CHAPTER 10

Playing Peter Parker

SPIDER-MAN AND SUPERHERO FILM PERFORMANCE

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Peter Parker is not just the defender of your friendly neighborhood, he's the nerd whose labor supports an age of marvels. And why shouldn't the exploits of this nebbish teen from Queens inspire delight, play, creativity, and even lunchboxes? Like Billy Batson and Steve Rogers before him, he is the ninety-eight pounder's revenge, the secret hope of every locker-stuffed milquetoast, the ugly duckling's swan song. He heralds a Silver Age because he embodies a simple narrative truth: power fantasies are not universally palatable visions of infantile wish fulfillment; rather, they are illusions that render the helplessness of one's everyday circumstances more salient. Simply put: superpowers wouldn't make things better; they'd only limn the ordinary pain we struggle to overcome. Stan Lee and Steve Ditko's profound revision of a basic superheroic trope is arguably the conceptual cornerstone upon which Marvel was built, and it is certainly no accident that the child of their insight—Spider-Man—is the company's most public face.

Marvel Entertainment (ME) became a limited liability company in 1998. Since then, the company has primarily been in the business of generating and exploiting creative intellectual property (IP) (Johnson 64–67). Specifically, this IP takes the form of superheroic characters—*range brands* that originate within the comics produced by their publishing subsidiary, Marvel Worldwide (MW), but can extend as an elastic range of *sub-brands* across media (Aaker 68–69). These sub-brands include the various MW publications, cinematic and televisual adaptations (whether licensed by other studios or produced in-house by Marvel Studios [MS] or Marvel Television [MTV]), cartoons (licensed or in-house productions by Marvel Animation

[MA]), and electronic games. The relationship between these range brands and sub-brands can also be parsed in narratological terms: the former serve as *hypotextual* commodities with considerable adaptogenic fertility—that is, they spawn any number of transformed *hypertextual* narrative instantiations (Genette 5). With a production history that dates back to 1962, Spider-Man is arguably Marvel's most fertile flagship brand (or hypotext). At the time of this writing, the range brand has spawned eight cartoons, a newspaper strip, two television series, numerous paperback novels and children's books, over thirty video-game iterations, a BBC radio series, four stage productions, and eight feature-length films (two of which are unauthorized by Marvel).

Like other iconic range brands in the Marvel Universe, Spider-Man's pop cultural saturation makes him an ideal case study to help us understand ME's contemporary approach to intellectual property. Specifically, we are interested in *performance*—the relationship between the dramatic performance of an actor in a filmic sub-brand of a Marvel property and the ensuing economic and cultural performance of the broader range brand itself. Increasingly, screen performers are playing a key role within the complexly intertwined factors that enable Marvel to function as a twenty-first-century transmedia conglomerate. Their situation within Marvel's corporate aesthetics and business practices warrants substantial consideration. Therefore, I will show how an actor's embodiment of an iconic superheroic property makes manifest the interplay of broader economic, technological, and discursive forces.

As high-profile commercial enterprises, superhero film franchises are predicated upon their anticipated fulfillment of several industrial objectives. First and foremost is their central role as economic linchpins in the output of many twenty-first-century studios, to say nothing of the synergistically integrated ancillary enterprises undertaken by the studio's parent company. Within a creative production culture, the superhero film has also become a privileged vehicle for the cultivation of new technological conventions, particularly the showcasing of bleeding-edge digital craftsmanship. Finally, at the level of reception, the superhero film is a transmedia object par excellence insofar as it is required to serve as the hub of networked fannish activity. Discursively speaking, to produce a superhero film is to deliberately engage in cage rattling: it is an enterprise predicated upon proffering an as-yet-unsanctified object for cultic scrutiny and potential canonization by a community of exacting subcultural gatekeepers.

The three industrial objectives outlined above create distinct challenges for the twenty-first-century actor appearing in a Marvel film, particularly those privileged laborers and spectacular bodies known as stars. I will provide a description of the complex system in which the various actors who have played the arachnoid hero operate. In being tasked with the responsibility of physically embodying an iconic transmedia property, these actors are confronted with obligations and expectations that are atypical of performative instantiation. My aim is to demonstrate how a superheroic performance might be circumscribed by a particularized interweaving of economic, technological, and discursive preconditions. Furthermore, this circumscription—a veritable web of industrial complexities—will be shown as a set of parameters unique to the production of transmedia superhero franchises.

A caveat is necessary here. In this chapter I will restrict the discussion to the analysis of performances by Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield in Columbia's five feature-length Spider-Man films: Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002–2007) and Marc Webb's subsequent reboot, *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), and its sequel (2014). Of course, there have been other Spider-Men: Danny Seagren in *The Electric Company*'s recurring "Spidey Super Stories" skit (1974–1977); Nicholas Hammond in CBS's live-action *Amazing Spider-Man* TV series (1978–1979); Yamashiro Takuya in Toei's *tokusatsu* series (1978–1979); and Reeve Carney in the Broadway show *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* (2011–2014). Numerous actors have also lent their talents to voicing the character in his numerous cartoon and video-game incarnations. However, the specificities of these other media, as well as the socio-historical particularities of their production contexts, have their own requirements for performers that are beyond the scope of the chapter. Moreover, the economic and cultural prominence of these films—Raimi's *Spider-Man* was the first movie "to cross the $100 million mark in its first three days"—means that the cinematic adaptations reciprocally affect the overall Spider-Man range brand to a much greater extent than these other sub-brands do (Robson 50). Finally, in the period between the writing of this chapter and its publication, a third film actor will have assumed the wall-crawler's mantle: Tom Holland. However, this volume will go to press before the release of Holland's heroic debut in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), which obviously means his work will not be considered here. For these reasons, the discussion is limited to the dramatic work of Maguire and Garfield, who are arguably the most historically visible of web-heads.

SPIDEY AS CELEBRITY: STAR SUPERHEROES

Does a famous property necessitate representation by an equally famous actor? For some industry analysts, the question is debatable. The diminishing box-office returns of aging male stars since 2010 (typically Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt, and Will Smith) and their lack of economically consistent heirs are often offered as proof positive of a new "New Hollywood" in which content is king (Aftab). Film journalists increasingly posit that blockbuster properties can no longer be presold on the basis of their star performers (Bart). Following the publication of its "100 Most Valuable Stars of 2013" survey, for example, *Vulture* reported that most of the actors appearing in high-grossing superhero films accrued the survey's lowest public awareness scores (Buchanan). As one jeremiad for movie stars opines flatly, "currently, the over-saturation of the market by . . . franchises has relegated actors as a complement in a movie rather than its star. . . . The continuations of these types of films show that an actor's name no longer makes the franchise; instead, the franchise makes the actor" (Insignares).

Given the prevalence of these kinds of claims, and the frequency with which up-and-coming (rather than top) stars are cast in superhero franchises, are we to minimize Maguire and Garfield (both rising stars when cast in the first Spider-Man films) as mere cogs in a machine? This view would be shortsighted. Instead, it is necessary to consider how their situation as stars might be sublimated within the commercial logic of ME's transmedia productions. The position and meaningfulness of celebrity actors within Marvel's feature films are of a different nature than similar attributes in (relatively) unknown performers. Specifically, the integration of the star actor's body and the body of the character s/he portrays needs theorization, as it presents a unique challenge for the performer. Concomitantly, a pressing concern for media producers at ME is how to contend with the specificity of a star's body in the production of ancillary products—including MW's own ongoing titles and subsequent comic spinoffs.

It is useful to place our considerations here within ongoing theoretical distinctions between star vs. "ordinary" acting. The actor has (at least) two bodies with which to contend during a performance: her/his own actual corporeality and the fictional physicality of the character s/he portrays. An anonymous actor might readily achieve an "integrated performance," as her/his publicly unknown figure helps to minimize the distance between actor (actual body) and role (possible person) (Maltby 399). By contrast, the dramatic problem for the star actor is the substantial visibility of her/his

individualized and publicly familiar body. It never quite becomes integrated within the fictional reality of the film, but instead remains diegetically "semi-autonomous" (Maltby 389). The star's body is "hypersemioticised": it bears an accrual of associative significations amassed from its mediated appearances over the course of the star's career (King 142). These signs have always already come into semiotic play as the star begins to represent a character. In this way, the star's body becomes "ostensive": presentational and visible within a dramatic performance frame in which (character) representation and (technical) invisibility have aesthetic primacy (Naremore 80). We are always required to look both at and through a star.

With superhero adaptations, highly visible celebrity actors are further required to integrate their bodies within equally recognizable corporate matrices. The superhero is a locus of multiple discourses—creative/authorial, economic/legal, receptive/cultic—that collectively define the character as an iconic body. "Spider-Man" is not just a second physicality with which an actor must align his specific body; he is a pluralistic figuration within a public's collective or intersubjective memory. As such, he represents a unique challenge to the celebrity actor whose own ostensive image competes with the notoriety of the superhero's iconic image. This discursively resonant image is the third body with which an actor must productively contend.

In order to better appreciate this iconic, third body, we might compare it to Jean-Louis Comolli's description of a star's appearance in a biopic as "a body too much." For Comolli, the dramatic problem for historical fiction is that the material referentiality of a historical body (i.e., the famous individual in question) is at odds with the "empty mask" of the actor's body (50). As such, these odds produce discomfort in spectators who are familiar with the actual appearance of the historical personage. They never become fully committed to the film's simulation of historical reality, and wish for the actor's diegetically semi-autonomous body to "disappear" (ibid.). Therefore, the body-too-much of the historical character produces a "double inscription": a ghosting effect whereby historically knowledgeable viewers become hyperaware of the absent individual's spectral superimposition upon the actor (ibid.). The actor's body, in turn, is regarded as a denegation—a refusal to adequately comply ontologically with the world perceived.

So, analogously, the iconic cinematic superhero is also a body-too-much. However, the double inscription it may produce is much more complex than that of the biopic performer. For it is not the material specificity of

an actual historical body that is the problem; instead, it is the iconicity and intense plurality of the adaptogenic superhero's body. Meryl Streep, for example, might labor to affect precisely the fluty cadences of Margaret Thatcher's voice, and makeup artists might prosthetically alter her features to affect a closer approximation to the former prime minister. But Streep's "disappearance" in *The Iron Lady* (2011) is comparably easier to achieve than the analogous integrations of Maguire or Garfield. Streep has but one referent with which to contend mimetically: the physical referent of Thatcher. Maguire's and Garfield's respective vanishing acts are trumped by the fluid and composite nature of Spider-Man's own body-too-much. And thus, these stars find that their attempts at dramatic integration must satisfy a bewildering array of creative, receptive, and legal authorities.

With great talent comes great responsibility, certainly. But responsibility to whom? Just whose Spider-Man is an actor to instantiate? The one that best embodies an acclaimed writer-artist team's vision? The one that is authenticated by fan consensus for its perceived adherence to the character's "essence"? Or the one approved by executives for its downstream market profitability? Any actor appearing within an adaptation faces the various challenges presented by expectations of fidelity. But Maguire's body must cohere with an arguably less specific emblematic referent when he plays Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* (Baz Lurmann, 2013) than when he plays Spider-Man, and Garfield is also afforded a proportionately greater distance from his clone, Tommy, in *Never Let Me Go* (Mark Romanek, 2010). Actors are typically granted considerable latitude to make noteworthy authorial contributions to a film. But the performance choices of the superheroic actor are always circumscribed by authorities with whom actors in other types of films need not contend.

Let us consider, for example, the collaborative model of serialized comic production, with its multiple author-figures contributing to a single range brand. Dozens of writer-artist teams have developed the range brand since Ditko's departure from *The Amazing Spider-Man* (*TASM*) in 1966 and the end of Lee's tenure in 1973. Other fan-favorite pairings with influential runs on Spider-Man titles include Lee and John Romita Sr., Roger Stern and John Romita Jr., J. M. DeMatteis and Sal Buscema, David Micheline and Todd McFarlane, and Brian Michael Bendis and Mark Bagley. In what sense, then, might an actor incorporate the intentions of these different creators through his gestural references, or by virtue of his own integrated persona?

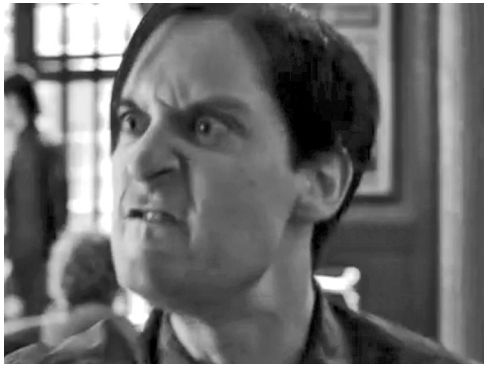
A profitable suggestion is to consider the graphical resemblance between

performance and comic text. The competing ontologies of drawing and photography in a comic book adaptation allow us to note the overlaps and discrepancies between actor and illustration. If "every drawing is by its style a visual interpretation of the world, in that it foregrounds the presence of an enunciator," then Maguire and Garfield enact their own performative enunciations (Lefèvre 8). These two actors vie for their own place within Spider-Man's ever-expanding portrait gallery, just as Paul Giamatti—in a different medium—is yet another graphic instantiation of Harvey Pekar in *American Splendor* (Shari Springer Berman and Robert Pulcini, 2003). And for fans, the cultic appeal of the actors' enunciations lies in the feedback loops they generate with regard to earlier comic hypotexts.

The casting of Maguire and Garfield follows the comics' graphic remodeling of Peter Parker from nerd to heartthrob. Ditko envisioned Peter as a rail-thin, gangly teen with owlish glasses and bad posture. Other more recent artists, such as Neil Edwards, Tony Harris, and Ramón Perez, echo this canonical treatment in their respective revisitations of the character's origins in *Spider-Man: Season One* (2012), *Spider-Man: With Great Power* (2008), and *TASM* vol. 3, no. 1.1 (2014), respectively. By contrast, Ditko's successor, Romita Sr., reengineered Peter as a more conventionally handsome and husky young man beginning in *TASM* no. 39 (1966). Romita Sr.'s interpretation of the character would become the dominant one within the comics for over two decades, and his Peter is probably the Peter with whom a general audience is most familiar. Some later hybrids of Ditko's and Romita Sr.'s respective approaches are also evident. For example, the co-creator of the alternate-continuity title *Ultimate Spider-Man* (*USM*), Mark Bagley, envisioned a smoldering Peter in the 118 issues he drew for the series (2000–2007), but he retained Ditko's emphasis on the character's diminutive physique and boyish features.

Tobey Maguire's Parker, then, can be said to evoke Ditko's early, more esoteric representation (fig. 10.1). Maguire is among the more neotenic of young stars, which makes him a logical heir to Ditko's milk-fed Parker. He also retains the spectacles and defeated physiognomy. "You're taller than you look," Mary Jane [Kirsten Dunst] tells him in *Spider-Man*, chiding his penchant to slouch. His overnight transformation to buffed-out hunkiness is treated with a comic wink ("Whoa," he gawps at the newly muscled reflection in his bedroom mirror). One can easily imagine Ditko's Parker yawping with Maguire's endearingly pubescent squeak. Arguably, his most interesting quality as a performer is his tendency to make idiosyncratic

10.1. Tobey Maguire vs. Steve Ditko's Peter Parker.

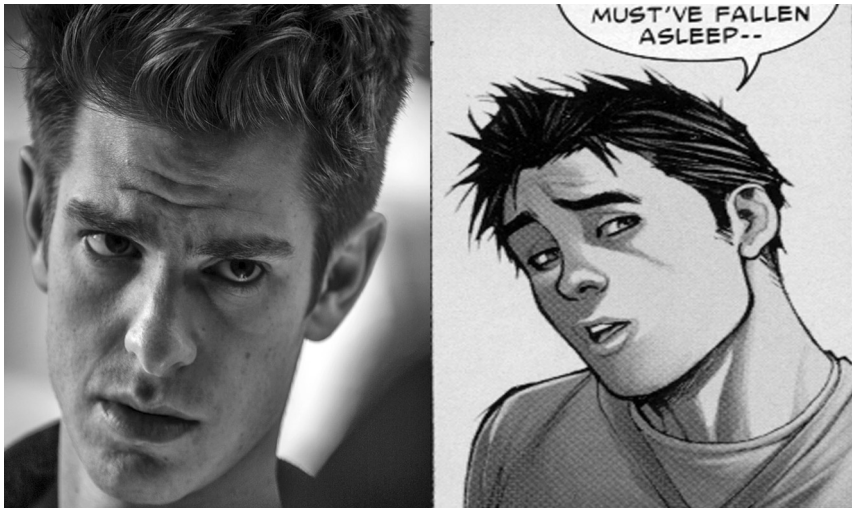


10.2. Emo Peter Parker: Maguire as meme fodder.

facial expressions at moments of extreme emotional or physical duress. Abruptly, his baby-faced features might contort into a strangely sharpened or flattened nose, a doubled chin, a saucer-eyed goggle, a weirdly cavernous philtrum. These expressive extremities receive their fullest workout during his expressivist turn as a Spidey-gone-bad in *Spider-Man* 3 (the so-called "Emo Peter Parker" sequences), and several of Maguire's gonzo faces have become fodder for popular memes (fig. 10.2). Suffice it to say, Maguire's surprisingly pliable face is well-suited to Ditko's signature tendency toward caricature and exaggeration.

By contrast, the casting of Andrew Garfield for Webb's films evokes Romita Sr.'s take on Peter Parker, and even more specifically, Bagley's version for *USM*. Webb himself testified that his films are "less based in Steve Ditko's world and probably closer visually . . . [to] *Ultimate Spider-Man*" (Boucher, "'Spider-Man' Director"). Garfield is slighter than Maguire, and his physique—with his lanky build and gangling neck—has some similarities to Bagley's pipsqueak Parker. His carelessly tousled hair also leans toward Bagley's interpretation and away from Romita's widow-peaked Peter. Blessed with strikingly expressive eyebrows, however, Garfield recalls Romita's revision of Peter as a matinee idol (fig. 10.3). Romita had Peter shed his specs for good, and in *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Garfield also typically goes without glasses, preferring contact lenses instead. Above all, Garfield comports himself with a palpable aloofness, as if channeling Robert Pattinson's ageless sense of superiority in *Twilight*'s (Catherine Hardwicke, 2008) high school scenes. Whereas Maguire was a Ditkoesque victim and pariah, Garfield drifts through Midtown High as if carried on the breeze of

10.3. Andrew Garfield and Emma Stone vs. John Romita Sr.'s and Ron Frenz's Peter and Gwen.



10.4. Andrew Garfield vs. Stefano Caselli's Peter Parker.

a secreted self-regard: less charismatic nerds are left to Flash Thompson's tender mercies in his stead. In *TASM*, this "Superior Spider-Man" intercedes on behalf of more hapless geeks, hefts his skateboard through the halls like a Roman standard-bearer, grinningly eavesdrops on a pair of dorks debating the physics of his web-slinging, and, in *TASM 2*, even high-fives his principal on graduation day. Garfield enacts these moments with nary a suggestion of the character's trepidation in early issues of *TASM*.

It should not be assumed, however, that Maguire's and Garfield's enunciations are authenticated simply because they are backward-compatible with MW's comic hypertexts. Otherwise, the comics take on a privileged and falsely generative hypotextual status. Garfield, for example, has declared that he fervently respected the comics that "saved [his] life" as a child, but he was equally inspired by his predecessor, Maguire, and "practiced [his] last line in the mirror" as an adolescent (Kit; David). Again, because Garfield's referent is a palimpsest, Maguire's model is as credible as the Spider-Man produced by Romita Sr. or Bagley. Just as noteworthy is the way in which Garfield's Parker serves as its own privileged feedback loop within MW's Spider-Man titles. Parker's graphical appearance can be said to increasingly resemble Garfield, particularly in the tousle-haired takes on the character by Stefano Caselli for *TASM* (fig. 10.4) and by Marco Checchetto for *Superior Spider-Man Team-Up*.

Given that the filmic sub-brands are now the more publicly visible manifestations of ME's range brands, such semblance has an undeniable corporate logic. Bryan Hitch's revision of the timeworn character of Nick Fury in *Ultimates* no. 1 (2002) to adhere to Samuel L. Jackson's physical and racial identity is a well-known example—a reimagining that later prompted MS to offer the star a multi-picture deal. Derek Johnson has also noted ME's efforts to ensure that MW's version of Wolverine would have a closer physical resemblance to the character's onscreen instantiation by Hugh Jackman. And, as Johnson correctly pointed out, these instances of graphic coherence are all prompted by ME's interest in aligning the various offerings in its most lucrative range brands (77–84).

So, while a superheroic star actor's work might gain authorial credence by graphically referencing the work of star creators, the actors' labor is also subject to executive authority. From a fiscal perspective, it must be understood that media producers are tasked with aligning a star's individually owned and managed persona (a commodified and monopolized personal brand) with the sub-brand that the star is cast to instantiate on screen. For example, Raimi allegedly petitioned Columbia to cast Maguire as the studio's first Peter Parker because of Maguire's emerging star image as a likeable but sensitive adolescent. The actor's associations with young men who must struggle with prematurely adult responsibilities thus squared with publicly recognized and corporately sanctioned conceptions of the character he was chosen to represent. In turn, and from a labor perspective, a star negotiates a fiduciary relationship with a studio that reinforces the monetary and cultural currency of her/his personal brand. Maguire, for example, was offered $4 million, $17.5 million, backend deals, and $50 million for his *Spider-Man* roles (Outlaw). He subsequently attained starring roles in such high-profile middlebrow fare as *Seabiscuit* (Gary Ross, 2003), *Brothers* (Jim Sheridan, 2009), and *The Great Gatsby*. His position as a Hollywood power-broker was also enhanced, as he has accrued twelve producer credits since 2002.

In light of stars' declining fortunes in a Hollywood preoccupied by franchises, however, many have argued that they are no longer an inherent strategic asset to a film's profitability. MS has played a significant role in redefining executive-labor relations in this new corporate climate. Several stars contracted to MS have signed on for an unprecedented nine productions (e.g., Chris Evans, Samuel L. Jackson, and Sebastian Stan). While these multi-picture contracts are a far cry from the seven-year exclusive

contracts of the studio era, their value to contemporary stars is hardly straightforward. The contracts' rewards are often indirectly careerist rather than fiscal, and MS uses the perceived boost to a star's exposure as leverage during contract negotiations. Chris Hemsworth, for example, was offered a low upfront fee of $150,000 to appear in *Thor* (2011), and the studio typically attempts to withhold backend compensation or breakeven points (Fernandez and Kit; Graser). MS also allegedly offered contracted stars a mere $500,000 raise to appear in Marvel's "Phase Two" features, with only another $500,000 proposed as a bonus if the films cleared $500 million at the box office (Finke). Only after Robert Downey Jr. renegotiated his fee for *The Avengers*—at least $50 million—were other contracted stars able to secure fees closer to their preferred asking price from the tightfisted studio (Eisenberg).

However, the extensive publicity demands, intensive physical workout regimes, salary disparities, hardball negotiations, and multiyear agreements have prompted grumblings from many contracted MS stars. Scarlet Johansson, for example, has described her employment by Marvel as "a gilded cage" (Barker-Whitelaw). Her co-star, Chris Evans, has announced plans to retire from acting altogether following the fulfillment of his contract. The parsimonious executive-labor relations at MS are certainly not the only example of studio frugality in the production of ME's film brands. Sony contracted Garfield for $500,000, with an escalating raise of $1 million per sequel—a stark about-face from the studio's star-struck attitudes of the early 2000s (Outlaw). With the 2015 casting of Tom Holland, another young actor (with only three previous features to his credit) has been entrusted to lead Sony's latest reboot of a filmic sub-brand—this time co-produced with MS as part of Marvel's own branded "Cinematic Universe." But such a decision is in keeping with the latter's parsimonious reputation as a studio with "constricting" contractual terms for aspirant stars with their sights on Hollywood's A-list (Masters). So, the studio's penchant for casting lesser-known actors is a key strategy that serves "the management of paratextual star narratives and trajectories, . . . the verisimilitude of the onscreen fantasy, and . . . the studio's present and future bargaining leverage" (Koh 488).

These examples demonstrate that the value of star labor and its affiliation with the corporate properties it helps to create are being redefined. MS has played a pivotal role in the declining proportional weighting of a star's symbolic value, which has arguably diminished in relation to the value of the product itself. The actor—the bearer of that value—now finds her/

himself in a contingent (rather than authorial) relation to the work. Her/his professional fortunes and cultural capital are now driven by product—rather than dramatic—performance. In short, the star no longer transcends the role; the role, or rather the product, subsumes the performer.

CREATING SHOW: SUPERHEROIC PERFORMANCE AS SPECTACLE

In speaking of stars' ostensive bodies and the body-too-much of the iconic superhero, we should remember that a star is never completely diegetically integrated. S/he never quite disappears; nor, it should be argued, should we be desirous of this vanishing. Maguire and Garfield are physical attractions in Columbia's *Spider-Man* adaptations, and not just as exemplars of male beauty. Like any superhero blockbuster, these adaptations serve as conventional occasions for the demonstration of the latest innovations in special-effects-driven spectacle. As a consequence, Maguire and Garfield must subject their actorly craft to the technological craft of digitally enabled filmmaking. However, this subjection does not represent the diminishment of contemporary acting; the crafting of so-called synthespians does not "replace" the performance craft developed in old media forms. Rather, new conceptual vocabulary is necessary to evaluate the achievements of digitally enabled performances.

As Paul McDonald reminds us, the star's body is itself used to "create show" as a site of spectacle—it is a humanized special effect, so to speak (62). The ostensiveness of stars' bodies has ensured that the diegetic absorption of so-called classical cinema has never been as totalizing as some have assumed. Rather, the delight of Hollywood cinema lies in acknowledging the achievements of a familiar personage who creatively instantiates an unfamiliar possible person. And thus our sympathetic allegiance with a character is always imbricated by our appreciation for the manner in which the character is enacted by a performer. The pleasures involved in looking both through and at Maguire or Garfield as he enacts his respective Spider-Man, then, can be connected to Marvel's considerable contribution to emerging forms of performance-based spectacle.

The unprecedented box-office opening of *Spider-Man*—with its extended sequences of a completely computer-rendered web-head—ensured that future onscreen heroes would be at least partial products of computer-generated imagery (CGI). Since 2002, then, the onscreen superhero body has been hybridized, becoming a synthesis of a star's corporeality, the physical

work of stunt actors and stand-ins, digital animation, and/or motion-captured action. Consequently, our apprehension of and appreciation for performance in the Spider-Man films is not limited to attending to the dramatic, representational work of Maguire and Garfield as they instantiate Peter Parker; we note the particularities of CGI characterization in the first trilogy, adjust phenomenologically to *TASM*'s first-person 3D sequences, admire the integration of Garfield's movement into *TASM 2*'s animation, and marvel at the dangerous gymnastics of stunt work throughout the series.

These various responses show that the spectacle of the star superhero's body is always doubled: it is both performatively and technologically ostensive. Consequently, we oscillate between sympathetic engagement with a costumed Peter careening delightedly through the canyons of Manhattan (for example, in the extraordinary long take at the end of *Spider-Man*) and knowing admiration of the laborious craft that produces Maguire's digital double in the same takes. In Dan North's words, our appreciation for Peter's dramatic struggles "is complemented by the image of computer technologies facing similar challenges in their task of representing near-impossible heroic deeds in a perceptually realistic manner" (168). Moreover, we recognize the "creative partnership that exists between animator, director and performer" as they collectively labor to produce this mediated action (Pallant 48). Our attention is dispersed: we thrill at the represented action but recognize that it is crafted by multiple authorial sources above and beyond the actor.

Our oscillating engagement between absorption and evaluation means that we might not "identify" with Peter in a traditional sense. Rather, this digitally enabled performance "puts us less in the position of Spider-Man/Peter and more in the position of a dance partner, in a kind of superhero pas de deux" (Richmond 130). Such a partnership necessitates a recasting of more familiar ways of evaluating actorly achievement. We can advance a few criteria here for the appreciation of the spectacular superheroic performance: the circumvention of *expressive restriction*; the achievement of *gravity*; and the adjustment to *digital mediation*.

Like his equally faceless or disfigured contemporaries Iron Man, the Thing, and Ghost Rider, a cinematic Spider-Man suffers from a featureless anonymity due to a mask that completely obscures his face. Various comic artists (e.g., Erik Larsen) and animators (e.g., the *USM* cartoonists) occasionally compensate for this restriction by allowing the mask's iconic eye lenses to change shape—narrowing or widening—when the costumed

hero is angry or shocked. But when Maguire and Garfield are featured in full costume, they are deprived of the ability to facially convey characterization and emotion, and encased in a costume that arguably appears more comical than imposing onscreen. Like all similarly outfitted actors, then, they adopt compensatory performance choices that offset these expressive restrictions. These techniques not only advance character but also serve as pleasurable signs of the actor's artistic ingenuity.

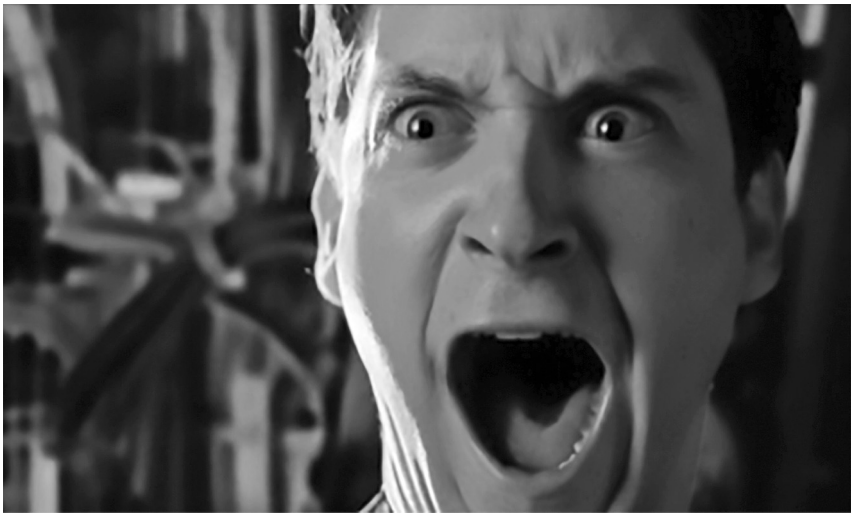
The most literal of strategies is simply to remove the mask. Without the encumbrance of an all-concealing disguise, the iconicity of the range brand gives way to the iconicity of the star. Or, we might also say that the iconicity of both figures is momentarily fused. As a clichéd bit of publicity might trumpet: "Tobey Maguire *IS* Spider-Man!" Both Raimi's and Webb's series feature a Peter who goes unmasked in public, or reveals his alter ego to various supporting characters. However, these unmaskings are often utilized at climactic moments that call for maximal expressive impact: the revelation of his identity to Mary Jane in *Spider-Man 2*, the confrontation with Captain Stacy in *TASM*, the death of Gwen Stacy in *TASM 2*. But beyond the practical necessity of allowing Maguire and Garfield to achieve their very moving reactions to such dramatic action, unmaskings in the films also reinforce Peter's youthful ordinariness—the very quality that makes the character such a remarkable addition to the superhero canon.

Spider-Man 2 and *TASM*, for example, implicitly meditate on the superhero's public revelation of ordinariness. "He's just a kid. No older than my son," exclaims one gobsmacked bystander at Maguire's exposed face as he lies unconscious in a subway car. Upon awakening, he meets the passengers' stares and anxiously touches his revealed face. "We won't tell nobody," one boy promises as he returns Peter's mask. This gesture of reciprocity both restores Peter's superheroic secrecy and marks his communal belongingness: he's a friendly, neighborhood New Yorker—just like anyone else on the train. In *TASM*, Garfield removes his mask in order to console a terrified boy he is rescuing from a car dangling precariously from the Williamsburg Bridge. "I'm just a normal guy, all right?" he assures him. Passing the mask to the boy, Peter urges him to put it on, so that it will give the boy the courage to climb from the burning vehicle. "It'll make you strong," Peter promises. Alone in his bedroom afterward, Peter gazes somberly down at his mask, as if committing himself to the truth of this promise, and again we are witness to the assurance of valor's commonplace attainability. The final narrated caption of *TASM* no. 9 famously proclaims Spider-Man as

"the superhero who could be—YOU!" Both of these unmasking scenes, then, preserve Stan Lee's accomplished insight.

While Maguire's and Garfield's revealed expressions are effective here, the two are also both accomplished at imbuing the faceless hero with a considerable degree of physical humor. Witness Maguire's embarrassed avoidance of a fellow elevator passenger's gaze in *Spider-Man 2* after he has shared too much information about the pelvic discomfiture of his costume. Comparably, in the course of humiliating *TASM*'s would-be car thief, Garfield orchestrates an evolving slapstick routine involving mock-groveling, webbing sneezes, and pseudo–kung fu. Well-timed gestures and comically graceful body language carries the day in both of these cases. Garfield asserts that he incorporated his studies of spider movement into his performance, in both action and interpersonal scenes. In one interview, he describes his technique: "Imagine all of your skin was as sensitive as a spider, the slightest gust of wind would feel like a tornado going by. You'd always be rushing. . . . And I looked at the idea of having more legs, more arms, and the spatial awareness. A spider moves up, down, side-to-side, all around. He's not linear. . . . [H]e can be here and then over there incredibly fast" (Boucher). The spidery skittishness is discernible in *TASM* as Peter evades Gwen's questions about his bruised face, and lies about his familiarity with branzino. Garfield hurtles from his locker, bobs and weaves around Emma Stone's scrutinizing looks, and jitters from a panicked lack of awareness about European sea bass to overly vigorous nodding ("No, no, I know . . .").

All of these examples amount to an actor's accomplished circumvention of expressive restriction in superhero films. Why, then, should "gravity" be considered another important criterion for a proficient superheroic performance? This quality has two senses. Metaphorically, it refers to the actor's traditional responsibility to bring dramatic gravitas to the scenario s/he inhabits. Such performative sobriety can take the form of moral seriousness—for example, Maguire demonstrating Peter's commitment to Uncle Ben's maxim of great power necessitating great responsibility, or Garfield contending with the consequences of vacillating from his promise to a dying Captain Stacy. Actors also might help a film achieve weightiness through the intensity of their emotional investment—for example, Maguire's abrupt, volcanic scream as a ceiling begins to collapse upon Mary Jane in *Spider-Man 2* (fig. 10.5), or Garfield's shudders as he strokes the hair of a lifeless Gwen in *TASM 2*. Such commitment is necessitated by the superhero



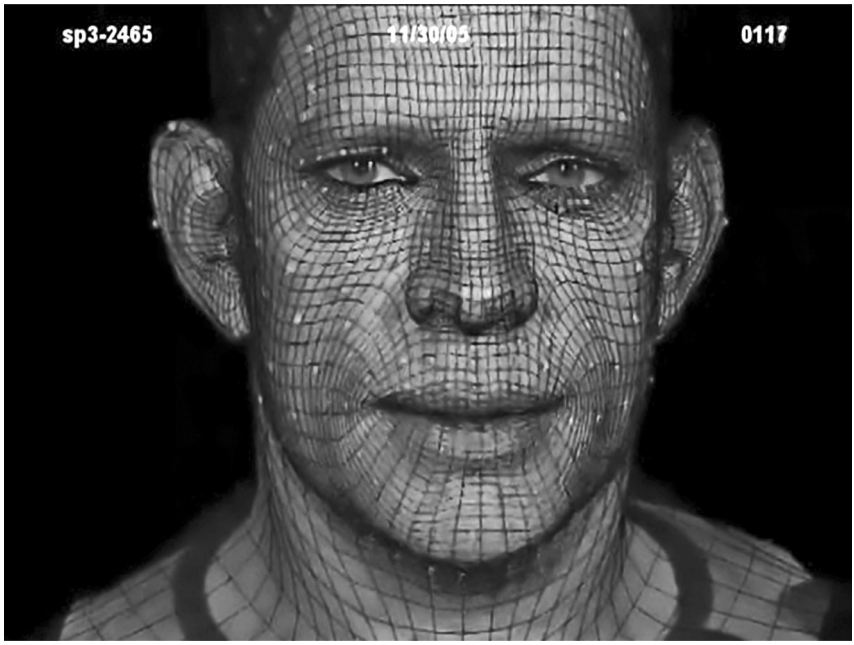
10.5. Tobey Maguire's scream in *Spider-Man 2*.

genre's imbrication within the tradition of melodrama, but it is also culturally warranted in order to stave off comics' historical associations with bathos and emotional immaturity. Certainly such moments are perceived by fans as affective testaments to *TASM*'s historical import as a superhero comic of surprising emotional sophistication. Indeed, Gwen's murder in *TASM* no. 121 is regarded as a subcultural watershed: the abrupt death of a recurring and much-loved comic book character is cited as effectively ending the lightheartedness of the Silver Age and ushering in a new era of seriousness and self-awareness within the genre (Blumberg).

The achievement of gravity also has technological connotations. Positing weightiness as a new evaluative measurement of superheroic performance counters frequent complaints about the "weightlessness" of digitally enabled performance. Describing the initial battle between Doctor Octopus and Spidey in *Spider-Man* 2, Scott Bukatman complains that "the net effect is of some vaguely rubberoid action figures harmlessly bouncing each other around the space" (120). If "the pleasures of the digital are about transcending gravity, about bodies exceeding their limits," clearly not everyone feels that anything goes (Landay 134). Consequently, twenty-first-century filmmakers take extraordinary measures to ensure that even the most outlandishly dynamic physical movement is in accordance with the tenets of perceptual realism. *TASM 2*'s animators crafted plausible movement by ensuring

accurate weight shifting, anatomically precise bodily compressions, responsive muscle jiggle, and detailed fabric wrinkling. The Spider-Man franchises, then, are instrumental in establishing a new representational mode in which gravity has become a preeminent aesthetic and critical concern.

This new mode necessitates the actor's adaptation to the unique production demands of digital mediation. Just as we might appreciate a superheroic actor's circumvention of physical expressive restrictions, so, too, might we accredit her/his engagement with the affordances made possible by new media—particularly digital animation and performance-capture systems. Just as animators manipulate in various ways the data produced by actors, the actor must adjust to the alienating emptiness of a motion-capture volume or facial scan system, and learn how to move her/his body in a way that allows a capture program to "read" it in the desired fashion (Allison 329). Accordingly, it is critical to recognize how such systems can actually showcase the fruits of the actor's labor. In *Spider-Man* 3, the piteous qualities of Flint Marko's horrified expression as his body devolves into a living mound of sand are produced by an amalgamation of two wire frames constructed from scans of Thomas Haden Church's face (fig. 10.6), realistic



10.6. Thomas Haden Church and *Spider-Man 3*'s facial capture process.

facial data captured by the strobing cameras of Imagework's Lightstage, and a performance-capture system's translation of Church's own facial emoting (Curtis 130). The end result is that the authenticity of the actor's emotionally informed movement is foregrounded even "while the world around them vibrates with detail actualized from the imagination" (Landay 134).

It is equally important to recognize that the actor is not inherently supplanted by her/his animated analogues. Computer-generated stunt doubles have been employed since 1995, but Raimi's films established the precedent for extended sequences of character animation. Unfortunately, his substitution of Maguire for a completely animated double led many critics to decry the loss of Spider-Man's indexicality. Bukatman, for example, asserted that the substitution of live action for animation "has the unfortunate effect of severing the connection between the inexpressive body and the liberated, expressive one" (121). As if to rectify these grievances, Webb's later films are noteworthy for their reintegration of the actors' alienated labor within the animation process. Rather than relying exclusively on data acquired from performance-capture systems, animators working on the *TASM* films took their cues from the motion studies of preproduction stunt doubles, or Garfield himself. During the course of these motion studies, and even during principal photography, the actors or stuntpersons made performance choices—gestures, movements, postures—which were then often used as reference points, or virtual keyframes, to guide the subsequent animation process.

Interestingly, Randall William Cook, *TASM*'s animation supervisor, bequeaths authorial status to Garfield as the originator of the process, and not just a source of inputted data. "Andrew created a unique pattern of movement and body language that helped define the character," he asserted, "and we could emulate it wherever appropriate" (Robertson 28). Jerome Chen, *TASM*'s visual effects supervisor, offered specific details of Garfield's contributions: "He was specific about the poses Spider-Man would hit. If he attached to a wall or crawled on the ground, he extended his fingers. His palms didn't hit the ground. He did specific things with his elbows, knees, how his back arched when he was in the suit that our animators had to pick up on. Our CG Spider-Man was an enhanced version of what Andrew could do, but with the same poses and feeling" (ibid.). Not only are the actor's contributions given pride of place in the animation process, but his performance choices are retranslated as iconic markers—keyframes—that guide the process of graphic inscription. Gesture and posture—two basic,

physical components of any traditional performance—are bequeathed a new importance as beginning and end points in a digitally crafted trajectory of dramatic movement co-crafted by actor and animator.

Equally impressive, though, is the actors' integration of comic book hypotexts through inspired performance choices. In particular, Garfield's gestures and poses are themselves performative quotations of graphic representations of Spider-Man comics. His precisely executed contortions intentionally reference the penchant for post-McFarlane artists to render impossibly exaggerated full-bodied acrobatics (Robertson 28). Moreover, the animation team—attuned to Garfield's embodied quotations—systematically enhanced the iconicity of his poses. *TASM*'s animation supervisor, David Schaub, explained further: "The way we choreographed the character in and out of the poses makes the comic book [poses] seem like snapshots taken of those performances. In many of the action sequences, we'd ramp down to slow motion so that the iconic poses really paid off" (Robertson 30). Through such techniques, performance and animation establish a technologically complex intertextual relationship to a comic hypotext. Webb's films provide another instance of three distinct ontologies overlapping to produce a new, digitally enabled performance technique that binds together the heretofore distinct work of comic artist, digital animator, and screen actor.

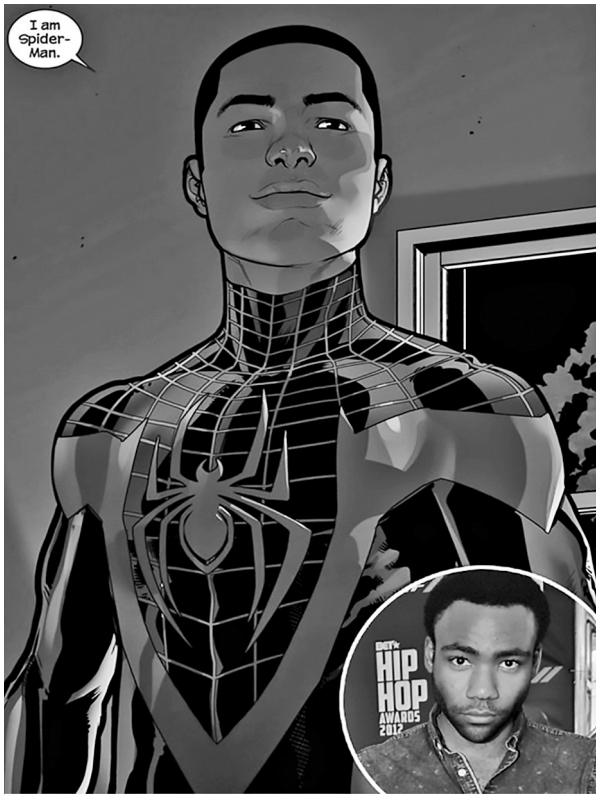
"BEST . . . SPIDER-MAN . . . EVER!": SUPERHEROIC PERFORMANCE AND FANDOM

In the age of social media, superhero films require the careful management of fandom, which is now replete with online petitions, casting scandals, viral campaigning, and the like. Actors who are hired to appear within a Marvel adaptation are therefore necessarily subject to an atypically loaded set of creative conditions. These performers must contend with the particularly dense prehistory of their project: its seriality, its multiple authors, and the intimidating "collective intelligence" of an "always-already" mobilized fan base (Jenkins 136). Each Spider-Man adaptation merely represents a potential contribution to what Thomas Leitch calls a larger "macrotext": that is, ME's canonical and continuity-based franchise (216). Of course, each new addition to this macrotext is subject to the exacting authority of fan experts who might be ready to cry foul at the prospect of, say, organic web-shooters. Therefore, each actor who is hired to make a creative contribution

to the franchise faces a number of unique questions: How will s/he make performance choices that encapsulate an ever-evolving, fifty-year-old serialized character? Why might the performative differences of a newly minted wallcrawler stretch the limits of fan tolerance? What encoded gestures might be included to signal a deference to fans' communal knowledge, expertise, and commitment—which always exceeds that of the individual performer?

Fandom derives a sense of empowerment from its certainty that it knows Peter Parker better than Hollywood dilettantes—or even MW itself—and filmmakers and actors are increasingly finding canny ways to both flatter and exploit this collective intelligence. Predictable bouts of fan outrage typically follow press releases announcing the casting of an actor considered to be "inappropriate" for a superheroic role. For example, there were 68,222 negative Tweets in the first hour that followed the August 2013 announcement that Ben Affleck would play the Caped Crusader in the forthcoming *Batman v Superman* (2016) (Breznican 14). And yet, although the film industry is becoming increasingly canny at cultic management, there may be no such thing as bad press; everything—even fan outrage—becomes free publicity. Therefore, when Michael Cera's name circulated in January 2010 as a *TASM* hopeful, Columbia stood to profit from the uncorroborated rumor. On the one hand, the film's producers would certainly not deliberately engage in fan-baiting by issuing press releases about potential talks with an actor as "unsuitable" as Cera. On the other, they stood to gain much subcultural capital by "listening to fans" and eventually casting a "respected" actor, Garfield, instead. And with the 2015 casting of Tom Holland as the next incarnation of the character, Sony was able to wrest its own share of nerd points from MS (and their favored candidate, Charlie Plummer). Holland mounted his own (unofficial) personal campaign for the role via Instagram videos of the impressive gymnastic stunts he performed in his backyard—a savvy (read: strategically "cool") use of social media that in turn enabled Sony to position itself as a forward-thinking company.

These casting controversies are frequently embroiled within both cultural and identity politics. Famously, Donald Glover jokingly petitioned on his Twitter feed for the part of Peter Parker in 2010 after being inspired by an *io9* editorial about the importance of opening the role to non-white actors (McWilliams). But after Glover appeared in his recurring role on *Community* wearing Spider-Man PJs, extremist fans—and even the occasional retailer—countered the lighthearted campaign online in a racist backlash.



10.7. Miles Morales and Donald Glover, *Ultimate Comics: Spider-Man* no. 28. Donald Glover at the 2012 BET Hip Hop Awards.

Such comments were often explicitly prefaced as being driven by a respect for hypotextual fidelity rather than as part of an outright xenophobic agenda (Cunningham 25). And yet Glover's critics were usually unable to articulate why such filmic conformity ought always to trump unconventional acts of remediation, or to demonstrate a sensitivity to the interests of a multiracial demographic.

Fascinatingly, the Glover campaign prompted writer Brian Michael Bendis to usher in a new black Hispanic Spidey, Miles Morales, outside of regular continuity in *USM* (fig. 10.7). Glover showed up in *TASM* as a subliminal Easter egg: a poster of his *Community* character, Troy Barnes, hangs in Peter's bedroom. And in another reciprocal instance of fan-driven, transmedia cross-pollination, Glover provides the voice of the animated version of Miles Morales in episode 63 of *Ultimate Spider-Man: Web Warriors*. However, and sadly, racist fans' animus at the prospect of a non-white Spider-Man corresponds with a more benign version of mandated racial "policing":

the licensing agreement between Sony and ME involving future filmic sub-brands. The 2011 contract mandates that a filmic Peter Parker must be Caucasian, as well as heterosexual (McNary). Thus, Sony and ME not only set legal parameters restricting opportunities for actors of color to appear in their high-profile transmedia franchises, but make visible and explicit the usually invisible and tacit racial dimensions of corporate branding.

Just as unruly fan tactics can prompt both responsive and contrarian strategies from media producers, fandom's daunting collective intelligence may react in both positive and negative ways to the superheroic actor and her/his singular, subjective representations. For example, Maguire achieves fannish accreditation for emphasizing Peter's jejune decency: he is predictably "sweet, naïve and gentle" (Morton). By contrast, Garfield's amplification of Peter as "a kewl badass" in *TASM 2* is perceived by other fans as a betrayal of the character's essence (Film Crit Hulk). How, then, does an actor—even a self-professed Spider-fan like Garfield—navigate myriad interpretations and conflicting expectations? Even the ongoing production of the venerated comic book hypotext is subject to authorial schism and fan resistance. An editorial team (headed by Nick Lowe as of February 2014) oversees all of MW's Spider-Man output, with crucial plot points affecting story continuity being decided at annual creative summits. This team exercises editorial fiat over all decisions undertaken by the creative teams working on the books and ensures that broader corporate mandates are upheld within published titles. But this team-based brand management often faces both internal friction and opposition by fandom, with notable consequences for the actors who are chosen to embody ME's cinematic sub-brand.

The storyline of "One More Day" (2007) and its relationship to the production of the rebooted film franchise offers a compelling example of the creative synthesis between fan desire and responsive corporate strategy.[1] The controversial crossover story saw MW editor in chief Joe Quesada mandating the dissolution of Peter and Mary Jane Watson's long-running marriage. The MJ/Peter pairing is one of the most familiar romantic partnerships in comics outside of Lois and Clark, and it represents a core structural element in Spider-Man's association with the romance genre. The problems that Peter's superheroic career poses for his love life are a recurring source of drama in many iterations of the brand—both comic and filmic. Notably, *TASM*'s writer, J. Michael Straczynski, publicly aired his grievances over Quesada's editorial decision, and he considered removing his name from the final two issues of the storyline (Straczynski). "One More Day" also

resulted in vitriolic criticism from fan communities, largely on account of the editorial team's perceived disrespect for the relationship.

Following the "One More Day" debacle, then, Webb's *Amazing Spider-Man* reboot acquired subcultural capital within fan communities by reintroducing the centrality of romance within the Spider-Man brand. Webb's films execute a romantic retcon by resituating Gwen Stacy as Peter's first girlfriend and quasi-partner in his early crime-fighting career. But his revision is not without precedent; in the alternate-continuity *USM* series, Mary Jane is Peter's girlfriend and confidante from the very outset, and Raimi's trilogy follows suit. Indeed, as Peter tells us in the opening voiceover of Raimi's first film, "this story, like any story worth telling, is all about a girl." This voiceover immediately cuts to a close-up of MJ—"the Girl Next Door," and the very first character seen in the film. By playing up *TASM* as a screwball romantic comedy of sorts, then, Webb takes his cue from Raimi's generic hybridity of action and romance. More importantly, the primacy granted to Gwen simultaneously undoes the perceived disrespect for female characters in "One More Day," helping to smooth over fans' ruffled feathers. Webb's film also reintroduces the lesser-known character of Gwen to a wider public (she is accorded a minor role only in *Spider-Man* 3) and maintains a thematic consistency with the broader world of ME and its insistence on Spider-Man's unmarried status.

The furor over Spider-Man's nuptials is not simply a subcultural tempest in a teacup; it exemplifies the complex interplay between ME's various Spider-Man sub-brands. We recall that the basic purpose of ME's brand system "is to clarify a range of product offerings," and that ME strives to "eliminate the inconsistencies and contradictions between incarnations of its characters" (Johnson 77). A vital dimension of the Spider-Man range brand—the character's romantic status—is revealed as a tumultuous site of contestation between creators, managers, and audiences. Concretely, then, *USM*, the "One More Day" arc, Raimi's trilogy, and Webb's films are entwined in a complex palimpsest of textual reciprocity spanning more than a decade.

This managerial process of clarification extends to the performative instantiations of the filmic sub-brands. We have seen how hopefuls for the cinematic Spider-Men were auditioned for their proximal adherence to audience expectations of a romantic male lead. Most importantly—in terms of *TASM*'s subcultural credentials—Garfield's casting helped to revivify the brand's generic associations with romance, which the "One More Day" storyline had undermined. Webb has remarked that it was largely Garfield's

chemistry with Emma Stone that won him the role over other shortlisted actors, including Jamie Bell and Josh Hutcherson. Of particular note was Garfield's use of expressive objects to bring out a scene's amorous undertones: "We were doing a scene that's not in the movie, where he was eating a cheeseburger and . . . trying to put [Gwen] at ease, while he is eating food. And the way he ate this food . . . I felt like there's something in the way he embodied and committed to that really tiny minutia—I just hadn't seen before" (McDaniel).

This minutiae is evident in the evasive shyness Garfield employs when Peter is confronted head-on with significant decisions involving Gwen. In *TASM*, he and Stone tentatively encircle each other—abruptly pivoting, nervously twirling—as they fumble toward committing to a first date. Such rebounding and encircling movements have action-based correlatives. When Garfield gets his first costumed workout, his web-slinging—careening, spinning, free-falling, fumbling—is both nervously and joyously reckless, not unlike working oneself up to asking out the girl of one's dreams. And in *TASM 2*, Garfield weaves and ducks his face behind a tree as Gwen confronts him about their foundering relationship (fig. 10.8). In a story deeply involved in the difficulties of facing up to moral and romantic responsibility, Garfield's graceful evasiveness reveals his impressive attunement with the character he embodies.

10.8. Andrew Garfield and Emma Stone talk it out in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*.

Both Maguire's and Garfield's actorly interpretations of Peter Parker are instantiations within a larger continuum of intertwining texts. Accordingly, they make performance choices that honor fandom's collective intelligence. The actors make reference to previous incarnations of the character across media, include encoded gestures to be recognized by attentive fans, and allow opportunities for knowledgeable interpretations to be made about the personality traits they choose to highlight. At *Spider-Man 2*'s dramatic turning point, Raimi, in an act of fan deference, visually quotes Romita Sr.'s famous "Spider-Man No More" panel composition in *TASM* no. 50, in which a rain-drenched Peter turns his back on the costume he has left in an alley garbage can. The two talented actors who have memorably embodied one of ME's most enduring range brands emulate such moments in ingenious ways. These cinematic Spider-Men are remarkable symptoms of changing star labor, evolving technological norms, and mercurial subcultural desires. Their accomplishments make salient new performative developments that we are only beginning to understand, and they signal delights available especially to the most devoted of True Believers.

NOTES

1. I also address the relation of "Brand New Day" to *TASM* elsewhere. See Taylor in "Works Cited."

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