based on the manner in which the narrative treats the diegesis of this rupture in continuity.

**Non-diegetic cases** contain no in-story acknowledgement of the change, being merely presented as the new status quo, such as the disappearance of Richie Cunningham’s brother Chuck after the first two seasons of television’s *Happy Days* (created by Garry Marshall, Paramount, 1974-1984), with subsequent references to the number of Cunningham children being altered to ignore his prior existence. Uncommon yet not completely unheard of in television, with the aforementioned case having inspired the term ‘Chuck Cunningham Syndrome’ in popular discourse to describe similar unacknowledged character retcons.

**Diegetic cases** provide an explicit rationale for the change in established facts, stated in-story, such as time-travel or the manipulation of reality. Very rare outside of

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13 A certain degree of common sense must be applied to this definition since, strictly speaking, the identification of a retcon is somewhat contingent on an audience’s perception of authorial intentionality. There are cases whereby a consistent authorial presence can be seen to have pre-planned a subsequent revelation from the outset (this is common in television shows with pre-plotted ‘season arcs’), which, strictly speaking, should not be considered retcons any more than the discovery of the previously unknown identity of the killer upon concluding a mystery novel. Long-running comic books (and television series), however, almost invariably change not only writers but also editors over the course of many years, and thus it is usually safe to assume that retcons of this nature were unintended by the writers of the original material being contradicted or otherwise revised.
14 When an alternative retelling is not provided, this often results in a requirement on the part of the reader to engage in a type of ‘mental editing’ by which, when recalling a previous storyline, the retconned facts must be substituted with those newly established by the retcon.
comics, a notable example is the film *Star Trek* (Dir. J. J. Abrams, Paramount, 2009) which presents a major break with over forty years of franchise continuity, but does so by explaining that time-travel has altered the course of established history and thus negated the events of the original television and film series and replaced them with a new divergent timeline in which the film and its sequels are set.\footnote{A similar device was used in the infamous *Spider-Man* storyline “One More Day” (*Amazing Spider-Man* #544-545, *Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man* #24 and *The Sensational Spider-Man* [vol. 2] #41 (w. J. Michael Straczynski, a. Joe Quesada, Marvel Comics, 2007-2008), whereby all memory or physical evidence of Spider-Man’s marriage to Mary Jane Watson was expunged from reality by the devil Mephisto (don’t ask) but actual historical events were not changed. This, by the definitions used herein, would constitute an extremely elaborate version of a soft retcon -- albeit almost deserving of its own subset -- since fictional ‘reality’ has not changed so much as the characters’ perception of it. It is, however, a useful example of the kind of loophole-seeking metatextual thinking that goes into explaining diegetic hard retcons.}

*Reboot* is a term denoting a significant revision of a character or franchise whereby essentially *all* previously-established diegetic history is discarded and begun anew. Thus, while the new ‘rebooted’ version may incorporate or adapt many of the same narrative elements as its predecessor, it is typically not considered to be remotely ‘in-continuity’ with previously published stories. Although this is essentially the same process undertaken in the creation of an adaptation to another medium (as radio, film or television versions are always presumed to operate within their own isolated continuities), the term reboot is generally applied only to a complete departure from established continuity within the same medium,\footnote{Although there are rare but increasing examples of explicitly shared diegetic continuity across multiple media, such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe encompassing not only feature films but also network and video-on-demand television series such as *Agent Carter* (Marvel Studios/ABC, 2015) and *Daredevil* (Marvel Studios/Netflix, 2015), and even sporadic comic books set within the MCU enjoying notionally canonical status.} as distinct from remakes and adaptations, which are typically considered to operate in separate new diegeses automatically.

Despite having been in practise in comic book narratives since the 1950s, as William Proctor notes, “This notion of ‘rebooting’ fictional entertainment franchises is a relatively recent phenomenon in cinema.”\footnote{Proctor, “Beginning Again,” p. 3. With a focus on other media franchises, Proctor comes to similar conclusions to this thesis on the adaptational implications of the reboot process. These issues will be discussed subsequently.} For example, *Casino Royale* (Dir. Martin Campbell, Columbia/MGM, 2006) served to reboot the James Bond film franchise into a firmly post-Cold War milieu, while *Batman Begins* (Dir. Christopher Nolan, Warner Bros., 2005) provides a fresh start from the more tonally outlandish tetralogy of Batman films directed by Tim Burton and Joel Schumacher in the previous decades. Proctor discusses at some length the varying motivations behind a reboot such as *Batman Begins,*
as an effort to salvage a property from the “strong paratextual perimeter” of negative appraisal surrounding the last entry in the prior cinematic iteration of the franchise, necessitating not only a cutting of ties with the Burton/Schumacher Batman to the point of active narrative contradiction “to erase any semblance of an intertextual connection” in order to renew the filmic Batman brand.18

As Proctor argues elsewhere, “This technique mirrors rebooting in comic books with one discernable difference: rebooting is normally explained in the story-world itself in comics.”19 I would contend that the caveat of “normally” is accurate, for there are many exceptions as we shall presently cover. However, due to the fact that this is not a strict definitional condition means it should not be used to suggest any more meaningful distinction between cinematic reboots and comic ones, beyond subcategorising reboots into diegetically and non-diegetically explained examples.

Outside of comics fandom the usage of reboot is relatively synonymous with the film industry term ‘re-imagined’ that was briefly popularised in film and television of the 2000s to describe reboots such as Planet of the Apes (Dir. Tim Burton, 20th Century Fox, 2001), or Battlestar Galactica (developed by Ronald D. Moore, Sci Fi Channel, 2003-2009). This, however, was essentially a marketing buzzword to escape the stigma of calling them ‘remakes.’

This is an important distinction to make, as the term has gained more mainstream currency outside of comics in the 2010s. In entertainment journalism ‘reboot’ is often (and increasingly) used interchangeably with the concepts of a remake, relaunch, and even belated sequels.20 Reboot has become a media shorthand “increasingly being utilized to describe a whole host of contradictory practices” as also observed by Proctor, “being used or, rather, ‘misused’ in a variety of perplexing ways,”21 by “writers, critics and industry professionals [who] invoke the term without interrogation or definition, leading to a multiplicity of meanings that confuse and contradict.”22 He adopts Mikhail Bakhtin’s term to “describe a spatiotemporal environment as a ‘chronotope’ – literally ‘space-time’,” in delineating the 2012 continuation of the TV soap Dallas as a “sequel and not reboot as many critics have described it. The new iteration of Dallas does not

20 For example, as the cover of June 2015’s issue of Vanity Fair proclaimed “The Empire Reboots!” of the forthcoming Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Unleashed, despite starring the original lead actors in a direct sequel to the original trilogy, 32 years later.
begin a new continuity; in fact, it actively relies on causality and thus continues the saga – albeit some two decades after the fact – rather than as a separate narrative entity.”23

Although its distinction from a sequel (belated or otherwise) should thus be obvious, it is still important to clarify a more than semantic difference between reboots and remakes, as there are close similarities of purpose and adaptive authorial process -- at least initially -- in rearticulating a previous textual utterance in a new iteration for a hopefully new audience. Seeking to clarify an appropriately academic usage of the term ‘reboot’ is also a concern for Proctor, who declares that:

…a single film cannot be rebooted, only remade or followed up with a sequel. To describe a single unit as a reboot is not a cogent designation, as stand-alone revisions invariably fit into remake taxonomies already in discourse. … In other words, a remake is a reinterpretation of one film; a reboot ‘re-starts’ a series of films that seek to disavow and render inert its predecessor’s validity (emphasis his).24

While I agree with Proctor’s assessment that reboots are essentially a franchise-specific phenomenon, I would argue his strict formulation is inadequate, and propose that there can be somewhat greater flexibility to this rule, as exceptions clearly exist of reboots which fall outside of strictly serial-to-serial diegeses. These are generally cases of intended reboot series which failed to garner sequels (or conversely single installments which were rebooted into longer series),25 in which the revived incarnations are clearly neither remakes nor sequels, but are still reboots, nevertheless.26

In starting the diegesis over again, reboots typically share common narrative strategies with remakes and indeed most forms of direct adaptation of a hypotext either within or across different media, so I would propose that the key definitional separation should lie in the reboot and/or the hypotext being part of a serialised narrative with the intention, or at least the expected capacity, for ongoing instalments within a newly-

23 Proctor, “Ctl-Alt-Delete,” p. 3.
26 For an example which would problematise Proctor’s strict formulation, take the case of the checkered screen history of adapting Marvel’s antihero the Punisher. The character has appeared in three feature films (The Punisher, Dir. Mark Goldblatt, New World Pictures, 1989; The Punisher, Dir. Jonathan Hensleigh, Artisan, 2004; and Punisher: War Zone (Dir. Lexi Alexander, Lionsgate, 2008) all featuring different lead actors, but moreover feature irreconcilable discontinuity between each film, and yet are also clearly too dissimilar to be classed as remakes of each other either. The Punisher will additionally be rebooted yet again for a guest-starring role in the second season of television’s Daredevil (Marvel Studios/Netflix, 2015), slated for 2016. The Punisher is a character who has been rebooted three times to date, without the serialisation of any component canon having yet occurred, despite each incarnation being clearly designed to initiate a franchise that failed to coalesce.
formed diegetic continuity. While any of the umpteenth adaptations of the works of Charles Dickens or Jane Austen that are a staple of British screens may take considerably different approaches to textual fidelity, length of adaptation or narrative emphasis as variously befitting feature films, two-part telemovies or long miniseries, they still remain a discreet narrative reprise of the same finite hypotext. A reboot by comparison has the opportunity, even the expectation, of using its open-ended serialised format to diverge in its own original direction once the rearticulation of the hypotextual origin story or premise-setting narrative initiation has been dispensed with. Even if subsequent instalments of the rebooted continuity may continue to draw adaptively on hypotextual iterations, it is the nature of ongoing serialised fiction to continue to seek out its own narrative path.

Another distinction lies between the macro and micro status of reboots and retcons respectively, with Proctor emphasising how the “retcon differs from the reboot in the sense that it alters elements of a series’ chronology without collapsing the narrative continuum altogether.” Specifically, he notes that “the retcon does not begin again but, rather, alters details in the continuum for the purposes of story.” Again, I would agree with Proctor but add the significant caveat that the two often go hand in hand, noting as he did earlier that comic book reboots are often diegetically explained.

While reiterating that this is by no means always the case, I propose viewing the two terms as having some complementary overlap akin to a Venn diagram -- not all reboots necessarily involve diegetically-visible retconning, preferring a ‘clean’ or ‘hard’ reboot without explanation, such as Casino Royale, while not all significant retcons have any reboot-like connotations to their overall ongoing narratives, such as the Dark Phoenix Saga. However, many cases of reboots employ a sweeping retcon in order to bring about an entirely different status quo -- in effect a clean-slate narrative reboot -- but which has nevertheless employed an in-story explanation to situate the resulting new

27 Such as the rebooted Battlestar Galactica featuring ongoing plot threads concerning the betrayal of Baltar or the colonial fleet eventually finding Earth being loosely inspired by equivalent events in the original 1970s series, or the sequel Star Trek Into Darkness (Dir. J. J. Abrams, Paramount, 2013) featuring characters and even specific scenes which metatextually depict reversals of equivalent scenarios in Star Trek II: The Wrath of Kahn (Dir. Nicholas Meyer, Paramount, 1982), amidst a broadly unrelated narrative. Neither example could reasonably be described as simply a remake, but rather examples of visibly palimpsestuous textual transmission within a reboot cycle, of which more shall be discussed.

28 There are, as ever, liminal examples, in which the brevity of the serialisation in both cases can potentially engender more direct comparisons as discreet texts, such as the 6-episode AMC/ITV 2009 miniseries The Prisoner, based on the cult original 17 episode ITV 1968 series of the same name being a loose, yet direct adaptation. So although atypical, it is arguably possible for certain cases of adaptation to constituted both remake and reboot.

ongoing chronotope within the same overall diegetic framework as that which it is replacing, as in the case of 2009’s *Star Trek*.

There are cases of even greater complexity. For example, *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (Dir. Bryan Singer, Fox, 2014) containing scenes set between and beyond the narrative timeframe of previous entries in the X-Men film series, as well as spatiotemporally altering that pre-established chronotopic narrative via plot-driven time travel. This makes the film simultaneously a sequel to *X-Men: First Class* (Dir. Matthew Vaughn, Fox, 2001), both a prequel and a sequel to the original three *X-Men* films 1 through 3, as well as being a reboot of *X-Men* 1-3. Yet conversely, it is not a reboot of their prequel *First Class*, taking place between the two major eras of the franchise. Indeed, despite diverging considerably from the narrative particulars of the original comic storyline from which it is titled and loosely based, *Days of Future Past*’s explicit alteration of the X-Men film franchise is to date the most overtly diegetic, comic-book-style use of retconning and rebooting yet seen in cinema.

Reboots, especially in comics, tend to have a particular emphasis on re-telling and altering a character’s established backstory, in particular their origin story. This is of particular relevance to Superman, whose origin story has been revised more times than any other comparable comic character, as shall be discussed in this chapter. Much like retcons, technically reboots can also be subdivided into soft and hard reboots, however this involves some more nuanced issues of shared diegetic universes, so we shall return to this distinction presently, using salient examples from the Superman franchise.

*Alternate Earths/Universes/Realities and the Multiverse* all refer to a relatively common trope in science fiction, perhaps most famously used in the 1967 episode “Mirror, Mirror” from the original series of *Star Trek* (created by Gene Roddenberry, Paramount, 1966-1969), whereby a parallel universe exists in which many of the same

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31 *Uncanny X-Men* vol. 1 #141-142 (w. Chris Claremont and John Byrne, a. John Byrne, Marvel Comics, 1981).

32 Much the same kind of time-travel premise makes the fifth film in the Terminator franchise, *Terminator Genisys* (Dir. Alan Taylor, Skydance/Paramount, 2015), both a diegetically-explicated reboot of the prior franchise’s narrative, as well as a sequel-of sorts to the preceding four installments, albeit with less direct story continuation than was the case with *Days of Future Past*’s connective tissue to its antecedents, as the events of the latter Terminator films do not ‘loop around’ to causally inform their own narrative over-writing in the same way. In this respect the film is less of an *in meia res* reboot, and thus closer in effect to the aforementioned continuity reset of 2009’s *Star Trek Into Darkness* beginning the Captain Kirk narrative again, from an earlier point than originally presented.
characters as the ‘native’ universe may have doppelgängers who lead different, even morally inverse lives to those of the ‘original’ characters, usually due to their version of reality having a different history. However, despite their radical differences from the primary established diegetic reality, these alternate universes should usually not be regarded as taking place in an altogether separate continuity, as alternate universes can cross over and interact in a manner that has ongoing consequences for both universes.³³

Note also that referring to an alternate ‘Earth’ is synonymous with the entire alternate reality/universe within which it is situated, and should not be confused with the overarching concept of wider diegetic fictional ‘universes’ (such as the ‘DC Universe’) that encompasses all stories within the same broader continuity. Furthermore, while many different iterations of this concept have been used in comics, the term ‘Alternate Earth’ has particular significance in DC Comics due to their ‘Multiverse’ system.

Multiverse denotes the concept which is, in some respects, similar to my proposed term of a supertext, insofar as it is typically intended to contain the sum total of all official content from the same company, inclusive of alternate universes and so forth. In practice, however, the trans-diegetic acknowledgement of a multiverse may be more restricted, and in contrast to a supertext, publishers tend to limit what they acknowledge as their textual multiverse to a single medium, such as comics, and generally do not encompass adaptations in other media as viable for inter-dimenstional’ crossovers, even if spin-off comics have been published that are set within a film or television-based universe.³⁴ Nevertheless, publishers’ diegetic use of such multiverses, especially those informed by sequential reboots does, as Parker puts it, “challenge the notion of a singular, cohesive canon. Rather, superhero franchises are made up of many, many multiple canons and continuities that are (or were at one time) considered official.”³⁵

Companies differ in management approach to their respective multiverses. Marvel, for example, did not significantly acknowledge the existence of a formalised

³³ Such as the pre-Crisis hero Black Canary migrating from her native Earth-Two to live on Earth-One.

³⁴ For example, the 2015 second season of The Flash introduces the concept of a DC Comics-style multiverse (with 52 parallel Earths, no less) into the show’s already shared diegesis with other DC superhero series screened on The CW, Arrow (2012-) and DC’s Legends of Tomorrow (2016-). However, while this development was used as a means to introduce adaptations of many new DC comic characters to this ‘Flarrowverse’ via travel from parallel Earths, there is no suggestion whatsoever that this television multiverse should be regarded to be one and the same as the ‘mainstream’ multiverse of comic book diegeses. Nor should it necessarily be considered to automatically imply multiversal diegetic links to other current (let alone former) DC television adaptations on other networks, such as Gotham (Fox, 2014-). However, precedent is already being set for potentially ongoing crossovers using CW’s multiverse device to bridge otherwise irreconcilable cross-network continuities, with the series star of The Flash scheduled to make a guest appearance in “Worlds Finest”, the March 28, 2016 episode of Supergirl (CBS, 2015-).

Marvel multiverse system prior to the millennium, and it remains a minor sideline to its mainstream universe, whereas DC’s policy on having a diegetically-acknowledged multiverse dates back to the 1950s, and its very existence has been a key motivating issue for various major retcons and reboots, most notably Crisis on Infinite Earths.36

**One-off stories** take place in unique, non-continuous diegeses that are not intended to affect any main ongoing canon, such as Marvel’s various What If...? series, or DC’s ‘Imaginary Stories’ of the Silver Age, and Elseworlds tales for the decades either side of the millennium. These can generally be regarded as legitimate if lesser alternate universes that exist within a multiverse system. In some cases they have been retroactively acknowledged as such by mainstream continuity in crossovers dealing with the multiverse.

**Alternate Timelines** are typically established to occur as the result of changing history via time-travel and creating divergent branches of reality. However, they usually are regarded in functionally the same way as Alternate Universes. Some writers treat alternate realities/universes and alternate timelines as effectively interchangeable concepts, barring narrative technobabble.

**Floating Timeline** refers to a common device used in most comics, comic strips, animation and some literature37 in which the ongoing publication of new material over many years runs into the problem that the creators or owners of the property do not want their characters to age in ‘realtime,’ seeking instead to attract several generations of potential audiences by maintaining a relative status quo. Thus, the children in Peanuts (cartoonist Charles M. Schulz, United Feature Syndicate, 1950-2000), The Simpsons

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36 The abbreviation ‘Crisis’ shall be used henceforth to refer to Crisis on Infinite Earths. Although the use of the term originated in earlier isolated crossover stories involving interactions between the alternate Earths of the multiverse such as “Crisis on Earth-One!” and “Crisis on Earth-Two!” (Justice League of America #21-22 (w. Gardner Fox, a. Mike Sekowsky, DC Comics, 1963), and there have been other large crossover events since 1986 which have incorporated the term into their titles, including Identity Crisis (Brad Meltzer, DC Comics, 2004), Infinite Crisis (Geoff Johns, DC Comics, 2005-2006), and Final Crisis (Grant Morrison, DC Comics, 2008-2009), the abbreviated term’s reference to Crisis on Infinite Earths specifically is widely understood in fan parlance. In large part this is due to the aforementioned significance of needing to thereafter divide DC continuity into pre and post-Crisis eras, and the near-universal acceptance of these terms in fandom.

37 This is a technique rarely utilised in long-running live action film or television series, as inevitably the actors involved will age visibly over the years -- a problem for genre series which feature supposedly unaging characters such as the android Lt. Cmd. Data in Star Trek: The Next Generation (created by Gene Roddenberry, Paramount, 1987-1994), or the vampire Angel in Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Unusual exceptions which manage to employ a floating or at least decompressed timeline include the series M*A*S*H* (H. Richard Hornerberger, 20th Century Fox, 1972-1983) which ran more than three times longer than the actual Korean War in which it was set, or the James Bond film series which recast the lead actors to accommodate a relative hold on their apparent ages, until even maintaining the Cold War origins of the character became implausible due to the onward march of time, requiring the series’ aforementioned reboot.

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(created by Matt Groening, 20th Century Fox, 1989-), or The Famous Five (Enid Blyton, Hodder & Stoughton, 1942-1963) never grow up, regardless of how many decades they have been regularly appearing in new content.

Similar to Eco’s notion of an oneiric climate (see below), the typical method of dealing with this is to treat the characters as taking place in an everlasting ‘present,’ whilst typically seeking to avoid mentioning specific dates or, if not, ignoring their accumulation, and leaving uncommented upon the inconsistency of any other temporal markers, such as topical references or the appearance of fashions and technologies later rendered obsolete and anachronistic.

However, this technique requires some variation when it comes to superhero comics. Although the entire Golden Age and much of the Silver Age existed in an essentially oneiric state much like cartoons and strips, eventually permanent changes began to take place in the status quo which indicated that some advancement of fictional time had clearly occurred. While the adult superheroes such as Batman or Superman were never shown to grow appreciably older (their specific ages generally not being stated), many characters initially depicted as youths or teenagers did begin to mature. For example, Spider-Man graduated from high school, attended then dropped out of college, and later got married, Robin went to college and eventually adopted a new adult superhero identity as Nightwing (and even temporarily assumed his mentor’s mantle as Batman, twice), and the original X-Men went from being students at Xavier’s School to becoming teachers themselves. As a result, the idea of a gradually shifting timeline had developed somewhat by the 1980s, from one of an oneiric ‘absolute presentism’ to a type of ‘relative presentism’ in which the unofficial policy at both DC and Marvel became evident. That is, their respective ‘modern’ superheroic eras (as opposed to Golden Age -- a time implicitly linked to WWII) have existed for roughly a decade prior to the present day, and that this ratio remains the same despite the onward march of extra-diegetic time. Thus, in ‘modern’ comics of roughly the past thirty years, Clark Kent has always had an active career as Superman for ten years, Spider-Man has gone from High school to post-college, and Nightwing/Robin has always aged from boyhood to manhood over the course of the decade prior to whatever is the current time of publication.

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38 Coogan, Superhero, pp. 213-214.
39 This policy was recently revised for DC, however, in 2011 with The New 52 relaunch, in which a new policy of five years was put into effect, presumably to make its lead characters appear more youthful.
Of course, this system will create new problems for itself as more and more decades pass and newer, ‘third generation’ characters (characters depicted as current teenager characters, relative to former teenagers like Nightwing, such as Tim Drake, one of his successors to the mantle of Robin), may in turn be developed into adult roles, all the while the original ‘adult’ heroes stubbornly refuse to break their oneiric chains altogether and advance into middle age.40

Unlike other issues relating to continuity, floating timelines remain a strictly extra-diegetic issue and are never seriously addressed in the comics themselves. It could even be argued that the Multiverse system was developed, in part, as a means of dealing with the widening diegetic gap between WWII as an increasingly distant fixed point in time and the ‘presentism’ of the then-ongoing Silver Age.41

The ‘Ages’ of Superhero Comics
The history of mainstream American superhero comics has for the last several decades been regarded by comics fans, and in turn some academics to fall into distinct eras which describe their broad historical, stylistic and to some extent thematic parameters. As discussed in Chapter 1, Coogan spent considerable time trying to determine the exact boundaries of each ‘age’ of the superhero genre to mixed results, as the task became somewhat mired in determining technicalities.42 Having previously explained my intent to eschew being bogged down in such historical semantics, I shall proceed to simply outline my fairly generalised usage, which is adequate for the purposes of discussing Superman’s textual development.

Golden Age refers to the inaugural era of superhero comics, in which Superman’s first appearance in 1938 spawned many others. The nascent genre experienced a boom during World War II and a subsequent postwar slump, during which time only Superman

40 Rare exceptions are mostly limited to Golden Age characters whose histories are inextricably linked with WWII, and who invariably have been depicted as having some explicit supernatural reason for not physically aging into the nonagenarians they logically should be. This problem has at least partially been ‘solved’ for DC, as the New52 relaunch has rebooted most of its Justice Society heroes to an alternate earth, no longer linking the characters to WWII. There are very few post-Golden Age characters whose origins are similarly tied to specific historical events, such as Vietnam War veteran the Punisher, and X-Men’s Holocaust survivor, Magneto.

41 Notable exceptions include the retro-Silver Age miniseries Marvels (w. Kurt Busiek, a. Alex Ross, 5 issues, Marvel Comics, 1994), and DC: The New Frontier (w./a. Darwyn Cooke, 6 issues, DC Comics, 2004), which elaborate on events in past eras of continuity, yet do so by deliberately flouting the anachronistic requirements of a floating timeline by remaining explicitly set in the same postwar era in which the comics they reference were originally published. For further discussion of these publications’ revisionist complexities, see Henry Jenkins, “‘Just Men in Tights’: Rewriting Silver Age Comics in an era of Multiplicity,” in Ndalianis, The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero, pp. 16-43.

and a scarce few others remained in continuous publication.\textsuperscript{43} In terms of DC Comics’ multiverse system, the Golden Age was retroactively synonymous with ‘Earth-Two’ continuity.\textsuperscript{44} The Golden Age is generally dated as being from 1938 to approximately 1950.

\textit{Silver Age} denotes the second boom of superheroes, including the birth of the modern Marvel Comics and its characters,\textsuperscript{45} and the increase in narrative seriality\textsuperscript{46} in turn led to the first significant diegetic continuity issues at DC, leading to its multiverse system. Silver Age continuity in DC is thus considered synonymous with ‘Earth-One.’\textsuperscript{47} The era is considered to have begun with the introduction of new DC characters who would become mainstays of the then-predominant ‘Earth-One’ continuity, either with the debut of the Martian Manhunter (\textit{Detective Comics} #225, 1955) or, more commonly regarded, the Silver Age version of the Flash (\textit{Showcase} #4, 1956),\textsuperscript{48} who began a trend of redesigning Golden Age heroes as new, unrelated characters, spearheaded by editor Julius Schwartz.\textsuperscript{49} The precise event (and thus year) that best marks the endpoint of the Silver Age is contested and highly arbitrary, so the parameters used here will be from 1956 to approximately 1973.

\textit{Bronze Age} is a less prevalent term, used to describe a period of increased complexity in storytelling, preoccupation with continuity, and a thematic skew towards an older, post-adolescent readership.\textsuperscript{50} Due to \textit{Crisis on Infinite Earths} taking place during this period, discussions of DC continuity often place greater emphasis on whether a character version or other canonical element is pre- or post-\textit{Crisis}, thus sometimes inaccurately (or at least imprecisely) conflating the pre-\textit{Crisis} Bronze Age with that of

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{43} Reynolds, \textit{Superheroes}, pp. 8-9.
\bibitem{44} This nomenclature has recently been appropriated under the post-\textit{New52} continuity to refer to a new Alternate Earth which, although still host to many of DC’s Golden Age characters, it is no longer diegetically associated with the WWII era.
\bibitem{45} Apart from Captain America and the Invaders, very few of Timely Comics’ discontinued Golden Age characters made the transition into the diegetic universe of its successor company, Marvel Comics, which was largely built around new characters created in the early 1960s. This was in contrast to the merger of All-American Comics and Detective Comics into National Comics and subsequent evolution into DC Comics, with continuous publication of late 1930s and 1940s heroes Superman, Batman and a few others, and with many of its Golden Age characters being revamped or later reintroduced from the 1950s onwards. See Jones, \textit{Men of Tomorrow}, pp. 222-223.
\bibitem{46} Jenkins, “Just Men in Tights,” p. 20; and Proctor, “Beginning Again,” p. 5.
\bibitem{47} Not to be confused with the “Earth One” graphic novels sporadically published from 2010 onwards, which occur within an \textit{Elseworlds}-style (although ambiguously shared) continuity in the DC multiverse separate from the primary DC continuity, both pre- and post-\textit{New52}.
\bibitem{48} Wolk, \textit{Reading Comics}, p. 4; and Reynolds, \textit{Superheroes}, p. 9.
\bibitem{49} Proctor, “Beginning Again,” p. 5.
\bibitem{50} Coogan, \textit{Superhero}, pp. 210-214.
\end{thebibliography}
the Silver Age due to their continuous continuity.\textsuperscript{51} The dating of this era, especially its endpoint, is subject to much debate. However, for the purposes of this thesis we shall somewhat arbitrarily use the definition of 1973-1986.

**The Dark/Meta/Modern Ages** are contested categorisations, encompassing the post-Bronze Age up to the present day. There is still a lack significant consensus regarding these eras’ definitions, number, boundaries, or even actual existence. Landmark dark, adult-oriented stories focusing on genre deconstruction from the late Bronze Age such as *Watchmen* (w. Alan Moore, a. Dave Gibbons, DC Comics, 1986-1987), and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (w./a. Frank Miller, DC Comics, 1986), brought new attention to comics as an artform and potentially serious literature.\textsuperscript{52}

It also inspired a fad of so-called ‘grim and gritty’ superheroes, which largely ignored the deconstructive, metatextual elements of Moore and Miller’s work, but superficially adopted their nihilistic and violent subject matter,\textsuperscript{53} leading to a rise in popularity for lethal antiheroes such as The Punisher, Lobo and Spawn. This preoccupation with ‘dark heroes’ and a degree of style over substance has retrospectively (and with some exaggeration) been seen with a negative reappraisal to characterise most of the superhero comics of the 1990s.

During this time the industry also diversified somewhat, with newer companies such as Dark Horse Comics and especially Image Comics, founded by Marvel-breakaway star artists at the forefront of the ‘dark’ style, beginning to encroach on the long-dominant market share of ‘The Big Two.’\textsuperscript{54} It was also during this period that the boom and bust of the comics speculator market occurred, producing first a dramatic upswing and then severe downturn in the industry, from publishers filing bankruptcy, to changes in distribution models, and specialty comic book stores proliferating and then

\textsuperscript{51} This can result in confusingly synonymous usage of the description ‘the pre-Crisis Superman’ and ‘the Silver Age Superman,’ when the former can encompass the entirety of the latter, but not vice-versa. This can result in misleading references to ‘the Silver Age Superman’ when referring to appearances of the character situated in the Bronze Age, and as such this terminology should be avoided.


going out of business, an event some claimed to have been triggered by the famous 1993 “Death of Superman” storyline. These tumultuous times have led to one popular moniker for this period as the Dark Age, laced with double meaning regarding both content and industrial circumstances.

So although there is little debate that the Bronze Age ended (if not when), nor that the thematic preoccupations of what some term the Dark Age have indeed largely passed, there is a distinct lack of consensus as to what to call the current era. There are arguments for designating a blanket modern or revisionary age that is still in effect today as a continuous entity from the revolutionary Miller/Moore works in the 1980s, blossoming into a new ‘Golden Age’ of formal experimentation and narrative diversity, but such viewpoints would make this not only the longest ‘age’ to date, but also one awkwardly bridging rather notable shifts in tone, content and the industry, including new major themes which would logically suggest that the last decade or more of comics belong to a new age of their own.

I contend that the largest stylistic break, which began in the late 1990s in counterpoint to the Dark Age (but arguably still inspired by the deconstructive work of Moore and Miller), and characterises a significant trend in post-millennial comics, was towards an even more complex focus on continuity and nostalgia. This is similarly conceptualised by Coogan’s proposition of a “Renaissance Age,” Wolk’s notion (via Warren Ellis) of a “Third Movement” or “revisionary superhero narrative,” or Jenkins’ discussion of the problematic definitions of revisionism when considering inherent “generic instability” in the superhero comics produced by “an era of multiplicity” of approaches to style and continuity. These new industrial and authorial impulses resulted in deeper metatextuality and even elements of metafiction from writers such as Alan Moore, Grant Morrison, Neil Gaiman, Mark Waid, Kurt Busiek and Warren Ellis, as I shall discuss in the next chapter. With a boom in status quo-flouting narratives involving pastiche versions of established characters especially under independent publishers and an accelerating cycle of continuity recons and reboots, I would argue that this era could most appropriately be termed ‘the Meta Age.’

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55 Bongco, Reading Comics, pp.185-186, 191-194, 222-224; and Pustz, Comic Book Culture, p. 80.
56 For a political economy-based discussion of this argument, see Rogers, “Manipulating Demand,” pp.145-156.
58 Wolk, Reading Comics, pp. 10-11.
59 Coogan, Superhero, pp. 219-230.
60 Wolk, Reading Comics, pp. 2-4, 122-135.
This form of reflexivity and ‘reconstruction’ is somewhat in line with Coogan’s broader attempt to tie in his delineations of the ages of superhero comics with similar phases in Schatz’s ‘genre cycle’ theories of film, as discussed in Chapter 1. However, Coogan’s model becomes shakier the further it goes along. Schatz’s theory of genre cycles (published in 1981), upon which Coogan bases his own, was developed to describe film genres which had, to that point, not yet developed beyond what he termed the reconstructive stage. Moreover, many of which could be argued to have subsequently died out. Similarly, Coogan’s own book, although as yet less than a full decade old, has been potentially rendered out of date in terms of subsequent developments in superhero comics’ publication, involving shorter and shorter intervals of reboots and relaunches in which the tropes and styles of different past eras gain shifting significance, making distinct cycles harder to deem applicable across the whole genre. Curiously Coogan does not revise his model to reflect this when he concisely reiterated his mapping of the ages of superhero comics onto that of the genre cycle in his 2012 analysis of Grant Morrison’s *All-Star Superman*.

Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, the exact determinations and boundaries of the post-Bronze eras of Dark Age and Meta Age are ultimately of somewhat lesser relevance to Superman’s continuity than the dates in which multiple specific reboots and other revisions took place during these eras, rather than on the cusp of their changeovers. In fact, the largest watershed change in Superman’s continuity since the Bronze Age occurred with *The New 52* relaunch in 2011, in the midst of what as yet seems to still be the ongoing continuation of the Meta Age.

**Eco, Superman, and Oneiric Continuity**

One can hardly proceed to delve into the question of continuity, and especially as it pertains to the Superman franchise, without addressing the work of Umberto Eco. Although writing on far broader semiotic issues than I am are concerned with here, Eco contributed some significant insights regarding the use of relative time in relation to the concept of narrative progression, that prefigure concepts of the floating timeline and explore it in more formal terms. Fortuitously, Eco chose as one of his major examples

63 For example, the increasing influence of resurgent Silver Age elements over the past decade or more have recently been sidelined by a strikingly 1990s aesthetic in the *New 52* relaunch under new Co-Publisher Jim Lee, himself a seminal artist of that era.
64 Coogan, “Reconstructing the Superhero in *All-Star Superman*,” pp. 204-206.
Superman, and one can certainly extrapolate his analysis to the whole superhero genre by extension. Although narrative time and narrative continuity are not strictly the same thing, there is definite conceptual overlap, and Eco’s formulation bears some discussion here.

Eco essentially posits that Superman stories exist in a form of narrative stasis that is caught somewhere between the principles of an archetypal myth, in which the final outcomes of a character’s life are already known by the audience in advance, and the unpredictability of the novelistic form, in which development and ‘what happens next’ is key. Contending that comics characters such as Superman utilise the archetypal aspects of being essentially constant and unchanging to provide their mythic resonance, while engaging in adventures that contain the illusion of plot and development, Eco formulates that the drawback is that Superman can never truly develop. The barrier to true, lasting development, as Eco sees it, is fear of the character being ‘consumed’ by a ‘step towards his death,’ or, to put it less histrionically, towards closure and narrative cessation. Since any such conclusion (on a permanent basis) is antithetical to the needs of a publisher and higher corporate structure which desire to continue an unceasing output of ongoing product, this resistance towards development and being ‘consumed’ becomes, pardon the pun, a never-ending battle -- a necessity for the indefinite prolongation of the serialised narrative. As Weldon puts it rather pithily, Superman is a “corporate-owned piece of perpetually licensed intellectual property chained to a continuous, open-ended narrative…The corporate-owned continuous narrative is, after all, the enemy of storytelling.”

This particular serialised state between the mythic and the novelistic is described by Eco as an “oneiric climate,” in which past and future are always rather vague compared to the “immobile present.” By this logic, Eco reasons that Superman’s narratives can never significantly develop, which he exemplifies by pronouncing that Superman could never marry Lois Lane, as this would constitute an “irreversible premise” that would stray too far from the oneiric climate that is necessary for his ongoing viability as a character.

66 ibid., pp. 108-110.
67 ibid., pp. 110-111, 113.
68 Weldon, Superman: The Unauthorized Biography, pp. 220-221.
70 ibid., pp.114-115.
Before going any further it must be acknowledged that Eco’s 1962 article (translated and revised in 1979) was written well before the proliferation of highly visible diegetic retcons from Crisis onwards, and he was seemingly unaware of the retcons involved in the establishment of the DC’s multiverse system that had already been implemented in the 1950s and 1960s. Taking this into account, however, with the exception of the retroactive split between the Golden and Silver Age versions of the character (more on this presently), there truthfully was little in the way of any drastic forward development of the Superman character by the point in his history at which Eco was writing. By and large Superman’s status quo changed very little on an issue-to-issue basis, a prime example of what Burke rather elegantly describes as “mainstream comic books with their Sisyphean protagonists engaged in never-ending battles.”

Thus it would be fair to say that by 1962 (or even by 1979) Superman’s character did essentially exist in an oneiric climate. Superman himself never got any older, none of his supporting cast had ever died, his mission had never significantly changed, even despite the expansions of the supertext that had occurred around him up to that point. Eco even allowed for the integration of such Weisinger-era additions to Superman’s surrounding mythos, which in his view did not actually effect the status quo of his own immobile present -- such as the introduction of new characters like Supergirl, or the retroactive insertion of further backstory regarding his teenage career as Superboy -- since these did not constitute a temporal advancement per se. While from the perspective of one strictly looking at issues of continuity, the insertion of the Superboy history would be considered a major hard retcon, Eco justifies its lack of impact on his conception of an oneiric timeframe, noting that even the addition of previously nonexistent past tales still allows for an unchanging present. In effect, Eco acknowledged the premise of what we would term a retcon, yet dismissed its significance to his own argument. Naturally, while not concurring with such a relegation of continuity, I do see it as consistent with the thrust of his reasoning, since issues of internal diegetic recycling as reflective of cross-franchise media adaptation were neither core to Eco’s theoretical model, nor yet obviously present enough at the time of his writing to have been properly considered.

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However, it must be said that while Eco’s analysis of the operation of narrative time in Superman comics (and by extension the superhero genre) were both salient and reasonably accurate at the time of his writing, he could not anticipate the extent to which the treatment of continuity would develop in the coming decade, with *Crisis* and its appertaining reboot of Superman. The significant re-writing of Superman’s history, relationships, abilities, and status quo, and the notional updating of his milieu, cannot be described as anything other than a development, or at the very least a re-development. I would argue this differs from his allowance of other past ‘minor’ developments that were gradual, and arguably peripheral to the narrative’s central character, as the *Crisis* reboot included Superman himself quite directly, as it fundamentally altered many key aspects of his status quo on a long-term basis. Moreover, the implementation of these developments was not a slow fade, but a hard cut.

Nevertheless, Eco’s wider point still retains considerable value, albeit requiring of some amendment and updating. Despite the changes in backstory, nuances of portrayal and relationship dynamics, Superman and his supporting characters still do not visibly age, and the advance of history and technology in the real world are reflected in the ongoing comics without acknowledging any passage of equivalent diegetic time, especially after multiple subsequent ‘modernising’ recons and reboots. In the broadest sense Eco is still correct, that decade after decade Superman never significantly ages, goes through major *permanent* changes in his mission or lifestyle, nor moves towards any kind of mythic narrative conclusion.74

What begins to seemingly break down the applicability of the oneiric climate is that in certain specific cases there *have* been seemingly irrevocable alterations to the status quo -- developmental changes in the novelistic mode -- which have stuck long-term. Most obviously pertinent to Eco’s argument is that Superman *did* eventually marry Lois Lane in 1996,75 and the couple remained married in ongoing continuity, ‘permanently’ disrupting the oneirically unconsummated Superman/Clark/Lois love triangle that had previously been an essential part of Superman lore for almost sixty years.76 As Ndalianis aptly observed regarding the marriage, “the myth of Superman

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74 At least, not in terms of whatever is the current ongoing major continuity version of Superman. There have been several ‘final’ Superman stories over the years, but these are typically one-offs or tales set in alternative diegetic realities, such as the very significant “Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?” by Alan Moore, which shall be covered in the next chapter.


76 In fact, it had happened even earlier for the Golden Age Superman and Lois Lane in *Action Comics* [vol. 1] #484, (w. Cary Bates, a. Curt Swan, DC Comics, 1978). However, since by that point his adventures had been retroactively relegated to the parallel world of Earth-Two, this was not widely considered by fans to
participated in temporal progression yet the mythology wasn’t destroyed as a result” (original emphasis).\(^{77}\)

Why then, did this not constitute a ‘step towards death’ for Superman? Is it that these developments are sufficiently rare that they can be seen as merely cases of one slightly different oneiric climate replacing another one, as opposed to continuous novelistic development? If so, perhaps the current applicability of Eco’s view might be married to the aforementioned fan-culture concept of the floating timeline, whereby a degree of gradual development is permitted as long as implicit examples of the passage of time -- such as Superman’s marriage or Robin’s transition into Nightwing -- remain broadly isolated, and plateau to a point where they cease to develop any further.\(^{78}\) As ongoing continuity becomes history, developments are permitted, provided they remain relative to the essentially unchanging present. Certainly the previously discussed technique of situating post-retcon narratives partially in media res via the inbuilt five or ten years of an undetailed prior superheroic career is suggestive of oneiric techniques writ large, with comic editors and authors wanting to periodically begin comic narratives again, yet with the capacity to skip ahead from the retold origin in order to maintain a status quo of the protagonist as an established, experienced hero.

However, this view is also unsatisfactory in the long run, as even the ‘permanence’ of a counter-oneiric development such as Superman’s marriage to Lois Lane turns out not to be inviolate. Despite remaining intact for a decade and a half of ongoing publication, and even weathering two subsequent soft reboots of Superman’s continuity, the married status quo did not survive the New52 relaunch of Superman’s continuity in 2011, which proved to be the most sweeping since the original Crisis. In this new continuity -- still current as of this writing -- Clark and Lois are not only unmarried, but in fact have never yet been in a relationship in this revised diegetic history. So although the possible eventuality of Superman’s marriage can no longer be viewed as an untenable ‘step towards death,’ long-term applicability yet ultimate impermanence of such narrative developments do necessitate a reappraisal of the extent to which Crisis did or did not contradict Eco’s oneiric model.

\(^{77}\) Ndalianis, “Enter the Aleph,” p. 286.

\(^{78}\) For example, although Robin aged from approximately eight years old to (at most) his mid-twenties between 1940 and the early 1980s, there is no evidence that he has diegetically aged a day further in the thirty-plus years of realtime publication since this point.
Should the ‘resetting’ of Superman’s narrative to a pre-marital state be viewed as a reassertion of the oneiric climate, simply on a longer timescale of realtime publication? Somigli suggests that “The development of the narrative over time in subsequent retelling and rearticulations does not entail a suspension of memory, a sort of continuous oblivion, as Eco seems to imply, but works more effectively the more the audience is aware of the previous articulation of the narrative that each retelling extends and remakes” (original emphasis). Or, to put it more simply, Geoff Klock suggests “Retroactive changes, reimaginings, reinterpretations, revisiting origins, and revisions became major storytelling tools, tools that, rather than overturning the difficulties of continuity, fit in nicely with Eco’s ‘oneiric quality’.”

I would certainly agree, but take it a step further in positing the question of whether reboots could be defined as themselves some kind of expression or mechanism of enforcing an oneiric climate, lest any established phase of continuity develop too far. Is it a case that the more things change, the more they eventually are reflexively forced to stay the same? Wolk certainly holds this view, noting:

The fact is that open-ended franchises …are fundamentally unable to grow up in some sense. Their stewards are charged with maintaining the marketable things about them, which means that significant, lasting change is almost impossible to get past the marketing department, or past sentimentally attached readers. If the new way doesn’t work out – and it almost never does – it’s time for the “cosmic reset button,” as fans call it: a contrivance that restores things to their original state.

In some respects this view is tempting, yet problematic to reliably quantify, for reboots (as distinct from retcons) have never really been demonstrably implemented in order to reset or negate an editorially regretted specific narrative path, as opposed to being motivated by wider corporate strategies to refresh the brands in general. If anything, I would argue that reboots are as much concerned with reinvention and modification as they are about backtracking or resetting.

The issue is confused by the fact that the New52 reboot has been in many respects an even more radical change in Superman’s status quo than was Crisis, much less the intervening wedding itself. ‘Knowing readers’ might presume that this is simply a more complex replay of the gradual, oneiric-defying development of Lois and Clark’s relationship culminating in marriage in the post-Crisis continuity, and that eventually the

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79 It was certainly the impetus behind the aforementioned infamous “One More Day” storyline retconning Spider-Man’s marriage.
81 Klock, How to Read Superhero Comics, p. 21.
82 Wolk, Reading Comics, p. 102 (emphasis in the original).
New52 iterations of Kent and Lane will likewise come together, but this cannot be known for certain.\textsuperscript{83} To push the envelope of the ‘irreversible premise’ further, an ongoing plotline in 2015’s Superman titles involves the ramifications Lois ‘outing’ Clark’s secret identity to the whole world, a story concept teased a few times over the course of Superman’s wider media supertext, yet never before implemented in such a seemingly irreversible manner.

It is important, however, to bear in mind my previously stated contention that while Eco’s formulation of the oneiric climate speaks to a pre-reboot-cycle awareness of serialised comic narrative’s odd diegetic temporality, the concepts of narrative time and narrative continuity, although containing conceptual overlap, are by no means one and the same. To take this further, while it is relevant to discuss how the operation of shifting continuity resulting from increased semi-novelistic narrative seriality after the time of Eco’s writing complicates the precise strictures of the oneiric concept as he originally laid it out, this is nevertheless not sufficient to declare Eco’s view debunked or even altogether outmoded. Moreover, it does not pay to confuse the later complexities of referential play in evidence through reboots, metafictional comics and intertextually self-aware media adaptations as being necessarily very pertinent to Eco’s theoretical underpinnings, which largely remain applicable to comic characters such as Superman on both the macro-franchise/supertext level, and within the monthly operation of any current ‘phase’ of continuity -- merely on a more narratively elastic scale than he originally described.

A critique of similar problematic conflations of Eco’s ultimately rather specific theory with less directly related intertextual analysis comes from Marc Singer, who pleads a fairly strident case that some existing secondary scholarship on Eco’s essay represents fundamental misreadings of its actual content, as examples of what he views as endemic problems in the media and cultural studies discipline. Taking aim at particular works referencing Eco by Jenkins and Ndalianis, Singer makes a cogent case that in several instances their scholarship both overstates the conceptual radicalism of intertextual superhero narratives, and misunderstands Eco’s original contentions while critiquing him. Yet in doing so, he argues, they appear to inadvertently demonstrate Eco’s enduring validity. Singer’s work is not, however, designed as a simple vindication.

\textsuperscript{83} And furthermore, how does one factor the significance of Lois remaining a supporting character in Superman’s new mythos despite having no romantic attachment between them, let alone the fact that as of this writing Superman is in a relationship with Wonder Woman, an oft-teased coupling that has been addressed in many non-canonical stories in the past, but never before in ongoing continuity?
of Eco’s theory, acknowledging the “historical contingency” of the original essay’s limited scope in lacking foreknowledge of later developments in comic book diegeses, and how “his structuralist methodology and universalist language extrapolates his observations far beyond the comics that inspire them,” are understandably inviting of criticism by subsequent generations of comics-literate scholars.\(^{84}\)

While pointing out the time-blinkered perspective from which Eco wrote -- not only his lack of foresight but also apparent ignorance of Superman’s early history when critiquing the character’s lack of political consciousness -- Singer elaborates how, what some critics such as Tom De Haven perceive as breaks with the oneiric model, should correctly be viewed as anything but. Singer argues that “The increasingly elaborate histories and non-canonical futures of the Weisinger era confirm rather than dispel Eco’s oneiric climate.” Moreover, he contends that their explicit framing as ‘imaginary stories’ demonstrates how “Weisinger and his writers attempted to contain these intrusions of progressive temporality and prevent them from infecting or advancing the main continuity.”\(^{85}\) Further elucidating the point, Singer asserts the distinction that:

Eco’s oneiric climate is not a simple state of timelessness so much as it is one strategy for managing a contradiction faced by any character in a popular serial narrative… [being] merely the method that Weisinger’s Superman comics (and more broadly, most superhero comics from the 1940s through the early 1960s) used to present the illusion of action, development and novelty while preserving the characters in their most archetypal, recognizable and marketable states (for commercial reasons that Eco largely overlooks).\(^{86}\)

In tandem with this essentialising description of Eco’s proposition, Singer criticises more recent scholarship for mistakenly declaring the oneiric model as no longer applicable or at least severely problematised by the greater variety of modern comics’ storytelling methods, contending rather that many current scholars such as Jenkins do not recognise that “this multiplicity faces the same tensions between progressive time and static time,” as superhero comics by and large “still confront the same temporal dilemma – and often do so in ways that are remarkably similar to Eco’s oneiric climate.”\(^{87}\)

Debunking some of Jenkins’ specific examples of apparent oneiric defiance in modern Marvel comics that were soon thereafter overturned (not unlike my own equivocal observance of Superman’s ‘long-term’ yet eventually retooled marriage), Singer goes so far as to declare that “Jenkins drastically overstates contemporary

\(^{85}\) ibid., p. 357.
\(^{86}\) ibid., pp. 358-359.
\(^{87}\) ibid., pp. 359-360.
superhero comics’ break from their past practises; the difference between the oneiric reiteration of the Weisinger era and the more protracted continuity resets of the present is a difference of duration and self-conscious attention rather than kind.”88 I would concur, as the applicability of the oneiric model becomes more a question of time scale, while adding the caveat that this applies essentially within discreet diegeses, rather than necessarily as a view of the supertext as a whole.

More provocative is Singer’s taking to task of Ndalianis’ usage of Eco, illustrating various points at which he contends she misreads, even diametrically misrepresents Eco’s original meaning. Using examples from Ndalianis’ discussion of how adaptations such as Smallville destabilise models of narrative causality, mythic structures and foreground intertextuality in a manner significantly disruptive to Eco’s oneiric schema, Singer argues point by point that she has selectively misused Eco’s contentions, often to the point of complete reversal. Singer asserts that, rather than Smallville disrupting the oneiric nature of Superman’s established history by its confounding of continuity expectations, “The myth sustains itself precisely by breaking down the temporal relations of before and after; Eco says exactly the opposite of what Ndalianis claims he does…. this simultaneous logic of familiarity and novelty, repetition and addition, does not unsettle Eco’s schema – this is Eco’s schema… Far from collapsing the mythological value of Superman, Eco’s iterative seriality preserved it for decades.”89

While I concur with much of Ndalianis’ analysis of the methods in which adaptations such as Smallville engage in complex intertextual play with multiple demographics, from casual initiates to deeply comics-literate ‘engaged readers’ as discussed in my previous chapter, I find Singer’s characterisation of her use of Eco largely persuasive. But what perhaps neither Ndalianis nor Singer adequately consider is that while Smallville’s densely intertextual rewiring of Superman continuity is not significantly disruptive to Eco’s oneiric model when it comes to past and future representations of Superman per se, the television show in and of itself, as its own entity, does not follow an oneiric model.

I would thus disagree with Singer’s analysis that “Smallville may work through allusion and trivial revision rather than oneiric iteration, but its mission to tell new stories about familiar characters by starting over from the beginning is merely one more

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88 ibid., p. 360.
89 ibid., p. 362 (emphasis in the original).
variation on the model Eco describes.” For, unlike the 1950s retconned backstory of Superboy upon which the television show is very loosely inspired, Smallville was not situated as part of a specific pre-existing continuity, as opposed to the collective cultural preconception of Superman’s generalised narrative outline across the wider franchise supertext. The show’s storytelling goal, to get to the point at which Clark Kent assumes the identity of Superman, involved constant evolution -- with later seasons bearing little resemblance to any status quo at its inception, and conforming to only that most schematic of destinations. Thus Singer’s classification of it serving as yet another oneiric variation of the supertext is rendered a strained extrapolation of Eco’s definition at best.

Significantly, the television show was not a direct diegetic prequel to the Salkind Superman films nor any of prior television incarnations of the adult Superman, despite containing references to most of them, nor does it serve as backstory to any of the various phases of established continuity for Superman in comic book form. So despite being positioned as a notional prequel to a familiar career for Clark Kent ultimately becoming Superman, the series was in a state of constant novelistic flux, with major characters dropping out, dying, and taking unfamiliar paths, with little overt status quo from season to season. I would argue that despite having an end goal implied from the outset, Smallville was uniquely unburdened by the need to conform to most established details of continuity that are the hallmark of prequels required to fit a diegetically foregone status quo, such as the much-maligned Star Wars prequels, being able instead to forge its own relatively unencumbered continuity with neither a particularly oneiric climate nor an inordinate proliferation of predetermined outcomes. In this respect, Ndalianis’ discussion of Eco’s schema being disrupted retains some measure of validity, if perhaps not as she originally posited it, in that Smallville does defy expectations of preserving an oneirically stabilised vision of familiar Superman mythos tropes, but due to being freed from directly causal textual linkage, rather than intrinsically via its own intertextual superfluity.

90 ibid., p. 363.
91 In much the same way as the cartoon series Beast Wars: Transformers (Hasbro/Mainframe Entertainment, 1996-1999) served as both prequel and sequel (due to time-travel) to the original ‘Generation 1’ multimedia lore of the 1980s Transformers toy franchise. Its many intertextual reference points to the established G1 mythos utilised elements from the parallel yet irreconcilable continuities of Transformers’ original animated and comic book narratives. Fan consensus thus regards Beast Wars as taking place in ‘some version’ of familiar G1 canon, yet in an isolated continuity of its own making. As mentioned in Chapter 2, a similar process is beginning with the 2015 television series Gotham, which mines an unexplored timeframe of Batman’s mythology without serving as a direct prequel to any established iteration of Bat-continuity.
I would ultimately assess that Eco’s oneiric climate model, although requiring some re-evaluation in light of changes to the nature of comic storytelling in the decades since its publication, remains an essentially valid and moreover valuable formulation, as it provides a highly accurate descriptor of the state of Superman’s continuity at virtually any given point in both his comic canon cycles and most of his adaptations to other media. Where amendment is required is in treating Eco’s oneiric vision as a component part of a wider cycle of reboots and rearticulations, at least for DC Comics, and especially within the development of Superman’s broader supertext. Perhaps reboots themselves might best be viewed as a kind of meta-oneiric device, a necessary component of the palimpsestic nature of comic book continuity’s cyclical refreshment. For as much as each rearticulation of the mythos via reboot or adaptation may seek to reinvent, update, or efface what has come before, the wider franchise supertext will almost certainly never end, and thus even the most radical deviations of textual rearticulation seem destined to ultimate reassert a meta-oneiric state, if you will. In its broadest picture, Superman remains conceptually oneiric partly because of reboots, not in spite of them.

This notion shall be explored further in the following chapter, but first it is necessary to consider the textual operations of stories which are by their very design contrary to oneiric limitations, as they fit entirely outside of the concerns of diegetic continuity which we have thus far concerned ourselves with, yet remain significant aspect of any consideration of the wider franchise supertext by dint of their existence as anti-oneiric texts.

**Imaginary Stories, Elseworlds, and Other Continuity Outliers**

While published material which is official yet out-of-continuity has been touched upon previously, the primary focus has hitherto been on tracking the changes and methods of change wrought to the primary, ongoing diegesis of whatever is deemed to be ‘current continuity’ at any given time. In other words, that material which was at once officially part of continuity being subsequently rendered retroactively non-canonical by the process of later retcons or reboots. However, this does not account for the plethora of material that, although officially published by the relevant rights-holders,\(^2\) was never framed as being canonical in the first place.

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Even though continuity was of lesser concern in the first few decades of the superhero genre’s publications, not all narratives presented by Marvel or DC Comics have always been intended to fit into their respective mainstream diegetic universes (or even multiverses). In an industry progressively more obsessed with the creation, maintenance, and manipulation of continuity, an outgrowth of this trend is the contrary impulse to tell stories that are explicitly and intentionally freed from the restrictively open-ended irresolution of the (relative) oneiric climate Eco posited. In direct contrast to the process of retroactively deeming material non-canonical, these tales are intrinsically designed to be incompatible with ongoing continuity, in order to tell stories that a typical continuity model would not allow.

The earliest examples of this were the aforementioned so-called ‘imaginary stories.’ Prevalent in the 1950s and 1960s, this formal designation demarcated what were typically one-off issues, inserted into the monthly flow of regular publications. They were particularly prevalent in titles overseen by Superman editor Mort Weisinger, and presented tales which blatantly violated the then relatively stable oneiric climate. Stories could involve any number of Eco’s ‘steps towards death’ for the typical status quo, such as Superman marrying Lois Lane,93 Luthor permanently reforming, even the death of Superman himself,4 or could even involve irreconcilable diversions from current canon such as changing aspects of the base premise and backstory, such as positing Kal-El’s entire family escaping Krypton,95 being the brother of Lex Luthor96 or Batman,97 or Clark Kent becoming a criminal opposed by Luthor as a Kryptonian superhero.98

A variation on this model became popular at Marvel Comics, mainly during the 1970s through 1990s, in the aptly named comic What If...?,99 in which each issue presented a divergent outcome from an established moment in continuity and extrapolating an alternate timeline of possible consequences, from obvious key moments in Marvel history such as “What if Phoenix had not died?”100 and “What if Spider-Man

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95 *Superboy* [vol. 1] #95 (w. Jerry Coleman, a. George Papp, DC Comics, 1962).
99 Principally in two volumes, *What If?* (Marvel Comics, 1977-1984), and *What If...?* (Marvel Comics, 1989-1998), as well as various sporadic miniseries and one-shots from 2005 onwards.
married the Black Cat?,” through to more unlikely options like “What if the Punisher became Captain America?” and “What if Conan the Barbarian were stranded in the 20th Century.”

At DC the imaginary story trend died out in popularity over this period, and was well and truly defunct by the time of Crisis on Infinite Earths’ reboot of their wider continuity. This was unsurprising, as restructuring and then maintaining continuity was their more immediate goal at the time than offering alternative glimpses -- with one significant exception penned by Alan Moore to close out the pre-Crisis era, to which I shall return in the next chapter. However, as the DC universe largely settled into its post-Crisis state, the idea of the non-canonical storytelling began to be revisited. The previously discussed Dark Knight Returns by Frank Miller was an early example, being set in a non-canonical potential future of a middle-aged Batman, while Alex Ross and Mark Waid’s Kingdom Come similarly portrayed a middle-aged Superman in the near future coming out of retirement to grapple with a crumbling society.

These landmark series led to the establishment of the ‘Elseworlds’ imprimatur, a swathe of one-shots, miniseries and short graphic novels which, as the included overview always read: “In Elseworlds, super-heroes are taken from their usual settings and put into strange times and places - some that have existed, and others that can’t, couldn't or shouldn't exist. The result is stories that make characters who are as familiar as yesterday seem as fresh as tomorrow.” Primarily but not exclusively featuring stories about DC’s ‘Trinity’ of Superman, Batman, or Wonder Woman, these tales typically involved

104 Although it is possible that the text has been widely misinterpreted as taking place in ‘the future,’ since there is scant textual indication that it is set any further ahead than 1986, its year of publication. A reading of the story as being (then) contemporary rather than futuristic would actually explain various apparent anachronisms in a ‘future’ interpretation, such as the U.S. President still being portrayed as overtly resembling Ronald Reagan. The presumption of its future setting is largely predicated on the expectation of Batman’s typically oneric youthfulness -- that a retired, 55-year-old Batman must ergo be set in ‘the future’ of the present day, in which contemporaneously published monthly Batman comics still depicted him in his prime. If one discards this preconception, however, it can easily be viewed instead as a story presenting the Silver Age Batman of the 1960s as having advanced to become a middle-aged man by 1986, eschewing the floating timeline convention in favour of realtime. This would also have a certain thematic resonance, as it was part of Frank Miller’s stated intent with the graphic novel to reassert a sense of seriousness to Batman which he felt had been derailed by the campiness of Adam West’s TV portrayal in the 1960s, in another example of cross-media adaptations having such an overshadowing cultural capital.
“transdiegetization,” as Genette would put it, transposing the characters into radically different settings, such as a Victorian-era Batman, an Arthurian Superman, an Old West Wonder Woman, or mash-ups with (public domain) classics of film and literature, including Superman as Frankenstein’s Monster, or Batman in *Nosferatu.* Others were more reminiscent of the old imaginary stories’ outlandish inversions of premise, such as Superman being the last survivor of Earth rocketed to Krypton, or portraying Kal-El being raised by the Waynes instead of the Kents to become a superpowered Batman.

Elseworlds represented, according to Klock, a transition from DC’s post-*Crisis* attitude to continuity simplification to its millennial latitude for greater multiplicity. While some of the more popular of these stories have since been briefly revisited by retconning them as part of later re-instated multiverse systems, the purpose of these publications was to explore versions and possibilities of the characters outside the scope of what would ever be deemed permissible in the mainstream DC continuity as too radical a departure from the status quo. While the rate of publication has slowed and the Elseworlds label become defunct, the premise of such stories continues under later out-of-continuity imprints such as ‘All Star’ and ‘Earth One.’

The function of imaginary stories, Elseworlds and other such continuity outliers published by the characters’ rights-holders -- as official yet non-canonical content -- is multifaceted. In some respects they allow for a wider exploration of characters than oneiric strictures can allow, permitting writers to reconsider the boundaries and implications of these properties, to see how far these characters can be pushed and distorted until they become unrecognisable, and in the process yield results that can vary

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110 *The Superman Monster* [graphic novel], w. Dan Abnet and Andy Lanning, a. Anthony Williams (DC Comics, New York, 1999).
111 *Batman: Nosferatu* [graphic novel], w. Jean-Marc Lofficier and Randy Lofficier, a. Ted Mc Keeever (DC Comics, New York, 1999).
115 As was non-narratively yet officially done by designating many of the older imaginary stories as alternate Earths within the pre-*Crisis* multiverse. *Crisis on Infinite Earths: The Compendium* (*Absolute Crisis, vol. 2*) (DC Comics, New York, 2005). See also Parker, “Official Apocrypha,” pp. 4-5.
from the trivial to at times deeply revealing of these fictional entities’ most essential components. As Gordon contends: “The symbolic resonance of Superman is important in uniting diverse forms, [...] as well as the comic book ‘imaginary tales,’ which are not held to be part of the main narrative of the Superman comic books but are a sort of apocrypha that further enhances the character’s mythological dimension.”116

From the perspective of adaptation, I shall elaborate in the next chapter my argument that the revision of continuity itself is an adaptive act, and thus through this adaptational lens official (yet noncanonical) imaginary stories and the like can be viewed as an unusual type of paratextual manifestation of the mainstream canon. As discussed in Chapter 1, my usage is similar to Genette’s conception of an autographic paratext, albeit with the aforesaid caveat that it is a difficult term to apply to comic books’ diegeses. This is due to all texts within the same overarching continuity being equally canonical, and a wider view of the supertext as lacking a discreet primary hypotext should deem even official adaptations to other media as no less textually valid from a franchise perspective.

What sets Elseworlds and imaginary stories aside and more comfortably into the paratextual category is their canonically peripheral nature from inception and, crucially, their limited nature. While several such stories have proved memorable and even influential, their intentional separation in publication status as designated noncanonical stories makes them fleeting, separate, and almost uniquely discreet in a medium which is predicated on the maintenance of long-form ongoing narrative diegesis. In this respect I would contend that the paratextual threshold that separates the narratological function an Elseworlds or What If? from ‘mainstream’ continuity (even if that continuity itself is subsequently rendered non-canonical) recalls my previous amendment to Proctor’s attempts to provide definitional distinctions between reboots, remakes and sequels, in terms of their framing as part of an intended ongoing serialisation.

Parker proposes the rather useful catch-all term “official apocrypha”117 to describe these noncanonical tales, and makes the compelling argument that “From a scholarly perspective, official apocrypha is seen as a discursive site for play with the conventions of the franchise… and as a way of monetizing interesting ideas that would not otherwise be suited for publication.”118 This is, I would add by way of clarification, due to the aforementioned frequently anti-oneiric premises of such tales being contrary to

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118 ibid., p. 4.
the needs of a meta-oneiric state being perpetuated for the financial interests of ongoing publication. This sense of ‘play’ can have a useful function in seeking to prop up mainstream continuity and reinforce its oneiric boundaries through providing contrasting examples of what current canon is not. Parker makes a similar observation, noting that “some canonical storylines strongly resemble official apocrypha, but are discursively positioned in opposition to those texts,” and that such a comparison serves “to reinforce the canon.”

Jenkins suggests that while “many hardcore fans see this kind of ‘continuity’ as the real payoff for their investment of time and energy in collecting the scattered bits and assembling them into a meaningful whole,” the popularity of such noncanonical tales suggests we should “consider the ways that franchises might value diversity over coherence in their exploration of fictional worlds.” In contrast to the conformity of the continuity impulse, Jenkins proposes:

…an alternative set of rewards for our mastery of the source material. Multiplicity allows fans to take pleasure in alternative retellings, seeing the characters and events from fresh perspectives, and comics publishers trust their fans to sort out not only how the pieces fit together, but also which version of the story any given work fits within.

Parker, however, takes exception to this, contending that, “Jenkins has continued to privilege consistency and clarity, and insists on understanding franchises in terms of the fictional universes they create, rather than as discursive systems.”

Parker contends that questions of official canonicity should be largely ignored, suggesting that “As scholars it is necessary that we decentralize our thinking to acknowledge and account for the ways in which different franchise discourses construct and organize vast, incoherent multiplicities of texts and meaning as a coherent system.” I find Parker’s call to embrace meta and peripheral aspects of franchises and eschew consideration of structures of canonicity intriguing yet impractical, although I do not entirely side with the formalism of Jenkins’ approach either. Parker is correct in his conception of the totality of superhero franchises’ fractured and overlapping treatment of continuity as far more complex than the type of sorting-into-the-right-boxes approach which Jenkins’ suggests, and his paraphrasing of Alan Moore’s seminal Superman tale

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119 ibid., p. 5.
121 ibid.
122 ibid.
124 ibid., pp. 8-9.
(which I shall discuss further in my next chapter) that “Aren’t they all *Imaginary Stories*”\(^{125}\) does aptly allude to the extra-diegetic absurdity of privileging equally fictional narratives by hierarchical conceptions of ‘reality.’

I would argue, however, for the purposes of my own methodology at the very least, that in his attempt to resist the potentially reductive model of Jenkins’ orderliness, Parker overreaches. It is all very well to view the textual multiplicity of official apocrypha alongside canonical texts for a more complete view of a franchise as he exhorts, yet he crucially underplays the central fact that canonicity does bear greater weight of significance, not only by dint of its publisher-designated higher status, but also simply due to its greater prevalence. In much the same fashion that I have demonstrated that cross-media adaptations bear a wider cultural capital than the ‘parent’ medium of comic books, it is no accident that ‘mainstream continuity,’ whatever that may currently entail, routinely dominates the vast majority of comic publisher’s output. Moreover, the significance of continuity management, however potentially misguided or subjectively excessive, cannot be underestimated in terms of the considerable amount of publishing output DC, and now increasingly Marvel as well, put into rebooting, retconning, and otherwise ‘managing’ the state of its diegetic canon. While Parker and Jenkins’ views are compatible with any appraisal of the wider view of comic franchises across multiple media, in terms of the generalised transmission of a core unified narrative as I have designated it a ‘supertext,’ it should not be overstated that official apocrypha form an ultimately small segment of the already subcategorised comic book arm of any such franchise, albeit a highly illustrative one in terms of studying how continuity operations are delineated.

**Multiplicity and Pastiche**

As I have argued that continuity outliers in the form of official apocrypha exist to circumvent, test and, by opposition, delineate the boundaries of oneiric continuity, before concluding this chapter it is necessary to consider briefly this same creative thrust taken to its logical extreme within the genre, short of engaging with unlicensed non-professional fan-fiction. This impulse to explore an iconic character beyond the bounds of continuity extends further, however, often to the point of certain creators wishing to push the characters beyond what the parent company would deem acceptable for even

\(^{125}\) *ibid.*, p. 9.
non-canonical publications like official apocrypha. This gives rise to the phenomenon of the pastiche character.

On the most basic level, in the context of comic books a pastiche character is an ostensibly original creation which contains many overt similarities in premise, backstory, appearance, superpowers, persona, milieu, or all of the above, to a well-known existing character, such that they are readily understood by the reader to be intended as a stand-in for the figure they pointedly resemble.

However, all characters with pronounced similarities to other preexisting ones are not necessarily pastiches -- for instance the Atlantean ruler Namor, speedster Quicksilver or archer Hawkeye, from Marvel Comics’ *The Avengers*, are not generally regarded as pastiches of DC’s earlier, identically-themed characters Aquaman, the Flash, or Green Arrow from *Justice League*, but rather are regarded to be merely similar yet distinct characters in their own right -- points amicably made light of on the rare occasions that Marvel and DC have published crossovers. Such similarities were not always treated with such cordiality in the corporate culture, however, as there is a history of litigation over such matters from the Golden Age of comics. DC took legal action against Bruns Publications’ Wonder Man and, most notably, Fawcett Comics’ Captain Marvel, was accused of infringing the copyright of Superman, due to similarities of appearance and abilities, despite radically different backstories. DC Comics prevailed and subsequently bought out the rights to the Captain Marvel/Shazam characters, in what would prove to be the first of several instances over the decades of DC purchasing the intellectual property of smaller publishers, including characters derivative of their own more famous properties.

From the Bronze Age onwards, however, pastiches became increasingly common. In some cases, they have been used to tell stories which avoid altering the status quo of more ‘valuable’ original characters, such as Alan Moore’s cast of characters in *Watchmen* being identifiably based on the former Charlton Comics characters such as The Question (Rorschach), Captain Atom (Dr. Manhattan), Blue Beetle (Night-Owl) et

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126 The miniseries *Marvel Versus DC* (4 issues, w. Ron Marz and Peter David, a. Claudio Castellini and Dan Jurgens, Marvel Comics and DC Comics, 1996), and *JLA/Avengers* (4 issues, w. Kurt Busiek, a. George Pérez, Marvel Comics and DC Comics, 2003) each featured scenes in which these closely-matched characters (and others) were pointedly juxtaposed.


al., then-recently acquired by DC with the intent of being folded into their post-*Crisis* continuity.\(^{131}\)

More commonly, however, pastiche characters tend to be created under companies other than the rights-holders to the characters upon which they are based. Most significantly, superhero pastiches are almost always created for a purpose that is at least partly an expression of McFarlane’s notion of “commentative power”\(^{132}\) -- just as they are designed to be immediately legible stand-ins for the characters upon whom they are so transparently based, they are intended to nevertheless tell stories *about* those characters, or otherwise explore the underlying themes or implications they represent.

Following a similar impulse to the continuity-freeing imaginary story or Elseworlds tale, pastiche characters allow creators to explore concepts or story directions which rights-holders would likely never allow their intellectual property to appear in. A significant early example was Marvel Comics’ *Squadron Supreme*,\(^{133}\) a thinly-veiled pastiche of DC’s Justice League,\(^{134}\) who decide to conquer the world for the purpose of forcibly transforming it into a utopia, as a narrative extrapolation of the typically reactive rather than proactive nature of superhero behaviour in enforcing the status quo, as discussed by Gordon, Pearson and Uricchio.\(^{135}\)

The essential concept of the godlike Justice League enforcing their subjectively benevolent will upon humanity proved popular, and would be revisited by successive generations of writers with other pastiches at other companies, most notably *The Authority*,\(^{136}\) in which the heroes include ersatz versions of Superman and Batman as a married gay couple,\(^{137}\) and who all combat threats with remorseless lethality.\(^{138}\) Although such a portrayal of their headline team was still outside the bounds of what was

\(^{131}\) When it became apparent that Moore’s bleak story would leave the Charlton characters effectively unusable afterwards, and in any case incompatible with being set in a wider DC Universe diegesis, the decision was made to use original pastiche characters instead. See Khoury, *The Extraordinary Works of Alan Moore*, p. 109.

\(^{132}\) McFarlane, “It Wasn’t Like That in the Book,” pp. 12, 13.


\(^{134}\) Which became the subject of one of the best metatextual jokes in the history of mainstream comic books, when in the aforementioned *JLA/Avengers* the wisecracking Hawkeye observes of the Justice League; “Oh, right -- *now* I got it! These losers -- they’re nothin’ but a bunch of Squadron Supreme wannabes!”


\(^{136}\) Various series and miniseries, created by Warren Ellis and Bryan Hitch, notable runs penned by Ellis and Mark Millar, WildStorm/Image Comics, later WildStorm/DC Comics, 1999-2010 (sporadically).

\(^{137}\) Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics*, p. 143.

\(^{138}\) Ironically WildStorm was eventually bought out by DC, meaning that DC now own several pastiches of their own characters, including the *WildC.A.T.S.* character Mr. Majestic, yet another thinly-veiled expy of Superman.
permissible in mainstream DC Continuity, the popularity of such violently autocratic pastiche characters was acknowledged and parodied via further layers of metatextuality, with DC creating pastiches of these pastiches themselves, to reassert the moral authority of their originals. Eventually the notion of a totalitarian Justice League using the actual characters would, further into the new millennium, start being utilised by DC itself, albeit still only in out-of-continuity content based in ancillary media.

If officially-published imaginary stories and Elseworlds tales may be considered paratextual to the main continuity of their subject matter, comic book pastiches lie somewhere between Gray’s expansive view of Genette’s allographic paratexts, a kind of professionalised equivalent to the “textual poaching” of fan-fiction discussed ethnographically by Jenkins, Swafford and Brown, as well as similar impulses and techniques which inform ‘Robinsonades’ and the genre of revisionist/parallel literature.

What necessitates that pastiches in fact be pastiches, as distinct from authorised continuity outliers, is of course copyright, as the professionally published comics cannot afford either the illegitimacy of fan-fiction, nor enjoy the privilege of their subject matter having fallen into the public domain.

In the 2000s and 2010s pastiches became widely accepted, a technique favoured by many of the most acclaimed writers in the mainstream industry, and are now a common method for varying purposes from parody, to lighthearted deconstruction of genre conventions, or even serious analyses of the specific mimicked hero that would never be allowed with the actual property itself. Sometimes these ersatz versions of longstanding characters play upon or subvert the familiar archetypes of the genre by portraying them radically against type -- depicting a Superman pastiche as a fascistic

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139 The Elite were an ultraviolent, dictatorship DC Comics super-team created as an obvious pastiche of The Authority (then owned by Image, but later acquired by DC due to the sale of Wild Storm), who upstage and then are subsequently upstaged in turn by Superman. The encounter played out metatextually as a debate over the moral authority of traditionally non-lethal versus modern bloodthirsty models of superheroes, in the story now widely regarded as a modern classic “What’s So Funny About Truth Justice & the American Way?” in Action Comics [vol. 1] #775 (w. Joe Kelly, a. Doug Mahnke and Lee Bermejo, DC Comics, 2001). The story was adapted (and, uniquely, expanded) by the original writer as the direct-to-video animated feature Superman vs. The Elite (Dir. Michael Chang, Warner Bros. Animation, 2012).


142 In particular: Warren Ellis, Mark Millar, J. Michael Straczynski, Garth Ennis, Robert Kirkman and Neil Gaiman, to name but a few.
conspirator\textsuperscript{143} or running a child abuse ring,\textsuperscript{144} for example. The general rule of thumb is that pastiche versions of characters are used for exploring aspects of popular characters by pushing them in directions that would be too radical, controversial, or even parodic of their unofficial hypotexts -- and none moreso than Superman.

It is thus perhaps unsurprising that, as the progenitor of the entire genre and most iconic and universally recognisable superhero, Superman has been the subject for far more pastiches than any other character, practicably more numerous than can be definitively counted. Portrayals range wildly -- from lampooning Superman’s ‘boyscout’ morality as juxtaposed against a prostitute superhero,\textsuperscript{145} to serious versions depicting the terrifying potential of a character with his godlike powers if unfettered by such morality,\textsuperscript{146} or compromised by insanity,\textsuperscript{147} iterations which emphasise the alien nature of such a character,\textsuperscript{148} recast his with an African-American appearance and origin story,\textsuperscript{149} focusing on the difficulty of such a globally busy hero to manage a secret identity and go on a date,\textsuperscript{150} others which reject heroism in favour of villainy,\textsuperscript{151} or willing to go to extreme measures to make the world fit his view of a utopia,\textsuperscript{152} and even exploring the metatexual ‘heroism’ of a Christopher Reeve-esque actor who once played Superman,\textsuperscript{153} to name but a few of many dozens.

\textsuperscript{143} The Homelander, from Garth Ennis’ \textit{The Boys}, 72 issues (WildStorm/DC Comics, later Dynamite Entertainment, 2006-2012).
\textsuperscript{144} In this case by Alan Moore himself, with a minor character in \textit{Top Ten} (America’s Best Comics/WildStorm/DC Comics, 1999-2001).
\textsuperscript{145} \textit{The Pro} [graphic novel], w. Garth Ennis, a. Amanda Connor, (Image Comics, 2002).
\textsuperscript{146} Such as Apollo, from the aforementioned \textit{The Authority}.
\textsuperscript{147} Marvel Comics’ \textit{The Sentry}, who doubled as his own supervillain due to a split personality. The character had conceptual similarities to Alan Moore’s work on both \textit{Miracleman} and \textit{Supreme}, such as being a middle-aged man who has forgotten he is a superhero, and utilising faux-vintage comic art to portray Silver Age ‘memories,’ respectively. First appeared in \textit{The Sentry} #1 (w. Paul Jenkins, a. Jae Lee, Marvel Comics, 2000).
\textsuperscript{149} The titular \textit{Icon}, 42 issues, w. Dwayne McDuffie, a. M. D. Bright, (Milestone/DC Comics, 1993-1997).
\textsuperscript{150} Samaritan, from Kurt Busiek’s \textit{Astro City}, a comic entirely populated by superhero pastiches, various monthly series, miniseries and specials (w. Kurt Busiek, a. Brent Anderson and Alex Ross, Homage Comics/Image Comics, later WildStorm/Image, later still WildStorm/DC Comics, currently Vertigo/DC, 1995-present, sporadically).
\textsuperscript{151} The Plutonian, from \textit{Irredeemable}, 37 issues, w. Mark Waid, a. Peter Krause, Eduardo Barreto and Diego Barreto, (Boom! Studios, 2009-2012).
\textsuperscript{152} Such as Hyperion from the aforementioned \textit{Squadron Supreme}, and The High, notably in the storyline “Change or Die” from \textit{StormWatch} [vol. 1] #48-50, w. Warren Ellis, a. Tom Raney, (WildStorm/Image, 1997).
\textsuperscript{153} The titular \textit{Superior}, 7 issues (w. Mark Millar, a. Leinil Francis Yu, Icon Comics/Marvel Comics, 2010-2012).
Conclusion

Whether through a multitude of official apocrypha, or through the near limitless opportunities offered by pastiche characters, Superman has been easily the character in the superhero genre most widely explored outside of the confines of his own canonical diegesis. This is perhaps doubly appropriate, for the character singled out decades ago by Umberto Eco as the exemplar of his conception of the oneiric climate as a schema for the relative presentism of superhero stories, narratively suspended between the novelistic and the mythic. As I have argued through the case study of Superman, and by extension the superhero genre, Eco’s oneiric schema is both outdated and limiting, yet contains in it a wider truth than perhaps he could have originally conceived.

By seeking to delineate and codify the language and framing of how continuity has been framed in the context of the genre’s history, I have argued that continuity itself, while seemingly anti-oneiric, does in its larger strictures of reinvention and cyclical rearticulation, demonstrate a broader meta-oneiric impulse. In a similar manner, the overtly anti-oneiric nature of noncanon stories and pastiches serve in turn to define further the oneiric quality of ongoing comic book diegesis’ increasingly cyclical nature.

However, for a deeper understanding of how these cycles operate, and what kind of inter-adaptational processes they reveal, it is necessary to move away from analysis of continuity principles in general, and engage with a more detailed understanding of the way these cycles accrue a deepening palimpsestuous textuality through a specific study of the history of Superman’s continuity, the longest and most densely re-worked of any in the wider genre he progenated. This shall be the topic of my next and final chapter.
Chapter 4
PALIMPSESTOUS CONTINUITY MANAGEMENT
AS ADAPTATION

The previous chapter analysed the multifaceted treatment of narrative continuity, breaking it down for examination of its finer definitions and methods, and its relational significance to the development of the superhero genre’s publication history. It is now the task of this chapter to move from questions of the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of canonicity to tackle a deeper analysis of ‘why.’

In order to do so, this final chapter will make a closer examination of this thesis’ chosen case study in order to explore these operations of canon, that of Superman’s own complex textual development. While earlier chapters have looked more broadly at the array of intertextual influences across the wider franchise supertext and touched upon noncanonical articulations of the mythos via both official apocrypha and pastiche, the focus here will narrow slightly to the nonetheless massive narrative continuum that forms Superman’s mainstream comic book diegesis, in all its convoluted permutations, spanning over three quarters of a century.

Having laid the groundwork at length in Chapter 3 for a methodological understanding of reboots and retcons, this chapter shall delve into the series of convoluted revisions that Superman’s unceasing monthly adventures have undergone over the decades in which diegetic hypotextual ‘history’ is retold, tweaked and even significantly erased time and again, with increasingly elaborate rationales. This will be demonstrated as being in distinct contrast to the more discreet handling of continuity employed by rival publisher Marvel Comics when facing similar concerns, and raises intriguing metatextual issues as popular tropes migrate from earlier phases of discarded narrative, in addition to adopting transmedia adaptations back into the ‘parent’ medium as discussed in Chapter 2.

While various continuity elements disappear and reappear over a series of increasingly frequent re-writings of Superman’s origin story and perpetual meta-oneiric redrafting of his status quo, a deeply palimpsestic text of the type Genette formulated emerges as a model to perpetuate the increasingly intertextual Superman narrative. This chapter delineates these various strains of internalised textual rearticulation via outlining the history of Superman’s specific comic book continuity, which will be demonstrated to act in part as a barometer of DC Comics’ editorial policies. Moreover, I shall argue that
attempting to ‘fix’ continuity ‘problems’ chiefly related to Superman in particular has been instrumental in the development of DC’s wider approach to continuity management policies, which would not have otherwise developed with as metatextual a flavour as they ultimately did. Pertinent critiques and parodies of these approaches from within the medium shall also be addressed.

Intertextual considerations covered in Chapter 2 regarding adaptation within the cross-media franchise shall be extended to the similar textual operations taking place via revisions of diegetic continuity within the comics medium, and I shall identify significant parallels of technique between adaptation within and without the comic medium. Crucially, this chapter shall address how the metatextual construction of such an increasingly dense and layered cultural narrative-text is designed to be differently accessed by a wide variety of potential readers, reaching across an array of prior and parallel utterances of the surrounding supertext, and resulting in profoundly palimpsestuous narrative rearticulations. In analysing these dense consequent palimpsests, I ask the crucial question of ‘why reboot?’ and why Superman, in particular, has been subject to such a uniquely repeated and accelerating cycle of such textual renewals.

**Approaches to Continuity**

One of the significant matters to note when analysing issues of continuity is the largely consistent and appreciably opposite approaches to continuity management employed by Marvel Comics and DC Comics when dealing with their respective fictional universes. Although neither company makes a particular point of publicly declaring an official ‘policy’ on continuity, strong trends are easy to observe, indicating an implicit preference, or at least their history of implementation.

While both companies have generally sought to maintain a status quo, neither have been particularly adverse to performing all manner of retcons and continuity revisions over the decades. Marvel, however, has generally taken the approach of having ‘invisible’ continuity, preferring to use the insertion retcon and soft retcon models as outlined in my previous chapter. One of the most famous examples was in the case of the X-Men character Jean Grey (originally codenamed Marvel Girl, and later Phoenix), whose landmark death at the conclusion to “The Dark Phoenix Saga”\(^1\) was later retroactively invalidated, revealing in a rather soap opera-esque twist that it had not been the real Jean Grey who perished. The retcon was that a cosmic entity had taken on the persona of Jean Grey who perished. The retcon was that a cosmic entity had taken on the persona of Jean

\(^1\) *Uncanny X-Men* [vol. 1] #137 (w. Chris Claremont, w./a. John Byrne, Marvel Comics, 1980).
Grey at the point of her first appearance in the new Phoenix identity, rather than actually being Grey herself as the story (and the ensuing four years of published appearances) originally presented.

The significance of this type of continuity change additionally requires readers to reassess retroactively many of the preceding stories they have read featuring Jean Grey in her Phoenix identity, in order to process the new information that the character who was presented as Jean when the stories were originally published was, in fact, merely an imposter. Although directly contradicting what readers had been led to believe at the time (and what writer Chris Claremont had originally intended), the soft retcon of Jean Grey’s survival and by extension Phoenix’s nature as a doppelgänger preserves a coherent diegetic ‘reality’ without prior narrative events being invalidated so much as drastically recontextualised by new information. In other words, it is not that events as originally experienced by the readers were later deemed to have ‘never happened,’ but rather that readers’ (directed) interpretation of said events was retroactively deemed incorrect, due to possessing incomplete knowledge at the time. This type of retcon that seeks to maintain an internally consistent vision of fictional reality is typical of the Marvel approach.

Hard retcons, by comparison, although by no means unheard of, are generally avoided at Marvel, and when used are almost entirely of the ‘non-diegetic’ variety, such as updating Iron Man’s origin story from taking place in the Vietnam War to the (presumably first) Gulf War in order to keep pace with a floating timeline. Although clearly inconsistent with previous depictions of the character’s origin, the revision is presented without any diegetic acknowledgement that a change in history or ‘reality’ has taken place -- the new version simply supersedes the original and readers are expected to ignore any further inconsistencies that result from the alteration, such as passing references to Vietnam in previous stories which are, nevertheless, otherwise still deemed canonical. Although as of the time of this writing the 2015 miniseries Secret Wars is ambiguously touted to have some lasting continuity ramifications for the wider Marvel Universe, for over five decades Marvel Comics has never conducted a line-wide reboot of its canon.

DC by comparison has had a far more ‘hands on’ approach to continuity, dating back to the beginning of the Silver Age (contemporaneous with the very beginning of

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3 This retcon occurred when the genuine Grey was later discovered alive, in Fantastic Four [vol. 1] # 286 (w./a. John Byrne, Marvel Comics, 1986).
5 See also Jason Bainbridge, “‘Worlds Within Worlds’: The Role of Superheroes in the Marvel and DC Universes,” in Ndalianis, The Contemporary Comic Book Superhero, pp. 68, 82.
Marvel), generally using diegetic hard retcons to make explicit changes to their continuity, often though the use of well-publicised crossover ‘event’ stories that reshape the origins and histories of individual characters and even the nature of in-universe reality. In part, this is due to DC having a longer history of continuous publication than Marvel by about twenty years,\(^6\) resulting in the accumulation of more continuity, and with it more continuity problems from an earlier point in its history.

Although the first decade or two of DC comics involved occasional minor retcons, it was the birth of the Silver Age and a new direction taken by the company in reviving several of its earlier characters in new forms, which led the company down the path of openly acknowledging continuity issues and presenting diegetic explanations. Perhaps it was merely that a precedent had been set, but DC has largely followed suit ever since, providing elaborate in-story explanations for editorial decisions regarding continuity management, a trend that has lent an increasingly metatextual tone to their comics’ diegesis, as well as becoming a more frequent occurrence over the ensuing decades. As Proctor notes, “retcons, relaunches and reboots have proliferated exponentially in the post-Millennial context.”\(^7\)

What then is the purpose of making this comparison between the implicit ‘continuity policies’ of the two major publishers of superhero comic books? Any analysis of Superman and his complex history of continuity revisions requires a contextual appreciation for the wider range of approaches to similar issues in the superhero genre, a genre overwhelmingly dominated by the output and history of these ‘Big Two’ publishers. Just as Marvel’s historically ‘invisible’ approach to continuity is broadly indicative of the most common usage of retcons in other genres and media that engage in similar types of long-term serialised storytelling, Superman’s publication history holds an unusually interrelated and crucial role within DC Comics’ wider continuity policy, which itself uses an atypically metatextual model.

I shall argue that the treatment of Superman’s continuity is so closely bound up in DC’s wider system of continuity management that the two have an almost inextricably

\(^6\) One could argue that this is not quite so simple, as DC itself did not exist *per se* prior to National Comics (itself the amalgamation of Detective Comics, Inc. and National Allied Publications) with All-American Publications in 1944 to become National Periodical Publications, only officially becoming DC Comics, Inc. in 1977 after decades of using the ‘Superman-DC’ cover logo. It should be noted that Marvel does have its own Golden Age characters as well (most notably Captain America), from the company’s prior incarnations as Timely Comics (1939-1950) and Atlas Comics (1951-1957). However, Marvel has not retained a large stable of Golden Age characters in active use, nor has it engaged in significant exploration of their Golden Age continuity for the purposes of incorporating it as part of its modern canon in the way DC has. The vast majority of characters and content deemed relevant (and more to the point canonical) to the Marvel Universe dates from the early 1960s onwards, with the debut of the Fantastic Four in 1961.

causal relationship -- that were it not for Superman, DC’s openly diegetic approach would most likely not have developed as it did.

**Crisis of Continuity Conundrums**

In the Golden Age the earliest example of a comic book ‘shared universe,’ and thus, by implication a notion of shared continuity, came into being via the formation in 1940 of the first superhero team, Justice Society of America. When superhero comics went into a sales slump in the postwar period\(^8\) from which they have never returned to the same heights,\(^9\) most of Superman’s Golden Age contemporaries ceased to appear in ongoing comics as their various respective titles ceased to be published. With the exceptions of Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman\(^{10}\) (and Aquaman and Green Arrow as backup features in *Adventure Comics*) appearing in continuous publication, superhero comics lay mostly dormant during the late 1940s and much of the 1950s, while other genres such as Western, Romance, Horror and War comics flourished in their place.

As discussed in my previous chapter, the birth of the Silver Age heralded the return of superheroes as a dominant genre, and was spearheaded by DC in 1956, even though Marvel is generally credited with ‘revolutionising’ the genre in the early 1960s, with its more psychological approach to characterisation and stronger initial attention to ongoing narrative continuity.\(^{11}\) Rather than reviving its existing characters unchanged, DC opted to take the core elements of several of their most successful Golden Age heroes -- generally their names, superpowers and broad iconography -- and entirely reinvent them for a new era as separate, unrelated characters. Piggybacking the rising popularity of science fiction, most of the reconceived characters had ‘scientific’ origin stories and sleeker ‘long underwear’ costumes than their more pulp-inspired predecessors,\(^{12}\) elements which, it should be noted, were both already in place for Superman as progenitor of the genre.

The core issue regarding continuity, however, was that these new versions of the Golden Age characters were *explicitly* not the same individuals as their wartime predecessors. For example, the Silver Age Green Lantern was now the brunette test pilot

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\(^{10}\) Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, pp. 8-9.

\(^{11}\) See Pustz, *Comic Book Culture*, p. 52.

\(^{12}\) For further discussion of the more diverse genre influences on the development of Golden and Silver Age superhero aesthetics than is commonly stated in fan discourse, see Jenkins, “Just Men in Tights,” pp. 26-29; and Jones, *Men of Tomorrow*, *passim*. 

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Hal Jordan empowered by a ring made with alien technology, as distinct from Alan Scott, the Golden Age Green Lantern, who was a blond railway engineer wielding a ring imbued with magic. In the same vein, the new Flash was police scientist Barry Allan as opposed to college student Jay Garrick, Hawkman was reconceived as the alien policeman Katar Hol instead of the reincarnated Egyptian prince Khufu, and the Atom became physicist Ray Palmer with shrinking abilities bestowed by a dwarf star fragment, instead of diminutive youth Al Pratt whose only power was a good right hook, and so forth. Much like their predecessors banding together as the Justice Society of America, the Silver Age incarnations formed the Justice League of America.

It was a fairly unprecedented concept, one Bongco considers the first instance of “one of the most significant trends in comicbook history – the revival and updating of original comicbook superheroes for a new audience,” a practice which has continued to this day. Although, I would argue, it would never occur again in so significant or concentrated a manner. Despite the more ambitiously metafictional elements and scope of later sweeping continuity ‘events’ such as Crisis, nothing has approached the wholesale reinvention of so many of the company’s major superhero properties as entirely new characters for ongoing main-continuity use.

In and of itself, this method of replacing these superheroes with similar new versions did not constitute an immediate continuity issue, as generations of different characters assuming the mantle of a single superheroic identity have since become popular, dubbed ‘legacy characters’ in another interesting example of shattering the oneiric climate. What was significant, however, was that rather than use this straightforward model or simply ignore the connection with their predecessors, these new stories actually did, from the very outset, take a position on their relationship to DC’s prior Golden Age continuity, loose though it had been. In the first appearance of the Silver Age reinvention of the Flash, upon gaining his superspeed powers Barry Allan decides to become a crimefighter and exposits that his choice to fashion his superhero identity as the Flash was directly inspired by having read comic books about the original Jay Garrick Flash, whom he regards as a fictional character.

This oddly metatextual approach to dealing with continuity was perhaps the first of its kind (almost certainly so for its genre), but it is hard to account for in retrospect. Whether it was intended as an obscure in-joke for long-time readers on the assumption that most of the original Golden Age audience were lost to a generational shift over the

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13 Bongco, Reading Comics, p. 98.
ensuing years (as comic readers of the time were generally presumed to be children and young servicemen who would grow out of the hobby), or a desire to have these characters appear new and not beholden to their predecessors, or merely a wish to avoid having to account for the continued existence of the original heroes, is unknown.

The unforeseen result, however, was a continuity problem which hinged on Superman. As stated, Superman had remained in continuous publication ever since his debut in 1938, ushering in the superhero genre and the Golden Age, weathering the superhero slump and continuing unabated into the new Silver Age. However, the problem emerged in relation to the now well-established notion of DC’s characters coexisting in a shared universe.

Just as Superman in the 1940s had occasionally interacted with the Golden Age Flash and his allies in the Justice Society, Superman now came into contact with the Silver Age Flash as a member of the Justice League. The obvious problem, overlooked at first by the various writers, was that the Golden Age characters had been established to be diegetically ‘fictional’ from the perspective of their Silver Age counterparts -- that is, not existing in the same continuity, and yet clearly Superman existed in both continuities. Moreover, he had done so with all his adventures to that point existing, at least notionally, in a single, unified canon.

What to do? As paying close attention to the minutiae of continuity was not yet a prevalent practice, the problem was left unaddressed for five years until a partial solution was introduced by Flash writer Gardner Fox in the story “Flash of Two Worlds,” wherein the Silver Age Flash accidentally travels to a parallel version of Earth wherein the Golden Age heroes he had believed to be mere comic book characters actually exist, allowing him to meet his inspiration Jay Garrick. This led to the designation of the then dominant Silver Age reality to be labelled ‘Earth-One’ and the Golden Age to be deemed ‘Earth-Two’ (albeit with an ahistorically counterintuitive numbering).

15 Apart from the Flash, the other reconceived heroes showed no initial acknowledgement of being aware of their ‘fictional’ predecessors.
17 The question of why the Golden Age heroes were only ‘fictional’ comic book characters from the perspective of the Silver Age version of Earth was rather metafictionally explained away in a soft retcon, by positing that the writers of these comic books were subconsciously attuned to this parallel reality and mistook the real adventures they thereby gleaned as being the products of their own imaginations.
18 Due to the retroactive nature of the canonical split, even simply determining what should be considered the ‘first appearance’ of Earth-One to be chronologically published has been the subject of ‘scholarly’ debate amongst fans. Opinions range from the first appearance of Superboy in 1945, to the first time the adult Superman referenced having had a career as Superboy, seen in retrospect as indicating that it was thus Earth-One’s version portrayed in Superman [vol. 1] #47 (DC Comics, 1947). More popular departure points include the aforementioned debuts of the Martian Manhunter and the Silver Age Flash in 1955 and 1956 as

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Thus began the establishment of the DC multiverse,\textsuperscript{19} whereby the sci-fi staple of parallel universes was systematised into a diegetically acknowledged series of alternate Earths, which incorporated the originally unrelated canon of the Golden Age as a separate but accessible part of an overall pan-reality system of continuity. In time this would expand to encompass many other alternate realities, including dark mirror universes, ‘funny animal’ genres, and variations of Earth as home to groups of other superhero characters acquired when DC bought out other companies’ assets.\textsuperscript{20} Each were designated their own parallel Earth in the DC Multiverse system of the time.

The point as far as Superman’s continuity was concerned, however, was that this provided in a roundabout way an explanation for the existence of Superman in both the Golden and Silver Age continuities -- that there were \textit{two} different Supermen, who diegetically coexisted, albeit on parallel Earths.\textsuperscript{21} Unlike the other aforementioned Silver Age characters who were entirely new versions of their wartime counterparts complete with different backstories and secret identities, the two versions of Superman were effectively the same man with the same origin -- both were Kal-El,\textsuperscript{22} survivor of Krypton’s destruction, raised on Earth as Clark Kent before becoming a newspaper reporter and fighting crime in an iconic red, blue and yellow costume under the name Superman. There were some differences, largely due to the development of the character over the ensuing decades, but the two separate Supermen were essentially metaphysical duplicates, alternate versions of the same individual.\textsuperscript{23} This created some interesting problems in turn, which shall be addressed in due course.

This new multiverse system remained in place for the next 25 years, with DC’s various alternate and duplicate characters occasionally hopping Earths, crossing over and teaming up for various adventures, predominantly focusing on the heroes of Earths Two and One, as these Golden and Silver Age characters respectively slid into the new era of

\textsuperscript{20} Most notably the ‘Shazam’ family of characters from Fawcett Comics following their lawsuit over similarities to Superman, the Freedom Fighters bought from the defunct Quality Comics, and several superheroes obtained from Charlton Comics such as Captain Atom, the Question, and Blue Beetle.
\textsuperscript{21} The specifically designated Earth-Two version of Superman did not make his first appearance as a separate character (subsequent to the predating Golden Age Superman publications he was now retroactively designated to represent), as distinct from the then-current ‘mainstream’ Silver Age version, until \textit{Justice League of America} #73 (w. Denny O’Neil, a. Dick Dillin, DC Comics, 1969).
\textsuperscript{22} Although the Earth-Two Superman was retroactively spelled ‘Kal-L,’ by way of distinction.
\textsuperscript{23} The same ‘duplicates’ explanation would be used to account for the few other characters who existed essentially unchanged in both eras due to their aforementioned ongoing publication between the Golden and Silver Ages, such as Batman and Wonder Woman.
the Bronze Age. Until, for essentially editorial reasons, it was decided that as DC Comics approached its half-century anniversary, a radical change was in order -- there was a perception that, as Coogan puts it, “Continuity became a burden.” Deeming the decades of accumulated canon to be an unwieldy and daunting obstacle to comprehension for not only new readers, but also writers as well, it was decided to reform DC’s cluttered continuity by abolishing the multiverse system.

This was no simple task, but it ultimately resulted in a massive crossover event (the first of its kind, establishing a near-annual publishing trend that continues to this day) entitled *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, featuring virtually every character DC owned at the time and involving tie-in issues for many of its ongoing titles, culminating in the titular 12-issue limited series. While the epic narrative of the story served as a diegetic rationale for the changes in continuity, involving a cosmic threat that sought to destroy all alternate universes (and in fact largely succeeded in this task), its metatextual purpose was clear -- to streamline the DC product line. Gone were all the parallel worlds and duplicate heroes, in its place was not a multiverse but a single universe, one definitive reality in which existed a single Earth, possessing a unified history that incorporated all DC’s various properties into coherent shared setting. That, at least, was the plan.

Without going into the exceptionally dense narrative details, the diegetic outcome was that only five of the notionally ‘infinite’ parallel universes escaped destruction and were then merged into a single reality, with a solitary Earth that now had a retroactively amalgamated history, in which the Golden Age heroes coexisted as living predecessors (not mere ‘comic book characters’) to their Silver Age counterparts and who, for the most part, still remained active. Direct duplicate characters such as the Earth-Two Superman were eliminated -- more on that later -- and any other such resulting contradictions were removed (unfortunately not very effectively). Virtually all of the characters in this new, singular DC Universe soon diegetically ‘forgot’ that a multiverse had ever existed, as their

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24 For a detailed retrospective on the inspiration and planning that went into *Crisis*, see *Crisis On Infinite Earths – The Compendium*, included with the ‘Absolute’ Edition of *Crisis On Infinite Earths*, by Marv Wolfman *et al.* (DC Comics, New York, 2005).


27 Earths-Two and One (the milieu of the latter remaining dominant overall), as well as ‘Earth-S,’ home to the ‘Shazam’ characters acquired from Fawcett Comics; ‘Earth-X,’ featuring former Quality Comics’ ‘Freedom Fighters’ heroes such as Uncle Sam and the Phantom Lady; and ‘Earth-Four,’ which included the recently purchased Charlton Comics heroes such as the Blue Beetle and Captain Atom. See also Ndalianis, “Enter the Aleph,” p. 279.
memories now only reflected the newly merged history. A tall order, given that readers themselves would not be so quick to forget. Proctor put it well, that audiences “cannot be rendered amnesiac at the whim of a corporate monolith.”

The most fascinating thing about Crisis is that it was unarguably the most extravagant example of DC’s attitude towards diegetic continuity alteration up to that time, in stark contrast to Marvel’s generally ‘invisible’ approach. Crisis took the notion of highly ‘visible’ continuity to its zenith with its metapocalyptic (to coin a term) destruction and recreation of continuity, making a marketing opportunity out of its efforts to reform its continuity system in the most high-profile manner possible. Rather than simply change their system and present the desired new paradigm as a fait accompli, DC chose to present a sprawling year-long event. Although the financial motives for this cannot be ignored, the core idea remained -- that an explicit diegetic explanation would be given for these major alterations to their continuity.

Murdough argues at great length that Crisis should be viewed through the lens of the Apocalyptic genre of literature, and that the framing of the event in such terms was essentially a ploy to give narrative weight and significance to the essentially commercial corporate decision to reorder DC’s continuity. The choice to fill the story with such cosmic Sturm und Drang was specifically motivated. Essentially, Murdough contends that Crisis was constructed in such explicitly diegetic terms as an apocalypse of fictional reality in order to ‘take seriously’ the epochal shift they were preparing to enact, in the hopes of thereby assuaging the inevitable fan trepidation towards the intended continuity changes. Thus the trauma of the fictional characters serves to legitimise the potential ‘trauma’ to long-standing fans with a committed understanding of the previous decades of continuity about to be discarded.

This argument put forward by Murdough is persuasive, as the decision by DC to frame its continuity changes with such an unprecedented level of metatextual overtness does indeed bespeak a sensitivity to the ‘apocalyptic’ effect this would have on fans’ view of the canon. I would add that this was a savvy move on DC’s part, yet also one essentially necessitated by their precedent of explicit diegetic acknowledgement of continuity issues, permeating all the way through the DC multiverse system that extrapolated from the aforementioned “Flash of Two Worlds.” So while Crisis would

28 Proctor, “Beginning Again,” p. 3.
29 See Klock, How to Read Superhero Comics, pp. 19-21, and Kaveney, Superheroes!, p. 194.
likely be nigh-incomprehensible to a DC novice, it nevertheless had to function as a legible narrative for those potential neophytes they hoped to gain for the coming relaunch it was set up to justify, and not wallow in pure metafiction for older, continuity-saturated readers alone. In speaking about cinematic reboots Proctor makes an observation which is nonetheless apropos here, that “From this intertextual viewpoint, it can be posited that the franchise reboot addresses old and new spectators within its aesthetic sphere, to maximise spectator interest and, of course, revenue.”

For whatever one may say about its intrinsic merit as a story, Crisis undeniably altered the status quo of DC’s continuity model, so much so that for at least two decades thereafter it rendered any kind of discussion of their continuity reliant on clarification between ‘pre-Crisis’ and ‘post-Crisis,’ a distinction that overrode previous considerations of Golden or Silver Age continuity outside of comics scholarship, as both were now part of a superseded system. To understand the narratological significance of these continuity alterations, it is important to examine further the close interrelation between DC’s wider treatment of canon and its handling of Superman in particular. As one of the goals of Crisis was to cast off the complex accretion of continuity elements that were deemed confusing or simply outdated, Superman was especially singled out.

Whether this was because he had the longest, most elaborate history, was perceived to be most in need of repair, was considered to be the company’s flagship property and thus ideal to demonstrate their new approach, or all of the above, the significance of Superman’s role as a repeated focal point for major overhauls of origin and backstory has been insufficiently examined in existing scholarship. Although his origin had previously been revised, technically even subject to mild retcons before, nothing to this extent had ever been attempted, as it was decided to start Superman over from scratch, completely rebooting the character. In seeking to define reboots, Proctor makes the important point that, ideally, they “indicate a removal or nullification of history in order to ‘begin again’ from ‘year one’ without any requirement of canonical knowledge of previous incarnations.” In this way reboots implicitly seek to attract new audiences for whom prior ‘fan literacy’ is not a requirement. In spite of the fact that the diegetic explanation of Crisis had allowed for much of the previously established Golden and Silver Age continuities to still be considered canonical in an altered, amalgamated form as

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was the case with various other DC characters, the decision was made in Superman’s case to wipe effectively all his previously extant continuity, including jettisoning much of the large supporting cast he had amassed over the Silver Age.

Moore’s Metacomics as Continuity Critique

Before continuing the examination of Superman’s textual development in the wake of *Crisis*, it is significant at this juncture to consider the impact of the severity with which Superman’s comic diegesis was culled, not only of its history, but also many of the concepts, characters and elements of his mythos, via an intriguing contemporary example of official apocrypha. As discussed in the previous chapter, much of the purpose of official yet non-canonical tales was to explore story concepts not permitted by the oneiric strictures of maintaining ongoing continuity, and thus by doing so, reflexively reinforce what continuity is by way of contrary example. And, as Murdough’s aforementioned argument contends, much of the apocalyptic tone of *Crisis* seemed designed as a form of metaphorical validation for fans’ ‘trauma’ over the diegetic unravelling of continuity in which they had become so invested. So bearing these colliding strains of thought in mind and applying them to the fact that Superman, more than any other major character was subject to an ‘apocalyptic’ degree of continuity erasure as the result of *Crisis*, we come to a brief examination of British writer Alan Moore’s epochal “Whatever Happened to The Man of Tomorrow?,” one of the most famous stories in the history of Superman comics, as well as arguably the most significant ‘Imaginary Story’ ever published.

Moore, as mentioned in Chapter 3 regarding his key influential role in the Bronze, Dark and Meta Ages of comic history, was along with Frank Miller responsible for raising the bar of mainstream American superhero comics in the 1980s to being perceived as at least capable of writerly sophistication, as most famously exemplified in his opus with artist Dave Gibbons, *Watchmen*. Famed at the time for his literary sensibilities and deconstructivist approach to the genre, Moore had previously explored perhaps the ultimate expression of exploding the oneiric climate of superhero narratives in the UK comic *Miracleman* (originally *Marvelman*). His ‘realistic’ take on superheroes detailed

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34 This required readers to engage in considerable amounts of the ‘mental editing’ discussed in the previous chapter.


36 The original black and white publication run of *Marvelman* was incomplete, appearing in UK anthology magazine *Warrior #1-21* (Quality, 1982-84), which was subsequently reprinted and coloured, and then Moore complete his run on the story in this American comic book format, as *Miracleman #1-16* (w. Alan More, a. various, Eclipse, 1985-89).
how a character with Superman’s demigod-like abilities would irrevocably and involuntarily reshape the world into his own potentially troubling utopia, complete with totalitarian, radically leftist and transhumanist themes. Upon coming to work for DC Comics in 1983, Moore had the opportunity to work on the official Superman character, initially via a handful of memorable one-off stories which, although far less radically deconstructive than the wildly anti-oneiric Miracleman, nevertheless sought to inject some greater psychological realism in portraying Superman as possessing survivor guilt over having escaped Krypton’s destruction, notably in “For the Man Who Has Everything.”

Yet it was what proved to be his last official work on the character that would be Moore’s most significant Superman story. It was a tale implicitly about continuity -- despite being explicitly noncanonical, and intricately bound up in the canonical impact of Crisis -- yet not being textually connected to the wider crossover. “Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?” was a curiously liminal story, even by the standards of official apocrypha, as it was clearly framed and intended as a metatextual farewell to the pre-Crisis history and mythos of Superman. It was explicitly designated as noncanonical, yet was to all intents and purposes set within and replicating an outgoing diegetic status quo of the mainstream Superman titles which was about to be dispensed with regardless.

Contextually, the two-part story filled the respective final pre-Crisis issues of Superman’s main ongoing comic book titles, and came about as the result of scheduling issues causing a delay between the end of Crisis (theoretically the point at which company-wide continuity was altered) and the debut of The Man of Steel. This led to the Superman titles having to tread water for some months and continue depicting the pre-Crisis version of the character. As it turned out, the situation afforded outgoing long-term Superman editor Julie Schwartz a somewhat unique opportunity to give the departing ‘classic’ version of the character a royal send-off rather than just abruptly switching over to the new version. The idea was to tell a celebratory ‘final’ tale of the Silver Age/pre-Crisis Superman in the form of an ‘imaginary story,’ by then a defunct format.

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37 See also Wolk, Reading Comics, pp. 103-104; and Kawa, “What if the Apocalypse Never Happens,” pp. 211-215.
38 *Superman* [vol. 1] Annual #11 (a. Dave Gibbons, DC Comics, 1985), which has been twice adapted for television, on *Justice League Unlimited* (Warner Bros. Animation, 2004-2006), and *Supergirl* (CBS, 2015-).
39 See Parker for a brief discussion of the fandom debate over the story’s continuity status, despite its clear designation as noncanon. Parker, “Official Apocrypha,” p. 4.
42 Although by this stage well into the Bronze Age of comics, the Superman revised by Crisis was perceived (especially in retrospect) as essentially still being the Silver Age conception of the character, especially given his continuous continuity.
In turning to Alan Moore, their ‘hot’ writer already renowned for unconventional approaches to character continuity such as his reinvention of Swamp Thing, DC sought to close the door on vintage Superman and his mythos. Collaborating with Moore was the quintessential Silver Age Superman penciller Curt Swan, a choice with strong associational resonance, having worked prolifically on the character for over thirty years. Swan’s genuinely (and by this point even somewhat anachronistically) Silver Age style was perfectly matched to a storyline designed to close the book on the era with which he was indelibly identified. Swan’s inclusion was an exemplary use of Gray’s notion of the paratextual perimeter, whereby desired intertextual bridges are invoked for the audience, less through direct textual references within the material itself, than via implied associational connections to the prior work of the creators involved. Moore himself took to the project with gusto, crafting a concise epic in which Superman’s story comes to a definitive, irrevocably anti-oneiric close.

Without delving into the story’s rich details, it is essentially the tale of Superman’s enemies teaming up for an assault of unprecedented ferocity, outing his secret identity, and finally laying siege to the Fortress of Solitude, in which the Man of Steel has attempted to protect Lois and his other civilian friends. The story concludes with Superman breaking his oath against killing to defeat Mr. Mxyzptlk, the architect of his woes, and then deliberately exposing himself to Gold Kryptonite, permanently removing his own superpowers. Yet the story’s framing device reveals in a coda that while Superman ‘died’ in this encounter, Clark Kent lives on under a new assumed name, married to Lois Lane and happily enjoying retirement as an ordinary blue-collar mechanic. Concluding with an evocation of the fairy-tale signoff ‘happily ever after,’ in marked contrast to Superman’s famous catchphrase that he fights a ‘Never-Ending Battle,’ Moore’s portrayal of a happy ending (albeit after much carnage) is a counter-intuitive conclusion, as other examples of Superman ‘End Tales’ have emphasised notions of the character’s presumed immortality, his death, or the perpetuation of his endless

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43 Gray, Show Sold Separately, pp.132-135.
46 A frequently-evoked trope, but an actual superpower that has rarely been definitively established in any ongoing mainstream continuity, due to the oneiric timeline.
heroism. The notion that Superman could have a mundane suburban retirement and be utterly contented with it is perhaps one of the most boldly optimistic ideas that the then-infamously ‘dark’ Alan Moore has ever used in a superhero story. In doing so, Moore presented exactly the kind of counter-oneiric portrayal whereby Superman’s ‘unconsumed’ mythic status that Eco described as inviolable has, indeed, been consumed… were this not an ‘imaginary story.’

Which, in no small part, lies at the crux of Moore’s tale, and its liminal continuity status. Moore chooses to underline his prologue script to the narrative with the subtext-heavy phrase “This is an IMAGINARY STORY... Aren’t they all?” Thus, from the outset the writer frames Superman and his final story in mythic terms, but also signals his metafictional awareness of the tale’s unique position. Moore pokes fun at the very notion of one type of fictional story being more or less ‘real’ than another, and signaling from the outset some suggestion of fallacy in the entire notion of the impending continuity rewrite that casts away old continuity (something he would do quite overtly years later in *Supreme*), as opposed to his own more integrated approach of radically reinventing characters from within or by utilising their established continuity, as he had already done on *Swamp Thing* and *Miracleman*. Reynolds regards this opening statement that “aren’t they all” imaginary stories as Moore’s “side-swipe at this kind of obsession with continuity,”48 and Klock contends the line demonstrates that “Moore recognizes the absurdity of delineating between ‘real’ fictional stories and ‘imaginary’ ones, and his statement is a defense against the changes he knows are coming to *Superman*.”49

I would take this further, and argue that the entire story itself was designed to be intentionally subversive towards the very notion of a continuity reboot, and implicitly critical of the then-concluding *Crisis* crossover in which Moore had essentially no participation. One of the striking elements of Whatever Happened... is the dissonance between the Moore revelling in a virtual cattle-call of the more outlandish and ‘childish’ aspects of Superman’s ballooned Silver Age features, from Elastic Jimmy Olsen to the Legion of Super-Heroes, from the Phantom Zone to Gold Kryptonite -- all elements imminently facing erasure from post-*Crisis* continuity -- juxtaposed with the portrayal of the shocking carnage dealt out to them in the story itself. Character after character is brutally killed off in Moore’s bleak little *Götterdämmerung* for Superman’s supporting

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47 In fact, the whole notion of Superman retiring was portrayed as a pivotal mistake in the narrative of *Kingdom Come* (DC Comics, 1996), although the tale did conclude with a similar assertion of the character’s essential humanity, but without the sacrificing of his powers.


49 A similar notion is expressed in Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics*, p. 22.
cast, with even a whole page devoted to a poignantly heroic death scene for Krypto the Superdog. The story is both a celebration of and funeral dirge for all the wild and strange elements of Superman’s history that were about to be cast aside to make way for the new canon.

And therein, I argue, lies the rub. Moore was clearly subverting his task of farewelling the wild and wacky Silver Age mythos by invoking the kind of multi-track reading that Sanders advocates for such highly intertextual works.50 Given the status of the tale as both ‘imaginary’ and yet understood by the contemporary readership to immediately precede a massive continuity revision, the considerable death toll of these characters can seem slightly gratuitous at first, a criticism one would rarely level at Moore’s work. Looking at the tale today this may not be so striking, as the ‘kill ‘em all’ ethos of alternate-future ‘End Tales’ has since become something of a well-worn trope in comics, film, and television,51 but in 1986 was still comparatively uncommon.

Instead, Moore’s story can be read as containing an embedded criticism of DC’s decisions to kill off canonically a vast number of their ‘sillier’ minor characters during Crisis whom they no longer wished to utilise after the continuity revision, as well as a few major ones such as the Flash and Supergirl. Further still, I contend that the story serves as a critique of the very notion of the Crisis revision itself and its metapocalyptic approach to continuity. Seen in the wider context of Moore’s later career and specifically in terms of the strong similarities to his work on Supreme (which used an overtly metatextual device of characters being ‘revised’ out of existence), this imaginary story begs the question as to why, if these characters are going to be discontinued from continuity, do they actually need to be killed in the narrative itself?

Given his own chance at telling an ‘ending’ story for Superman and his supporting cast that was not directly tied-in to Crisis, Moore’s text underlines the absurdity of DC’s approach of killing off characters they did not plan to use anymore, while preserving those who were simply going to be metaphysically revised regardless, because of some questionable editorial logic. The absurdity which Moore seeks to lampoon here was even somewhat prescient. Many of the supporting characters killed in Crisis with the intention

50 Sanders, Adaptation and Appropriation, p. 62. See also Ndalianis, “Enter the Aleph,” pp. 270-290.
51 The trope was also used several times apiece on long running science fiction television shows in the Star Trek and Stargate franchises. Some other notable examples include the episode “The Wish” from the third Season of Buffy the Vampire Slayer (The WB, 1998), and the episode “Failsafe” from the first season of the DC animated series Young Justice (Warner Bros. Animation, 2011). Marvel Comics sporadically publishes limited series using ‘The End’ banner to tell such stories, such as Incredible Hulk: The End (w. Peter David, a. Dale Keown, single issue, Marvel Comics 2002), Fantastic Four: The End (w./a. Alan Davis, six issues, Marvel Comics, 2007), etcetera.
of never being used again actually did crop up in the new continuity regardless (such as Superman’s onetime sweetheart, the mermaid Lori Lemaris), as a function of the cycles of hypotextual resurgence discussed in my previous chapter, making their violent deaths in *Crisis* ultimately unnecessary and merely gratuitous.

Utilising the freedom of the imaginary story designation but in turn mocking the very notion of a hierarchy for relativistic fictional canonicity, Moore slyly suggested that these Silver Age versions of beloved characters like Jimmy Olsen were not simply being written out of continuity -- retired from reality in an abstract way -- they were being *killed*. His story posed the subtextual question, why violently murder Supergirl and Lori Lemaris in the pages of *Crisis* when just as many other ‘silly’ details were going to get simply swept under the metatextual rug by the forthcoming reboot regardless? Moore’s tale made the sidelong comment to DC that if they were going to murder some characters that they did not want anymore but then revise reality anyway, why not simply slaughter everyone…? Through these metafictional allusions, Moore’s tale, although relegated to official apocrypha, was making literal the ‘violence’ being done by DC’s continuity carnage in *Crisis*, and Superman’s particularly severe evisceration of continuity via the then-forthcoming *The Man of Steel* specifically.

“Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?” stands as Moore’s prophetic testimony to the flawed process of editorial continuity management generating stories that diegetically deal with such changes with a degree of metatextuality verging on the metafictional, little knowing yet oddly anticipating just how ‘traumatically’ recurrent and exacerbating an issue these reboots would become in the following decades. Serving as a critique of both the means and ends of *Crisis*, these were all themes that Moore would revisit in his final work on the topic of Superman a decade later, in the pages of *Supreme*, which I shall touch upon later in this chapter.

Although officially not part of the same outgoing canon it was created to farewell, Moore as it turned out had penned the most famous ‘imaginary tale’ of the character who was about to be, and would continue to be, most extensively and repeatedly effected by the process of continuity revision throughout his forthcoming publication history.
Complicating the Continuity Model

For the first pre-planned instance of this type of major continuity revision, DC enlisted superstar writer/artist John Byrne to take the reigns to Superman, with input from Marv Wolfman, the writer of Crisis itself, with the task of crafting an updated origin for the character, and establish what would be the new approach and ‘rules’ for depicting the Man of Steel and his continuity thereafter. This heavily revised version of Superman debuted in Byrne’s miniseries The Man of Steel, which significantly altered most specific details of the earlier versions of the character’s origin whilst still remaining faithful to all the long-accepted major story points.

Perhaps more dramatic were the changes designed to effect the character going forward, such as the sweeping elimination of almost all of Superman’s vast collection of continuity elements such as sidekicks, headquarters, super-pets, gadgets and recurring plot devices that had accumulated over the previous five decades, notably including archnemesis Lex Luthor being recast as a corrupt tycoon instead of a mad scientist. Importantly also, shifts in Superman’s characterisation and portrayal both dramatically reduced the magnitude of his superpowers (which had gradually risen to godlike proportions over preceding decades) whilst emphasising Clark Kent as a more genuine part of Superman’s identity than a completely performative ‘mild mannered’ disguise -- revisions both clearly designed to humanise the character which DC worried had become too ‘unrelatable.’ The prospect of these changes was not universally popular, as a brief media frenzy emerged over the notion that Superman was going to become a stereotypical 1980s yuppie.

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52 As the previous Golden Age/Earth-2 vs. Silver Age/Earth-1 split was retroactively acknowledged rather than intentional at the time, as previously discussed.
54 The Man of Steel (6 issues, w./a. John Byrne, DC Comics, 1986).
55 For example, rather than possess his full complement of superpowers from infancy, Clark Kent gradually develops them over the course of his youth, partly in order to write out the scenario that allowed many comical Silver Age stories involving a Superbaby or Superboy (now deemed too ‘silly’ for modern tastes), as well as serving Byrne’s major goal of humanising the hero by affording him a somewhat more normal childhood. Also radically different was Byrne’s portrayal of Krypton, inspired in part by the then-recent Richard Donner/Richard Lester film adaptations Superman (1978), and Superman II (1980), which replaced the utopian Krypton of the Silver Age and its 1950s style science fiction with a far more alien and bleak society, for which the human-raised Clark Kent would feel little longing or identification.
56 Ndalianis, “Enter the Aleph,” pp. 276, 278.
However, despite having all the hallmarks of a clean reboot, by the strictest application of my definition of the term, this technically qualified as a particularly sweeping diegetic hard retcon. Although *The Man of Steel* itself did not textually acknowledge that the continuity alterations wrought by *Crisis* were responsible for this new version of the origin, and nor did the ongoing monthly comics initially make much reference to issues of past continuity, the diegetic context was widely understood, due to fans’ awareness of *Crisis*. This somewhat blurs and complicates the terminology, since the post-*Crisis* Superman clearly represented a reboot of continuity in almost every meaningful sense, especially since it involved not only a rewriting of past history, but also many of the diegetic ‘rules’ of the fictional reality itself.58

But why was it not an entirely complete reboot? Completely wiping clean Superman’s past history proved to be problematic in the long run, and was indicative of troubles with the effects of *Crisis* on DC’s wider continuity in general. Somewhat contrary to popular perception, *Crisis* itself was not really intended to fix continuity problems *per se* -- as discussed, the only significant continuity ‘problems’ to have existed beforehand were those pertaining to Superman (and select few others) appearing in both Golden Age and Silver Age continuities, which had much earlier been ‘solved’ by the establishment of the multiverse system long before *Crisis*. In truth, *Crisis* was intended to simplify a workable but unwieldy existing continuity model, for which there were not many outstanding continuity problems at all. Rather, it was as a *result* of the changes wrought by *Crisis* that genuine continuity problems emerged.59

These were most prominently due to the incomplete and inconsistent nature of the continuity revisions across the board, and the lack of a unifying editorial approach to manage how *Crisis* would affect DC’s diverse output. While some of the more prominent characters including Superman and Wonder Woman received such wholistic hard retcons of their entire histories as to virtually constitute reboots, the revised DC Universe at large retained an imprecisely defined majority of its established story continuity, by interweaving the previously separate histories of the alternate earths merged during *Crisis*,

58 Unlike earlier examples mentioned such as *Star Trek* or *Spider-Man*, neither Superman nor anyone else in the newly unified DC Universe could ever return to the pre-*Crisis* multiverse by travelling in time prior to the events of *Crisis* itself, as diegetic history, and thus continuity, simply no longer ‘existed’ in its originally published form. A rare (and frankly somewhat diegetically inexplicable) exception to this was Peter David’s brief use of the original Supergirl, explicitly plucked from the pre-*Crisis* reality in the storyline “Many Happy Returns” in *Supergirl* [vol. 4] #75-80 (w. Peter David, a. Ed Benes, DC Comics, 2002-2003). Additionally, the 2015 crossover event *Convergence* featured cities plucked from notionally erased continuity via some ill-defined manipulation of reality by the Superman villain Brainiac.

recontextualised as consecutive eras in a single unified history. In a similar, but far more metatextually complex fashion to the aforementioned example of Marvel’s Phoenix retcon, DC readers were now required to mentally ‘edit’ their perception of the diegetic history in which many previously published stories were still deemed broadly canonical, provided they did not conflict with the new rules of ‘reality.’

For example, although the Golden Age Justice Society still diegetically ‘existed’ largely as per their original depictions, any interactions with the Golden Age Superman now ‘no longer happened,’ since the character and his history had been written out of continuity in order to conform with the idea of there only being a single, modern-day Superman. Although these kinds of ‘intergenerational’ retcons were generally workable, the situation inevitably led to irreconcilable contradictions when even characters with totally revised personal continuity such as Superman were no longer compatible with depictions of their prior interactions with contemporaries who, conversely, had histories that were intended to be generally unchanged. This ended up requiring many additional small retcons in turn, to plug these continuity leaks appearing throughout the hull of this new DC Universe. As Klock observed, “To a large degree, the changes imposed by Crisis did not stick, and the DC universe was left even more chaotic than before.”

In retrospect, it is fairly clear that the core reason for these compounded post-Crisis continuity problems lay in DC’s attempt to incorporate prior continuity into their new unified canon. Or perhaps less simplistically, the impossibility of retaining the majority of some characters’ established histories while completely jettisoning those of others, given the inevitably interconnected nature of a long-running shared fictional universe. In theory at least (although perhaps impossible to coordinate), relaunching all

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60 This involved little retconning in and of itself, as the Golden Age characters previously from Earth-Two remained diegetically rooted to predominantly WWII-centric careers, providing little overlap with the Silver Age Earth-One characters whose careers dated back to the late 1950s at the earliest, even aside from the encroachment of a floating timeline.

61 For example, John Byrne’s post-Crisis erasure from continuity of Clark’s teenage career as Superboy had a disastrous spillover effect on the Legion of Super-Heroes, a title still being published whose team origin was directly linked to Superboy. The resulting contradictions required elaborate diegetic ‘repairs’ in the form of further retcons, sometimes years after Crisis. Another contradiction was that the Justice League’s prior adventures were still largely considered to be canonical, yet George Pérez’s revision of Wonder Woman’s origin did away with all her past history. However, unlike Byrne’s Superman, which established a narrative timelapse allowing for Superman to have a vaguely-defined career spanning several diegetic years of undepicted stories prior to the ‘present day,’ Pérez’s Wonder Woman was introduced as a ‘rookie’ superhero, rendering her past appearances in the Justice League diegetically anachronistic. Hard retcon ‘fixes’ were again required (over a decade after the fact), substituting Wonder Woman’s place in the early JLA with that of Black Canary (JLA: Year One #1-12, w. Mark Waid, a. Brian Augustyn, DC Comics, 1998). This necessitated the aforementioned concept of ‘mental editing’ on the part of the reader, when considering the canonicity of other implied past adventures not directly depicted in their continuity-altered form.

62 Klock, How to Read Superhero Comics, p. 21.
their titles afresh without retaining any direct continuity would likely have been the most efficacious way of avoiding such problems.

As it is, it has been the primary purpose of subsequent continuity revisions and other crises such as Zero Hour and Infinite Crisis to justify yet further revisions designed to fix existing problems left over from Crisis,63 while continuing to make other desired changes at the same time “to bring on-board new readers,”64 until The New52 effectively rebooted the wider DC Universe in 2011, to a similarly sweeping extent as did the original Crisis. Klock rather aptly offered the summation that:

Crisis would fail miserably as an attempt at simplification, giving the world a DC universe that made even less sense than before. … The irony of Crisis was that its methodology, in simplifying continuity, was used to make superhero comic books all the more complex, convoluted, and rich: any attempt at simplifying continuity into something streamlined, clear, and direct … only results in another layer of continuity.65

With each subsequent reboot, the more intertextually dense the supertext of the DC universe ultimately becomes, as even the hardest reboots are never clean, and the resulting palimpsest becomes shot through with the echoes of past canon.

**Genette and Hypertextual Considerations**

‘Layers’ is in fact a highly pertinent image to invoke, as Gerard Genette’s conception of the text-as-palimpsest outlined in my first chapter now finds its greatest pertinence to my study. Although writing about literature with little reference to the particulars of fictional constructs neither intrinsically multi-authored nor serialised in format, Genette’s formulations of hypertextuality are quite useful to considering how continuity operates as a mode for successive textual adaptations. As discussed in my first chapter, his key terms that designate any adapted text as a ‘hypotext’ and any later work that draws on said source to be a ‘hypertext,’66 one is immediately faced with a potential snag, in that the continuous nature of comics falls rather problematically afoot of the question: when does the one becomes the other? Is every published issue of a Superman comic thus a hypotext for the next issue? Can each issue therefore be both hypotext and hypertext? Is Superman’s first appearance in Action Comics #1 therefore the only discreet textual episode that can be considered a ‘true’ hypotext? It is an issue further confounded by the fact discussed in the previous two chapters whereby various elements now considered to

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63 Ndalianis, “Enter the Aleph,” p. 280.
be essential aspects of the Superman mythos did not debut in this first issue, nor the first decade of publication, nor even in the comic medium.

There can be an unpredictable balance in audience response between the repetition of the familiar and the innovation of new elements each time the comic diegesis is adapted to another medium or internally rearticulated via reboots. Burke would concur, noting that “Comic book fans may want adaptations to display the same continuity (i.e. fidelity) as the source, but they are not adverse to elements introduced by the adaptations becoming canon. Accordingly, interpretations may often add elements that later become character mainstays… In this way adaptations form part of the bedrock over which an ongoing comic narrative flows, sending it in different directions and shaping its course,” as in the case with feedback processes examined in Chapter 2.

Fortunately, Genette offers several solutions, perhaps the most simple of which is the observation that “Hypertexts, as it is well known, generate [further] hypertexts.” Although spending little time discussing truly serialised texts, his descriptions of literary continuations are apt, describing these as imitations (as opposed to transformations) of hypotexts that are uniquely constrained by the necessity of conforming to the elements of setting, characterisation and timeframe established in the previous work.

This is as good a description as one could ask for of the requirements of maintaining diegetic continuity from issue to issue and one creator to another in a comic book series. When new writers create narrative departures with the intended direction of what has come before whilst maintaining a broadly consistent style, this is much akin to the type of continuation Genette considers “one of the most respectable uses of the hypertext.” New writers, after all, inevitably wish to make their own mark on a property through their continuation, often as “a pretext for an oblique rewriting,” as Lefèvre observes of Batman’s wildly varying interpreters. Reynolds puts forth some good analysis on the topic from an authorial standpoint, regarding how “[t]he fixed points which are reinterpreted with most regularity are the origins of major characters,” whereby new creative teams seek to leave their mark on the character. However, he is inaccurate in observing that “[w]hatever new material is created and whatever new connections are made between existing plot-lines, continuity will be seen to be

68 Genette, Palimpsests, p. 373.
69 ibid., pp. 162-163.
70 ibid., p. 174.
71 ibid., pp. 199-200.
73 Reynolds, Super Heroes, p. 48
preserved.” While this is certainly true in some instances before Crisis, from that point onwards the majority of these rearticulations of origin stories such as Superman’s are deliberate breaks in continuity, attempts not merely to redefine backstory, but to irreconcilably alter it.

More pertinently, Berger notes that “Superman’s origins have been rewritten by contributors throughout his history, suggest[ing] that Superman has been a ‘revisionist’ narrative – constantly revisited and updated – from its early days. This would further decentre Siegel and Shuster’s privileged authority, eventually disconnecting their version of Superman entirely.” While concurring with the prospect of the supertext as a perpetually revisionist narrative, I would disagree with the extremity of suggesting that Siegel and Shuster’s original conception has been altogether abandoned, as opposed to merely decentred, since far too much of what still remains as key to Superman’s enduring tropes and underpinnings remains intact from this earliest published configuration. Instead, taking into account such changes in authorship, I would posit that these peculiarities of ongoing comics’ serialised narratives might also be described as a form of Genette’s “allographic prolongation,” while also noting that such sequel-like continuations are naturally often driven by commercial motives to produce more in the same vein of what has proven popular.

In fact, comics and other serialised fiction can serve as something of an answer to a problem posed by Genette, with the notion that continuations which seek to conclude incomplete works in a sense betray an essential aspect of such hypotexts, that being their very incompleteness. Comics, with their slow development (if any) from an oneiric climate, can never truly ‘betray’ the incompleteness of their hypotext, as by their perpetual nature they are themselves never truly complete. Although not addressing anything as intensely self-reflexive as a developed system of continuity management such as that of DC Comics, some of Genette’s terminology discussed in Chapter 1 is useful when discussing retcons and reboots. In considering textual transformations that employ the excision or suppression of elements of a hypotext, Genette notes that such an alteration invariably diminishes layers of meaning available to the resulting hypertext, while by the same token an equal kind of distortion is created by the addition or extension of the content of a hypotext.

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74 ibid.
75 Berger, “Are There Any More at Home Like You?,” p. 93.
76 Genette, Palimpsests, p. 207.
77 ibid., p. 176.
This very much mirrors the process of a retcon, in which the replacement of pre-existing portions of continuity leads to an inevitable shift in the textual consistency or diegetic ‘reality’ as the reader perceives it. By a similar note, the use of reboots to keep Superman’s origin up to date are very reminiscent of what Genette describes as the processes of “transdiegetization” (transposition to a different time or setting -- particularly relevant to the Elseworlds stories discussed in the previous chapter), 79 and “proximization,” in which a hypertext brings the diegesis of the hypotext into the present place and time of its audience. 80 Apart from a shift in locale, temporal proximisation is a perfect analogy to not only floating timelines in general, but also modernising reboots especially.

Particularly intriguing is Genette’s notion that severe cases of diegetic transposition can constitute an “emancipation from the hypotext” whereby a new hypertext can be so distinct as to be relatively self-contained and not require reference to its source. 81 Although on some level that is notionally the goal of most reboots and intended continuity ‘fixes,’ in practice this sense of emancipation can rarely be said to be valid for the dense hypertexts that result from the alterations to Superman’s continuity. As shall momentarily be outlined, this is more true of the ‘running change’ soft reboots than those harder examples of The Man of Steel and The New52, which were both almost entirely cut free from preceding continuity, and very much designed to be a starting-off point for new readers not versed in the discarded canon. Furthermore, one can never exclude the profit motive at play, as Proctor notes that such reboots “can be an economic decision to re-invigorate, revitalise and, crucially, re-monetize the brand/property in order to extend its commercial life-span.” 82

However, even these reboots remain densely intertextual, and are never truly ‘emancipated’ from their hypotexts, actually becoming less so as old continuity paratexts progressively rupture through the bulwarks of each reboot. After all, just because an element of continuity has been removed from canon in such a way that it officially ‘never happened,’ does not mean that audiences forget the fact that they read it. As Ndalianis argues, “Wiping out Supergirl and Superboy can’t mean that they no longer exist because they still live in the memory and experiences of their readers.” 83 Procter would concur, observing that “while it may be simple to wipe the memory of fictional characters, it is

79 ibid., p. 296.
80 ibid., p. 304.
81 ibid., p. 309.
82 Proctor, “Beginning Again,” p. 3.
83 Angela Ndalianis, “Enter the Aleph,” p. 282.
impossible to perform a similar ‘crisis’ on the reader… This is why a reboot can never completely wipe the slate clean,” for while “the strategy may seek to disavow past errors… cancelling out cultural products is not literally possible.”

It is a sentiment echoed by Ndalianis in discussing the work of Grant Morrison, noted for his intertextual approaches to retcons, that “past continuities can never be erased,” regardless of their having diegetically “wiped out entire characters and universes; the fact that they existed in the memory of their readers meant they were real.”

I would even take this further, and observe the intergenerational wrangling of canon, as readers eventually become new generations of writers, they routinely seek to restore elements they had previously enjoyed which had been erased from continuity in the interim. In many respects, the progressive reintegration of many Silver-Age elements after they were retconned out by Crisis in an attempt to ‘fix’ DC’s continuity is the story of this very process, writ both large and metatextually. As Kaveney puts it:

The unabashed influence of earlier texts on their work is one of a number of ways in which the productions of the fanboy creators are thick texts, which is to say they are texts whose contingent, collective and polysemous nature renders them especially satisfying. The fanboy creators are also a variant form of their favourite reading and viewing matter’s assumed ideal viewer.

Speaking of retcons designed as continuity ‘fixes,’ Genette’s term “transpragmatization” is an apt one, describing hypertexts that are intent on “correcting possible errors or deficiencies in the hypotexts, with a view to improving its effectiveness and its reception.” Similarly, “transvaluation” involves revising a character’s function to become more sympathetic or serve a more significant function, providing a perfect description of Byrne’s revamp of Clark Kent as a more dominant and genuine aspect of Superman’s persona.

Genette’s reboot-relevant notions even include speaking of cases where hypertexts’ emancipation from their hypotexts is to the point of becoming “murderous continuations,” effectively erasing the earlier work, which in the case of a retroactive comic-book continuity is a completely literal manifestation of his concept. Provocatively, Genette also raises the idea of the obverse, cases in which later hypertexts involve a resurgence of earlier content, wherein “the hypotext has risen to the surface and abolishes

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85 Ndalianis, “Enter the Aleph,” pp. 281-282.
86 See Coogan, Superhero, p. 218.
87 Kaveney, Superheroes!, p. 203.
88 Genette, Palimpsests, p. 312.
89 ibid., p. 344.
90 ibid., p. 198.
its own hypertext,”\footnote{ibid., p. 196.} which is an almost perfect description for the progressive resurgence of Silver Age continuity in post-\textit{Crisis} Superman comics, an act of clear defiance over their ‘murderous’ casting-off during \textit{Crisis}.\footnote{For an analysis of some more overtly metafictional, non-Superman-related examples of Silver Age revisitation and reincorporation in the 2000s, see Jenkins, “Just Men in Tights,” pp. 16-43.} Hypertexts that have built up many layers of adaptation in a web of legible textual history form Genette’s aforementioned notion of a literary palimpsest, a text in which the well-versed reader is always conscious of the other versions that have preceded or supplanted it, regardless of which version they are currently reading, as these other iterations are inherently inscribed therein. This type of “palimpsestuous reading” is a boon in Genette’s view, for “the hypertext thus always stands to \textit{gain} by having its hypertextual status perceived – even when that gain is assessed in negative terms.”\footnote{Genette, \textit{Palimpsests}, pp. 374, 398-399.} Proctor concurs, declaring that continuity is a “mutable affair within the superhero genre and each ‘reboot’ requires diegetic ratiocination.”\footnote{Proctor, “Beginning Again,” p. 2.}

If ever a hypertext was apt to be described as a palimpsest, it would be those of Superhero comics with their layers of continuity revision, reversals and reinscriptions, and none more so than with the frequency and wide source of intertexts as in the case of the history of Superman comics.

\section*{Superman’s Ongoing Continuity}

Before continuing to a more detailed examination of the shifts in Superman’s continuity, for ease of reference I shall first outline the five major revisions at this point:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textbf{1950s – Earth-One/Two split} (untitled retroactive partition of Golden and Silver Age histories of Superman, first acknowledged in 1969).\footnote{The exact cut off point between these eras is highly contested, as it was a vague retroactive determination, as opposed to an of-the-moment reboot.}
  \item \textbf{1986 - \textit{The Man of Steel}} (a six-issue limited series which revised Superman’s origin as a diegetic consequence of \textit{Crisis}).
  \item \textbf{2003 - \textit{Superman: Birthright}} (a twelve-issue limited series which further revised Superman’s origin).
  \item \textbf{2009 - \textit{Superman: Secret Origin}} (a six-issue limited series once again revising Superman’s origin).
  \item \textbf{2011 - \textit{The New52}} (a company-wide reboot. Although various flashbacks and snippets of information about Superman’s new continuity have been detailed,
especially in Grant Morrison’s run on *Action Comics* [vol. 2], no concentrated retelling of his origin has yet been published.}

However, due to the 2003 and 2009 retellings constituting soft reboots within an otherwise uninterrupted diegesis, from a broader perspective of Superman’s comic book metanarrative one can also more simply view the ‘hard breaks’ in continuity as dividing into four main eras: Golden Age, Pre-Crisis, Post-Crisis, and New52.

Even aside from the various minor expansions and shifts in the details of Superman’s origin in his early years, it is something of a misnomer to view the transition from the Golden Age to the Silver Age versions of Superman as the first major revision of the character’s origin, as this retcon was, ironically enough, itself determined in hindsight -- a retroactive retcon, so to speak. Unlike all the shifts in Superman’s continuity from *Crisis* onwards, the notion that the earlier Golden Age Superman was discontinuous from the one then currently being published in the Silver Age was not something that was pre-planned and then carried out. Instead, it was a situation that arose from the development of the aforementioned Earth-One and Earth-Two concept and the subsequent realisation that Superman had contradictorily existed in both eras due to his being in continuous publication.

By the time DC came up with the idea that there were two parallel incarnations of Superman and finally showed them meet for the first time in 1969, the Silver Age version was already long established. There had originally never been any intent at the time to suggest Superman had been anything other than the same character all along, mostly due to these being the very early days of writers’ continuity-consciousness. As such, the linear cutoff point between the two eras in terms of Superman’s ongoing monthly adventures is somewhat arbitrary, contested, and vague at best, the major point of distinction being that the opportunity was used to explain away the inconsistency between the Golden Age accounts of Clark Kent’s early life with the only major retcon that Superman’s narrative had experienced up to that point, being the retroactive introduction of his Superboy career in 1945.96

96 *More Fun Comics* #101 (w. Jerry Siegel, a. Joe Shuster, DC Comics, 1945). Effectively the first significant retcon to Superman’s continuity, Superboy stories detailed a teenage career for the Last Son of Krypton while growing up in Smallville. Since Superman’s early years had not been previously explored in any detail, this retcon would have been barely disruptive to Golden Age continuity, were it not for the inconsistency of Kal-El’s superpowers, which had originally developed slowly in adulthood. Another notable departure was in portraying Luthor growing up in Smallville, contradicting his first appearance in *Action Comics* [vol. 1] #23 (w. Jerry Siegel, a. Joe Shuster, DC Comics, 1940) presenting the archnemeses as meeting for the first time as adults.
Even though Superman’s Golden Age continuity had been diegetically ascribed to Kal-L, the Superman of Earth-Two, some meticulous fan-historians take the more metatextual view that this was too hard a retcon to be taken at face value. By this argument, the first appearance of the Kal-L character should not be designated as Action Comics #1 from 1938, but rather would more accurately be identified as 1969’s Justice League of America #73, being his introduction as an overtly separate character. This is fairly reasonable, as Kal-L was effectively a new creation designed to assimilate (and explain away) over a decade of continuity previously assumed to still belong to Kal-El, and thereby forms a unique and somewhat dissonant place in the wider framework of Superman’s continuity revisions.

To recall the earlier example of Marvel Comics’ X-Men, the retcon that split the Golden Age Superman off from the ongoing adventures of his Silver Age successor would have been, for the readers, similar in effect to the revelation that Phoenix had in fact never been Jean Grey in the first place, except in this case using a hard retcon that situated Kal-L as a functionally identical separate character within the new multiverse system. The advantage in the short term was that this now distinct version of Superman could thereafter be used to tell stories that would have not been allowed in the ongoing Kal-El stories in the lead features as they would indeed disrupt Eco’s oneiric climate, such as Superman growing middle-aged, marrying Lois, getting promoted from reporter to Editor-in-Chief, and entering partial retirement.

The problem, however, seems greater in retrospect, as it is a unique case in Superman’s history where what was once the ongoing mainstream version of the character was subsequently deemed to be a metaphysically and literally separate character, as opposed to the same character who has undergone a diegetic alteration of his reality, even if Superman himself, as Proctor puts it, “retained no memory of the earlier continuity and history begins again from a new spatiotemporal position or an alternative narrative

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97 As opposed to Kal-El, the then-current Superman based in Earth-One. This reflected the original character’s earliest Golden Age spelling.
98 Whether the first instance in Superman [vol. 1] #47 (DC Comics, 1947) of Superman mentioning his prior Superboy career should be taken in hindsight as the first diegetic appearance for the adult version of the Earth-One character, or that by implication the Superman appearing in the previous issue would thus be designated instead as Kal-L of Earth-Two, is ultimately highly arbitrary. Moreover the textual vagueness of such fan-driven retroactive determinations stand in marked contrast to the increasingly explicit, official, and coordinated management of continuity reboots that DC would enact in the future.
99 This is as distinct from other alternate-Earth duplicates who featured only in discreet, finite stories such as Ultraman, Superman’s evil double from the morally-inverse Earth-Three, or later Elseworlds incarnations such as the middle-aged Superman of Kingdom Come (4 issues, w. Mark Waid, a. Alex Ross, DC Comics, 1996).
universe.” Whereas from Crisis onwards every revision of Superman’s origin has been deemed to have happened to the same character, only the Golden Age Kal-L is considered a separate entity — thus by the diegetic rules of DC continuity the Superman of today, despite having undergone several successive alterations of his history and thus having embodied different ‘versions’ of the character back through each successive era, remains existentially the same person as the Silver Age Superman, to the sole exclusion of his immediate predecessor.

This is a metatextually unusual situation, as the reality of any linear reading of Superman’s history would treat the Golden Age Superman as no more nor less distinct an incarnation of the character as any of those that followed him — less so, in some regards, since his aforementioned transition into the Silver Age iteration was truly retroactive and thus fairly imperceptible at the time, certainly compared to that of the more explicit later revisions.

What this scenario does is deny the earliest version of Superman his metatextual place in the diegetic palimpsest of Superman’s history, as both the character and his continuity form an ongoing text in which successive versions are simply reinscribed over older ones. This unique point of separation between the first and all other ‘current’ versions of Superman that followed seems almost like a far less metaphorical example of a hypotext’s ‘murderous continuation,’ almost literally so in fact, since in 2006 the long-absent ‘original’ Earth-Two Superman was returned as a misguided antagonist in Infinite Crisis, before ultimately dying a hero’s death.

Although it should be noted that as of the time of this writing DC has just announced plans to publish new adventures of the pre-New52, post-Crisis/Birthright/Secret Origin versions of Superman and Lois Lane, as a spin-off from the 2015 Convergence crossover. This series scheduled for publication in late 2015, Superman: Lois and Clark, is touted to portray the characters as essentially continuity refugees living in the current main DC Universe concurrently with (but unbeknownst to) the now primary New52 versions of the same characters. This scenario is reminiscent of the continuity metaphysics discussed here in terms of the Earth-One Superman, yet remains an as yet unsatisfactorily explained contradiction of the previous history of DC’s continuity revisions, much like Convergence itself.

101 To put it another way, in strictly diegetic terms, Kal-L was capable of meeting his metatextual successor Kal-El simply by crossing parallel Earths (even after the elimination of the multiverse in Crisis), by dint of being a physically discontinuous entity, while it has never been possible for Kal-El to ever meet one of his metatextual successors due to the rearrangement of continuity as diegetic reality. This distinction was brought home when Kal-L returned in Infinite Crisis (7 issues, w. Geoff Johns, a. Phil Jimenez, George Pérez, Ivan Reis, Jerry Ordway, Joe Bennett, DC Comics, 2005), nineteen years after the original event, and treated the modern post-Birthright Kal-El as being the same man as the pre-Crisis Earth-One iteration, even though the latter retained no memory of having experienced that version of reality himself.

102 In Infinite Crisis #7 (w. Geoff Johns, a. Joe Bennett, Phil Jimenez, George Pérez, Ivan Reis, DC Comics, 2006). The brutal finality of which was in marked contrast to his happily-ever-after ‘retirement’ from continuity into a pocket universe at the end of the original Crisis, a unique fate afforded him that was not shared by the many other characters either killed or erased in the crossover.
For all the continuity tangles *Crisis* ultimately caused the wider DC Universe, the *Man of Steel* reboot of Superman’s continuity was successful insofar as its new status quo remained essentially intact for a quarter of a century, or a third of Superman’s history in comics publication. Although the *Birthright* and *Secret Origin* retellings of the origin were further soft-reboots in turn, they were building upon the groundwork laid by Byrne in 1986, and tweaked the backstory while perpetuating the ongoing narrative of the post-*Crisis* Superman. Their retcons became apparent *in media res* for the monthly titles, without interruption or severe disruption to the diegetic ‘history’ of stories published at the time.

The post-*Crisis* era steadily built its own unique mythos and contributed to the ongoing legend of Superman, introducing new long-running characters and continuity concepts, while shaping the interpretation of Superman used in transmedia adaptations of its era for years to come.\(^{104}\) However, one significant trend began to emerge early on. The stories immediately following John Byrne’s *The Man of Steel* -- many written by Byrne himself -- involved reintroducing the revised post-*Crisis* versions of Superman’s supporting cast and rouges gallery of villains as expected, yet counter-intuitively it did not take very long for some of the more outlandish elements explicitly removed by *Crisis* to start returning as well. This was intriguing, given that a significant part of the purpose of wiping Superman’s history clean was to take the opportunity to ‘modernise’ the character by discarding ‘dated’ elements that were deemed no longer usable, such as Supergirl, super-powered pet dog Krypto, Clark’s college sweetheart Lori Lemaris the mermaid, or the Fortress of Solitude. Surprisingly then, within merely a year we saw a new version of the mermaid introduced,\(^{105}\) two years brought a new version of Supergirl,\(^{106}\) a new Fortress by three years and so forth,\(^{107}\) in a gradually increasing flow until even may of the notionally ‘silliest’ ideas such as Krypto the Superdog were reintroduced into the ongoing continuity.\(^{108}\)

It is difficult to say whether these progressive reincorporations of the sundry Silver Age elements that were swept away by *Crisis* had reached a kind of critical mass or if some other motive entirely was at play, but in 2003 it was decided to retell Superman’s

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\(^{104}\) As discussed in Chapter 2, such as Ruby-Spears’ animated *Superman, Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman, Superman: The Animated Series, Smallville*, and the cinematic reboot *Man of Steel*.

\(^{105}\) *Superman* [vol. 2] #12 (w./a. John Byrne, DC Comics, 1987).

\(^{106}\) *Superman* [vol. 2] #16 (w./a. John Byrne, DC Comics, 1988). Although to conform to the new edict that took Superman back to his original state Krypton’s lone survivor, the first post-*Crisis* Supergirl (there were a few) had rather complex but distinctly non-Kryptonian origins.

\(^{107}\) *Adventures of Superman* [vol. 1] #461 (w./a. Dan Jurgens, DC Comics, 1989).

origin once more, via a process of hard recons which nonetheless constituted a soft reboot. For 17 years prior, Superman’s comics had enjoyed a period of tight continuity, carefully coordinated at annual writers’ summits, with the overlapping publication schedules of his multiple concurrent monthly titles resulting in a new Superman comic coming out weekly. During this period Superman’s intra-title continuity was so strong that editor Mike Carlin implemented the ‘triangle system,’ which lasted between 1991 and 2002, so that even when issues from separate titles were not engaged in a direct narrative crossover storyline, the intersecting issues would nevertheless be easy to read in the correct narrative order.\textsuperscript{109}

In addition to the individual comic periodical’s issue number in the traditional top left corner, a small triangle would also appear elsewhere on the cover bearing the year and instalment number,\textsuperscript{110} allowing readers to avoid any potential confusion of week-to-week sequencing between disparately-issue-numbered titles. It was a unique system, not shared by even other top-tier superheroes of the era who were likewise starring in multiple concurrent publications, like Batman and Spider-man, such was the closeness of Superman’s ongoing continuity.\textsuperscript{111}

The ‘Triangle Era,’ as it came to be known editorially, was a period of unprecedented tight continuity coordination, affording Superman’s ongoing narrative many long-running subplots and storylines involving recurring villains and supporting cast, notably including Cat Grant’s and Perry White’s respective troubled families, the gradual development of Clark Kent and Lois’ relationship, the multi-year mystery of Lex Luthor II’s identity, and, most famously, the death, funeral, replacement and rebirth of Superman, and his eventual wedding to Lois Lane. In contrast to the gradual development of characters and plots over time as seen in many ongoing superhero comics, many of these story arcs were planned and executed in the long term, over the course of years, with specific goals in mind.

Eventually this attention to keeping Superman’s various titles in lockstep passed, and the strictures of tight inter-title continuity started to wane. This came to the fore with the miniseries Superman: Birthright penned by Mark Waid,\textsuperscript{112} the popular writer of the seminal Elseworlds (and thus out-of-continuity) series Kingdom Come which prominently

\textsuperscript{109} Weldon, Superman: The Unauthorized Biography, pp. 241-242.
\textsuperscript{110} So that, for example, the ‘triangle numbers’ for The Adventures of Superman [vol.1] #497 and Action Comics [vol. 1] #684 were 1992/47 and 1992/48, respectively.
\textsuperscript{111} For a more in-depth analysis, see Matthew J. Smith “The ‘The Triangle Era’ of Superman: Continuity, Marketing, and Grand Narratives in the 1990s,” in Darowski, The Ages of Superman, pp. 156-165.
featured Superman. Waid was something of an expert on the character, being self-described as possibly the world’s biggest Superman fan. The context of the series, its effect on ongoing continuity, and the longevity of said effects were altogether different from that of *The Man of Steel*.

The primary distinction was that, unlike Byrne coming in as part of the wider sweeping changes of *Crisis*, Waid was not given a blank slate to once again start over. Similar to some aspects of the broader DC Universe itself after *Crisis*, Waid was expected to retain the majority of then-current Superman continuity -- in this case established post-*Crisis* continuity -- without drastically altering diegetic history in the process. Thus *Birthright* was still operating within the broad milieu of everything that had come since *The Man of Steel*, while in effect rewriting the origin that had been that landmark miniseries’ very purpose to redefine.

While most assuredly not a hard reboot in the same vein as *Man of Steel*, similarly *Birthright* did not itself contain any internal acknowledgement of the fact that it was presenting hard recons as the result of a diegetically-triggered alteration of ‘reality,’ or at least ‘history.’ Unlike *Man of Steel*’s direct causal link to *Crisis*, *Birthright* was explained in advance as having been diegetically triggered by the conclusion to a rather forgettable time-travel plotline involving the various Superman titles, but was notably not connected to any broader manipulation of the diegesis affecting the wider DC Universe.

Perhaps due to the restrictions of broadly conforming to established ongoing continuity, the actual alterations to continuity brought about by *Birthright* were relatively discreet compared to the radical changes in *The Man of Steel*. Despite constituting another official revision of Superman’s continuity and the alteration of his early history via a hard retcon, the series itself had little impact, with no halt or renumbering in the publication of Superman’s titles to indicate the continuity changeover as there had been briefly for *The Man of Steel*, nor any obvious appertaining shift in the portrayal of the character in his ongoing comics.

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115 Aside from passing, tokenistic references, such as to Lex Luthor and Clark Kent’s youth in Smallville, which in itself generated some aforementioned unaddressed continuity problems for previous post-*Crisis* canon. The post-*Crisis* Luthor had been depicted as a middle-aged man who had grown up in Metropolis as a contemporary of Perry White, but *Birthright* depicted him instead as a peer of Clark Kent’s. Thus several of Luthor’s major post-*Crisis* storyline were thrown into question, as they involved Luthor having (and pretending to have) fathered sons who had reached their late teens and early twenties by the time of Superman’s adulthood, as well as Luthor’s explicitly still canonical election to President of the United States, implicitly making him the youngest man in (fictional) history to ever hold the office.
The changes predominantly involved a lot of cosmetic modernisation, or Genette’s “proximisation,” to update the origin (something seemingly redundant given the floating timeline) into a firmly postmillennial America, such as copious mentions of email and online journalism, implementing yet another aesthetic redesign of Kryptonian society, and perhaps most notably a further revision of Lex Luthor’s backstory. This combined elements of both his pre- and post-
*Crisis* origins, that was clearly motivated by the portrayal of the character in the then-popular television adaptation *Smallville*,\(^1\) which itself used a similarly amalgamated model for Luthor, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Representing a new soft-reboot of the origin yet oddly unheralded as such at the time,\(^2\) *Birthright* did not serve to fix any perceived continuity problems, but rather created new ones by instituting ‘running changes’ to ongoing continuity, particularly regarding Luthor. What was notable about this retcon was, in a sense, its narratively gratuitous nature, appearing primarily concerned with appealing to a new generation of readers, whom it was presumably feared may have already found 1986’s *The Man of Steel* outdated, and attempting to garner the interest of *Smallville* viewers. Yet it was still a conservative approach, without seeking to create anywhere near as significant a departure as the prior continuity overhaul.

This seemingly began a trend of piecemeal continuity alteration, soft reboots rather than restarting continuity altogether, an approach that combined with the aforementioned gradual reintroduction of previously discarded pre-
*Crisis* elements over the preceding two decades. Additional hard retcons to this barely-settled new continuity soon followed, starting to be revised again after only two years. This culminated in yet another full retelling and revision of Superman’s origin only five years after the end of *Birthright*.

On this next occasion, however, the model for change was even more diffuse and unheralded, yet conversely, proved to be far more extensive than *Birthright*. Once again though, it lacked explicit references to the diegetic causes of this hard retcon, although it was generally understood to have been the result of the then-recent DC crossover event *Infinite Crisis*. However, unlike the original *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, and despite being a

\(^1\) Ndalianis, “Enter the Aleph,” pp. 275-276, 278.

direct narrative sequel to it, *Infinite Crisis* ultimately did not generate wide sweeping changes to the DC Universe, or at least not to the primary ongoing DC continuity.\(^{118}\)

Similar to *Birthright* in taking the form of ‘running changes’ rather than halting continuity altogether and beginning again as with *The Man of Steel*, this revision was nonetheless presented in a somewhat opposite manner to *Birthright*, initially with various unexpected, unheralded hard retcons reflecting what readers could only infer to be a new continuity cropping up in the ongoing monthly Superman titles, some three years before an actual miniseries presenting this new origin in any detail was published.\(^{119}\)

When it finally came, the result was *Superman: Secret Origin*,\(^{120}\) written by the then-prolific and popular Geoff Johns, bringing together the various preceding retcons he had implemented in the monthly Superman titles over the previous three years into a unified context, without actually reiterating much of their content. This resulted in a series which, although presenting a reasonably cogent narrative, did not serve as nearly so much of a rule-establishing ‘continuity handbook’ as its predecessors *Birthright* and *The Man of Steel* had, requiring instead that readers be familiar with the major developments in the prior three years of Superman comics.

Even aside from this diffuse approach to detailing Superman’s third post-*Crisis* origin, perhaps what is most significant about *Secret Origin*\(^{121}\) is that it represents something of a culmination of long-running trends of reintroducing the many elements discarded by *Crisis* and *The Man of Steel* back into continuity in a new form, resulting in what could be essentially described as a modernised take on the Silver Age Superman. Many stories published since *Crisis* were now implicitly stricken from canon, while significant pre-*Crisis* aspects (if not necessarily specific stories) had been restored, such as his cousin Supergirl, Krypto and sundry other Kryptonian survivors, Luthor’s scientific

\(^{118}\) *Infinite Crisis* (7 issues, w. Geoff Johns, a. Joe Bennett, Phil Jimenez, George Pérez, Ivan Reis, DC Comics, 2005-2006) was used to justify a host of continuity tweaks across the DC Universe whilst otherwise still broadly maintaining the past two decades of post-*Crisis* history as canon.

\(^{119}\) These began with the “Last Son” storyline, which introduced a new version of Krypton incompatible with that depicted in *Birthright*, one clearly based on the portrayal in Richard Donner’s films (note that Donner co-authored the tale), as well as the introduction of similarly film-based versions of villains General Zod, Ursa and Non in *Action Comics* #844-846, 851 (w. Geoff Johns and Richard Donner, DC Comics, 2006-2007), and in *Action Comics Annual* #11 (w. Geoff Johns, DC Comics 2008). Subsequently *Action Comics* #850 (w. Geoff Johns, Kurt Busiek and Fabian Nicieza, DC Comics, 2007) included many thumbnails of the new continuity’s history, as did backup profile pages in the much-delayed *Action Comics Annual* #11, which both served to emphasise that Superman’s new backstory included disparate elements from Silver Age and post-*Crisis* continuities, as well as film and television adaptations.

\(^{120}\) Six issues, w. Geoff Johns, a. Gary Frank, DC Comics, 2009-2010.

\(^{121}\) Although as stated, most of the significant continuity retcons pertaining to this latest origin were depicted in earlier, separately published issues, for the sake of simplicity we shall refer to all these retcons by Geoff Johns as though a single unit, invoking the belated miniseries *Secret Origin*.  

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genius, some degree of a career as Superboy, and many bizarre versions of Kryptonite. It also served as one of the most purely continuity-oriented reboots to date, focusing predominantly on re-positioning Superman’s lore with a greater emphasis on more overt intertextual feedback from transmedia adaptations, chiefly from the Richard Donner films and elements of Smallville. Perhaps partly in keeping with this nostalgic impulse, Johns’ retelling involved dialling back considerably on Waid’s earlier attempts at heavy-handed proximisation of Superman’s narrative with up-to-the-moment modernity, other than to add an emphasis of post-George W. Bush-era scepticism of the American military-industrial complex, via portraying the recently re-characterised antagonist General Sam Lane as being in cahoots with Lex Luthor’s corporate skulduggery.

The extent to which this was truly compatible with much of the post-Crisis history that theoretically had been maintained was rather nebulous other than the general sense that the ongoing saga of Superman’s ‘modern’ history had not been interrupted, and the explicit retention of some major developments. Thus continuity had entered a new state of vagary in its attempts to have its metatextual cake and eat it too. It seemed as though the more DC tried to micromanage Superman’s continuity, the looser its grip upon it had become.

The hard break with the post-Crisis era finally came, however in 2011 with the much-publicised relaunch of DC’s entire publication line, dubbed The New52. The most sweeping continuity change to the main DC Universe since the original Crisis on Infinite Earths, it was another of Genette’s ‘emancipations from the hypotext,’ yet one which seemingly achieved what that original 1986 event was designed in part, yet somewhat failed, to do -- create a ‘jumping-on point’ for new readers. In an unprecedented move, DC’s whole mainstream comic output was cancelled and overhauled, with 52 new #1 issues, with some titles disappearing from their roster, new ones launched and many ongoing ones thus renumbered and restarted.

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122 Although apparently only in secret, to maintain the broad strokes of Byrne’s portrayal of Kent publicly debuting his superhero identity as an adult, but also allowing for the restoration of the pre-Crisis version of the aforementioned Legion of Super-Heroes, whose continuity had been irreparably complicated by the erasure of Superboy.
123 Some major post-Crisis events had been referenced in this phase, and thus were clearly still canon in this new continuity, for example Clark and Lois were still married, Superman had still died and returned to life, Luthor apparently still had held the office of U.S. President at some point despite the many changes to his backstory, and most supporting characters created since Crisis were still in existence, such as Cat Grant, Connor ‘Superboy’ Kent, Steel, the Eradicator, and Doomsday.
125 It should be noted that this was precisely what Crisis on Infinite Earths writer Marv Wolfman had advocated for the post-Crisis DC relaunch, but at the time a company-wide renumbering of all titles was rejected as too radical.
Although not preceded by a metapocalyptic narrative of parallel universes and cosmic destruction as was the original *Crisis*,\textsuperscript{126} the diegetic explanation for the *New52* relaunch was the reality-altering crossover series named *Flashpoint*, which essentially used the somewhat more conventional sci-fi trope of an altered timeline to justify the appertaining continuity reboot, focusing on the Flash, as an homage to his aforementioned role in initiating the multiverse concept in 1961\textsuperscript{127} that led to DC’s history of such reboots. Akin to the Star Trek’s temporal reboot with its 2009 film, the device was also not dissimilar to the diegetic trigger for the *Birthright*’s soft reboot of Superman’s continuity, but on a grander scale.\textsuperscript{128}

One of the most unprecedented methods dramatically used to signal the rebooted quality of much of the post-*Flashpoint* continuity was that virtually all DC’s characters had revised costume designs, mostly by Jim Lee. Although technically superficial, and while virtually all superheroes have experienced (usually temporary) costume redesigns from time to time, to have a line-wide redesign was a strong and clear signal that *The New52* was a significant relaunch of DC’s diegesis, as even *Crisis*, for all its sweeping changes, had not altered most of its characters’ iconic aesthetics. Given the wide and continued use in ancillary media adaptations and especially merchandise of the predominantly ‘classic’ costume designs for their characters (mostly derived from the 1930s-1960s), it was a bold move. One that was clearly designed to signal that the core DC Comics product line were experiencing not just a relaunch of continuity, for the perusal of hardcore fans, but gambling that the alteration of their characters’ signature appearances would draw the attention of the general public, as a fresh approach to be taken in earnest.

Continuity, however, was definitely affected. Although the new status quo implemented by *The New52* was the most sweeping and drastic reboot of wider DC

\textsuperscript{126} Although the resultant *New52* continuity did involve the folding-in of Image Comics’ WildStorm Universe (bought from founder Jim Lee) into the new mainstream DC Universe canon, as well as elements of DC’s horror-themed ‘mature readers’ Vertigo imprint (founded in 1993), it was not presented with the same significance as was the similar merging of the five ‘surviving’ alternate Earths at the end of *Crisis*. As of the 2011 DC relaunch, Vertigo continues as a DC imprint for offbeat creator-owned titles, while characters who had starred in Vertigo yet previously originated in the DC Universe such as Swamp Thing and John Constantine were overtly reintegrated into the *New52* continuity.

\textsuperscript{127} Ndalianis, “Enter the Aleph,” pp. 278-280.

\textsuperscript{128} The story as presented was that, in essence, one of the Flash’s enemies Professor Zoom alters history via time-travel, changing the ‘primary’ DC Universe into a considerably altered status quo, in which only the Flash remembers how things ‘should’ be -- a common plotline in science fiction. When the Flash himself eventually travels back in time and attempts to ‘fix’ history, the result was the ‘fixed’-yet-still-changed *New52* continuity. However, much like the aforementioned instance of 2009’s *Star Trek* reboot, it is a rather loose catch-all of a diegetic explanation for the new continuity, as many aspects of ‘reality’ are changed that would have no logical bearing on the death or life of the hero’s parent, such as the complete revision of Krypton’s aesthetics and history yet again.
continuity since *Crisis*, like *Crisis* it was imprecise, incomplete, and involved both an inbuilt time lapse and floating timeline, as well as a piecemeal approach to continuity retention. As in 1986, while the broad nature of diegetic ‘reality’ and ‘history’ had been altered and many characters’ backstories rewritten, certain events and characters were noted to have undergone comparatively few changes, such as the Green Lantern and Batman families of titles. These largely retained the histories of various major changes in status quo over the preceding few decades, notably various popular crossover series.

While *The New 52* can be reasonably viewed as entailing a reboot of Superman’s continuity, the same cannot be readily said for the inconsistent changes to the wider DC canon, especially not for the treatment of Batman, whose treatment in Proctor’s words “does not constitute a reboot” and that “With regards to continuity, I would say it [*The New 52*] resembles a rather messy affair.”

And also, just like *Crisis*, it would be Superman who would once again receive the most thorough wiping clean of his continuity slate, with the details of his backstory rewritten again, his allies and villains’ origins all tweaked, the aforementioned retconning of his marriage and entire relationship with Lois to have never happened, Luthor has apparently never been U.S. President, Krypton was wholly revised yet again, Krypto the Superdog is now a wolf from the Phantom Zone, and Superman’s costume has been radically redesigned for essentially the first time on a notionally permanent basis. In sharp relief from the ‘running changes’ which *Birthright* and *Secret Origin*’s soft reboots had wrought, the Superman of *The New 52* retained little if any of his post-*Crisis* narrative continuity.

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129 Both for Superman specifically and the DC Universe in general, as the intermediary crossover ‘events’ which involved company-wide continuity alteration, *Zero Hour* and *Infinite Crisis*, had ultimately resulted in minimal major retons to the broader post-*Crisis* diegesis.

130 Editorial policy mandated that the issues of the relaunched *Action Comics* [vol. 2] chronicling Superman’s earliest adventures were set ‘5 years’ prior to the present day, as was the initial arc of the keystone launch title *Justice League* [vol. 2]. Thus, much like the time lapses covered by the original *Man of Steel* miniseries, the continuity of *The New 52* once again reflects DC’s aversion to portraying their rebooted heroes as ‘inexperienced’ heroes from day one of their new narratives. See Noeline Clark, “‘Justice League’: DC will write new first chapter for super team,” *Hero Complex*, June 12, 2011, http://herocomplex.latimes.com/comics/justice-league-de-will-write-new-first-chapter-for-super-team/#/0. See also Graeme McMillan, “George Pérez Explains His ‘Frustrating’ Superman Experience In The New 52,” *Comics Alliance*, June 26, 2012, http://comicsalliance.com/george-perez-superman-experience-new-52/.


133 Apart from references to Superman having at one point died and come back in an implied story that may or may not have been similar to the 1992 post-*Crisis* “Death of Superman” crossover, virtually none of Superman’s previously published adventures appear to have remained canonical, except perhaps for his participation in some larger company crossovers such as the Green Lantern-centric *Blackest Night* (2009-
It was not, however, as stark a ‘back-to-basics’ approach as had been that of *Man of Steel*, as many of the ‘silly’ Silver Age elements that were gradually reintroduced into post-Crisis continuity such as Supergirl, Krypto and the Fortress of Solitude were retained in *The New 52*, but in more significantly altered forms. As much as the ‘retro’ quality of many of the ‘leaks’ of 1950s continuity references that writers like Byrne and Waid brought from the Silver Age comics they grew up reading, the current relaunch of DC is clearly influenced by a new generation of creators’ nostalgia for the aesthetics and stories of the 1990s. This is evident in elements such as the major return of the character Doomsday; crossovers concerning bleak futures; the idea of Superman and Wonder Woman having a relationship; an overall ‘darker’ and ‘edgier’ tone; and especially the Image Comics-esque aesthetic choices of Jim Lee’s redesigned costumes. The re-emergence of these tropes, evidently, was referencing a new, more recent cycle, merged with revamps of the older material.

All of which leads to the question... why? Why is Superman’s continuity, of all DC’s major characters, the one most subject to totally discarding his accrued narrative history at the junction of major company relaunches, when stablemates of the same level like Batman are largely untouched? And why, unlike these other characters, has Superman been subject to *additional* soft reboots of his backstory in the interim of these events? For that matter, what should be made of the fact that this number of continuity revisions, quite uniquely to Superman, should take place in steadily decreasing intervals, such that only two years separated the most recent reboots? What do these contracting continuity cycles portend?

**Continuity Management**

Before that question can be answered, it is necessary to reconsider the importance of continuity, and how its revision functions as distinct from diegetically-contained changes in tone and approach. The true significance of continuity over the seven decades in which Superman has seen continuous publication in comic book form is complex, and challenging to assess. On the one hand, the vast majority of individual comics issues do not, as a rule, openly engage with questions of continuity, serving only to tell their individual stories and in doing so reflecting the tastes and styles of their respective eras and contexts.

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2010) that remain part of the *New 52* continuity. Even these would likely be subject to the type of aforementioned ‘mental editing’ for readers, given the obvious incongruity with the new portrayal of Superman.
As ultimately only one component of the far wider supertext of the franchise, comic book continuity is a factor that would prove undetectable or insignificant to a major proportion of Superman’s broader consumer base for his media supertext. This is something rendered all the more so due to the predominantly detail-oriented changes that have at no point radically altered the fundamental strokes of Superman’s origin, abilities or characterisation to such a degree where the different continuity iterations of the character would be readily distinguishable to the layperson.134

Continuity, however, does matter. The development of progressively greater attention to narrative cohesiveness in comics for fans and writers alike has been a core aspect of the development of the mainstream American superhero comic, reflecting an engagement with the material on a more invested, long-term level. Speaking of this engagement, and similar to Reynolds’ notion of an “ideal metatext”135 discussed in Chapter 1, Wolk offers the viewpoint that:

…immersion in that world isn’t just what they [the comics] require; it’s what they’re selling. Contemporary superhero comics aren’t really meant to be read as freestanding works… superhero comics’ readers understand each thirty-two page pamphlet as a small element of one of two gigantic narratives, in which most characters have thematic and metaphorical significance. These two big stories have names – corporate names: Marvel and DC …Each company’s superhero comics are collective histories of a fictional place that now has so much backstory attached to it that no one person knows it all.136

It must also be acknowledged that the two immense masses of diegetically contiguous texts discussed by Reynolds and Wolk are also historically significant, for their unique stature in collective ongoing storytelling, when one takes DC and Marvel’s respective superhero universes into consideration. As Kaveney recounts of a conversation with a colleague, the contention that “by now, these two continuities were the largest narrative constructions in human culture (exceeding, for example, the vast body of myth, legend and story that underlies Latin and Greek literature), and that learning to navigate them was a skill-set all of its own.”137 And moreover, I would hasten to add, no individual superhero’s supertext eclipses that of Superman in duration, variety of intergenerational mediatised adaptation, or frequency of internal continuity rebooting.

As Pustz discusses in Comic Book Culture, the increasing importance of continuity to the subculture of comic book fandom (and thus comic book writing in turn) became particularly pronounced due to the fact that fans have formed a specialised subculture,

134 Or at least until the recent start of aesthetic changes to the iconic costume brought by The New52.
136 Wolk, Reading Comics, pp. 90-91.
137 Kaveney, Superheroes!, p. 25
which has essentially become the dominant demographic of the medium’s consumers.\textsuperscript{138} This is in stark contrast to the balance required to satisfy the much larger proportion of casual audience members that consume other serialised media such as television, even for shows with significant fanbases like *Game of Thrones*.\textsuperscript{139} The comics industry, he argues, has little incentive any more to make their titles accessible to non-fans as these would form an ever more peripheral demographic of their sales.\textsuperscript{140}

Discussing how the pleasures of developing continuity operate as a form of reward or flattery for a knowledgeable readership, Pustz acknowledges that literacy in rich and self-reflexive continuity becomes vital to a longtime reader’s sense of connection to a character and immersion in their fictional world, as it is developed to take on greater depth.\textsuperscript{141} Reynolds even contends that continuity in comics became the “most crucial aspect of enjoyment for the committed fans.”\textsuperscript{142}

This in turn is a financial incentive for publishers, wanting to hook consumers into feeling that they cannot miss an issue for fear of a gap in their knowledge-base of the forever-progressing narrative.\textsuperscript{143} Inexorably, catering to these preferences makes a ‘knowing audience’\textsuperscript{144} rather than new ones the primary target. Moreover, when the development of dense continuity leads to change that irrevocably breaks with the timelessness that is key to Eco’s ‘irreversible premises’ such as Dick Grayson growing out of the role of Robin to become Nightwing (not to mention stories that deliberately violate continuity), Pustz contends that continuity had reached a point by the mid-1990s whereby it had become functionally illegible for the uninitiated.\textsuperscript{145}

All of this is fair enough, but I would conversely argue that it is not novel to the Dark Age of comics as Pustz contends. It can be seen much earlier in the Bronze Age of the 1980s, and even before *Crisis*, given the simplification of continuity that it was notionally trying to achieve. Conversely though, publishers face a counterpressure of requiring generational renewal, as Superman’s never-ending battle remains in perpetual publication. While for the experienced reader continuity is a primary pleasure, for a new

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{138} See also Bongco, *Reading Comics*, p. 129.
\item \textsuperscript{139} Although still broadly quite true of even most genre-themed television, Pustz did not anticipate the advent of highly popular yet very continuity-heavy shows such as *Lost* or the re-envisioned *Battlestar Galactica*, nor does he make any comparison to soap operas, which in many respects the closest equivalent to comic books in their use of long-term continuity management, even to the extent of using devices such as retcons.
\item \textsuperscript{140} Pustz, *Comic Book Culture*, pp. 112-113.
\item \textsuperscript{141} ibid., pp. 113, 129-130, 132, 205.
\item \textsuperscript{142} Reynolds, *Super Heroes*, p. 38.
\item \textsuperscript{143} Kaveney, *Superheroes!*, pp. 30, 194. See also Pustz, pp. 113, 132-133.
\item \textsuperscript{144} Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, pp. 120-121.
\item \textsuperscript{145} Pustz, *Comic Book Culture*, pp. 113, 130-131.
\end{itemize}
one it can seem as impenetrable as the giant door to the Fortress of Solitude, as though a barrier preventing casual visitation. Thus while on the one hand DC seems to always strive to maintain continuity for the short to medium term, in the long run it has shown a pattern of wanting to simplify, discard or otherwise retell Superman’s origin and redefine the details of his status quo in the hopes of garnering new audiences. It is this key tension which informs many of the continuity issues discussed here.

Gordon quotes Otto Friedrich’s observation of how “one of the odd paradoxes about Superman… that while he is a hero of nostalgia, the constant changes in his character keep destroying the qualities that make him an object of nostalgia,” yet Gordon himself argues that “those changes contribute to the nostalgia about Superman, because the character operates in a mythological dimension, which gives it a form of consistency at a symbolic level.” Although Eco argued that Superman’s oneiric narratives exist in a phase between the principles of the truly mythic and the novelistic, I would argue that these viewpoints are not mutually exclusive.

It is these mythic dimensions of Superman which allow him to be constantly retold and recycled without drastic reconception, because the core tropes and elements of his story have remained reasonably firm since at least the mid 1940s -- they may undergo tinkering or a lick of paint, yet his foundations remain immutable. Thus the constant retelling of the origin of the Last Son of Krypton in the comics is not so much truly to inform anyone of who he is… they already know. Instead it is a question, a mythical question, of how to retell the story anew, to make the details appear relevant to current tastes, but without ever shying away from its fundamental textual identity. Superman’s intergenerational nostalgia is so profound, so culturally permeated through decades of continuous transmedia adaptation that while there may be a perceived, perhaps legitimate imperative to reintroduce his story to subsequent generations for fear that he become ‘your dad’s superhero,’ in truth Superman’s iconic essentials are almost universally recognised and understood by audiences long before they ever read his comics, to an almost literally mythic extent.

In bridging and maintaining these mythic dimensions with the realities of producing a marketable continuous publication, continuity in the Superman titles is a highly illustrative example of the whole notion of comic book continuity and the ways in which it is used. This is especially so given the far more continuity-obsessed practices of

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DC Comics generally, in choosing to revise its continuity so extensively and with such increasing frequency, with tweaks to Superman’s status quo typically at the forefront of such revisions.

In fact, Superman is a particularly useful lens through which to view the practice of continuity management, not only due to the close, often causal link between his continuity and DC’s in general, but also thanks to the essential lack of truly drastic change to the character’s actual portrayal in spite of the many retcons and near-reboots. For all his revisions, the essentials remain the same, the broad strokes of his origin, the majority of his abilities, his persona, even to a large degree the tone and narrative sensibility of his adventures generally have not undergone radical shifts in the ongoing core diegesis of his comic book history.

**Continuity versus Interpretation**

An important distinction to consider is between a shift in interpretation versus a shift in continuity. The most noteworthy point of comparison here can be made with Batman, being the only other superhero to be almost equivalent to Superman in longevity of publication, popularity with fans, transmedia presence, and broader cultural recognition.

In terms of portrayal, Batman has been subject to a far wider variation of tone and narrative style than has Superman. These have ranged from early depictions as a dark, occasionally lethal avenger, closely linked to the noir/pulp fiction tradition, to becoming a square-jawed champion of mainstream values during wartime, with his plucky kid sidekick Robin. This shifted in turn to the camp outrageousness of fighting aliens and supernatural creatures as often as gangsters in the 1950s and 1960s, firstly as a result of the Comics Code Authority’s censorship, and then later as feedback inspired by Batman’s own contemporaneous television adaptation. The Dark Knight Detective reclaimed his serious investigative vigilante roots once more in the 1970s, before becoming a brooding, neurotic loner at the end of the twentieth century, mellowing only slightly into a stern, hyper-competent perfectionist in the first decade of the new millennium. As a result of being a character who has, as Spigel and Jenkins observed, existed “in transformed states, for multiple generations,” Batman can mean quite radically different things to different demographics, in a way that could never truly be said of Superman.

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148 Naturally, this summary involves a degree of simplification, and there were certainly exceptions and digressions in every era, depending in large part on the creative teams involved in the comics at any given time.

Yet for all of these wildly varying interpretations of Batman’s characterisation and the portrayal of his milieu, the Dark Knight has never been subject to the kind of severe and repeated diegetic retcons to his comic diegesis that have been exercised on Superman, who has conversely maintained an essentially consistent persona as an upright defender against crime and natural disasters, against a backdrop of romantic soap opera. Despite having passed through all the same metapocalyptic crises as Superman, Batman’s continuity has received very few noteworthy alterations over the years, with his scant number of subsequent retellings of his origin, generally serving to embellish rather than overtly change previously established canon, and at no point overtly restarting his history.

The fact that Batman has become something of a mobile signifier without necessitating nearly as many hard or soft retcons to his continuity as has Superman, with his comparatively stable portrayal has been subjected to, is striking. Perhaps the simplicity of Batman’s origin and the somewhat timeless (and endlessly reusable) rogues gallery of memorable villains are less conducive to frequent revision. Conversely it might be that Superman’s science fiction origin story provokes ongoing interest in revising and re-

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150 Superman’s use in WWII for propaganda purposes within his comic book diegesis was largely limited to fighting saboteurs and encouraging readers to buy war bonds. For an interesting study on how Superman was shown playing a more direct wartime role in other media, as well as through the paratexts of his comic book covers unrelated to their internal narratives, see Todd S. Munson, “‘Superman Says You Can Slap a Jap!’: The Man of Steel and Race Hatred in World War II,” in Darowski, The Ages of Superman, pp. 5-15; and Chris Murray, “Propaganda: Superhero Comics and Propaganda in World War Two,” in Magnussen and Christiansen, eds., Comics & Culture, pp. 141-156. For an analysis of the contrary approach taken by Timely (later Marvel) Comics with their own far less invulnerable hero, see Christopher Murray, “Propaganda: The Pleasures of Persuasion in Captain America,” in Smith and Duncan, Critical Approaches to Comics, pp. 129-141.

151 With the notable exception of the somewhat anti-establishment portrayal of Superman in his very earliest pre-war years (loosely evoked by Grant Morrison’s run on Action Comics [vol. 2] in The New 52), and to some extent the shift to humanise the character through a differing nuance of how the Clark Kent identity was portrayed after Crisis, although the significance of the latter is often exaggerated. See Teiwes, The New ‘Man of Steel’ is a Quiche-Eating Wimp!: Media Reactions to the Reimagining of Superman in the Reagan Era,” pp. 125-142.

152 That is, full narrative retellings equivalent to Superman’s various aforementioned miniseries from The Man of Steel onwards, as opposed to partial recaps or flashbacks. The post-Crisis “Batman: Year One” (Batman [vol. 1] #404-407, w. Frank Miller, a. David Mazzucchelli, DC Comics, 1987) was a soft reboot of his origin, with other small continuity tweaks being limited to passing mentions in Infinite Crisis, Zero Hour and the retroactive split between the Golden Age Earth-Two and Silver Age Earth-One versions of the character, as had been the case with Superman. It was not until 26 years after “Year One” that Batman received another soft-reboot of his origin story, in the year-long 2013-2014 crossover event “Zero Year” helmed by writer Scott Snyder, beginning in Batman [vol. 2] #21. To date, Batman has never had a hard reboot to all but completely expunge his continuity in the way Superman has had at least twice.

153 Even when the introduction of the multiverse system necessitated the designation of the Golden Age Batman of Earth-Two as a distinct character to the then-ongoing Silver Age version, the continuity divergences were primarily concerning post-Golden Age developments of the character, as their backstories remained essentially identical, compared to the addition of Superboy as a point of major divergence between the classic iterations of Superman.

154 Bongco, Reading Comics, p. 145.
exploring in new variations and updating notions of the public’s evolving sensibilities regarding sci-fi tropes. It could be that while the comparatively fantastical nature of Superman’s abilities lends the character to more consistently outlandish stories that inspire the more rapid accumulation of new minor characters and continuity elements, which in turn become perceived as ‘dated’ more quickly than Batman’s comparatively ‘realistic’ world of hardened criminals and flamboyant psychopaths.

On a more basic level, Batman’s origin is more of a premise than an actual story per se, an explanation for why he fights crime, with virtually no iteration covering the period between Bruce Wayne being orphaned and shortly before his adult assumption of the Batman identity.\textsuperscript{155} This stands compared to Superman’s origin story, which involves more key characters and multiple story phases from the cradle through to adulthood, being more intrinsically narrative in the ‘epic’ mode of recounting a life history with biblical overtones.

Or to take a more mundane view, possibly the distinction is due simply to the more drastic culling of Superman’s pre-\textit{Crisis} barnacles, compared to Batman’s continuity remaining relatively unscathed, that has led to a progressive reintroduction of these many jettisoned elements that new generations of fans-turned-creators found they missed and wished to reintroduce. Conversely, this is very likely one of the key motivating features behind the stark contrast between Superman and Batman’s continuity treatment in \textit{The New52} relaunch, as one of the key outcomes of Batman’s long accretion of largely intact continuity has been the generation of a large family of associated characters. By having Eco’s ‘irreversible premise’ of Dick Grayson becoming Nightwing or Barbara Gordon becoming crippled and reinventing herself as Oracle,\textsuperscript{156} and other characters taking on the mantle or Robin or Batgirl in turn, Batman has engendered a large supporting cast who are themselves marketable in additional solo or group titles outside of the core books starring Batman himself. Entirely restarting Batman’s continuity at the time of \textit{Crisis} or \textit{The New52} with a clean slate as did Superman would likely reset Dick Grayson as the original Robin, and leave up to half a dozen associated characters unavailable to star in other comics until their gradual re-introduction into a revised continuity. Thus, a certain

\textsuperscript{155} In fact, the new television series \textit{Gotham} (developed by Bruno Heller, Warner Bros. Television/Fox, 2014-) is the first part of Batman’s entire supertext to explore in any detail Bruce’s childhood after being orphaned.

\textsuperscript{156} Although it should be noted that, as of \textit{The New52} relaunch, Barbara has recovered and reclaimed the Batgirl mantle. Significantly, however, her prior crippling and career as Batgirl has not been written out of the revised canon.
economic imperative to maintaining Batman’s lineage of sidekicks and allies clearly exists.  

Why then, should this not be the case for Superman? Although Superman has never had sidekicks per se, he has over the years developed several spin-off characters such as Supergirl, and notably Steel and the clone Superboy spinning out of “The Reign of the Supermen,” following his infamous “Death of Superman” story. Yet while each of these characters has sporadically starred in spinoff titles, they have proven not as numerous nor enduring as those of the ‘Batman family,’ with less narratively-driven ties and links, and fewer unifying storylines that beget further development. One has to consider, therefore, whether part of the reason that DC shows little interest in retaining Superman’s continuity compared to engaging in increasingly frequent retellings of his origin story is that, in fact, Superman’s origin story has become his most definitive story, his most ‘resonant trope.’

Even Superman’s noncanonical Elseworlds texts generally revolve around an alteration to the circumstances of his origin, asking how the Man of Steel might have turned out differently if his rocket cradle had landed him in Arthurian England, Soviet Russia, or an Amish community. Bestselling comics, prose and television writer J. Michael Straczynski even penned three graphic novels, detailing yet another transdiegetising modern retelling of Superman’s origin, even despite it having no bearing on ongoing continuity, simply for the opportunity to turn his hand to this iconic story.

While DC sees value in retaining many of Batman’s past stories and continuing to develop his evolving family of characters, Superman returns again and again to his beginnings, to his origin, to retell the epic of how he came to be who he is. And this applies not just to comic book reboots, but also to the entire supertext. Three novels written decades apart across 63 years each reimagine Superman’s origin in exhaustive detail, and every solo version of Superman on radio, film, television or animation

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157 Intriguingly, this approach seems to have finally carried over to film somewhat, as the forthcoming Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice (Dir. Zack Snyder, Warner Bros, 2016) introduces the new shared-universe version of Batman without a preceding solo relaunch film, yet clearly representing a rebooted continuity from Christopher Nolan’s preceding Dark Knight trilogy. Not only does the film introduce its new Batman in media res, trailers and press releases indicate that it also features Batman at an advanced state of his career, with at least one Robin already having either retired or died.

158 Superman: Earth One (w. J. Michael Straczynski, a. Shane Davis, DC Comics, New York, 2010); Superman: Earth One, Volume Two (w. J. Michael Straczynski, a. Shane Davis, DC Comics, New York, 2012); and Superman: Earth One, Volume Three (w. J. Michael Straczynski, a. Ardian Syaf, DC Comics, New York, 2015). Note that the nomenclature of ‘Earth One’ is not to be confused with the pre-Crisis designation pertaining to the version of Superman appearing in the Golden Age.

159 George Lowther, The Adventures of Superman (Random House, New York, 1942); Elliot S! Maggin, Superman: Last Son of Krypton (Warner Books, New York, 1978); and Tom De Haven, It’s Superman (Chronicle/Ballantine, San Francisco CA, 2005). Lowther’s books contained several of the first appearances
begins with at least a single instalment recounting his origin. His earliest incarnations of each even have his origin verbally summarised at the beginning of every episode, in the famous ‘Strange visitor from another planet’ speech. Over half of Richard Donner’s 1978 Superman film adaptation is devoted to Superman’s origin story, as was the case again in 2013’s Man of Steel film reboot by Zack Snyder. Moreover, the longest-running transmedia adaptation to date, Smallville, was entirely concerned with Clark Kent’s development prior to becoming Superman.

Batman, by comparison, has generally had his origin summarised very quickly in media adaptations, if at all. The iconic 1960s Adam West TV series never mentions Batman’s origin at all, Tim Burton’s 1989 feature film covered the events only in brief flashbacks and inferences, and even the seminal 1990s Batman: The Animated Series only makes references to it in a few episodes, and covers aspects of the adult phase of forming the Batman identity in flashbacks from the animated film Batman: Mask of the Phantasm (Dir. Eric Radomski and Bruce Timm, Warner Bros. Animation, 1993). It was not until Christopher Nolan’s Batman Begins in 2005 that a relatively full origin of Batman was ever dramatised, and even then in a decidedly piecemeal and nonlinear fashion.¹⁶⁰

Superman’s origin story, in other words, is clearly a very key component to the character, perhaps the key component, eclipsing any other element of the character’s narrative which has been covered over his many decades of publication and adaptation. From a creative standpoint this may partially explain the temptation to constantly retell and embellish that iconic story anew, to put a new stamp on it, and capture a new generation. It is additionally possible that if DC does indeed view Superman’s origin as his most definitive and ‘marketable’ story, it perhaps bespeaks a correlating lack of confidence in the character’s viability as a regular monthly ‘story engine,’ and that whenever it is felt necessary to revitalise the character, the company increasingly leans towards rebooting his diegesis. It would certainly offer some explanation as to why Superman’s origin, more than any other comparable character, is so frequently re-inscribed, even outside of major DC continuity events, a process progressively increasing in frequency over the last two decades. Proctor makes this point as well, stating: “it may

¹⁶⁰ Whether the aforementioned 2014 television series Gotham will go on to Smallville-like longevity remains to be seen, but should be noted that the series’ premise is as much focused on the early years of Jim Gordon and Batman’s future adversaries as it is about Bruce Wayne himself.
be a surprise to many that the origin narrative has been told, or more pointedly, retold, a remarkable number of times since the turn of the new Millennium,” noting the “rapid acceleration of the reiterative and adaptive processes we are witnessing” with such reboot cycles.161

What is certainly evident, what these changes and reboot cycles demonstrate, is that the alterations to Superman’s comic book diegesis are ‘pure’ continuity issues. They are prime, illustrative examples of how a massively multi-authored, perpetually hypertextual serialised narrative and associated cross-pollinating supertext engages in an ongoing metamorphosis. The history of Superman comics is a microcosm of the entire concept of continuity management in extremis, wherein those involved across generations of editors and writers play out a debate. They are not so much contesting who the character of Superman is, or what he means (in the way Batman being so often reinterpreted begs that question), but rather engaging in an increasingly progressive, seemingly unending process of debate over how best to tell essentially the same story.

As is the task of every new film or television adaptation presenting the character anew to another generation, for comics writers it is making the choices of discarding, importing and reappropriating which elements of previous iterations and adaptations from across the history of his supertext are considered the most appealing, the most iconic, the most relevant to all possible audiences, and in doing so crystallise the enduring and unchanging core of the property. However, what distinguishes this process of constant re-adaptation from the indefinite rearticulations of literal myths or even from other cases of frequent retelling and re-adaptation, such as the literary phenomenon of the Robinsonade is that, for Superman, these many iterations are not produced in isolation — they are part of a continuous process.

While both examples are similarly multi-authored extrapolations of a concept long since removed from the guiding hands of their original creators and spread across an expanse of time and changing cultural landscapes, Superman’s comic book adventures remain in unceasing production, shepherded by an unbroken chain of writers, editors, a comic publisher and ultimately a parent corporation. As much as it may be determined that Superman’s origin story is his most marketable and essential ‘textual utterance,’ unlike the manifold versions of Robinson Crusoe it is not a tale retold purely for its own sake, it does ultimately always serve as the basis to refresh the character for his ongoing stories which are always in the process of being told.

The reboots, the retcons, the retellings of Superman’s origin are all, in essence, asking the same question, of how to re-adapt this most core, essential story as the basis for new adventures to come. This pattern, this accelerating cycle of revised origins reconstituting diverse influences is, I would argue, ultimately a form of internalised intertextual self-adaptation. Proctor agrees, contending that “This process of ‘rebooting,’ then, can be seen as a method of adaptation… part of the adaptation is that the comic is adapting itself rather than a source outside the medium. …It is, in this respect, self-cannibalising.”

Furthermore, Proctor posits that reboots constitute a process distinct from common genre counter-pressures between “standardization and differentiation,” but rather that “By collapsing canon and continuity and rationalising it within the story-world itself is a statement of intent… the reboot is an instant declaration of dislocation that quests autonomy (although this can never truly occur).”

In discussing the cognitive impossibility of such textual autonomy, Proctor elaborates that “a ‘clean’ reboot or tabula rasa… dislocated from history is an impossible conceit. …the reboot precariously straddles a fulcrum between new and old, inseparable yet disconnected” and that “through this process of ‘undoing,’ it also preserves …. The ambition to erase only preserves the connection.”

I concur, and extend the point further, as my argument demonstrates the even greater complexity of intertextual fragmentation and reabsorption at play in such reboots, from within and without comic books as they key ongoing locus text, in an endless process of narrative re-evaluation and transmission across the supertext as it self-adapts anew from these intersecting currents.

**Palimpsestuous Continuity**

To view the development and management of Superman’s continuity as a debate over which previous versions of the franchise should be reinstated is perhaps the most apt way to look at these cyclical changes. As discussed in Chapter 2, the long history of Superman’s adaptation into other media has had an observable effect back onto the comics themselves. Frequently this results in positive feedback loops of influence, whereby particular story or character tropes migrate from comics to transmedia versions and back again in an altered form, often becoming more resonant and influential due to the far wider audience of said media adaptations than the actual comics. This prompts the kind of deep cultural memory that Hutcheon describes as the result of such frequently re-adapted

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162 *ibid.*, p. 6.
163 *ibid.*, p. 9.
164 *ibid.*, pp. 11, 12.
texts prompting an increasingly palimpsestic reception.\textsuperscript{165} While Proctor does not particularly address the feedback issue, he touches upon the significant consideration of differing cultural capital for mainstream audiences as discussed in my previous chapter, noting that “there are far more people who have seen a Batman film than read a Batman comic.”\textsuperscript{166}

This model of ‘resonant tropes’\textsuperscript{167} re-entering the comic hypertext via subsequent revisions of continuity functions in essentially the same way as the aforementioned reincorporation of previously discarded continuity elements from within the comics alone that have, often with the benefit of some nostalgia, become resonant tropes for subsequent revisions, as in Hutcheon’s model of ‘lateral’ adaptations informing the nature of such palimpsest texts.\textsuperscript{168} At the heart of Superman’s continuity management over the decades is this internalised adaptive debate over which elements of past versions of Superman, be they comics, film, television, radio or especially older comics, enjoy the most resonance for these (re)creators involved, who function as Hutcheon’s ‘relay’ through which rearticulated texts become “palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation.”\textsuperscript{169} To thus summarily revisit the major revisions of Superman’s continuity reveals that this model of interpreting his changes in terms of creators looking backwards is quite viable, especially when taking into account the influence of both previous states of comics continuity as well as past media adaptations.

As the fuzzy continuity of the earliest decade or so of Superman’s history gave way to the Silver Age, continuity retcons were mostly in the forms of additions such as the Superboy backstory, as insufficient time had passed for nostalgia to play a significant factor in this early stage of continuous development and expansion of the character’s mythos. By the Bronze Age these ballooning elements had started to be seen as something of a hindrance, and much of the sweeping change brought about by the Man of Steel as the diegetic result of Crisis served mostly to pare back existing elements rather than to reclaim ideas from the past.

However, this was not entirely so, as the considerable simplification of Superman’s mythos and notable reduction in his Superpowers were definitely reminiscent of the Golden Age wartime Superman, if not quite his earliest years. Furthermore, Byrne was the first creator to borrow significantly from cross-media adaptations as part of his

\textsuperscript{165} Hutcheon, \textit{A Theory of Adaptation}, p. 122.
\textsuperscript{166} Proctor, “Beginning Again,” p. 13.
\textsuperscript{167} Coogan, \textit{Superhero}, pp. 6-7.
\textsuperscript{168} Hutcheon, \textit{A Theory of Adaptation}, pp. XIII, 21, 125.
\textsuperscript{169} \textit{ibid.}, pp. 7-8, 173.
reboot of the character’s origin,\textsuperscript{170} taking some cues from the Donner films,\textsuperscript{171} such as his sterile, inhuman rendition of Krypton. Notable also was his somewhat ‘transvaluating’\textsuperscript{172} portrayal of Clark Kent as a more confident, less overtly performative aspect of Superman’s ‘real’ personality, being inspired by the performance of George Reeves as the not-particularly-mild-mannered reporter in the 1950s television series \textit{The Adventures of Superman}.\textsuperscript{173} Even in this earliest major reboot we can see Byrne engaged in generating a hypertext which encourages the kind of multi-track readings Sanders describes, whereby knowing audiences will be open to experiencing the “palimpsestic doubleness” in their awareness of the reboot not merely as a revision or retelling, but ‘as an adaptation’ concerned as significantly with prior adaptations as with privileging comic hypotexts.\textsuperscript{174}

By the time of \textit{Birthright}, a considerable number of the supporting characters and continuity ideas deliberately eliminated by \textit{Man of Steel} had worked their way back in, but all thus far conforming to the post-\textit{Crisis} ‘rules’ established by Byrne.\textsuperscript{175} Here pre-\textit{Crisis} elements started to be reintroduced via hard retcons, such as a less sterile view of Krypton more akin to the Silver Age, a more classically performative Clark Kent persona, and re-establishing Luthor’s scientific genius and shared youth with Kent while still allowing for his tycoon role in \textit{The Man of Steel}, a move directly inspired by the TV series \textit{Smallville} but in turn taken from Silver Age comics continuity. While the diegesis remained putatively unbroken, then-current Superman canon was becoming ever more amended by retcons that reintegrated a variety of past canonical material, inciting an ever more ‘palimpsestuous reading’\textsuperscript{176} of the narrative.

This process only accelerated, for while Waid’s \textit{Birthright} may have changed little compared to \textit{The Man of Steel}, it opened the door for Geoff Johns’ subsequent series of hard retcons that culminated in \textit{Secret Origin}, and the progressive reintroduction of a mix of resonant tropes from past comics and transmedia alike. This phase reintroduced Silver Age comics elements such as Superboy’s membership in the Legion of Super-Heroes, the

\textsuperscript{170} Although not the first of any description, as a few of the most iconic pieces of Superman’s mythos actually debuted on radio, including Kryptonite, Jimmy Olsen, Perry White and the Man of Steel’s alliance with Batman.


\textsuperscript{172} Genette, \textit{Palimpsests}, p. 343.

\textsuperscript{173} Byrne has mentioned this in various interviews, such as Henry Mietkiewicz, “Superman Goes Back to the Drawing Board,” \textit{The Toronto Star}, June 21, 1986, p. F1. See also \textit{The Krypton Club Newsletter} #11, June 1, 1995, reproduced at http://www.kryptonsite.com/loisclark/krypt11.htm.

\textsuperscript{174} Sanders, \textit{Adaptation and Appropriation}, p. 62.

\textsuperscript{175} Thus for example, although new versions of Supergirl, Krypto and Kandor had since been reintroduced, they all still found loopholes to avoid being ‘true’ Kryptonians, thus maintaining the edict that Superman remain the Last Son of Krypton. See also Murdough, “Worlds Will Live, Worlds Will Die,” pp. 75, 136.

\textsuperscript{176} Lejeune, \textit{Moi Aussi}, p. 115.
restoration of Supergirl, Krypto, and the denizens of Kandor and the Phantom Zone all as genuine Kryptonians, finally putting to rest Byrne’s ‘Last Son’ rule. At the same time Johns imported many tropes from the blockbuster film adaptations of Richard Donner (this feedback was contemporaneously mirrored on Smallville) far more directly than Byrne ever did, such as the cinematic versions of the Fortress of Solitude, Jor-El and villain General Zod, inspiring his portrayal of Kryptonian society in aesthetics and narrative, with liberal doses of Silver Age interpretations thrown in. More so than at any point in the history of the supertext, the comic book adventures of Superman during these years had become a site of Sanders’ ongoing textual flux, in which engaged readers were in a state of hyperawareness of the type of adaptive textual co-presence described by Genette, as much as they were reading the surface narrative of whatever given storyline was being published that month.

Although seemingly all swept aside by the hard reboot of The New52, much of this deepening millennial mélange of the Silver, Bronze and Meta Ages under the increasingly patchworked umbrella of Byrne’s post-Crisis reinvention remain readily legible within the current palimpsest, with most of the same characters and concepts still broadly floating around under a new top-layer of retro-Dark Age tone and aesthetics with a curious entrée of Golden Age nostalgia. Everything old is new again, eventually, or as Somigli put it, “The development of comic book narratives over time can be characterized as sameness within difference, as a reshuffling of a number of narrative elements into new patterns.”

**More of Moore’s Metacritique**

Before concluding this examination of the palimpsest of Superman’s comic book continuity, I shall briefly return to the work of Alan Moore for another pertinent critical reflection from the celebrated writer on the metatextuality of comic book continuity, specifically via the lens of Superman’s many successive rearticulations. In Chapter 3, I argued how both official apocrypha and pastiche explorations of characters provide a counter-oneiric balance to mainstream continuity, and it is perhaps no surprise that, having already discussed Moore’s most famous official yet noncanonical Superman tale, that he returned to the topic of Superman later in his career to try his hand again via the method of pastiche. Perhaps significantly, Superman is the only character in Moore’s career which

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177 For whom, it should be noted, Johns had once worked as an assistant prior to breaking into comics as a writer.
the writer has revisited on as many occasions, or adapted in so divergent a fashion, firstly on a thematic deconstructive level via *Miracleman*, then through a handful of official tales culminating in his previously discussed metacritique of DC’s approach to continuity revision in “Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?,” and finally but most extensively through very direct pastiche in *Supreme*.

Coming at a point in the 1990s where Moore had cut ties with the ‘Big Two’ of Marvel and DC, dropped out of and then re-entered the mainstream superhero genre to work for then-upstart independent publisher Image Comics, *Supreme* marked the beginning of Moore’s fascination with pastiche in the latter part of this mainstream career which subsequently led to his establishment of the America’s Best Comics imprint. The character of Supreme was created by Image’s co-founder and artistic *enfant terrible* Rob Liefeld as a pastiche character obviously resembling Superman via his similar powers, appearance, and historical links to the early 20th century, yet originally portrayed as a hyperviolent moralist vigilante, unencumbered by Superman’s respect for life or the law.

When courted to take the character’s reins, Moore did so on the condition that he could completely disregard everything that had come before, deciding that it would be fun to “rescue this lame, appalling Superman knock-off” as “the idea of Superman as a psychopath is not a very interesting idea,” and instead he wondered “if I were to make it like a really, really good Superman knock-off,” he might recapture “The more enduring parts of the Superman mythology that had all been carted away… I’d rather enjoyed that rich mythology and continuity.” The result was a deliriously enjoyable 22-issue romp in which Moore retrofitted the character’s previously superficial reflection of Superman into an incredibly detailed and closely-observed pastiche of the wholesome, zany Silver Age era of Superman which he had, a decade prior, been tasked with apocryphally retiring.

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182 In terms of volume rather than time -- that is pagecount and number of issues, as opposed to years passed -- in which case the distinction would go to *Miracleman*, but again due solely to its sporadic publishing schedule.
183 *Supreme* #41-56 (Image Comics, later Maximum Press, later still Awesome Comics, 1996-1998) and *Supreme: The Return* #1-6 (Awesome Comics, 1999-2000). Similar to *Miracleman*, and indeed as with many of Moore’s independent projects, *Supreme* was subject to some changes in publisher during his tenure, with Image publishing the first two issues, Liefeld’s independent Maximum Press putting out #43-48 before transferring to Liefeld’s new company Awesome Comics, where it was then cancelled mid-storyline with issue #56, and then continued with restarted numbering as *Supreme: The Return* (albeit with no actual interruption to the story) for six issues before sudden cancellation, leaving the story hanging without a conclusion.
184 See Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics*, p. 191. For a more extensive discussion of *Supreme*, *Miracleman*, and Alan Moore’s entire body of Superman-related work in context of his wider mainstream career, see Teiwes, “A Man of Steel (by any other name).”
Although far too numerous to list here, the comic was replete with analogies to just about every major element of the pre-\textit{Crisis} Superman mythos, such as archenemies Darius Dax (a Lex Luthor pastiche), professional love interest Diana Dane (Lois Lane’s stand-in), superhuman adopted sister Suprema (cousin Supergirl), superpowered dog Radar the Hound Supreme (Krypto the Superdog), an immense secret headquarters in the flying Citadel Supreme (arctic Fortress of Solitude), a vulnerability to the deadly radioactive meteor Supremium (Kryptonite)... and many, many more besides.

Even the cover of Moore’s first issue (#41) is a direct graphic evocation 1939’s \textit{Superman} #1, as cover artist Jerry Ordway (providing his own paratextual perimeter as a noted former Superman penciller) depicts Supreme mirroring Superman’s exact flying pose and composition from the iconic cover, even recreating the distinctive decorative framing design, which Moore has filled with text enthusiastically spruiking the comic’s contents in the same style of phrasing as present on the original. This approach results in \textit{Supreme} being so densely packed with minutiae and such an abundant amount of subtle in-jokes and references that a reader’s enjoyment (and possibly even comprehension) of \textit{Supreme} is exponentially proportionate to the depth of their knowledge of Superman and DC Comics’ long history, the ultimate reward for the automatic intertextual proficiency Jenkins, Hutcheon and Sanders ascribe to engaged/knowing audiences.\footnote{Jenkins, \textit{Convergence Culture}, pp. 93-130; Sanders, \textit{Adaptation and Appropriation}, pp. 62-81; and Hutcheon, \textit{A Theory of Adaptation}, pp. 120-121.}

More than just a character-for-character pastiche, however, Moore’s \textit{Supreme} became an exploration of the entire history of Superman, and by extension superhero comics in general. This was done as an exercise in not only subject matter, but also technique, as Moore and a team of artists\footnote{Including Chris Sprouse, Matt Smith, Ian Churchill, Joe Bennett, J. Morrigan and Mark Pajarillo, and Rob Liefeld.} created present-day adventures which each contained ‘flashback’ sequences drawn by Rick Veitch. These were produced by Veitch in an astonishing variety of deliberately antiquated penciling styles, ranging from canny imitations of Joe Shuster to Jack Kirby, complete with recreations of antiquated benday dot colouring methods. To match Veitch’s retro art, Moore channelled his inner Jerry Siegel, Stan Lee et. al. for period-appropriate idioms of hyperbolic dialogue. Wolk describes this kind of referentiality as part of a trend of “Metacomics,” which “may pay lip service to being universally comprehensible, but they’re really aimed at what I call ‘superreaders’: readers familiar enough with enormous numbers of old comics that they’ll understand what’s really being discussed in the story.”\footnote{Wolk, \textit{Reading Comics}, p. 105.}
There was, however, a deeper concept underpinning this reverential and referential lark of historical recreation, much as there had been behind Moore’s revelling in legitimate Superman obscurata back in “Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?,” to explore and critique the nature of comic book continuity. With *Supreme*, Moore’s metatextual subtext in “Whatever Happened…” reached full metafictional bloom, as he introduced in his first issue a bold story conceit that would continue to be touched upon throughout his run. Supreme, being portrayed with a far more Superman-like persona than as Liefeld had originally conceived him, is depicted observing a cataclysmic *Crisis*-like alteration of reality around him, and is ushered into a strange limbo dimension dubbed ‘the Supremacy.’ Here he discovers hundreds of alternate earlier versions of himself, Supremes from earlier phases of diegetic continuity (albeit entirely unpublished ones invented by Moore himself) who survived their worlds and personal histories being ‘revised’ away. Moore’s rather outré premise clearly posits the idea of a metafictional Valhalla for past versions of Superman that have been removed from fictional ‘existence’ due to revisions in comic book continuity, treating these characters that are subject to the whims of writers and editors who rewrite, retcon and reboot either small elements or entire histories, as though they were real living people experiencing an apocalyptic cancellation of reality as they perceive it.\(^\text{189}\)

Tellingly, all the versions of Supreme demonstrate changing trends in comic book fashions, representing the shifting sensibilities of different eras, discarded artistic and narrative styles from the rough-hewn dynamism of the Golden Age to the psychedelia of the late Silver Age, the overwrought grimness of the Dark Age and every strange permutation in between. With the characters’ metafictional awareness of their own narrative revision, Moore parodically revisits the kind of ‘trauma’ to continuity he more

\(^{189}\) Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics*, pp. 23-24, compares the idea of the Supremacy to Moore’s earlier metafictional concept in *Swamp Thing* of the viewpoint of omni-dimensional access known as Aleph. Also using Moore’s notion of the Aleph as a springboard for a far more expansive analysis of highly intertextual metanarratives in comics related media adaptations is Angela Ndalianis, “Enter the Aleph,” pp. 270-290. It should be noted that both Klock and Ndalianis pay considerably greater attention to the notion of Hypertime, as both scholars were writing when the concept was presumed to still be in effect. Conceived by writers Grant Morrison and Mark Waid and debuted in the crossover event *The Kingdom* (DC Comics, 1998), it was intended as an entirely different model of diegetic metaphysics to supersede the more traditional multiversal models. Seeking to embrace a radical textual pluralism, they declared that ‘all stories matter,’ and that every obscure Elseworlds miniseries, defunct continuity or television adaptation were notionally still canonical and accessible via Hypertime. While clearly appealing to comics scholars as a diegetic validation of the entire breadth of DC’s near infinite transmedia supertext, this model of continuity was all but entirely ignored by subsequent editors and writers, bearing no lasting impact on the company’s methods of continuity management. It is for this reason that I have afforded Hypertime short shrift in my thesis, and have similarly chosen to omit the as-yet-ambiguous new model of the DC multiverse that has just emerged from DC’s 2015 crossover events *Convergence* and *Multiversity*, as their lasting significance is yet to be seen.
brutally represented in “Whatever Happened…” with the new 1990s Supreme experiencing existential anxiety over his discovery of having so many preceding continuity doppelgängers. Upon expressing his angst over being told that his own memories stretching back decades of diegetic reality have only recently been written into continuity, the confidently old-fashioned Shusteresque 1930s ‘Original Supreme’ retorts “Banana oil! Your past hasn’t been written in yet! You probably popped into being just a few weeks back!” and relates that he himself was “…born in 1920. That was the first ‘1920,’ incidentally. There’s been lots.” (italics in original). This meta-joke about multiple iterations of fictional history is especially apt, as one of the common tropes of retcons rewriting past events rarely has a direct correlation to specific real-world dates, due to the transdiegetic nature of most reboots seeking to modernise their characters along with the typical avoidance of dates due to the floating timeline principle.

To drive the point home further (and fill out the numbers) Moore’s scores of different iterations of Supreme includes analogues of the innumerable examples of ‘Imaginary Stories’ from the Silver Age, as well as the many times Superman was temporarily altered by the bizarre effects of red kryptonite -- every such alteration counting as a ‘revision’ for the purposes of the Supremacy’s metaphysics. By presenting Supreme’s fictionalised continuity as containing far more iterations than the handful of reboots that occurred to the real Superman, Moore engages in a broader examination of the nature of continuity, as pertaining not just to overt retcons but also changes in artistic style, reflections of cultural mores and fashions in the genre, and all manner of other anomalies and discarded ideas that crop up in such massively, even intergenerationally, collaborative narrative as are superhero comics. Continuity, it suggests, is not limited to consistency of diegetic details, but also to alterations of era and sensibility.

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190 This of course is also a metatextual play on the fact that, in the real world, Supreme is merely a pastiche character published by Image Comics that had, at that point, only existed for around four years.
191 Thus, much as a childhood in the 1920s could be inferred for Superman upon his debut in 1938, applying the revised details of his subsequent origin retellings would apply in turn to the 1960s, 1970s, even 1990s could be inferred if dates were ever to be mentioned. Notably the TV show Smallville, despite being a prequel to Clark Kent’s Superman career, was resolutely set contemporaneously to its 2001-2011 dates of transmission.
192 Such as turning into a giant, splitting into two separate individuals, regressing to infancy, growing the eyes and antennae of an huge ant, or going temporarily insane, to name but a few.
193 Indeed, Moore allows for more variation amongst his past versions of Supreme than was every really the case with Superman, in particular allowing differing iterations to have completely unrelated origins such as gaining their powers from radiation, a magic belt buckle, etc. -- itself an observation of the changing trends in fashionable or ‘believable’ origins over the decades for superheroes more generally. Tellingly, the only version of Supreme to actually have an alien origin mirroring Superman’s own is the aforementioned Supremacy ruler Sixties Supreme, “Last Son of the exploded planet Supron.” Supreme #41.
194 In the sense that it is not real material that was ever previously published.
Moore’s conception of the Supremacy contains a significant resonance of his work on “Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?” in its critique of comic-book continuity, as though an intertextual explosion of the simple concept he expressed a decade earlier in that memorable prologue line: “This is an imaginary story... aren’t they all?” With the Supremacy, Moore proceeds to unpack, play with, and somewhat debunk the apparent absurdity of the notion that any one work of fiction can be regarded as more ‘real’ or ‘in-continuity’ than any other piece which uses the same character. He overtly challenges the notion that any story can ever be officially ‘erased’ from narratological history by simple act of editorial fiat, while explicitly depicting such a notion. Moore also implicitly challenges this concept of erasure in light of the memory of the reader, which Collins conceives of as audiences’ persistence of textual hyperconsciousness. Or as Ndalianis argues, “how can entire fictional histories and the characters who participated in them be wiped from the memories of readers who had experienced them? [...] The fact that they existed in the memories of their readers meant that they were real.”

Although left incomplete and part of Moore’s ‘reconstructionist’ phase as a corrective approach to the superhero genre due to a sense of culpability for (and rejection of) the Dark Age of comics which his grim deconstructionist works of the 1980s had precipitated, and while lacking the stinging edge of “Whatever Happened…,” Supreme was nevertheless an intertext with a clear dialogic relationship back to this earlier work,
paired in its similar function as a metacritique of superhero comics’ fascination with diegetic revisionism, of the addiction to reboots by DC in particular, and as effecting Superman most especially. What had been an oblique metaphor in his official Superman story had come to overtly “parody the various ills of the comic industry”\(^\text{202}\) with *Supreme*, and in doing so Moore had drawn attention to the metatextual preoccupation of diegetically-acknowledged continuity management systems by extrapolating it to its metafictional extreme. In creating the Supremacy, and by extension the hordes of successive iterations of Supreme himself, Moore had created the perfect diegetic expression of the comic book palimpsest which the official Superman was indeed becoming, and -- prophetically once again -- was yet to become all the more so, as rapidly accruing new layers of continuity erasure and re-inscription were to come in the following decades.

**Conclusion**

Prior to the recent changes of *The New52* reboot, Superman’s continuity had evolved over the preceding 25 years into a strange beast, theoretically still an extension of the ‘cold restart’ of his history begun in 1986 by John Byrne, thus representing the longest unbroken diegesis in his wider supertext since the decades between the Golden Age and *Crisis*. Yet having been so heavily amended and supplemented by the reinsertion of sundry elements from the canon of other past comics, films and television series alike, Superman’s post-*Crisis* diegesis had become a mélange of old ideas and new storylines. So while the changes wrought since 2011 may have supposedly wiped the slate clean yet again, Superman comics today remain a true palimpsest, clearly legible to the ‘knowing reader’ as yet another rearticulation of past tropes and elements, in which the past never ceases to be the topic of adaptation.

Although initiated by a confluence of largely unpremeditated metatextual serendipity emerging from peculiarities of overlapping diegeses between different eras of publishing, and precipitated by the emergent contradiction of Superman’s ongoing publication straddling the gulf between the superhero genre’s first and subsequent flowerings, comic book continuity is a site of deeply palimpsestuous textual reinscription, of a level Genette could scarcely have anticipated ever occurring within the diegesis of a singular unbroken narrative publication. As Alan Moore anticipated not once but twice along the history of this hypertextual mutation, Superman, moreso than any other

character in the genre he served to initiate, is a living site of ongoing self-adaptation, existing in a state of constant and accelerating textual transmission from both within and without comic books’ place in the Man of Steel’s wider media supertext.
CONCLUSION

The development, management, and transformation of diegetic continuity is a core component in the production of serialised narratives. This process becomes exponentially more complex and internally foregrounded when the narratives concerned accrue the massive textual complexity of being collaboratively authored by generations of different creative and editorial voices. Such diegeses extended and diversify, not only temporally but also laterally. These narratives become simultaneously produced across multiple parallel media forms down the decades, in some cases for the better part of a century. Beyond simple considerations of branding or direct adaptation, studying how these issues of diegetic multiplicity arise via continuity maintenance and cross-media adaptation becomes key to an adequate scholarly understanding of how corporately owned intellectual properties are perpetuated across wider character-based multimedia franchises.

Having drawn upon scholarship from the contested field of adaptation studies as well as the diffuse and still relatively nascent discipline of comics studies, I have sought through my thesis to bridge a gap in existing scholarship by presenting a fuller and more comprehensive modelling and analysis of what diegetic continuity ultimately is and how it is utilised and reshaped. Much of the existing discourse focuses on associated or contributive factors rather than a direct engagement with canonical theory itself. These include outmoded structuralist/poststructuralist debates over fidelity criticism in matters of discreet-text direct adaptation, viewing the fanbase appeal of narrative continuity from a primarily ethnographic and sociological rather than textual perspective, or as mere footnotes to chiefly historical appraisals of the superhero genre generally, or the comic industry and medium more broadly still. Even direct comics scholarship has tended to approach narratological questions of canonicity and continuity alteration indirectly, from either industrial, metafictional, semantic, or disciplinary angles of theoretical specificity.

In seeking to redress this absence of targeted analysis, I have argued that American superhero comic books and their multimedia adaptations serve as uniquely concentrated and thus superbly illustrative sites of dense, complex continuity issues which can be teased out and more thoroughly understood as component processes integral to the development of long-form serialised media narratives. Furthermore, I have demonstrated that emergent canon ‘problems,’ which almost inevitably arise from such collaborative narrative prolongation, industrially necessitate divergent systems of continuity
management. A better understanding of such strategies and techniques can ultimately be applied to other areas in film, literature, adaptation and media studies, all of which can benefit from a deeper analysis of the impact of continuity operations in the production and audience engagement strategies across diverse media expressions.

Through my study’s work to unpack and synthesise the canonical wrangling involved in several interrelated platforms of multimedia dissemination and the consequent imperatives of wider brand cohesion across these parallel forms, I have coined the term ‘supertext’ to better discuss how lines of textual transmission from within a diffuse intellectual property franchise operate as part of a cohesively branded whole, as distinct from either diegetically isolated component canons or wider diegetic ‘shared universes’ of which they may be part. In doing so I have argued that superhero comic franchises, while currently enjoying an emergent dominance in popular transmedia entertainment, are sites of complex self-adaptation, in which the apparent hypotexts of comic book periodicals constitute a liminally influential position as both notionally ‘core’ ongoing texts, yet conversely lack the significant cultural capital bestowed by the larger audience-bases which their adaptations enjoy. Assessing this seemingly disproportionate influence is problematised by considerable intertextual linkage, being themselves ongoing rather than static hypotexts, subject to almost equal if not greater lines of adaptive textual influence and feedback from across the very supertexts they theoretically spearhead.

I have used both the expansive detail yet also the intentionally limiting focus of a case study in order to better explore such theoretical implications, and my choice of the Superman multimedia franchise is of key methodological value in this regard. ‘Why Superman?’ is intricately tied to the central question resulting from my research, to ask ‘Why Reboot?’, and by implication all the interwoven processes of adaptation across media and influence within the most expansive and long-running superhero franchise, a significance enhanced by Superman being the progenitor franchise of that entire genre. The question of iterative textual rearticulation as a media supertext seeking to constantly refresh itself is demonstrated in my thesis to function along similar and progressively complimentary lines, in both its diegetically discontinuous succession of adaptations to different media, yet also internally in the increasingly complex cycles of altered and rebooted continuity through ongoing comic publications, as the franchise seeks to perpetuate generational renewal of its diverse fanbase.

Through close analysis of how these intertextual processes have developed over their long production history, I have argued that processes of continuity management
within serialised narrative diegesis of comics are fundamentally tied to the same essential techniques of textual rearticulation as are the many examples of cross-media adaptation within the same supertext.

My first chapter provides a broad literature review, outlining my base methodology of approximating an open structuralism that takes elements of adaptation studies’ component derivations from film and literature disciplines, coupled with a narratological bent which informs my conditional appraisal of the much-contested approach of fidelity criticism as a useful tool for relational assessment rather than a strict technique of value-assessment required to be either ignored or rigidly adhered to. Intertextual theory is outlined for its general usefulness to my project, covering key issues especially pertinent to cross-media adaptation such as ‘thick texts’ and knowing audiences, and the value of perceiving such texts as open to multi-track reading strategies. Key theorists are addressed, with Genette especially singled out for his wealth of pertinent terminological innovations which I have adopted selectively for their usefulness. Most especially this includes his conception of relational texts as literary palimpsests, through which perceiving their lines of influence and textual transmission can enhance their understanding, a model I engage with at greater length when applied to the highly iterative nature of superhero meta-narratives.

Several major scholars in the field of comics studies were overviewed, including further terminological wrangling in addressing an academic discourse which has adopted much of its specialised language and view of the genre’s history via the amateur scholarship tradition from within fandom, as well as positioning my study as strictly dealing with theoretical and primary texts, and thus distinct from much of the work of major scholars such as Jenkins in their focus on the output of fan cultures, including online behaviour and unofficial fan-generated content such as fan-fiction. Finally, this chapter begins addressing major issues of differing models of interpreting superheroes’ publication history, the boundaries of their generic definition in relation to wider tenets of genre theory, and existing scholarship on matters of continuity, setting up for deeper analysis in the following chapters.

Chapter 2 foregrounds my analysis of the transmedia franchise aspects of the supertext, specifically regarding the methods of adaptation at play in the narrative rearticulations to different media for different generations. In addition to an overview of how the Superman metanarrative has been a transmedia franchise virtually since its inception, and covering the history of these adaptive extensions, I demonstrate how the
lines of intertextual influence become progressively more reflexive and referential, with later adaptations drawing as much upon other prior adaptations as on comics themselves as a notional ‘source text.’ By analysing this problematic hypotextual status of the comics as non-static, non-discreet textual utterances which themselves are in a state of perpetual development and rearticulation, I argue that a more complex adaptational model is required. In examining and contesting Coogan’s ‘resonant tropes’ model, I extended the notion of adaptive feedback to a more comprehensive view of the web-like array of textual influences within the supertext, with some case study examples of how the overshadowing cultural capital which popular media adaptations exert frequently re-inscribe their textual influence on the ‘parent medium’ of comics, amid the ongoing cycles of continuity alterations to their diegesis.

Having thus covered the direct processes of transmedia adaptation across the supertext, Chapter 3 refocuses my study on the deeper analysis of canonicity, demonstrating how this universal element of serialised narrative manifests with unique metatextual complexity within the comic medium. Through both providing newly rigorous definitional strictures for my usage of fan-derived specialised terminology such as ‘retcon’ and ‘reboot,’ and outlining the history of continuity management in the superhero genre generally and by DC Comics specifically, I demonstrate how contradictions in Superman’s textual development lay at the crux of such concepts’ development and the publisher’s emerging practices of diegetically-open continuity alteration.

Close engagement with Eco’s famed argument regarding the unusual narrative temporality of Superman, and efforts to reconcile subsequent disagreements between comics studies scholars, led to my appraisal that Eco’s model of the oneiric climate, although requiring updated reconsideration, remains a broadly salient work of theory for the discipline. Arguing that this conceptual model can be viewed more broadly in light of continuity revisions, I contend that reboot cycles themselves, rather than representing breaks in the oneiric climate can be seen as a type of ‘meta-oneiric’ reinforcement of a broader structural status quo for the supertext. To illustrate this further, I introduced the theoretically problematic categories of both official apocrypha (intentionally non-canonical tales), and pastiche creations entire outside of official continuity, yet unquestionably explorations thereof. Rather than serve as a demonstration of the receding significance of continuity in an age of canonical multiplicity as some scholars have contended, I argue that the existence and usage of such counter-continuity stories in fact
serve to reinforce the oneiric quality of the primary canonical diegesis by oppositional example.

Chapter 4 continues my unpacking of continuity processes through further historical analysis of the ongoing intertextual development of Superman’s comic book diegesis across the decades and its unrivalled number of major retcons and reboots enacted upon the main ongoing canon. In comparing the implicit editorial policies of continuity management between DC and Marvel, and contrasting the treatment of overt continuity revision versus stylistic interpretational variance across multiple media with Superman’s closest transmedia analogue, Batman, I have demonstrated that the particular focus on perpetually retelling and seeking to update the Man of Steel’s origin story in particular indicates a near-obsessive focus on the part of the publisher with this specific textual utterance as primary to the franchise.

Re-engaging at greater length with Genette’s conception of the palimpsest, I argued that the compulsion to reboot Superman’s diegesis and rearticulate his narrative point of inception especially has become inextricably linked to DC’s phases of broader brand management, yet also extends beyond this to an extent experienced by no other character. Further, I theorise DC’s corresponding lack of apparent faith or value in Superman accruing a long-term diegetic history which remains in canon, of the type that is still afforded to Batman’s continuity, a distinction which I contend is tied to the comparatively counter-oneiric nature of the Dark Knight’s more marketable gallery of supporting characters. To further illustrate the profoundly palimpsestuous nature of Superman’s continuity in its postmillennial state of rapidly accelerating reboot cycles, I revisit the previous chapter’s introduction of both types of non-canonic storytelling via pertinent examples by comics auteur Alan Moore which, although written years apart, serve as meta-critiques of the core concepts of continuity revision and the consequently deeply-layered nature of superhero diegeses, and the Man of Steel’s in particular.

Further directions my line of research could take in the future include considerations of multiple industrial trends in entertainment media, such as examining the increasing use of narrative continuity as a lynchpin of developing franchise brand cohesion in intellectual property products, comparative studies of differing media empires’ ‘canon policies’ regarding the alternate unification or diversification of diegetic output, as well as potential re-examination in film, literature and adaptation studies of older examples of continuity management, reboot and shared universe practices in older media which have been underexplored.
The relevance of my methodology and framing of adaptive continuity operations will hopefully become a more active topic of scholarly engagement in the decade to come, as the current entertainment media landscape increasingly favours narrative expressions in which such matters are integral. Transmedia storytelling and the franchising of serialised intellectual property is rapidly becoming more dominant, not only with the dramatic rise in prominence of superhero adaptations in film and television, but through the immense popularity of sci-fi and fantasy themed children’s, ‘young adult’ and adult book series being systematically acquired by Hollywood and adapted to the screen, often before their literary hypotext series have completed publication. With Game of Thrones, Twilight, The Hunger Games, The 100, Divergent, Percy Jackson, and The Maze Runner rushed into production as film and television projects, several with two-part final instalments, and supported with hosts of ancillary media, it is clear that the extendable franchise adapted from pre-existing serialised hypotexts that specialise in tight continuity has become the preferred model for Hollywood, in contrast to the more diffuse trial-and-error of film series with sporadic sequels.

The retcon and the reboot phenomena will likely gain greater currency in studies of the proliferation of prequelised, rebooted franchises such as Star Trek, Silence of the Lambs’ Hannibal Lecter, Psycho’s Norman Bates, and also as the ‘shared universe’ diegetic model of comic books and their film adaptations is increasingly to be applied to families of interwoven projects for forthcoming relaunches of blockbuster franchises, such as Star Wars and Ghostbusters. Research on comic book adaptation and franchises going forward may especially benefit from extrapolating new avenues of inquiry from the theoretical tenets laid down in my thesis, especially as the rapidly expanding and planned-ahead diegesis of the now well-established Marvel Cinematic Universe and nascent DC Extended Universe will inevitably face issues of continuity management such as I have explicated in my study. Without the oneiric advantages of characters only ageing as fast as artists choose to allow them, only time will tell if in a decade or so (presuming the superhero genre maintains onscreen popularity) the MCU will face the same kinds of choices to retcon or reboot its narrative diegesis to address the vicissitudes of real actors not conforming to a floating timeline. Conversely, as the DCEU builds momentum alongside its already established multiple diegeses of its ongoing shared universes on television, it will be exciting to see new research contrasting the canon-management strategies of DC seeking to juggle supertextual brand cohesion vs. a multiplicity of differentiation, versus Marvel Studios’ attempts to enforce diegetic conformity across both
platforms. These issues may soon not only apply to transmedia expressions of comic book-based intellectual property, as the prospect of corporate rights-holders may soon seek to refresh, reboot or otherwise extend only recently ‘concluded’ franchises to capture potential half-generations of new consumers. New *Harry Potter* ‘expanded universe’ spinoff films such as *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* are already on their way, but how long will it be before there is a push to reboot the previous adaptations? With new *Star Wars* films concurrently set in multiple different eras announced to be released every year for the foreseeable future, we are entering the era of perpetual reiterative prolongation in serialised and shared-universe media franchises, in which the processes of the ‘adaptive reboot’ will become all the more relevant as a site for further study.

I have demonstrated through my thesis that the history of the Superman franchise’s supertext has become one of the most useful case-studies for a deeper understanding of the multifaceted strains of cross-media adaptation and internalised revision across generations of creators and consumers with increasingly metatextually-heightened modes of reception. Due in no small part to DC’s long policy of using an overt, fully-diegetic approach to its continuity management, the palimpsestuous nature of Superman’s comic book history in particular has become not only inescapably evident but also self-perpetuating in nature. This is to the extent that while accelerating and narrowing cycles of reboots may notionally aspire towards some form of canonical exegesis of the supertext’s metanarrative, the chief subject of Superman’s continuity is now effectively that of exploring continuity itself. While canonicity and shared universes are emerging with greater significance than ever before in their cross-media adaptations, the management of comic continuity has become its own process of ceaseless self-adaptation and reflexive rearticulation. Comic diegesis forms a meta-hypertextual ‘spine’ of its supertexts that despite its audience-dictated lower cultural capital remains essential due to its perpetually ongoing nature, yet one which is both intertextually permeable to feedback and in a state of near constant flux. Superman stands foremost in this regard as the oldest, most variably disseminated and thus salient example of the comic book textual palimpsest, due to his unrivalled number of continuity revisions, and I have argued that his is the bedrock example against which can be measured the deepening trend of iterative rearticulation which is becoming central to the current entertainment media landscape. As adaptations issue from the wellspring of continuity, continuity progressively adapts itself.
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Graphic Novels and Collected Editions

Note: Due to the highly collaborative nature of comics, graphic novels and reprinted collections aka “trades” (trade paperbacks, not always actually using paperback binding), these materials are alphabetised by title rather than writer. Publication dates of original issues and details of all major creators are listed when available, but in cases of large numbers of contributors only primary artists are given.

**Absolute Dark Knight.** Written and art by Frank Miller, originally published in *Batman: The Dark Knight* #1-4 (1986), *Batman: The Dark Knight Strikes Again* #1-3 (2001), DC Comics, New York, 2006.


**Age of Ultron.** Written by Brian Michael Bendis, art by Bryan Hitch *et al.*, originally published in *Avengers* #12.1 (2011) and *Age of Ultron* #1-10 (2013), Marvel Comics, New York, 2013.

**All-Star Superman [Absolute Edition].** Written by Grant Morrison, art by Frank Quitely, originally published as *All-Star Superman* #1-6 (2006), DC Comics, New York, 2006.


**The Authority: Relentless.** Written by Warren Ellis, art by Bryan Hitch, originally published as *The Authority* #1-8 (1999), WildStorm Productions [an imprint of DC Comics], La Jolla, Canada, 1999.


**Batman/Superman/Wonder Woman: Trinity.** Writing and art by Matt Wagner, originally published in *Batman/Superman/Wonder Woman: Trinity* #1-3 (2003), DC Comics, New York, 2005.


Infinite Crisis. Written by Geoff Johns et al., art by Phil Jimenez et al., originally published in Infinite Crisis #1-7 (2005), DC Comics, New York, 2005.

JLA: Earth 2. Written by Grant Morrison, art by Frank Quitely, DC Comics, New York, 2000.

JLA: New World Order. Written by Grant Morrison, art by Howard Porter, DC Comics, New York, 1997.


The Man of Steel. Written and art by John Byrne, originally published in The Man of Steel #1-6 (1986), DC Comics, New York, 1993.


Superman in the Forties. Written by Jerry Siegel, William Woolfolk and Bill Finger, art by Joe Shuster et al., DC Comics, New York, 2005.

Superman in the Seventies. Introduction by Christopher Reeve, written and art by various, DC Comics, New York, 2000.


Superman: Our Worlds at War. Written by Joe Casey et al., art by Carlo G. Barberi et al., DC Comics, New York, 2002.
Superman: President Lex. Written by J.M. DeMatteis et al., art by Ed McGuinness et al., originally published in President Luthor Secret Files #1, Action Comics #773, The Adventures of Superman #581, 586, Superman #162-166, Superman: The Man of Steel #108-110, and Superman: Lex 2000 #1 (one-shot), [2001-2002], DC Comics, New York, 2003. Note: A fairly haphazardly assembled collected edition, which features not only whole issues but also several excerpts of only a few pages, and some stories are presented out of chronological sequence.


Superman: the Bottle City of Kandor. Written and art by various, original episodes published in Action Comics #242 (July 1958), Action Comics #245 (October 1958), Superman’s Girl Friend, Lois Lane #21 (November 1960), Superman’s Pal, Jimmy Olsen #53 (June 1961), Superman #158 (January 1963), Superman’s Pal, Jimmy Olsen #69 (June 1963), World’s Finest Comics #143 (August 1964), Superman’s Girl Friend, Lois Lane #76 (August 1967), Superman’s Girl Friend, Lois Lane #78 (October 1967), Superman Family #194 (March-April 1979), Superman #338 (August 1979), DC Comics, New York, 2007.


Superman: The Greatest Stories Ever Told Volume Two. Written and art by various, originally published in Superman #30 (September/October 1944), Superman #132 (October 1959), Superman #141 (November 1960), Superman #167 (February 1964), Superman #223 (January 1971), Superman #400 (October 1984), Superman (second series) #2 (February 1987), Adventures of Superman #500 (June 1993), Adventures of Superman #638 (May 2005), DC Comics, New York, 2006.

Superman, the Man of Steel [vols. 2-6]. Written and by John Byrne et al., DC Comics, New York, 2003-2008.


Supreme: The Story of the Year. Written by Alan Moore, art by Joe Bennett, Rick Veitch et al., originally published in Supreme vol. 2 #41-52b (#41-42 Image Comics, #43-48 Maximum Press, #49-52b Awesome Comics) [1996-1997]. Note: Issue #52 was published as two separate comics "52a" and "52b", containing a continuous story across both issues, Checker Book Publishing Group, Centerville OH, 2002.


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