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# Studios call: Lights, comics, action!

With comic-book inspired movies doing boffo box office, producers are mining even B-characters for more and more films. But is it too much of a good thing?

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'With great power comes great responsibility." It's a famous quote by a famous man, except he's not really a man -- he's actually Spider-Man. He said it after his uncle was killed by a burglar; he had a chance to stop him but chose not to out of selfishness. In the comic books, it's a mantra that constantly reminds him of a harsh lesson learned.

It's a message that Hollywood and comic-book companies may want to take to heart, given the fickle attention spans of moviegoers and the record number of comic-book movies being made.

*Spider-Man*, the 2002 movie, took in more than $403-million (U.S.), making it the fifth highest-grossing film of all time. That, along with the huge success of the two recent *X-Men* films (a total combined gross of $371-million), has everybody jumping on the bandwagon. This year will see at least six comic-book movies, starting with Dark Horse Comics' demon-turned-superhero story *Hellboy* today. Marvel Comics, the top publisher, follows with *The Punisher* on April 16, *Spider-Man 2* on June 30, a third *Blade* movie in August, and *Swamp Thing* in September. Not to be outdone, DC Comics adds Halle Berry in *Catwoman* in July. Next year looks to be even busier -- Marvel itself has five films planned for 2005.

Is it too much? Will audiences get tired of superheroes, and is there a danger of overproduction?

This isn't a new issue to the comic-book industry. Spurred by the success of DC's *Batman* movie in 1989, the industry boomed in the early nineties and producers took advantage: Production of books increased, prices rose and, by and large, quality suffered. Real fans deserted them, soon followed by those who bought the books thinking they might be worth something some day. That left a decimated readership, and Marvel -- perhaps the worst transgressor -- went into bankruptcy protection in 1996. The company emerged a few years later with a new business plan, calling for the licensing of its huge character library as its primary source of income. Now, that means more movies to spur more licensing.

"With great power comes great responsibility," says Marvel chief executive officer Avi Arad, quoting his company's mascot when asked about the danger of making too many films. "It's up to us to screw it up. It's like we screwed up comics! It was terrible. But we fixed that, and it's the same responsibility with movies." Overproduction isn't a problem, he says, if the films are different enough. It's all about "product mix." Arad paints Marvel's coming films in different lights: While *Spider-Man 2* is a straight-up superhero romp, *The Punisher* is a vigilante story, or Charles Bronson's *Death Wish* done "Marvel style." *Blade: Trinity*, meanwhile, is a vampire movie, and *Swamp Thing* is a supernatural horror tale.

Peter Sanderson, author of a book on Marvel called *Marvel Universe* and professor of comics history at New York University, agrees with Arad and says that comic books aren't really a genre as far as films are concerned, but rather a source for various genres -- just like novels. Films as diverse as *Road to Perdition*, *From Hell* and *Ghost World* were all based on comics, so "it would be misleading to say that there are too many movies based on comic books because comic books can deal with any kind of subject." Overproduction, he says, can be stemmed if there's a good mix of genres and if, in the end, the focus is on quality control.

"It's only too much if the movies aren't good, and I don't think you can ever have too many good movies." But why the sudden trend in translating comic books to film? Again, this isn't something that's really new, as there have been mega-hits in the past -- DC's *Superman* movie, in 1978, grossed more than $130-million, and *Batman* took in $250-million in 1989; the two *Men in Black* movies, in 1997 and 2002, grossed a combined $440-million. But despite these successes, there hasn't really been a steady stream of comic-book movies until now. Sanderson suggests the reason for the trend goes beyond the box office.

"You now have a generation of filmmakers who have grown up reading and admiring the comics that they're turning into films," he says. "A lot of people grew up with this stuff, reading this material, and do not condescend to it and who are motivated to turn it into films." Mike Mignola, creator of the Hellboy comic book, was impressed with how much respect the movie's director, Guillermo del Toro, showed him and his source material: "Directors take the material seriously, they regard it as any other legitimate genre of film." There's also the technology issue. Mignola says developments in special effects over the past decade now make it possible to duplicate anything that happens in comic books.

"I remember when I walked out of the movie theatre after seeing *Terminator 2* -- I went with a bunch of other cartoonists, and we had this look on our face of 'holy crap.' We always though there was stuff we could do that Hollywood couldn't. But after seeing that movie, we were saying that Hollywood could do anything. So are we out of a job?" Obviously not, since the artists are the ones who are ultimately fuelling the trend. Mignola says comic-book movies have established themselves and aren't going away.

"There was a time that if somebody did a bad comic-book movie, Hollywood would say 'We can't do comic-book movies any more.' But *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* made so much money, there would have be a colossal string of bombs for Hollywood to turn its back on the comic-book stuff. I think it's here to stay, it's just a matter of having the right people make them." Fans may not agree. As much as Arad promotes all his Marvel films as top-notch efforts, some are bad and some are not entirely welcome.

"*Daredevil* licked hind-quarter," says Daryl Collison, owner of 3rd Quadrant Comics in Toronto. "If they keep doing all these B-characters, it might get a bit overdone." As a retailer, Collison is pleased every time a comic-book movie hits theatres, since his business inevitably spikes. But as a fan, he only wants to see "the big ones" -- Spider-Man, X-Men, Hulk, Fantastic Four -- and thinks the B-level characters, such as Daredevil, the Punisher, Hellboy, and all the others in the pipe, will "water down" the whole concept.

"The biggies -- those are the ones that deserve this treatment."

Calgary-born comic and toy magnate Todd McFarlane, who cut his teeth drawing Spider-Man in the early nineties and revolutionized comic art while doing so, is somewhat more cynical about Hollywood. Studios tend to have "knee-jerk" reactions, and the comic book trend may be only a bomb or two short of fading away.

"*Spider-Man 2* is going to be huge, but if *Punisher* and *Hellboy* and whatever else is next do dismal [at the box office], there's going to be the conversation again of what's the viability of comic books."

Indeed, with great power comes great responsibility.