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Regeneration & Rebirth: Anatomy of the Franchise Reboot

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In 2005, Christopher Nolan resurrected the *Batman* brand from the cinematic graveyard and revived the film franchise for the 21st-century consumer. This successful rejuvenation, in both the critical and economic spheres, has resulted in a groundswell of franchise activity that spawned a set of texts increasingly referred to as the "reboot" cycle of films. To some extent, the strategy here is to nullify history and disconnect stagnant or failed product from a new, cinematic experiment. This provides an opportunity for the major Hollywood film studios to resuscitate, recycle, and regenerate "age-old but dilapidated franchise[s]" by returning to a recognizable and iconic product range rather than original, untested material (Day, 2009: 41). From an economic perspective, this "protects […] investment by reducing risks" and maximizes the marketing potential of cinematic texts (Balio, quoted in Neale, 2000: 237). As Lussier claims:

> [Remakes and reboots] generally come from brand recognition […] Studios have these little gems in their library. They may have fallen out of favour or disappeared to some extent but they're still the names the public recognize. So they dust them off and try again. Quite simply they're easier to sell because they have name recognition. It's like reinvigorating the brand. (Lussier, quoted in Russell, 2009: 89)

Arguably, then (and rather cynically, perhaps), the financial and critical triumph of Nolan's *Batman* series ushered in a zeitgeist of franchise regenerations that strive to emulate its accomplishments. As a result, the reboot has become a "blockbuster" or "tent-pole" event that, if successful, can "support the economy of an entire studio" (Cucco, 2009: 218-19) or, as Wolf claims, sustain the global economy generally (1999). *The Dark Knight* (2008) broke box-office records to become the first billion-dollar film in history (Radner, 2011: 170); *Casino Royale* (2006) became the most successful Bond film in the series until its sequel *Quantum of Solace* (2008) took the accolade; and the J.J Abrams *Star Trek* (2008) reboot followed suit with a global take of $400 million dollars, the highest grossing entry in the mega-franchise so far (Leyland, 2010: 74). Aside from these significant economic achievements, the films were critically celebrated, unsettling the notion that hype is the only determining factor of success.

Historically, recycling, repackaging and "revisioning" has often been criticized as evidence of creative exhaustion, but it is important to recognize that reinterpretations, remakes and revisions have always been a feature of the cinematic landscape (King, 2007: 65). It is also worth mentioning that film is not the only medium intent on recycling its archival vault: serializations, remakes and sequels are common features of nineteenth-century theatre (Neale, 2000: 257). The comic-book colossus DC has published monthly adventures of Superman and Batman for over seventy years, whilst archetypes such as Sherlock Holmes, James Bond and *Star Trek* have been in constant circulation and, indeed, recirculation in some form or other for decades. Simply put, the concept of textual repetition and revision is not a new phenomenon, but a vital ingredient of the cultural stew, though it is often heralded as a signifier of aesthetic atrophy and stultification.

This article does not suggest that the film industries deliver aesthetic product via a figurative hypodermic injection into an audience of cultural sponges that are manipulated into complicity and conformity. More pointedly, in fact, the reboot strategy is indicative of a critical and astute audience: if cinemagoers accepted Hollywood product without question or discernment, the film industries could simply spin out sequel after sequel, without worrying about box office receipts because *everything* would sell, regardless of quality or taste. As we will see, the profit principle is only one of many factors governing the reboot's *raison d'être*.

On the other hand, I do not suggest that the audience is entirely emancipated from the economic structures and dictates of corporate entities. As Gomery points out, Hollywood is a "textbook example of monopoly capitalism" and remains "a collection of businesses seeking power and profit" (2005: 27). I believe the reboot cycle of franchise films illustrates a struggle for hegemony taking place within the cultural sphere, an unequal dialogue between spectator and industry; unequal because Hollywood "have awesomely more resources at their disposal to shape the agenda" and their aesthetic output (Wayne, 2005: 6). The buck, as it were, stops with them.

Yet the consumer clearly has a voice. The motive for rebooting a film franchise is at least in part a response to a commercial and/or critical failure of some kind. Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005) had to fight to repair the damage done by Schumacher's *Batman and Robin* (1997), which effectively "transformed a money-spinning franchise into a radioactive turkey cat dinner" and forced the property into cinematic hibernation for almost a decade (Morrison, 2011: 338). Similarly, the decision to perform a generic *volte-face* with the James Bond series was not influenced entirely by commercial concerns. *Die Another Day* (2002) was the most economically successful Bond installment at that point, setting

"new box office records for the series" (Chapman, 2007: 240). Why, then, would a reboot be necessary given this economic success? James Chapman argues that within the fan community, *Die Another Day* "soon became a leading contender for worst Bond movie" and this precipitated the need for re-evaluation and reinvention (*Ibid*.). Executive producer Barbara Broccoli claims there was an altogether different reason behind Bond's 21st-century "upgrade": "September 11th happened and it felt inappropriate for the films to continue down that fantastical path. So we decided to move to a more serious Bond" (quoted in Day, 2010: 70). Indeed, Pierce Brosnan's final outing as 007 includes an invisible car, a death-defying surf maneuver using a kayak, and a plastic-surgery operation that surely belongs in the realm of science fiction. From this perspective, the motivation for rebooting the franchise is to strip the superspy of his superpowers and situate him in a "real" environment rather than the preposterous, pantomimic habitat of *Die Another Day* and its antecedents. As Jonathan Crocker suggests, the 2000s saw franchise films infused with more "reality" and less fantasy, which may be attributable to the post-9/11 climate (2010: 95). Batman, too, cast off the gothic trappings of Burton and the hyperbolic extravagances of Schumacher in place of a Gotham City rooted in the "real" world. As Grant Morrison puts it, "Everything about *Batman Begins* was as carefully worked out [...] to be 'believable'" (2011: 342).

This article, then, explores the reboot cycle of franchise films and seeks to offer a systematic analysis of the ways the term has been articulated to craft a working definition of the concept. Indeed, a specific paradigmatic designation remains unexplored by the academic community, whilst discourses within UK mainstream publications (such as *Empire* and *Total Film*) have referred to the reboot, the remake, the sequel, the genre process and the "television feature" (Verevis, 2006: 37) as conceptually conflated entities without attempting to define, interrogate or clarify the term. In this article I aim to tease out these contradictions.

For example, Nick De Semelyen describes *Tron: Legacy* as "part-sequel, part-remake" and a "smart reboot," yet it would best be described as a sequel to the original 1982 film rather than this cacophony of paradigms (2011: 48). Several films on the 2011 release schedule have been characterised as reboots, including: the Coens' remake—or "readaptation" to use Thomas Leitch's taxonomy (2002: 45)—of *True Grit* (Crook, 2011: 145); *The Green Hornet* (Crowther, 2011: 73), which fits neatly into Constantin Verevis' (2006: 37) notion of a television feature; *Death Race 2,* a sequel to the *Death Race* remake (Geary, 2011: 138); and a belated return to Springwood in Wes Craven's *Scream 4*—surely a sequel given the film's numerical identity and the return of almost all the original cast (Newman, 2011: 75). Simply put, a single film cannot be rebooted, only remade or followed up with a sequel. To describe a single unit as a reboot is not a cogent designation, as stand-alone revisions invariably fit

into remake taxonomies already in discourse. A reboot is, essentially, a franchise-specific concept (Arnett, 2009: 1). It is important to emphasize that what we are discussing here is serial fiction rather than self-contained narrative units. Generic markers already exist to explain the remaking of a singular text, whether using Michael Druxman (1975), Leitch (2002), or Verevis' (2006) taxonomies. *Batman Begins* et al strive to disavow their previous filmic incarnations "with the specific purpose of beginning the franchise anew" (Arnett, 2009: 3).

To demonstrate this point, I begin by briefly explaining the difference between the reboot and the remake, the prequel and the sequel. Although I argue that the reboot is a relatively new phenomenon in film, it is not brand new *per se*, as the technique has existed within comic books for decades, and parallels will be drawn between this method and that of the film franchise reboot. This leads into an analysis of Christopher Nolan's *Batman* series, which is then adopted as an interpretive framework to further highlight the codes of the reboot paradigm and how this treatment alters the meaning of texts and connects them via a "mosaic of citations" (Kristeva, quoted in Horton, 1998: 3) across what Jim Collins describes as "the intertextual array" (1992). Finally, I explore the claims made by film writers and industry figures that *Terminator Salvation* (2009), *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (2008), and a significant number of other texts are reboots, where such claims seem ill-defined and problematic. Many writers, critics and industry professionals invoke the term without interrogation or definition, leading to a multiplicity of meanings that confuse and contradict. I argue that various film institutions seek to align themselves with the economic and critical accomplishments of *Batman Begins*/*The Dark Knight* and *Casino Royale*/*Quantum of Solace* to spin a whirlpool of audience interest and profit potential. The rebooted *Batman* series is a focal point because it is a crucial textual force that influenced the cycle of franchise reboots that followed, and, indeed, continues in its wake.

Remakes, Reboots and Re-launches

Reboots and remakes share an abundance of commonalities, but this does not mean they are conjoined entities without distinction. Both remakes and reboots "repeat recognizable narrative units" to some extent (Verevis, 2006: 1), while both rearticulate properties from the cultural past in a pattern of repetition and novelty (Horton, 1998: 6). It can be argued, however, that a film remake is a singular text bound within a self-contained narrative schema; whereas a reboot attempts to forge a *series* of films, to begin a franchise anew from the ashes of an old or failed property. In other words, a remake is a reinterpretation of *one* film; a reboot "re-starts" a *series* of films that seek to disavow and render inert its predecessor's validity.

Furthermore, a reboot is not the same as a prequel as it strives to disconnect itself, in a spatio-temporal sense, from the earlier incarnation in a quest for autonomy. Concurrently, a reboot is not a sequel as this would, once again, imply an adherence to continuity. A reboot wipes the slate clean and begins the story again from "year one," from a point of origin and from an alternative parallel position: *Batman Begins* tells the story of the Dark Knight, who he is and how he came to be; Abrams' *Star Trek* depicts the original Enterprise crew *in utero*; and *Casino Royale* portrays James Bond's inauguration as a 00-agent with a license to kill. All these texts show the protagonist(s) in a process of "becoming" (Arnett, 2009: 4), and this is a fundamental feature of the reboot.

The term reboot, in its original context, is "used to describe the process of restarting a computer or electronic device [in order] to recover from an error" ("Reboot Definition," 2010). From this viewpoint, the commercial and critical disappointment of the Burton/Schumacher cycle of *Batman* films resulted in a kind of central error in the "aesthetic processing unit" that "crashed" the operating system. Shutting down the computer—or in this case, the franchise—and rebooting it, resets the hardware and, hopefully, restores the unit to optimum functionality. As with a computer's internal memory, rebooting the system does not signify total loss of data. Rebooting a franchise does not imply that its core memory is destroyed. In other words, pressing the reboot button does not eradicate the iconographic memory of the cultural product. Batman functions as "a rigid and consistent template which specifies not just the character's appearance but his location, associations, motivations and attributes" and this remains intact (Brooker, 2005: 39).

Due to academic neglect in this area, the discourses surrounding the film franchise reboot are to be found primarily within mainstream cinema publications and on the internet (although David Hollands (2010) has published a short essay in the undergraduate journal *Film Matters*, but does not offer a definition of the term, except to claim that it is a new category of remake). Thomas Willits offers what I believe is a more accurate description: "reboot means to restart a serial entertainment universe that has already been previously established, and begins with a new storyline and/or timeline that disregards the original writer's previously established history, thus making it obsolete and void" (2009: 1).

The description of a parallel timeline is an interesting and valid point, as the comic book medium has used this technique—and arguably popularized it—to explain and rationalize shifts in narrative continuity. DC Comics, home of the archetypal triumvirate of superheroes Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman, created a narrative universe whereby all the principle players operate in a story-world with an internal logic—what

Matt Hills describes as a "hyperdiegesis" (Hills, 2002: 137). In other words, all of DC's characters live in the same spatio-temporal environment: for example, Superman and Batman are friends and regularly join forces to combat evil, to fight side-by-side with a slew of other DC icons in the Justice League, and star in their own series, *Superman/Batman*. This grand narrative logic gave birth to innumerable narrative paradoxes; hence DC created the "multiverse," wherein multiple configurations of key characters operate across an infinite number of parallel worlds, thereby restoring narrative continuities. This creates opportunities for new stories to be told that do not pollute or negate previous narratives, or infuriate often pedantic fan communities. Over five decades of multiplicity, this corpulent narrative has become labyrinthine, and DC continuity became "so confusing [that] no new reader could easily understand it while older readers had to keep miles-long lists to keep things straight. And the writers [...] were always stumbling over each other trying to figure out simple answers to difficult questions" (Wolfman, 1985: 2). The solution to this problem was to reset the DC universe by creating a cataclysmic event that streamlined its continuity and enabled the narrative to be "rebooted" by merging all existing parallel worlds into one, single, unified coherence and, essentially, "rewiring" its history (Berger, 2008: 87). This effectively collapsed existing continuity and allowed the icons of DC to be re-launched from "year one," which would work on several levels. First, it rendered the current mythos null and void. Second, a new readership is invited into the fold that may otherwise have been put off by decades of continuity and lore which, according to Kaveney, is "the largest narrative constructions in human culture (exceeding, for example, the myths and legends of Latin and Greek literature)" (Berger, 2008: 5). Third, old readers and aficionados would be re-invited to participate in the dawn of a new universe. These older, experienced readers, who Collins (1992: 337) describes as "sophisticated bricoleurs," can re-negotiate the palimpsest of multiple texts situated across the "intertextual array." Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, DC is an industrial machine and is therefore concerned with making money or, even more pointedly, making a profit. Comic books, like all popular forms, are "commercial works of art [and] are always based on the compromises that that involves" (Kaveney, 2008: 24). These factors combine and coalesce to influence the production of the DC comic-book universe.

Hence, *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1986), a twelve-part series that destroyed DC's multiverse and killed a range of characters, including Supergirl and the Flash. Richard Berger describes this strategy as a "'time-warp' device [that allowed] the DC stable of comic book superheroes to begin again," free from the constraints of a convoluted, confusing and contradictory continuity (2008: 97). Superman's origin story was re-written and re-envisioned by John Byrne in a six-part series titled *Man of Steel* (which intriguingly is the title of Zack Snyder's

forthcoming *Superman* film franchise reboot), whilst Batman's origin story was revisited and streamlined by Frank Miller in the seminal text, *Batman: Year One* (1987), a major influence on Nolan's *Batman Begins.* Wonder Woman died at the climax of *Crisis* and was subsequently resurrected in 1987 in her own reboot. Death in the comic-book universe is rarely a permanent affair. Superman, Batman, Supergirl, the Flash and Captain America, to name a few, have all died and been miraculously resurrected through some quirk of ratiocination. Death and rebirth are common features of the superhero hyperdiegesis.

Of course, the medium of comic books is subject to change given its serialised nature and needs "revisioning, reversioning, and revisiting" (Parody, 2011: 2) to remain contemporary. Whereas *Crisis on Infinite Earths* destroyed the multiverse and restarted the fictional universe of DC, twenty years later, its sequel *Infinite Crisis* (2006) resurrected the multiverse as a nexus of 52 parallel worlds that again sought to iron out inconsistencies and expand narrative potentialities. As veteran DC writer Julius Schwartz once commented: "Every ten years or so, the universe needs an enema" (quoted in Kaveney, 2008: 191-192). Suffice to say, reboots, relaunches and rebranding exercises have become a staple of the superhero genre of comic books, allowing "new creators to stamp their mark on old characters and companies to breathe new life into tired properties" (Molcher, 2011: 48). I argue that the cine-reboot functions in a similar manner. In the next section, I unpack the Batman film franchise to lay out its *modus operandi*.

Genesis of a Bat

In 1997, Joel Schumacher and fellow creators of *Batman and Robin* were universally castigated by critics and fans, forcing the franchise into hibernation for almost a decade. The neo-gothic aestheticism of Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) and its sequel, *Batman Returns* (1992) had regressed to the "camp" tones of the 1960s TV series with *Batman Forever* (1995) and *Batman and Robin* (1997) to such an extent that online fans were screaming for Schumacher's head. This may sound like hyperbole, but one website was titled "Bring Me The Head Of Joel Schumacher." Among the many commentators, Jeff Shain wrote with colourful invective:

> Schumacher, you little piss ant! Who the fuck gave you the right to direct anything remotely as cool as Batman? [...] pick up a Batman comic book you asinine fool? Does Gotham City look like Club Expo to you? Do you see any neon? What the fuck? And NIPPLES? This isn't a fucking joke! Batman isn't some two-bit circus freak like your bearded lady of a mother! He is the essence of gothic darkness, a man ripped between reality and fantasy,

> teetering on the brink of insanity with only his partner and butler and his mission to keep him from going crazy! Did you capture any of these elements? Of course not, because obviously you must have gone to Ronald McDonald[‘s] School of Film? Who’s the next villain, Schumacher, you schmuck, you prick [...] the Hamburglar? FUCK YOU! (Shain, quoted in Brooker, 2005: 306)

Until that point, the Bat brand on the silver screen had been an economic triumph that has arguably become the commercial blueprint for corporate synergy and extra-textual marketing strategies (Sabin, 1996: 167). Eight years later, in 2005, *Batman Begins* was released, prompting celebration of its dark palette among critics and audiences. Many believed this was a prequel to the Burton/Schumacher cycle of Bat films (Lewis, 2008: 365), but this was not the intention of the Warner Brothers studio, who wanted to invalidate the Schumacher era and regenerate the property anew. The first *Batman* films (*Batman*, *Batman Returns*, *Batman Forever* and *Batman and Robin*) constitute a complete franchise, whereas *Batman Begins* is neither prequel nor sequel to these texts but, rather, a separate, unrelated unit that restarts the series from “year one” without relying on the established continuity of its antecedents (in fact, actively negating them in its search for autonomy). In essence, this is a quintessential reboot. To illustrate the dislocation between the two film franchises, we must explore Burton’s *Batman* in conjunction with Nolan’s *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight*.

In Tim Burton’s version of the Batman mythos, the Joker (Jack Nicolson) “is given a name after fifty years of anonymity” (Brooker, 1999: 193). Jack Napier, as he is known in Burton’s universe, is a vicious criminal who is betrayed by gang leader Carl Grissom (Jack Palance) after Napier sleeps with Grissom’s wife. When the Gotham Police receive a tip-off from Grissom, they raid a warehouse where Napier and his cohorts are engaged in criminal activities. Eventually, Batman (Michael Keaton) arrives on the scene. Napier struggles with Batman, but ends up dangling above a vast container of boiling acid with only Batman’s grip to prevent him from falling. But, alas, Napier slips from Batman’s clutches and plummets into the bath of industrial chemicals below. This tragic event does not signify the end for Napier, who survives and re-christens himself the Joker, smothering his face with clown paint and lipstick to highlight his scars, which effectively resemble a psychotic, exaggerated grin. Thus, the Joker is born, a sociopath hell-bent on vengeance against the foe that destroyed his face and threatened his existence. However, in a *coup de théâtre* during the film’s denouement, it is revealed that the Joker is responsible for the death of Batman’s parents, an act witnessed by Bruce Wayne when he was a child. This serves as the catalyst that inspires the adult Wayne to create an alter ego with which to tackle the criminal underworld of Gotham: thus, the Batman is born, embittered “dark

knight" and costumed vigilante dispensing summary justice upon society's scourges. The Joker blames Batman for his pathological state but, as Batman counter-argues, "you killed my parents. You created me first."

This juxtaposition contrasts with the original comic-book source material, wherein the Joker is *not* portrayed as the murderer of Wayne's parents (that particular crime is committed by Joe Chill, who works for the Gotham City Mafioso). In *Batman Begins*, the narrative subverts the Burton interpretation and re-situates Joe Chill as the killer of Thomas and Martha Wayne, therefore precluding the idea of the Joker being responsible for this heinous act entirely. And while this may imply that Nolan's version of events is somehow legitimized as authentic due to its ostensible comic-book fidelity, Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's *The Killing Joke* (1988) graphic novel offers another interpretation of the Joker's origins "as a failed comedian who turns to crime to support his pregnant wife," thereby problematizing the notion of one, incontrovertible truth (Brooker, 1999: 193).

During the final scene of *Batman Begins,* Lieutenant Gordon explains to Batman that a new criminal prowls the streets of Gotham, a criminal who also has "a taste for the theatrical." Gordon hands over a playing card with the joker insignia clearly highlighted. The film ends with Batman promising to "look into it." In other words, Nolan's version of the Batman mythos is significantly different from Tim Burton's narrative, as made explicit by this scene. In Burton's film, Batman is partly responsible for the accident that maimed and scarred Napier. In Nolan's, the Joker already exists before Batman learns of his criminal activities. Furthermore, as we are introduced to the Joker in Nolan's *The Dark Knight*, played with maniacal intensity by Heath Ledger, the differences between the two franchises become even more apparent. Ledger's Joker is insidious and truly threatening compared with Nicolson's pantomimic clown-prince. Ledger's incarnation is not Jack Napier reborn; in fact, *this* Joker's true identity is not revealed, and the origin of his mutilated face is left undisclosed (although he does offer two conflicting stories on "how [he] got these scars"). One thing is certain: Heath Ledger's Joker is not the same as Jack Nicolson's Joker. Simply put, they do not exist in the same narrative universe. Ergo, *Batman Begins, The Dark Knight, and The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) are completely detached from the Burton tale and its sequels, at least narratively speaking. In short, they are two, disconnected franchises, what I call *Batman* F1 (1989-1997) and *Batman* FII (2005-present). This significantly alters the narrative of Burton's *Batman* and, arguably, supersedes it or, to use Berger's term once more, "rewires it." The reboot seeks autonomy through this dislocation, which as we will see is an improbable if not impossible endeavor. Nolan's Batman series is invariably measured by its ancestry. Ledger's Joker is truly frightening compared with Nicolson's, for instance (and by extension, Cesar Romero from the 1960s television text). To paraphrase

Angela Ndalianis, even though Nolan's Batman strives for autonomy and separation from its cinematic lineage (especially the risible *Batman and Robin*), the fact that they existed and still exist in the memory of the audience proves that autonomy is unlikely (2009: 282). As Ndalianis asks, "[H]ow can entire fictional histories and the characters who participated in them be wiped from the memories of readers who experienced them?" (2009: 280).

In Nolan We Trust

The overwhelming success of *Batman* FII has influenced a new cycle of films that continues as we enter the second decade of a new millennium. Arguably, film producers and directors seeking to align their product with the critical and financial achievements of Nolan's reboot have interpreted the term in various and contradictory ways. Popular publications such as *Empire* and *Total Film* have muddied the concept somewhat by collapsing the remake, the reboot, the sequel, the television feature and the genre dialectic into one paradigmatic jumble, without attempting to interrogate or define the concept. This section addresses this disorder by looking at the narratives of *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*, *Terminator Salvation*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (2010), and *Rise of the Planet of the Apes* (2011) to further demonstrate how the term has been articulated within the mainstream and the problematic collision of paradigms this has created.

2008 saw the release of a third *Mummy* film, *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* and director Rob Cohen claimed in a series of interviews that he was rebooting the franchise from "year one" (Richards, 2008: 76; Dawson, 2008: 32). However, Cohen's claim is contradictory, because this third *Mummy* installment is a sequel to the 1998 film *The Mummy Returns* and hence not a reboot due to its canonical status. Cohen insists that:

> [t]he third *Mummy* film bears little in common with what came before. This time we've got a whole new Mummy in the form of Jet Li [and] the action slips to the cold slopes of the Himalayas [as opposed to the desert landscape of the first two films]. (quoted in *Empire*, 223, [January], 2008: 26)

I would argue, however, that Cohen is describing the mechanics of genre—a dialectical struggle between formula and invention—rather than the reboot, which is a narrative technique that begins continuity afresh from a new spatio-temporal position. For instance, Brendan Fraser returns as Rick O'Connell, the hero of the text, and the narrative trajectory follows directly on from the two films in the series. And while it is true that several generic goalposts have been moved somewhat—Jet Li as the latest supernatural entity, for example, and the geographical shift

from Egypt to China—this is still very much a part of the same franchise. As John Fiske points out, "genre serves the dual needs of a commodity: on the one hand, standardization and familiarity and, on the other, product differentiation" (1987: 114). The changing locus of the latest *Mummy* film and the inclusion of Jet Li are hardly emblematic of a franchise reboot. There is no indication of a chronological shift to "year one," no significant tonal transformation, and no sense of dislocation from the previous films. In fact, *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* relies explicitly on the first two texts in the series and does not attempt to invalidate them in any way. It is, essentially, *The Mummy 3*.

Similarly, *Terminator Salvation* is not a reboot, but a sequel. Once again, there is a generic shift from present-day America to a war-ravaged future only glimpsed via flashbacks and dialogue in the first three films in the series, but as with the *Mummy* example, this latest installment does not contradict the events detailed in the other Terminator films, but explicitly depends on them. In *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003), the first stirrings of war between humans and technology are depicted, and the film concludes with John Connor watching in horror as the battle unfurls before him. *Terminator Salvation* simply continues along this narrative trajectory. Still, numerous articles referred to the latest incarnation as a reboot rather than a sequel (Hewitt, 2008: 140; 157; Lipworth et al., 2009: 56). As Adam Smith writes in *Empire*, "[i]t is clear that, at least in the studio's mind, *Salvation* is the first in a new franchise" (2009: 81). Producer Moritz Borman claims that the reason for not calling the film *Terminator 4* is simple: "It's *Terminator: Salvation*. What we're doing is rebooting the franchise" (quoted in Harley, 2009: 61). However, like *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor*, this is arguably *Terminator 4*.

Moreover, Christian Bale, who plays John Connor in *Terminator Salvation*, is also the man behind Batman's cowl in the reboot, which connects the film directly with Nolan's texts. Bale commented that he "could see a similar reinvention was needed to what [he] felt was so well achieved by Chris Nolan with *Batman Begins*" (Harley, 2009: 63). It is also significant that the script for *Salvation* was co-written by Jonathan Nolan, Christopher's brother, who also co-wrote *The Dark Knight*. As Harley argues, "the involvement of Bale and *The Dark Knight* script-god Jonathan Nolan fans excitement" (Harley, 2009: 61).

Likewise, Samuel Bayer discusses his reboot of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* franchise and conjures Nolan's name as a linchpin to symbolically connect their respective films:

> I like what Christopher Nolan did with *Batman*. I think Tim Burton is an amazing director, but I think that Christopher Nolan reinvented, to a degree, the superhero genre. Heath Ledger's portrayal made people forget about Jack Nicolson. The new Batmobile made me

> forget about the old Batmobile [...] that's the way we're approaching *Nightmare* [*on Elm Street*]. (quoted in McCabe, 2010: 36)

In a similar fashion, Rupert Wyatt, director of the *Planet of the Apes* reboot *Rise of the Planet of the Apes*, draws comparison with *Batman Begins*:

> This is part of the mythology and it should be seen as that. It's not a continuation of the other films; it's an original story. It does satisfy the people who enjoy those films. The point of this film is to achieve that and to bring that fan base into this film exactly like *Batman* [*Begins*]. (quoted in Lussier, 2011)

It is no coincidence that Christopher Nolan recently acted as mentor on a new Superman film project that sets out to reboot the franchise following the critical and financial failure of 2006's *Superman Returns*. As *Man of Steel* (2013) director Zack Snyder remarked of the connection with Nolan's Batman films:

> If you look at *Batman Begins*, there's that structure, there's the canon that we know about and respect, but on the other hand there's this approach that pre-supposes that there haven't been any other movies [...] in every aspect, the whole thing is from that perspective. (Snyder, quoted in Tyley, 2011: 112)

Given the rhetoric in the examples cited above, it can be suggested that film industry professionals—directors, writers, producers and actors, for instance—are engaging with the media to promote cinematic product by aligning it with the billion-dollar achievements of *The Dark Knight*, using the reboot label for promotional purposes. The next section looks at the intertexual/hypertextual aspects of the reboot and how a text can never achieve complete autonomy from its vast and expansive genealogy, thus creating a paradoxical form: a product that seeks to begin at an origin nexus yet is in constant conflict with its textual ancestry and cultural memory.

Batman and the Intertexual Array

According to Hollands, one of the primary functions of the reboot is to "destroy the 'original text,' while also denying the existence or importance of said text's sequels" (2010: 10). However, no text is an island, and the year one approach is a strategy that does *not* render past narratives obsolete and irrelevant, regardless of industry intention, but rather reactivates them within an increasingly complex web of Bakhtinian dialogism indicative of our media-saturated culture. Whilst the reboot strategy strives to begin a franchise from year one, to argue that this

approach renders all the mythological components of the *Batman* universe obsolete repudiates the heteroglossial and hypertextual factors that can reactivate the multiplicity of anterior texts across cultural history that set in motion a whole raft of different readings.

Julie Kristeva coined the term intertextuality in the 1960s to describe "the ways in which any text is a skein of other texts […] Earlier texts are always present and may be read in the newer text" (Horton & McDougal, 1998: 3). For instance, Heath Ledger's Joker, as discussed above, does not exist within a vacuum-sealed cinematic text, but rather initiates a dialogue with *all* the representations of the Joker situated across the intertextual array comprised of comics, television series, graphic novels, films, and other *Batman* related products and practices. From this intertextual viewpoint, it can be posited that the franchise reboot addresses old *and* new spectators within its aesthetic sphere to maximise spectator interest and, of course, revenue. *Batman Begins* and by extension other reboots do not insist upon a well-versed, comic-literate audience. The reboot invites the new and uninitiated into the fold. But the audience will inevitably also consist of "sophisticated bricoleurs" who take pleasure from locating intertextual references and creating a reading based on this extra-knowledge (Collins, 1992: 337). These bricoleurs have an unprecedented awareness of cultural history that understand texts, not as "self-contained structures" but as "the repetition and transformation of other textual structures" (Verevis, 2006: 18). A reboot can significantly efface the original text and invite the spectator to read between multiple texts" (Horton & McDougal, 1998: 4).

Gerard Genette's concept of the hypertext, a sub-theory of intertextuality, illustrates how texts can operate and re-activate chains of associations with the multitude of anterior products situated across "the intertextual array" that can bring into play a whole range of limitless interpretations (1997). A hypertext, that is a new text, "transforms, modifies, elaborates or extends" an anterior text or 'hypotext'" (Genette, quoted in Stam 2000: 209). For example, the correlation between filmic adaptations and their source novels are "seen as hypertexts derived from pre-existing hypotexts" (*Ibid*.). This sets in motion a textual network that allows an increasingly media literate audience to follow these "multiple paths" to negotiate with the text and build their own path through the information, unrestrained by encoded readings (Elsaesser & Buckland, 2002: 161-162). As Claire Parody argues, "canonicity, continuity, and authority become problematic concepts, constantly re-negotiated [and] come together as an 'array' of versions, origin points, co-existing, overlapping, and contradictory narrative realities, rather than a master narrative and stable textual corpus" (2011: 3).

As with the reboot, the concept of the hypertext can be traced to the realm of computer programming, whereby a text is "composed of blocks

of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains or trails in an open-ended perpetually unfinished textuality described by the terms link, node, network, web and path" (*Ibid*.). To transpose this model to the analysis of media texts, one can argue that the hypertext encourages the reader to navigate the text—whether a film, book, television series, or song—by following the large range of networks, links and pathways to construct their own journey through the information, unimpeded by "strict linearity and predetermined meaning" (*Ibid*.). A single, definitive meaning is a misnomer, as levels of interaction shift and mutate according to the position of the reader and the textual knowledge they possess or seek out. Similarly, an audience not well-versed in a narrative universe as intricate and cavernous as the Batman mythos can read and interpret a text in a different but no less important manner.

The Batman textual matrix is a vast and intricate palimpsest of a story-world that includes animated series, graphic novels, comic books, television, cinema, radio and magazines. The franchise reboot may strive to disconnect new product and new narrative from its historical situation but, as comic book writer Grant Morrison states, "past continuities can never be erased" from the memories of the audience, no matter how many crises are inflicted upon the fictional hyperdiegesis (cited in Ndalianis, 2009: 281). While *Crisis on Infinite Earths*/*Infinite Crisis* and the like may have "wiped out entire characters and universes; the fact that they existed in the memory of their readers meant that they were real" (Ndalianis, 2009: 282). The same is true of the Batman films. Nolan's *Batman Begins* and *The Dark Knight* may aspire to disavow the Burton-Schumacher films to some extent, but they cannot disengage entirely or even partly from those works. The reboot becomes part of the hyperdiegesis or mythos and spectators "actively participate in a gamelike conversation that's about the construction of the [...] genre across media: its various points of origin, its points of divergence, and its radical transformations" (Ndalianis, 2009: 285).

Conclusion: Hollywood Hegemony

This article, then, suggests that the critical and financial success of Nolan's Batman films has ushered in a cycle of franchise film reboots that seek to restart, rebrand and relaunch pre-sold iconographic product in order to further extend their economic and cinematic life-span. Batman, as a film series at least, was dead in the water following Schumacher's *Batman and Robin*. The *Star Trek* franchise had passed its expiration date in both the filmic and televisual arenas, and the Enterprise had been put into mothballs indefinitely. James Bond was still an economically robust film franchise, but was increasingly descending into farce and parody, which angered the fan community and threatened the series' survival. *The Planet of the Apes* series was a cinematic relic, and Tim Burton's 2001 reimagining failed to reignite the franchise's popularity,

meeting with negative reviews and backlash from the fan community. Sherlock Holmes was a fossilised detective, and Conan the Barbarian a forgotten warrior of the Schwarzenegger halcyon days. Superman's cape and tights no longer made us believe a man could fly, while Spider-Man was punished into submission by a bad film and even worse reviews. The solution? Press the reboot button and try again. Effectively, this means that critical and/or commercial malfunction is not a catastrophic end, but an opportunity to wipe the slate clean and implement a new beginning from "year one." Spider-Man's imminent 2012 reboot comes a mere five years after the last Sam Raimi film. Nolan's Batman series will end with 2012's *The Dark Knight Rises*, and reports confirm that Warner Bros. will look to capitalize further on the success of its billion-dollar property by rebooting the franchise again (Bradshaw et al., 2011: 91). Schwartz's statement about giving the universe an enema every ten years requires readjustment to incorporate this rapid acceleration of the process.

I would argue that the profit principle remains the pre-eminent driving force behind the immense popularity of the reboot cycle of films. The properties receiving the reboot treatment are iconic brands that are instantly recognizable across the cultural landscape, and as such, these pre-sold identities carry less of a risk than original material that may or may not attract the public's imagination and thus the contents of their purses. Yet this is not as cynical as it may seem. The audience plays a vital role in this process and the struggle for hegemony is never static but always on the move, negotiating, dialoguing, resisting and acquiescing. The reboot strategy illustrates that audiences critically assess the texts they consume and, at times, cause the industry to rethink their tactics. It is an erroneous supposition to suggest that audiences are solely manipulated by Hollywood corporate structures, but it is equally erroneous to surmise that manipulation does not occur or affect people. The reboot is a(nother) complex interplay between spectator and industry, art and commerce, the old and the new; a dialectic that "is never simply a top-down process of imposition," but a struggle within the societal superstructure (Wayne, 2005: 6). This "same but different" interplay is not a new addition to the cultural cauldron but, as I have argued, the reboot is a unique adjunct to the regenerative processes that have historically existed to revitalise, reinvent and recycle textual forms.

This article has posited a working definition of the film franchise reboot that seeks to begin a dialogue around this contemporary and contentious issue. The paradoxical discourses surrounding this subject open up a raft of questions about definition and meaning creation. For example, who decides meaning? Who, or what, determines which signs equal which signifiers and the resulting interpretations? Post-structuralist thought posits that linguistic chaos is the reality where signs are bound in an endless chain of signifiers without any final signification. But surely the quest for meaning is part of academic work, else we be subjected to an

orgy of meaninglessness and non-sequiturs. Hopefully, this discussion raises some important issues and contributes to the debate on franchise cinema and, by extension, the economic, aesthetic and textual forces in dialogue across the post-millennial cultural fabric.

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