

## Make Mine Mutants!

Marvel comics and plenitude in contemporary America

Nick Gillespie

DESPITE BEING WIDELY panned, the latest movie based on a Marvel comic book, *Daredevil*, was the No. 1 movie in America for the first two weeks of its release, pulling in some \$74 million in ticket sales during that period. While *Daredevil*'s Dr. Doom-like grip on the top slot predictably loosened with time (it's No. 3 as of this writing), Marvel-inspired movie madness won't be disappearing anytime soon.

Last year's *Spider-Man* put over \$400 million worth of asses in U.S. theaters, enough to garner the No. 5 spot on the all-time domestic box office chart; the foreign take basically doubled that fat amount. The surefire hit sequel to 2000's wildly popular *X-Men* flick arrives in May, and A-list director Ang Lee's much anticipated *The Incredible Hulk* follows in June. These days, mega-sized movie mobs seem to be shouting what a few decades ago only a small, shunned subculture of comics readers dared whisper: "Make Mine Marvel!"

This is, to say the least, an interesting turn of events, one that is on the face of it every bit as surprising and unbelievable as a bad comic book plot. After all, Marvel only recently suffered one of the more spectacular flame-outs in recent corporate history, sliding into receivership during the cash-crazy 1990s and generally being given up for dead (see "Smash! Pow! Bam!," October 2002). Part of Marvel's renaissance is due to the smart team that oversaw the company's emergence from bankruptcy in 1998. The suits have made a strategic decision to treat Marvel, which owns

the rights to almost 5,000 characters, as something like an intellectual property warehouse. By shifting the focus to licensing properties and rebuilding its comic book core, Marvel is allowing creative talent to flourish while minimizing risk to investors.

But savvy business practices only take you so far as an explanation for *cultural* ascendancy. Nor can Marvel's success simply be attributed to an endless appetite for films about just *any* sort of costumed do-gooders. After all, the two main movie franchises inspired by Marvel's distinguished competition, DC Comics, have been sucking on kryptonite for years.

After starting off strong, the *Superman* series fizzled out with 1987's *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace*, a neutron bomb of a flick that left theaters standing while killing off the few remaining fans of Man of Steel cinema. Similarly, 1997's *Batman & Robin*, the last installment in a series that demonstrates the law of diminishing returns better than most economic textbooks could ever hope to, managed to turn away the masses far more effectively than Fredric Wertham's homophobic declamations in *Seduction of the Innocent*.

A larger reason for Marvel's success may be that mainstream American society is more fully engaging the themes that have made Marvel Comics unique since the early '60s, when most of its signature characters first appeared. "The Mighty Marvel Universe"—to use a phrase coined by the comic book company's legendary auteur Stan Lee—has always been a place of relentless human mutation and transformation that simultaneously terrifies, individualizes, and

empowers. This vision proved so appealing that it became dominant throughout superhero comics.

We all know the Marvel origin stories by now: After being bitten by a radioactive spider, Peter Parker develops superstrength and more; after being belted with "gamma rays," Bruce Banner turns into the Incredible Hulk, a green-skinned rageaholic with a heart of gold; Wolverine (see above) and the other X-Men are of a wholly different race (*homo superior*), and born with their distinctive powers and their distinctive bodies. Matt Murdock, *Daredevil*'s alter ego, is blinded by radioactive waste but





emerges with extra-keen senses of hearing, smell, touch, and taste. In Marvel comics, precisely that which makes someone an individual alienates him from others (who can Spider-Man confide in?), even as it makes him interesting (who would read about just plain old Peter Parker?).

To engage the Marvel Universe then, is to contemplate an intriguing existentialist koan, an insoluble riddle about individual identity, community, and especially wild self-transformation—something as potentially liberating as it is anxiety-inducing. How does a person, much less a society,

balance these things, which are often at loggerheads with one another?

To engage the Marvel Universe is also to engage our contemporary world, which anthropologist Grant McCracken has convincingly argued is characterized by “plenitude,” or “the quickening speciation of social types.” McCracken’s Web book, *Plenitude*, is available online at [www.cultureby.com](http://www.cultureby.com); so is a related text, aptly called *Transformation*. Pick any category of humans, McCracken says—seniors, or teens, or goths, or gays, or straights—and there are more identities available to more individuals than ever before.

Sometimes such speciation is forced on us, but we also readily mutate ourselves these days, in search of pleasure, individuality, and new experiences. As important, this transformation process is never fully under our control, even as we strive to direct it through ever-varied patterns of culture making and operations small and large, figurative and literal.

Spider-Man, the Hulk, the X-Men, Daredevil—that’s us on the big screen. No wonder we’re packing the theaters to watch. ■

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## Potter Mouths

Charles Paul Freund

DO SEQUENCES LIKE this one from *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* turn their young viewers into dolts? Some French filmmakers and critics think so. "I go very often to schools," director Bertrand Tavernier recently told the BBC, "and I have found a lot of young kids have difficulties in analyzing a concept, an idea, in a film." Why? It's the effects. "If the technology is controlling us, it will transform

us into stupid children, and in a way, part of the American cinema does that."

If that were possible, French movies would long ago have stupefied the world. Frenchman George Melies invented special effects in the 19th century, while his countrymen the Lumiere brothers astonished early audiences with commonplace documentary footage. The fact is that new technologies are often used for play and pleasure; as they mature, they become part of the fine-arts hierarchy. Sound, photographic, and

film technologies, among others, have all followed this path; now comes digital's turn.

"It is a non-culture," Gallic critic Phillipe Rogier said of America on the BBC, "a non-civilization, just a way of life." Yeah, yeah. America's "way of life" values the inventiveness and dynamism of "ordinary" culture; France's celebrates hierarchical cultural authority through a notorious rote-based education. If director Tavernier is encountering thick French students, it just might be France's fault. ■