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Superheroes in Hollywood: Factors shaping the superhero narratives via batman v superman: Dawn of justice

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Abstract

The paper tries to explain the nature of superhero films with the context of Gerard Genette's Transtextuality. With the specific example of *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, the paper argues that the two traditionally separate superheroes were brought together by signing into the previous films of these independent superheroes. This makes the film a bricolage of various incidents. More specifically, the paper explores Architextuality, Paratextuality, Hypotextuality, and Metatextuality, through the example of *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*.

Keywords: Intertextuality, Paratextuality, Hypotextuality, Metatextuality, Film theory, Superheroes, Literature, Cinema, Hollywood

1. Introduction

The objective of this paper is to understand the film *Batman vs Superman (2016)* via elements of Gerard Genette's Transtextuality. A text does not exist in isolation. The atmosphere in terms of politics, other texts and, the general environment of the nation and the world affects the text in more than one way. The reason why *Batman vs Superman (2016)* becomes important is because the two protagonists have traditionally been separate from each other but fight for the same cause that is for the "Good". Both the characters are superheroes who ideally existed in different time phase which never overlapped. So, *Batman vs Superman* then almost becomes a bricolage of various elements of the two superheroes' lives and characters. And that is the reason why elements of intertextuality in this film are both compelling and imperative for a better understanding.

Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice is directed by Zack Snyder and features D.C. Comics characters of Batman and Superman. It film starts within the previous film, *Man of Steel (2013)* where Superman is fighting the villain, General Zod, who is trying to destroy humanity. The montage shows this fight in Metropolis, the city where Superman resides, buildings are getting destroyed and there is chaos. A typical super fight scene! And then the camera rolls down and the audience see Bruce Wayne (whose secret identity is of Batman) observing this fight and also, the destruction happening to the city. It is at this point, the two different narratives come together to give shape to one story.

Julia Kristeva noted this influence of one text on another. According to her, ideas are always in a "state of production" and she argues that "authors do not create their texts from their own mind, but rather compile them from pre-existent texts" [1]. Now Gerard Genette takes intertextuality as part of a more inclusive term called Transtextuality which according to him, means "all that which puts one text in relation, whether manifest or secret, with other texts" [2]. Other elements of Transtextuality are: Paratextuality, Architextuality, Metatextuality and, Hypotextuality or Hypertextuality.

At this point, there is a collision of two superheroes narratives, both viewing each other as a threat to humanity. *Man of Steel (2013)* serve as Hypotext to *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*. According to Genette, Hypotext is an "earlier text which serves as the source of a subsequent piece of literature" [3]. Here, it is important to mention the close relationship between the title and the sub-title of the film. *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, like *Man of Steel*, serves as the hypotext to the film on *Justice League*.

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Justice League, also known as Justice League of America is a group of fictional superheroes created by the D.C. Comics. It is not easy for first time watching audience to understand the connection between all these prequels and sequels but one does not have to dig in deep for comprehending these symbols. The subtitle of the film, *Dawn of Justice* is a clear indication that a foundation of Justice League is being laid in this film. Therefore, for Genette subtitles, titles, subheading, chapters, subchapters, and prefaces were an important part in any text. The term he used for these elements is Paratextuality.

But the narrative needs to proceed as well. There is a debate in the United States about the affiliation of the Superman. Is Superman a good guy, saving the world from aliens or Superman, a bad guy, trying to destroy the world? Another man, Lex Luthor, at the same time, tries to acquire large amounts of Kryptonite rock, sample of which was found in the Indian Ocean. This procurement is to be done in the veil of protection weapon if the Aliens attack earth, but the real reason of getting access to Krypton rock is to weaponize it. Sounds like Arms Race all over again. But what is important to mention here is that the characters first appeared in comics. Superheroes and comics, the history of both go hand in hand. America since the beginning of the World War2 has been struggling with conflicts. The Cold War, Arms Race, Vietnam War and recently the 9/11. The reason for the development of superheroes in America, and more importantly the obsession with them, lies in this context of constant fear and threat in the society. Also, the superheroes who originated in the comics, usually are suffering from emotional turmoil, loss and emptiness which makes them easy to relate to the American psyche. For example, Superman or Clark Kent is an alien, he finds it hard to get together with the mainstream population. One shall not forget that America is a nation of immigrants, Superman represents the conflicts and emotional rush of immigrants in a foreign land. Batman, also is subjected to violence as a child. His parents were murdered in front of his eyes and growing up as an orphan, Batman realized his responsibility towards Gotham. Batman certainly invokes the image of an orphan in Charles Dickens novels. Going back to the threat and anxiety in which the United States has been living in, these superheroes provide a space where good and bad are separate and "Good" is embodied in the figure of the superheroes fighting the evil in society, in this film's case-multinational corporations which are seeking to run the nation and the world, Lex Luthor. It is a cathartic experience for the audience to watch their anxieties on the screen but also, in the end restoration of the order taking place. Comics and Superheroes have also played an important part in representing American values to the world, for instance, Justice League of America. Similarly, science fiction is an important aspect of film *Batman v Superman*. All these genres are capable of being useful in the analysis of the film, as per Genettes theory. He calls "designation of a text as part of a genre or genres" as architextuality ^[4]. As mentioned above, the genres of a text calls upon itself various meanings, and in this case aspirations as well. Comics and Science Fiction, both serve as the ego-bearer of the United States, where they could make the future they seek, possible. But Genette warns the readers that "Genre is only one aspect of the Architext" (Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree, Genette, pg 4, Web).

Lex Luthor sees Superman and the Batman as the potential threat to his aim of world dominance and therefore maneuver the two superheroes against each other. That plan does not work out, so Luthor through the technology available and his genius gives birth to a demon which is an indirect allusion to the monster created by the Frankenstein. Mary Shelley had used this trope of the popularly known as the mad scientist in the year 1818. Superman dies fighting the demon.

What is important is the critical commentary of the film on its hypotext, *Man of Steel* where Superman was portrayed as an ultimate superhero who was going to save the world, but *Batman v Superman* shows the other side of the coin. There was a widespread destruction which happened on Earth due to Superman's harrowing fights with Zod. These fights looked fascinating from a distance but in *Batman v Superman*, these fights were zoomed in on, showing a child losing his mother (reminding Batman of his mother and how she was killed). The critical commentary of one text on another is also an element of Transtextuality, and is called Metatextuality. According to Genette, "it unites a given text to another, of which it speaks without necessarily citing it (without summoning it), in fact sometimes even without naming it" (Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree, Genette, pg 4, Web).

Genette in *Palimpsests* writes that Kristeva explored the first element of the Transtextuality under the name of Intertextuality. Which means "a relationship of co-presence between two texts or among several texts" and as "the actual presence of one text within another" (Genette, Pg 1-4). *Batman v Superman* is an exceptional example of Intertextuality because it works on the premise of a genre that facilitate, infact, works and develops on the previous or the future editions. There are direct references to The Aquaman, Cyborg, Flash and, The Wonder Woman in Lex Luthor's secret file on Metahumans. These are the individual characters from various superhero comics but are brought together under the Justice League of America later for new text and work. This is also how a text works. It brings together various elements and make those elements in-sync with each other and create a story, a narrative out of it. Similarly, for transtextuality, Genette says that the five elements of Transtextuality or these five types of transtextuality cannot be separated from each other. These are constantly interacting and are "overlapping" ^[5] each other.

There is a wide range of criticism that the film has come under. Zack Snyder, the director of *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* has been accused of being preoccupied with the past and the future of the the characters that he did not create substance for the present film. The important characters, like Lois Lane, were unnecessary forced into the script to keep up with the past editions. The haphazard pace of the film signified the urge to introduce Justice League, the future edition of the film. One tends to ask the question that, is there a scope of originality in the work of art and literature if there is an influence on the text from the other text.

T.S. Eliot, in *Tradition and Individual Talent (1921)* talks about the importance of following a tradition for the production of good work of art. For him tradition meant "simultaneous order" ^[6] with historical timelessness. The poet must understand his work's relationship to his predecessors with a strong grip of the present. Talking about

Eliot becomes important here because Zack Snyder was trying to do exactly this while making this film. He wanted to take the Superman with all his origins and past and take all that Batman has to offer and bring them together in a film which would speak to the audience. Also, it is impossible to discuss Hollywood productions without mentioning the industry itself. The film was a commercial venture and was created to make money. It would have been a difficult choice if not impossible, to create a story independent of the past. It was equally unsafe to keep the film independent of the future production because Superman, Batman and, Justice League work as a franchise. Making profit is the ultimate aim of these franchises. Apart from the film, the company also trade in accessories and merchandise of these superheroes. Now, that the Justice League is back in the frame, it will be easier for the franchise to keep the profits coming from the merchandise. These nuances of profit making are imperative to talk about because these shape the film, the text and the work of art, as much as any other factor. The rules of Hollywood if combined plays the role of a text which is relentlessly interacting with the making of the films, with scripts, scenes and characters.

In conclusion, *Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice* is analysed through the structuralist perspective. Structuralism, in the most basic term, stands for analyzing and identifying the most basic structures with which a text is made up of. It is interesting to analyse a commercial film via this approach because in the contemporary times, there is a Formula for almost every film to make it a success, the success which can most commonly be counted through the profits that are made. Through Gerard Genette's theory of transtextuality, one can break the formula down to see and understand these constituents. The analysis of the film from the five elements of the transtextuality is informative to comprehend the responsibility of the genre of comics and science fiction on the film, also, the baggage of past which the Superman was carrying and its importance in terms of the commercial success- the responsibility of the director to introduce the next film of the franchise. All these factors make themselves visible when the film is broken down into a few basic structures. After this study, one realizes that a text (here, film) is more than a creative outburst. It has a structure and a place in the market which makes its creation possible.

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