

Comics Across Media

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I would like to situate my discussion of comics across media specifically in relation to the connection between comics, media industries, and fans. One way of accounting for the importance of comics to Hollywood is through the industry's increased attention to fandom as a source of both profit and publicity. Drawing on my own experiences and archival research, I want to suggest that we think about the San Diego Comic-Con, a massive annual convention devoted to comics and media fandom, as an entry point into these issues.

Though a wide variety of regional fan conventions are held all over the country, Comic-Con is significant for its size and its rich history of bringing fans, artists, and industry together in one space. What began in 1970 as an intimate 300-person event has exploded over the past 40-years with current attendance numbers of over 125,000. In recent years, the convention has received a substantial amount of attention from Hollywood and buzz about Comic-Con circulates widely in the popular press. Comic-Con's massive growth has been met with resistance by some fans who express a longing for the early years when they would mingle by the hotel pool with comic legends like Jack Kirby. Comic-Con also has its share of critics who suggest that Hollywood's presence at the convention has pushed comic books aside and robbed the event of its intimate, fan based feel. Michael Uslan's comment to the *LA Times* that "Comic-Con is in danger of having Hollywood co-opt its soul"¹ exemplifies this kind of discourse, expressing a nostalgia for Comic-Con's early days and implying that the event has been tainted by the frivolity of Hollywood's incessant self-promotion.² While such critiques ring true on many levels, I would also argue that Comic-Con's current status as a catchall fan convention, where media of all kinds are vigorously marketed and publicized, is not without precedent. Comic-Con's early inclusion of various media fandoms, artists and industries set the stage for the massive event we see today.

Comic-Con was, as the name suggests, first and foremost a comic convention, but other media were also present at the event from the very beginning. Old programs and souvenir books from Comic-Con's early days reveal a significant presence of film and television in addition to comics. Even the convention's first logo incorporated comic art, film and science fiction in its design. While the convention was and is primarily fan organized, the opportunity to meet artists and performers has always been an important part of Comic-Con. Within the first decade of the convention, Marvel and DC were buying large ads in the programs, setting up "goodwill booths," and sending artists to promote new comics.³ While Hollywood promotion may have taken over in recent years, it is safe to say that The Big Two were exploiting Comic-Con as a promotional venue long before Hollywood had fully recognized its potential.

However, the film industry was not entirely absent from the event during these years. Perhaps the most notable early Hollywood presence was in 1976, when Lucasfilm sent Charles Lippincott to Comic-Con with a preview of *Star Wars*. This preview was part of a synergistic promotional strategy that also included a Marvel comic book adaptation. Not only did Lucasfilm use Comic-Con as a venue to create buzz about their film in the fan community, it also sought to expand the market by reaching out to comic fans in particular. What was, in the 1970s, an exceptional and innovative marketing strategy has become commonplace at Comic-con in the 2000s.

If, as I have argued, there is a historical precedent for promotion and publicity at Comic-Con, what does this mean for contemporary considerations of the event and the relationship

between comic books and Hollywood more generally? How can we reconcile intimate interactions with legendary comic book artists and a star-studded preview of *Captain America* or *The Avengers* in a room filled with 6,500 fans? What links these two scenarios is the feeling of exclusivity fostered at the event. Both offer a chance to experience something that cannot be repeated or reproduced in the same way anywhere else. In thinking about Comic-Con this way, one can begin to imagine how hugely important it is for fans and producers. Looking at Comic-Con in a historical context suggests that it is not as simple as claiming that Hollywood has “co-opted” the fan event. Instead, we might see the relationship between comics and Hollywood as more complex and certainly more expansive. Comics have always provided vital source material and intellectual properties rife for adaptation to film and television, but in recent years, it would seem that Hollywood has also attempted to reproduce the kinds of experiences that comic book fans have been encountering for decades.

Notes

¹ Uslan quoted in Geoff Boucher, *Oh, Right, Comic Books*, 28 July 2008 2008, Available: <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jul/28/entertainment/et-comicon28>.

² Uslan’s remark is highly complicated and problematic upon deeper consideration. Not only is Uslan clearly a fan of comics, having taught the first accredited college class on comic books in 1971, but he has also written several comics himself and served as an executive producer on all the Batman feature films and cartoon releases, from Burton’s 1989 film to the most recent blockbuster *Dark Knight*.

³ Rick Marshall, "Remembrances of Cons Past," *San Diego Comic-Con* (1984).