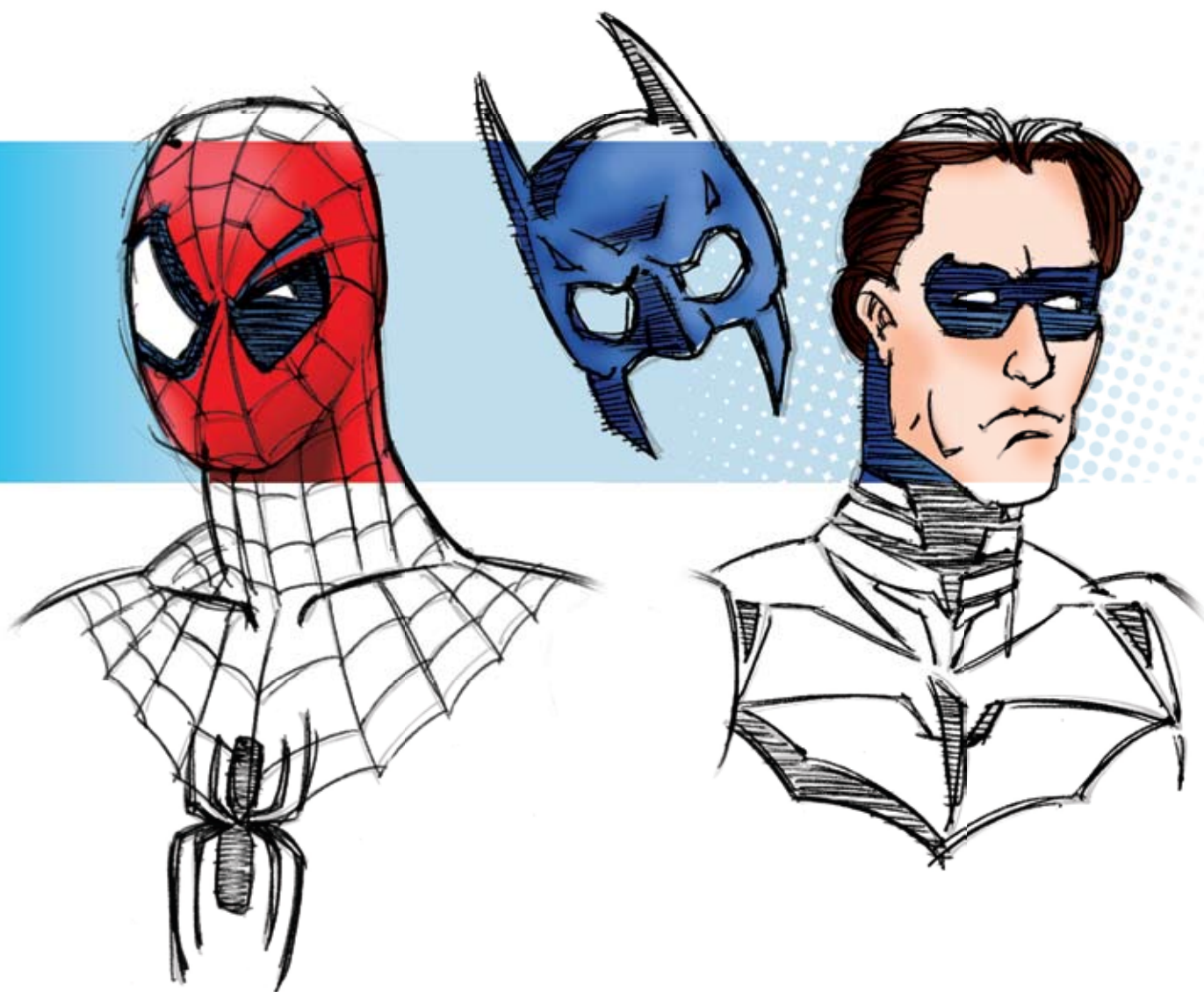


# From the Top of the Cowl to the Tip of the Cape

## The Cinematic Superhero Costume as Impossible Garment

Dru H. Jeffries



***The superhero costume is a subject of great fascination, simultaneously functioning as the iconic embodiment of a character's identity and as a fetishized object of fan desire.<sup>1</sup>***

As is the case for many contemporary films that are adaptations of a previously existing work, fan discussions about forthcoming superhero films are frequently centred around promotional images of the actors in costume. In the late 1980s, Michael Keaton's casting as Batman caused a massive fan protest (comparable to the recent backlash against Ben Affleck's casting in the same role) that was partly assuaged once fans were given photographs of the actor in the suit. Indeed, the marketing of superhero films is largely based around the circulation of such images, from the posters that hang in theatre lobbies to action figures that bring replicas of the cinematic superhero costume into the home. Yet despite the centrality of the costume to the production, marketing, and reception of these films, this generic linchpin has received little critical attention.<sup>2</sup>

Since the creation of and responses to cinematic superhero costumes necessarily involves a dialogic negotiation between the film and comic book versions,<sup>3</sup> the superhero costume is one area in which the concept of "fidelity" in adaptation may actually have some hermeneutic value.<sup>4</sup> Fans' fetishization of superhero costumes suggests

that visual fidelity is a primary criterion of aesthetic value for many viewers, regardless of other considerations (e.g., whether the costume would be functional in the real world); in other words, clothes make the (Super)man. In live-action media, however, the superhero costume presents difficulties that do not exist to the same degree in illustrated formats, such as comics or animation. The most salient issues with regard to the cinematic superhero costume are the material(s) out of which the costumes are made, how the films present (or elide) moments of transformation from civilian clothes into superhero garb, and the overall relationship between the film and cinematic verisimilitude on the one hand versus the stylization of the comic book medium on the other. Fundamental differences between these media must also be considered. Whereas motion is only inferred in comics, it is shown in film, and yet cinematic superhero transformations are seldom depicted onscreen. The motivating factor for this is that the cinematic superhero costume is largely an 'impossible garment,' whose representation in films relies on the kinds of gaps that are built into the formal architecture of comics (known as "gutters"), which necessitates brief yet significant temporal ellipses when transposed to a filmic context. The question of fidelity, then, goes beyond superficial visual similarity and concerns a common mode of representation – one filled with gaps and elisions – between the two media.<sup>5</sup>

In short, live-action superhero costumes are caught in a bind: fidelity to the original comic book designs privileged by fans tend to result in impossible garments, which can create diegetic gaps that prevent audiences from fully accepting the costumed hero as 'real.' Visual fidelity, believability, and pragmatic feasibility are all desirable, but fidelity tends to be mutually exclusive with the other two criteria. The representational gaps that these impossible garments seem to demand only reinforce the palpable disconnect between the live-action body of the actor and the (increasingly) computer-animated body of the costumed superhero. The way out of this problematic is to treat the cinematic superhero as an ontologically hybridized figure – always both man and superman – that requires a hybrid mode of representation that seamlessly

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1. The term "fetish" is used here in both senses, referring both to fans' attachment to how these costumes look as well as the sexual dimension that such an obsession can assume. The central role of the superhero costume in pornographic parody films and fan art speaks to the aspect of this attachment, a topic that is beyond the scope of the present investigation and warrants its own study.

2. That is, beyond the countless Internet posts and "infographics" detailing the minutest differences between iterations of, for example, Superman's chest insignia. Such articles tend to chronicle or visualize different versions, but they are typically quite superficial and fail to account for why changes occur. See Kirsten Acuna, "The Incredible 75-Year Evolution Of The Superman Logo" for a representative example of this phenomenon.

3. Recent films such as *Batman Begins* (Christopher Nolan, 2005) and *Man of Steel* (Zack Snyder, 2013) have started to employ the symbology of the superhero costume to advance their themes, which represents an attempt to diegetically justify their protagonists' choice to wear fairly outlandish outfits while fighting crime: for Batman, the bat represents using the fear that criminals deploy against their victims as a force for good; for Superman, the emblem that adorns his chest is an alien ideogram meaning "hope." The importance of diegetic motivation will return later in this essay.

4. The issue of "fidelity" has haunted adaptation theory since its inception, much to the chagrin of those who attempt to move beyond it (e.g., Robert Stam, "Beyond Fidelity: The Dialogics of Adaptation," in *Film Adaptation*, ed. James Naremore [New Brunswick, Rutgers University Press, 2000]: 54-76; Thomas Leitch, "Adaptation Studies at a Crossroads," in *Adaptation* 1.1 [2008]: 63-77). See the first chapter of my dissertation ("The Comic Book Film as Palimpsest," forthcoming) for a thorough cri-

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tique of adaptation theory as an approach to analyzing the comic book film genre.

5. The reliance on montage to produce a diegesis that never existed before the camera as an ontological whole is most famously denounced in the film theory of André Bazin, whose preferred aesthetic is grounded in long takes and montage that preserves the ontological unity of the scene. In this essay, I will be associating the montage aesthetic with comic books rather than with Eisenstein or his like. When referring to cinematic "realism" throughout this essay, it is a Bazinian realism defined by an uninterrupted representation of time.



blends live-action photography and (digital) animation in order to transcend the gutters of the comic book and be fully cinematic. A discussion of the *Iron Man* film franchise will demonstrate how this strategy contrasts with the dominant approach taken in the vast majority of superhero films.

The traditional superhero costume in comic books contains several distinguishing and recurring features, including (but not always or limited to) the following: skin-tight fabric that reveals the hyper-muscled superhero body while also providing some level of armour/protection, but without impeding flexibility or mobility; a mask that transforms the eyes, rendering them a pure, anonymous white; and, lastly, a cape that defies physics in the pursuit of casting an iconic shadow. The superhero mask, in particular, has some plasticity and often reflects the emotions of the face it obscures (e.g., the eyes on Spider-Man's mask can squint in concentration or widen in surprise). The costume as a whole is often revealed to be composed of multiple parts – Batman can remove his shirt, Spider-Man can take off his mask – and yet behaves like a unitard when worn (when Spider-Man puts his mask back on, it seamlessly reintegrates back into the whole). Any one of these features would make the superhero costume impossible to visualize in live-action, and all of them together present a significant creative challenge to the costume designers tasked with outfitting these characters for the screen. Consequently, some of these features are simply discarded: the masks lose their power to emote or to obscure pupils,<sup>6</sup> the conceit that thin, skintight fabrics are kevlar-enforced is eliminated, and capes tend to obey the laws of physics.<sup>7</sup> These are but of few concrete, genre-

6. One exception to this is *Green Lantern* (Martin Campbell, 2011), whose title character's pupils fade almost completely whenever his (computer-generated) mask appears.

7. Again, there is at least one exception: *Spawn* (Mark A.Z. Dippé, 1997), whose title character's computer-generated cape flows and grows

specific reasons why perfect visual fidelity to an illustrated medium is impossible in live-action.

Likely due to budgetary and technological constraints, the earliest superhero films merely attempted to retain the iconic elements of the comic book costumes (minus the colour) using conventional materials. As such, the costumes worn in serials such as *The Adventures of Captain Marvel* (John English and William Witney, 1941), *Batman* (Lambert Hillyer, 1943), *Superman* (Spencer Gordon Bennet and Thomas Carr, 1948) and several others look more like homemade Halloween costumes than the garments of legendary crime-fighters. Costuming Adam West, Burt Ward, and Christopher Reeve with tighter, thinner fabrics for *Batman* (1966-1968) and *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978) represented the next phase of live-action superhero costuming. In their design, these are remarkably faithful to the images drawn in comics, but spandex and nylon do not cling to real bodies the way they do as illustrations. In comics, costumes appear almost as a second skin; they echo, as Scott Bukatman notes, the nudity of classical statuary. He writes,

The superhero costume marks a return to earlier modes of male self-representation by combining Rococo ornamentation (with its flashing colors, flowing capes, epaulets, and talismans) with a classical ideal in which “the hero wore nothing but his perfect nudity, perhaps enhanced by a short cape falling behind him... The hero's harmonious nude beauty was the visible expression of his uncorrupted moral and mental qualities” (87).<sup>8</sup> Purity and performative flamboyance were thus uniquely combined in the superhero's costume. (2003, 215)

Such an ideal is all but impossible in live-action. In the name of realism, the gossamer thin, skin-hugging fabrics depicted in superhero comics necessarily become thicker for film, and the bodies that they put on display cannot help but fall short of the comic book superhero's hyperbolic perfection; even Reeve's considerable muscles are just barely discernible under the nylon fabric of his Superman costume. In this respect, the live-action superhero costume may faithfully replicate certain attributes of the comic book costume (in terms of colour, design, etc.) but the “perfect nudity” of the illustration is inevitably lost when worn by a live action actor.

Beginning in the late 1980s with *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989), the superhero costume addresses this problem by discarding with fabrics entirely in favour of a ‘suit of armour’ approach, using rubber or hard foam

in a decidedly physics-defying manner.

8. The internal citation is to Anne Hollander, *Sex and Suits*.

*Fidelity has proven to be an impossible ideal, since even the thinnest fabrics cannot reproduce the “perfect nudity” achieved in comic books and the desire for verisimilitude necessitates that certain changes be made to the costume designs that fans know and love.*

as primary materials. The “nude” ideal of the comic book superhero is, paradoxically, more easily attained with these thicker costumes, upon which musculature can be inscribed. In the *Batman* franchise, the armour became increasingly anatomically correct with each instalment, culminating in the much-maligned ‘bat nipples’ of *Batman Forever* (Joel Schumacher, 1995) and *Batman & Robin* (Schumacher, 1997).<sup>9</sup> Leather costumes become popular with films like *Blade* (Stephen Norrington, 1998), *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000), and *Daredevil* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2003), wherein they provide some utilitarian protection along with a sleek, tough look, albeit without any sculpted musculature. This marks a move away from creating a cartoonish world in which superheroes are merely one fantastical element among many (as in *Batman & Robin*) toward capturing a verisimilitudinous world that is partially inhabited by costumed heroes. Signifiers associated with comic book style – bright palettes, elaborate and colourful costumes, scenery-chewing performances – are hereafter replaced by diegetically-motivated (and hence more ‘believable’) equivalents. Indeed, when Wolverine (Hugh Jackman) complains about the all-leather suit in *X-Men*, perhaps speaking on behalf of the comic book reader, Cyclops (James Marsden) self-reflexively quips back, “What would you prefer? Yellow spandex?” This may be read as an acknowledgement by the filmmakers that visual fidelity to the source material would not, in this instance, make sense within the world of the film.

Around the same time, however, thinner materials make a comeback in films like *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002) and *Man of Steel*. Unlike the flat nylon suit of the earlier *Superman* films, these synthetic costumes are thoroughly textured and embossed to maximize aesthetic interest and painted to emphasize and exaggerate the

9. This costume design is playfully referenced in Zack Snyder’s *Watchmen* (2009), in which Ozymandias’ rubber suit features well-defined pectorals, six-pack abs, and nipples. With such subtle gestures to other cinematic superheroes, Snyder’s remediation of *Watchmen* functions as a commentary on past superhero films as much as on the comic book genre that Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons critiqued in their graphic novel.

musculature of the actor inside the garment. While the raised webbing and mirrored eyes of Spider-Man (Tobey Maguire)’s costume represented minor adornments to the comic book version, Superman’s outfit in *Man of Steel* featured one major change that caused some controversy among fans: the removal of the so-called “red underwear.” Director Zack Snyder has stated that they were removed from the costume because they were not “consistent with the world we were creating” in the film (Zuckerman): in other words, fidelity to the source material and verisimilitude were mutually exclusive in this case. As evidenced here, superhero costumes may take on a variety of forms in the contemporary, post-*Blade* period, so long as the choices made are properly motivated by the characters and the world they inhabit (Spider-Man’s costume is necessarily thin because he values flexibility over protection; Superman’s thin costume is constructed from an indestructible alien material). Thus, while the tone of superhero films today oscillates between the moral, tonal, and aesthetic seriousness of Christopher Nolan’s work with DC characters (both as director and producer) and the more playful spirit associated with Marvel’s output, all are indebted to the paradigm shift toward the kind of generic verisimilitude inaugurated by *X-Men*. The approach may be summarized thusly: fidelity to the way the characters dressed in comics is acceptable only insofar as it can be diegetically justified in the film.

Thus far, I have described some of the different phases that superhero costuming has experienced over the decades in different films and franchises. As is nearly always the case with adaptation across different media, fidelity has proven to be an impossible ideal, since even the thinnest fabrics cannot reproduce the “perfect nudity” achieved in comic books and the desire for verisimilitude necessitates that certain changes be





made to the costume designs that fans know and love. Refusing (or failing) to adhere to the designs offered in comic books, however, does not make the cinematic superhero costume an impossible garment, which is my overarching contention. This impossibility is the result of shifting from a static, “gappy” medium to a dynamic, fluid mode of representation, and is best demonstrated in moments of transformation: of superheroes dressing or undressing. While there are some characters who have the supernatural ability to spontaneously morph between their secret and superheroic identities, the rest of them have to put their pants on, as the saying goes, one leg at a time. The process of putting these impossible garments on and taking them off of actors, however, is not simply a matter of putting legs into pants and pulling shirts over heads; in some cases, it is a matter of having a wardrobe department sew the actor’s body into a suit.

When dealing with impossible garments, filmmakers elide the moments that undermine their believability. Such elisions – which, appropriately, often concern the literal erasure of seams – produce a cinematic equivalent to the kind of representational ruptures that are native to the comic book medium. Jared Gardner describes reading a comic book thusly: “in the passage from one frame to the next, the gutter intervenes, and the message is transformed in countless ways by the syndicated act of millions of readers filling in the gaps between” (Kindle loc. 670). The act of filling in the productive absence between panels known as “the gutter” is, as Scott McCloud influentially claimed, the fundamental act upon which reading comics is predicated (67). Conventional continuity-based filmmaking, by contrast, seeks to eliminate such gaps in order to create a smooth, uninterrupted, and unambiguous sense of immersion in the diegesis represented on screen. According to comics historian Robert Harvey, “A film would show the movements that are [...] lost between panels” (186). During his analysis of a sequence from Will Eisner’s *The Spirit*, he articulates the relevant feature of comics’ narrational mode: “the breakdown of the action

omits the motion between the two images [...] We see only ‘before’ and ‘after’ shots, with speed lines supplying all the sense of the now completed action. But seeing that much is believing. We’re convinced” (187). In short, comics can persuade the reader of an action with less visual information than we would need to see in a film, especially with regard to feats that seem impossible in the real world.

The superhero costume – specifically, the inability to easily put it on and remove it – represents just such an impossibility, creating a problem for filmmakers trying to show the moments lost between panels. As a result, they may either shoot and cut around moments that would ‘give away’ the trick, limiting what we see to the ‘before’ and ‘after’ that we would get in a comic, or they may show it all, including the discrepancies that result. Neither option is as persuasive as the comic. An example of the former strategy can be found in Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002–2007). Throughout the films, the superhero costume is clearly one piece: the mask is seamlessly connected to the rest of the suit below the neck, the gloves are connected to the arm sleeves, the boots are connected to the pant legs. Though the suit looks and behaves as a unitard, the character nevertheless has the ability to remove the mask or boots when necessary (e.g. unmasking to kiss Mary-Jane [Kirsten Dunst]). However, when he puts these items back on, the suit seemingly regenerates itself, once again becoming a single unbroken piece. As in a comic, Raimi omits the “gutter” material, cutting away from Spider-Man before the mask is completely back on, obscuring its status as an impossible garment.<sup>10</sup> But whereas a “gappy” comic book representation would be considered complete for that medium, the gaps that result in the film are jarring. The other approach is demonstrated in *Batman Returns* (Tim Burton, 1992), when Bruce Wayne (Michael Keaton) removes his mask in front of Catwoman (Michelle Pfeiffer) after the final confrontation with the

10. The same is true of the recent reboot *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marc Webb, 2012).

Penguin (Danny DeVito) in the sewers of Gotham. Like the Spider-Man suit, Batman's rubber armour is essentially one piece. In order to reveal his identity to Catwoman, Wayne has to tear the cowl off at the neck, effectively ruining the entire suit. Where the *Spider-Man* films ask us to accept that simply placing the mask back on can seamlessly repair the costume, *Batman Returns* makes it clear that such reparations are impossible. In this scene, however, the eyes present a greater continuity issue. Since some skin around Batman's eyes is visible under the cowl, he has to blacken the area with make-up in order to create the illusion that the mask covers more of his face than it does. In the shot-reverse shot pattern the film employs in this scene, Batman's eye make-up is present at first, but when the camera returns to Batman after a cutaway to Catwoman, the black make-up around Batman's eyes has disappeared, displaying the now conspicuously light skin around his eyes. This allows Batman to reveal his identity without consequently revealing his maquillage, but the viewer is confronted with the impossibility of the Batman costume. This cannot be dismissed as a continuity error, since it must have been a deliberate choice; for Burton, not displaying an unmasked Wayne in semi-blackface must have been worth sacrificing shot-to-shot continuity.

Thus it seems that superhero films have good reason to elide moments of transformation entirely. Looking over the history of the genre, transformations are typically on-screen and instantaneous (*Captain Marvel*), on-screen and fragmentary (*Daredevil*), or off-screen entirely (*Man of Steel*). Complete transformations only begin to appear in the digital era with the sophistication of computer-generated imagery, and even now they are rare. With

the introduction of photorealistic CGI, cinema became capable of showing something that comics never could: the transition from civilian to superhero in real-time, without the kind of cuts, gaps, or fissures that undermine continuity and verisimilitude—in other words, without gutters. While the uninterrupted (long) take in cinema conveys continuity and a sense of realism, the gaps between each panel in a comic book necessarily emphasize discontinuity and artifice, even if the narrative meaning is identical to that imparted by a seamless representation. As Bukatman notes, “A single frame cannot illuminate or [produce the continuity and history central to a sense of self]: the sequence alone can do this” (2003, 135). The title characters in *Spawn*, *Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003), and *Green Lantern*, as well as Mystique (Rebecca Romijn) in *X-Men* and Venom (Topher Grace) in *Spider-Man 3* (Sam Raimi, 2007), are all examples of superheroes (or villains) whose transformations are seen in full thanks to the integration of live-action photography and digital animation. In each of these cases, actors seamlessly morph into their fantastic alter egos before our eyes.

Morphing, however, cannot be the only way to suture these kinds of gaps, especially given that most superheroes do not morph into their costumes, but rather put them on as one would any outfit. By this criterion, *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008) and its sequels are perhaps the most fully realized in all of superhero cinema. Iron Man may be the only superhero who wears a physical suit<sup>11</sup> whose transformations are often shown in uninterrupted takes; given their rarity in the genre, these scenes are among the greatest spectacles in these films. The fully realized machinations of the Iron Man



11. The suit is physical within the diegesis, though in any given shot it may be a combination of practical and CG elements, or entirely CG.

*In 1978, the original one-sheet for Superman promised that we would “believe a man can fly,” but even today superhero films rarely give viewers those crucial bits of footage that allow them to believe that man and superman are one and the same.*

armour as it gradually covers Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.)’s body, climaxing with the lowering of the face shield and the white-blue illumination of his electronic eyes, are cinematically seamless while also demonstrating how the suit’s seams fit together to form an ontological whole. These scenes, already spectacular in the first *Iron Man*, are renewed in each sequel with new armours that assemble in novel and surprising ways: the “suitcase armour” in *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010) is the highlight of the film’s most memorable set-piece, while Stark’s midair transformation in Marvel’s *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012) is an enthralling spectacle which amplifies viewer excitement for the immediately ensuing battle for New York. The franchise’s trend of costuming-as-set-piece culminates in *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013), wherein a partially armoured Stark breaking into the Mandarin’s lair represents the film’s most inventive action set-piece while the climax featuring forty autonomous Iron Man suits is perhaps the most spectacular scene in the trilogy.

Referring to the proliferation of such CG bodies in superhero films, Bukatman writes that “after Tobey Maguire’s Peter Parker pulls Spider-Man’s mask over his face and swings into action, the figure onscreen literally ceases to be Tobey Maguire. This has the unfortunate

effect of severing the connection between the inexpressive body and the liberated, expressive one” (*Poetics of Slumberland* 203). The fully realized transformations shown in films like *Iron Man* reduce this unfortunate effect, allowing the viewer to associate the CG Iron Man suit with the photographic Stark. By contrast, the all-CG Spider-Man reads as inert to viewers in part because of the impossibility of the costume. We never see Maguire become Spider-Man; at best, we see him almost become Spider-Man – cut – and then Spider-Man appears, fully formed. As *Iron Man* demonstrates, seeing the man get into the costume not only legitimates the shots of the all-CG Iron Man, but also the isolated close-ups on Downey’s face ‘inside the suit.’ The long take of Downey becoming Iron Man has a Bazinian effect in this context, legitimizing the isolated close-ups to follow and attesting to their authenticity. Bazin summarizes the two opposing approaches thusly: “The same scene can be bad literature or great cinema depending on whether it is edited or shot with all its elements in the frame” (86). I would revise his assertion to fit the present case study specifically: the same scene can behave like cinema or comics, depending on whether the transformation is continuous and complete or “gappy” and incomplete. By the same logic, the superhero’s hybridity can also be demonstrated or undermined. Eliding the transformation emphasizes the schism between or the impossibility of reconciling the two personas. While such elisions do not disrupt the narrative, they deny us moments of transformation that, when seen in full, legitimize the dual identity of the superhero and allow the viewer to believe the character’s continuity over time in both roles.

In 1978, the original one-sheet for *Superman* promised that we would “believe a man can fly,” but even today



superhero films rarely give viewers those crucial bits of footage that allow them to believe that man and superman are one and the same. As I have demonstrated here, the process of adapting the superhero costume to live-action is fraught with many concerns, of which fidelity may be low on filmmakers' list of priorities, especially compared to the desires of fandom. Indeed, "faithful" costumes may be impossible to bring to the screen in a seamless (or cinematic) way, requiring filmmakers to either shoot and edit around the seams that cannot be shown or to elide showing the transformations entirely, mirroring the gap-filled representational mode of comics. As the *Iron Man* franchise attests to, however, photorealistic CGI gives filmmakers a third option, but even CG-heavy films such as *Spider-Man* or *Man of Steel* tend to opt out of showing transformations from beginning to end, leaving gaps that echo the gutters between comics panels. These films may succeed in convincing audiences that a man can fly, but they fail to convince us of something that seems much simpler: that a man can get dressed on his own.

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