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Paratextual Battlegrounds and Critical Power Struggles: *Justice League, Black Panther*, and Contemporary Film Reception

By Tom Naylor

Thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Communication, Cultural and Media Studies (MA by Research)

The University of Huddersfield

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Abstract

This explorative work shall consider two blockbuster case studies in *Justice League* (Snyder, 2017) and *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018), assessing how contemporary film reception aids our understanding of power dynamics in the era of social media. I develop ideas of how paratexts work in a contemporary online world, complicating Jonathan Gray's description of 'thresholds' (2010) and introducing the term 'paratextual battlegrounds' to depict paratexts as sites of contestation, where the meaning of a text is struggled over. The power of contemporary participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) has shown traditional hierarchies of power are becoming increasingly vulnerable to challenge from outsider sources and will lead to a reassessment of Pierre Bourdieu's field theory (1993) that acknowledges this shift. By considering three case studies in contemporary film criticism, I show that we must revisit and revise field theory to accommodate the multiple positions contemporary critics can assume, while also theorising the role of aggregator sites such as Rotten Tomatoes as para-paratexts (Hills, 2015a) sparking producer and fan anxieties. This will ultimately reveal that a contained or co-opted reconfiguration of power has occurred in contemporary social media which invites us to explore the tensions between traditional industry figures and the new possibilities enabled by online sites to complicate dominant positionings and paratextual framings of blockbuster franchises as well as specific films.

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Dedications

For my Mum and Holly,

Dedicated to my Dad.

INTRODUCTION – ‘THESE AREN’T JUST COMIC BOOK MOVIES, THEY’RE SOMETHING MUCH MORE’

When we watch a film, our opinion of it is not shaped by that viewing alone. Anything from a review, to a trailer, to a toy can inform our perception of a text, and the prevalence of online media has provided more potential channels to shape a text than ever before. Social media has particularly proven to be a site in which the boundaries between producer, fan, and critic have become porous, encouraging greater interaction between all groups and complicating how we approach a text. Surrounding texts like promotional materials and reviews have been labelled ‘paratexts’ by Gerard Genette (1997). Genette describes paratexts as ‘thresholds’, noting that a ‘threshold exists to be crossed’ (1997, p410), showing how a paratext can act as our entryway, a framework for the consumer’s interpretation of a text. These paratexts can be created by both fan and producer and often create a dialogue, as Genette claimed that ‘a well-managed conversation... becomes an irreplaceable form of the paratext’ (1997, p365). I can update this notion to explore the idea that through contemporary channels such as social media, paratexts operate as a very literal type of ‘conversation’, with a direct and responsive web of intertextuality emerging as various groups engage with each other through online channels. These ‘conversations’ attempt to shape the perception of a text, and Jonathan Gray’s work on paratexts (2010) applies this concept to contemporary media and presents paratexts as sites of creativity which work to create an identity for the text in question (p11). Gray’s work generally assumes that paratexts are accepted and successful in imposing a reading on a text, yet through these ‘conversations’ that occur in online spaces, fans have been found to create paratexts that actively work to resist producer-led readings. This thesis shall therefore complicate Gray’s work and in the first chapter will introduce the concept of paratextual battlegrounds to describe how numerous parties compete in attempts to influence the reception of a text. This suggests paratexts are not simply ‘airlocks’ (Gray, 2010, p26) with one entryway to a text, but are instead battlegrounds that offer multiple negotiated readings (Hall, p516) through various channels. These

paratexts are created by many sources, and so I shall investigate the tension between various groups, as a web of intertextuality emerges where multiple paratexts come into conflict in these battlegrounds. The effectiveness of these paratexts will in turn lead to our exploration of what I will label 'plastic paratexts', incorporating work from Kristen Warner (2017) to acknowledge the way in which paratexts can offer constructions of authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2012) in attempts to add validity to certain readings of texts. This will be a necessary intervention that will aid our understanding of how contemporary paratexts attempt to shape the narrative of a text, showing the various efforts to negotiate and game these paratextual battlegrounds.

This consideration of paratextual battlegrounds will demonstrate that traditional hierarchies of power are subject to challenge in contemporary media, and I will demonstrate this further through an assessment of how these challenges impact film reception. My second chapter shall amend Pierre Bourdieu's concept of field theory (1992) and consider how critical positioning has shifted in a contemporary context to adjust to the new roles that paratexts can play. Here we find it harder to place a critic in one single position in this field of practice, with online spaces amplifying the tension that exists between heteronomous and autonomous poles. Case studies will reveal that new figures in criticism can emerge from 'outsider' positions that assume more conventional positions of authority by acting as interlopers that reframe the field as we understand it. The need to provide a reassessment of the field will be further emphasised by the ability of paratextual battlegrounds to contest these hierarchies. This will be shown through the consideration of the film review aggregator site Rotten Tomatoes, and its ability to act as a 'para-paratext' that frames other paratexts (Hills, 2015a, p14). Assessing Rotten Tomatoes as a site that monitors the field will show that paratextual activity can amplify anxieties surrounding reception. This will provide a site through which issues of reception, fandom, authority and power all come to a head, showing exactly how contemporary reception has shifted due to the paratextual influence on these changing structures of power.

To apply these concepts, this explorative work shall investigate (though not compare) two contemporary film case studies in *Justice League* (Snyder, 2017) and *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018). I will here consider four illustrative paratexts that immediately outlines how contemporary paratextual activity operates in relation to my case studies. This type of blockbuster is a huge part of the contemporary film industry, with the financial and cultural impact playing important roles in the lives of studios, fans, audiences, and journalists (Flanagan, Livingstone, and McKenny, 2016). The strong emotional responses prompted by these films is immediately apparent here as a *Black Panther* fan on an online forum was hyperbolic in their praise of the film, stating that:

Feige (praise be) et al have built such an incredible machine over the last 10 years to produce such incredibly made stories that they can take someone like Ryan Coogler, who's only made two, albeit incredibly good, films and give him carte blanche to let him make an almost flawless iconic piece of Afrofuturistic science-fiction, with c-level superhero... we'll look back at the last year as pivotal in the MCU [Marvel Cinematic Universe]. These aren't just comic book movies anymore, they're something much more. (Reddit, 2018a)

This elevation of the film as 'something much more' did not go unnoticed, and through a similarly public channel, director Ryan Coogler posted an open letter on the Marvel Twitter account, commenting on the generally positive response to the film (Figure 1):



Figure 1- 'Wakanda Forever' (MarvelStudios, 2018)

In this producer-created paratext, Coogler expresses his gratitude, thanking fans, critics, and even those who posted about the film on social media for generating hype and moving the director to tears. Such a paratext attempts to both humanise Marvel and provide a voice for the producers that will bolster fan enthusiasm for the film. In invoking the critical reception, Coogler suggests that it was well regarded by the press, and though the film did indeed receive a generally positive response, a review by critic Armond White entitled '*Black Panther's* Circle of Hype' (2018) goes some way to provide a dissenting voice. Here White rejects the hype surrounding the film, actively opposing those who had praised it for its diversity, instead arguing that:

What motivates their [Marvel's] methods of racial exploitation are confirmed by this week's *Time* magazine: Its cover features Boseman, *Black Panther's* star, handsomely replacing *Time's* infamously racist, darkened O. J. cover [Figure 2 and Figure 3], to prove that the publication has abandoned journalism to become a social-justice-warrior pamphlet. Combining youth and black exploitation is an effective propaganda tactic when audiences don't recognize how they're being manipulated; they're simply flattered by it.



Figure 2- (Williams and Hirakawa, 2018)

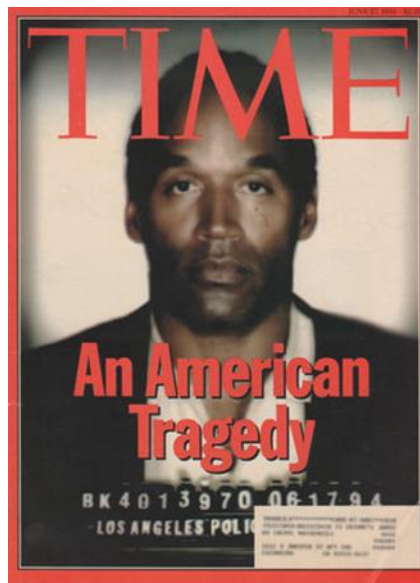


Figure 3- (Mahurin, 2018)

In this vitriolic review Armond White actively negotiates the politicisation of the film not simply through the text itself, *but also through its promotional paratexts*, likening the *Time* magazine cover to 'propaganda'. White criticises both the producer-led attempts to convey *Black Panther* as a progressive text, and the audience's culpability in being 'seduced' by such a piece of promotion. This shows that different paratexts are responding to each other as much as the text itself, and so we have a need for a more complex model of reception that acknowledges the multifaceted and ever-changing power dynamics of participatory culture, a term from Henry Jenkins that shows media consumers to be 'active, critically engaged, and creative', showing that 'fans are central to how culture operates' (Jenkins, 2006, p1). A consideration of a contrasting text through the response to the poorly received

Justice League will provide an idea of how participatory culture approaches a text with a predominantly negative reception.

Justice League can be considered an interesting contrast to the MCU and *Black Panther*, as a great deal of expectation was placed in *Justice League's* ability to change the fortunes of the critically struggling DCEU [DC Cinematic Universe], often perceived as a rival franchise to the MCU. This expectation was perhaps no more evident than when some DCEU fans created a petition to demand an alternative cut of *Justice League* be released. With 179,054 signatures, the petition noted the fans' issues with the theatrical cut and argued that 'As the box office and critical reception has shown, pandering to the masses is not a sound strategy' (Mata, 2017). Here we do indeed find a contrast to the reception of *Black Panther*, with an example of how fans are working to actively challenge, rather than support, the producers of a film. The petition demonstrates yet another paratextual channel through which film reception can play out, here showing the sometimes-antagonistic side of fan activism and offering another way in which paratextual battlegrounds operate.

These four pieces of reception – the online fan forum comment, Coogler's grateful open letter, White's negative review, and a DCEU fan's petition - are all indirectly informed by one another, creating the type of web of intertextuality alluded to earlier and establishing a range of power dynamics that can contribute to our assessment of the films in question. The dynamics briefly outlined here demonstrate that traditional figures of authority such as producers and professional critics are vulnerable to challenge by outsider sources that one would have previously assumed lacked such influence. This points to the value of paratextual battlegrounds in the internet age, capturing how participatory culture can challenge dominant positionings and provide an insight into the different desires of the many groups invested in a text. This explorative work will provide a necessary update to work by Jonathan Gray, and though it will not attempt a comparative analysis (as such an analysis is impossible to do in this short form study), I will use my case studies to assess the paratextual battlegrounds surrounding *Justice League* and *Black Panther*, allowing me to explore how the increasingly porous

nature of online spaces enable groups to challenge hierarchised positions of power. I will then continue this complication of traditional power relations through paratexts and apply it to a specific area of reception in film criticism. By reassessing this field of practice and updating Bourdieusian theory, I will further emphasise how contemporary media has been subject to a remediation of power that means we must attempt to map new positions in the field of criticism. By acknowledging that these shifts are occurring in contemporary media, I will be able to outline how and why certain paratextual activity occurs in film reception, valuable in our understanding of how groups operate in an online world. Before I begin to explore my case studies, I must firstly outline the prior knowledge and research that has been conducted in this field. This will allow me to prepare a theoretical framework through which I can consider my case studies, providing a foundation from which to produce relevant research surrounding paratexts and contemporary film reception.

LITERATURE REVIEW

My research will track the paratextual activity surrounding *Justice League* and *Black Panther* and to do so I will take cues from research into reception trajectory, considering how we are able to follow the reception of a text by both fans and critics. The critical reception of any text is of course informed by the surrounding paratexts that can shape our readings, immediately raising the notion of power in both the prefiguration and reception of a film as certain paratexts will prove to be more influential than others. Not only will I consider the ways in which producers seek to impose dominant narratives through such paratexts, but I will also assess how these are then subject to support or contestation from outside sources such as fans, allowing me to evaluate how groups engage with paratexts. It is consequently these areas surrounding critical reception, paratexts, fandom, and franchises that will be the main areas of exploration for my own research. By assessing these areas, I will be able to uncover the tension that exists in the relationship between fan, producer, and text. This will not only demonstrate the increasing value of fan activism, but also complicates our current understanding of paratexts, through this contestation challenging our understanding of the hierarchies of power that surround a film.

Paratexts and Reception Trajectory

Taking into consideration materials like reviews, press releases, and promotional materials ensures that my research will intimately deal with the concept of paratexts, established by Genette (1997) regarding literature, and describing anything that is not the main text itself. Genette applied this term to a book's cover or blurb and labelled these 'thresholds' that readers implicitly need to pass through on their way to the text (p2). These paratexts can function in several different ways, only one of which is attempting to control or shape other interpretations. The concept of paratexts has since been adopted by several academics beyond literature, with Gray's 2010 book *Show Sold Separately* a seminal text when applying the concept of paratexts to media. Here Gray praises paratexts for their creative contributions in creating an artistic aura (p83), and Frome (2013) shows how this is possible

through film reviews, describing reviews for *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Hand, 1937) a 'barely-veiled cribbing of Disney's press releases' (p463). This all indicates that paratexts have throughout history attempted to inform exactly how a text is read, yet we can approach the success of this with some scepticism. Gray's depiction of 'entryways' limits our understanding of how a text is consumed, and rather than operating as a closed-off entryway that has to be crossed, the form of paratexts in contemporary media surely rejects this image as we can consume many paratexts that actively conflict with each other. This is reinforced by Martin Barker (2017), who points to a 'fluidity in the life of paratexts' (p237) and suggests that nearly all 'encounters are mediated, pervaded and remade by paratextuality' (p238). This thesis shall therefore aim to complicate Gray's work, presenting paratexts as open sites through which the meaning of a text is subject to contestation.

This approach to Gray shows that our understanding of paratexts requires updating. This is encouraged anyway by Gray, who makes the case for the study of paratexts in the contemporary era, arguing that 'As paratexts, convergence, and overflow increasingly bring texts together... and as it therefore becomes increasingly difficult to study any one medium in isolation, paratextual study will become all the more important and all the more helpful' (2010, p221). This not only shows the necessity for paratextual study, but with online media ensuring that paratexts are more prevalent now than when Gray's book was first released, shows how I can incorporate new areas and channels of relevance. This will lead to a consideration of how the paratexts surrounding my two case studies engage with social media, a space vital in our reading of contemporary texts as 'digital paratexts continually shift and amplify the sites of interpretation with any given media text' (Gilmore, 2017, p249).

The relevance of paratexts to film is substantial, with Gray arguing that 'a large proportion of the paratextual world is commissioned into existence by Hollywood' (2010, p20), and so we must consider how these paratexts aim to inform our perceptions of the central text. In a paratext such as a review, we find authoritative critical voices attempting to act as 'reputational entrepreneurs' (Allen and

Lincoln, 2004, p871), and when determining how well a film will be received, Klinger (1989) notes that 'the values appearing to be completely external to a film – promotional values – penetrate the very formulation of content and style... the making of its "consumable" identity' (p9). These paratexts can often offer a greater attachment for fans than the 'text' itself, with Geraghty (2014), using the Hard Rock Café and suggesting that 'HRC fandom is not about the music played in the cafés and bars or the brand it promotes through the famous musical memorabilia on its walls, but rather it is about the physical ephemera that fans collect and the places and spaces they visit' (2014).

We consequently must acknowledge that paratexts can play a role in constructing this 'identity', managing hype and instilling certain expectations of a text. This of course suggests a tension as various groups play a role in the construction of this identity, with fandom, critics, and producers being intertwined through this shared practice. The agency of these various groups can be considered, and a discussion of Disney's *Song of the South* (Sperb, 2010) concluded that when fans opposed the dominant reading of the film (that of it containing racist content) then they were 'often found to privilege feeling over politics' (p32). This shows what Sperb labelled as 'fandom's own self-critical utopianism' (p45) and points to the idea that a fandom may often choose to ignore potential readings of a text if it threatens their affection for it. This provides some depth to our understanding of paratextual activity, showing the agency fans have in rejecting such dominant readings, and pointing to the ideological implications paratexts can have.

These ideological concerns are emphasised through recent research, with paratexts depicted as a 'signifier site of identity and power' (Johnson, 2014, p1). The work '#wheresrey? : Toys, spoilers and the gender politics of franchise paratexts' (Scott, 2017) reveals how the lack of representation for the main character in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (Abrams, 2015) in merchandising prompted a response from fans that in turn forced action from producers. This presents the idea that paratexts are not simply closed off entryways, but often act as prompts for further discussion and debate surrounding wider social causes. This also further emphasises the way in which these producer-

created paratexts can be critiqued and challenged by fans, showing the value of participatory culture in challenging a dominant reading. These ideas regarding the ability of participatory culture to challenge ideological readings will be considered further in Chapter One, as it is evident that paratexts 'are utilized by fans as both the justification and means for staging a broader critique of the gendered logics of media franchising' (Scott, 2017, p146). These ideas of ideology working through paratextual reception are perhaps most present in Martin Barker's *The Crash Controversy* (Barker, Arthurs, & Harindranath, 2001), exploring David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996), and how the '[Daily] Mail's account of the film became the dominant and defining account' (p12) in turn making the debate surrounding the film 'a much wider ideological project' (p14). Barker looked at hundreds of articles surrounding the film and found that the *Daily Mail's* negative campaign (presented as an 'external event' (p141) by the *Mail* itself), became a dominant feature of the film's reception. The influence of the *Daily Mail* was explored in interviews conducted by Barker, with many people's opposition linked to a 'moral concern' surrounding the *Daily Mail's* campaign, while those who were open to the assessing the film on its own terms found few moral concerns (p116). This suggests that paratextual campaigns sometimes offer distinctly different readings of a text that can influence a consumer.

The role of paratexts in the reception of a film can be tracked when considering the 'reception trajectory' and the way in which the various pieces of discourse surrounding a text all contribute to its meaning throughout its lifespan (Mathijs, 2005, p2). Mathijs' approach to *Daughters of Darkness* (Kumel, 1971) provides an understanding of how to assess reception trajectory, with an emphasis on how a film's publicity can differ depending on the channels through which it is being promoted, and how this in turn influences its eventual reception (p6). As my case studies will be assessed both pre-release and post-release, the idea that there is a chronology, or a narrative that develops even before a film's premiere is important to consider, and further useful examples of reception studies can be found in Thomas Austin's book *Hollywood, Hype and Audiences* (2002a), which focuses on the reception trajectories of *Basic Instinct* (Verhoeven, 1992), *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Coppola, 1992), and *Natural Born Killers* (Stone, 1994). Austin's various findings include the description of *Dracula* as a

'dispersible' text (p114), offering multiple entry points for the audience to appeal to a number of different tastes, and the way in which a film such as *Natural Born Killers* aimed to 'exploit the appeal of transgression' (p186) for the viewer, presenting the film as a 'site of ideological contestation' (p56). When Austin suggests that a 'balance must be struck in critical analysis between scrutiny of the complexities of actual viewers' diverse and socially situated engagements with popular film... and an awareness of how viewing strategies and supporting discourses are variously sought, (in)validated and hierarchized both within and beyond film texts' (p198), it reinforces the idea of placing these films in a wider social context, considering how the various responses interact with each other. I can extract Austin's exploration of contestation and apply it to my own case studies as an ideal opportunity for research into how audiences contest and remediate paratexts throughout the trajectory, reframing them to suit their own aims.

Film Criticism and Field Theory in Contemporary Reception

I have so far established how various types of paratext can complicate the reception of a text, and I must acknowledge that a key area of paratextual activity in film reception is film criticism. Contemporary paratexts have ushered in key debates around critical authority and consensus as film criticism in the contemporary world is of course unavoidably tied to digital media and the growth of aggregator sites such as Rotten Tomatoes. Academic work such as *The Permanent Crisis of Film Criticism – The Anxiety of Authority* (Frey, 2014) go to lengths to calm these anxieties and make the point that 'crisis and criticism have been connected literally since ancient times' (p20) and 'recurring themes show debates around criticism are nothing new' (p57). My research will therefore consider just how contemporary paratextual activity in film reception operates and has shifted in the age of online media, as both established critics and fan responses can often occupy the same spaces (such as social media), the same spaces I have shown to be malleable and open to contestation. Here I shall consider Bourdieu's work related to field theory (1993) as a key concept which essentially establishes the way in which figures in a field of practice occupy hierarchised positions depending on their accumulated capital. Bourdieu explains how there are various 'players' in a field of practice and how

these players engage with each other through a 'set of dominant power relations' (p14), arguing that 'no one enters a game to lose' (p8). This immediately establishes fields of practice as sites in which power dynamics are key to positioning and will therefore tie into my wider exploration of how conventional structures of power are challenged in contemporary paratexts. Bourdieu explains how there are several types of capital that contribute to one's positioning, with 'cultural capital' accumulated through knowledge and symbolic capital representative of 'prestige' (Bourdieu, 1993, p7). I shall here assess how some film critics accumulate and deploy these types of capital in various ways, establishing 'symbolic hierarchies' (1993, p48) that depict one's role in the field.

Bourdieu's depiction of capital can be criticised, and Lin (2002) suggests the importance of 'bridges in networks' (p27) that shows how capital may move across fields, providing a more fluid depiction that Matt Hills reinforces, describing how 'Bourdieu can be accused of excessively objectifying the 'fields' that he studies' (2005, P168). Similarly, Ross Garner (2016) shows that Bourdieu can be accused of simplifying positioning, as a tension can exist when attempting to position a figure in the field, using the term 'heteronomous autonomy' to describe the way someone may be pulled between the two poles. This shows that I must approach field theory with some reservations, acknowledging that the fluid state of contemporary paratextual battlegrounds means that positioning in a field is subject to more reassessment than before, and I shall therefore work to accommodate these potential new positionings.

This notion that there are clear hierarchical positions of authority in a field of practice will be complicated by the ways in which online media has increasingly muddied the distinction between the field of criticism and the involvement of outsider figures. Frey himself considers the idea that film promotion can now incorporate social media accounts of regular people rather than critics (p125), and through the alleged democratisation of film criticism suggests that there is a 'lack of critics with public persona or personal power' (p103), and that a site such as Rotten Tomatoes encourages a predictable consensus in its aggregation of film criticism (pp130-133). Questions can be raised over

how Rotten Tomatoes achieves this alleged democratisation, with the Vice President of the site (Jeff Voris) arguing that the site is 'incredibly layered', featuring 'snippets of dozens of individual reviews... links to full reviews... news articles and feature stories' (Barnes, 2017). This complicates our understanding of the role of Rotten Tomatoes, as though the site evidently produces much more than a single score of a film, it is the score that is the subject of so much debate and fixation. The debate surrounding consensus is tied to a wider issue in contemporary media, explored by Hanrahan (2013), who, focusing on music criticism, suggests there has been a 'shift from aesthetics to consensus as the basis of cultural judgement' (p74), and 'from popular culture to "popularity culture"' (pp78-79). This shift to consensus does not negate the value of the critic, however, and Frey argues that they offer the skill of 'liberating the reader by stimulating his or her creative and critical faculties' (p65). A.O. Scott argues that 'criticism is not a matter of technique or form so much as it is a matter of personality, of who you imagine is doing the talking' (2016, p159), suggesting there is still value in having a traditional figure of authority evaluating a text. The very presence of an aggregator site such as Rotten Tomatoes complicates this individual authority however, reducing the value of a group of critics to a single score. It is therefore important to reassess how the critic operates in this contemporary culture, attempting to reconcile the power they are associated with and the potential limitations that come with operating in these contentious online spaces.

I have therefore established that contemporary film reception is at an interesting moment, with traditional understandings of paratexts, authority, and reception all requiring new study to incorporate the role of contemporary media. I have shown that we can work to complicate Gray, suggesting that the role paratexts play in shaping the 'identity' of a text invites multiple parties to attempt to contest and challenge framings. This tension suggests that paratextual study should acknowledge the shifting nature of online media, and how this enables traditional structures of power to be challenged. To explore this in greater depth, I must consider the role of my case studies in contemporary film culture, assessing how franchises and fandom operate and how the relationship between fan and producers is developed, maintained, or contested. It is this relationship that will

further frame my own case studies, as concepts of fan power and participatory culture are vital when considering how the narrative surrounding a text is established.

Fandom and Franchises

My research will focus on fan engagement in an online context, as the ability to 'like', reply, create, and share content on social media increases the engagement one can have with a group of producers, fans, or paratexts. Jenkins, Ford, and Green's *Spreadable Media* (2013) further explores this concept, making the point that in the 'Web 2.0' era, the consumer has assumed more control, and yet through this engagement brands can still retain control of their text, as 'audiences will often police their own actions, calling out those who they feel damage the integrity of a platform' (p62). Jenkins therefore seems to be emphasising the value of collaboration between producer and fan, suggesting that 'their collective discussion and deliberations – and their active involvement in appraising and circulating content – are generative' (p176) and that there is therefore greater investment from a fan who now buys into a 'cultural economy which rewards their participation' (p294).

This is all to suggest that the once distant relationship between a fan and their chosen text is becoming more open and interactive, and that the use, engagement, and even creation of paratexts by fans is now one of the key ways in which we can also frame a text. Some fan's desire to engage and have their voice heard is what Hills (2015b) calls 're-performing expertise' (p361) and reveals how producers of texts (such as *Doctor Who* showrunner Steven Moffat) are often found to have drawn on fan expertise to incorporate ideas into the show. Hills suggests however that this kind of collaboration has not necessarily closed the gap between fan and producer, and that those instances of expertise are often isolated as the acts of 'Big Name Fans' (p372), potentially limiting the claims made by Jenkins et al in *Spreadable Media*. There is therefore a space in the debate between Jenkins and Hills that should allow for an investigation into the tension that exists between fan and producer in the framing and reframing of texts. The question arises regarding how 'influential' fans truly are over the narrative of a text, or just how much of this fan 'influence' is simply concessions by producers to maintain the

perception of strong producer-fan relationship, maintaining the producer's power over the dominant narrative. It is this tension that means I must consider the way in which franchises maintain these relationships with fans.

To consider how a franchise might establish an 'identity', I can consider work on branding, with Arvidsson (2005) emphasising the necessity of popularity, arguing, 'The goal of brand management becomes similar to that of everyday parliamentary politics: a good standing in the polls' (p90). These relations are of course sustained by a franchise's engagement with fans, explored by Murray (2004) regarding the promotion of *The Lord of the Rings* (Jackson, 2001, 2002, 2003) and further explained by Derek Johnson who notes that the key to a successful franchise is 'continuing relations' between producer and consumer (2013, p37). Arvidsson sheds light on how brands can maintain these relations and suggests that 'brand values build on qualities like attraction, association, loyalty and emotional or other subjective investments that lend themselves to measurement only with great difficulty' (2005, pp133-134). Such concepts have already been found in academia, and Hills (2012) coins the term 'fanagement' to describe the way in which producers of a text anticipate certain fan responses, and consciously create specific further texts as a way of preventing criticism, an attempt to 'protect brand value' (p425). This idea that paratexts and transmedia are often simply concerned with sustaining relations by protecting a brand's image must therefore be assessed in connection to my own case studies, acknowledging that a franchise's engagement with fans may often simply be an attempt to court favour in the knowledge that fans can reject what is considered inauthentic.

Despite the attempts of producers to exert the greatest influence over the perception of a text, we must remember that a fandom can challenge this perceived relationship through fan activism. Work by Lopez (2012) and Brown (2018) provides insight into how fans exert their own desires on texts. Lopez has focused on fan activism and protest in relation to race, and her work 'Fan Activists and the Politics of Race in *The Last Airbender*' (2012) finds how a fandom can begin a protest with the focus 'within the world of the text itself' (p2) but extend it, acting as a gateway for 'shifting conversations

from fictional texts to the realities that they impact and rely upon' (p13). This is similarly discussed in another Lopez work, 'Blogging While Angry...' (2014) which explores how contemporary blogging has provided a voice for marginalized communities. Equally, Brown's work on '#wheresrey...' (2017) demonstrates that a fandom's use of social media can 'express a resistance to dominant hegemonic culture' (p337), indicating that fan activism can be viewed as an attempt to push back against the power of producers and demand some accountability. In a similar vein, Chin and Hills (2008) consider how fans use 'performative enacting of restricted confession' (p262), becoming 'subcultural celebrities' that helps facilitate greater engagement from other fans. Lopez concludes her 2012 work by claiming it 'opens the door to investigations of other fandoms that have taken on social causes as a result of their fascination and frustration with their primary text' (p13). The outlined ability of fan activism here again emphasises how traditional power relations can be challenged through participatory culture, linking back to our consideration of the value of paratexts and proposing that through these paratexts fans have been afforded greater power via online spaces.

A potential limitation of fan activism is raised in 'Activating Activism' (2017), in which Johnson found that social media would still work to impose a dominant reading of texts, as 'Facebook can alternately push activist conversations about media franchising to the forefront of social media discussion of major entertainment industry franchises or suppress it in favour of celebratory promotional narratives preferred by studio marketers' (p148). Johnson noted however that, though Facebook attempted to present an official perspective (here described as 'Marvel's point of view' (p154)), in fact the user-created discussion in 'Trending Topics' 'focused reception of the film toward critical and activist perspectives beyond preferred promotional rhetoric' (p154). Even here we find that a fandom does indeed possess the ability to influence and challenge the dominant narrative imposed by producers. This fan activism can still be critiqued, and Bertha Chin (2014) notes that, though fan activism in the form of blogging can be beneficial for fans, it can be viewed as performing labour, creating a culture in which fans vie for status within their fandoms. This should therefore impose a limit on my consideration of just how agentic fans are, and though Chin maintains that 'fans are allegiant to the

text rather than the industry' (2014), I must retain some scepticism when considering how a fan's views may simply reinforce a producer's intentions.

In assessing how fans operate in an online world, it is also worth considering the various new ways in which fan activism manifests in other forms in an online context. Work from Böttcher, Woolley-Meza, and Brockmann (2017), and Beato (2014) regarding online petitions describes the value of 'rhetoric rather than strategy' (p1, 2014) and how the success of many petitions can hinge on 'social influence' (p14, 2017), revealing how fan activism can often be shaped by a well-crafted campaign. Petitioning has been labelled as low-commitment however and the entire culture of 'clicktivism' has been condemned as having a 'limited shelf life' (Huang et al, 2015). I can therefore argue for the value of online fan activism, as Drumbl (2012) notes that 'online fan cultures have been perhaps the most consistently vocal' (p1). Though the case can be made that online activism is unable to instigate tangible change, it does have value in providing insight into fan desire. The fact there is little research conducted into these petitions relating to film and television provides an incentive to further examine the potential for fans to challenge the power of producers through relatively new methods, and I will demonstrate this in my chapters (p47 AND p67).

Despite the apparent attempts by fans to engage with texts and prompt change, it is evident that comic-book franchises have historically followed a similar path of appeasement as outlined by Jenkins and Arvidsson, with Meehan (1991) noting that Warner Brothers' involvement in *Batman* (1989) was not an investment in one film, but an investment in 'infrastructure' (p54). This concept of establishing an 'infrastructure' has continued into a contemporary franchise relationship with fans, with Marvel displaying a 'remediation of fan desire' (Yockey, 2017, p3) in regard to casting that 'makes the act of consumption more intimate than it could be otherwise' (Yockey, 2017, pp13-14). There is some cynicism in these acts, as often a franchise's actions relating to areas like casting may be mere concessions that enforce the status quo while giving the illusion of power to the fandom (Taylor, 2017, pp288-290). This distance is similarly noted by Flanagan, Livingstone, and McKenney (2016), who

stress that it 'might still be a stretch to mark the MCU as participatory culture' (p182), reinforcing the idea of a fan/producer divide. Flanagan et al (2016) also outline how the Marvel franchise emphasises the 'promotion of a studio identity over an individual one' (p46), and that the producers show a keen awareness of how their texts will be framed (p91), as the hiring of specific directors 'reinforces Marvel's proposed identity as 'hip', attuned to current trends, and in possession of cultural capital' (p147). These attempts to control the 'identity' of a text can come under scrutiny from outside sources however, as Howell (2015) describes how publicity surrounding a film such as *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins, 2017) can emphasise the lack of experience in both producing and promoting more diverse superhero films. In these cases, Howell suggests it falls to subcultures such as smaller feminist sites to keep franchises in check and so the potential power of a fandom is stressed yet again in its ability to provide a counter to the producer's narrative.

Though a fandom can be admired for its ability to instigate discussion and provoke change, there is an antagonistic side to fans that must be considered when exploring how these power dynamics operate. Johnson (2007) discusses the idea of 'Fantagonism', and how fans battle for a 'unified interpretation' (p287) of a text, using the example of the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and its sixth season, in which a new showrunner (Marti Noxon, replacing Joss Whedon) was essentially rounded upon by the fandom, and that 'by calcifying perceptions that Noxon had illegitimately taken over and sullied the series, these fans worked to negate her authority in support of their own metatextual interests' (p293). This shows how a fandom can become critical of a text if it does not follow what they perceive to be an authentic reading, described as 'totemic nostalgia' by Proctor (2017a). These specific concepts of identity for a fandom are explored in relation to football in Theodoropoulou's 'The Anti-Fan within the Fan – Awe and Envy in Sports Fandom' (2007). Theodoropoulou views the intense rivalry between the football clubs Olympiakos and Panathnikos and how fans become 'anti-fans' simply in opposition to a rival, in part because 'the competence and skills of the two objects, which are in direct competition, are near equivalent... and it is this equivalence that makes the opposing fan object a threat to the fan's object and makes her/him an anti-fan' (p318). It is therefore not just an

antagonism inside a fandom that I will attempt to examine, but also the way in which opposing fandoms interact, a particularly useful concept considering my two selected case studies are a part of fandoms that are often perceived to be rivals (Proctor, 2017b, p340).

These concepts will encourage a further exploration of fan conflict, revealing how fans interact with brands and other fans in contemporary media. We can continue to apply Derek Johnson's idea of 'fantagonism' to this area, where he points to the 'centrality' of antagonism in fandom (2017, p369).

Johnson suggests that these acts play an important role in meaning making, arguing that:

'Ongoing struggles for discursive dominance constitute fandom as a hegemonic struggle over interpretation and evaluation through which relationships among fan, text, and producer are continually articulated, disarticulated, and rearticulated.' (2017, p370)

This shows that 'fantagonism' and the conflict and 'struggle' that arises from such acts helps to contribute to a text's meaning. Click (2019) states that the study of anti-fandom is 'even more important in the digital age' (p6) and Milner (2010) acknowledges this increased interaction in online spaces, suggesting that fans argue over text integrity, enacting several roles such as antagonistic/adversarial. Such examples of this are found in sports fandom (McCulloch, 2019 and Popp et al, 2016), in which the prominence of fan antagonism in online spaces suggests that communities have an ability to co-create brand meaning or reinforce relationships with a brand through such activity, with Popp et al pointing out that fans are often 'driven by rivalry' (2016, p23).

This certainly shows the value of fan conflict in our eventual reading of a film, with Ewing (2013) further emphasising that concepts of fan conflict are intensified in online spaces, a statement supported by Bothe (2014), who argues that 'fandoms are not homogenous places', painting a picture of competing interpretations of a text conflicting through these online sites (2014, p10). The value of these interactions is made evident by Jones (2019), who suggests that 'anti-fan commentary plays an

important role not only in enforcing taste but also in negotiating the meaning found [in the text] (p286), and this idea shall be useful in my own exploration of how fans interact in these online sites of contestation. Rather than simply viewing conflict as a negative, destructive trait, I shall instead remain aware that it can contribute to our overall understanding of a text. This will provide insight into the various differing readings of a film and how they may or may not coalesce, acknowledging that this will be a useful reflection of the abilities of the different paratexts I will explore.

What has emerged through this exploration of previous work is the shifting nature of contemporary reception, as various groups attempt to adjust to the way that online media invites a challenge to traditional figures of authority. Despite the general assumption that paratexts are successful in their ability to shape the identity of a text (Gray, 2010), acknowledging the role of fan activism shows that fans are in fact able to defy and negotiate these producer-led framings and exert some of their own power over the discourse surrounding a text. The case can be made therefore that a new wave of paratextual theory is required, one which takes the role of fan engagement more seriously, as the role of fan activism, particularly in an online context, should provide an opportunity to explore how established hierarchies of power (instilled by producers) are challenged and negotiated. This approach to paratexts further invites study into wider shifting power dynamics and suggests that our approach to film criticism and fan/producer relations must also acknowledge that dominant positionings are subject to challenges in this online world. I will therefore explore the tensions that exist between established authoritative figures and challengers in film criticism, using work by Bourdieu to assess how these shifts can be mapped. To thoroughly explore these areas, I must firstly outline the methods through which I will achieve these aims.

METHODOLOGY

A consideration of previous academic work has made it clear that to thoroughly develop my concept of paratextual battlegrounds I must assess contemporary reception through paratextual study. I will here outline the methods I shall use to conduct my research, using supporting work to guide how I will approach areas such as social media, participatory culture, and paratexts. There has been much paratextual research that has guided how I will approach this thesis, with research by Gray (2015) arguing that 'the paratext is always part of the text' (p230) and suggesting I must an approach paratexts surrounding my chosen films with a similar textual analysis that I would the film itself. This type of approach has been applied to paratexts in the past, with Martin *Barker's The Crash Controversy* (Barker, Arthurs, & Harindranath, 2001) exploring a range of paratexts surrounding David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996), tracking the discourse and assessing how the narratives surrounding the film were shaped through this reception. I can therefore see that paratextual study provides valuable insight into how groups attempt to shape the meanings of texts and provides a prompt for my research in a similar area, where I will assess online paratexts through channels of social media.

I have selected the two contemporary case studies of *Justice League* (released in the UK on 17th November 2017) and *Black Panther* (released in the UK on 12th February, 2018) for several reasons. It is of particular value that my two selected case studies are at different stages of chronology and success as part of their wider cinematic universes, with *Black Panther* the eighteenth entry in the well-established MCU, and *Justice League* the fifth entry in the critically struggling DCEU. This means that the two franchises are at separate points of development, with the 'identity' of the MCU seemingly fully constructed, while the DCEU is still finding its feet. This should provide an interesting point for comparison when I consider how producers, fans, and critics all negotiate the 'identity' of these franchises through their readings and reception. Previous work into superhero films revealed that a key part of the way superhero franchises operate was based on nurturing a relationship with their

fans (Flanagan, Livingstone and McKenney, 2016). This tied in to a wider understanding of how brands operate (Arvidsson, 2005) and suggested that using films from two large, recognisable franchises in the DCEU and MCU would provide useful data in exploring paratextual activity and the interactions that occur between various groups. I apply a similar approach to reception trajectory as Barker et al (2001) and Thomas Austin (2002a) yet applying these approaches to contemporary social media paratextual activity, and to the specific area of comic book films, will allow me to cover new ground. These examples of paratextual research employ time periods for the reception of a film when gathering data, and for the most part I will attempt to follow this approach, establishing a two-month window at either side of the UK release of each of my case studies when gathering data. I must acknowledge that reception does not begin and end at any set point however, and so I shall be willing to use additional resources if my data takes me beyond the established timeframe of my research. This will allow me to provide an accurate image of the fluid nature of reception, ensuring that my attempts to assess the paratextual activity surrounding these two films depicts this fact.

When categorising my findings in the data gathering stage, I will split them up into 'pre-release', 'post-release', and 'reviews', in theory allowing a narrative to emerge from this distinction as I will be able to track how responses differed at the various stages of a film's production. This applies a similar approach as Thomas Austin, who describes 'the assembly, marketing and reception of *Bram Stoker's Dracula*' (2002b) and so using a similar distinction will allow me to attempt to track shifts in reception clearly. Through a netnographic approach I will use a qualitative assessment of the data I collect, supported by Kozinets (2015) who described how qualitative techniques can 'help draw (or re-draw) the map of a new or rapidly changing terrain' and can also 'help identify what may be the most interesting constructs and relationships at work' (p55). As my look at existing literature has highlighted, I will be attempting to reassess and 're-draw' our understanding of paratextual study and field theory, meaning that a qualitative assessment will be the best way to thoroughly map out such theoretical changes.

To gather fan responses to the texts and understand how groups can engage with these paratexts through contemporary channels, I will use a range of sources, such as Twitter posts and comment sections of key news items, using hashtags and searches to find responses. The value of research into Twitter is made clear by Kozinets (2015), who suggests that in the age of Twitter it is 'virtually unlimited how many people one person can reach out towards' (p47). Recent research into activity on Twitter has shown it to be an area of great importance when assessing how groups interact with texts. Bay (2018) outlines how Twitter can be used as a channel through which they can directly express their feelings about a text to a producer due to the accessible nature of the site, be it positive or negative. Ahuja and Shakeel (2017) have also recently conducted research into Twitter users, describing how 'companies are increasingly using Twitter for brand engagement and visibility' and so I can apply this to film reception to assess how these paratexts might reflect a producer's aims. I will use symbolic netnography as defined by Kozinets (2015) to explore how interactions on Twitter contribute to our understanding of extratextual, i.e. paratextual narratives. When I gather data through Twitter, I will in part use features such as Twitter Moments which is created by Twitter as a way of grouping together a select number of tweets about a specific news item. This will be particularly useful in highlighting certain moments of a film's production that are deemed of interest, such as premieres and trailer releases. This shows the value of Twitter acting as an 'information distributor', helping the social spread of news (Kozinets, 2015, p36) and will be useful in providing an immediate way to assess a collection of tweets surrounding such pieces of news. Yet we can view this feature with some scepticism as it only showed a select number of tweets related to each news item. Work by Johnson (2017) has highlighted this potential issue, suggesting that social media sites like Facebook can attempt to support or suppress specific pieces of information, and so I will remain cautious of this when viewing Twitter Moments. Kozinets (2015) hints at the potential limitations of such areas of research, suggesting that 'Twitter tends to simplify so that we can see the basic structures' (p39), yet I can use this simplicity as an advantageous trait, showing an immediacy in fan response.

I will not just consider data from Twitter, as there is clear value in conducting research across platforms, with Kozinets (2015) making the case that ‘the social media space is complex and varied, with sites that range from the social to the informational, specific sites for specific purposes and interest, and particular sites targeted to the needs of particular groups... [W]e must be aware of this landscape as we seek to match our research interests to available sites’ (p17). I will therefore aim to assess this varied landscape by considering Reddit alongside Twitter. Weninger (2014) argues that ‘Reddit is beginning to influence the world in ways that both the mainstream media and research community do not yet fully understand. The Reddit community is able to bring a higher order of organization to online content and is changing the methods of discourse online’ (p173). It has been suggested that ‘Reddit’s large userbase provides a key advantage in supporting niche topics’ (Newell et al, 2016, p279) and so this suggests that Reddit encourages acts of fandom, and so researching Reddit will allow me to explore how fans respond to my selected case studies. A ‘subreddit’ is a way of dividing content based on topics, labelled ‘communities of interest’ (Hale and Grabe, 2018, p450). Hale and Grabe explored the subreddits focused on Hilary Clinton and Donald Trump, making the case that Reddit offered ‘a unique opportunity to identify how supporters and opponents verbally and visually presented Clinton and Trump, relatively isolated from supporters of the opposing candidate, and unobstructed by campaign handlers or media professionals’ (2018, p450). I will be able to take this approach as well, using Reddit as a site through which I can identify how fans present *Justice League* and *Black Panther*.

I will focus on two subreddits as sites of fan activity, with the ‘r/DC_Cinematic’ subreddit host to around 111,000 members, and the ‘r/marvelstudios’ subreddit host to around 512,000. As both subreddits focus on their respective franchises, this will be a useful space to gauge fan reception, particularly as posts are created throughout the production of every film in both franchises. Examples in these subreddits such as ‘*Guardians of the Galaxy* - Official Trailer #2 Discussion Thread’ and ‘*Black Panther* Trailer Hype Thread’ show that the subreddits act to monitor the trajectories of the films and so will aid my research as fans here are found to actively provide areas to discuss each aspect of a

film's release. Its description as a 'social content aggregator' (Newell et al, 2016, p280) suggests that I will be able to view what is perceived to be an 'aggregate' of fan interest, while 'The Evolution of Reddit' (Singer et al, 2014) acknowledges that Reddit has transformed itself into an increasingly self-referential community, this suggests there will be value in collecting data from Reddit as an alternative channel to Twitter. When conducting this research, I shall maintain an awareness of the ethical concerns associated with a study that will use social media posts as a key part of my thesis. Research by Bay (2018) highlights the importance of only using public posts, also protecting the identity of users, stating that 'only handles of subsequently deleted or suspended accounts are revealed in this paper' (p9). I will use this approach as well for both the Reddit and Twitter posts I collect, to respect the identities of social media users, though I shall not ask for permission to use the posts, as they will be available to access through public sites.

Through a desire to show how this updated image of contemporary paratextual activity impacts one specific area of reception, I will apply Bourdieu's field theory (Bourdieu, 1993) to case studies of film critics. By choosing three contemporary critics I will be able to map out three different positions in the contemporary field of film criticism. The critics I selected were all writing for different channels such as rogerebert.com, aintitcoolnews.com, and *The National Review*. Here we find a group of critics with different forms of capital. This will allow me to appropriately assess the various positionings Bourdieu alludes to, considering the three critics I have selected work for a range of channels from a site such as *The National Review* to *Ain't It Cool News*. These positionings will be reinforced by the fact that academic works exist surrounding these proposed case studies (Ebert, 2009; Salmon, 2010; Gonzalez and Molloy, 2017) and will aid me as the perceptions of these critics will inform the positioning they assume, reflecting their social and symbolic capital. I will attempt to position them based on Bourdieu's work (1993), however there are issues with this approach. I must consider the potential ambiguities of my case studies and their positionings, acknowledging that there may not be one clear point on which I can place the critics. This will complicate my application of Bourdieu's approach but

in turn may aid my research in allowing me to provide a more fluid depiction of contemporary reception.

I shall use the methods outlined here to aid my understanding of how contemporary paratexts operate and will begin in my first chapter with a consideration of how paratexts attempt to shape the dominant readings of my case study franchises and texts. This will start to portray how the reception of a text is informed by paratextual activity and the interactions of various groups will begin to set up my depiction of paratextual battlegrounds.

1 - FROM THRESHOLDS TO BATTLEFIELDS: PARATEXTS IN CONTEMPORARY RECEPTION

Jonathan Gray explores the relationship between fan and paratext, noting that 'Fan creativity can work as a powerful in media res paratext, grabbing a story or text in midstream...' (2010, p146). This shows that fans are not simply passive and have the potential to play a very active role in the ultimate reception of a text through their own creativity, a trait now particularly amplified due to the accessible contemporary spaces provided by social media. By assessing a diverse range of paratexts (such as merchandise and social media posts) surrounding the trajectory of both *Justice League* (Snyder, 2017) and *Black Panther* (Coogler, 2018), considering what readings these paratexts attempt to impose and how these are then engaged with by an audience, an image will emerge of how paratexts can act as a battleground in the attempt to establish readings of a particular text. While Gray suggests that 'paratexts condition our entrance to texts... setting the terms of our "faith" in subsequent transubstantiation' (2010, p26) this chapter shall show that paratexts are open to critique and debate, sites through which the reading of a text does not come fully-formed but undergoes a process of negotiation by multiple parties. The fan creativity alluded to by Gray shall play a key role in this ability to challenge assumed dominant readings and so this chapter shall aim to establish what kind of relationship exists between fan and producer in a contemporary online context, and how the ability of fans to interact with producers and create their own paratexts complicates our understanding of these power dynamics.

Stuart Hall's Encoding / Decoding model (Hall, 1999) provides insight into how various interpretations of paratexts differ, explaining how producers attempt to encode dominant readings of texts that are then decoded through negotiated readings by consumers. This can be critiqued for its simplistic approach however by using the likes of Iser (1978), presenting the idea that there is a more complex dialogue between reader and text that takes place. I will therefore deviate from the often text-centric approach of Hall, and instead consider the model in relation to audiences and paratexts, with a focus

on how producers can respond to this decoding done by fans, a move which adds greater depth to Hall's approach. In using this understanding of reception, I will further argue that paratextual trajectories follow expected patterns of encoding by producers to instil a dominant reading, and yet the very presence of fans in an online space complicates matters, creating these paratextual battlegrounds in which the tension between fan and producer in the attempt to dictate the narrative surrounding a text is amplified. These readings are further complicated by the way in which user-created paratexts can be remediated depending on the message conveyed, utilising the alleged authenticity of fandoms to enrich the already proposed dominant readings of the films.

This concept of 'authenticity' will here be used as explained by Sarah Banet-Weiser (2012) who notes that 'building a brand is about building an affective, authentic relationship with a consumer, one based... on the accumulation of memories, emotions, personal narratives, and expectations' (p8). The value placed on 'authenticity' will be coupled with Kristen Warner's concept of 'plastic representation' (2017) and I will introduce the term 'plastic paratext' as a means of acknowledging the ways in which some paratexts that attempt to impose a specific reading of a text, featuring the same 'hollowness' Warner alludes to (2017) through displays of cultural capital in tandem with the ability of paratextual battlegrounds to disrupt dominant readings. Though Banet-Weiser suggests authenticity is in the hands of producers, Warner shows how these attempts can fail and so I will attempt to show how these appeals to authenticity may be produced, negotiated or re-produced by various groups. This chapter shall therefore present paratexts as a site in which the aims of both fans and producer clash. The introduction of paratextual battlegrounds will explore such sites and assess the effectiveness of fan activism in challenging producer power. I will initially consider the power relations involved in framing a text, assessing how producers attempt to instil dominant readings, and revealing how the narrative surrounding a film's release begins to be shaped.

Legitimizing Blockbusters

When we consider the influence of producers in establishing dominant readings through paratexts, it must be noted that this has many historical precedents, with it being long established that the reception of texts is influenced by the desires of producers. This is evidenced in the critical reception of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937), as Jonathan Frome notes that many reviews were ‘barely-veiled cribbing of Disney’s press releases’ (2015, p463). These attempted dominant readings do not just emerge in reviews however, but are also found in the ‘prefiguration’ of a text, that is, the ‘ideas and understandings that circulate around a text before it becomes available to consume’ (Michelle, Davis, Hardy, Hight, 2016, p66), often including (but not restricted to) merchandising, press releases and magazines (Barker & Mathijs, 2012, p 666). This notion of prefiguration can be likened to agenda setting, outlined by McCombs and Shaw (1972) as a situation where ‘the mass media force attention to certain issues... They are constantly presenting objects suggesting what individuals in the mass should think about, know about, have feelings about’ (p177), using the example of political campaigns to demonstrate that the public knowledge of issues is often determined by just how much emphasis the media put on certain topics (p176). As McCombs and Shaw were writing in 1972, the concept of agenda setting has become more vulnerable to resistance over time, with Meraz (2009) indicating that the growth of online media has found a type of democratisation in the spread of information, with ‘citizen media’ gaining greater control than in previous eras (p701).

I will therefore assess the prefiguration of both *Justice League* and *Black Panther* through producer’s framing, considering how the trajectories of the two films develop as producers attempt to impose dominant readings through such prefiguration and agenda setting. I must acknowledge the power and reach of such framing when I view a popular website such as vulture.com (with a large online following - around 448,000 Twitter followers and 677,565 likes on Facebook). The website’s coverage of both *Black Panther* and *Justice League* reveals that, though it is not an ‘official’ (i.e. studio-led) channel

attempting to promote the films, the language used by the writers is undoubtedly promotional in tone. Both cases of prefiguration offer clear examples of brand relations as outlined by Arvidsson (2005), and a strong example of this can be found in a pre-release article in *Vulture* from September 2017 entitled 'DC Rethinks Its Universe' in which DC's chief creative officer Geoff Johns attempts to stress how past films in the DCEU such as *Man of Steel* (Snyder, 2013) had featured the 'DC Entertainment branding, but largely without its fingerprints' (Riseman, 2017). This suggests that, due to their poor critical reception, previous entries in the DCEU were now deemed to have been executed poorly, and Warner Bros. executive Jon Berg goes on to stress that future films would emphasise 'Heart, heroics, humanity, and humor' (Riseman, 2017). The agenda setting here is evident, as the article essentially acts as a mouthpiece for the producers behind the DCEU, with an aim to make readers conscious that the creatives behind future films in the franchise are actively responding to criticisms. Many further examples of this prefiguration (see Schilling, 2017, and White, 2017) can be found that include a similar focus on the lightened tone of *Justice League*, suggesting that there was indeed a clear dominant reading that emerged in the film's pre-release stage, stressing how the upcoming release of *Justice League* would see a change in tone from prior DCEU entries.

In contrast, due to the great success of previous entries in the franchise, a preview piece for *Black Panther* from *vulture.com* had no need to attempt to reinvigorate the image of the MCU. Instead, 'Let Kevin Feige Get You Even More Hyped for *Black Panther*' (Buchanan, 2017) implies that the reader is already excited about the film and is solely focused on praising *Black Panther*, stressing its inclusivity and attempts at positive representation:

the thing that had Feige [President of Marvel Studios] most excited about *Black Panther* was the opportunity to mix things up with Marvel's 18th movie. "It's really exciting that this part of the universe is so unbelievably diverse and looks unlike any of the other films that we've made," he said. "The cast looks different than any of the other casts that we've had. Both in front of and behind the camera, it's almost entirely people of color, which I think is a special,

important thing, and one of the reasons the film will be unique and as great as I think it's going to be." (Buchanan, 2017)

This shows that a key desired reading of the film is to acknowledge the 'authentic' representation of African culture, an opinion further cemented by the film's director in other outlets such as *Empire* magazine, in which it is explained that 'Before signing on [Ryan] Coogler made it very clear to both Kevin Feige and Nate Moore [*Black Panther* producer] that he would need to go to Africa before he could start writing' (*Empire*, 2018, p70). Yet again then, agenda setting occurs as Feige and Coogler use more traditional forms of media as an outlet for prefiguration, attempting to position the film as a landmark in comic-book movie representation. This follows a path outlined by Flanagan, Livingstone, and McKenney in *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon* (2016), who predicted that the eventual release of *Black Panther* would present 'genuine efforts towards diversity in the schedules [and] show an alert response to risk' (p200). It is further argued that though 'the introduction of *Black Panther* does not guarantee radicalism, [it] does suggest ways of exploring black characters with premises that are not dependent on white and American narratives', providing the first 'black, leading, mainstream superheroes for the cinema' (p203). This is clearly the dominant reading the producers of *Black Panther* are attempting to impose, and further pre-release rhetoric from vulture.com emphasises this in a much more explicit way, with production news paired with headlines such as 'New *Black Panther* Trailer: We're Rooting for Everybody Black' (Harris, 2017) and social media posts from *Vulture* labelling the soundtrack 'blackity-black' (*Vulture*, 2018). This is all to cement the concept of difference and diversity in further discussions surrounding *Black Panther* and attempts to place the film very clearly in a progressive ideological position for an audience to consume.

What emerges from both pre-release framings is the desire to present each film as an atypical blockbuster, with *Justice League* presented as a departure from the tone of the previous DCEU entries, while *Black Panther* is depicted as making strides in representation, becoming more inclusive than past MCU entries. This would eventually inform the ensuing reception of the films, with the generally

unfavourable critical reception to *Justice League* featuring a recurring use of the MCU as a point of comparison, with some arguing that 'DC's attempt at building a shared cinematic universe was contextualized in relation to Marvel Studios from the start.' (Adlakha, 2017). Others argued that 'the relative failure of *Justice League* can partially be chalked up to it "just" being a conventional superhero actioner' (Mendelson, 2017), showing how *Justice League* was evaluated not only in response to its own prefiguration, but also in comparison to other superhero films that were framed, in contrast, as ground-breaking and subverting convention.

This is very much a continuation of how Hills (2003) notes that we become aware of the blockbuster 'only via marketing discourses that construct, define, and reiterate it as such, thereby bidding for cultural status', constructed 'through discursive and extra-textual practices' (pp179-180). In this context I can reframe the argument found in *Legitimizing Television* (2012), applying Newman and Levine's idea that certain types of television are elevated to a greater level of prestige and that, 'for some kinds of television to be consecrated as art, other kinds must be confirmed in inadequacy. New is elevated over old, active over passive, class over mass, masculine over feminine' (Newman and Levine, 2012, p5). It becomes apparent therefore that producers go through the act of 'legitimizing blockbusters' in their encoded and widely re-circulated pre-release agenda setting, attempting to present their films as breaking new ground, but, certainly in the case of *Justice League*, at the expense of previous entries in their own franchises. This suggests that a potential way for a blockbuster to generate hype is to become distinguished from other blockbusters and to devalue prior entries in the process, both adding brand value and positing brand distinction. Though these are the dominant readings producers are attempting to impose, I have established that the influence of these producer-led paratexts can be questioned. The entrance of fan negotiated readings muddies the narratives surrounding the two texts, as these dominant readings are offered up to be resisted, accepted or negotiated in various ways through paratextual battlegrounds. It is evident that through prefiguration, producers work to impose an ideological framing that will establish the dominant narrative surrounding a text, yet I must consider how such acts are carried out. The ensuing discussion of plastic

paratexts will reveal how these producer-led paratexts are contested, with constructs of authenticity utilised by fans in attempts to influence the narrative surrounding a text.

Plastic Paratexts: Constructions of Authenticity

Though a concept of difference was stressed throughout the prefiguration of *Black Panther* and *Justice League*, that is not to say that this form of agenda setting is at all indicative of how the films were received, or that the attempted dominant readings are at all reflective of the ensuing discourse. In the case of *Black Panther* particularly, I must retain some scepticism when assessing how ideas of representation are conveyed, and the concept of 'authenticity' can be challenged when I consider Kristen Warner's concept of 'plastic representation' (2017). Warner argues that diversity is often simply used as a tool of tokenism, suggesting that we are in an age in which 'any representation that includes a Person of Color is automatically a sign of success and progress', in turn ensuring that 'images in the era of representation matters become hollowed, malleable signs with artificial origins'. Warner herself uses the example of Jay-Z's *Moonlight* music video (Yang, 2017), in which a scene from *Friends* is re-enacted with an all-black cast, indicating that:

Swapping in and out racial groups with little adjustment to the parts themselves retains the original work as the primary driver and as a result marks the changes as superficial. The original work maintains its universality in this instance by proving that "anyone" can be a member of the *Friends* cast. As a consequence, the performances feel like hollow experiments produced in a laboratory; they feel plastic.

Warner is therefore suggesting that attempts to provide progressive representation through the mere inclusion of visual difference is in fact problematic via its superficiality (hence the claims of hollowness). Further examples of plastic representation are outlined by Warner in the case of FX President John Landgraf, who in 2016 announced plans to promote greater diversity by encouraging the hiring of directors of colour and white women. Warner addresses this with cynicism, noting that the freelance nature of television directors makes such moves easier and acts as a 'flattening directors

of color into markers of quantifiable gains ... [rendering] diversity as an artificial additive and not a substantive contribution'. We can view this as a strong critique of the producers in charge of representation in the media, suggesting that current attempts at diversity are merely modest concessions and that 'any meaningful progress is curbed; instead, the goal posts of expectation are moved to more comfortable places for those in power who can make those changes' (Warner, 2017). The plasticity Warner alludes to indicates the inability of producers to provide depth to representation, instead preferring to focus on showing a certain amount of visible diversity, and this is, to a degree, the same way in which the producers of *Black Panther* were found to operate. Quotes found in the prefiguration of *Black Panther* are at pains to stress how progressive the film is, such as: 'the most exciting thing about the way *Black Panther* looks is who it presents as powerful. At a time where too many superhero movies are led by blandly handsome white men named Chris, *Black Panther* celebrates a cast made up almost exclusively of dark-skinned black actors, most of whom rarely get to headline a live-action movie of this size' (Buchanan, 2017). This indicates that through certain casting decisions, the producers had already achieved their aim of imposing this progressive dominant reading.

Warner (2017) makes it clear that in contemporary media there is a 'danger of valuing quantity more than dimension, a dynamic that epitomizes the artificiality of plastic representation', and it is apparent that this idea of artificial authenticity in the media as a type of placation is not solely confined to the issue of diversity. As Warner alludes to the presence of this plasticity elsewhere in media, we should also look to apply these concepts beyond representation and to the framing of other issues. The key trait of 'hollowness' found in plastic representation appears to work with a level of cultural capital that provides the text with a supposed authenticity. We can therefore take Warner's notion of 'plasticity' and apply it to the paratexts surrounding my case studies of *Justice League* and *Black Panther*, suggesting that many paratexts in contemporary media introduce readings that display the same traits of hollow authenticity in the hopes of influencing the dominant reading. We must therefore introduce the term plastic paratext to describe how some paratexts operate using Warner's

concepts in contemporary media, using the influence of cultural capital (that is often associated with the creator of the paratext) to inform the reading of a text and influence meaning making.

We will find examples of plastic paratexts throughout my own case studies, with one example finding that a fan-produced paratext is able to provoke a response from members of production by critiquing a pre-release piece of promotional material, with the criticism validated by appearing to appeal to some authentic fan-approved version of a text (supported by the capital provided by the role of a 'fan' creating the paratext) (Twitter, 2017). The ensuing response to the plastic paratext points to the way in which they are seen as influential due to the value of cultural capital, influencing readings by presenting their critical response as an appeal for authenticity. This is to suggest that plastic paratexts are not solely related to representation, and instead depict how both fan and producer can use the provocative abilities of paratextual battlegrounds to challenge the dominant readings of a text, instil meaning and disrupting traditional hierarchies of power through these appeals to authenticity. We should therefore acknowledge the paratextual battlegrounds depicted in this thesis contain multiple examples of plastic paratexts that utilise cultural capital to contribute to the negotiated readings and conflict that occurs around *Justice League* and *Black Panther*.

After the release of the two films, the negotiated readings of both *Black Panther* and *Justice League* became prominent, with fans challenging paratexts on the lines established by earlier dominant readings. The first example of a plastic paratext was found as fans critiqued some of *Black Panther's* merchandise on Twitter, complaining that 'the skin tone on the pin should be much darker and match that of both the character of T'Challa and the actor portraying him, Chadwick Boseman.' (Alexander, 2018), showing that, though attempts to frame the film in terms of its racial representation were succeeding, this in turn prompted fans to hold those readings to account. This shows that debates surrounding the film's representation extend beyond the film itself and into the critique of paratexts. Criticisms here align closely with the arguments presented by Warner, in that the paratext is challenged on the grounds of a successful textual depiction of race. The ability of fans to critique a

film’s representation through the skin tones of its merchandise could demonstrates the same hollowness that Warner alludes to, as if holding producers to account for poor merchandise then ensures that the film itself will be held up as a model of positive representation.

This shows that plastic paratexts can act as a way of understanding paratextual battlegrounds, depicting how the construction of certain paratexts encourages greater critique of dominant readings by using the influence of specific forms of cultural capital. Plastic paratexts are not confined to areas of racial representation however, and a further example can be found in a promotional image for *Justice League* that was critiqued for being a ‘step backwards’ in its choice of costume for the Amazonian women (Twitter, 2017a):



Figure 4- (Twitter, 2017)



Figure 5- (Jo, 2017)

The post was well publicised, with around 21,000 retweets, and prompted a response from a member of the *Justice League* cast as actress Samantha Jo tweeted a reaction to the image, stressing that the costume left her ‘overjoyed with the mobility I had and NEEDED to complete the moves asked of me’ (SamWJo, 2017). Jo attempted to negotiate the criticisms, stating ‘I just want to be sure we don’t jump to conclusions. For me, the *Justice League* folks are some of the few who I felt and feel are on our side

of the movement'. I can therefore argue that the plastic paratext here is the tweet comparing images of *Wonder Woman* and *Justice League*, with the plasticity evident as it speaks to a desire to condemn the latter film's depiction of women before it had even been released. This furthermore shows that social media is an effective channel for such paratextual battlegrounds to emerge, enabling posts to be shared tens of thousands of times and prompting an actual response from a member of production. This again demonstrates that though plastic paratexts by their very nature imbue a hollowness, they are often constructed with a strong appeal to a sense of authenticity that in turn forces an acknowledgment from producers of these ideological critiques. The way in which this paratextual battleground challenges a reading of the film reveals a tension between traditional, studio-led paratexts and these plastic paratexts which often utilise cultural capital to counter dominant readings and producer power.

This construction of an authentic response to a film through paratextual battlegrounds is further complicated when we consider that the posts of users can become co-opted into a wider campaign, evidenced clearly in the case of *Black Panther*, when a contributor for the site blackgirlnerds.com created the hashtag #WhatBlackPantherMeansToMe. Prompting wider engagement on Twitter and encouraging other users to post their own responses of how the film affected them personally (Figure 6), the large number of posts featuring this hashtag, coupled with the thousands of times some of the posts were shared, all suggests that the campaign was successful at encouraging users to engage with *Black Panther* on a personal level. The campaign eventually featured as a Twitter Moment under the headline 'If you think *Black Panther* is "just a movie," you're wrong' (Twitter Moments, 2018), with posts using phrases such as 'REPRESENTATION MATTERS' (Twitter, 2018a) and many stressing the impact the film would have on younger generations, with one stating, 'It means my black niece gets to see strong black women doing heroic things. It means she gets to see herself up on the screen. It's everything. I can't wait for her to see it.' (Twitter, 2018b). Here, what began as a fan-created paratext with an aim to encourage responses from fans through the accessible site of Twitter (coupled with an established hashtag for even easier access) almost becomes another piece of promotion for the film.

The campaign reinforces the dominant reading established through the producer's prefiguration, praising concepts of representation and difference, yet this time supported by the sense of authenticity that is attributed to a fan-created post.



Figure 6- (BlackGirlNerds, 2018)

Plastic paratexts therefore help us consider the idea that paratexts often aim to instil a reading of a text based on the symbolic capital associated with the creator of the paratext. Here fan-created paratexts can act as powerful support or opposition to producer-led paratexts, due to the power associated with an authentic response. The #WhatBlackPantherMeansToMe campaign demonstrates that these plastic paratexts can indeed be adopted as part of a wider campaign that attracts involvement from members of the public and, even though the campaign here supported the themes of difference and representation established by producer-led paratexts, the strength associated with a fan's authentic response provided the campaign with that much more weight. This shows the value of a paratext originating from a seemingly 'authentic' source, allowing fans to view what is essentially

promotion for the film as an extension of their own feelings. This concept of plastic paratexts complicates work from Lopez (2012, 2014), who describes how one of the key functions of fan activism through paratexts is allowing a film to become a conduit for wider social causes, often in the form of protests. This does indeed show how audiences can impose ideological messages onto paratexts, yet if we consider the way in which a campaign in a public site such as Twitter can often work to reinforce a producer's dominant readings, we find that an opportunity exists to either accept or reject these readings in a very vocal manner. By co-opting fan-created paratexts, it does appear that brands are conceding some power to the fans, yet if the fan-created paratexts simply reinforce producer-led readings we must question the effectiveness of such acts of fandom.

It is very clear that the concept of authenticity is used as a type of distinction, allowing brands to co-opt fan-created paratexts and validate the already established concept of their brand. This is an extension of Banet-Weiser's argument, who, when using Arvidsson, describes how 'Brands engage with consumers in a context of "freedom", whereby consumers are expected to have a say in the coproduction of brands' (2012, p47). Such appeals to the dominant narrative through these plastic paratexts essentially act to reinforce the producer's prefiguration, yet I must also question the effectiveness of such acts. This chapter's ensuing look at paratextual battlegrounds will reveal that attempts to influence a film's reception can also turn antagonistic. Though Gray argued that 'each paratext acts like an airlock to acclimatize us to a certain text, and it demands or suggests certain reading strategies' (2010, p26), the multiple entryways to a text presented here will complicate Gray's argument, presenting paratexts as less of an 'airlock' and more as a battleground that provides many ways to approach a text.

Mapping Paratextual Battlegrounds

I have established that both fans and producers utilise online media to create and engage with paratexts that frame films in multiple ways but these paratexts are not solely 'progressive' acts of fandom (such as the #WhatBlackPantherMeansToMe campaign) and can in fact often emerge as an

antagonistic force. Proctor argues that 'totemic nostalgia' is a type of 'fan perfectionism... centred on an affective relationship with a fan object' (2017a, p1121), suggesting that these passionate ties to a text are often the reason for a fan's vocal defence of what is perceived to be an authentic reading of a text. I can use these ideas to explore how and why fans mobilise and critique the dominant readings of a film, with the fixation on the authentic a clear continuation from our exploration of plastic paratexts. I must therefore outline the concept of paratextual battlegrounds as sites in which these fan anxieties can play out, where numerous attempted readings compete to dictate the narrative surrounding a text.

It is unsurprising that controversies arose surrounding *Justice League*, as a troubled pre-production saw numerous issues publicised, with director Zack Snyder replaced by Joss Whedon, concerns surrounding the film's runtime, and news emerging of how Superman actor Henry Cavill was contractually obligated to keep a moustache for another film (that would therefore need to be removed through special effects). As these various pieces of news emerged, fans began to critique the film on social media. They were particularly concerned about the change of director, with many worried that the incoming Whedon would compromise Snyder's vision for the DCEU, viewing it as a departure from the intended direction of the franchise. Social media was a key channel for fans to express their grievances and Whedon, with his notable Twitter presence, was an accessible figure for fans to engage with. This fan response manifested in a particularly vitriolic fashion when Whedon was found to 'like' a tweet that criticised the *Justice League* villain, Steppenwolf (Gonzalez, 2017). Reactions to this act were heavily critical of Whedon, with replies including:

.@joss You are absolutely repulsive. How dare you even like this tweet?
Your fingerprints are all over this film & you have yet to voice out any kind of support for it.
You are despicable & you have singlehandedly ruined @ZackSnyder's #JusticeLeague.'
(Twitter, 2017b)

Hey @joss. It's one thing to not promote a film you completed. But to have the lack of decency & the unmitigated gall to like tweets trashing a film that YOU took over for Zack in his time of mourning is disgusting. If you don't like it, then we all rather have you simply shut up (Twitter, 2017c)

Fuck off, even after Snyder trusted you to take over *Justice League* you decided to fire Junkie XL, reshoot unnecessary scenes, make the worst CGI in a cb [comic book] movie, promote Thor ragnarok more than JL, and now this. Your wife was right about you. You are a piece of shit (Twitter, 2017d)

This is all to suggest that fans are more than willing to using the accessible spaces of social media in an antagonistic way, to lambast the producers for appearing to present a 'non-totemic' attitude to a text they are involved with (Proctor, 2017a, p1121). These examples of toxic, antagonistic fandom play out on the public site of Twitter, an easily accessible space for fans to engage with producers, and the fact that the subject of fan's critique is a director's lack of perceived loyalty to a franchise again suggests that ultimately fan's fidelity is to an 'authentic' approach to their text. The fact that fan responses to producers often become chaotic and critical goes some way to suggest that, though social media can provide the opportunity for a more accessible site for fan activism, there is often little depth to the discussion generated, and in turn a lack of action stemming from such acts. This is a notable point when considering the 'plastic' nature of many posts, and whether the posts on social media are created with the intention of prompting any change or are instead simply posted with the intention of proving one's own 'authentic' fandom.

Further examples of online activism showed that this desire to present an authentic version of the text and contest producer's framings was not just confined to challenging the pre-production readings of the text, but also saw attempts to massively alter the readings of the text even after *Justice League's* theatrical release. The aforementioned pre-release debate surrounding Whedon played an evident role in a section of the DCEU fandom's creation of a petition entitled 'Petitioning Warner Bros - Zack

Snyder's Director's Cut and Tom Holkenborg's (Junkie XL) Score for Home Release', stating in the description:

Justice League has been met with the dismay of critics, fans and most importantly, the alienation of its original fan base. Fans were treated to a *Justice League* that was only Zack Snyder's film in name but not in quality... Superman seemed to have been completely shifted in Whedon's reshoots. This is evidenced by the poor job of removing Henry Cavill's mustache and a complete shift in personality. This leads to the conclusion that most of Zack's footage for Superman was reshot by Whedon... All of this can be repaired if Warner Bros. releases a director's cut of *Justice League* that adheres to Zack Snyder's vision, Chris Terrio's script and Junkie XL's tone. (Mata, 2017)

The petition, created by fan Roberto Mata, had the aim of amassing one million signatures and, though the petition has not reached that figure, a total number of 177,771 signatures at the time of writing shows, much like the case of *Black Panther*, that the discourse surrounding *Justice League* in the pre-release stage framed the film's reception by fans in the post-release stage. The creation of this provocative, antagonistic paratext shows how a paratext can actively work to counter the dominant reading of a text. Though the effectiveness of channels such as change.org is seemingly limited when deployed in an antagonistic way, there is no doubt that the creation of these online paratexts provides a strong indicator of fan anxieties throughout the release of a film, suggesting that the poor critical reception to *Justice League* led to the desire from fans to rectify such a response. The previously established 'enemy' figure of Joss Whedon was a target that allowed fans to attempt to emphasise their superior expertise of the DCEU, shown here in their belief that a more authentic, 'Snyder Cut' of *Justice League* existed and that fandom has a responsibility to shepherd such a version into release. In a potential attempt to improve relations and engage with fans directly, a Q&A on the r/DC_Cinematic subreddit with a *Wonder Woman* VFX artist was created, yet this was also met with a hostile reception from many users. The artist subsequently posted '90% of messages I got were pretty

abusive, and I think sadly, for the most part, this sub-reddit is a pretty hostile, adolescent community. Hope the majority of you grow up a bit' (Telegraph Reporters, 2017). I can consider this interaction to be indicative of the way in which paratexts, in attempting to provide a platform for fans to engage with their favoured texts, can often simply encourage a destructive response as fans jump at the opportunity to try and hold producers to account for perceived errors.

What emerges, then, is the interesting role of producer-created paratexts. Though the dominant readings depicted earlier were often rejected and negotiated, they often helped frame oppositional responses, with fans entering these paratextual battlegrounds to actively disrupt the producer-led readings and exert their own authority, often through the display of acts of 'authentic' fandom. This need not be presented as a wholly negative, antagonistic trait however, and it has been established by Brown (2018) that fandoms can engage with texts in spaces such as Twitter to bring marginalised issues (such as diverse representation) to the fore, with Brown arguing that 'social media has been embraced and leveraged by female fans who may otherwise have felt somewhat marginalised' (p3). This is similarly found in the case of *Black Panther*, in which attempts to portray the film as a progressive, landmark moment in comic-book movie representation are negotiated and challenged retroactively. It is perhaps most prevalent in the way in which fans critiqued the film's lack of queer representation for the character Okoye (Danai Gurira), despite it being a presence in some versions of the comic book (Reddit, 2017a). Further debates surrounding authentic diversity were found when actress Amandla Stenberg revealed that she had turned down a role in the film in order to allow a darker-skinned actor to take her place, claiming "These are all dark-skin actors playing Africans and I feel like it would have just been off to see me as a biracial American with a Nigerian accent just pretending that I'm the same colour as everyone else in the movie," (Crucchiola, 2018). This shows that, in attempting to establish a dominant reading that presents *Black Panther* as a unique and progressive piece of cinema, the producers were offering themselves up to greater scrutiny, with both fans, and even members of the film's production negotiating such debates.

This demonstrates the nuanced possibilities of fan negotiations, suggesting that although fans are found to challenge dominant readings, this need not be presented as a wholly negative act, with fans demonstrating the ability to be critical of a text while still largely within the frames of a dominant reading. Our understanding of this can be aided by Richard McCulloch, who describes how negativity can often be viewed as a useful act of fandom, in that it shows an important process of deliberation (2019, p9). McCulloch uses an analysis of the social media posts of Liverpool Football Club fans to coin the term 'fantipathy', and finds that, though fans are often critical, this criticism stems from a wish for the subject of critique to do well (2019, p4). In the case of *Black Panther*, for example, we find a desire from fans to ensure that the film is indeed as inclusive and representative as the producers initially suggested it would be which suggests that ultimately fans are working to uphold an accurate depiction of the producer-led, dominant reading of the text.

Though these online paratextual battlegrounds have encouraged an increased dialogue between both fans and producers, I must also acknowledge that this in turn can prompt outsider sources to engage with the texts through these contemporary online spaces. These antagonistic acts were found most drastically in the case of screenings of *Black Panther*, in which numerous social media posts were faked to claim that cinemagoers were being attacked by "black thugs" while attending screenings. Accompanying pictures of injuries that were posted were proven to be from an unrelated post in 2016 (Romano, 2018), and numerous other false stories emerged that, along with several other posts, seemed to create a fearful atmosphere, prompting a cautious response from some notable Twitter users, urging followers to be 'extra careful' (Twitter, 2018c). A site such as vox.com is shown to act as a sort of para-paratext (Hills, 2015a), actively working to debunk these faked posts, encouraging readers at one point to 'get in the habit of being sceptical online. Always stop and do a reverse image search on any incendiary or inflammatory image you run across online, especially if it seems too awful (or too good) to be true. A reverse image search allows you to look up the original source for an image, if it previously existed on the internet.' (Romano, 2018). This shows a keen awareness of the power of paratextual battlegrounds to disrupt dominant readings, here completely resisting any positive

representation and instead portraying the black community as aggressors, again using online spaces to present a seemingly 'authentic' experience. What emerges from this incident therefore is a continuation of ideas raised by Chakraborty et al (2017), who argues that, in an era of clickbait, traditional media outlets are now assuming the role of gatekeepers in online spaces, and to some degree attempting to limit the influence that 'ordinary', non-industry users can have through paratextual activity. This is evidence of the strength that contemporary non-industrial paratexts can wield and suggests that a strong tension exists in these contemporary paratextual battlegrounds between traditional figures of media power and challengers.

Conclusion

What emerges from this chapter is an image of contemporary paratexts that critiques Gray's 2010 work, as paratexts are not only shown to be open, interactive spaces facilitating multiple entryways into a text, but are also presented as sites which offer an opportunity to challenge producer power and the dominant readings they impose. This suggests that my description of 'battlegrounds' is a much more accurate way to consider paratextual activity, taking into account the contentious way many groups use them. The origins of these paratexts play a large role in our understanding of how these dominant readings are constructed, with a strong emphasis placed on the value of an 'authentic' response. I must remain wary of how such concepts of authenticity are constructed and utilised, with plastic paratexts showing that fan-created paratexts can simply work to reinforce dominant readings through the assumed validity of fan authenticity. Paratextual battlegrounds show that these dominant readings are very much up for contestation in contemporary reception and reiterate the power of fan activism in challenging the hegemony of producer power. Though some fan activism occurs in an antagonistic, provocative sense, it can also work to impose positive readings of texts that work to critique producers while still within the frames of dominant readings. This is all to suggest that the power relations assumed by producers are no longer as rigidly hierarchical, with industrial paratexts vulnerable to challenge in a contemporary context, often supplanted by the more authentic fan-created paratexts that present a negotiated reading. It is evident that power dynamics in

contemporary film reception are shifting, and to further explore this I must consider the ongoing debate surrounding film reception, placing my research surrounding paratextual battlegrounds into the specific area of paratextual activity that is the field of film criticism.

2 - FROM FIELDS TO BATTLEFIELDS: PARATEXTS IN CONTEMPORARY FILM CRITICISM

As evidenced in my first chapter's exploration of paratextual battlegrounds, authority is subject to contestation, apparent as *Justice League* and *Black Panther* were subject to a power struggle from studios, fans, and critics over the meaning and value of the texts. The significance of these paratextual battlegrounds is clear, and so this chapter shall consider the way in which the paratextual activity of film criticism operates in this contemporary context. The prevalence of sites such as rottentomatoes.com has led to proclamations of a move towards objectivity in criticism, purportedly limiting the value of the individual critic and instead supposedly ushering in a culture of democratisation. I shall therefore investigate this alleged democratisation, considering how the film review aggregator site Rotten Tomatoes complicates the sense of an individual critic's authority and expertise. This will show how the very concept of critical authority has opened up to a wider group of challengers as I continue to assess the abilities of paratextual battlegrounds. To do this, I will use case studies of three critics (Matt Zoller Seitz, Armond White, and Harry Knowles), extending Pierre Bourdieu's work on cultural capital and field theory (Bourdieu, 1993; Thompson, 2014). Though Bourdieu acknowledges that fields are sites of struggle, I will establish that in this new age of online media, multiple types of critic emerge who both accumulate and then deploy capital through a variety of channels. This will challenge the more conventional forms of criticism and embrace the new possible positions in the field that are encouraged by online media, such as the ability of more traditional 'fan' figures to rise up and accumulate greater symbolic capital, coupled with the potential that clickbait can offer in allowing a figure to make their presence even more notable and vocal.

To aid my understanding of 'authority', I can consider Bourdieu's concept of field theory, which outlines the idea that, in a specific field of practice (used in this chapter to primarily refer to the field of film criticism), there are various players with various positions in a hierarchy, with these positionings reliant on the levels and structure of capital one has acquired (Bourdieu, 1993, p8). These levels of

capital are often dependent on the specific player's own origins as 'there is no level playing field... players who begin with particular forms of capital are advantaged at the outset... such lucky players are able to use their capital advantage to accumulate more and advance further than others' (Thompson, 2012, p65-67). Such positioning in the field is then established along poles of autonomy (heavily influenced by symbolic capital and with a focus on field-specific interests) and heteronomy (often linked to a mass appeal and influenced by economic concerns), with the dynamic of the field based on a struggle between these two positions (Bourdieu, 1993, pp14-47). A consideration of how such positions are assumed in contemporary criticism will advance how we view different critics in relation to each other, in turn aiming to see if the ideas that 'class relations within capitalism are ... reinforced and reproduced' (Blewitt, 1993, p367) and that 'public taste conforms to the social and cultural values of the leading sectors of society' (p370), are still intact in this area of contemporary reception.

The debate surrounding the democratisation of criticism in media has seen many academics lament the shift to a culture of consensus (Hanrahan, 2013; Frey, 2014; Scott, 2016), arguing that the nuance displayed by an individual critic has been restricted in favour of a more 'objective' stance. This is found in the aggregation of film criticism, as reducing the value of a film to a single score can in turn restrict the value of a critic's cultural capital, implying that their view is only as important as a binary judgement of 'fresh' or 'rotten' (Frey, 2015). The exploration of paratextual battlegrounds of course counters this idea, with the increased involvement of fans in influencing the extra-textual narrative of a text representing a clear undermining of this 'consensus'. Claiming a culture of consensus is indeed premature, and the critic still has some role to play in defining concepts of taste in culture, maintaining Bourdieu's idea that 'Works of Art' require of the consumer 'an aesthetic disposition...' (Blewitt, 1993, p367-8). Bourdieu argues that the critic still represents a position of expertise that cannot be attained by just anyone yet I can dispute this and his claim that 'The subordinate classes' lack an aesthetic disposition (Blewitt, 1993, p367-8), as discrediting the expertise many can display through fan subcultural capital (something that shall be complicated in the exploration of a figure such as Harry

Knowles later in the chapter). Though fans can perform their expertise we must remember that Hills points out this expertise is often assigned to the acts of 'big name fans' (Hills, 2002), with the critic seemingly still standing apart in their role as an arbiter of taste. This is supported by Frey, who argues that 'the question of authority is vital for the critic: through its possession he or she is granted the legitimacy to describe, explain, elucidate, contextualize, and/or evaluate a certain cultural object or topic to a certain audience' (Frey in Sayad & Frey, 2015, p18). This is a point that is unsurprisingly emphasised by other established autonomous critics such as A.O. Scott, who argue that the critic's job is to 'insist on subjecting [a film] to intellectual scrutiny' (Scott, 2016, p8). Such a position attempts to preserve the field and resist the democratising effects of Rotten Tomatoes yet ignores the fact that fans often display a different type of expertise, displaying their subcultural capital, that is, capital 'based on perceptions of authenticity and distance from mainstream culture' (Moore, 2005, p232) as fans. Though this type of fan expertise may not be as powerful outside of specific areas of fan activity, this perspective can often clash with the cultural capital a critic displays, with this distinction particularly evident in the two groups' differing use of intertexts.

Though this focus on expertise is of course a vital trait for the critic to have, 'expertise' may take on a different complexion depending on the type of critic and type of capital they possess. What further emerges from my research is how many paratexts surrounding *both Justice League* and *Black Panther* have a strong focus on the symbolic capital contained within the identity of critics themselves. This is particularly evident when we consider how paratexts regarding the initial reception of *Black Panther* stressed the response of specific critics, noting that 'Black Reviewers and geek sites, in particular, were effusive about the positive representations of black women' (Rahman, 2018). We can therefore see the perceived value of their reputation providing symbolic capital, and what also emerges in these individual pieces of discourse is the way that critics use intertexts to stress their own knowledge, which in turn elevates a film such as *Black Panther*. Attempts to place the film in a wider context included likening *Black Panther* to other releases that were praised for their depictions of race, with a review in *The Telegraph* noting that 'as with Jordan Peele's *Get Out*, or [Ryan] Coogler's 2015 *Rocky* spin-off

Creed, *Black Panther* isn't a novelty, but a fresh perspective on a well-worn format' (Collin, 2018). The use of intertexts was not confined to referencing contemporary blockbusters, however, and in the case of *Black Panther* also extended to invoking Edward Said's 'orientalism' (Said, 2003), with writing in *Starburst* magazine stating that 'it should also be noted that the crazy headdresses and animal cults of the Wakandans, as first depicted, would hardly pass the Edward Said test of 'othering' exotic foreign cultures for the entertainment of the west' (Dotson, 2018). A notable review in *The New Republic* invoked postcolonial critic Frantz Fanon:

In 1952, the psychoanalyst and revolutionary Frantz Fanon observed that in comic books, "the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage, are always symbolised by Negroes or Indians." Things have changed since then, though not as thoroughly as some would like... *Black Panther* suggests that through acts of imagination and representation, centred around a cosmopolitan and uplifting African narrative, this relationship might be repaired. Fanon would be proud. (Gray, 2018)

The legitimating use of Said and Fanon in *Black Panther's* critical discourse is interesting, as the way in which critics use these academic, high-brow intertexts to frame this mainstream blockbuster release goes some way in supporting the argument by Blank that reviews can create hierarchies but 'only if they produce credible knowledge' (2007, p198). Blank's use of 'credible' here suggests that a critic must demonstrate a certain level of symbolic capital to attain such credibility. In using intertexts like Fanon and Said, a critic is borrowing a degree of symbolic capital supplied by these names, in turn politicising *Black Panther* and elevating it as 'more' than a blockbuster. Furthermore, this supports Bourdieu's idea that 'the more educated have a cerebral, intellectual, distancing or reflexive appreciation concentrating on form, style and relations to other arts' (Blewitt, 1993, p368), a point that is particularly relevant when I note that, in comparison, much of the fan discourse surrounding *Black Panther* is relatively free of references to intertexts, instead opting for a more text-centric discussion. This is seen in 'The Official *Black Panther* Discussion Ultrathread Vol 2' (Reddit, 2018b), in

which the 'best' rated comments were all references or quotes from the film, suggesting that fans display subcultural capital as a variant of expertise. This insular approach by fans indicates the way in which notions of expertise can differ, as the forms of cultural capital displayed by the critic contrast with the less recognisable fan display of subcultural capital, which is more confined to constructing an image of uniqueness surrounding the text in question. These competing values of knowledge in reception shows a varied approach to the text depending on the type of capital one possesses. While this would previously have found distinctly separate areas of reception, our assessment of paratextual battlegrounds has shown that these perspectives now clash, with the contemporary field blurring the distinctions between these forms of expertise.

Though I have so far established that the critic still retains some value, there is of course much variation when I consider the different types of critic that operate in contemporary criticism. I can therefore critique Frey and Hanrahan, who argue that a culture of consensus is taking over criticism in media at the expense of the individual critic (Hanrahan, 2013, pp78-79). In fact, what really emerges is less clear cut, and while the critic's own 'expertise' is complicated in an online space, online media allows specific, more outspoken and provocative personality types to flourish through the embrace of clickbait (Chakraborty et al, 2016). Though the role of the critic comes with its own established capital, I shall consider case studies of three critics (Matt Zoller Seitz, Armond White, and Harry Knowles) that occupy very different spaces in the field of film criticism, from an inheritor of a dominant position in the field, to a challenger to such dominant, conventional positions, to an interloper that rejects the conventions of the field and presents a new trajectory into heteronomous positioning. In our ensuing assessment of how these critics occupy certain positions in the field, the difficulty in finding neat positionings for the three suggests that contemporary criticism requires us to revisit aspects of field theory. What will emerge is an image of critical positioning as a more fluid structure than Bourdieu initially outlined, with structures of capital changing in this contemporary context and encouraging critical shifts.

Matt Zoller Seitz – ‘The Inheritor’

Following the death of film critic Roger Ebert in 2013, a powerful position in the field of film criticism was vacated and required a successor, which was in some part filled by fellow American critic Matt Zoller Seitz, appointed editor-in-chief of rogerebert.com. When we consider the field of film criticism, there are few figures that are held in as notable esteem as Roger Ebert. Writing predominantly for the *Chicago Sun-Times*, Ebert is arguably one of the most famous film critics in history, with his cultural capital accumulated through decades of film criticism alongside a TV show (*At the Movies*) hosted with fellow film critic Gene Siskel that emphasised his ties to the industry and strong social capital. I can therefore place Ebert in a powerful heteronomous position in the field, due to his immense popularisation of film criticism (Bergan, 2013).

With a career that has included a position at *The New York Times* and a nomination for the Pulitzer Prize for Criticism, I can view Matt Zoller Seitz as representative of a ‘conventional’ form of film criticism, writing for well-established outlets. I must also consider that Zoller Seitz has embraced some contemporary forms of criticism and has acquired his capital not only through his prose, but also through a very strong social media presence. Here Zoller Seitz has engaged with other ‘legitimate critics’, and further used online media in a series of video essays that dissected the work of Wes Anderson (Zoller Seitz, 2015). This shows that Zoller Seitz was able to use his established symbolic and cultural capital in tandem with an embrace of online media, in turn helping him acquire greater social and economic capital in the field and pushing him towards a position of greater heteronomy. The press statement that accompanied Zoller Seitz’s hiring as the new editor-in-chief of rogerebert.com noted that the critic already had a following, featuring a quote by Ebert’s wife stating that ‘Roger and I envisioned the site as a bridge between critics and fans. Matt brings his own loyal followers and fans to help build on Roger’s enduring legacy’ (PR Newswire, 2013). Zoller Seitz’s position was already one of great cultural capital, yet his accessibility in online spaces provides a greater sense of symbolic capital, showing even conventional critics can use online spaces to accumulate greater levels of

capital. Here Zoller Seitz appeared as this so-called 'bridge' between critics and fans while continuing to maintain traditional hierarchies of power at sites such as rogerebert.com.

As the institution of rogerebert.com appointed a figure with a similar position in the field to Ebert rather than explore an outsider perspective, it can be argued that Zoller Seitz has inherited some of Ebert's symbolic capital, reinforcing the idea that 'continuity is actively reproduced by those it already favours' (Litherland, 2018, p8) and that this position in the field is restricted to those that must display a certain degree of cultural capital and expertise. That is not to say that displaying a high level of cultural capital immediately ensures one a position as an arbiter of taste, and in the ensuing discussion of Armond White the case can be made that, no matter the level of expertise, one must still conform to specific expectations of critical conventions or risk being confined to an outsider position in the field, a contrarian figure that I can label 'the challenger'.

Armond White – 'The Challenger'

When I consider the ways in which online media and the democratisation of film criticism have changed the perception of the individual critic, I must consider the argument from Frey that there are a 'lack of critics with public persona or personal power' (2015, p103). Though this is a criticism often levelled at contemporary film reception, it certainly cannot be said of Armond White, who is a notable figure often labelled a contrarian, and the subject of much disdain from other voices in film criticism. This was shown when he was kicked out of the New York Film Critics Circle for heckling director Steve McQueen (Stedman, 2014). White's contrarian opinions often speak to the concerns raised throughout some fans' (and some academics') negotiated readings, and this is particularly evident if I return to White's review of *Black Panther*. In contrast to the generally positive reception of the film, White's review is very critical, not only critiquing the film itself but also the response from other critics, suggesting that:

Even elderly academics and young Afro-futurists who prattled about "revolution" have unaccountably joined the circle of *Black Panther* hype, as if it was somehow a protest. They

accord an oddball sanctity to the media practice that persuades the public to cheapen its own best interests (White, 2018)

This review therefore directly opposes the attempted dominant readings explored in Chapter One, as White rejects the celebration of the film's diversity on similar grounds to Kristen Warner, noting a hollowness in the film's depiction of race that, to White at least, is unnecessarily lauded. White's criticism of the hype surrounding the film also extends to the status of the film as a blockbuster, arguing that:

The media's enthusiasm for this bland action flick is maddening. The problem isn't one particular movie, but the celebration of the illusion of "progress." When Hollywood pegs everything in terms of race or gender, it dictates to the masses and keeps them all in a plantation mentality, mindlessly applauding *Black Panther* as part of the new segregation (White, 2018)

I can in fact find support for this perspective from Dan Hassler-Forest, who, when writing about Afro-futurism, argues that 'one of the problems with these highly lucrative commercial storyworlds is that they are hardly ever radical enough' (2016, p184). I can therefore propose that though White's arguments may appear needlessly contrarian - invoking a 'plantation mentality' to suggest that those who praise the film for its progressiveness are in fact simply helping to restrict representation - they are at the very least backed up by the cultural capital in arguments made by some academics, and that it is perhaps simply the strong vitriolic language used by White that prompts ensuing outrage.

Through this provocative style of White's criticism, I must recognise that online media enables a type of 'trolling' that utilises traits found in *The Outrage Industry: Political Opinion Media and the New Incivility* (Berry and Sobieraj, 2014), which suggests that 'outrage discourse involves efforts to provoke emotional responses from the audience through the use of overgeneralizations, sensationalism... belittling ridicule of opponents... it takes the form of verbal competition, political theatre with a verbal scorecard' (p7). It is this sensationalism and verbal competition that White displays, found in many

more of his reviews, such as his description of *Toy Story 3* (Unkrich, 2010) as a film for 'non-thinking children and adults' (White, 2010) and his hyperbolic prose further found in his description of *Justice League* as 'one of those wondrous Zack Snyder extravaganzas that fulfill the aesthetic potential of comic-book graphics and achieves essential cinema kinetics' (White, 2017). His response to *Black Panther* is therefore just the latest example of how White directly opposes critical consensus through sensationalism, building a reputation based on such an attitude that generates interest in his criticism. The strange positioning of White here - at once autonomous in his expertise and valuation of the art form, yet heteronomous in his provocative position as a clickbait contrarian - complicates our understanding of Bourdieu's field theory. Such a complication is considered by Ross Garner's work on 'heteronomous autonomy' (2016), describing how 'commercial concerns... and demonstrations of agency blur' (p14), revealing that the tension between these two poles is very present in contemporary culture, and through this I can reinforce the idea that film critics no longer simply occupy one space in the field.

The advantages of a position that appeals to heteronomy can be economic, as the controversy often stirred up by such contrarian posts brings greater attention to a site or an article. White has positioned himself as maintaining autonomy as other critics move to the heteronomous pole, arguing that 'people who are now employed by the mainstream media are so intimidated by the internet that... they've simply given up being film critics, because they're afraid of losing readership... probably because publishers and editors simply want to get readers and appease readers, rather than inform and instruct readers' (White in Salmon, 2010). The growth of online media has meant that the contrarian nature of White garners some attention from fellow critics, with a popular image circulated that shows White's praise of critically panned film titles while criticising those films with a typically positive reception. This image generated so much discussion that it found its way to Roger Ebert, who subsequently published a piece entitled, 'Not In Defence of Armond White' (2009), in which Ebert wrote how he was puzzled that 'a critic could praise *Transformers 2* but not *Synecdoche, New York*. Or *Death Race* but not *There Will Be Blood*. I am forced to conclude that White is, as charged, a troll. A

smart and knowing one, but a troll' (Ebert, 2009). Ebert therefore displays an acknowledgement of White's cultural capital (later in the piece praising White's support for the film *You, The Living*) and actually goes some way in making a case for the role of a critic like White, arguing 'He works for the *New York Press*, an alternative paper, and why should an alternative paper offer a conventional critic?'. It is the label of 'troll' that sticks however, and it should be said that White has previously criticised Ebert, claiming that 'Roger Ebert destroyed film criticism... it was a kind of purposefully dishonest enthusiasm for the product... I think he does NOT have the training. I think he simply had the position... I'VE got the training.' (Salmon, 2010 online).

Through this exchange I find an extension of paratextual battlegrounds, with the suggestion that they are not only able to contest readings of texts but can also contest critical positioning. White here completely rejects the label of 'troll' by Ebert and attempts to position himself in a position of critical expertise, showing an appreciation of cultural capital as the likes of Matt Zoller Seitz would, yet doing so through alternative channels with a more provocative rhetoric. Both Zoller Seitz and White are shown to be defined by their relationship to the dominant figure of Ebert, with Zoller Seitz inheriting Ebert's position while White actively opposes the fact Ebert held such a position to begin with. We therefore find Zoller Seitz occupying a more heteronomous position in the field, with White's rejection of such positions seemingly moving him towards a position of autonomy. As established however, the case can be made that White also occupies a heteronomous position through his style of criticism, with this inability to place White in one single position suggesting that a more fluid depiction of a field is required, acknowledging that there can be multiple levels of positioning to account for the multiple forms of capital a critic can display.

Salmon concludes that 'at this current juncture, White has attained that wide readership mainly by being provocative.' (2010). This suggests that the idea of paratextual battlegrounds does not just relate to attempts to reframe the narrative of a text, but can also be extra-textual, acting as sites in which positions in a field are disparaged and critiqued. This therefore suggests that White's

provocative rhetoric has brought him greater notoriety as a critic, with a value placed on visibility that can even be traced back to White's own criticism of how Ebert's television show was 'simply blather' (Salmon, 2010), attacking the dominant figure in the field to build White's own status. It therefore appears that for nearly all critics there is some concession made to gaining a high-profile, heteronomous position in film criticism, it is just that the way in which White deploys his capital has a much greater antagonistic role expressed through his outright defiance of consensus. I can therefore make the case that having a figure such as White in contemporary criticism is valuable for traditional journalism in general, with White's contrarian nature providing a counter to the more rigidly heteronomous positions in the field assumed by Zoller Seitz. White's provocative statements attract an audience in a way we might find comparable to a publication such as *The Daily Mail*, which, though operating in a more outright heteronomous position, has utilised an online presence to become one of the most viewed news sources in the world by using traits such as clickbait to draw in an audience (Addison, 2017). The potentially lucrative nature of such contrarianism therefore sees White assume a strange position in the field, with a tension existing between his relatively autonomous style of criticism and the way in which such a style has seen him edge closer to heteronomy due to the notoriety (and in turn, visibility) he receives from this approach. Though I have established that White and Zoller Seitz operate as binary figures in the field, a consideration of another critical figure, Harry Knowles, somewhat disrupts this binary. I can label Knowles an 'interloper', defined by Scott Eldridge as figures in new media adopting a journalistic identity (2014, p26), with our exploration of such a radically different figure reconstituting the logic of the field as we have understood it so far.

Harry Knowles – 'The Interloper'

Though I have so far outlined how the field of criticism demands re-evaluation due to the ability of critical shifts to occupy multiple positions at once, I must also acknowledge that there are new routes into film criticism for those without the traditional background, evidenced clearly in the case of Harry Knowles. Knowles was the founder of film website *Ain't It Cool News* which would not only review films but would also post news about films in pre-production, valuing exclusive stories that saw *Ain't*

It Cool News provide 'public access to every step of what previously had been largely hidden production and marketing processes.' (Owczarski, 2012). Knowles initially broke this sort of news with few connections to the industry, instead relying on 'individuals sending him information related to the industry, most of whom were... unknown and anonymous to him' which in turn allowed 'bigger scoops than typical journalistic enterprises could [publish]' (Owczarski, 2012). Knowles' prose was similarly unconventional, with a more relaxed, informal style that demonstrated his subcultural capital was more in line with a fan than a critic. This was reinforced by his writing under the name 'headgeek' on aintitcool.com, and perhaps demonstrated most evidently in his founding of the 'Butt-Numb-A-Thon', an annual 24-hour movie marathon that ran from 1999 to 2017 and screened a range of cult and popular movies.

This display of fan subcultural capital saw Knowles assume a relatively autonomous positioning in the field of film criticism due to his perceived 'fan' expertise, yet this autonomy was not secure, and as his career progressed Knowles 'was starting to face accusations that he had been seduced by the Hollywood insiders he had once critiqued' (Gonzalez and Molloy, 2017). This shift towards a heteronomous position in the field reached its apex when it emerged that Knowles had 'accepted a production deal with Revolution Studios... [which] seemed to largely shift how he and the site were framed in the media.' (Owczarski, 2012). This showed that Knowles was no longer simply occupying a position in the field of criticism (and an increasingly heteronomous position at that) but had now found himself in the field of producers, showing a transition from 'outsider' critic to an integrated member of the establishment, though never a full insider figure. Knowles here finds himself in a strange position in the field, as though his increased visibility saw him assume a greater heteronomous position in the field, this then led to the loss of the symbolic capital (from his outsider status) that made him so successful to begin with.

The structure of Knowles' capital had shifted to the degree that an immediate contrast can be made between Knowles and Matt Zoller Seitz, with the former's origins as an outsider at odds with the more

established positioning of the latter, and with Zoller Seitz's strong ties to specific critics (such as notable television critic Alan Sepinwall) and critical institutions (such as rogerebert.com) suggesting consolidating a position of authority and maintaining traditional gatekeeping in a way that a figure such as Knowles completely sidesteps. Ultimately however, the way in which Knowles' expertise became utilised by studios showed a desire from producers to get onside with Knowles, perhaps reducing his fan subcultural capital to a more palatable, 'studio-approved' form of symbolic capital. This is a similar approach to that outlined in Chapter One, in which producers were found to attempt to control paratextual activity, and so here we again find the idea that 'transformation [in the field] still exists within a limited set of historical possibilities' (Litherland, 2018, p8). This speaks to a producer desire to limit the influence of fans in the industry and, in the case of Knowles, showed how his outsider status was stripped of him, rendering him not just a 'fan' but now a part of the industry, at once increasing Knowles' 'expertise' yet diminishing his subcultural capital as a fan figure that had enabled his success. What is revealed through this consideration of Harry Knowles is the way in which online media allows individuals with an outsider status to accumulate greater symbolic capital and in turn achieve an increasingly established heteronomous position in the field yet at the potential cost of their non-traditional autonomy.

The shifting roles of my case studies can be placed in a wider context if we consider the role of these critics as cultural intermediaries. Maguire and Matthews (2012) explain how the term cultural intermediaries is a 'descriptive catch-all for seemingly *any* creative or cultural occupation or institution... they construct value by framing how others engage with goods' (2012, p552), performing creative work at the point between production and consumption (Maguire and Matthews, 2014). We can therefore view the film critics referenced in this thesis as cultural intermediaries, with their various displays of capital providing judgement on a film that then informs the consumer's reading of the text. When discussing how Bourdieu approaches cultural intermediaries, Maguire (2014) notes that they 'create the conditions for consumers to identify their tastes in goods' in their role as 'professional taste makers' (2014, pp20-21), suggesting they require a degree of authority that is further

emphasised by Maguire and Matthews' references to an 'expert orientation' (2012, p552). As has been established, however, there are now a number of different forms and perceptions of 'authority' operating in different areas of film criticism, and this can be linked to Maguire's reference to an intensified focus on 'new occupations' (2014, p19) that here allow critics to display these different forms of capital in new sites.

Considering the numerous new sites of activity for critics enabled by online media, we can acknowledge that cultural intermediaries are able to display both an 'expert orientation' while existing in new contemporary spaces, no longer the 'static' figure that Bourdieu suggested (Maguire, 2014, p22). This suggests that it is possible for many new figures to be considered cultural intermediaries due to these accessible online spaces, and so there is potential for even more new positions of expertise to emerge and be legitimised in the field of criticism, with the likes of Knowles' 'outsider' role reflecting the contemporary sites of discourse. This may point to a broadening of the role cultural intermediaries in all areas of culture, not just film, considering the various contemporary ways a figure can display expertise, and emphasising the earlier suggestion that the traditional hierarchies of power continue to be disrupted.

These case studies display the way in which the field of film criticism attempts to maintain a hierarchy, with a certain level of capital and authority necessary for one to become a notable figure in contemporary professional criticism. What has been outlined, however, is the ways in which this capital can develop, be accumulated, and then deployed, through a variety of methods depending on the origin and positioning of the critic and the institutions they work for. The varying levels of capital displayed by the three critics here demonstrate that there are many ways in which one can position oneself in the field of criticism. The example of Knowles demonstrates that unorthodox origins outside the industry are now no longer a barrier to achieving an influential heteronomous position, and that in fact symbolic capital that accompanies such non-traditional autonomous positioning as an outsider can often be advantageous in allowing such figures to position themselves even more powerfully in

the field. An image of critical shifting shows the ability to accumulate and deploy various types of capital in relation to various positions in the field. This supports our depiction of paratextual battlegrounds and shows the field of film criticism to be a similarly open site, inviting challenge and contestation through a number of channels. I have so far only considered individual critics in our assessment of this field, yet an examination of where Rotten Tomatoes can be positioned will further emphasise the role of paratextual battlegrounds in reception, with the site acting as a summation of the themes raised throughout this thesis.

Rotten Tomatoes as 'Para-Paratext'

The individual critic, though assuming a position of authority and expertise, is not the main target of fan anxieties, and I will evidence that it is in fact a rather reductive objective 'score' that is the subject of most fan criticism. Yet again, I find further complications in our understanding of expertise in contemporary criticism, as though I have established that authority has opened up to allow critics from different field positions to display authority over a text, the supposed objectivity of a site such as rottentomatoes.com again reduces this authority to a numerical figure unconcerned with a subjective viewpoint. The site aggregates the reviews of a film and produces a resulting score which is either deemed 'fresh' (with over 60% favourable reviews) or 'rotten' (with any score under 60%), and the aggregation of so many different styles of critic even further complicates our understanding of contemporary expertise, as here the site reduces capital to a final score, yet that score is still informed by the symbolic capital associated with the figures of film critic.

The strong negative connotation of labelling a film as 'rotten' is no doubt the reasoning for such a fixation from fans on what the score for their favoured film is, with this figure similarly allowing fans to rank films next to each other as though one is 'objectively' better than the other. There is also the question of exactly what constitutes a positive or negative review, and the vice president of Rotten Tomatoes (Michael Voris) defended the process, stating:

Our curators audit each other's work. If there is any question about how a review should be classified, we have three curators separate and do independent reads. If there still isn't agreement, we call the journalist. (Barnes, 2017)

This is still an area in which the validity of Rotten Tomatoes is critiqued, with *Justice League* fans attempting to position specific reviews of the film (which received a 40% 'rotten' Rotten Tomatoes score), next to those of *Thor: Ragnarok* (Waititi, 2017) (which received a 92% 'fresh' score) and noting that though all reviews were marked 2.5 / 5, only some were deemed fresh reviews while others were deemed rotten (Figure 7.). This of course ignores the actual substance of any of the reviews referenced (and furthermore omits the more outright negative reviews) but does point out the issue of attempting to evaluate a film based on a single score. Conversely, however, when a franchise's films (such as those of the MCU) receive relatively favourable reviews, then fans are willing to use such scores to demonstrate either the consistency of the franchise or the increasing quality of the films, with some fans creating a chart to measure such scores (Figure. 8.). The chart used here indicates that *Black Panther* is now the highest rated Marvel film to date and presented a steady growth in the MCU's Rotten Tomato scores in general, suggesting that fans were very willing to display the critical reception of the franchise when it was shown to be a positive factor. This lack of a coherent positioning in fan reception can be explained through 'discourse variability', with the contradictory nature of this reception to the scores indicating how fans are able to alter their responses depending on the context.

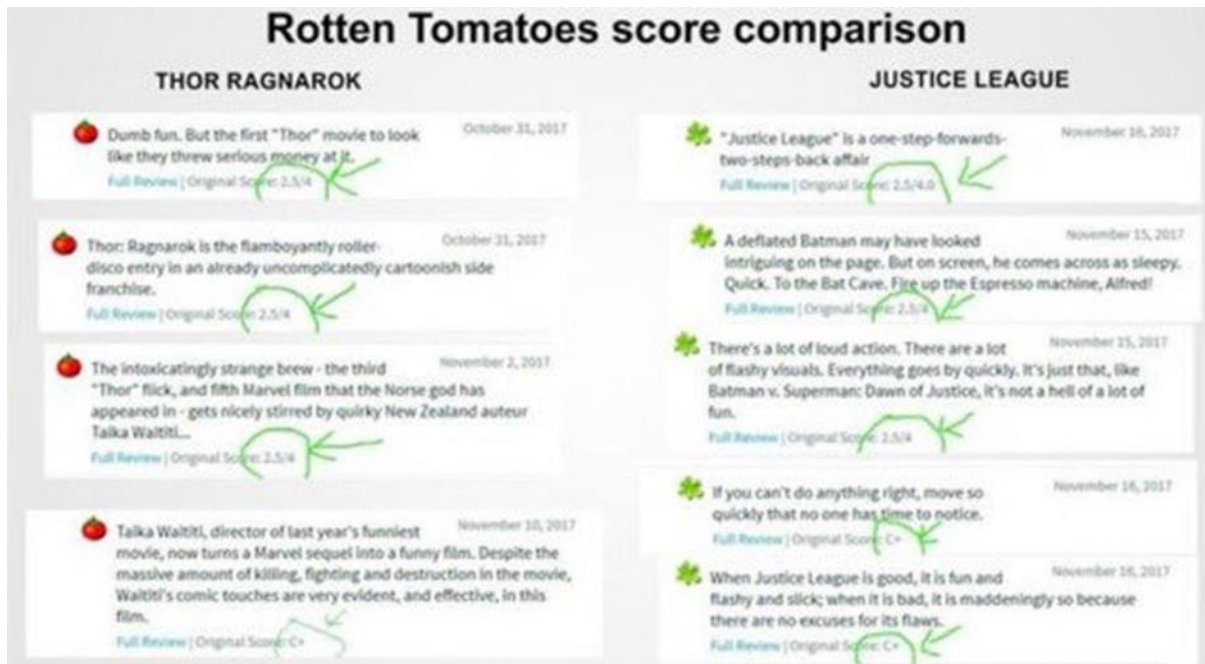


Figure 7- (Twitter, 2017b)

'Black Panther' is Marvel's best reviewed movie to date

In 18 films, Marvel has never had a movie with a rotten rating on Rotten Tomatoes

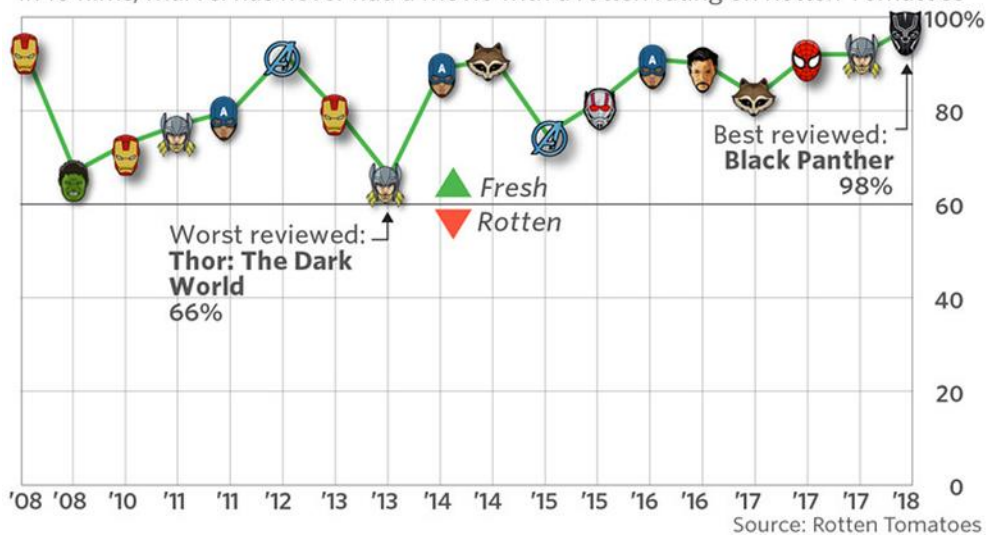


Figure 8- (Reddit, 2018)

In attempting to reconcile this site with Bourdieu's field theory, I can argue that the very fact that Rotten Tomatoes uses an aggregate score suggests that it relies on a certain heteronomous appeal to

mainstream audiences, with the score acting as an immediate assessment of a film's value. This finds Rotten Tomatoes with its own symbolic capital associated with objective assessment yet the fact that it is only the critics' scores that prompt such anxiety suggests the site relies on the symbolic critical of the film critic as well. It is telling that, when anticipating the Rotten Tomatoes score for *Thor: Ragnarok* (Waititi, 2017) for example, fans focused solely on the single score (Reddit, 2017b), suggesting that the site had indeed flattened a lot of the perceived distinction between critical differences, though I should acknowledge that the process of selecting a group of 'Top Critics' does still maintain some notions of critical hierarchy and expertise. Of course, this ultimate reception of a film does not occur in a vacuum, and so such attempts by Rotten Tomatoes to position a given film are complicated by the involvement of other parties.

Examples of paratextual battlegrounds outlined in chapter one such as petitions work here to disrupt the perceived objectivity of Rotten Tomatoes, again making the case that fan activism can disrupt dominant readings of films. The supposed objectivity that arises from this scoring is an issue that fans have particularly been opposed to, as the desire to have a good score creates anxiety around the very process of scoring, and as a result some forms of online activism have been found to attempt to discredit Rotten Tomatoes. Paradoxically, what emerges is a situation in which fans reject the value of a Rotten Tomatoes score yet are still found seeking the validation of a positive and legitimate reception to the film, again reinforcing the idea of discourse variability in fan responses to texts. This was found in the case of some DCEU fans who created an online petition on change.org entitled 'Don't listen to film criticism' (Coldwater, 2016), arguing that 'there's a disconnect between critics and audiences' and that 'you may enjoy a movie regardless what the critics say about it.' The petition received 22,942 signatures and so, despite no real aim from the petition (suggesting that it, like much of online activism was more about making a statement and airing grievances than making any tangible change) presents a desire from fans to voice their opposition to the scoring system. It is this suggestion of online activism that potentially encouraged the ensuing response to Disney's releases by a group called Down With Disney. This campaign was seemingly a reaction to the poor reception of recent

entries in the DCEU franchise and aimed to impact the score of Disney films as *Black Panther*, *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo, 2018), and *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (Johnson, 2017) with the creator of the group posting that:

Given the massive success of the audience review rigging on the Rotten Tomatoes site for '*Star Wars: The Last Jedi*,' and due to the sudden rise in those disgruntled with Disney business practices among other factors especially due to the corporate manipulations which created falsified bad press for the DCEU, I feel that it's time to strike back at all those under Disney and bring down the house of mouse's actions for paying off the critics that hurt DC Comics on film and for other parties affected by them. (Fernandez, 2018)

The ensuing controversy surrounding this group's intentions was well publicised, with thinkpieces (Williams, 2018) acknowledging the antagonistic abilities of online activism and lamenting that 'In an era when culture wars are predominantly fought on social media, this sort of down-voting can seem like an effective guerrilla tactic' (Virtue, 2018). The campaign's group was ultimately shut down by Facebook however (Fernandez, 2018) and Rotten Tomatoes released a statement stating:

We at Rotten Tomatoes are proud to have become a platform for passionate fans to debate and discuss entertainment and we take that responsibility seriously. While we respect our fans' diverse opinions, we do not condone hate speech. Our team of security, network and social experts continue to closely monitor our platforms and any users who engage in such activities will be blocked from our site and their comments removed as quickly as possible (Verhoeven, 2018)

The statement positions Rotten Tomatoes as an active figure in this controversy, showing their agency and their ability to impose restrictions on dissenting voices, though I must retain some scepticism when considering just how these gestures can often simply be good PR from a site. This perspective is evidenced by Ysabel Gerrard (2018), presenting the idea that social media sites such as tumblr and Instagram are often vocal about how they moderate content (in this case, in relation to eating

disorders), when in fact there is little tangible change as users find ways to circumvent such moderation such as avoiding the use of hashtags. This not only seems to suggest that the divide between fans and critics is still at a point of great tension, but also indicates that although online fan activism prompts little change from producers and traditional media, fan's actions at the very least publicise and amplify their cause. When exploring the Down With Disney controversy in greater detail however, William Proctor reveals how the narrative surrounding the campaign was perhaps exaggerated, noting that 'over 96% [of negative reviews of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*] critique creative decisions in the film whereas less than 3% mention people-of-colour, women, and the PC-inflected agenda of 'social justice' Disney.' Proctor ultimately concludes that 'By tracking and mapping the discourse, then, one can see quite clearly how controversy is not only manufactured, but the way in which it can spread like wildfire, with journalists, bloggers, news anchors, social media users, fans and coalition audiences providing spark and kinder [sic] as well.' (2018). This indicates the degree to which fans seek the amplification of their voice through mainstream channels, and so noting the way in which fans are able to dictate the narrative surrounding a text (particularly through the proliferation of such narratives enabled by social media) in turn allows us to question the legitimacy of such channels.

The debate surrounding Rotten Tomatoes shows that, though anxieties persist surrounding the 'objective' nature of the score, these anxieties are still informed by the fact that capital associated with film critics as the Rotten is an aggregation of 'Top Critics' reviews, chosen through an alleged 'well-defined process' (Barnes, 2017). This again attempts to reinforce some sort of distinction between critical opinion and the general public, elevating the critics' judgement due to their assumed expertise and cultural capital. Yet it has been suggested that this ability to be able to see which critics favour specific films has led to 'spreadsheets of which critics to invite to early screenings — often at festivals — based on questions such as who liked what in the past and who gives positive reviews more often than not.' (Barnes, 2017). This limits claims of objectivity, showing how Rotten Tomatoes scores are susceptible to influence by producers, who are yet again shown to attempt to retain control

over the reception of their films. The contrasting presentation of these attempts by fans and producers to 'game' Rotten Tomatoes scores by engaging in paratextual battlegrounds further emphasises the dominant hold producers have on the reception of a film, receiving nowhere near as much coverage for these acts as fans do, and where fans are instead presented as antagonistic and troublesome.

While I have outlined that the attempted objectivity of Rotten Tomatoes complicates our application of Bourdieu's field theory, the evident influence it has in contemporary reception means that I must consider how it is positioned in relation to the field of film criticism. The very fact that Rotten Tomatoes selects 'Top Critics' shows an attempt to define an authoritative position, yet the reduction of this critical expertise to an aggregate score diminishes the individual viewpoints of critics, instead presenting Rotten Tomatoes as a site of power which attempt to objectify and monitor the field of criticism by claiming objectivity itself. It is this role of monitoring the field and acting as a 'para-paratext' that makes Rotten Tomatoes such an important site to other groups and aids our understanding of how the reception trajectory of a text and its paratextual battlegrounds comes to a head in this site.

Conclusion

Through this chapter I have shown how the concept of paratextual battlegrounds continues to be evidenced in a consideration of film criticism. Our understanding of how this field operates according to Bourdieu is complicated through contemporary paratextual activity in online sites. This shows critical shifts through which individual figures do not just occupy new spaces, but multiple spaces, deploying their capital in various ways at once. The case study of Matt Zoller Seitz suggests that traditional gatekeeping occurs to preserve certain ideas of how a critic should operate and accumulate cultural and symbolic capital (i.e. Inherit it, after establishing themselves as enough of an expert to assume a heteronomous position in the field), whilst a critic such as Harry Knowles suggests alternative paths are available. Knowles demonstrates that an outsider figure can accumulate a certain degree of symbolic capital and become an established critic, though they will remain an outsider until

they are enveloped by involvement from traditional institutions that in turn limit the subcultural capital a figure such as Knowles is able to display as a 'fan'. Occupying a space in the field between these two critics is a figure such as Armond White. Though accumulating and displaying a certain amount of knowledge of film to suggest his cultural capital is comparable to a critic such as Matt Zoller Seitz, White also finds himself occupying an 'outsider' role in the field through displays of traditional autonomy, in contrast to the non-traditional autonomy displayed by Harry Knowles. We may then argue that what has occurred in contemporary film criticism is a wider accessibility to critical spaces in the field, and while my case studies have demonstrated that these roles are still subject to attempted hierarchical positioning, they are also subject to contestation from outside sources and vulnerable to the tensions that emerge between fandom and industry, a continuing demonstration of how paratextual battlegrounds can inform our understanding of contemporary reception.

CONCLUSION

Jonathan Gray wrote that 'a proliferation of competing paratexts will be a text's saving grace, ensuring that its world is varied and disparate enough to welcome a wide range of viewers and interests' (2010, p208), and throughout this thesis my depiction of paratextual battlegrounds has emphasised this image of competition. Far from a 'welcoming' interaction between various groups, we often find a hostile, territorial response. Gray suggests that 'paratexts contribute to the text and are often vital parts of it' (2010, p208), but here I can suggest that often paratexts aim to contribute *simply to other paratexts*, working to dispute and disrupt a competing reading. My case studies of *Justice League*, *Black Panther* and their surrounding paratexts revealed this exact complication, presenting various groups that negotiated, competed over and contested the meaning of a text or paratext. What has emerged through this thesis is that every group involved in reception has a belief that their paratexts will work, showing an assumption in general that paratexts are successful despite the fact no single paratext dictates the dominant reading of a text and these groups' aims are all different. This leads to paratextual anxieties and a web of intertextuality emerges where groups respond to each other's attempted readings and create their own paratexts in response. This depiction of paratextual battlegrounds shows how various groups and paratexts work to shape a text, trading blows through negotiations and contesting various readings. These negotiations take many different shapes, with fan activism utilising the abilities of social media to create forms of participatory culture (such as online petitions and hashtag campaigns) that encourage engagement and push back against producer power. This shows the instability of paratexts and the need for paratextual battlegrounds to narrate such tensions, again it being clear that Gray's arguments do not do justice to the complex webs of intertextuality that I have outlined here. His attempts to study 'the types of meanings created by paratexts, how they variously dovetail or clash with meanings with their related texts' (p16), only uncovers a fraction of the paratextual activity that occurs surrounding the reception of a text, and my thesis has worked to extend this further and uncover even more ways through which textual meaning is paratextually constructed and disputed.

The tensions that emerged through these paratextual battlegrounds presented an image of shifting power dynamics in contemporary media, and this was narrated further through my second chapter's focus on film criticism as one area of paratextual activity. I showed how the ability of these paratexts to complicate our readings of a text and disrupt traditional hierarchies of producer power could be applied to case studies of three critics (Matt Zoller Seitz, Armond White, and Harry Knowles) that similarly complicated our understanding of film reception. Using Bourdieu's field theory (1993) to establish a conventional 'field of power' (p14), I developed his suggestion that the dynamic in a field of practice is based on a struggle between autonomous and heteronomous positionings by continuing to explore the ability of paratexts to challenge hierarchical authority. Acknowledging that various types of capital all contribute to a critic's eventual positioning in the field, I argued that online media and the paratexts that can emerge from these sites have made it harder to find neat positionings for critics. A critic such as Armond White can display both conventional, autonomous expertise of cinema, yet through these new online spaces can also shift to the heteronomous pole due to his embrace of clickbait contrarianism. A figure such as Harry Knowles is equally hard to map, with his once niche expertise through acts of fan subcultural capital eventually co-opted by producers, finding him occupying an increasingly heteronomous position at the expense of the very traits that made him successful to begin with. This therefore called for a complication of Bourdieu that acknowledged this critical shifting, introducing these 'interloper' figures such as Knowles, and these hard-to-position figures such as White, to show that the once rigidly hierarchal structures of power in a field of practice are open to challenge, despite producers' best efforts to retain power and co-opt such challenging figures.

This assessment of the field of film criticism reinforces the value of paratexts and their ability to disrupt dominant positionings, and my second chapter's assessment of Rotten Tomatoes further emphasises this potential. Through the aggregator site of Rotten Tomatoes we find a para-paratext (Hills, 2015a) that speaks to both the potential of paratexts to act as indicators of fan anxieties, and a demonstration of how authority is subject to contemporary challenges. Rotten Tomatoes' ability to monitor and

aggregate the field as a whole proves to be one of the more contentious and anxiety-inducing sites of power, with fans and producers alike attempting to game the scores through paratexts of their own. This shows that these contemporary paratextual battlegrounds demand a reassessment of field theory to accommodate both this prevalence of critical shifting and an acknowledgement of paratextual battlegrounds to enable such shifts.

My findings in this thesis demonstrate that the image of paratextual battlegrounds is a very useful depiction of how contemporary reception occurs and how the power dynamics in contemporary media operate, opening the door to much more research in this area. My exploration of how a figure such as Harry Knowles was co-opted by producers shows that producers are attempting to manage such shifts in power. Further study can explore how producers attempt to co-opt or control fan activity, with previous work by Matt Hills (2012) coining the term 'fanagement' to depict one such method. More attempts from producers undoubtedly exist as new forms of participatory culture emerge that prompt more responses from producers. These attempts to influence the reception extended into post-production, with the various responses to Rotten Tomatoes showing a desire to game aspects of reception from fans and producers alike. As Hanrahan has demonstrated regarding music criticism (2013), anxieties surrounding attempted democratisation are prevalent in a wide range of contemporary aspects of culture, and so further study into reactions to such sites should be encouraged. Work from Filieri, Alguezaui, and McLeay (2015) shows that attempts to game aggregator sites such as Trip Advisor are very prevalent, suggesting that paratextual battlegrounds extend beyond film and into many aspects of culture.

In applying paratextual battlegrounds to the wider culture, we will be able to assess how groups are able to utilise some of the paratextual abilities I have outlined here. My depiction of plastic paratexts shows the perceived value of an authentic response to a text, yet the often-anonymous spaces of social media demonstrate that this is also susceptible to influence. My exploration of how a social media campaign attempted to ward consumers away from *Black Panther* screenings - creating false

stories of racially aggravated attacks – shows that constructs of authenticity play a key role in these contemporary battlegrounds. This is not wholly negative however, and the Twitter campaign of #WhatBlackPantherMeansToMe shows that through constructions of authenticity fans sometimes present their readings as an ‘authentic’ validation of a producer’s dominant readings. The power of these plastic paratexts and paratextual battlegrounds has been made evident in the case studies throughout this thesis. Several examples of paratextual battlegrounds such as the Twitter critique of a *Justice League* promotional image (Twitter, 2017) shows how competing notions of a film’s quality can all gain prominence in these contemporary online sites at various stages of production, challenging the assumed power of producer-led dominant readings. The fact that these paratextual battlegrounds often prompt a response from figures in the production the text such as the open letter from a *Justice League* actress (Jo, 2017) shows that they do indeed have great influence in shaping the reading of a text, to the degree that in contemporary media a fan-made paratext can become as influential as a producer-created paratext. These examples show the way in which paratextual battlegrounds can even occur between various figures in the production of a text, showing that both producer and fan now often operate in the same sites. Through my work in this thesis we can analyse how and why different groups operate this way, as traditional power relations have become susceptible to challenges.

This thesis focused on two comic book movie blockbusters, and so provided a useful exploration of how the discourse surrounding this type of film occurred, yet further case studies should be encouraged into a range of films. Noting the way paratextual battlegrounds operate in relation to an arthouse film may well yield alternative outcomes, as the role of fans and producers may alter depending on the type of film involved. For example, the paratextual battlegrounds that emerged around a film such as *La La Land* (Chazelle) in 2016 saw a disparity between its initial rave reviews at the Venice International Film Festival and the ultimately more nuanced critical discourse that emerged, critiquing the film for its depiction of race (Gittell, 2017). These criticisms came to a head at the 2017 Academy Awards, which saw *Moonlight* (Jenkins, 2016) be crowned Best Picture winner after

La La Land was mistakenly announced as winner (Carroll, 2017). Here I can see how paratextual battlegrounds emerged that actively framed *La La Land* against a seemingly more 'progressive' film, showing how this paratextual discourse enveloped multiple texts. This suggests that more 'prestigious' films are indeed subject to paratextual battlegrounds and continues my use of Newman and Levine (2012), and the act of 'legitimizing blockbusters' referenced in chapter one. By framing films against each other, we see how paratextual battlegrounds appear to be an ever-present fixture of film discourse, and I would invite further study into how these battlegrounds reflect the type of film they are focused on.

Though my second chapter assessed how new critical figures and positionings have emerged in contemporary media, this could not, by definition, offer comprehensive coverage. Work by Frobenius (2014) surrounding vloggers explores how video blogs encourage engagement from an audience and we can apply this to specific instances of film vloggers to explore how online participatory culture has enabled new critical positions. By encouraging further study into a channel such as Red Letter Media, we would be able to further assess how this critical shifting can occur in an online space and attempt to position this type of figure in a revised field. This would enable us to continue to present a more fluid depiction of the field that acknowledges the multifaceted nature of the contemporary critic. This can be extended to even more unconventional figures as Frey discusses how, in the promotional materials for the 2012 film *The Impossible* (Bayona), 'criticism focused pointedly on the marketing campaign and, above all, the poster... rather than reviews exclusively from broadsheet, tabloid, television, or radio critics, however, the longest and most prominent quotations came from... Twitter users, not professional critics' (2015, p81). Here we find viewers of a film placed in a position of critical authority using paratexts, a move that warrants further exploration as a more drastic form of an 'interloper' figure.

Though I feel that my case studies were very successful at providing a good depiction of the changing role of the critic in the contemporary field of film criticism, providing strong examples through which

I could critique Gray and Bourdieu, it is not to say this approach could not be improved. The fact that all three selected case studies were American critics suggests that my findings only presented a certain perspective on the field, and a consideration of a wider range of critics would of course provide a more thorough mapping of the field. My inclusion of Rotten Tomatoes further complicated my thesis and showed that there are many ways to approach contemporary reception that complicates a traditional understanding of Bourdieu.

As recently as October 2018, new work is emerging that furthers validates my depiction of paratextual battlegrounds. Writing about the reception of *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (Johnson, 2018), Morten Bay's paper 'Weaponizing the haters: The Last Jedi and the strategic politicization of pop culture through social media manipulation' (2018) depicts how politicised social media discourse had entered pop culture and informed the reception of this film. Despite a generally positive reception to the film, Bay describes how negative responses were largely politically motivated, with 'organized influence measures' such as troll accounts acting as a 'political persuasion tactic' (pp28-29). Even Bay's title, with its reference to 'weaponizing' groups, portrays this type of paratextual activity as contentious and reinforces my description of battlegrounds. His conclusion that 'pop culture debates on social media are being politicized, sometimes for strategic purposes that have nothing to do with the subject under debate' suggesting that 'researchers studying these matters may find it beneficial to turn their attention to pop culture and how political messaging is propagated in its fandom' (p29) demonstrates an awareness of the wider cultural impact of these paratextual battlegrounds. Though Bay acknowledges the limitations of his study as presenting just as a small sample of the reception of *The Last Jedi*, the conclusions of this research tie in with my own thesis and show that new paratextual battlegrounds are forever emerging that find new ways to attempt to challenge conventional power dynamics. Far from the simple image of 'entryways' described by Gray in 2010, less than a decade later we find an image of paratextual battlegrounds that do not only challenge our understanding of conventional power relations but suggest further implications in assessing how contemporary paratexts compete to shape ideological readings throughout culture.

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