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Arrow and Superhero Television

Essays on Themes and Characters of the Series

Edited by James F. Iaccino, Cory Barker *and* Myc Wiatrowski

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Introduction

James F. Iaccino, Cory Barker
and Myc Wiatrowski

Superhero and comic book adaptations have been big business for film studios for nearly four decades now, dating back to Richard Donner's *Superman* in 1978. As with most genres, superhero films have arrived in waves since 1978: Batman dominated most of the 1990s like Superman did in the 1980s; Marvel properties like the X-Men and Spider-Man revitalized audience interest in the early 2000s; competing Batman and Iron Man franchises catalyzed a brand new DC and Marvel arms race in 2008; and today the film industry views every moderately or once-popular character as pieces to position within enormous, multi-film cinematic universes. As of the time of this writing, five of the top eleven highest-grossing films of 2016 are comic book adaptations (*Captain America: Civil War*, *Deadpool*, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, *Suicide Squad*, and *X-Men Apocalypse*), with another (*Doctor Strange*) sure to join them. Both Marvel and DC have at least a half-dozen more films, including new solo projects for Wonder Woman, Captain Marvel, Aquaman, the Flash, and Black Panther, in development for release before 2020.

The superhero waves have been far choppier on television. At least one prominent superhero project has aired on television in every decade since the 1950s: *The Adventures of Superman* (1952–1958), *Batman* (1966–1968), *Wonder Woman* (1975–1979), *The Incredible Hulk* (1978–1982), *Lois & Clark: The New Adventures of Superman* (1993–1997), and *Smallville* (2001–2011). Yet the various successes of these series only occasionally inspired additional projects in their respective time periods, positioning each project as an exception to the prevailing assumption that superheroes do not translate effectively to live-action television. Whether due to budgetary and ownership restrictions or the large shadow cast by the winking pop art aesthetic of the 1960s

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Batman series, the television industry (and, by proxy, viewers) did not take superheroes seriously well into the 21st century. Even *Smallville*, the longest running live-action superhero series by a comfortable margin, was disregarded by popular critics and the industry press after its first few seasons on the air; its 2011 series finale was watched live by three million viewers—good for a fourth place finish that night.[1]

Eighteen months after the end of *Smallville*, the CW premiered *Arrow* (2012–), a series based on fellow DC character Oliver Queen and his alter ego Green Arrow. Originally developed in 1941 for DC's *More Fun Comics* by Mortimer Weisinger and George Papp, Green Arrow enjoyed only modest popularity as a Batman clone (wealthy, non-superpowered vigilante) until a more politically pointed partnership with Green Lantern took off in the 1970s.[2] The Robin Hood–esque Emerald Archer has been a regular member of DC's various Justice League factions, both in the comics and in animated television series, and played a significant role in the final seasons of *Smallville* (where he was portrayed by Justin Hartley). Green Arrow's human abilities and middling status among more popular DC heroes made him the perfect character for producers and comic fans Greg Berlanti, Marc Guggenheim, and Andrew Kreisberg to bring to television.

An amalgamation of recent Green Arrow comic storylines, the Christopher Nolan Batman films (2005, 2008, and 2012), *Smallville*, and even *Lost* (2004–2010), *Arrow* debuted to the CW's highest ratings in three years.[3] The series was an immediate hit with critics as well, generating positive reviews throughout its first few seasons and high praise for its combination of Nolan-esque "gritty" realism, heightened comic book sensibilities, and artfully crafted fight choreography and action sequences. More impressively, the emergent adaptability of *Arrow*'s universe inspired producer Greg Berlanti, DC, and Warner Bros. Television to develop new series within it, bringing audiences *The Flash* (2014–), *Supergirl* (2015–), and *DC's Legends of Tomorrow* (2016–) in rapid succession.

Without *Arrow*, of course none of those other series exist, but likely neither do DC/WBTV's non-affiliated series *Gotham* (2014–) and *Lucifer* (2016–). Maybe Marvel and Disney would have always brought *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013–) to ABC no matter what as a way to expand the cultural footprint of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but *Arrow*'s success made that decision easier. Without *Arrow*, cable channels like FX and Syfy and streaming platforms like Netflix might not be joining their broadcast partners in the rush to develop series from superhero source material as well. And without *Arrow*, the CW looks entirely different in 2016, potentially not existing as a broadcast network at all.

That *Arrow* legitimized the superhero universe on television is just one of many reasons why the series deserves the edited collection treatment.

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When the three of us collaborated on a similar book about *Smallville* in 2011 and 2012, it felt important to justify why the series earned such attention; just a few years later, the reasoning seems obvious: the latest and biggest superhero wave has reached the shores of television, and then some. Caped and masked crusaders are inescapable and central to the modern media experience. They dominate film and television screens, but the conversation surrounding them—fan chatter and productions, critical reception, and industry reporting—extends onto our computers, smartphones, tablets, web browsers, and social feeds. Stars like *Arrow*'s Stephen Amell, Emily Bett Rickards, and David Ramsey are regular attendees on the convention circuit, a multimillion dollar cottage industry. The magnificently crafted press cycle of casting news, post-air interviews with actors and producers, pre-season trailers, Comic-Con panels, blooper reels, and key art keeps series like *Arrow* in the spotlight and makes fandom a year-round commitment.

Nevertheless, the popularity of *Arrow* and its peer series could not have occurred at any other time in the history of the media industries. Technological disruption and shifting viewing habits means that fewer people are watching television in the traditional fashion—live during primetime—each year. Cord cutting and network-affiliated streaming platforms and Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon Prime enable viewers to craft an increasingly personalized, on-demand, and fragmented experience. Consequently, past notions of success like Nielsen ratings are essentially meaningless, replaced by a combination of secret viewing data culled from disparate sources and the nebulously defined concept of buzz. For a series like *Arrow*, weekly reviews from critics, regular coverage from reporters, and constant chatter from fans on Twitter, Facebook, and Tumblr essentially "prove" that it is a success by sheer amount of coverage.

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While this ecosystem may not be as immediately lucrative as previous eras of television, the media industries still generate a significant amount of revenue on series like *Arrow*. For fans and scholars, this ecosystem makes it more likely that series will continue to have longer runs on the air, will continue to tell more complex stories without the fear of cancellation, and will generate longer and more fruitful discussion among critics, fans, and producers alike. This latest wave of superhero projects may eventually subside, but *Arrow*'s importance to that wave will hopefully not be forgotten.

Essays in this collection show that beyond its place within contemporary superhero television, *Arrow* is a rich text worth examining. Although the authors indeed point to the series' influence on and representation of the superhero genre, they primarily demonstrate that *Arrow*—like most of its peers—is much more than *just* a superhero program. Depending on the episode or season, *Arrow* is as much an urban crime procedural as it is a hero's journey. The series concerns itself with inequality and corruption far

more than it does cataclysmic global or intergalactic terror events. Past traumas (both physical and emotional) are equally as crucial as present day questions about dual identities. Perhaps most jarringly, Oliver, Diggle (David Ramsey), and other partners kill their foes—first quite liberally and later, after much inner and outer turmoil, only when they deem it absolutely necessary. *Arrow*'s "dark and gritty" tone is not just a promotional talking point or camera filter; this is a series engaging (sometimes far more successfully than others) with precarious, challenging ideas.

Amid its intermittently bleak subject matter, *Arrow* is well versed in the worlds of adaptation, intertextuality, and fan service. As the authors in this collection show, the series of course regularly references and remixes its comic book source material, but it also comments on its own storylines and iconography. Although it may not reach the fast-talking and referential comedy bits as Marvel's Cinematic Universe, *Arrow* (typically through Emily Bett Rickards's Felicity) assures viewers that it is in on the joke. Part of this awareness is listening to the fans; the social media dialogue between producers and particularly active viewers has been ongoing, occasionally hostile, and generally productive for *Arrow*'s long-term prospects. By acknowledging its position within numerous interpretive frames—the superhero genre, the adaptation, the CW drama full of beautiful people, and the franchise-builder—*Arrow* speaks to a multiplicity of contemporary audience groups primed to make connections, spot references, and dig just a little bit deeper.

Whether *Arrow* is the best of the recent superhero series is immaterial. In fact, that the series has stumbled in recent seasons during stretches when it is forced to serve as springboard for other heroes makes *Arrow* just as emblematic of the current media ecosystem as its strongest episodes. With media conglomerates looking to turn each piece of intellectual property into its own corner of an expansive universe, television series with source material are pulled in an incalculable number of directions. To *Arrow*'s credit, the series and its producers have commonly admitted their problems or errors, occasionally writing them into the series as part of a meta storyline about growth and progress. Again, this is how the contemporary superhero series must operate to appeal to the fickle but passionate audience.

In recent years, scholars have been quick to embrace the impact of superheroes and their appropriation into film, television, games, and the web. Researchers are not blind to this latest wave as a cultural and industrial phenomenon. However, more attention on individual texts within the wave is necessary; *Arrow* functions as a strong starting point because of its role in expanding the wave to television, but also because it signals the potential and drawbacks of the serialized superhero series in equal measure. The essays in this collection prove that superhero series can and should be investigated as adaptations, hero's journeys, political critiques, franchise starters, branding

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opportunities, troubled romances, feminist triumphs, and contradictory visions of capitalism, liberalism, and masculinity. Fans, critics, and the popular press cannot stop thinking and talking about superheroes; we hope that this collection makes certain that scholars continue to join—and even lead—those conversations.

The Structure of the Collection

This collection is organized into five parts, each dedicated to broad topics: (1) how *Arrow* represents new ways to understand key interpretative frameworks, including the Hero myth and adaptation; (2) the series' depiction of muscular, scarred, and tattooed bodies; (3) its treatment of women like Felicity and Laurel; (4) DC Comics and Oliver's shifting sociopolitical ideologies across different mediums; and (5) the audience reception to *Arrow* and the fan influence on the television program's ongoing plotlines.

Part One, "Theoretical Approaches to Understanding *Arrow*," provides three distinct frameworks to more fully understand the show's various storylines. Although most commonly identified as either a comic book or superhero show, essays in the opening part of the collection illuminate the other stories to be found within *Arrow*'s core DNA. Indeed, these essays illustrate the ways in which *Arrow* uses the generic formula of the comic book superhero to tell remixed versions of the familiar.

In "'I must become something else': The Evolution of the CW's *Arrow*," Lisa K. Perdigao examines the series' approach to adapting decades of comic book source material. Perdigao suggests that, rather than simply revitalizing recent comic storylines, *Arrow* positions itself as a postmodern, self-aware adaptation that constantly comments on its attempts to produce a story that is of apiece with both Green Arrow's origins and the current television landscape. To this end, Perdigao also demonstrates how the series centers itself as part of a much larger intertextual universe, one flexible enough that it can sustain winking nods to ongoing fan conversations and provide the platform for new DC Comics adaptations.

Where Perdigao traces the ways in which *Arrow* embodies the modern adaptation, Perry Dantzler's "Reading the Body, Deciphering the Text: *Arrow*'s Multiliteracies, Superheroics and Merging Multimodalities" uses the series to explore the concepts of literacy—moving past simple comprehension of written texts to include methods of inquiry and functional skills—in the superhero story. For Dantzler, *Arrow* signals its interest in literacies from the beginning with "The List," a book featuring the names of those who have "failed" Starling City that drives Oliver's initial crusade upon his return home, and carries it through the series with a focus on characters' emerging

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technological and physical combat literacies. In employing this framework for close textual analysis, Dantzler illustrates how *Arrow* and its fellow superhero projects represent an ideal form of multiliteracies in a highly connected, increasingly complex age.

Joseph Campbell's Heroic Journey has long been a core framework for scholars to understand (and for creators to apply) popular culture texts. In the third essay of Part One, "The Arrow and His Villainous Counterparts: An Examination of Their Journeys Toward Psychic Transformation," James F. Iaccino charts *Arrow*'s engagement with Campbellian Heroes and Villains, honing in on how the series portrays the respective journeys of Oliver, Slade (Manu Bennett), and Malcolm (John Barrowman). Iaccino's analysis describes crucial moments in both the past and the present that influence these journeys. In doing so, Iaccino unpacks how *Arrow*'s sometimes plodding (and often derided) flashbacks enable the writers to craft non-linear, sometimes even circular, evolutionary paths to Hero and Villain status—and signals the continued relevance of the Campbellian framework in the process.

As a superhero series on the youth-oriented CW network, *Arrow* provides its fair share of close-ups on bodies—the muscular, the wounded, and the inked. Part Two, "Muscles, Scars and Tattoos," examines *Arrow*'s repeated exploration of the physical form, spotlighting how the series uses the body not just as an object on display, but also a canvas for emotional trauma, social bonding, and, in Oliver's case, a connection to a cadre of criminals and killers.

Arrow never hesitates to show Oliver's degree of commitment to physical training and overall improvement in his superhero skills. But as Juan Llamas-Rodriguez examines in "Working Out as Creative Labor, or the Building of the Male Superhero's Body," this portrayal of training also applies to the series' star, Stephen Amell. Drawing from Amell's precisely curated social media presence and the media industry complex's creeping celebration of preparatory fitness routines, Llamas-Rodriguez reveals how the actor's physical labor functions as a self-reflexive nod to both his on-screen character and the CW's perceived sexiness. For Llamas-Rodriguez, Amell's public declarations about the challenges of "becoming" a superhero feed into *Arrow* and the CW's textual and paratextual references to the impressive physiques of many characters, signaling that both the series and the network are aware of these unrealistic fitness standards.

Although *Arrow* loves to celebrate the bodies of its characters, the series is also not afraid to show the toll of repeated superheroic pursuits. In "Twenty Percent of His Body: Scar Tissue, Masculinity and Identity in *Arrow*," Evan Hayles Gledhill interrogates the series' use of training sequences and scarring to depict how Oliver's embodied experience is literally etched into his skin. Moreover, in tracing *Arrow*'s shift from singular hero tale to a team-oriented

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