

- BOOK REVIEW -

***Claudia Bucciferro (editor). 2016. The X-Men Films: A Cultural Analysis.
Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
ISBN 9781442265332***

Reviewed by Paul Ramaeker

As the contemporary mediasphere becomes ever more saturated with superhero film and television, Claudia Bucciferro's *The X-Men Films: A Cultural Analysis* will surely stand as one of the first of its kind, an edited collection focused on a single property, the *X-Men* films produced by Lauren Shuler Donner et al., and distributed by 20th Century Fox. For all the writing out there on films based on comics, the only comparable volume is *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe*, by Martin Flanagan, Mike McKenny, and Andy Livingston (Bloomsbury, 2016). Surely, though, it will only be a matter of time before *The X-Men Films* is joined by books on the various cycles of films adapted from DC properties, or on specific phases or iterations of Marvel properties. As such, this counts as a cutting edge collection, regardless of the advancing age of the series in question; indeed, it is the very longevity of this series that warrants a collection entirely focused on it. *X-Men* was released in 2000, followed by *X-2: X-Men United* in 2003, and *X-Men: Last Stand* in 2006; but this initial trilogy has been followed by two sequels focused on Wolverine, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* in 2009, *The Wolverine* in 2013, and one more to be released in 2017; and another trilogy, *X-Men: First Class* (2011), *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014), and *X-Men: Apocalypse* (2016). As a series focused from the start on mutants in teams, the *X-Men* films offer a wide range of subjects to be analysed, particularly so given the explicit political charge of the property. If Superman and Batman are all too easy to read as adolescent fantasies of a quasi-fascist nature (it is much more complicated than that, of course), the *X-Men* titles have been positioned since early in the comics' run as a liberal 'New Society' vision that treats mutants as a metaphor for any particular outsider group seeking social and cultural acceptance. The

Paul Ramaeker is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Media, Film and Communication Studies at the University of Otago.

exigencies of big-budget film production, though, raise the question: Are the films as ideologically progressive as they might appear?

Bucciferro's introduction puts a personal spin on her investment in the series, relating her experience of seeing the film in Concepción, and succinctly lays out the project of the book, examining the X-Men as a way of exploring social issues. This is spread out across sections devoted to Utopianism and transmedia marketing; 'agency and authority', in which the contributors delve into issues around mutants, transhumanism, and constructions of the warrior; gender and race; and passing and Otherness. It must be said that, as a film scholar, I am coming at this book from a perspective quite different to that of the majority of the authors here; most of them are Communications scholars, with a few having backgrounds in literature or politics, and just a couple from film. Frequently, then, I found myself wanting more nuance and detail in the textual analysis, as well as more historical background, especially in terms of economic contexts (Nicolò Gallio's piece on the marketing of *Days of Future Past* is welcome as regards the latter). The book is, instead, mostly invested in qualitative, representational analysis. Given this caveat, though, it is still fair to expect a degree of variability in any anthology, and so it is here.

Particularly disappointing is that the one essay that seriously engages with film style falls into the trap of directly equating selected instances of low and high angles with empowerment and disempowerment, without fully considering either narration or intrinsic norms. That essay, coming in the section on women in the franchise, doesn't necessarily need such an assertion to prove that the female mutants tend to be marginalised in one way or another. Indeed, most of the collection is predicated on the idea that the films signally fail to measure up to the progressive political standards that ostensibly characterize the X-Men. Despite the films' overt messages of diversity and inclusion, they are mostly constrained and curtailed in this regard by the hegemony of white heteronormative patriarchy. Carolyn Cocca's essay 'Containing the X-Women' persuasively demonstrates the many ways in which the films fall short of the comics as regards gender politics, while Julie Davis and Robert Westerfelhaus examine Rogue's powers as ones she must relinquish, not a source of strength. Jason Zingsheim shows that even the shape-shifting Mystique is ultimately aligned with whiteness, and her agency compromised by positioning here as a mere point of contention between two men, Xavier and Magneto (a point echoed by Overton, du Pré, Pecchioni, and Overton).

Elsewhere, David Oh looks at Orientalist and post-racial fantasies in the *Wolverine* films, Jessica Benham questions the displacement of disabled rights into mutant rights, and Jason Smith finds no real challenge to white dominance in the representation of minority mutants. Other essays are somewhat more ambivalent, focused more on exploring the complex and often contradictory ways that the mutants articulate struggles around issues such as, in

Nathan Miczo's 'Wolverine in Transition', definitions of masculinity, and, in Christina M. Knopf and Christine M. Doran's 'PTXD', social distinctions between civilian and warrior.

Many of the essays here spring from the opposition between Professor X. and Magneto. In 'Magneto's Dilemma', Ron Von Burg and D. Stokes Piercy use their debates to hash out issues around transhumanism, while in 'Passing While Homo Superior', Kat Overland both looks to them to ground her discussion of passing in relation to mutancy, and critiques the either/or logic of them as a binary. Among the strongest entries here focus on the ideological work that mutancy does across the series. Matt Yockey's 'Mutopia' looks at the mutant's Otherness in relation to notions of American-ness, its myths of Utopia, its exceptionalism, and its hegemonic values, while also recognising the challenge to normativity in Xavier's coalition. Evan Hayles Gledhill takes a fruitful tack in looking at the mutants as a fictive means to approach issues around biopower, debates around 'material reality and the subjective experiences of its inhabitants' (34). The mutants, she argues, can help illuminate 'Foucault's challenge to extend the field of human rights by extending the definition of the human' (35), with the X-Men's 'discursive construction of bodily non-normativity as giving voice to alternative subject positions by resisting the enforced normativity in current morphological standards of human bodies' (35). In this respect, she argues that the invocation of Nazism (in Magneto's concentration camp past) is used as a means to suggest the power structures behind eugenics and discursive standards of normativity. This is a rich area, and Gledhill explores it cogently. Likewise, not least after a long run of pieces quite critical of the films (most often rightly so), it comes as something of a relief to get to Bucciferro's own essay, 'Mutancy, Otherness, and Empathy in *The X-Men*', in which she goes back to the basic potential of the characters and their world. Mutants, she writes, represent not any particular group, but a more generalised Other, enabling an in-depth, conceptual exploration of Otherness itself, which invites us to 'deconstruct the Other as a category'. "To live is to struggle, say the X-Men, but there is power in teamwork and diversity". 'While exploring alterity and alienation, the X-Men offer empathy and hope as entry points for building a better future' (221).

In their 'Epilogue', Bucciferro and Zingsheim ably tie the threads of the volume together, identifying three overarching themes '(1) illustrating identity shifts and mutations, specifically the politics of representation regarding intersectional subject positions; (2) processing social issues, including human rights, war, and technology; and (3) discussing futurity and otherness, while exploring the past and present in connection to a politics of difference' (224). They acknowledge the ways in which the films explore alternative identities and subjectivities, and explore cultural anxieties, yet without necessarily subverting dominant ideologies. In doing so, they point to the larger functions of the volume itself, not only to look at what the films tell us about contemporary culture, but also to offer 'analytical tools that promote media literacy' (223). This indicates the ways in which this

collection is intended to spur classroom discussion, allowing students to approach difference and intersectionality through the framework of familiar cultural texts. This is a valuable goal, and certainly this book offers a rich set of resources for pedagogical use. They clarify that this is an epilogue and not a conclusion: the X-machine rolls on, with numerous upcoming titles as of the time of writing, including *X-Men: Apocalypse*, *Deadpool* (both 2016), and many more in the works. As such, *The X-Men* will indeed continue to offer material for analysis and debate. Their final words, then, are apt: 'For the foreseeable future, *The X-Men* will allow us to trace the ways social identities and meanings evolve and mutate over time, to process the ethical issues that face us as a people, and to use fantasy to create a better world. For a culture in need of superheroes, these may just be the powers that save us' (229).