

Sammelrezension: Superman: Comics, Film, Brand

Gary Bettinson: Superman: The Movie – The 40th Anniversary Interviews

Bristol/Chicago: Intellect 2018, 134 S., ISBN 9781783209590, GBP 20,-

Phillip Bevin: Superman and Comic Book Brand Continuity

New York/London: Routledge 2019, 166 S., ISBN 9780815368595, Hardcover GBP 120,-, eBook GBP 22,50

These two books are very different beasts. *Superman: The Movie – The 40th Anniversary Interviews* is focused on a single film text, whereas *Superman and Comic Book Brand Continuity* ranges across the cultural history of Superman. However, the differences between these two studies go far deeper.

Bettinson's book is an "oral history [...] of big-budget film production in the new Hollywood era" (p.11), but it assumes that such a thing requires nothing much in terms of methodological discussion or theoretical framing. Consequently, it contains almost no content communally identifiable as 'academic' – the References page (p.131) lists a mere 13 entries, of which several

are stories from *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone* or *Newsweek*. Two or three references hail from University Presses, and yet this material underpins the whole book.

Whilst Bettinson's interviews are always interesting, ranging across people such as executive producer Ilya Salkind, director Richard Donner, and Lois Lane herself, Margot Kidder – interviewed relatively shortly before her passing in 2018 – it is difficult to see how they differ from standard fan convention fare or DVD/blu-ray extras. What, if anything, is added to the project via its publication by an academic press, and having been written by a Senior Lecturer? The entire volume

seems to be aimed at a fan readership, and not as a crossover from the academic market, but in place of it instead. Pull-quotes occupy entire pages, and 16 pages of colour photos crop up; this feels like an ‘academic’ work that is thoroughly and paratextually complicit with the industry and the fandom it is engaged with. Interviewees’ words are never theoretically (re)contextualised in any way; they are simply left at face value, without analysis. And some of the interview questions are no less blandly self-congratulatory than convention time-fillers, e.g. suggesting to Richard Donner, “It must be gratifying that audiences continue to appreciate *Superman: The Movie*” (p.48).

Were any scholar to be researching the late-seventies or early-eighties Superman movies, then the interviews set out here could furnish them with useful source material, especially on “behind-the-scene problems” (interview with Sarah Douglas, p.111) such as the absence of Christopher Reeve and Margot Kidder from international publicity for *Superman II* (1980). But as an “anniversary” celebration of *Superman: The Movie* (1978), this feels indistinguishable from authorised, official paratexts.

Neoliberal academia may well be under pressure to reach out beyond its conventional domains (scholars/students), and to adopt a more commercialised model of ‘knowledge exchange’ with corporates or fan cultures, but this title seems less like a transfer of knowledge from academic subculture to wider culture, and more like a wholesale abrogation of any (residual) sense

of academia’s cultural distinctiveness. If hybridised aca-fandom lies beneath Bettinson’s work, as I would suggest, then nevertheless the published outcome targets (and resembles) fandom per se, suggesting at least one strand of contemporary aca-fandom which leans heavily towards fannish identity and moves significantly away from recognisable academic performativities, e.g. the mobilisation of cultural/social/media theories.

Phillip Bevin’s monograph for Routledge is the very opposite; here is a study which fruitfully occupies aca-fan territory by expressing high levels of fan cultural capital at the same time as engaging critically and creatively with prior theories of superhero franchising. Centrally, Bevin’s work is in dialogue with Will Brooker’s *Hunting the Dark Knight* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012). In his study of the Christopher Nolan series of Batman films, Brooker identifies three paradigms of meaning through which the character is realised: myth, matrix and canon (2012, pp.152–154). Myth concerns the character’s most general circulation in pop culture, well outside the control of DC (p.152). By contrast, the matrix of Batman is the level of official DC branding, “a smaller, more contained and more controlled network of texts, defined by their current status as Warner Bros. Batman products: expressions of the contemporary corporate template, rather than a broader, folk identity” (p.153). And lastly, canon “is the most rigid”, defined by DC comic book continuity and policed by fans through resources such as the DC Database (p.154).

Bevin reworks these levels of meaning-making as cultural continuity, brand continuity, and narrative continuity respectively (p.82). By so doing, he argues against the way in which Brooker treats the paradigms as a continuum moving from looseness/open-ness of meaning (myth) through to the closed-off, constrained meanings of canon. Instead, Bevin argues via his Superman case study that what he terms “cultural continuity” can in fact provide a problematic weight of expectation acting on new versions of Superman, coming to stand for the figure’s “correct” or essentialised ur-rendition rather than working as a loose, multiple sense of the unofficial character. At the same time, changes in “narrative continuity” can open up new possibilities, instead of simply reinforcing a rigid, fixed perspective (2019, pp.82–83).

Interestingly, Bevin’s theorised arguments reinforce the importance of the very film to which Gary Bettinson devotes his commemorative interviews, since Bevin locates *Superman: The Movie*, and Christopher Reeve’s portrayal of the character, as a limiting incarnation which has come to dominate the popular imagination, i.e. acting as a prime source of Superman’s cultural continuity. For later critics, and potentially generations of fans, Reeve’s idealistic, good, bright and cheery portrayal has arguably come to stand as the one “true” Superman that subsequent blockbuster film versions must live up to. As such, *Superman: The Movie* has become “timelessly definitive” (p.85) for commentators, operating as an intertext through which ‘darker’ visions of

the character, such as that in the film *Man of Steel* (2013), can be devalued or rejected (ibid.).

Bevin’s argument plays out across Superman’s cultural career, and his Conclusion is especially productive. Here, he analyses the reception of *Justice League* (2017), a film which had been directed by Zack Snyder, in line with his reputation for crafting a ‘dark’, auteurist take on the Superman character, before Joss Whedon took over and reinstated a more Reeves-esque version of the Henry Cavill-played Superman. As Bevin notes, “it’s not the retconning of Superman’s personality in *Justice League*’s Narrative Continuity that seems so out of place but the disconnect between the film’s simplistic story and often bright, breezy tone and the previously dark branding of Zack Snyder’s more dense and complex prior DCEU [DC Expanded Universe] films” (p.153).

Though it’s certainly possible to read the Whedon reshoots as restoring a “true” vision of Superman, where tautologically the character is assumed to be essentially Reeves-esque, and so should be represented in this way, Bevin also notes that for DC fans who had valued the darker world of Snyder’s Superman, then the Reeves-ification of *Justice League* can be counter-interpreted. It becomes, instead, “an inauthentic and lazy restoration job done to a [...] more interesting work and as an unconvincingly shiny veneer pasted on top of a more complex original” (p.153). Here, cultural continuity becomes an object of fan contestation in relation to brand and narrative continuity, rather than a

guarantor of textual authenticity. Bevin shows how Snyder's version of Superman may have brought brand continuity – a current, official and 'mainstream' version of the character – into tension with Superman's established cultural continuity. The end result, played out across the palimpsest of the Snyder-Whedon *Justice League*, was hence a relatively incoherent narrative continuity through which differing factions of fans could read 'their' Superman, whether Snyder-dark or Whedon-light.

By analysing how cultural, brand, and narrative continuity can dynamically intersect and work in different ways, Bevin makes a valuable contribution to the wider theorisation of long-running franchise media, as well as paying off Bettinson's focus on the production details of *Superman: The Movie*. Indeed, it is tempting to transfer Bevin's arguments to Disney's *Star Wars* (2015-), which has also run into tensions between cultural, branding and narrative continuity, perhaps more profoundly than Superman and the DCEU. *The Last Jedi*

(2017) and *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019) have both represented brand continuity, whilst using narrative continuity to wage a semiotic 'war' over the role of *Star Wars*' cultural continuity, stretching the tensions in *Justice League*'s reception across back-to-back franchise entries.

Bevin's fertile approach indicates a markedly different mode of aca-fandom to Bettinson's, one where academic identity is prioritised over fannish attachments. Of course, these negotiations of the aca-fan cultural economy are refracted through each book's position in the political economy of academic publishing: one is a fan-friendly £20 paperback, and the other is a £120 hardback aimed at University libraries. This commodity splitting, and ideological distancing, of fan vs academic is lamentably reactionary at a moment when media franchises are proffering a cultural space through which concepts of representation can be self-reflexively fought over.

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