

The Age of the Superhero: The Cycle of Appropriation & Revitalisation in the Hollywood Blockbuster

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*A thesis submitted in fulfilment for the degree of Master of Arts at the University of Otago,
Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand.*

15th February, 2017

Abstract

Over the course of the 2000s, the Hollywood blockbuster welcomed the superhero genre into its ranks, after these films saw an explosion in popularity. Now, the ability to produce superhero films through an extended transmedia franchise is the coveted prize of major studios. The likes of Sony, 20th Century Fox and Warner Bros. are locked in competition with the new kid on the block, Marvel, who changed the way Hollywood produces the blockbuster franchise. This thesis examines the recent successes of the superhero genre, predominantly in relation to the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), which exemplifies the industrial model of the Hollywood blockbuster and the cycle of appropriation and revitalisation that defines it. In discussing the conflicting creative and commercial interests of these films, I will examine the superhero genre in relation to transmedia storytelling, paratexts, genre, star power, and the significant role of fan amplification. Fan expertise and opinion on the comic book properties that underprop superhero films plays an important industrial function in the development of these films. Through their support and promotion of superhero films, I argue that the perception of ‘fannish authenticity’ has been integrated into modern studio production in terms of promotion but also director selection. I analyse the creative and industrial role of the contemporary auteur-director and how studios like Marvel call upon up-and-coming talent to further legitimise their films and have them appeal to middlebrow expectations through auteur as well as fan credibility. Such director selection demonstrates: 1) how the contemporary auteur has become commodified with transmedia franchise blockbusters and, 2) how, due to the conflicting creative and commercial interests inherent to the blockbuster, these films are now supported by a form of co-dependent authorship. In analysing these various elements of the contemporary superhero genre, my thesis shows how a transmedia franchise can be developed and how it functions, on both a micro (within the franchise itself) and macro (within the film industry) level.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Dr Holly Randell-Moon, without whom this thesis would not have seen the light of day. Thank you for your wisdom, calming influence, and for being so patient with me. Your endless encouragement and advice throughout this year has been an inspiration and so, although it never seems to be enough, I sincerely thank you Holly.

I would like to extend my thanks for the entire MFCO department, who have been equally supportive and encouraging throughout the year. I would like to thank Dr Paul Ramaeker and Dr Rosemary Overell for your encouragement as I balanced my work with tutoring, your genuine interest in my research, and for your help over the year. In addition, I would like to thank Owain Gwynne and Kevin Fletcher for organising the Revisiting Audiences Conference in June, which provided an opportunity for public speaking, meeting other academics in our field, and most importantly, the validation that I was onto something! Finally, I would like to thank the backbone of our department, Maureen Lloyd and Paulette Milnes, who have made sure I know what's what, where the coffee is, and how to use the printer.

To my fellow postgraduates, it's been a privilege working alongside you wonderful people! I've thoroughly enjoyed getting to know you all, and I will definitely miss our irregular drinking sessions! In particular, I'd like to tip my hat to Lewis, my fellow MA student, for all the coffee breaks, procrastination and motivation.

To my friends, wherever you are in New Zealand, or the world, thank you. Regardless of your interest in what I've been doing this past year, you have all offered support in one way or another, be it movie nights, drinks, or simply catching up. Cheers for the great yarns and the entertaining distractions.

Last but not least, I'd like to thank parents. To Mum and Dad, thank you for having me this past year, I imagine it's been nostalgic and frustrating in equal measures! Thank you for your constant encouragement, pretending to understand what I'm talking about, and for being there for me whenever I have needed you. I greatly appreciate it, even if it doesn't always come across that way! So, once again, thank you.

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Introduction

The blockbuster is known for its position within the film industry as a vehicle for spectacle, star power, new and/or improved technologies and above all, as a lucrative source of entertainment for mainstream audiences. This staple of the industry has shaped the careers of many directors and actors, among others, producing numerous franchises and standalone films in the process. The industrial practices of these films are structured by commercial imperatives, yet their innovation and consistent success hinges on creative innovation. An industrial formula that balances commercialism with creativity is currently exemplified by the films dominating the blockbuster market, namely, the ‘superhero’ movie. Since the revival of the genre with Bryan Singer’s *X-Men* (2000) and Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man* (2002), these films have taken Hollywood by storm, reviving independent filmmakers’ creative auteurism, increasing their fans’ role in promoting films, and expanding the parameters of the genre and the gendered characteristics associated with superheroes. This revival was consolidated in 2008 with two very different entries into the genre: Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight* (2008) and Jon Favreau’s *Iron Man* (2008), both of which demonstrated the critical and commercial potential of the genre, legitimising these films as able to meet mainstream and middlebrow expectations. *Iron Man* is notable for its role in establishing Marvel’s transmedia franchise, or ‘shared universe’, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (hereafter, the MCU). This franchise model has and continues to incentivise studios to rethink their approaches to franchise building, leading to several attempts to emulate its success. Consequently, it is important to explore the industrial and creative effects that superhero films are having on the industry, and if this most recent manifestation of the blockbuster can be sustained over the years to come.

First, when discussing superhero films, it is important to clarify what it is, as a genre. Broadly speaking, a ‘superhero’ film explores the story of one or more ‘superheroes’, and is not to be confused with a ‘comic book’ film. David Bordwell noted in his 2006 book *The Way*

Hollywood Tells It (2006, p.54) that “[comic]-book movies were scarcely a genre in the studio era, but they became a central one with the arrival of the blockbuster”, evident in the success of Richard Donner’s *Superman* (1978) and Tim Burton’s *Batman* (1989). Drew Morton notes that Bordwell’s notion of ‘comic book’ films as a genre is problematic, since comics are a form of literature, not necessarily a genre (2014, p.ix). To Morton, the “breadth of narrative content and vast range of styles from single panels to strips to books to graphic novels make such a designation problematic” (ibid.). This point is worth keeping in mind when we consider that some of America’s earliest films – Thomas Edison’s adaptation of Richard F. Outcault’s *Buster Brown* in the early 1900s, for example – were adapted from comic books but did not feature superheroes. In referring to the ‘superhero genre’, I am emphasising the films and other media centred around superhero-characters, as opposed to all films that originate from comic books, since this could include the likes of *300* (2007) or *Kingsman: The Secret Service* (2015), for example. If we exchange the term ‘comic book film’ for ‘superhero film’ though, Bordwell is correct in his observation that the increasing success of these films subsequently constituted a genre. In this thesis then, ‘superhero film’ will be used as a term to designate the genre as opposed to ‘comic book film’. In addition, Koh Wee Him Wilson argues:

the superhero ... belongs to a metagenre that has traditionally operated on a strategy of appropriation and persuasion, in which its producers have indiscriminately represented to audiences stock characters from other genres of adventure fiction as superheroes, and have additionally made great use of promotional paratexts to convince these audiences that such appropriation are well within the bounds of the superhero metagenre’s generic verisimilitude (2012, p.18).

While this is relevant to my analysis of the genre – and I will review some of the points Koh makes here – my aim in this thesis is to offer a more up-to-date look at transmedia franchise building. In doing so, I will demonstrate how the generic strategy of appropriation is tied to the commercial and creative imperatives for *revitalisation* of both the Hollywood blockbuster on the macro scale, and the superhero genre from a micro scale.

Second, when I use the term ‘blockbuster’, I am referring to a film that has achieved great commercial success. Therefore, any film that has earned the designation ‘blockbuster’ has, by definition, profited hugely in relation to its budget; this could mean earning millions from a low-budget film, or a big-budget film earning profits of double, or more. In regards to the latter, a failure among blockbusters may still be referred to as a blockbuster, due to the large budget used to fund its production. Although a low-budget film may qualify as a blockbuster, for my purposes, the term will be used in reference to the big-budget films that, due to the industrial and creative purpose(s) behind them, are intended to be high concept films, or, blockbusters. Because of this confluence of interests between commercial imperatives and creative innovation, I posit that there is a ‘cycle of appropriation and revitalisation’ inherent to the blockbuster that defines these films and, by extension, Hollywood, as an industry that constantly seeks longevity and stability through novelty. This cycle refers to the ability of the blockbuster to a) appropriate genre(s) and other elements as needed, and b) franchises’ ability to come back from any failures years later through various ‘reboots’. It is this cycle, I argue, that separates the blockbuster from its more critically acclaimed filmic peers and has allowed them to maintain a relatively consistent level of success throughout their history, and form the lynchpin of an industrial model for the Hollywood studio systems.

The blockbuster originated when Hollywood’s major studios, reeling from economic failure and conglomerations, turned to the auteur-directors known as the ‘Movie Brats’, such as Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg, and Francis Ford Coppola. Their collective films were hailed as a ‘New Hollywood’, which produced the first summer blockbuster, Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* (1975). This film’s success can be attributed to new marketing strategies involving the release of big-budget films during the leisure periods of the year – summer and Christmas – as well as marketing through television and releasing a film in hundreds of theatres simultaneously. The marketing technique, now referred to as the ‘blockbuster strategy’,

combined this marketing and distribution with actors' 'star power' to bring in large audience numbers. Robert Evans compared this strategy to a parachute jump, saying, "if it doesn't open, you are dead" (Evans as cited in De Vany, 2004, p.122). With subsequent summer blockbusters, such as *Star Wars* (1977) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), Hollywood began to see the advantages in spectacle and allusion-driven films, which not only entertained, but also fulfilled a sense of nostalgia for audiences, marking the moment "when the world recognised the value of childhood" (Thompson and Bordwell, 2010, p.486). This 'simplified' filmmaking form can be attributed to the ideological crises that arose during the 1970s as a result of the Watergate Scandal and Vietnam War, which had left the American public shaken. Robin Wood explains that Hollywood's response to this uncertainty was to have their films emphasise a reassuring nostalgia. Here, reassurance was also key to the production in this era of sequels and repetition of narrative content (Wood, 1995, pp.203-204). Wood contends that the films of the 1980s reassured audiences by appealing to their 'childishness' through a combination of special effects-driven spectacle and imagination/originality that simultaneously placates nuclear anxiety and/or fears of fascism that were present in the wider political arena at the time (pp.206-213). Blockbusters would only continue to grow in scale over the 1980s, as evidenced by the gradually increasing budgets of the *Star Wars* (1977-1983), *Indiana Jones* (1981-1989), and *Back to the Future* (1985-1990) franchises, indicating the industry's confidence in the (potential) profit return of these films.

The 1980s brought with it a second wave of conglomeration, resulting in all of Hollywood's major studios now belonging to various conglomerates, with diversified media interests – for example, Gulf + Western (Paramount) had interests in the auto industry – although over the 1980s, these companies shed the majority of their operations not connected to entertainment production. This led to a shift in focus for studios, leading to blockbusters' involvement in the production and distribution of ancillary products, a strategy referred to as

‘synergy’. Over the 1980s, the blockbuster became increasingly commodified, both in themselves and as objects that formed part of a chain of goods for the consumer, as well as functioning as ‘multipliers’ for the sale of other products. Though it is important to recognise that Hollywood films have always been commodities or commercial products, they had not previously marketed ancillary products to such an extent. Synergy represented a new form of commodification that strategically cohered films with the products found across a corporation’s various production lines. In essence, the blockbuster became both a source of merchandising opportunities and a means of marketing them, relying heavily on audience analysis in order to identify marketing opportunities for both a film’s own advertising as well as that of its merchandising collaborators. These changes led to the blockbuster being conceived of and regarded as a predominantly ‘superficial’ type of film, with Richard Maltby commenting that “in these aspects of their economic organisation, [films] have moved ever closer to the heavily commodified aesthetic of broadcasting, by which the viewer is led not into a work for consideration of its thematic and ideological elements, but away from the text itself into those commercial frames that surround it” (1998, p.27). Although Maltby’s reading is the predominant lens through which blockbusters are typically viewed, I will later explain how this framing of the blockbuster’s economic production obscures the importance that creativity and originality has in relation to their marketing and release. Citing John Belton and Frederic Jameson, Maltby regards these films as ‘the failure of the new’, finding them to be exuberant and inventive from a stylistic standpoint but also politically conservative (p.21). To him, the blockbuster’s reliance on spectacle restricted them aesthetically (ibid.), which, in conjunction with their horizontally integrated, synergy-oriented marketing strategies, further distinguished the blockbuster from its predecessors of the ‘Classical’ or ‘Old’ Hollywood, which were economically reliant on the studios’ vertically integrated system, through a monopoly control on the production, distribution and exhibition of films.

Historically blockbuster films (including the variations preceding the post-1970s blockbuster) have stimulated the introduction and development of new cinematic technologies, in particular, the transition to sound in the 1920s, widescreen in the early 1950s, and in the 1980s-1990s, Computer-Generated Imagery (hereafter, CGI). Although the studios behind each of these technologies had their own reasons for incentivising their use, they all saw them as a means of competitive branding, creating a cycle of innovation and investment in new technology. The blockbuster can therefore be seen as a medium that provides, because of the sheer scale of these films, a means of introducing new technologies to and attracting large audiences. Unlike sound and widescreen technologies though, CGI did not make an immediate impact on mainstream cinema. In the early 1980s, many computer software companies were rejected by Hollywood due to the failure of key projects, especially *Tron* (1982), which was seen as a market and audience test for the potential of this new brand of special effects. CGI was infrequently used over the years in the likes of *The Last Starfighter* (1984) and *Willow* (1988). By the end of the decade however, software companies such as Industrial Light & Magic (ILM) were able to get a foot in the door to convince Hollywood to increase their investment in effects, presumably due to their previous work on the *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones* and *Back to the Future* franchises.

In the 1990s, ILM worked on the effects for two films vital to CGI's development – James Cameron's *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) and Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* (1993) – the latter of which is known for its successful combination of both practical (non-CGI) and digital effects. The former typifies the now commonplace CGI film, with its huge budget (approximately \$94 million), major star (Arnold Schwarzenegger), intense, high-action episodic plot and revolutionary effects. In fact, its special effects were a key talking point during promotion of the film with *The Hollywood Reporter*, quoting vice-President of Lightstorm Entertainment Larry Kasanoff on press reaction to the film: "They're [saying] things like

‘greatest science fiction movie in history’; ‘will blow you away’; ‘redefines the state of special effects’” (Kasanoff as cited in Allen, 2003, p.107). The attention that the film received because of its ground-breaking special effects was an important factor not only in its financial success, but also in proving the value of such technology in filmmaking. Spielberg’s *Jurassic Park* also helped to cement the viability of the CGI blockbuster. By virtue of having the ‘father’ of the modern blockbuster at its helm, and producing an action-packed adaptation of Michael Crichton’s best-selling novel, *Jurassic Park* created pre-release hype around a known literary property and the promotion of the film’s effects as one of its main attractions. The success of introducing new and often unproven, cinematic technologies through blockbusters is demonstrative of contemporary Hollywood’s cycle of appropriation and revitalisation. Allen describes CGI as “the logical conclusion of the current state of filmmaking in America” (Allen, 2003, p.108). The first blockbusters of the New Hollywood relied on special effects as a means of propelling narrative spectacle to greater heights. What we have today then is an industry that produces fewer films, for more money, aiming for a high, albeit superficial, level of impact on its audiences – the motto ‘bigger is better’ does not just define Hollywood’s blockbuster production model, it is one that these films live or die by.

In addition, the appeal of blockbusters can largely be attributed to these films’ ability to appeal to ‘middlebrow expectations’. Roberts argues targeting this ideal audience enables blockbusters (like her example, *Titanic* [1998]) to achieve both commercial *and* critical success. Roberts follows Pierre Bordieu’s definition of ‘middlebrow’, which he claims comprises “accessible versions of avant-garde ... bringing legitimate culture within the reach of all” (Bordieu, 1984, p.323). Filmic middlebrow expectations can be explained as the standards of ‘high culture’, which typically emphasises intellectual or aesthetic superiority, but bought within the purview of an accessible film. In contrast, there is ‘low (or ‘lowbrow’) culture’, which emphasises neither of the aforementioned elements. Commercially-motivated

blockbusters are often associated with low culture due to their ‘superficial’ and ‘simplistic’ aesthetic and narrative elements, while high culture is associated with more critically-acclaimed, ‘serious’ films. Because of these classed cultural associations, critics and award ceremonies are reluctant to reward blockbusters, as they are not validated as aesthetically or artistically serious. Consequently, by appealing to middlebrow expectations, blockbusters can supersede their traditional association with ‘lowbrow’ culture. Superhero films have demonstrated this appeal to middlebrow expectations, especially through the films of Christopher Nolan, which I will discuss later.

Considering these creative and industrial factors, we can see how the blockbuster has been able to maintain a consistent level of success since their arrival in the mid-1970s, demonstrating how the ‘bigger is better’ mantra has managed to serve the major studios all these years. Thanks to rapid improvements in special effects, particularly the development of CGI, studios charged into the 2000s with franchises including *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003), the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series (2003-2011), and the *Harry Potter* film series (2001-2011). Amongst these films though, it was the superhero film that steadily rose to the fore, defying expectations that its appeal was limited to a select fanbase. I later discuss how this fanbase is invited by studios to amplify the appeal of this genre to a wider audience. Improved effects meant that this genre could finally be realised on the silver screen, since the various super-powers and adventures of these characters were no longer as difficult to visualise cinematically as they were before. These technological achievements do not mean that there had not been successful superhero films before the 2000s, Donner’s *Superman* and Burton’s *Batman*, as well as the sequels to these films, and Stephen Norrington’s *Blade* (1998), were successful entries in this genre but they were exceptions when compared with the box office and critical failures of their contemporaries. As mentioned earlier, Bryan Singer’s *X-Men* revitalised the potential of the genre for mainstream audiences. The film featured an ensemble

cast, which included the likes of Halle Berry, Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellen. These actors brought with them the marketability of stars and, in regards to the latter two, a gravitas from their backgrounds in theatre that helped to legitimise both the film and by proxy, the genre as a whole.

The involvement of Stewart and McKellen in particular helped *X-Men* appeal to middlebrow expectations due to their ‘high-culture’ backgrounds as thespians. Likewise, their respective roles in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994) and McKellen’s later performance as Gandalf in *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy extended their appeal to comparatively ‘low-brow’ fans of science-fiction and fantasy, to whom this film was marketed. *X-Men* proved to be a critical and commercial success, leading to a sequel, titled *X2* (2003), which improved on its predecessor by assembling a larger cast of actors targeted to different age demographics and advanced the special effects for the supernatural powers embodied by the heroes (and villains). The film would be followed by Sam Raimi’s *Spider-Man*, centred around its eponymous superhero and unique within the genre because of his character’s ‘ordinariness’ when compared to his fantastic peers, thereby making him relatable to audiences. Again, like *X-Men*, this film was followed by a successful sequel, *Spider-Man 2* (2005). These franchises’ sequels improved on their initial efforts by flawlessly fusing real-world scenes with CGI, granting these films success at the box office and establishing the superhero genre as a lucrative player in the blockbuster game.

Although technology played an important role in improving the quality and success of superhero films, the genre was not without failed entries. Both the *Spider-Man* and *X-Men* trilogies’ final chapters (*X-Men: The Last Stand* [2006] and *Spider-Man 3* [2007]) were met with mixed to negative reviews (see Chang, 2006, and Dargis, 2007 respectively) and were poorly received by fans in subsequent years even though they were commercially successful at

the time of their release. Likewise, a large number of superhero films produced in the early aughts failed at both commercial and critical levels, including, but not limited to: *Daredevil* (2003), *Hulk* (2003), *The Punisher* (2004), *Catwoman* (2004), and *Constantine* (2005). Mary Elizabeth Pryor argues that rather than inherently improving the quality of superhero films, special effects instead play a key role in determining whether a film will succeed or fail. By this, she means that, on the one hand, when technology is used as a supplement to enhance a film's story, the film often proves to be successful. On the other hand, if effects are favoured over the basic craft of storytelling, then the film will suffer. To Pryor, the balance between these two elements is vital to the success of any superhero film (2005, pp.11-12). The superhero films of the 2000s can therefore be seen as a cautionary tale for the evolution of special effects-driven stories. While advances in special effects may have allowed for various comic book adaptations, those same effects can also function as a double-edged sword when their expense is not recouped through critical and audience response.

The period from 2000-2005 had shown the potential of the superhero genre for mainstream commercial and critical success, thanks to improvements in special effects, but had also highlighted their flaws, with several entries into the genre achieving commercial success at the cost of positive critical reception. It was in this environment that Christopher Nolan unveiled his reboot of the Batman franchise with the aptly named origin story, *Batman Begins* (2005). With this film, Nolan ensured that as much of the action as possible was in 'practical' locations (primarily in Chicago) and that 'practical' effects (involving live actors and props) were used over digital effects (Schatz, 2012, p.199). The film's success quickly led to a sequel, *The Dark Knight*, a film that was both critically and commercially successful, resulting in several Academy Awards nominations. Heath Ledger's performance as Batman's nemesis, the Joker, won the film particular acclaim, with the actor posthumously winning the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor. The film's successes are often attributed to the seemingly 'realistic' approach

Nolan took to the superhero genre, evidenced in the film's emphasis on the use of practical effects, locations and subdued drama. Nolan's contribution to the superhero genre played a decisive role in not only legitimising the genre but also proved that the genre was capable of contributing 'serious' film entries to the critical canon, defying assumptions that these films could only appeal to lowbrow audiences. At the other end of the scale was Marvel's equally ground-breaking *Iron Man*. Directed by Jon Favreau, the film was the first entry by a fledgling Marvel Studios into what would become not just a franchise but one that has changed – and is still changing – the face of Hollywood's blockbuster industry. With *Iron Man*, Marvel Studios had taken their first steps towards a 'shared universe' of films, television, and comic books, now widely known as the MCU. This franchise established a distinct tone for its superheroes based on light-hearted comedy and team building. More importantly, the studio created a successful strategy for the interrelation of its comic book properties across various media, taking horizontal integration and synergy a step further towards a franchise that utilised transmedia storytelling.

The scholarly understanding of transmedia storytelling is most commonly associated with the work of Henry Jenkins, though it is important to note his work is an expansion on the work of other scholars, who explored earlier variations of transmedia (Paech, 2002, and Rajewski, 2005, for example). In essays such as "Searching for the Origami Unicorn: *The Matrix* and Transmedia Storytelling" (2006), Jenkins defined a transmedia franchise's story as one that "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (pp.95-96). Instead of extending a film's profits principally through merchandising opportunities, as is the case with horizontal integration/synergy, a film's story can be extended through various media as a way of sustaining audience engagement with the original text. This essentially provides a franchise with a steady stream of supplementary material, all of which, while individually self-contained – so as to ensure that seeing the original

film, for example, is not necessary for audience engagement with other media – builds up an extended world and surrounding mythology.

The economic logic here is that by providing such a wide variety of media for audiences to consume, an equally wide range of demographics can subsequently be captured; for those who do not wish to watch the films, a television series or comic book series provides an alternative form of consumption for the same property. Jenkins notes that “a good transmedia franchise works to attract multiple constituencies by pitching the content somewhat differently in the different media ... [and] if each work offers fresh experiences – then you can count on a crossover market that will expand the potential gross” (p.96). The production of transmedia content therefore sustains audience interest by constantly offering new levels of insight and experience into a franchise’s characters and stories, thereby refreshing said franchise for new audiences, and, consequently, ensuring audiences remain loyal to a franchise ‘brand’. Since the consumption of various media creates “a depth of experience that motivates more consumption” (ibid.), audiences do not lose interest in what could otherwise become a temporally redundant franchise. Essentially, every addition to a transmedia franchise builds upon its predecessors, building new points of entry into that ‘shared universe’ whilst ensuring that each separate property retains a sense of individuality.

MCU Phase 1 (2008-2012)

Films	<i>Iron Man</i> (2008)	<i>The Incredible Hulk</i> (2008)	<i>Iron Man 2</i> (2010)	<i>Thor</i> (2011)	<i>Captain America: The First Avenger</i> (2011)	<i>The Avengers</i> (2012)
Tie-in Comics			<i>Iron Man 2: Public Identity</i> (2010) <i>Iron Man 2: Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.</i> (2010)		<i>Captain America: First Vengeance</i> (2011)	<i>The Avengers: Fury’s Big Week</i> (2012) <i>The Avengers Prelude:</i>

						<i>Black Widow Strikes</i> (2012)
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MCU Phase 2 (2013-2015)

Films	<i>Iron Man 3</i> (2013)	<i>Thor: The Dark World</i> (2013)	<i>Captain America: The Winter Soldier</i> (2011)	<i>Guardians of the Galaxy</i> (2014)	<i>Avengers: Age of Ultron</i> (2015)	<i>Ant-Man</i> (2015)
Tie-in Comics	<i>Iron Man 3 Prelude</i> (2013)	<i>Thor: The Dark World Prelude</i> (2013)	<i>Captain America: The Winter Soldier Infinite Comic</i> (2014)	<i>Guardians of the Galaxy Prelude</i> (2014) <i>Guardians of the Galaxy Prequel Infinite Comic</i> (2014)	<i>Avengers: Age of Ultron – This Scepter’d Isle</i> (2015)	<i>Ant-Man Prelude</i> (2015) <i>Ant-Man – Scott Lang: Small Time</i> (2015)
Marvel TV (ABC & Netflix)		ABC: <i>Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. Seasons 1-2</i> (2013-2015)	ABC: <i>Agent Carter Season 1</i> (2015)	Netflix: <i>Marvel’s Daredevil Season 1</i> (2015)	Netflix: <i>Marvel’s Jessica Jones Season 1</i> (2015)	Tie-in Comic: <i>Jessica Jones</i> (2015)

MCU Phase 3 (2016-2019)

Films	<i>Captain America: Civil War</i> (2016)	<i>Doctor Strange</i> (2016)	<i>Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2</i> (2017)	<i>Spider-Man: Homecoming</i> (2017)	<i>Thor: Ragnarok</i> (2017)
Tie-in Comics	<i>Captain America: Civil War Prelude Infinite Comic</i> (2016)	<i>Doctor Strange Prelude</i> (2016) <i>Doctor Strange Prelude – The Zealot</i> (2016)			
Films (cont.)	<i>Black Panther</i> (2018)	<i>Avengers: Infinity War</i> (2018)	<i>Ant-Man and the Wasp</i> (2018)	<i>Captain Marvel</i> (2019)	Untitled <i>Avengers</i> film (2019)

Marvel TV (ABC & Netflix)	ABC: <i>Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.</i> Seasons 3-4 (2015-present)	ABC: <i>Agent Carter</i> Season 2 (2016)	Netflix: <i>Marvel's Daredevil</i> Season 2 (2016)	Netflix: <i>Marvel's Luke Cage</i> (2016)	Netflix: <i>Marvel's Iron Fist</i> (2017)
Other & In-development	ABC (Digital Series): <i>Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.: Slingshot</i> Season 1 (2016)	Netflix: <i>Marvel's The Punisher</i> (2017)	Netflix: <i>Marvel's The Defenders</i> (2017)	Netflix: <i>Marvel's Daredevil</i> Season 3 (announced) <i>Marvel's Jessica Jones</i> Season 2 (announced)	ABC: <i>Marvel's Cloak and Dagger</i> (In development) <i>Marvel's Damage Control</i> (In development)

Marvel's Release Schedule (2008-present)

The establishment of multiple, distinct franchises has been achieved with the MCU, and the franchise is in its third cinematic 'Phase', with several television shows in production and/or development, as well as numerous tie-in prequel comic books (see chart above). Both 'Phase 1' and 'Phase 2' featured six feature films, with prequel comics, while the latter Phase introduced television shows on both network television, and online via Netflix, further expanding the franchise's mythology (see chart above). It is important to note though that while the film side of the MCU is under the supervision of Marvel Studios, the television shows (including Netflix productions) are made by Marvel Television. Although these studios are both working towards the same transmedia goal, there has been a notable hierarchy between the media, with the cinematic side of the MCU taking priority over the television shows, and the latter essentially existing as supplementary texts, much like the prequel comics used in the films' marketing and promotion. This creates a contradiction of sorts when considering Marvel's slogan, which emphasises 'It's All Connected', stressing the unique position their shared universe holds within the industry. Thus, this thesis will examine the different

components of the MCU in terms of their interrelations in order to understand the creative and commercial imperatives that structure the contemporary blockbuster.

This thesis will be structured around three chapters, each of which will introduce and explore different aspects of the creative and commercial influences of superhero films on the blockbuster production model. My first chapter explores the narrative and world-building involved in establishing the MCU. I will explain how Marvel Studios achieved their current economic and critically successful position by developing their shared universe from the ground up and the gradual approach to the crossover event, *The Avengers*, which led to their success in this endeavour. The financial and creative risks involved for Marvel as a company in creating a transmedia franchise will also be discussed in conjunction with their methods for expanding the mythology of the franchise through paratexts, such as Easter Eggs. In particular, this chapter will also focus on the role of fans within the MCU franchise model and their dual position as Marvel's target demographic, and an important aspect of their marketing strategy. I discuss the ways in which Marvel presents itself as "faithfully" adapting and translating its comic book properties across media to generate fan fidelity and loyalty to its brand. Finally, this chapter will discuss how the MCU utilises other media, such as television, the relationship between these media, and how Marvel compares to their competitors in terms of transmedia storytelling. Overall, I aim to explore how a transmedia franchise can be developed and how it functions on both a micro (within the franchise itself) and macro (within the film industry) level.

The second chapter of my thesis will examine the textual features of MCU films, focusing on the generic conventions used to create superhero films as well as the presentation of heroic figures within the genre. This will involve a discussion of the superhero genre's exemplification of the blockbuster's cycle of appropriation and revitalisation and the conflicting creative and commercial interests behind these films as well as the role of paratexts in relation

to marketing, and further into the chapter, the films' stars. I will establish how Marvel has appropriated genres to differentiate their standalone projects from one another while retaining a tone unique to the MCU across their transmedia franchise. Then, I will turn to the characters that these films and television shows centre around, the heroes, analysing how they are presented and their personalities. I explore the differences and similarities between Captain America and Iron Man in terms of their standing as 'action heroes' and as representations of idealised masculinity. From this discussion, I will examine how the superhero genre emphasises broader industrial practices that valorise star persona and box office bankability in terms of race, gender, and sexuality. This chapter will therefore provide a more detailed analysis of the genre and its characters' and the genre's position within the industry.

The third and final chapter of this thesis examines the creative role of the director within the blockbuster production model, in particular, the MCU. As well as contextualizing the relationship between the director and the aforementioned creative and commercial interests involved in the blockbuster production model, I continue my analysis of race and gender in terms of how the mediation of diversity affects studios' selection and promotion of directors for particular projects. While this selection process expands the opportunities for indie-directors and directors from minority groups, I discuss what these changing hiring strategies say about the wider industry and its white and male dominance thus far. From here, I examine the authorial role of the director within individual superhero franchises, and, how they are utilised within broader transmedia franchises, not just creatively, but from a marketing perspective too. This discussion draws out the role of fans and marketing, analysed in Chapter One, to explain the emergence of what Suzanne Scott describes as the 'fanboy auteur'. According to Scott, this auteur-director is feted creatively due to their fan credentials. They serve as a "creator/figurehead of a transmedia franchise" and attempt "to navigate and break the conventional boundaries between producers and consumers" (Scott, 2013, p.45). Taking my

point of departure from Scott, I argue that blockbuster filmmaking today is reliant on what I refer to as ‘co-dependent authorship’. This is a system of filmmaking in which the creative and commercial interests of the blockbuster must be balanced and depend on one another for success. Such a system results in a hybrid form of authorship that neither rejects nor accepts one element over the other.

By analysing the superhero genre from these different industrial and textual perspectives, I shall establish the genre’s current position within the film industry today, particularly in relation to the cycle of appropriation and revitalisation driving the genre’s underlying creative and commercial interests. From here, I assess the genre’s continuing viability. Due to the genre’s success and influence within the industry, its longevity is also tied to that of the blockbuster model as a staple of the stability of the Hollywood film industry. The latter point here cannot be emphasised enough since the superhero genre’s fall could have dire consequences for Hollywood’s major studios and their current production models. Finally, I position my discussion of the genre predominantly around the MCU, although I will also examine what their competitors Sony, 20th Century Fox, and particularly DC, are offering towards the genre. The primary goal of my thesis therefore is to evaluate the sustainability of the superhero genre in contemporary Hollywood, and how it may deal with the looming threat of oversaturation. With this in mind, it is pertinent to first examine the franchise leading the charge for the genre, the MCU, and its unique use of narrative and world-building.

Chapter One: Franchises – Assemble! Establishing a Transmedia Story

1.1 – Introduction: The Origins of the Universe

What is so great about the Avengers comics is not just that it's a team of superheroes ... what's great about the Avengers is that they were superheroes in their own comics. In their own mythology that you already knew, that you'd already read, that you're already fans of, and they're all coming together ... under one title. That's what was brilliant about it ... And we wanted to unveil the movie characters in the same way. That had been a 'what if?', that had been a dream scenario for many, many years. And because Iron Man worked, and had been so successful, they said 'what do you have next?', 'you want to do it like that? Great, do that'. (Kevin Feige as cited in Rogers, 2012)

As Marvel Studios President Kevin Feige describes it, the birth and rapid success of the MCU is a veritable miracle, the result of applying the logic of comic book crossover events to blockbuster film franchises. The success of Marvel, and to a lesser extent, their competitors, has led to multiple superhero franchises, whose futures are mapped out so extensively that from 2016-2020, approximately twenty-six films are scheduled for release. In fact, depending on the success of these films during this time, more films could still be announced, demonstrating the extent to which the superhero genre has come to dominate the blockbuster market. Financially, it is not difficult to understand why studios are backing the genre this extensively, especially when considering that among the films that have cleared the \$1 billion box office, five of them are superhero films: *The Dark Knight*, *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), *The Avengers*, *Iron Man 3*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, and *Captain America: Civil War*. Furthermore, these films' critical successes enabled a surge of mainstream popularity for the superhero film in the late 2000s (thanks largely to *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight*), that saw the genre reach a level of legitimacy it had not quite managed to grasp with the early successes of the *Spider-Man* and *X-Men* franchises. Yet, for all the victories this genre has secured in recent cinematic history, these films have posed greater risks than, perhaps, any blockbuster franchise has before them. Despite having been around since the late 1930s, the superhero genre has struggled to be taken seriously

throughout its history. This means that, aside from the inherent investment risks that drive blockbuster productions, superhero films are always treading a fine line between legitimacy and ridicule in their critical and audience reception.

Regardless of this risk, the superhero genre is being funded to ever greater heights with each profitable venture undertaken by the major studios involved in the Hollywood film industry, namely: Disney/Marvel Studios, Warner Bros./DC Comics, Sony/Columbia Pictures, and 20th Century Fox. Although Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* Trilogy could be seen as the franchise that legitimised the superhero genre, the MCU ultimately changed, not just the genre, but also the entire Hollywood film industry. The sheer economic risk that Marvel took in developing their 'shared', transmedia universe cannot be understated, especially when considering it in relation to the efforts of the aforementioned studios. Therefore, this chapter will focus on the narrative and world-building involved in constructing the MCU, as well how Marvel were able to sell what was, at the time, a radical notion – standalone blockbuster films sharing a narrative universe, culminating in a 'crossover event'. In examining the industrial and transmedia practices of the MCU, we will see how this franchise is so fundamentally different, as a franchise, from the films of its competitors. In addition, this chapter will also explore the relationship between Marvel's various media, particularly television and film that are involved in the MCU and again, how its competitors compare with respect to the development of their shared universes. The aim of this chapter then, is to establish how a transmedia franchise on the scale of the MCU was developed and how it functions on both a micro (within the franchise) and macro (within the industry) level.

1.2 – Constructing a Universe, One Phase at a Time

Marvel Comics are typically regarded as one of the two leading producers of comic books, with their main competitor being DC Comics. Yet, despite their position within the comic book

industry, Marvel found themselves facing declining sales in the aftermath of the comic book 'renaissance' of the 1980s. During this period, the work of Alan Moore (*Watchmen* [1986-1987]) and Frank Miller (*Daredevil* [1979-1983], *The Dark Knight Returns* [1986]), among others, ushered in a new phase of the superhero genre's history, one that represented "the birth of self-consciousness in the superhero narrative" (Klock, 2002, p.3). This new approach was called 'revisionist' or 'revisionary' by fans and scholars alike, a term used "to stress that [the writers'] main contribution was to question the whole meaning of the [superhero] genre through the critical revelation of its ideological contradiction" (Pagello, 2013, p.4). According to Frederico Pagello, the revisionists' "principal aim ... [was] not so much to put an end to [the] genre or to design alternative ways of writing popular comics as to deconstruct their mechanics in order to show how they work and the way in which they could be differently rearticulated" (ibid.). The success of these revisionary works resulted in high profits for both Marvel and DC, which were followed shortly by failure.

This economic boom within the comic book industry was especially advantageous to DC since, because of their position within the Time Warner conglomerate, they could display their characters through Warner Brothers, thanks to horizontal integration. With this built-in means of marketing their comic properties, Time Warner could take a character like Batman and sell films, television shows and merchandise as well as the comic books featuring him. Marvel, on the other hand, were independent from media companies and as such, could not easily replicate the success of their rival. This did not stop them from trying though. In the 1990s, Marvel attempted to emulate and become a 'mini-Disney' of sorts. To achieve this, they bought trading card companies Topps and Fler in order to sell their properties through that medium, which became increasingly profitable thanks to a speculator's market (Johnson, 2007, p.70). The year 1996 however, saw Marvel's profits decline, a problem exacerbated further by the reaction of their fans, who felt that in their efforts to diversify their holdings, Marvel had

allowed the quality of their comics to suffer. Fans began then to boycott Marvel's comics. As a result of this dramatic shift in the market, Marvel declared bankruptcy, finally coming under the control of a conglomerate in 1998 when they were acquired by Toy Biz, who in turn were dependent upon Marvel for their toy licensing deals (Johnson, 2007, pp.70-71).

Although Marvel's ambition to emulate Disney's corporate model had been cut short, they were not deterred. Derek Johnson notes that although the company had "failed to duplicate the *corporate* structure of Disney or Time Warner, Marvel's new approach settled for the *creative* structure of a 'mini-Disney'" (Johnson, 2007, p.71). Likewise, Janet Wasko argued that "Disney's synergistic strategies are based upon its characters; each character is a wheel whose spokes each represent a product revolving around that brand" (as cited in Johnson, 2007, p.71). With this in mind, Marvel's new focus involved placing less emphasis on their comics – due to the aforementioned problems with their fans' boycott – and turning to a new medium, film. Although they could not expand on their primary output, comic books, Marvel did have numerous intellectual properties at their disposal. Attempting to emulate Disney's approach to characters then, Marvel made licensing deals with various studios, including licensing the *X-Men* to 20th Century Fox and *Spider-Man* to Columbia Pictures/Sony. The advantage of this licencing was that, while they would not see a massive profit from these agreements, Marvel were also not exposing themselves to the risks that had brought them down before. Because they did not have to risk massive capital investments like those that had led to their bankruptcy, Marvel were subsequently able to recover financially. In fact, by 2002, licensing deals made up twenty-six percent of their revenue (Johnson, 2007, p.72). This revenue shift helped to solve Marvel's fiscal problems, and retain their relevancy within popular culture, all the while setting up the company for their future endeavours, such as the MCU.

Although these licensing deals were instrumental in bringing Marvel out of the red, the company soon began to see the creative problems with these arrangements. Matthias Stork notes that “the licensing model imposed several disadvantages on Marvel ... including the lack of creative control over its property, restricted financial planning and content development, as well as limited access to the organisation of ancillary markets” (2014, p.82). Essentially, despite owning the rights to these characters, Marvel’s licensing deals meant that their income was restricted and consequently, untenable in the long-term. This led to the company restructuring themselves in 2005, creating the subsidiary, Marvel Studios, in the process. In doing so, Marvel sought to regain control over both their intellectual property, and produce their own films as “an external independent *non-cinematic* company in Hollywood, using [their] comic book expertise to drive a new form of blockbuster content” (ibid.). To achieve this, Marvel needed to secure the necessary finances to produce a film. Derek Johnson wrote that, thanks to firms like Relativity Media – who had begun arranging financing for independent production with agencies outside of the Hollywood establishment – Marvel executive David Maisel was able to get a credit line of \$525 million from Merrill Lynch (2012, p.11). The Ambac insurance company helped by promising to cover the interest payments owed to Marvel’s creditor should these films fail at the box office. The rights to twelve of Marvel’s characters were at stake in the event of failure (Johnson, 2012, p.11). At this point, the question was no longer *if* Marvel could produce their own film(s), but which characters they would be about.

Marvel no longer held the rights to some of their most popular franchises, with Columbia Pictures/Sony owning the rights to *Spider-Man* and 20th Century Fox holding the rights to the *Fantastic Four* and the *X-Men*. However, they did have the rights to several characters, including Captain America, Nick Fury, Thor, and Iron Man (whose rights they had recently regained from New Line Cinema). In addition, Universal was willing to let them use the Hulk so long as Marvel paid for the film. It did not take long for Marvel to realise that with

this roster of characters, they had access to the original line-up of their major crossover franchise, the Avengers, and with that knowledge they began simultaneous production on *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk*. Although the latter did not perform brilliantly at the box office, the former greatly exceeded expectations, making \$585.2 million from its \$140 million budget. Furthermore, thanks to their new financing scheme, Marvel profited from *Iron Man* more than the previous sixteen films produced through licensing deals, while Paramount only received approximately \$50 million for their role, inverting Marvel's previous relationships with major studios. Thus began Marvel's creation of the transmedia franchise that is the MCU.

As a standalone film, *Iron Man* was critically and commercially successful, but its ending created a storytelling mark of distinction for the MCU. The film's use of the post-credits scene (now a staple of the MCU) saw Tony Stark/Iron Man (Robert Downey Jr.) meeting Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson), director of S.H.I.E.L.D. (the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division; an organisation present in the background of the film). Fury announces to both Stark and, implicitly, the audience, that "you've become part of a bigger universe; you just don't know it yet". Marvel's next film, *The Incredible Hulk* also ended with a post-credits scene, this time featuring Stark speaking to Bruce Banner/ The Hulk about the 'Avengers Initiative'. Each film leading up to, and including, *The Avengers*, comprised 'Phase 1' of the MCU, with each successive entry expanding the universe further. In addition, Easter eggs, subtle paratextual references to the wider universe, which included mentioning the events of other films through 'hidden' clues in the films' narrative, extended the shared universe of the MCU films and rewarded audience engagement. Every film of the MCU then, was a "public announcement about the universe's cohesion, declaring itself part of a larger framework" (Stork, 2014, p.84).

Therefore, *Iron Man* introduced audiences to the idea of the *universe*; *The Incredible Hulk* introduced us to the idea of a potential *team*; and the next film, *Iron Man 2*, changed the game somewhat, by making S.H.I.E.L.D. and *The Avengers* a more concrete part of the narrative, setting up the next Marvel film, *Thor*. Likewise, *Thor* expands the universe, quite literally, through its science-fiction tale of the eponymous hero from the planet Asgard (situated in another galaxy), which in turn, plants the seeds for the next entry, *Captain America: The First Avenger* (as well as implicitly signalling the possibility for MCU characters outside of earth, such as the Guardians of the Galaxy). This film takes us back in time to World War II, establishing the notion of superheroes that existed (chronologically) before its protagonist's MCU predecessors. The post-credits scene for *Captain America* finally sets up the premise for *The Avengers*, with the MacGuffin,¹ the Tesseract, a mysterious box that originated from Asgard. Consequently, we see how Marvel's use of post-credits scenes not only expanded upon this cinematic universe, but also established the larger, shared narrative in which these films operate. In doing so, Marvel dramatically changed the superhero genre, with the franchises of standalone superheroes culminating in the climax to Phase 1: *The Avengers* (2012). This film was not just the triumphant conclusion to Phase 1 of the MCU, it managed to accomplish what was previously unheard of: uniting characters from various, separate franchises into a single film, all while being a commercial (making \$1.5 billion at the box office) and critical (having a positive rating of 92% on review aggregator, Rotten Tomatoes; "Marvel Cinematic Universe") success. *The Avengers'* triumph led to a second Phase of standalone films, mostly comprised of sequels and one new property – 2013's *Iron Man 3* and *Thor: The Dark World*; 2014's *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (*CA:TWS*, hereafter) and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (*GotG*, hereafter); and *Ant-Man* in 2015 – which again led to a team-up of the heroes in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*.

¹ A MacGuffin is a plot device, ranging from a goal, desired object, or other motivator that the protagonist(s) pursue. One example of this would be the briefcase in Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994).

Several of these films, especially the sequels, were also preceded by prequel comics that helped establish what their respective characters had been doing between films, and some included short films (referred to as Marvel One-Shots) when released on home media. For example, the home release of *Captain America* included a short film entitled *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Thor's Hammer* (2011), which chronicled the secondary character Agent Phil Coulson's (Clark Gregg) journey to New Mexico between his appearances in *Iron Man 2* and *Thor*. Furthermore, late in 2012, following the success of *The Avengers*, Marvel released their first television show, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2012-present; hereafter *AoS*), which followed the adventures of Coulson and his team, the international spy organisation that the show's protagonists worked for and to whom the superheroes report to as 'guardians' of the earth's safety. The show would be heavily affected by the narrative aftermath of *CA:TWS*, which saw the downfall of S.H.I.E.L.D. According to critics (see Schwartz, 2014, and Barr, 2014), these events helped to improve the quality of the show because episodes were focused on a larger overall narrative (as opposed to a mystery-of-the-week format), which heightened the show's espionage-based elements, leading to the renewal of *AoS* for a second season. During the mid-season break of 2014-2015, Marvel released a miniseries called *Agent Carter*, a period piece that followed the adventures of Peggy Carter, who had previously appeared in the *Captain America* films and a Marvel One-Shot, also titled *Agent Carter* (2013). 2015 was a busy year for Marvel too, in addition to these shows and the eagerly anticipated Avengers sequel, they released two more shows, *Daredevil* and *Jessica Jones* through the online streaming service Netflix. With *Daredevil*, Marvel sought to portray the 'street level' of their universe, with the eponymous anti-hero fighting to stop the efforts of a crime lord, who had established himself during the fallout from the Battle of New York from the climax of *The Avengers*. In turn, *Jessica Jones* followed a super-powered, female private detective, who, after her suffering at the hands of the mind-controlling Kilgrave, the 'Purple Man', is weighed down by her subsequent Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD) and guilt-driven alcoholism. As of the time of writing,

Marvel has released a second season of *Daredevil* and *Jessica Jones* as well as a new show *Luke Cage* (featuring a character established in the former show) via Netflix. Two more shows are planned for Netflix distribution, *Iron Fist* and *The Punisher* (the latter featuring a character introduced in *Daredevil*). A miniseries called *The Defenders* is the proposed endgame for these shows, which will see the television characters interact and fight alongside one another in a crossover event; much like the Avengers did on the silver screen before them. This flurry of television production demonstrates the various ways that Marvel has sought to expand their Cinematic Universe outside of films.

A strategic priority on revenue and creative control over characters serves to demonstrate how Marvel has gradually established their Cinematic Universe from 2005 through to the present day. As of 2016, Marvel has released a second season of *Agent Carter*, *AoS*' third season, in addition to the first two entries into Phase 3 of the MCU: *Captain America: Civil War* (*CA: CW*) and *Doctor Strange*. Furthermore, there are currently several shows rumoured to be in development, including *Damage Control* (a comedy) and *Cloak and Dagger* (following a new pair of superheroes). Although Matthias Stork posits that the MCU is just that, cinematic, and not a transmedia construction (Stork, 2014, p.85), it has clearly expanded into the latter. The sheer variety of content released outside of the cinema – not just television and webseries, but all the prequel comics and other ancillary markets included in the promotion of these films and series – indicate just how prevalent an example of a transmedia franchise the MCU has become. Overall, the transmedia model shows *how* the MCU was nurtured through inter-media relationships and how it has developed from a post-credits scene at the end of *Iron Man* into a constantly evolving and expanding machine. The question that follows, then, is *why* Marvel were not only so successful but able to change the way audiences and critics saw the superhero genre, and by extension the blockbuster franchise, to a staple of mainstream entertainment with an appeal beyond its heretofore limited comic book fanbase.

1.3 – Marketing to and for the Fans

The success of Marvel, and by extension, the superhero genre, can be attributed to the audience that was there from the beginning: the fans. Fans of comic books have eagerly followed the development of the genre, particularly through its recent ascension to the mainstream. The movement of Tony Stark and company from the fringes of popular culture to its mainstream is not just the work of Hollywood studios, but the fans, who play a vital role in amplifying the promotional and creative work of the studios. In order to understand this work, it is necessary to appreciate the integral role of the fan in selling the concept of the costumed superhero as blockbuster franchise material to a wider audience. For a transmedia franchise like the MCU, the relationship between studio and fan, between the product and the consumer, can influence the desired effect of narrative synergy. To Henry Jenkins, fans “are more apt to watch series faithfully, more apt to pay attention to advertising, and more apt to buy products” (2006, p.63). This creative and consumptive role involves fans producing their own ancillary works (fan fiction, for example) and gathering as much knowledge as possible about media properties to speculate and comment on their development. Studios can benefit from this fan activity because it stimulates ongoing online and media interest in the films. Ultimately, comic book culture is “one of consumption and commodity” (Pustz, 1999, p.18). This relationship is viewed to benefit both fans and transmedia franchises. Jenkins comments that “If old consumers were assumed to be passive, the new consumers are active ... If the work of media consumers was once silent and invisible, the new consumers are now noisy and public” (Jenkins, 2006, p.19). While the active audience model has been theorised within media and communication studies scholarship for some time (see Hall, 1980), Jenkins is pointing to the ways technology actively cultivates a more sustained media engagement that in turn, influences the development and production of media content. Media companies prize this new active audience because of the potential for brand loyalty. Alex Brundige suggests, “Active viewership on the part of fans generates an

affective energy through the processes performed around these properties in fan communities” (2015, p.4). Therefore, film studios’ engagement with fan communities is vital to the success of the superhero genre, and franchises like the MCU, due to the way in which fans’ passion can serve as a means of promotion. In discussing this fan engagement, I will be drawing upon Brundige’s thesis, “The Rise of Marvel and DC’s Transmedia Superheroes: Comic Book Adaptations, Fanboy Auteurs, and Guiding Fan Reception”, which is the most comprehensive account of this topic to date.

The value of comic book properties to fans lies in their inter-textuality and polysemy. That is, the ways in which comic books absorb aspects of popular culture and encourage audiences to negotiate the different meanings offered from the text(s) they consume. The meanings of social identity and of social experience that can be found in the semiotic resources provided by a cultural commodity, in this case, comic books, result in a semiotic production of meaning (Fiske, 1992, p.37). John Fiske elaborates, stating that this process is “characteristic of popular culture as a whole rather than of fan culture specifically” (ibid.). Brundige expands on this semiotic productivity, arguing that the process becomes ‘fannish’ through active physical productivity (Brundige, 2015, p.4). This ‘textual productivity’ can occur when fans “produce and circulate [texts] among themselves” (Fiske, 1992, p.39), with fans producing new texts and expanding upon preceding ones. Transposing this process to cinema, the films produced by major studios do not inherently guarantee a stable set of meanings or narratives for fans, but instead, provide a foundation from which they can produce their own meaning, an activity considered an intrinsic aspect of the meaning-making reception of media texts and which drives fandom. Jenkins notes that fans “construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media” (Jenkins, 1992, p.23). As digital (and social) media has become more pervasive, these active fan practices have only become more prominent in turn.

Marvel, DC, and their competitors, have increasingly sought ways to engage with fans through each superhero film they produce, selling their franchises as authentic adaptations of the comic book source material. In doing so, the studios promote the ‘fanboy auteur’ (which I examine and problematise further in Chapter Three). This term is Suzanne Scott’s interpretation of these films’ directors who function as an intermediary between the studios and the fans, due to their own (perceived) fannish background. Choice of director is a strategy used by studios to reassure fans that their alteration of a property for the purposes of a film franchise is faithful. Studios also attempt to authentically repurpose and syncretise elements of comic book storytelling in order to facilitate inter-textual engagement in their film adaptations. The adapted versions call upon the fundamental elements of the comic book characters that have functioned across the multiplicity of their respective source material that “builds upon details and events which were well established in the continuity era” (Jenkins, 2009, p.30). Jenkins continues, saying that “certain events [have] to occur within these universes – say, the death of Bruce Wayne’s father, the destruction of Krypton, or the formation of the Justice League – but we are invited to read those events from different perspectives” (ibid.). So, by producing ‘authentic’ films that demonstrate a textual continuity, of sorts, studios can convey the appearance of respect for these properties, based on the fans’ relationship to and knowledge of the source material.

It is important to note though, that when discussing the ‘source material’, I am referring to the popular comic book texts that stand out within the medium’s ‘mainstream’, the books that have influenced their readers’ interpretation and understanding of the characters and stories. This understanding can potentially complicate any discussion of film adaptations of said texts, as the comics and their characters have had numerous permutations over their decades-long history. Brundige notes “age and generation is central to the perceived

authenticity of an adaptation, as certain source texts are privileged at different periods in time” (2015, p.5). This can be seen in recent film adaptations that are often based on texts from the comics’ boom of the 1980s, which, although undeniably fantastic, offered a more grounded approach to characters and stories. They featured “heroes who have ceased to be superhuman, who sometimes have problems with drugs, alcohol, and sex, and above all, who grapple with notions of authority, power, and evil that are not always clear and against which they do not always win” (Bongco, 2000, p.141). The ‘mature’ content in these stories subsequently led to a shift away from contemporary superhero films’ comparatively camp predecessors – such as the *Batman* (1966-1968) television series, Richard Donner’s *Superman*, and Tim Burton’s *Batman* – to a more grounded, ‘gritty’, and relatively ‘realistic’ interpretation of superheroes, although among their contemporaries, Donner and Burton’s films were considered ‘realistic’. This was because they moved away from the comparatively camp tone of previous superhero adaptations, particularly the Adam West-led *Batman* (1966-1968) show of the 1960s, and took the hero’s emotional journey more seriously. Interestingly, the contemporary attribution of ‘realism’ to superhero films demonstrates how notions of fidelity are culturally and historically malleable. In any case, this grounded approach to adapting the superhero genre, has contributed greatly to these films being taken seriously by mainstream audiences and critics.

Clearly then, the notions of authenticity and fidelity when adapting comics to the screen are integral in appealing to the comics’ pre-established fans. As mentioned earlier though, the various interpretations and reimagining of these properties over the years can result in the ambiguity of textual origins, with a single text possessing a “plethora of possible meanings” (Stam, 2000, p.57). This is not to say though that fans are concerned with an adaptation accurately translating the source’s authorial meaning from one text to another. Rather, fans judge an adaptation based on its ‘faithfulness’ to its origins. In regards to comic book adaptations then, authenticity is, at best, ambiguous, yet remains a key part of fans’ reception

of these films. Brundige notes that for fans, “the fidelity important to comic book adaptations is a ‘discourse of fidelity’; it is what fans say to each other and to a wider audience regarding perceived ‘faithfulness’ that matters, not actual intertextual connections” (Brundige, 2015, p.7). Consequently, it is “the *claim* that an adapted text is authentic [which provides] the basis of acceptance” (ibid.). Thus, it is the ability to debate and claim ownership over the terms of authenticity and the source of origins that is important to fans.

By virtue of being the producers of their various properties, Marvel’s transition to independent film production offered a level of perceived authenticity and fidelity that their competitors (aside from DC/Warner Bros., perhaps) lacked. Former Marvel CEO, Avi Arad, established the company’s position on the expectations of the filmmakers involved in their properties, stating in 2006: “Unless you buy into the gestalt of what Marvel is and understand the characters and metaphors and treat them as living people, we are not interested. This is material that has withstood the test of history, and the director and writer have a sense of responsibility” (Avi Arad as cited in Stork, 2014, p.87). It was imperative to Marvel that they ensured that the fans of the comics were also fans of their filmic adaptations. Pragmatically though, only a small portion of film audiences consist of comic book fans, the ones Marvel were relying on to engage with the adaptations the most. This engagement was ideally supposed to involve fans following a film’s development from pre- to post-production. Brundige comments that by “appealing to a larger mainstream audience, studios [like Marvel] cater to fans in order to facilitate the positive discussion of their films” (Brundige, 2015, p.15). His argument is supported by the example of Guillermo del Toro’s adaptation of *Hellboy* (2004), the success of which, according to Ben Fritz, was “thanks in part to enthusiastic online fans” (2004). Thus, contemporary comic book fans, despite their comparatively small size, play a significant part in the marketing of these films to more mainstream audiences through the process of ‘amplification’. As described by Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith:

Amplification ... usually occurs among two or more people who have read the same comic book, but it is also possible for a reader to relate portions of the comic book message to someone who has not encountered it first-hand. The significance of this amplification is that the final meaning that resides with a receiver might be the product of both the reading itself and the discussion that followed, or, in the case of second-hand receivers, it could be the product solely of discussion. (Duncan and Smith, 2009, p.13)

Burke acknowledges that it is these ‘second-hand receivers’ – the mainstream audiences – that give fan discourse power, since “with no familiarity with the source, they will propagate fan opinion, often considered expert, thereby giving the first-hand receivers wider influence” (Burke, 2015, p.139), as fans typically offer the most prominent online reaction to superhero films.

Fans’ opinion, or non-reception of adaptations, is mediated by online and other forms of film press as an important barometer of a superhero film’s quality thereby effecting in turn, how mainstream audiences view the films. ‘Fan power’ is derived from the influence of the former’s thoughts on these adaptations. This ‘power’ can have an effect on how mainstream audiences value “fidelity, or at least the idea of it” (pp.140-141). The dichotomy between these two groups is intrinsically linked to how they each approach contemporary superhero films. As noted by Jonathan Gray and Neil Rae, “although comic book readers are the most knowledgeable of audiences, they are very much a minority within the total number of viewers for comic book movies” (Gray and Rae, 2007, p.86). At the other end of the scale are mainstream audiences, who, generally, enter these films with little to no prior knowledge of, or engagement with, the properties involved. In discussing the numerous textual experiences involved in the superhero genre, Gray and Rae note that superhero films call upon “all viewers to struggle somewhat with the intertextual networks of knowledge and precedence, ultimately creating two very different textualities for the film, with significant tension between the two types” (ibid.). Despite their lack of fannish knowledge though, mainstream audiences do have some popular culture awareness of comic book source material, meaning that the films’ function as adaptations of fannish properties is still relevant across different levels of audience reception.

Expanding on the relationship between fans and mainstream audiences, Brundige comments that “the knowledge on the part of mainstream audiences about the existence and prominence of the comic source texts tie issues of fidelity to their reading of the genre” (Brundige, 2015, p.17). For mainstream audiences, there are several reasons to value faithfulness to the source text, despite their lack of direct consumption of such texts. These reasons include, but are not limited to, the belief in the ‘seniority’ of the original texts over an adaptation (Robert Stam as cited in Burke, 2015, p.17), and the deference to ‘original’ comic book fans, who are regarded as ‘experts’ with a more nuanced understanding of what makes the stories and characters of these comics ‘great’ (ibid.). Both Marvel and DC have capitalised on this perception of fidelity as quality, particularly through the inclusion of their logo in the opening credits, which include animations that incorporate flashes of comic book panels and images. Aside from reminding viewers of their respective companies, the incorporation of this comic book aesthetic into their logo design solidifies their intention to remain faithful to the source material. By amplifying the emotional and textual engagement of fans to mainstream viewers, the film studios responsible for these adaptations have successfully established the commercial and critical potential of the superhero genre to the Hollywood blockbuster.

For Matthias Stork, it is important to note that Marvel’s relationship with fans was not “merely designed to appeal; it was designed to appeal and to be *sold*, as a myth come to life, ready to be experienced as a consumer good” (2014, p.91). By appealing to fans’ desire for authentic adaptations, Marvel (and by extension, their competitors) were able to retain their ‘old’ fans (of the pre-existing comic properties) whilst simultaneously utilising those same fans to expand their transmedia audience. This strategy was hugely effective, particularly because it satisfied both film producers and consumers (fans). As well as breaking the mould for traditional blockbuster franchise models, the MCU’s use of serialised storytelling also serves

as an emulation of fannish behaviours, due to this narrative model being borrowed from comics. Series like DC's *Justice League* or Marvel's *The Avengers* served as crossover 'events' that allowed for several individual properties to interact. In regards to this, Kevin McDonald notes that the "unique ability to simultaneously elicit fan involvement while also maximising the overlapping commercial potential of this involvement anticipates one of the main aspirations of the franchise model. Indeed, it suggests that the film's expansive storylines and mythological substrata were instrumental in converting viewers into life-long apostles" (McDonald, 2014, p.123). As a result, Marvel has capitalised on fannish behaviour by basing their transmedia cinematic storytelling on comic book crossover events, creating a greater sense of comic book 'authenticity' for fans and promising mainstream viewers a filmic 'payoff' for engaging with the standalone films, thereby increasing audience consumption of the franchise.

Marvel has also gone to great efforts to communicate with and appeal to fans by using "sites of comic book fan culture in constructing recognisable brands for film franchises" (Brundige, 2015, p.21), namely, the MCU. Perhaps the most notable of these sites is the San Diego Comic-Con (hereafter, SDCC), which has grown from its humble origins in the 1970s, to the major arena of fan participation it is known as today. McDonald states that although it was formerly aimed at a niche market, SDCC "is [now] aligned not only with the blockbuster phenomenon but with an intensified version of the blockbuster where individual films are explicitly conceived as part of a brand-oriented franchise designed to foster a transmedia multiverse of profits" (McDonald, 2014, p.118). Studios now utilise panels at conventions like SDCC to reveal exclusive new footage for and/or announce upcoming films. In regards to the latter, Marvel have established a new standard within the industry by announcing entire blocks of upcoming films, such as their unveiling of Phase 2 (2013-2015) and Phase 3 (2016-2019) of the MCU. By doing this, studios reward fans for their engagement with their franchise's brand between and during the films' release. This method is demonstrated through the specific

language used by the producers and creators to further appeal to fans. Stork highlights the repetition of certain terms in marketing the MCU, specifically, the idea of a ‘promise’ on behalf of Marvel to the fans as they introduced *The Avengers*. Stork elaborates, saying that the “notion of the promise carried through the entire discursive process of assembling and selling *The Avengers*, with Marvel increasing its cultural fan capacity as a company that honours its relationship with its core customers” (Stork, 2014, p.92). By cultivating fandom through promises and discourses of authenticity, studios like Marvel demonstrate an acknowledgement of the fans’ desire that the fidelity of their characters should be maintained and reliably represented onscreen. To Brundige, “this authenticity will affect a wider audience who engage with fannish commentary surrounding these films in online communities” (Brundige, 2015, p.22). Therefore, fans play a significant role in the production of superhero films, from their ability to confirm an adaptation’s authenticity, to their role in the marketing of these films. I will complicate my discussion of fan labour in Chapter Three, where I will discuss the effect of changing gender dynamics within the comic book fan community.

1.4 – Marvel & Other Media: The Double-Edged Sword of Transmedia World-Building

In less than a decade, Marvel has created one of the most successful blockbuster franchises in film history, and a transmedia franchise at that. Their franchise, in addition to film, has utilised television and online series, short films, and prequel comics in order to tell the tale(s) of the MCU. However, Marvel’s films have been criticised for repeating the same narrative across each of its films and for featuring weak and underdeveloped villains, amongst other things (see O’Regan, 2017). Furthermore, the MCU’s position in Hollywood as the first successful ‘shared universe’ has been met with scepticism from fans and critics alike, particularly in regards to the contradiction between Marvel’s motto that ‘It’s All Connected’, and the limited, sometimes non-existent connections between the films and other MCU-based media. By exploring the

MCU's peripheral media elements, we might better ascertain how effectively Marvel are developing their franchise across multiple media. The strength of their transmedia franchises is their world-building potential. This is also their weakness, with industrial limitations including production costs/times, and a circumscribed oversight from Marvel Studios and Marvel Television respectively. By exploring these restrictions, we will see how the supplementary material of a transmedia franchise functions as a double-edged sword, as the MCU's greatest asset and Achilles' heel.

Across Marvel's standalone films there have been several recurring trends that have drawn criticism of the MCU. First, their standalone films are often centred around the titular protagonist's origin as he (more on this later) makes the leap into super-heroics. In these films, the protagonists face similar stories, such as being forced to come to terms with their new abilities/powers (e.g. *Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and *Captain America*), or to find a place for themselves in the world (e.g. *GotG*, *Thor* and, again, *Captain America*). Their antagonists are often mirror-images of the hero, right down to their skillset – as seen with Iron Man and Iron Monger, Hulk and the Abomination, Captain America and Red Skull, and Ant-Man and Yellow-Jacket² – while almost all of them are underdeveloped, with poor or unclear motivations driving their actions. The only one of these antagonists to escape this fate is Thor's brother/villain, Loki, who stands apart not just for his compelling introduction in *Thor*, but for the fact that he has lived long enough to appear in three (four counting the upcoming *Thor: Ragnarok*) films in the MCU. Virtually every villain in the MCU has been killed off by the end of their respective appearances. As a result, critics (see Outlaw, 2015) consistently refer to the poor narrative conclusions of each successive entry to the MCU; barring Loki's appearances of

² Obadiah Stane/Iron Monger (Jeff Bridges) uses a robotic suit similar to Iron Man but for malevolent purposes; the Abomination (Tim Roth) allow himself to be experimented on until he transforms into a monster similar to the Hulk; Red Skull (Hugo Weaving) is the Nazi cult leader, with bio-engineered super-strength like Captain America, and to whom the latter opposes during World War II; and Yellow-Jacket possess shrinking technology akin to Ant-Man's.

course. The flipside of this perceived problem though, is that the heroes are immune to death, or at least the narrative permanence of it. Here, I refer to Marvel's overreliance on the 'death fake-out', whereby audiences are led to believe a character is dead, only for their survival to be revealed later in the film. This was the case with Nick Fury (in *CA:TWS*), Phil Coulson (who was killed in *The Avengers* and brought back for the television show *AoS*), and Groot (in *GotG*). The conclusions of these films are typically explosive in nature, with large civilian areas and communities suffering the violent (but unseen) consequences of the heroes' battles. Fortunately for Marvel's critical integrity, this problem was addressed in the first entry into Phase 3 of the MCU, *CA:CW*, where the Avengers were subject to governmental and United Nations' oversight of their unilateral actions. This policy divided the Avengers into pro- or anti-government positions, driving the film and franchise's plot forward into a 'civil war' between the superheroes. Finally, the geopolitical implications of superheroism aside, these films aim to be, for lack of a better term, family-friendly, with a focus on humour and blockbuster entertainment often preventing these films from addressing darker themes. For example, this tone led to some of the criticism of *Iron Man 2*, which saw director, Jon Favreau clash with Marvel executives over his desire to cover the famous "Demon in the Bottle" (1979) comic book storyline, which saw Tony Stark confront his alcoholism. Instead, audiences were treated to an arguably less satisfying compromise, with Stark experiencing poisoning from the magnet in his chest (that keeps him alive and powers his iron suits), which he is able to cure later in the film. Overall, these criticisms do not greatly affect the MCU's current critical standing (their Rotten Tomatoes scores have only gone below 70% twice; "Marvel Cinematic Universe"), but together, they could potentially lead to Marvel's first box-office failure from audience fatigue somewhere down the line. The films of the MCU are therefore far from immune to criticism but have enough good characteristics that appeal to a range of audiences, which outweighs their narrative and tonal shortcomings.

The television shows are another beast altogether though, with their role in the MCU being much more tentative than their more profitable cinematic predecessors. As mentioned, Agent Phil Coulson was revived after being killed in *The Avengers* in order to utilise him for Marvel's first step into television, *AoS*. This move was divisive among fans, as there were those who felt that his death had a greater impact – since it motivated the Avengers into action in the film – without his ‘resurrection-by-consumerism’. Others however, sought his revival as ongoing form of fan engagement, with the actor who plays Coulson, Clark Gregg, commenting that it was “the nerds [that] brought him back to life with a hashtag, #CoulsonLives” (Gregg as cited in Eisenberg, 2014). In addition to appealing to fans, *AoS* also functioned as a confident step by the MCU into the position of a transmedia franchise, as Phase 1 has only used tie-in, prequel comic books and their short films, the One-Shots, outside of the films. *AoS* saw Coulson take charge of a group of S.H.I.E.L.D. agents as they investigated strange occurrences around the world, many of which functioned as Easter Eggs for the comics and the MCU that the show was a part of. Although it seemed a logical progression for Coulson, at least in terms of setting the premise for a show, *AoS* suffered critically for the majority of its first season. The principal criticism was that it was struggling to find a consistent and original voice, dragging out various subplots, for example (see Valentine, 2015). This changed, however, when the show's eponymous spy agency, S.H.I.E.L.D. was destroyed in *CA:TWS*. The show addressed this in a tie-in episode that highlighted the wider ramifications of this film on the MCU, as one of Coulson's own agents, Grant Ward, was revealed as a member of the enemy organisation, HYDRA.³ Prior to this reveal, Ward had been regarded as a boring, stiff character whose only purpose on the show was to serve as their action-oriented character. Since then, his character has evolved over the show's three seasons, alongside the show itself, which has since introduced the concept of Inhumans, super-powered individuals who have inherited the potential to gain said powers thanks to the Kree (the race that *GotG*'s Ronan is a member of). Introducing the

³ HYDRA are a terrorist organisation that originally appeared in Marvel Comics. They are typically opposed by Captain America and/or S.H.I.E.L.D.

Inhumans can be seen as both a means of making up for Marvel's inability to use mutants in the MCU (who are part of the *X-Men* property licensed to Fox). It also established a foundation for an *Inhumans* film, which now appears to have been abandoned in favour of a new television show – *Marvel's The Inhumans* – to be released in September 2017, demonstrating the potential for the creative direction and production of the show to be affected by the films and vice-versa.

Resembling the films, *AoS* has a (relatively) family-friendly tone and relies on a similar style of humour. The show plays an integral inter-textual role in establishing the MCU as a transmedia franchise by providing Marvel the opportunity to expand their Cinematic Universe through Easter Eggs and story content, physically revealing the world outside of the films. In doing so, audiences are able to see not only how technology is advancing in a post-Avengers world, but how the governments of the world reacted to the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D., and later, Inhumans. In doing so, *AoS* was able to build a parallel narrative to the themes of *CA: CW* over its third season, which has been praised for its topical political and popular culture relevancy. As noted by the *A.V. Club*'s Alex McCown, "this narrative means *S.H.I.E.L.D.* is taking full advantage of its medium in order to tell the story the upcoming *Captain America* film can't: A full and fraught exploration of the need to protect freedom and privacy, even for those with extraordinary abilities" (2016). Likewise, Marvel's second show, *Agent Carter*, provided another means of expanding the MCU, especially through its post-WWII period setting, which allowed audiences to fill in the historical blanks of the MCU, whilst also presenting the first female-led MCU property. In addition to its own Easter Eggs, *Agent Carter* demonstrated the early beginnings of S.H.I.E.L.D., while it was still the Strategic Scientific Reserve featured in *Captain America: The First Avenger*. The show's first season provided explanations of the origins of the program that 'created' future Avenger Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) and the Winter Soldier (Sebastian Shaw), as well as a reference in the show's second season to the at-the-time, upcoming *Doctor Strange*. Furthermore, in contradistinction to the films, both *AoS*

and *Agent Carter* have demonstrated a willingness to deal in the finality of character death, with side characters and even members of the core cast being killed off over the course of each show's run. Overall then, these two shows, both of which are broadcast by the network television channel American Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), enable the MCU to expand in terms of both its wider narrative and world-building as well as the possibility for the televisual entries to portray more 'risky' character development and death.

As previously mentioned in this chapter, Marvel has also ventured into online series, specifically the shows they produced for the streaming service Netflix. These shows have been critical successes (with Rotten Tomatoes scores ranging between 87-96%; *Rotten Tomatoes*, "Marvel Cinematic Universe") and have notably set themselves apart from their filmic and network television peers, not just because of their medium, but through the much 'darker' content they cover. *Daredevil*, for example, tackled the edgier material of its source material (particularly the comics that came out of the 1980s) by examining issues of vigilantism and the law, corruption, and the use and necessity of violence in modern society. In regards to the latter point, the show's second season saw the titular anti-hero challenged by a newcomer, the Punisher, who, unlike *Daredevil*, is willing to kill civilians and law enforcement personnel he views as enemies. These themes are often explored in relation to *Daredevil*'s Catholicism, amidst notions of guilt and sin. Meanwhile, *Jessica Jones*' first season portrayed even more unsettling topics, including rape, assault and PTSD, in relation to its female protagonist as well as the domestic violence experienced by both Jessica Jones and her best friend, Trish Walker. Additionally, drug addiction was examined through Jones' neighbour Malcolm. *Daredevil* and *Jessica Jones* allow Marvel to explore the different genre styles of superheroes in more depth. Unlike the films and their ABC television shows, their Netflix content has greater freedom, stylistically, for Marvel to commit to the generic realisation of its serious subject matter. *Daredevil* can be seen as a martial arts crime drama while *Jessica Jones* exemplifies the

conventions of the neo-noir/ detective/ psychological thriller. This generic stylisation allows the shows to remain easily distinguishable from one another and demonstrate the rough underbelly of the MCU (in New York City, at least), which comprise the ‘street level’ or everyday aspects of a world that is home to superhumans. Unlike Marvel’s other content, their Netflix series are designed to cater for adults – these shows are definitely not for children – allowing Marvel to circumvent criticism of their content being too ‘family-friendly’ by providing an alternative media entry point for different sets of audiences. This reaffirms Marvel’s ability to appropriate genre and style, just as it does with its films, as well as their willingness to expand the MCU further (successfully) in order to extend and revitalise different properties.

There is, however, a downside to Marvel’s expansion into non-film-based media, in that despite appearances, there is a notable hierarchy in the inclusion of the films in an overarching narrative and the retention of the films’ actors within that medium. In the MCU itself, this quickly becomes clear as despite the numerous references to the films in both the ABC and Netflix shows, the latter are not mentioned in the former. The shows reference the events of the films, as seen with *Agent Carter*’s explanation of Black Widow and the Winter Soldier’s origins, or *AoS*’ fallout from the disintegration of S.H.I.E.L.D. in *CA:TWS*. The only real impact the shows’ narratives have on the films however, is when a heli-carrier arrives to save the day in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, allowing the Avengers to evacuate citizens from their battlefield. Despite being criticised as an example of *deus ex machina*, for those who watched *AoS*’ second season the heli-carrier was the result of a secretive, offscreen collaboration between the show’s Phil Coulson, and the films’ Nick Fury. Likewise, in *CA:CW*, Vision notes that since Stark’s revelation that he is Iron Man, there has been a rise in the MCU of ‘enhanced persons’, subtly referencing *AoS* and Marvel’s Netflix content. These inter-textual connections between the films and the television shows are viewed as vague and uneven by fans and critics. Even *AoS*’

leading star Chloe Bennet has commented that “The [MCU] loves to pretend that everything is connected, but then they don’t acknowledge our show at all ... I would love to do that [incorporate reciprocal references in the films and show], but they don’t seem too keen on that idea” (Chloe Bennet as cited in Roberts, 2016). This demonstrates the flaws in Marvel’s claim that “It’s All Connected”. Contrary to what Marvel would have fans and even their employees believe then, their television shows are subservient to the films, which ultimately take medial and narrative priority.

This problem of prioritising the films in the MCU world-building can be attributed to various logistical reasons, ranging from the expectations of audiences, to creative and production issues at the industrial level. Simply put, the films will inevitably make more money than their lesser-known counterparts, unless they fail dramatically at the box office. Therefore, although fans play an important part in promoting and selling the MCU as a coherent transmedia story, they are one stakeholder among the franchise’s wider audiences. Broadly speaking, the majority of Marvel’s audiences cannot be expected to view all of the content the studio produces, assuming they watch anything other than the films, or even each individual film. So, from an economic standpoint it makes sense that Marvel would not necessarily wish to incorporate their TV characters into the films out of the blue when it might detract from developing their film-based characters (although it is plausible to achieve this through Easter Eggs, for example). At the other end of the scale, television shows have a limited budget, which would struggle to afford the stars headlining Marvel’s films. In addition, the shows’ production schedules would struggle to synchronise with the films. Specifically referencing events or characters from the shows could potentially be too confusing for casual audiences of the films suggesting at some point, narrative economy is required in transmedia franchises. The attribution of star power to different media, and indeed the economic expectations for different

media, such as film and television, have arguably not caught up to (some) audience's transmedia expectations.

Furthermore, there are organisational issues within Marvel itself that explain how and why they have struggled, thus far, to meet fans' expectations for a balanced inter-textuality between the different media. Here, I am referring to the divide between Marvel's Film and Television divisions. The former of these is led by Kevin Feige, the 'architect' behind the MCU's massive success, while the latter is led by Jeph Loeb, known not just for his work in television (on *Lost* [2004-2010] and *Heroes* [2006-2010], for example), but in comics, having written successful titles including *Batman: The Long Halloween* (1996-1997), *Daredevil: Yellow* (2001-2002), and *Spider-Man: Blue* (2002-2003). Until recently though, both men answered to Marvel Entertainment's CEO, Ike Perlmutter. That changed, however, in August 2015, when *The Hollywood Reporter* revealed that there had been a restructuring of Marvel Studio's organisation, with co-Presidents Feige and Louis D'Esposito now reporting to Disney Studios Chairman Alan Horn, thereby allowing them to bypass Perlmutter when making decisions. Perlmutter, a man whose frugality has been reported to be the reason behind Marvel actors' pay complaints (see Finke, 2013), was responsible for *Avengers: Age of Ultron*'s male-oriented toy merchandise, which resulted in the lack of toys for Black Widow. The latter promotional decision led to outrage from fans, including Marvel star Mark Ruffalo (Robinson, 2015). Subsequently, now that he does not have to answer to Perlmutter, Feige and his colleagues have more freedom in creating and diversifying the personnel directing their films, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Three.

Unfortunately, this restructure does not necessarily mean all is well for the relationship between Marvel's film and television divisions because, despite Feige and co. escaping from Perlmutter's frugal (and possibly sexist) grip, the same cannot be said for his colleagues. As

discussed, the films have complicated the TV side of the MCU, especially when it came to the narrative aftermath of *CA:TWS* and *AoS*. Anthony Ocasio has written about the divide between Marvel Studios and Marvel Television, noting that this “‘feud’ has been going on since Walt Disney CEO Bob Iger – after buying Marvel Comics in 2009 – created a new division, Marvel Television, with Jeph Loeb as the Feige of the small screen” (2015). Ocasio explains that behind the scenes, it was felt as though the TV shows would be piggybacking off the hard groundwork laid by the films, offering one possible explanation as to why executives (passively) made things difficult for *AoS*. This led to Marvel Studios producing *Agent Carter* which, although technically a product of Marvel Television, was the former’s brain child (ibid.); these production origins might explain why there are more clear references (through characters’ origins) to the films. Ocasio comments that the medial divide becomes apparent when the topic of film-television crossovers is raised with Feige, or even the film actors, with all of them being “unable to handle questions about Marvel Television without quickly revealing their true feelings before going into ‘PR mode’” (ibid.). As of the time of writing, Marvel’s upcoming film *Inhumans* has been pulled from their schedule, with some commenting that the film was only on Marvel’s Phase 3 line-up as a compromise between Perlmutter and Feige (Keyes, 2016) in order to allow the latter to greenlight *Captain Marvel* ([2019] Marvel’s first female-led film). In addition, Joanna Robinson has reported that Perlmutter was also responsible for the resignation of former chairman of Disney consumer products, Andy Mooney, when the former commented that no one would notice the difference between Don Cheadle and Terrence Howard (when the former replaced the latter in *Iron Man 2*) “because black people ‘look the same’” (2015). This comment reportedly led to the subsequent departure of three female African-American executives (ibid.), drawing further criticism of Marvel for their films’ lack of racial and gender diversity. Consequently, with Perlmutter (somewhat) out of the picture, Marvel Studios now have greater creative freedoms. This gives them the potential to become more gender-friendly, with Feige recently commenting that Marvel Studios “think [it] would

be fun to turn [Black Widow] into a standalone franchise” (Feige as cited in Kennedy, 2016), a property that many fans have been asking after for years.

Overall, despite their current problems regarding corporate politics, recent changes on Marvel’s creative front have afforded them an opportunity to revive their franchise right at a point when they are planning on increasing their release schedule from two to three films per year; with 2017 seeing the release of *GotG Vol. 2*, *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, and *Thor: Ragnarok*. Of these upcoming releases, the return of Spider-Man to the MCU fold is of particular note, not only for its storytelling significance, but also for its demonstration of two major studios’ (Marvel and Sony) cooperation, providing us with a tangible example of Marvel’s willingness to utilise corporate synergy to achieve source fidelity and hence extend audience and fan engagement with their properties.

1.5 – Battling it Out: How the MCU Compares to Other Franchises

Marvel and its Cinematic Universe have been highly successful, changing the face of Hollywood by redefining the blockbuster franchise, and contributing to the legitimisation of the superhero genre. But, as discussed previously, they are not the only kid on the block, and in this part of the chapter, I will review Marvel’s major competitors. In doing so, I aim to explore the different approaches taken by Sony/Columbia Pictures (*Spider-Man*), 20th Century Fox (*X-Men* and *Fantastic Four*), and DC/Warner Bros. (DC Comics), and how they have or have not been successful in their attempts to establish a transmedia franchise. Consequently, I will be able to better ascertain Marvel’s standing within the industry and their creative influence on the superhero genre.

As discussed in 1.2, Marvel was able to pull itself out of bankruptcy by licensing its characters to various film studios. One of these was *Spider-Man*, one of, if not the most famous

of Marvel's myriad of characters, who was licensed out to Sony/Columbia Pictures. Among Marvel's pantheon, Wilson Koh explains that the character's popular potential lies in the property's ability to "speak to audiences across broad registers of experience ... [and] is able to be enjoyed with little to no prior knowledge of specific arachnid adventures" (2009, p.745). Sony's first outing with the character was Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man*, a film that was highly successful, both critically and commercially, producing a story that, despite its camp aspects, presented a heartfelt portrayal of the web-slinger befitting its 'ordinary' superhero. *Spider-Man* was followed up by a sequel, *Spider-Man 2*, which was just as successful as its predecessor was. This run of success would not be sustainable though, as *Spider-Man 3* received mixed reviews (see Ebert, 2007), despite its commercial success. The film has since been regarded as a prime example of studio interference due to Sony's insistence that the film incorporate the villain Venom, in addition to Sandman and Green Goblin, resulting in the film being 'overstuffed' (ibid.). Eventually, Sony chose to abandon their plans for the franchise, cancelling development on *Spider-Man 4* and a *Venom* spin-off, and instead, focusing on rebooting the Spider-Man franchise. Rebooting the franchise is necessary for a studio such as Sony, who are required to produce a Spider-Man film every 6-8 years, otherwise the rights will revert back to Marvel Studios, as was the case with characters such as Daredevil and the Punisher.

In 2012, *The Amazing Spider-Man* was released, with Andrew Garfield cast in the lead role. The film's performance was lacklustre in comparison to the preceding franchise, and cynically considered a blatant attempt by Sony to emulate its competitors by establishing a more overt, serialised story, through the mystery of Peter Parker's parents (see Franklin, 2012). *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014) was released next and, like *Spider-Man 3* before it, fell victim to a convoluted story and overabundance of villains. Furthermore, when this film came out, Sony had already announced plans for a spin-off, *The Sinister Six*, featuring characters introduced in the sequel, as well as *Venom* and a female-led Spider-Man film. These plans

highlight Sony's desire to create their own shared universe franchise, much like the MCU, in the hopes of mimicking their financial successes. Unfortunately for them, this did not prove successful though, and since then, Sony has come to an arrangement with Marvel Studios, which will allow Spider-Man (and by extension, all characters associated with him) to become a part of the MCU. This arrangement led to Spider-Man (now played by Tom Holland) appearing in *CA:CW*, with a standalone entry planned (*Spider-Man: Homecoming*). This cooperation between the two studios demonstrates the potential for future cooperation (as discussed in 1.4), while being mutually beneficial, as each studio are responsible for their respective productions; so, standalone Spider-Man films are produced by Sony, while any appearances in other MCU films are produced by Marvel Studios. Likewise, whichever studio funds the film is the one that profits from said film, thus providing an incentive for both studios to produce commercially and critically successful films to facilitate future crossovers. In addition, Marvel is now responsible for all Spider-Man films from a creative standpoint, ameliorating fans' concerns over Sony's creative track record with the property. Therefore, this demonstrates how major studios can cooperate because of fan engagement and response to source fidelity and continuity.

Spider-Man's success in the aughts was accompanied by Bryan Singer's revitalisation of the superhero team film with *X-Men*. This film was a creative and commercial success, resulting in a sequel – *X2: X-Men United* – which, like Sony's franchise, was followed by a disappointing third entry, *X-Men: The Last Stand* (see Chang, 2006). Fox's franchise did not improve from there though, as the trilogy was followed by the disappointing *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009), which was a critical failure (see Billington, 2008) and, at best, a placeholder for Fox to retain the rights to the X-Men. Following this, Fox released a soft reboot of the franchise with *X-Men: First Class* (2011) a prequel film that critically succeeded (see McCarthy, 2011) whilst revitalising the franchise with a film set outside of pre-existing

storylines and casts of its predecessors. Fox went on to make another solo outing, *The Wolverine* (2013), which led into the prequel-sequel, *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014). With the reins handed back to Bryan Singer (who directed the original first two films *X-Men* and *X2*), *Days of Future Past* provided, thanks to a time travel story, a means of diegetically retconning⁴ *The Last Stand*, whilst continuing the story of *First Class*. As of the time of writing, Fox has since released the hugely successful solo R-rated property, *Deadpool* (2016), a character famous for his vulgar, meta-humour, whose film began production thanks to vocal fan disappointment over the character's appearance in *Wolverine* (see Fischer, 2015), and the sequel to *Days of Future Past*, *X-Men: Apocalypse* (2016).

Despite the mishaps of *The Last Stand* and *Origins*, Fox appears to have learned from their mistakes and restored the creative legitimacy of the franchise. However, there remains one key creative problem within their franchise. Because of licensing rights, their films all operate within a 'shared universe' of its own even though their characters operate in the same 'world' as other Marvel creations in the comic books. Russell Backman notes that "the first two films in the trilogy avert the cataclysms of their plots and manage not to alter the ground state of their world ... [while] the third film ... pulls out all the stops by focusing on highly public world-changing events" (2014, p.216). This limits any further lateral extension of the franchise, in that by affecting the story-world so dramatically, it became more difficult for the films to remain a mirror image of their contemporary world. This error (and *Origins*) led to *First Class*, which I referred to as a soft reboot, since this film avoided questions of continuity by reverting to a 1960s setting when the characters were younger. Thanks to the X-Men's large range of characters, aside from Professor Xavier, Magneto, and Mystique (and a cameo from

⁴ Retroactive continuity, or retcon, refers to a literary device whereby new information is added to the established continuity of a fictional work by revealing the origins or earlier history of characters. In regards to the *X-Men* franchise, *Days of Future Past* removed *X-Men: The Last Stand* and *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (both of which received negative fan reactions) from the franchise's continuity by establishing new origins for the characters.

Wolverine), reboots of the franchise allow for the introduction of younger versions of previously established characters at any time as well as new ones. This navigation of continuity was then confused by *Days of Future Past*, which functioned as a sequel for both franchises (*X-Men's* and *Wolverine's*), and allowed for a 'reset' of sorts of the overall franchise's timeline. As a result, audiences remain uncertain as to what can be considered canon⁵ now, which is yet to be addressed by any subsequent X-Men films.

It is interesting to note another contrast between Marvel Studios and Fox by looking briefly at the latter's latest success story *Deadpool*. Interestingly, the film was stuck in development hell for some time (notably after Fox butchered the character, almost literally, in *Origins*), until test-footage was leaked online in 2014, which was met with an enthusiastic response from fans. The level of demand from fans ultimately forced Fox's hand, who were not interested in making an R-rated superhero film, and they green-lit the project a few months later. Their lack of faith in *Deadpool's* box office potential was revealed by the film's writers, who noted that, days before the film was greenlit, they were asked to remove the equivalent of \$7-8 million from the budget, reducing the blockbuster's budget to a paltry \$58 million. *Deadpool* arguably demonstrates Fox's lack of understanding of the power of fan amplification, as the film went on to make \$760.3 million, beating *Iron Man* and several other superhero films in the process, becoming the highest grossing and most profitable film of the *X-Men* franchise (ironically due to its restricted budget). Kevin Feige commented that *Deadpool* showed that "when you present something unique to an audience, they will respond to it" (as cited in Clymer, May 2016). He elaborated, saying that "if there's any 'secret' it's respect the source material, understand the source material and then, any adaptation you make from the source material

⁵ Canon is the content that is accepted as an official part of the story in the universe of that story. So, for example, Tom Holland's version of Spider-Man is canon to the MCU, whereas Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield's respective performances would not be, as they appeared in different 'universes'.

should be done only to enhance whatever the original pure spirit of the source material was” (ibid.).

Feige’s comments illustrate the importance of authenticity in comic book adaptations, discussed in 1.3, and the role of fans, who undoubtedly contributed to the film’s viral marketing campaign (such as the trailers and posters, one of which famously promoted *Deadpool* as a Valentine’s Day romance), in promoting property fidelity. Fox has therefore managed to develop a highly successful franchise with the X-Men, albeit one that is seemingly made up on the spot, with their films contradicting each other and often convoluting their (accidental) shared universe. This sets them apart from Marvel, who not only understand the need for authenticity in adaptations and an engagement with fans as loyal customers, but also make sure to plan several years ahead for inter-textual continuity. It is this latter point that ultimately differentiates the studios’ handling of their respective adaptations and certainly contributes to the continued success of Marvel Studios over Fox.

Finally, we turn to Marvel’s primary competitor from its comic book days, DC Comics, whose films are produced by Warner Bros. As discussed previously, Christopher Nolan’s *Dark Knight* Trilogy is regarded as a turning point for the superhero genre, particularly through its establishment of the dark, gritty superhero film. It was this trilogy of films, all of which were critical and commercial successes, that prevented DC from starting a shared universe of their own, since they could not start a new Batman franchise until Nolan’s was complete. Their first subsequent non-Nolan effort was 2011’s *Green Lantern*, which was critically panned, and underperformed at the box office, making \$219.9 million from a \$200 million budget. Following the closing chapter of Nolan’s trilogy, *The Dark Knight Rises*, DC released *Man of Steel* (2013; hereafter *MoS*), a film that served as a reboot of Superman while also being the first chapter of their new, shared universe: the DC Extended Universe (or DCEU). Taking into

account its production and marketing budget, *MoS* was a modest financial success, and received mixed reviews, notably for failing to cover any new ground for the character. This was attributed to the film being too concerned with recapturing the dark grittiness of Nolan's *Dark Knight* Trilogy (see Edidin, 2013 and Goldberg, 2012, the latter of which highlights this concern during the film's production). *MoS*' sequel was initially delayed, as DC decided to opt instead for *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016; hereafter *BvS*), which functioned as both a sequel to *MoS* and prequel to their upcoming crossover film, *Justice League* (2017). *BvS* was considered to be a critical failure (Rotten Tomatoes gave it an average rating of 27%; *Rotten Tomatoes*, "*Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*") which did not live up to the heavily promoted 'title fight' with a convincing narrative. It was also faulted for not capturing the authenticity of characters, for instance Batman breaks his 'no-kill' rule and murders several law enforcement personnel contrary to his modus operandi as established across several comic book (for instance, *The Dark Knight Returns*) and film depictions (such as Nolan's *Dark Knight* Trilogy) of the character. DC's focus on presenting a 'serious' alternative to its competitors is an attempt to realise a tonal distinction from the MCU. However, continuing fan and critical disappointment with their films has resulted in personnel change with Geoff Johns (CCO of DC Comics) being bought in to oversee the DCEU, much like Kevin Feige does for the MCU. It is thought that through this move, the studio will be able to continue its 'filmmaker-driven' productions and be able to recoup several recent box office flops. Consequently, it is clear that the studio is hoping to correct their course, particularly as they have *Suicide Squad* (2016), and two more films scheduled for release in 2017, *Wonder Woman* and *Justice League*. As of the time of writing, it is too early to make a critical call on the DCEU's longevity, but currently, their creative and commercial situation is as bleak as their films.

DC also produce several television shows, treating them as part of a multiverse, which allows for their shows and films to remain separate and avoid confusion among fans about the

DCEU's shared universe. In this medial realm, they have been more successful in courting positive fan and critical engagement. The first of these shows, the broadcast network CW's *Arrow* (2011-present) continued DC's inclination towards the dark and gritty, and followed Oliver Queen/Green Arrow. The show quickly became known for its skilled choreography, and serialised storylines, resulting in it being used as a 'backdoor pilot' for the next entry into the 'CW-verse', *The Flash* (2014-present). *The Flash* was comparatively cheerier in tone than *Arrow*, embracing the silliness of its comic book origins, yet retaining the serialised storytelling that has worked for the latter. Since then, DC has released another show via the CW, *Legends of Tomorrow* (2016-present), and a webseries, *Vixen* (2015-2016). Furthermore, another show started by *Arrow*'s developers, *Supergirl* (2015-present), has recently moved from its original network CBS to the CW, implying that the show will become a part of that same universe whilst a character from a cancelled superhero show – *Constantine* (2014-2015) – was given new life through an appearance on *Arrow*. Consequently, we can see how these various shows have successfully formed a universe of their own, one that remains distinguishable from its filmic successors. Furthermore, *The Flash* and *Supergirl* are among the highest rated shows on the CW, and have established a successful entry point for younger and female audiences than the films. Yet, despite being around before the DCEU began, the latter films have clearly begun taking creative priority over the former television shows. This can be seen through *Arrow*'s use of the Suicide Squad, a team that appeared in different iterations over the show's second and third seasons, before noticeably being removed. This can be attributed to DC's desire to create a *Suicide Squad* film, which was released a year after their televisual counterparts' final *Arrow* appearance. *Arrow* star Willa Holland has recently commented that "when DC found out they were going to be doing their own movie we had to axe all of the characters before we even got to show them" (as cited in Mohamed, J., 2016). So, much like the MCU, and despite appearing in different universes, the 'Arrow-verse' is subordinate to the DCEU, much like Marvel's television shows are to the films of the MCU. Overall, then, DC is not too different from Marvel

in its industrial and creative approach to the different media that make up their franchises, although each are dominating the other in television and film respectively.

1.6 - Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated not only *how* Marvel managed to attain their success with the MCU, but *why* they were so successful, thanks to their use of and relationship with the fans that support them so enthusiastically. I have demonstrated how the MCU was established through narrative and world-building and how this set them apart from their competitors. In doing so, we have seen the prioritisation of Marvel and DC's films over their respective television series and how this has affected the creative direction of their television properties in turn. In conclusion then, this chapter has established how a transmedia franchise such as the MCU can be successfully developed, how it functions on both a macro- and micro- level, and how important fans are within this framework on both a creative and industrial level. I will now turn to a more in-depth discussion of superhero characters and the genre, examining them on a textual level through paratexts. Exploring superhero franchises from a paratextual angle, enables a better understanding of these characters' narrative and promotional function within their franchise(s) and how they contribute to the genre's successes.

Chapter Two: Paratexts, Stars & Idealised Bodies – Traversing the Superhero Genre

2.1 – Introduction

In Chapter One, I explored the MCU and its position within Hollywood as a transmedia franchise that has successfully engaged with both serious fans and more casual, mainstream audiences. In doing so, Marvel, and their competitors, have secured a position for the superhero genre in Hollywood, making it a staple of the blockbuster in contemporary cinema. In exploring the reasons for the success of Marvel's transmedia franchise, I have been able to discuss the superhero genre on a practical, industrial level. This in turn, allowed for a critical discussion of how fans, through processes like amplification, played a pivotal role in the success of the genre to which they are so devoted. In fact, their role is integral, to not only the genre's success, but also its ability to survive, and, potentially, resist oversaturation. Consequently, in this chapter, I will continue to discuss the role of fans within the context of the industrial processes surrounding the superhero genre and blockbuster films, by exploring the ways in which paratexts are used to promote these films. Through this focus on fans, I will explore the use of paratexts and Owain Gwynne's idea of 'fan-made time' in promoting the genre, providing further context to the process of 'amplification' discussed in the previous chapter. This discussion of fans will lead into a more in-depth examination of the superhero genre itself, how it functions as a genre and how its appropriation of other genres' conventions has helped to sustain its critical and commercial viability. The generic conventions of the superhero and action star have gendered implications for how male superheroes and actors continue to

dominate the superhero franchise. This chapter then, explores the superhero genre from a paratextual angle, on the micro level considering both the textual features of the genre, and the macro level through their impact on promotional and industrial practices with respects to fans and extending the audience along gender lines.

2.2 – Fans, Paratexts & ‘Fan-Made Time’: Waiting for the Civil War of the Superhero Genre! Marvel vs DC

In continuing my exploration of the significance of the fan to the superhero genre (and by extension the studios producing these films and television shows), it is useful to take a closer look into the actual marketing of these films and, specifically, how fans operate within this promotional context. As mentioned in the previous chapter, fans play an important role in the success of the superhero genre, particularly in relation to the critical and commercial successes enjoyed by the MCU. The way in which studios engage with the fans of their superhero properties has become a crucial element in securing the perceived sense of authenticity required to ensure fans’ enjoyment of their content. Film trailers are a key entry point for studios’ establishment of a fan relationship and they play one of the most prominent roles in a film (or television show’s) marketing campaign. It is through the reception of these trailers that the aforementioned process of ‘amplification’ – whereby fans’ reactions are conveyed to more casual, mainstream audiences – occurs. In addition, trailers also provide indicators of what to expect from a film, in terms of tone and genre, further influencing audiences’ potential engagement. Thus, it is necessary in discussing the role of fans to explore how trailers affect potential moviegoers’ expectations of media content and how they may even pre-emptively influence their opinion of the advertised film.

Over the years, trailers have become as much of a staple to the film industry as films themselves. With the emergence of new and online media, many filmgoers view new trailers with a similar excitement to viewing a film. Lisa Kernan defines a film trailer as “a brief film

text that usually displays images from a specific feature film while asserting its excellence” (2004, p.1). Kimberley Tolson notes, in response to this definition, that for Kernan, film trailers function as a persuasive promotional text that is “meant to entice viewers through specific and directed appeals” (2010, p.2). Film trailers are therefore one of the primary methods of marketing used by studios to convince audiences to see their film(s). In fulfilling this purpose, trailers try to limit audiences’ subjective perceptions, with original and innovative trailers motivating audiences to see (and pay for) the advertised product, while more generic or poorly presented trailers will have the opposite effect, garnering ridicule and criticism, leading to disengagement with the film. In order to appeal to audiences, and the variety of opinions and expectations they have of films, David Jerrick, drawing from Thomas Hixson, that “marketers of film trailers embrace different aspects (e.g. genre, plot, actors) to differentiate themselves from competitors and position themselves in the minds of those who appreciate the movie’s specific style” (2013, p.1). So, by emphasising certain elements of a film during this preview, through intriguing imagery or dialogue, for example, studios are able to market their films in a way that allows them to appeal to specific fans of, say, a particular genre or actor, whilst theoretically appealing to more casual audiences too. Effectively, trailers serve to bring a higher level of awareness to audiences’ interpretation of a film, a process which makes marketing positioning and by extension, subsequent marketing, easier.

In understanding the relationship of a central text to its ancillary ones, trailers can be characterised by what Gérard Genette refers to as ‘paratexts’. This term covers “those textual elements that emerge from and impart significance to a (literary) text that aren’t considered integral to the text itself” (Kernan, 2004, p.7). Essentially, paratexts refer to the texts that exist on the periphery of a text, such as a film, functioning as supplementary texts of sorts to guide the meaning and reception of the primary text. This is the case with trailers, which serve to promote and advertise the primary text, or film. Paratexts are not limited to promotional content

though since, as Jonathan Gray notes, they “often take a tangible form, as with posters, videogames, podcasts, reviews, or merchandise, for example” (2010, p.6). In terms of understanding how paratexts work within an industrial context, Gray suggests that, if we understand the film industry by the “triumvirate of Text, Audience, and Industry ... then paratexts fill the space between them, conditioning passages and trajectories, and variously negotiating or determining interactions among the three” (2010, p.23). Trailers’ paratextual function then, is to offer audiences little titbits of information on the way to consuming the main product – the film – entertaining and intriguing audiences throughout the marketing lead-up to a film’s release. By acknowledging the trailer’s position as a paratext, we may better understand how they are positioned in relation to the central, primary text.

Despite the importance of the trailer in a film’s marketing, it should be noted that they only have a limited amount of time to convince audiences to see their film. The time restriction imposed on film trailers “compels audiences to create an imaginary (as-yet-unseen) film out of only the fragments they are exposed to” (Jerrick, 2013, p.2). In the process of establishing this imaginary text, trailers are able to manipulate audience opinion by, as previously mentioned, appealing to audiences’ engagement through genre, the inclusion of certain actors, and/or by appealing to viewers’ emotions. Jerrick comments in relation to the latter that “[mood] management theory states that an individual will select media to control affective mood states that are more desirable, especially when moods are affected by outside stimuli” (ibid., p.3). Furthermore, *how* a trailer appeals to prospective audiences will vary depending on the type of film being advertised. For example, a dramatic film will be presented in a way that emphasises its performances, story, and serious tone, whereas a comparatively ‘lighter’ film will promote its humour and/or spectacle, promising quality of entertainment based on the tone established in the trailers. Mood management takes place largely through the promotion of a film’s genre in marketing since it has been found by marketers that moviegoers choose a film based on genre

preference (ibid., p.4). Trailers must therefore draw upon the cultural zeitgeist and inter-textual knowledge surrounding their film's genre, relying on particular iconography for example, alerting target audiences to its generic content in the process. Consequently, by establishing these various paratextual elements within this limited timeframe, trailers are able to promote a film effectively to audiences.

However, if films fail to meet audiences' expectations, as advanced by trailer(s), this can negatively impact on said film's performance, both critically and commercially. As a point of comparison in the marketing of films through trailers, I will focus on two contemporary superhero films, namely DC's *BvS* and Marvel's *CA: CW* released in March and May of 2016 respectively. Both films are remarkably similar despite being created by competing studios. They feature internal conflicts among their superhero characters that are manipulated by a lone, external, antagonistic figure, both continue their respective shared universes, the DCEU and MCU, and both were made on a budget of approximately \$250 million. However, similarities notwithstanding, the films performed very differently, with *BvS* receiving negative criticism and making \$827.7 million at the box office, less than the one billion project for a film with the inclusion of DC Comics' famous Trinity (Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman). *Civil War* on the other hand, made over \$1 billion at the box office and was a critical success (see Chang, 2016). The films' performance resulted from a combination of factors including the role of critics' reviews and the subsequent word-of-mouth from fans and casual moviegoers alike. I focus here on how each of these films' trailers established their market position and audience expectations.

Of these two films, *BvS* had five trailers (including teaser trailers), whereas *Civil War* had three. Perhaps more interesting though, is the period of time across which these trailers were released: *Civil War* released a trailer in November 2015, and February and March 2016.

BvS, meanwhile, released a teaser trailer at the San-Diego Comic-Cons in 2014 and 2015, as well as trailers in April and December 2015, and February 2016. With this in mind, both films' trailers, broadly speaking, attempt to position their own titular fights as the primary draw for audiences – the duel between Batman and Superman and the 'Civil War' between conflicting teams of Marvel superheroes (led by Captain America and Iron Man). All of these trailers feature a variety of brief shots, giving a taste of the spectacle audiences could expect from these battles and dialogue that established the ideological and pragmatic conflicts in the two films. For *BvS*, the superhero conflict emerges from the destruction caused by Superman in the finale of the DCEU's first entry *MoS* and questions surrounding Superman's role in society (and the power he wields) as well as Batman's (at times literal) brand of vigilante justice. Likewise, *Civil War* conveyed the external threat to its superhero characters (a dozen in total) in the form of political pressure to establish a system of accountability where the Avengers would have to answer to a governing body. This raises ideological questions for the aforementioned leaders of each side, Iron Man and Captain America, whose clash over government accountability later develops into a more personal one (surrounding Captain America's wartime "friend", Bucky Barnes/The Winter Soldier as the film progresses).

This latter plot point is hinted at in the trailers but, most importantly, is not spoiled for viewers. The balance of suspense with plot promotion is where *BvS* seemed to get ahead of itself in its marketing. Its second official trailer, released in December 2015, revealed that the film's finale would be centred on the villain Doomsday, as opposed to the eponymous duel of the title. This reveal alone worked to the detriment of promoting said fight as the primary draw for audiences, but what was more revealing to the keen eye of fans was the *implied* spoiler of Doomsday's appearance. Doomsday is known, almost solely, for his appearance in the comic books series *The Death of Superman* (1992), during which he and Superman killed each other after a long, gruelling battle. That is, fans of the comics would then know that Doomsday's

presence would lead to Superman's death, effectively revealing the film's main narrative twist before it screened. It is here that I believe the two films' marketing campaigns differ since, although they are very similar in many aspects, Marvel's *Civil War* ultimately did not give its major plot twists away. Moreover, it did not reveal how or why the two new characters making their debut in the MCU (T'Challa/Black Panther and Peter Parker/Spider-Man) were involved in the 'Civil War' in the first place nor did they reveal the film's villain (whose role was, while significant, ultimately somewhat of a red herring) played by Daniel Brühl. Furthermore, *Civil War* marketed itself as a *Captain America* sequel, something that it conveyed through the relatively grounded visual style that differentiated its predecessor, *The Winter Soldier* from the other films of the MCU. In contrast, the trailers for *BvS* displayed an exaggerated, grandiose look that seemed to be designed to reflect the philosophical issues about power and limitations the film was aiming to explore. By sticking to that old adage, 'less is more', Marvel won the marketing battle between these two films, something that is reflected in these films' commercial and critical performances. Ultimately, one of the key differences between these two franchises is their tonal approach to the superhero genre and how this affects fan perceptions of fidelity and authenticity of the adaptations, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

As mentioned earlier, fans undoubtedly played a key role in the success of these films, particularly through the process of amplification. This process, which I discussed in Chapter One, is the means through which fan discourse is conveyed to more casual, mainstream audiences, the latter of whom value the former's opinion due to their perceived status as experts on the comic book properties the films are based on. Part of the amplification process involves what Owain Gwynne's refers to as 'fan-made time'. In general terms, Gwynne defines this term as "a period of intense discussion revolving around an event tied to the object of fandom ... that is made, shaped, and owned by fans" (2014, p.81). This discussion takes place within a shared community online, a necessity for the purposes of this term since, as Gwynne explains

“the online space provides an instant link to a wider population of fans and allows for the kind of rapid interaction ... necessary for the constitution of fan-made time” (ibid.). It is within the context of fan-made time that fans interact with one another and discuss an upcoming event within a particular fandom, such as a film that is about to be released. Within this space, fans are able to discuss various topics about a future film or, in relation to the superhero genre, the different slates of future films set for release as part of different franchises, particularly the MCU and DCEU which both, as of the time of writing, have films scheduled for release through to 2019-2020. Fan-made time therefore provides an account of the space and time within which fan discussion takes place prior to a film’s release. It is within fan-made time that fans discuss the various elements of a film’s marketing, trailers in particular, and develop collective opinions about them. It is these opinions to which some mainstream moviegoers or film news sites may turn to in order to get an idea of what to expect from an upcoming film. Opinions and engagement generated through fan-made time consequently demonstrates the medial context which amplification occurs within and its importance to the promotion of the superhero genre.

As a collective group, fans are consistently regarded as an active audience, operating within a vocal, participatory culture. This has been an important aspect of the fandom discussed in this thesis and can be traced back to the time before the current crop of superhero films, for instance in the 1990s when fans’ boycotting of Marvel became one of the key reasons for the comic book juggernaut’s bankruptcy (1.2). Fans’ engagement with superhero texts likewise functions within this participatory culture, an environment with “relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing creations” (Jenkins, 2009, p.xi). Furthermore, in “a participatory culture, members also believe their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at least, the members care about others’ opinions of what they have created)” (ibid.). An essential part of fan communities, the values of participatory culture have been utilised by Marvel and DC as a

means of marketing their products, particularly superhero films. This strategy is based on the idea of ‘spreadable media’ posited by Henry Jenkins, who characterises the term as “media which travels across media platforms at least in part because the people take it in their own hands and share it with their social networks” (as cited in Usher, 2010, p.1). In order to be ‘spreadable’, media must be easily sharable through social media *and* ensure that it encourages the act of sharing said media. As Brundige notes, “by encouraging circulation, spreadable media harnesses the intrinsic participatory nature of online culture” (2015, p.55). In marketing their films, Marvel and DC have “courted their fans to connect with their properties through this kind of spreadable media” (p.55). By utilising the participatory culture of fans in this way, studios like Marvel and Warner Bros. are able to capitalise on fan engagement with the text (or paratext), in turn ensuring that they promote and amplify it to comparatively casual mainstream audiences.

Recent examples of promoting and building up hype for future films can be seen in Marvel and DC’s respective announcements of their planned slate of films in October 2014. For Marvel, this was the announcement of their third ‘Phase’ of films, while for DC, it was officially announcing (and thereby establishing) the planned releases for the DCEU. Both studios’ schedules planned production of film through until approximately 2019-2020, with each studio aiming to release two or three films per year. There was a massive online response from fans in response to these announcements, as fans discussed, for example, how the films would set up more or different parts of their cinematic universe, theorised where certain characters might appear, and guessed how these films would connect and/or continue from one another (see Cecchini, 2015). Here, fans’ interpretations and discussions of these announcements highlights not only the way in which they benefit the studio through extended promotion but also how they can potentially complicate the authority of these studios. In regards to this latter point, studios have had to soften their stance on how fans interact with their

intellectual property, something that is clear in their responses to online leaks of their trailers that preceded the official release date. These leaks undermined the authority of studios to determine how their content would be viewed and when but also emphasised the need on the part of the studios to appeal to fans, who are most likely unconcerned with *how* the trailer was leaked, instead simply being happy that they are accessing it ahead of schedule. In the past, leaks of trailers would have resulted in that trailer being taken down from an online platform (see Breznican, 2011), usually followed by the threat of legal action, whereas now, in this more fan-friendly market, studios are essentially being forced to roll with the punches of fan-made time. Currently, studios typically respond by pushing their official release forward, giving fans a high-quality version of a trailer instead of punishing them. This occurred with the leak of a trailer for *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (to which Marvel responded by blaming the fictional antagonist group HYDRA), while DC released their official version of a trailer for *BvS* soon after it was leaked online. As Brundige comments, “by fostering fan participation rather than quelling it at this early stage in the release process, Marvel and DC influence the context in which their content is discussed” (2015, pp.57-58). Overall, then, a marketing environment that is responsive to participatory culture demonstrates the context within which fans operate and engage with the texts and surrounding paratexts produced by major studios like Marvel and DC. Consequently, it is important to discuss *how* these studios are able to not only appeal to audiences, but how their films successfully distinguish themselves from one another as well.

2.3 – Everything’s Derivative: Appropriating Genre, A Hollywood Story

As established in my Introduction, superhero films exemplify the Hollywood blockbuster, not just in terms of its success, but also in relation to how the blockbuster functions as a genre. In defining ‘genre’, critics and theorists typically end up locked in debates over what constitutes one. For example, should a genre be defined in terms of its conventions (themes, tropes, mannerisms etc.) and/or intentions (such as the horror genre’s ‘intention’ to incite fear in

audiences)? The solution that Andrew Tudor finds to be most useful is that genres can be defined by common cultural consensus as to what constitutes a Western, and from here, an analysis of how this consensus is confirmed in the film take places (1995, p.5). To Tudor, this solution is “clearly the root of most uses of genre” (ibid.). For argument’s sake then, although “the edges may be rather blurred” (p.6), the conventions and tropes that define a genre are those confirmed or reaffirmed by the audiences that watch them. If we follow this conceptual approach, audiences will recognise genres based on certain conventions and cues in the film; a Western can be identified by its setting and themes of ‘civilisation versus wilderness’, and so on. When analysing genres, another important analytical point to consider is that most genres, especially those that occupy the cultural zeitgeist for a length of time, such as the Western and the Musical, go through a “predictable life cycle” (Feuer, 1993, p.88). Further expanding on this idea, Rick Altman discusses how genre studies can be split into two main schools of thought: first, genres can be related to human life cycles in that they can develop, react, become self-aware, and at times, self-destruct; second, they undergo ‘biological evolution’ and evolve and adapt over time (1999, pp.21-22). If audiences go to a genre film, they will have certain aesthetic and cultural expectations of what will be in those films based on the historical period in which the film is made. Genre hybridity, often seen in blockbusters, confirms the cultural and historical specificity of genres, as it relies on audience expectations of what constitutes a genre in order to disrupt and subvert known genre conventions.

Thus, if a genre film prompts a certain response from audiences, both aesthetically and culturally, then we can again see the importance of the paratext in priming audience expectations prior to a film’s release. In discussing the marketing of film trailers, Jerrick asserts that, for example, “trailer producers’ appeal to spectators’ familiarity of desire for familiarity” through highlighting previously discussed elements of emotion, iconography, and genre, “which serves as the trailer’s primary informative agent” of the film’s content (Jerrick, 2013,

p4). The familiarity with these elements, genre in particular, is reinforced by constant repetition of a genre and the conventions surrounding it. Citing Kernan, Jerrick notes “trailers are able to remind audiences of their own personal experiences and attachment to this kind of ritualised spectatorship” (Kernan as cited in Jerrick, 2013, p.4). Consequently, conveying a sense of genre paratextually positions the film within moviegoers’ previous inter-textual knowledge of films, which, from a marketing standpoint, is vital, since genre preference typically plays a large part in moviegoers’ choice of what to see in theatres. In providing a sample of a film, generic elements can be conveyed through cinematic features such as iconography and soundtrack choices. These elements, in turn, can be subverted in the film itself or in the trailer, and it is often by doing this, that a film can set itself apart from its peers within its genre. As such, this distinction through subversion demonstrates how genre operates in a paratextual way to position and orient audiences’ relationship to the main text, the film itself.

The cycle of appropriation and revitalisation inherent to the Hollywood blockbuster model is important to highlight when discussing the relationship between blockbusters and genre. If we assume that genres are constituted by the conventions that define them, the blockbuster then occupies the position of genre hybridity, as these films can appropriate genres as needed to sustain audience interest and engagement in the narrative – a blockbuster in this sense is arguably ‘genre-less’. This appropriation becomes clearer when we also take into account what constitutes a blockbuster, namely, their commercial status as high-risk/high-reward films. Although the blockbuster is typically associated with the action genre, often with fantasy and/or science-fiction elements, their commercial success is, ultimately, what defines them, and sets them apart from other films. For example, *Titanic* features elements of an action or disaster film, but is regarded by many as a romance. With this in mind, we can see how blockbuster films have managed to avoid over-saturation (or exceeding the limits of their ‘life-cycle’) as previous genres have done before them. In addition, as established previously in the

Introduction, blockbusters can avoid associations with lowbrow quality by appealing to middlebrow expectations through the appropriation of generic conventions associated with ‘quality’ films. The superhero genre is an exemplar of the blockbuster since these films rely on the appropriation of genre(s) for commercial and audience revitalisation. In regards to the latter, this genre can offer several examples of rebooted franchises. The past decade alone has seen various reboots of the X-Men, Spider-Man, and Superman franchises, to name a few. In addition, studios like 20th Century Fox and Sony, who currently hold the rights to *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* respectively, have to produce films for these franchises regularly, or risk losing the rights back to Marvel, further demonstrating the incentives for Hollywood to revitalise franchises through creative cycles of generic differentiation and appropriation.

In order to understand the superhero genre in relation to this cycle, I will be drawing upon the work of Martin Flanagan, Andrew Livingstone, and Mike McKenny from their book *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon* (2016), where they discuss the use of genre in relation to both blockbusters and the superhero genre. Broadly speaking, the superhero (blockbuster) film can be regarded as a subcategory within the action genre, particularly action-adventure. Barry Langford highlights the limitations of action as an individual genre, in that it does not possess the consistent shape required for genre attribution, in that it is too difficult to identify what constitutes an action film specifically. Among the various, valid reasons he cites for this limitation is that “excessive scale ... and consumption” are neither iconographic nor thematic properties. In film studies, genre is usually determined in terms of specific criteria (certain character types or themes, for example), and how they become coded into narrative designs, which are stable and repeatable enough to transcend individual cases and become recognised as an overarching genre (Maltby, 1996, p.114). Expanding on this, Langford isolates the “rampant generic hybridity” often presented in action cinema as exacerbating matters of categorisation. It is difficult to locate ‘action’ because it is so prone to merge with its close

genre neighbours, such as science-fiction and fantasy (2005, pp.233-234). That said, Langford does settle on the idea that ‘reliable constants’ can be found in the textuality of large-scale action films. He suggests the key examples of “spectacular action sequences (which themselves fulfil generic iconographic requirements); stable, repeatable narrative structures (a ‘thin’ spine leading off into weakly connected set-pieces), and a lack of emotional and psychological depth, squeezed out by lack of ‘space’, if not interest” (ibid.). Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone note that in contrast to this understanding, “[Yvonne] Tasker applies more of a historicised sense to how action/adventure have become contested with a flexible set of meanings; they may not form ‘secure generic objects’ but do allow for a series of nuanced designations that remain open enough to make use of, not be threatened by the hybridity of which Langford speaks” (Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, 2016, p.85). Therefore, it is common for action cinema to utilise multiple genres simultaneously in its execution, to the point that it becomes a naturalised aspect of the genre’s definition (p.87).

In her more recent work, Tasker has discussed what I would refer to as the use of genre appropriation by blockbusters, more specifically in relation to the superhero genre. To Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, Tasker’s findings add a few pertinent nuances, such as the need to organise narrative in a way which will justify “fascinating sites of action” (2015, p.181) that reflect a thematic drive towards exploring the transformed body, allowing for CGI effects (Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, 2016, p.85). For Tasker, the superhero narrative emphasises the hero’s ability to use their body to overcome physical conflicts or challenges which is fundamental to all manifestations of the genre. Expanding on this, she notes that the superhero body carries a more ambivalent meaning in relation to the narrative functions accessed by the character’s powers, for example, the origin story in which the new hero struggles to return to ‘normality’ (2015, p.181). Here, the need for textual fidelity to the source material arises once more, particularly with regard to the visual iconography of comic books

and the adaptation of this visual style to the silver screen. In relation to the superhero body, this fidelity is required in order to fulfil both fans' expectations of what characters should look like and to provide a clear manifestation of characters' incarnations for ancillary marketing. One key example of generic superhero iconography would be the costume, something that has, for the majority of superhero films released since 2000, been relatively grounded in realism. Balancing the 'realism' of action-adventure with visual-effects driven plots, we can see how studios like Marvel attempt to engage and subvert audiences' expectations by allowing for deviations away from conventional genre associations, like the often-flamboyant superhero costume. The costumes of Iron Man and Captain America change frequently, for example in terms of colour shades and placement of symbols, further distinguishing their respective appearances throughout the MCU whilst fulfilling the need for filmic verisimilitude over comic book accuracy. At the same time, retaining some stylistic aspects of their costumes from the source material appeals to core comic book fans. Related to this point, is the visual and generic construction of the superhero physique, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Although superhero films are arguably not a genre, like the categorical Western or Musical, for example, I find it important to explore these films within this framework, as genre is the crucible through which revitalisation and appropriation of the blockbuster take place and forms a key nodal point in the superhero franchise's current success. Discussing the superhero genre further, Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone also note that "some of the recent narrative cycles which centralise [the superhero genre] could justifiably form evidence of a contribution to extending the rather one-dimensional parameters defining the action genre" (2016, p.87). They refer to some of the genre's key examples, particularly Nolan's *Dark Knight* Trilogy and Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* films, as well as some of the MCU films, as highlighting the narrative innovation of action films and their "increased thematic engagement towards social realities" (ibid.). They note that "popularity, critical endorsement and box office can serve to take a film

away from the natural genre placement conferred by its textual features” (ibid.). Therefore, within the context of popular filmmaking, genre is constantly shifting, a moving target of sorts, that is open for interpretation and subversion. As established, there is a consistent degree of genre hybridity present in action cinema, to which the superhero genre is no exception. In ascertaining the reason for superhero films’ success, it becomes necessary to discuss how these films engage with genre hybridity.

2.4 – Genre Hybridity

As the action blockbuster has demonstrated the ability to appropriate genre across its history, so too has the superhero genre, particularly the MCU and several of the films that comprise this transmedia franchise. Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone suggest that “instead of isolating the differences which introduce hybrid genre flavours, or trouble the assumed constraints of superhero cinema, or serve agendas of ‘legitimising’ the field by speaking of formal maturation”, we should ascertain what exactly “*grounds* these texts” (2016, p.87-88). They claim that the ‘trick’ that has enabled Marvel’s critical and commercial successes is “to build a considerable shared universe and let genre, and the insertion of referential material, provide a map to the shifts in tone that must be negotiated to get the best from it” (p.88). They propose that this ‘trick’ “occurs via a complex combination of elements” (ibid.), resulting in the concept of a ‘genre fractal’. A fractal version of something can be described as a miniaturised replica, a repetition of the pattern on a smaller scale. In regards to genre, it would be used to signal the content of genre but reduced and nestling in the territory of another. A different way of understanding ‘genre fractal’ is through the musical concept of a ‘sample’ which is the act of taking a portion, or sample, of one sound recording and reusing it as an instrument or a sound recording in a different song or piece. In this sense, a genre fractal is an encapsulation of a genre used to “help carry the meaning of a text derived from superhero fiction in a way that meshes

it with filmic value” (ibid.). This utilisation of genre fractals is evidenced in Marvel’s use of paratexts, such as Paolo Rivera’s poster for *CA:TWS*, pictured below:



PAOLORIVERA.COM

(Rivera, 2014)

In this image, commissioned by Marvel Studios, artist Paolo Rivera portrays the characters and imagery of *The Winter Soldier* through the lens of 1970s realism, thereby constructing a ‘fractal’ relationship with other films of this era such as *Three Days of the Condor* (1975), which shared Robert Redford as a star. Interestingly the words ‘Captain America’ are omitted from the title on the poster, suggesting a possible embarrassment about including such an overt reference to super-heroics in relation to this period of film history. As Marvel commissioned the poster, the promotional strategy suggests that a) they are aware of this issue, and b) of the generic references made by their film that, in the case of *The Winter Soldier*, is to films related to 1970s thrillers.

To Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, “[fractal] genre instances replay in microcosmic form the ‘world-building’ labour that has gone on in constructing the MCU, where tonally disparate texts are shown to nevertheless be related (just as was always the case with the universe in comics)” (ibid.). Taking into account this idea of genre fractals then, we can begin to see how the superhero genre has utilised genre hybridity, appropriating genre in order to distinguish each entry from one another, which, in theory at least, should help to prevent the oversaturation of the market. Based on the definition provided by Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, I argue that genre hybridity and genre fractals, respectively demonstrate large- and small-scale methods of genre appropriation. In this sense, a genre fractal can be seen in *GotG*’s opening, which features an alien spaceship abducting Peter Quill (Chris Pratt). Quill’s response cues the audience to reproduce his stare in wonder, mimicking the distinctive use of light by Steven Spielberg in films like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977) (p.89). This serves as a subtle, visual precursor to the film’s next scene, showing an adult Quill years later on an alien planet, dancing to *Redbone*’s “Come and Get Your Love” (1974). Here, the soundtrack, itself a reminder of the home Quill was taken from, serves to provide a sense of nostalgia for the 1970/80s. On a greater scale though, the film utilises genre hybridity in its appropriation of the space-opera genre, to distinguish the film within the MCU whilst enhancing the aforementioned nostalgic emotional cues. In the MCU alone, there are several examples of genre appropriation: as mentioned, *The Winter Soldier* contains generic elements of a paranoid 1970s conspiracy thriller, while its predecessor *The First Avenger* is a WWII period film. *Thor* and *The Dark World* both convey elements of fantasy alongside an action narrative and *Ant-Man* works as a ‘family adventure’ with heist elements. Even the ‘event’ films featuring the Avengers are distinguishable from the majority of the genre’s offerings by virtue of their crossover nature. Likewise, the television side of the MCU also feature genre fractals, with *AoS* operating as a high-tech espionage protocol series; *Agent Carter* as a period, semi-noir ‘buddy’ show with a

feminist slant; *Daredevil* borrows elements from the martial arts and crime/legal procedural genres; while *Jessica Jones* established a neo-noir tone throughout its first series. Based on this generic appropriation, we can see how Marvel have distinguished themselves from not only their competitors but also their individual properties from one another.

In appropriating genre conventions to differentiate their films, Marvel has found a way to prevent their entries becoming too repetitive, something for which they are already beginning to receive criticism. As explained in 1.4, aside from Tom Hiddleston's Loki, the majority of their villains have been criticised for being underdeveloped and/or killed off within a standalone film, thereby preventing future development. Furthermore, despite these generic differences, Marvel have retained a (relatively) consistent (somewhat) realistic and light-hearted tone across the majority of the films, save perhaps *The Incredible Hulk* which was the exception to the rule, due to being shot alongside *Iron Man* (the film that established the MCU tone). This tone emphasises audience *entertainment* and is supported by Marvel's apparent adherence to promoting humour and spectacle in their films as part of their brand reliability. The Netflix shows break away from this tone, although this is most likely due to a combination of their comparatively adult target audience and the divide between Marvel Studios and Marvel Television discussed in the previous chapter. The filmic tone of MCU properties has proven to be a staple of their films, providing one explanation for the consistency of these films' performance. Through their use of paratexts, such as trailers and posters, Marvel are able to emphasise their consistent 'family-friendly' tone and the genre fractals present in their individual films highlight their distinctiveness as a point of audience engagement. By contrast, DC appears to have positioned themselves as more serious superhero filmmakers, as evidenced by the dark tone utilised in 2013's *MoS* and 2016's *BvS* and *Suicide Squad* (although the latter attempted to balance this dark tone with a [literal] colourful, 'pop' tone) as well as the psychological realism present in Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy.

This different use of tone is evident in the film (and surrounding paratexts) of the previously discussed *Civil War* and *BvS*. Even though *Civil War* is arguably a (slightly) darker entry in the MCU, the film does not shy away from humour, as shown during the film's seventeen-minute 'civil war' sequence, in which twelve of Marvel's heroes fight one another. Throughout this sequence, the heroes joke with one another – understandable considering they are the good guys – and the action and spectacle are used by the film's directors, the Russo brothers, to add to the humour. By contrast, *BvS*' titular fight, only eight minutes long is much grimmer, with its tonal staging and action allowing for virtually no levity. Fox and Sony (the studios behind the *X-Men* and *Spider-Man* franchises respectively) meanwhile, tend to rely less on genre fractals, focusing more on character and thematic development. For example, the civil rights undertones of the *X-Men* franchise, and the difficulty of balancing 'normal' life with super-heroics present in the *Spider-Man* films. This latter example can be linked, at times, to the coming-of-age and high school/teen genre(s), a link made much more overt with the casting of Tom Holland (the youngest actor to play the character thus far) as Spider-Man. Consequently, the versatile nature of superhero films, in terms of both their appropriation of genre and the ease with which they can be revitalised, demonstrates why these films exemplify the Hollywood blockbuster. The generic versatility of the superhero genre, particularly in the MCU, has achieved and sustained its success using genre appropriation (via genre fractals) and paratexts.

2.5 – Navigating a Shared Universe: Stars and Paratexts

There is one more aspect that is key to an analysis of the reasons underpinning the superhero genre's success, namely, the stars who headline the various films and television shows that comprise the genre. These actors, who across the genre vary from the unknown to the household name, each bring a certain type of marketability with them, that enhances both the film(s) they

perform in, and even the paratextuality surrounding these films. In discussing the role of the star in relation to the superhero genre, I will be drawing upon Wilson Koh's work in his essay, "I am Iron Man': the Marvel Cinematic Universe and celebrity labour" (2014). In his essay, Koh asserts that during the climactic moments of superhero origin films, especially in the MCU, textually privileged assertions of super-heroic identity are frequently made (pp.484-500). For example, at the end of *Iron Man*, Tony Stark asserts "The truth is ... I am Iron Man" to the gathered press, while in *The First Avenger*, Steve Rogers dramatically declares "I'm Captain America" to freed prisoners of war. To Koh, these assertions of super-heroic identity, along with Marvel's tendency to cast lesser-known actors in leading roles, are interlinked, conveying what he describes as "a canny strategy by Marvel Studios to manage paratextual star narratives and trajectories" (p.485). Koh clarifies that by 'lesser-known' actors, he is referring to those that do not fall into the 'A-list', actors that "can carry a big blockbuster film on their name value alone" (ibid.). Examples of such actors include Chris Evans (who was admittedly a recognised star following his role in *Fantastic Four* [2005]) and Chris Hemsworth in *The First Avenger* and *Thor* respectively, with Hugh Jackman in *X-Men* and Tobey Maguire in *Spider-Man* comprising earlier examples of this type of casting. Better-known actors are cast too, including Jeff Bridges as the antagonist in *Iron Man* and, to a lesser extent, Chris Pratt (*GotG*) and Paul Rudd (*Ant-Man*) who, paratextually broadened the appeal of their films thanks to their comedic skills, supporting marketing strategies that focused on the films' humour. These examples prompt discussion of the actor's role within the superhero genre, and the function they serve, within both the film and paratextually.

Koh notes that in order to cast a certain actor for a specific part, producers have to consider what this actor might bring to the role in terms of existing economic value, degree of fame, star trajectory and idiolect (p.485). Koh elaborates, citing Richard Dyer's argument that film stars implicitly bring their own paratextual narratives to the films that they appear in,

“[signifying] in [these] films by virtue of being an already-signifying image” which is comprised from various “media texts that can be [variously categorised] as promotion, publicity films, criticism, and commentaries” (Dyer, 1979, p.88). To Dyer then, the construction of a film character is heavily based on audiences’ understanding and expectations of a character and/or actor. This results in audiences interpreting an actor in relation to their past (or previous paratexts) and the currently unfolding text of a film, both of which involve the actor’s star image. In his analysis of the star and blockbusters, Justin Wyatt sees the star’s image as a multifaceted tool, strategically promoted by producers such that it can be recuperated within the film text (Wyatt, 1994, p.31). In regards to superhero films, we can turn to Thomas Austin’s related discussion of the stars that portrayed Batman between 1989-1997 – Michael Keaton (star of Tim Burton’s *Batman* and *Batman Returns* (1992), Val Kilmer (star of Joel Schumacher’s *Batman Forever* [1995]), and George Clooney (who headlined Schumacher’s disastrous follow-up, *Batman and Robin* [1997]) – and how they respectively adopted the role. Austin comments that the latter two films with Kilmer and Clooney each featured their star dramatically donning the Batman costume. As a result, “the precise way in which each star-actor inhabits the Batsuit depends upon a combination of the character-role, a star persona in process, and performance techniques grounded in the particular actor’s body and voice ... [and] cinematic codes” (Austin, 2003, p.135). Furthermore, Austin highlights that with each Batman film’s release, “efforts [were] made through promotion and publicity to blend star and character into a successful (that is, convincing) ‘alloy’” (p.136). Consequently, Koh argues, “the conceits and concerns of films ... have historically been personified by their lead star(s), and by whichever public triumphs and failings this star may have” (2014, p.486). Following the approach to casting identified here, it becomes clear that when casting a famous character, specifically, a character as iconic as Batman, an A-list actor is required more often than not, as seen with the casting of Ben Affleck as the latest caped crusader, for example. That said, there are exceptions to this rule, as will be discussed later.

Koh explains the importance of star persona for superhero character success with one of Marvel's first casting choices for its MCU: Robert Downey Jr. as Tony Stark/Iron Man. The paratextual link between star and character is easy to identify as Downey Jr.'s well-documented playboy lifestyle and problems with drug addiction make him a perfect fit, of sorts, for the role of the textually self-described "genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist" (*The Avengers*) that is Tony Stark. In the comics, one of Tony Stark's most famous storylines is that of 1979's *Iron Man: Demon in a Bottle*, which saw the titular character struggle with alcoholism, a character flaw that has carried through his iterations across various media. So, taking into account the star and character's respective problems, along with Downey Jr.'s mid-2000s career revival (through his work on *Ally McBeal* [1997-2002] and films like Shane Black's *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* [2005]), the 'alloy' between star and character is established and highlights the way in which Marvel were clearly banking on this paratextual link working to their advantage. Another, less prominent example would be the casting of Chris Evans as Captain America, as his previous paratextual renown, thanks to the likes of *Fantastic Four*, fits with the alloy between a heroic and physically strong Evans and his iconic character.

However, this reliance on paratextually linking (A-list) stars and characters is not necessarily a staple of the superhero genre. In casting Chris Hemsworth, a relatively unknown actor with no pre-existing star persona, as Thor, the star marketing could start from scratch, framing him as a strong, foreign personality alloyed to the character's 'fish-out-water' story that sees him stranded in North America in his origin film. Notwithstanding Koh's points about matching A-level actors to a superhero character persona, casting relatively unknown actors in big roles has become a staple of the MCU. In doing so, the studio relies on their performance and inherent underdog status (by virtue of their standing in celebrity culture) to elevate them to stardom. This in turn can be linked to the 'promise' discussed in Chapter One that was made

by Marvel to their fans to follow through on the latter's collective expectations for authenticity and fidelity in their adaptations. In casting lesser-known actors, Marvel is able to position its production choices as driven by story rather than economic or publicity requirements. The other key factor at play though in casting decisions and star promotion, is Marvel's own status as 'underdogs' within the industry since, prior to their incorporation into Disney, they were financing and developing their own films, at great risk to themselves, initially at least, and attempting to adapt the storytelling methods of comic books to the silver screen. This undoubtedly serves as another way for Marvel to appeal to their fans (many of whom will likely relate to the position of underdog) as well as ensuring that they retain fans' trust across their work. Here, Marvel have positioned themselves as an industrial variation of their stars' public persona.

It is important to discuss the lesser-known actors leading these franchises, whose paratextual rise to stardom matches their character's emergence as a superhero. Koh comments that "the rise of the superhero character to superheroism offers a neat parallel to the rise of a lesser-known actor's star trajectory from relative obscurity to starring in a big-budget movie and consequently having a high-profile media presence and elevated career prospects" (2014, p.487). In addition, casting lesser-known actors ensures that the film's narrative and tonal consistency is prioritised. Koh offers the example of James McAvoy being cast as Charles Xavier/Professor X in *X-Men: First Class*. This actor came from a background in theatre which paratextually syncs up with Patrick Stewart's star persona, who played an older iteration of the character and has a famed theatrical background. Such a move indicates the importance of managing audiences' extra-textual knowledge of the characters and actors. If an actor like Brad Pitt had played Xavier instead, his involvement (and his paratextual role as a film star) would have disrupted and overshadowed the character he was playing. Citing Dyer, Koh adds that "[extra]-textual knowledge of this sort can potentially draw audiences out of the diegetic world-

illusion, whenever the star appears onscreen and performs in ways incompatible to his public image” (Dyer, 1979, p.148). The more practical side to casting these actors is, unlike their A-list colleagues, they cost less.

This allows studios, particularly Marvel, to keep down the cost of these expensive blockbusters. Reports on *The Avengers*’ stars’ earnings surprised the industry as it became clear why these lesser-known actors were disgruntled about their pay (Koh, 2014, p.488). Downey Jr. was said to have made approximately \$50 million from the film (thanks to a deal that saw him earning approximately 5% of the film’s earnings). In contrast, his co-stars earned around \$2-3 million each, with Scarlett Johansson and Samuel L. Jackson being the only exceptions, earning \$4-6 million apiece. However, while it is unfortunate for the actors (although not necessarily relatable), it is important to note that paying these actors equally would cost the equivalent of a blockbuster alone, ignoring the remaining production costs. As Koh describes, “there would be an accretive effect ... where subsequent Captain America solo films, for example, would need to be vastly higher budgeted in order to keep up with the increasing demands of their lead actors” (2014, p.488). By casting lesser-known actors, Marvel have ensured that they would retain bargaining power (and thereby maximum profits) when it came to contract (re-)negotiations. In fact, Marvel has shown no hesitation in re-casting for production purposes, as was the case with Bruce Banner/Hulk being played by Edward Norton, then Mark Ruffalo, and the *Iron Man* film series’ James “Rhodey” Rhodes/War Machine being played by Terrence Howard, then Don Cheadle. In summary, by casting lesser-known actors, Marvel have successfully managed to manipulate paratextual star narratives and trajectories, the verisimilitude of the onscreen fantasy, and the studio’s present and future bargaining leverage when the lead actor’s box-office draw inevitably rises (ibid.). Importantly, this also highlights a key strategy used by Marvel (and their competitors, by extension) to appeal to middlebrow expectations and further legitimise their product(s) by prioritising the creative

direction of their storytelling rather than appealing to mainstream audiences through celebrity actors.

2.6 – Macho Super-Men: The Superhero’s Body

It is important to note though, that, despite these various textual assertions, the actors involved in these films are not the characters they play. Downey Jr. is not Iron Man, Chris Evans is not Captain America, and Mark Ruffalo is not the Hulk. Superheroes are ultimately fictional concepts that form the foundation of the comic books (and recently, films) that tell their stories. After all, these franchises were around long before some of these actors even began working. Thus, we must acknowledge that these films, and all characters/actors associated with them, are but a single variation of a larger textual assemblage. In this regard, Henry Jenkins posits that the producers of these films have embraced the principle of narrative multiplicity. This principle (much like the ‘shared universe’) is a product of comic book franchises, and involves multiple comics being published simultaneously, with different iterations on the central superhero. One example of this would be Marvel’s ‘Ultimate’ series, which provided an alternate universe of their comics, offering a variation on the mainstream universe. Jenkins comments that this shift towards narrative multiplicity is meant to complement that of narrative continuity. He states “so that we do not lose interest in compelling stories within individual issues as we move into the continuity era nor do comics readers and producers lose interest in continuity as we enter into a period of multiplicity” (Jenkins, 2009, p.21). Jenkins goes on to note though, that focusing on narrative continuity and privileging long-time fans, “might also act as a barrier to entry for new readers who often found continuity-heavy books difficult to follow ... [However,] the contemporary focus on multiplicity may similarly reward the mastery of long-time fans, but around a different axis of consumption” (ibid.). Consequently, the long-time fan will be able to appreciate the different iterations of their favourite characters, while new readers are able to engage with material that would otherwise leave them out of the loop.

Koh argues then, that while “this combination of continuity and multiplicity came about as a result of well-established superhero brands and a saturated comic-books market” (2014, p.489), that same logic is also applicable to recent superhero films. With each revitalisation of a superhero franchise, the character’s origins are usually retold, allowing new audiences to enter the fold whilst setting the foundation for future films. Koh argues that “these notions of continuity and iterative multiplicity ... point to the superheroes of these films [having] a virtual life” outside the cinema, due to their accumulated character histories (p.490). At the same time, since they appear frequently across multiple media platforms (including films, animated series, and comic books), these characters are nevertheless conveyed in a relatively consistent manner, regardless of which iteration one sees or reads. This medial dispersion of superheroes allows for the endorsement of various ancillary and transmedia texts and products. As a result, this media creates a kind of paratextual ‘loop’ that highlights the prominence of the superhero in contemporary popular culture.

The presence of superheroes across texts and media makes them exemplary of what Chris Rojek’s describes as the ‘celeactor’. This is “a fictional character who is either momentarily ubiquitous or becomes an institutional feature of popular culture ... [celeactors are] adjuncts of the mass media. They cater to the public appetite for a character type that sums up the times” (Chris Rojek as cited in Koh, 2014, p.491). For Rojek, superheroes like Batman or Superman “present idealised representations of American heroism and the defence of justice” (ibid.). By extension then, we can apply the term to Marvel’s characters, such as Captain America, or any of his other filmic contemporaries. This is because these characters, while fictional, are recognisable, almost immediately so, thanks to the specific iconographies that surround them. Furthermore, they are, as discussed, re-accessible through many media

platforms so no matter where a story takes each character's iteration(s), their core characteristics remain unchanged.

Koh notes that Rojek's work exists alongside the idea of the virtual celebrity, or 'synthespian'. The 'synthespian' is a contemporary virtual celebrity, born from multiple media platforms, thereby possessing an artificial realism, as opposed to André Bazin's notion of the integral realism of early cinema (2014, p.491). Koh argues that the synthespian is a "simulacral of the third order, a copy that despite having a lost/non-existent original referent ... [existing] only in the minds of its audience-consumers" (ibid.). Mary Flanagan even goes so far as to say that synthespians are a natural evolution of our contemporary era's mediated celebrity culture, in which the star's body must function as a widely-circulated disembodied image to achieve fame (1999). This point is of particular relevance to the superhero characters leading franchises like the MCU. Scott Bukatman comments that superhero comics "narrate the body in stories and envision the body in drawings. The body is obsessively centred upon ... The superhero body is everything" (Scott Bukatman as cited in Koh, 2014, p.491). The superhero's hyperbolic body (and mental traits) demonstrate the meta-genre's underlying concern with the body as a splintered locus of transformation and identity. This obsession with the body has allowed superheroes to embody "shifting attitudes towards flesh, self, and society" ranging from them being initially "armoured against the shocks of industrial society ... [to incarnating] problematic and painfully reductive definitions of masculine power and presence" (ibid.). Irrespective of these shifting attitudes though, the ideal body in the meta-genre's narrative must be flawless. The superhero's body is idealised to such a point, that it *must* remain healthy, never aging and, if it dies, it is only for a short while. The expectations of the stars playing these characters are high then, since, particularly in relation to the superhero films being produced today, it is *assumed* that the stars will be the idealised embodiment of youth and strength, having a

disproportionate effect on the male stars' female counterparts, whose (expected) sexualisation through physical prowess and youth is more overt.

This argument about the flawless superhero's body can be related to Yvonne Tasker's notions of the 1980s action hero through the categorisation of the eponymous 'tough' and 'wise' guys. The tough guy was a character typically embodied by the likes of Sylvester Stallone or Arnold Schwarzenegger, known for their independence and muscles, but especially, their excessive use of violence. Representative of the 'bigger is better' mentality that influenced the action cinema of the 1980s, the narratives of these films were driven by action, offering spectacle that amazed audiences whilst serving to justify the need for muscular heroes. The muscular, silent and violent tough guy is embodied today, in part, by the superhero Steve Rogers/Captain America (Chris Evans). In his film appearances, Rogers is the ideal hero, a brave and patriotic soldier, able to slide into his role as a hero with ease. In many ways, he was born to be a hero; he simply lacked the physique to become one. Rogers possesses the required moral and intellectual virtues then, he only becomes a hero once his body is transformed. In his WWII origins, he serves as the poster boy for American war propaganda, initially acting as a spokesperson for bearer bonds, before eventually joining the war effort as a soldier. Aside from Thor, Rogers' partially-naked body is put on display a great deal more than his superhero counterparts in the MCU, with specific attention placed on other characters (often female) gazing at his body. For example, after Rogers' transformation from a small, scrawny man, to the tall, muscular body he gains through experimentation, his later love interest, Peggy Carter, approaches him. Both Rogers and Carter are shown lost for words, the former due to the effects of his recent transformation, and the latter who is trying not to openly admire his new physique, barely stopping herself from touching his chest. Here, the gaze works both intra- and extra-textually, as the camera's gaze on the body is reinforced by characters within the scene.

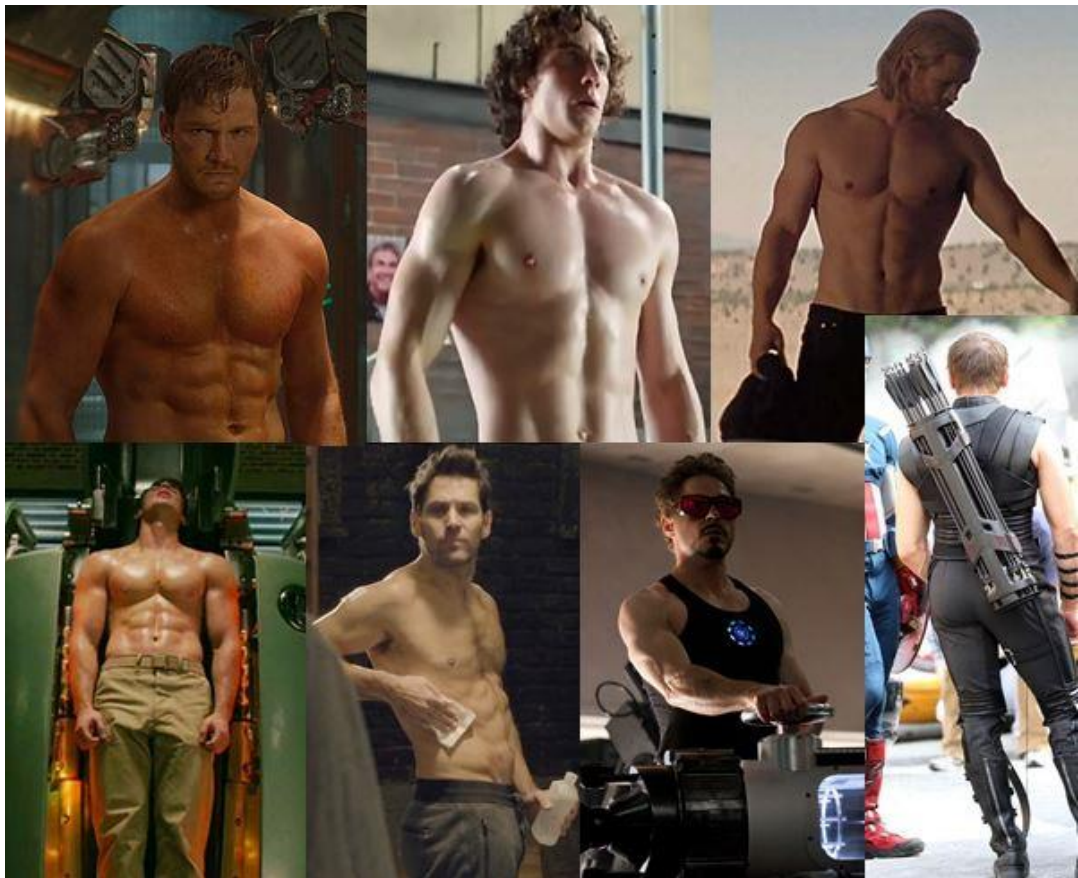
Tough guys were not the only action hero persona identified by Tasker, with their counterpart being found in the ‘wise guy’. Named for their ‘wise-cracking’ style of humour, the wise guy was exemplified by the protagonist of *Die Hard* (1988), John McClane (Bruce Willis). This character has become known for his humour and sardonic one-liners, especially his catchphrase, “yippee-ki-yay, mother fucker” (*Die Hard*). He is frequently portrayed as a reluctant hero, who, for all his maverick tendencies, is simply a man in the wrong place, at the wrong time. Willis is presented as an action hero pin-up, much like his tough guy counterpart, but through his humour, he is able to undermine the more worrying aspects of the muscular action hero. Consequently, the dichotomy between these two types of action hero allows any anxieties raised by the physical display of the tough guy to be displaced through comedy, as shown by the wise guy. The wise guy then, can be identified through his humour, which he uses as a means of coping with the situation he has reluctantly involved himself with and, while he may be muscular, his body is nowhere near that of the bodybuilding Schwarzenegger and Stallone. In the MCU, a key example of the wise guy would be Tony Stark/Iron Man, a character who is notably reluctant in his role as a hero. Unlike his peers, Stark is generally motivated more by guilt for his proxy involvement in perpetuating war(s) through his technology and weapons. Furthermore, like McClane before him, Stark uses humour as a coping mechanism of sorts, particularly when it comes to dealing with the impossible scenarios presented to superheroes. One example of this is when Stark confronts the Norse demi-god Thor, belittling him as he asks, “doth mother know you weareth her drapes?” (*The Avengers*). This, as well as Stark’s frequent mid-battle one-liners, suggest that like other wise guys, he uses humour as a means of coping with the situations he finds himself in, although notably, Stark is active in his role as a hero. Paul Rudd fits this type too as Ant-Man.

Problematically though, it is worth noting that the wise guy (and indeed tough guy) are almost always white, heterosexual men. This precludes women and people of colour (POC)

from being able to occupy a similar heroic and comedic role. In fact, POC are often the humorous sidekick, implying that only a white man can be funny and transcend a sidekick role. Several of Marvel's heroes demonstrate this: Tony Stark has James Rhodes/War Machine (Terence Howard, then Don Cheadle) and Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow, Captain America has Peggy Carter (Hayley Atwell), then Sam Wilson/Falcon (Anthony Mackie), and Ant-Man has his partner-in-crime, Luis (Michael Peña). An exception to this rule, in terms of race, would be Will Smith, who plays the lead wise guy character Floyd Lawton/Deadshot in *Suicide Squad*. Smith is an outlier however and the casting choices discussed above highlight the emphasis placed on white, heterosexual masculinity in the superhero genre, and indeed, mainstream (action/adventure) cinema.

These characters' brands of heroic masculinity are also reflected in their costumes, as discussed by Masani McGee. Citing Steve Neale, she discusses how male bodies were previously filmed in the action movies of the 80s. According to Neale, "we see male bodies stylised and fragmented by close-ups, but our look is not direct, it is heavily mediated by the looks of the characters involved. And those looks are marked not by desire, but rather by fear, or hatred, or aggression" (1983, p.18). Here, Neale is arguing that an unmitigated gaze that focuses on a male figure can lead to a homoerotic viewing experience that the majority of male-dominated films of his time sought to avoid. Aside from depictions of violence onscreen, to Neale, the only other way to present a male character as the subject of an erotic gaze was to feminise him in some way. Neale was writing in regards to 1980s action heroes though, and as such, McGee contends that Marvel challenges this pattern through "the costumes of the male characters [which] place their bodies on display in a manner that insists upon an erotically-charged gaze, yet because of the concepts and ideals that those costumes may represent ... that gaze does not have to be mitigated in the way Neale describes" (2014, p.1). In regards to Rogers and Stark, their costumes represent their patriotism and technological superiority respectively.

Expanding on this, McGee suggests that Marvel’s heroes can operate “within a spectrum of roles that allows for feminised and/or alternative portrayals of gender, hetero- and homoeroticism, and spectacle” (McGee, 2014, p.2). In this sense, we can see how Marvel’s male heroes challenge earlier conservative anxieties regarding the display of a male body for male audiences, further demonstrating the differences between these contemporary action heroes, and their 1980s counterparts, exemplified in the compilation of images below.



(“Fritzll” [Reddit User], 2015)

In superhero films, as shown in this image, the (white, heterosexual) male form is usually shown to be the epitome of physical perfection, which, iconographically, is highlighted and emphasised by their costumes. This is particularly evident when we examine Captain America’s costumes. His first costume is a self-reflexive nod to the character’s comic book

origins, while his second, although patriotic, is more practical, functioning as a military uniform not too dissimilar from those worn by WWII soldiers. In *The Avengers* though, Rogers' costume notably changes in style, as it is made to be more form-fitting, clinging to his body in a way that is designed to emphasise his muscular physique as much as possible. Here, Rogers' costume becomes less practical, and more reminiscent of his attire from the comics, ironically making it similar to the costume he wore to sell war bonds in *Captain America*. This version of his costume is supposed to be a spectacle for both the audience and the civilians of the MCU; the costume change is also explained diegetically as being a result of Agent Coulson's fandom of Rogers. This intra- and extra-diegetic spectacle results in those looking at Rogers to see him as a superhero, a soldier, and a conventionally attractive male, thereby embodying an idealised form of heroic masculinity.

In contrast, Stark's armour both reinforces and subverts any attempt to define his body as an ideal form of masculinity, due to the character's simultaneous embodiment and rejection of traditional signifiers of masculinity, such as physical strength or charisma. Stark's armour is designed to reflect the idealised body of the typical superhero, yet he himself is hindered by his own injury and imperfections. Stark's comment in *Iron Man 2* that his armour is a "high-tech prosthesis", reflects an evolution of what the idealised superhero body is today. McGee comments that "the superhero form must be something that is constructed, something created to not mask but balance the very realistic social and physical flaws that a conventional human being would have" (McGee, 2014, p.5). Consequently, Stark's armour reflects his own role as a reluctant hero, outwardly championing heroic masculinity, whilst simultaneously subverting it. This demonstrates how our contemporary superheroes differ from the action heroes of the 1980s, particularly in terms of the heroic masculinity they convey, as well as the expectations for both male and female audiences to enjoy their bodies, which nullifies anxious attempts to dispel any perceived homoeroticism.

In terms of the evolution of the male physique in action films, the ‘New Man’ is an action hero of the 1990s that bridges the gap between the heroes of the 1980s and the present. Susan Jeffords referred to 1980s action heroes as ‘hard-bodied’, a term designed to convey the conservative era they embodied. Jeffords’ understanding of the hard-bodied action hero asserts that these characters’ bodies personified the ideals of the Reagan era, through their perceived control over their environments (immediate or geopolitical), those around them (be they citizens or enemies), and as able to resolve crises successfully (Jeffords, 2004, pp.26-27). Their bodies “assist in the confirmation of this mastery by refusing to be ‘messy’ or ‘confusing’, by having hard edges, determinate lines of action, and clear boundaries of their own decision-making” (p.27). By the early 1990s, these figures were largely being rejected by mainstream Hollywood, a result, Jeffords argues, of the American public’s (and Hollywood’s) shifting interest from justice to commitment to the family (p.141). The hard-bodied heroes of the 1980s changed in turn, echoing this family-oriented sentiment, “the emotionally and physically whole man of the eighties would rather be a father than a warrior” (pp.142-143). This transition can be seen in films like *Kindergarten Cop* (1990) in which Schwarzenegger is shown changing from a brutal cop into a nurturing kindergarten teacher. Retroactively, Jeffords argues, “the men of the 1980s are given feelings, feelings that were, presumably, hidden behind their confrontational violence. And whereas 1980s action-adventure films gloried in spectacular scenes of destruction, 1991 films began telling audiences that these men were actually being self-destructive” (pp.144-145).

Through this idea of the New Man, we can see how action heroes have developed since the 1980s into the more complicated superhero. Simply put, the former tapped into their emotions, which has led to contemporary action heroes seeming to be more realistic and relatable than their predecessors. This is made evident by Stark’s reliance on technology, as seen throughout his appearances in the MCU. As mentioned, he requires technology to survive,

although this is no longer the case after he has an operation in *Iron Man 3*. Nevertheless, his overreliance on technology can be seen in the constant upgrading of his armour, to the point where, by *Iron Man 3*, he has built dozens of armours, which he controls like drones. In many ways, Stark's fears mirror contemporary concerns surrounding terrorism, drone warfare, ever-advancing technology, and the 'War on Terror'. This latter point is reflected in the film's use of individuals imbued with Extremis⁶ exploding as well as Stark's own PTSD-fuelled paranoia. Likewise, despite all appearances to the contrary, Rogers has his own concerns that subvert the heroic masculinity he represents, specifically the fact that he is a man out-of-time. Here, I am referring to his freezing between *Captain America* and *The Avengers*, which is how he survived from WWII to the present day. While this has left Rogers with his mid-century traditional sense of morality and masculinity, it also means that he is unaware of many of the changes that occurred during the time he was frozen. As such, the only thing he is sure of is his role as a soldier, but he is forced to question even this in *CA:TWS*, due to the questionable ethics and realpolitik of modern warfare. Therefore, the New Man of the 1990s has influenced the portrayal of action heroes as more emotionally vulnerable than those of the 1980s. In turn, this means that modern male superheroes are expected to display a vulnerable side in addition to their great physical strength. The strong and silent tough guy is not as relevant in this day and age – we need his talents but he cannot be infallible.

The male superheroes we see in film today, as exemplified through Captain America and Iron Man, respectively embody at least some aspects of Yvonne Tasker's notion of the tough and wise guy personas of the action hero. Because of the emergence of the New Man in the 1990s, these superhero characters have evolved to include an emotional element that makes them more relatable to audiences than their 1980s counterparts were. However, although they

⁶ In *Iron Man 3*, Extremis is a virus, itself an attempt to recreate Captain America's Super Soldier Serum, that rewrites the operating system of the human body, improving it to its peak potential, whilst granting the individual powers, of sorts. It is not, however, always successful, resulting in some hosts violently exploding.

may be more 'realistic' on an emotional level, in terms of the ways they cope with their powers and violence, these superheroes are, in the end, 'super'. Almost all of these characters depicted onscreen have something that sets them apart from ordinary people; they are, by definition, extraordinary in some way or another. This may be in terms of physical and/or mental attributes, strange powers, advanced technology, or even a particular skillset. In this sense then, superhero characters could be seen as hyperbolic, thereby representing a form of idealised or spectacular form of masculinity (or femininity). Their features possessed by these characters do not just distinguish them from their 1980s counterparts though, they reflect the times we live in, the uncertainty that comes with contemporary issues, such as the War on Terror, and the social fear and paranoia that accompanies this.

Today's action heroes are therefore a culmination of both of these types of heroic masculinity: the confidence of the 1980s action hero having met the emotional vulnerability of the 1990s' New Man. What makes the male superhero so important today is the mainstream success of the genre, which has placed these films and characters at the forefront of contemporary action cinema, much like the hard-bodied tough guys of the 1980s. Superheroes currently convey an idealised form of masculinity within mainstream (action) cinema. There are two 'tiers', I would argue, of heroic masculinity in action films today: the 'realistic' tier, in which the attributes and skills of characters, while extreme, can be attained through training such as bodybuilding, as is the case with Batman or Iron Man; and an 'idealised' tier, where characters' abilities are impossible to attain. The prevalence of this latter tier is a reflection of the uncertain times we live in, with superhero characters such as Captain America being reminiscent of 1980s action films, with their relative simplicity, spectacle, and often exaggerated physicality. The superhero genre has remained relevant by developing its characters, who align closely with their peers in the wider action genre, to be both emotionally complex and physically appealing. This development reflects changing audience expectations

that demand a level of ‘realism’ in the way that superheroes emotionally navigate their powers alongside a corporeal spectacle of the male form. Consequently, we can see how these characters continue to appeal to the (perceived) majority of superhero fans – the white male comic book fan – and how these characters have been able to remain relevant in a contemporary context.

2.7 – Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how paratexts and amplification, via fan-made time, serve to promote the superhero genre to both fans and mainstream audiences. Furthermore, I have established how the superhero genre’s appeal has been maintained on a creative level, through the appropriation of genre, or use of genre ‘fractals’ to both enrich and distinguish Marvel’s films from one another. I have explored the role of the star in relation to these paratextual and generic elements and, in particular, how the star’s ‘superhero body’ is utilised as yet another means of box-office appeal for both a mainstream and fan audience. The next chapter will discuss the perceived ‘minority’ of fans (women, people of colour, and so on) and their relation to superhero films, before unpacking the creative role of the director within this industry in order explicate how this genre can be diversified and maintain longevity.

Chapter Three: The Men (& Occasional Person of Colour/Woman) Behind the Mask – Authorship in the Superhero Genre

3.1 – Introduction

Central to Marvel's, and indeed the success of the Hollywood blockbuster franchise, is the cycle of appropriation and revitalisation that is so central and integral to these films' production. Marvel are undoubtedly at the forefront of their field, leading the charge in their development of their transmedia franchise. The significant role of this cycle can be linked to the Marvel franchise's industrial and creative malleability. Through the support of fans in amplifying the authenticity of their adaptations, Marvel Studios' Cinematic Universe has flourished over the past eight years. Over this period, they have demonstrated not only their ability but also their willingness to change and adapt their films' creative directions in response to fan, critical, and box office reception. Thus far, Marvel has been able to utilise a variety of elements to their commercial and creative advantage, including transmedia storytelling, genre appropriation and the use of paratexts in the promotion of their films and stars. Further, as I discussed in the previous chapter, they have also utilised a form of idealised masculinity, particularly through their predominantly white, heterosexual characters, to update their portrayal of action heroes. Marvel's superheroes have built upon the heroic figures that preceded them in action cinema, such as Yvonne Tasker's 'hard bodies' and 'wise guys', and the so-called 'New Man' that emerged during the 1990s, allowing them to develop a coherent and socially progressive action hero that can appeal to as many demographics as possible within a mainstream film setting.

In this chapter, I will continue my discussion of Marvel's promotional strategies in relation to their fans by expanding further on the representation of gender in the MCU. In doing so, I explore how Marvel have responded, and may respond in future, to the changing demographics amongst fans and the creative changes that result from a diversifying audience. I will explain how the perceived outliers of fan communities – people of colour and women –

are steadily entering the territory of the white, male fan community who are assumed to represent the majority of fans. I will then discuss the director's role within the superhero genre (as exemplified by the MCU), and how theories of authorship need to be updated in order to explain Marvel's hiring and marketing strategies in relation to their diversifying audiences. Further, by looking at the director's role, I will ascertain not only how these figures reflect the strengths and weaknesses (particularly in terms of creativity) of Marvel, but by extension, the superhero genre. I will then close my argument with a discussion of where the superhero genre, and franchises like the MCU, can go from here and assess the sustainability of this increasingly saturated market.

3.2 – “Is it a man? Are they white? No, it's the rest of the fandom!” – Race and Gender in the Superhero Genre

As discussed in 2.6, Marvel has successfully utilised different action hero types, such as the 'hard body', to varying degrees across their cinematic superhero protagonists. By doing this, Marvel were able to develop an idealised masculine superhero template, capable of appealing to a range of demographics while also responding to contemporary social critiques of masculinity. In his essay “Some Assembly Required: Joss Whedon's Bridging of Masculinities in Marvel Films' *The Avengers*” (2016), Derek S. McGrath explores the gender roles of the characters in *The Avengers* through a postfeminist (understood as third-wave feminist) lens, emphasising and expanding on the arguments posited in Chapter Two. Specifically, McGrath argues that Whedon's *The Avengers* “continues the work that ... earlier [MCU] films accomplished, in varying degrees, at providing representations of postfeminist masculinity as multivalent rather than one-dimensional (p.135). For McGrath, the Avengers differ from previous 'team-ups' seen in earlier action film franchises such as the *Lethal Weapon* (1987-1998) and *Batman* (1989-1997) franchises, as the Avengers are more collaborative than hierarchical in their inter-personal relationships. Accordingly, McGrath argues that through “this lack of hierarchy between characters, [and] varied masculine styles (including that of

female characters), Whedon presents a thoroughly heterosocial ensemble” (p.136). Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer state, “[s]uperhero films are centrally concerned with concepts of masculinity” (Kord and Krimmer, p.109), yet, within a postfeminist discourse, these films can reflect forms of masculinity that resist conventional masculine-feminine boundaries. Essentially, through their teamwork, the Avengers demonstrate a more fluid approach to masculinity, in that they are a model of heterosocial collaborative masculinity, which contrasts with the hyper-masculinity often associated with their contemporaries in the genre.

While acknowledging the polysemy of these characters, as I cautioned in the previous chapter, the Avengers are not wholly removed from ideals of hyper-masculinity – several of Marvel’s superheroes are quite literally the embodiment of idealised Western masculinity. McGrath acknowledges these points, highlighting the way in which the male gaze is directed at Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow’s (Scarlett Johansson) form-fitting costume or Pepper Potts’ (Gwyneth Paltrow) short shorts. Yet, despite this gaze, McGrath also emphasises the way in which Steve Rogers, Clint Barton/Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner), and Bruce Banner/Hulk’s (Mark Ruffalo) bodies are all on display in various states of undress (as evidenced in the images included in Chapter Two). Consequently, McGrath argues that “*The Avengers* engages in larger discussions about performativity, refusing to present any character as wholly comfortable with their gendering” (2016, p.138) and that the way in which Whedon negotiates gender in *The Avengers* need not be wholly traditional nor wholly progressive (Jowett, 2005). McGrath applies this complex reading of gender to the Avengers’ de-facto leaders, Rogers and Stark. Rogers, he argues, is presented as virginally pure, personifying an idealised American spirit of uncompromising, naïve innocence, highlighted by both his strong moral code and his evident inexperience at romancing women (2016, p.140). Although he is pessimistic that “the world hasn’t changed” (*The Avengers*), Rogers finds his relative innocence to be compatible with twenty-first century notions of ‘new masculinity’, “combining both ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’

characteristics toward an understanding of gender equality and refutation of outdated male chauvinism” (Jowett, 2005, p.124). Stark, meanwhile, slides more comfortably into the role of the hyper-masculine, emotionally isolated white male hero (albeit one whose narcissism and vanity lead to metrosexual styling and presentation). Despite his ‘lone wolf’ status, Stark’s character arc across the *Iron Man* trilogy, and *The Avengers*, comprises an emotional journey where he learns that he does not have to be alone, and that contrary to his beliefs, emotional closeness or dependence are not necessarily emasculating. Through his engagement with the Avengers, Stark experiences the loss of an ally, practising more collaborative teamwork in order to avenge that death, ultimately discovering a deeper purpose to his role as a hero, through self-sacrifice (McGrath, 2016, p.140). In summary, Stark and Rogers, while conforming to ideal forms of masculinity also offer subversions of those qualities through their embodiment of differing forms of emotional vulnerability.

McGrath also explores the comparatively minor characters among the Avengers, specifically Barton and Romanoff, in terms of the gender roles they embody. Through the juxtaposition of these characters in *The Avengers*, McGrath argues that the conventional masculine-feminine gender binary is disrupted, with each character assuming a combination of masculine and feminine traits that are untraditionally associated with their (respective) gender (p.143). For McGrath, while Barton is “more parental, even motherly, despite his stoic demeanour, Romanoff assumes more masculine qualities and even masculine symbols that defy attempts by villains to refer to her as a weak woman” (ibid.). Expanding on this latter point, he refers to the characters’ respective choices of weaponry: among the range of weapons Romanoff employs in *The Avengers*, she notably uses guns and during the film’s climax, Loki’s (phallic) staff. Barton on the other hand, is feminised through his reliance on a bow and arrow, which, coincidentally, was the weapon of choice for the female protagonists of *The Hunger Games* and *Brave*, both of which were released in 2012, alongside *The Avengers*. Whedon presents these

characters with complex gendering, each having personalities that do not fit neatly into social definitions of masculinity or femininity. McGrath contends, “Romanoff’s relationship with Barton actually reveals an empowered female position, as she stands as his physical and mental superior” (p.144) because, during the film, she defeats Barton in a physical confrontation and manipulates Loki, the supposed ‘trickster god’ during an interrogation. Although both Romanoff and fellow female S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, Maria Hill (Cobie Smulders), are subordinate to either Nick Fury or Rogers, they both demonstrate independence, physical capabilities, and in the case of Hill, openly question their superiors. This serves to demonstrate how the Avengers can be seen through a postfeminist lens that contests gender binaries and equality based on sameness and elaborates the evolution of superhero gendering based on earlier discussions of hyper-masculinity in the superhero genre.

However, although Marvel has taken some steps towards progress, they still reinforce gender binaries and conventional gender traits in their merchandising. From an industrial standpoint, Black Widow is given different franchise treatment through: a) the lack of a Black Widow toy in the *Avengers: Age of Ultron* merchandise (1.4), and b) the notable absence of a Black Widow solo film (at the time of writing). In regards to the former, Black Widow’s conspicuous absence (rectified later in 2015 to a selection of products, after *Age of Ultron*’s theatrical run) was seen as strange, particularly since the character had the third highest amount of screen-time by that point in the MCU, having appeared in *Iron Man 2*, *The Avengers*, *CA:TWS*, and *Age of Ultron*. Broadly, this merchandising exclusion was blamed by a former Marvel employee on sexism within the industry, in particular Marvel and Disney (Annie N. Mouse, 2015). Other industry experts point specifically to Ike Perlmutter whose involvement, from his business acumen to his reported racism and sexism, potentially explains the absence of a Black Widow solo film (1.4). Although the Phase 3 films were (mostly) announced prior to the corporate shake-up (1.4), their green-lighting demonstrates a conscientious shifts towards

increasing character diversity in the MCU, particularly with the announcement of *Black Panther* and *Captain Marvel*, the first African-American and female-led superhero films in the MCU. In addition, Marvel later announced the sequel to 2015's *Ant-Man* would be *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, with the latter character making her debut (as her superhero alter ego the Wasp) as a co-headliner for the film. These moves exemplify franchise, or industrial, revitalisation since, by incorporating calls for diversity into their creative model, they can generate further fan loyalty and media promotion, thereby revitalising Marvel's overall brand.

Marvel's problems with portraying diversity in their films highlights a broader shift in comic book and superhero fandoms. Although the assumption tends to be that comic book fandoms are made up predominantly of white, heterosexual males, new research suggests that this has changed dramatically in recent years. According to Brett Schenker, of the 24 million self-identified comic fans in the United States, 46.67% of that group were female (2015), while viewership of *The Avengers* was estimated to be 40% female (Finke, 2012). Furthermore, a survey of 2015 comic book conventions found that attendance at comic-cons was approximately 48.9% female, 48.7% male, and 2.4% non-binary/other (an option added for that year's survey) (Salkowitz, 2015). These results demonstrate the changing face of superhero films' fans. The increasing presence of female fans was evident during the online social media campaign for a Black Widow solo film, through the hashtags #WeWantWidow and #BlackWidowMovie, which were shared by Scarlett Johansson and her co-star Mark Ruffalo. Although Marvel, via Feige, initially expressed reluctance, they have since become more interested in the idea, publically at least, with Joss Whedon even saying he would happily return to direct it (Clymer, July 2016). Complaints about the lack of diversity in Marvel's films (I will turn to their television shows shortly) are valid despite these attempts to appeal to fans. As Erin Isley comments, there is still a problem with superheroines "almost always [being] reduced to tropes, such as 'damsels in distress' or 'femme fatale', and [they] are not given enough character to

make them seem realistic, but are instead oversexualised or objectified” (2015, p.2). Here, Isley points to Black Widow’s depiction on the battlefield: she consistently “has pristine hair and makeup, while her team mates are beaten, bloodied, sweaty, and dishevelled – as if suggesting that only men can handle a physical fight, or that even if a woman is able to fight, she must not appear to have been” (p.4). Isley does note that some steps have been taken, especially on the television front, with the release of *Jessica Jones* and *Agent Carter*, to portray complex female characters capable of violence. She concludes that “including women in the superhero genre is not enough ... [and] will not close the gap between superheroes and superheroines” (p.9) unless they are written in a manner that accurately depicts the ‘reality’ of these characters’ situations.

On the film front, as mentioned, Marvel are faring worse in terms of their ethnic and racial diversity in comparison to their televisual efforts. Phase 2 saw the respective inclusion and introduction of African-American characters Col. James Rhodes/War Machine (Terence Howard then Don Cheadle) and Sam Wilson/Falcon (Anthony Mackie). In addition, African-American actress, Zoë Saldana joined *GotG* as the green-skinned assassin, Gamora; a role which sees her, like Black Widow, fall into the aforementioned ‘femme fatale’ trope (and covers her skin so she is not presented as a black human character, therefore leaving the majority of human characters white). Phase 3 has seen the introduction of the African hero, Black Panther, whose solo film will reportedly feature a cast of approximately 90% African and African-American actors (Freeman, 2016). Furthermore, as mentioned, the Phase 3 films will introduce female superheroes the Wasp and Captain Marvel. While this demonstrates improvement on the part of Marvel Studios, Marvel Television, by comparison, are leading the way on the diversity front. Their first show *AoS* has consistently featured three women in its core cast (two of whom are Asian-American) as well as an African-American character. *AoS*’ third season also welcomed two recurring Hispanic characters, Elene ‘Yo-Yo’ Rodriguez (who recently led her own digital series, *AoS: Slingshot*) and Joey Gutierrez, the latter of whom was one of Marvel

(Television's) first openly gay characters. Furthermore, *Agent Carter* and *Jessica Jones* were Marvel's first properties to be female-led, with the latter achieving critical acclaim. *Jessica Jones* also featured Carrie-Anne Moss as the 'genderswapped', lesbian Jeri Hogarth. In the comics, the character of Hogarth was originally Jeryn, not Jeri. The producers' decision to 'swap' the character's gender has enabled the MCU to welcome a prominent LGBT character into its fold. In addition, Marvel's other Netflix shows, *Daredevil* and *Luke Cage* feature strong female characters, particularly Rosario Dawson's Claire Temple, Deborah Ann Wolf's Karen Page, Simone Missick's Misty Knight, and Alfre Woodard as Mariah Dillard. The latter of these shows, *Luke Cage*, was Marvel's first property to be led by an African-American superhero, also featuring a predominantly African-American cast. Marvel Television have taken greater strides in terms of diversifying its characters and revitalising the brand for a television audience.

Although it was *Daredevil* that paved the path for Marvel's New York-based Netflix shows, *Jessica Jones* and *Luke Cage* are the shows that have made the effort to reflect the contemporary diversity of the city, and indeed some of the underlying issues within that society surrounding the law and justice, gender, and race. It is interesting to note how their characters remain firmly on the outskirts of the MCU. This of course, is partially due to the lack of connectivity discussed in 1.4, but also due to the Netflix shows' conscious effort to convey the MCU's 'street level' and the heroes and villains who occupy this space. This positioning of the heroes on the outskirts of film's diegetic worlds offer a critical perspective on power and violence that the films of the MCU would most likely struggle to convey for a mainstream audience. In her analysis of *Jessica Jones*, Eva M. Thury describes her as a trickster figure, "a liminal creature ... inhabiting the threshold between two worlds and shaking them up in some fashion ... [Jones is] a super-powered woman living on the outskirts of the world of (costumed) superheroes and choosing not to join them" (2016, p.2). For Thury, Jones prefers operating on her own terms, not taking herself too seriously but this self-imposed social positioning also

allows her to negotiate the trauma of her abduction and objectification by the first season's villain Kilgrave (David Tennant). Jones' job as a Private Investigator (PI) provides a means through which her trickster-like inventiveness is utilised, such as hiding her superhuman strength and feigning vulnerability. Kilgrave's role as a (sexual) predator and Jones' efforts to stop him, and by extension confront her demons, received praise from critics as an empathetic approach to issues surrounding violence, sexual assault and PTSD. *Luke Cage* offers a different perspective on violence and vulnerability, conveying the struggles faced by African-Americans in contemporary North America. Arguably, the show did not confront social issues as effectively as *Jessica Jones*, but does convey the effort being put into making these 'street-level' shows realistic (and not in the 'dark and gritty' sense à la Nolan's *Batman* trilogy which for the most, do not explicitly address sexism or racism). In the age of the Black Lives Matter movement, the idea of a "bulletproof black man", as African-American series creator Cheo Hodari Coker puts it (Child, September 2016), has never been more pertinent. The MCU, then, is slowly but surely taking steps to increase diversity across their products, reflecting the rapidly changing fan demographics that support them and helping to sustain media and critical interest in their properties.

3.3 – Suit Up! Finding the Right Auteur for the Job

If it is important for Marvel's film and television shows to convey an increased level of character diversity then, this must also be reflected on an industrial level, specifically, on the production side. As mentioned, *Jessica Jones* and *Luke Cage*'s showrunners are a woman (Melissa Rosenberg) and an African-American man respectively, signalling again, Marvel's efforts to find a creative author that will bring fidelity to the properties. Marvel's recent choices in film directors reflect this strategy. Recently, they have hired Māori director Taika Waititi for *Thor: Ragnarok*, and African-American Ryan Coogler to direct their first black superhero film, *Black Panther*. Likewise, in various interviews, Marvel has expressed the importance of hiring a female director for their upcoming and first female-led entry into the MCU, *Captain Marvel*.

Specifically, Feige commented that “Having a female director at the helm to tell the story of a woman who is also our most powerful hero by far is very important to us” (Kevin Feige as cited in Gallagher, 2016). Although of the two directors mentioned thus far, only Waititi has undergone production of their film, Marvel’s inclusiveness of non-white directors has been demonstrated already. Filmed in Australia, Waititi made a point of hiring Aboriginal crewmembers for *Thor: Ragnarok*, explaining that it was because he (and Marvel) had a responsibility to the indigenous people of Australia to give back to their communities, particularly those who have fewer opportunities (Taika Waititi as cited in Siede, 2016). While this was Waititi’s idea, Marvel were reportedly ‘fully on-board’ with it, leading to the contracting of an Aboriginal company to supply water to the production, eight Aboriginal people being hired (including a cinematographer and actor). Furthermore, several other Aboriginal people were brought on as ‘attachments’, a role akin to a paid internship and brought about by an initiative of Screen Australia’s Indigenous Department. Waititi’s film does not appear to be alone in this step towards inclusivity, as shown by the aforementioned example of *Black Panther*’s cast. Likewise, Chris Hemsworth’s tweet with Waititi in support of the Standing Rock protests (see Chipman, 2016) – which includes an apology for dressing in red face six months earlier – further demonstrates the production’s commitment to Indigenous issues. Similar decisions have been made by DC in regards to their films, as shown with the hiring of Patty Jenkins to direct their upcoming DCEU entry, *Wonder Woman*.

Clearly, these decisions will generate good publicity for these companies, yet there are other creative and industrial factors at play here. As discussed in my Introduction, a key method of making a blockbuster critically viable is for a studio to raise their film above ‘low brow’ status by appealing to middlebrow expectations, negotiating a point between low and high culture. One such method of achieving this is by hiring certain actors to legitimise a film, for instance, Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellen for their various *X-Men* film appearances. Utilising

(and appropriating) genre can also achieve this, as was the case with *The Dark Knight*, often referred to as a crime-drama than superhero film which, in addition to the hiring of a prestige cast, helped Nolan elevate his film beyond the genre it occupied. A studio can also appeal to middlebrow expectations through a film's director. By hiring an African-American director for an African-led superhero film, for example, Marvel can frame the film's racial characters more 'authentically' for *Black Panther*, thereby creatively legitimising their film. Furthermore, Hollywood has shown a tendency in recent years to hire indie-oriented film directors, often with very few features under their belt, to direct these behemoths. This was the case with Ryan Coogler, the director for *Black Panther*, who previously completed only two films, *Fruitvale Station* (2013) and *Creed* (2015). Again, these practices create good publicity for Marvel, as these directors, whose backgrounds emphasise their artistic credibility, typically need to direct a number of smaller-budgeted films before being hired for a large blockbuster. Essentially, in hiring these directors, studios like Marvel can appropriate their inherent, or assumed, creativity, thereby appealing to middlebrow expectations whilst presenting opportunities to up-and-coming talent in the industry. These hiring strategies need to be discussed more thoroughly though, which I shall do in relation to theories of authorship in filmmaking.

The origins of authorship, as we understand it today, can be found in the Romantic literature of the 19th century, which caused a shift in the author's role from being responsible for their audience to having their own natural genius, imagination, and emotional spontaneity acknowledged by their audience (Abrams, 1980). Later, in the 1950s, this understanding of authorship was applied by the writers of *Cahiers du Cinéma* to film analysis, particularly through François Truffaut, who promoted a *politique des auteurs*, where films conveyed the 'personal stamp' of their director(s), who was seen as the auteur (author), and primary source of meaning behind their film(s) (Truffaut, 1954). This served as an extension of Alexandre Astruc's argument that "the filmmaker/author writes with his camera as a writer with his pen"

(Astruc, 1968 p. 22). These writings later led to Andrew Sarris' 'official' introduction of authorship in film as an academic theory. He argued that to be regarded as an auteur, a director must demonstrate technical competence, convey their personality and meaning through their film(s), the latter of which should be the result of the tension between their personality and the source material (1962, p.537-538). Sarris' theory faced sustained criticism, leading to the idea of auteur-structuralism, whereby a director's works are thematically structured by systems of binary oppositions. Within these oppositions, meaning can be found in the interplay between an overall structure (a director's filmography) and the individual films that comprise said structure (Wollen, 1985). Again, this theory was also criticised, particularly in regards to the notion of the director as the creator behind *every* aspect of filmmaking.

Subsequent to these criticisms emerged poststructuralist auteur theory, the terms of which were established by Roland Barthes' essay, "The Death of the Author" (1981). Barthes argues that by 'killing' the author (specifically, rejecting the author's position as sole authority over a text), they can be removed from their position as a theological authority over a text(s) meaning/s. The role of the author is essentially redundant in textual analysis, since giving a text an author places an inherent limit on the meaning(s) that the text can produce (p.212). If the author is removed from the production of meaning, there will be no 'secret', 'ultimate' meaning hidden within the text; instead, the onus to produce meaning falls onto the reader. Barthes proposes a new figure, the 'scriptor' to replace the author. The scriptor acts more as an editor and recycler of meaning than creator in the traditional sense, as the scriptor knows that the text can only draw on pre-existing texts in an "immense dictionary ... that can no know halt ... the book itself is only a tissue of signs an imitation that is lost, instantly deferred" (p. 212). In essence, he is arguing that meaning exists as an 'echo', always reflecting and referring to another interpretation. Here, there is no certainty of a source, origin, truth or ultimate explanation. For Barthes then, the author serves a cultural function as opposed to being a

universal absolute. Michel Foucault agrees and expands on this, arguing that the author's "presence is [only] functional in that it serves as a means of classification" (1980, p.284) whose role is decided by their cultural context. Foucault argues that, in a contemporary society, an author's main purpose is to provide a label, a method of categorising and differentiating texts from one another.

For Foucault, the 'author-function' serves bourgeois, capitalist notions of art through the identification of a creator's work as "a form of property ... a possession caught in a circuit of property values" (p.285). Essentially, this approach provides an author with a 'stamp' of sorts, a guarantee of status that they can profit from. Rather than auto-generated by a sole individual then, authorship is constituted through systems of ownership, commodification, classification and legitimation. Poststructuralist notions of authorship therefore reject the historical figure of the author as the authority over textual construction due to the limits this imposes on the production and reception of meaning. Instead, texts should be interpreted on multiple levels, from which the author is one discursive or semiotic code among many. Applied to films, a poststructuralist approach to authorship also considers inter-textuality in filmic meaning, for example by emphasising how our understanding of context (previous films we have seen) informs how we produce meaning in relation to a specific film experience. Furthermore, by opening up film analyses to multiple levels of meaning-making, the various aspects of film production (involving key creative personnel other than the director) are taken into account in the construction of textual meaning. By acknowledging the inter-textual and collaborative process of meaning-making, the auteur-director is removed from their previous position as a supposedly theologically authoritative figure to one source of meaning among a larger group of people and filmic codes.

As discussed in my Introduction, the success of the auteur-directors of the ‘New Hollywood’ era inadvertently shaped the industry of contemporary Hollywood, particularly through the creation and development of what we now know as the Hollywood blockbuster. That is, an inherently creative interpretation of film production unintentionally facilitated the most commercial form of filmmaking today. Nevertheless, despite this crucial role in the blockbuster’s development, the auteur’s creative and economic roles have changed greatly. The success of the auteurs in the New Hollywood enabled changes in creative practices that allowed for the current positioning of directors in blockbuster production, particularly the need for studios to engage with the younger generation and so-called ‘cinephiles’. However, the peak of the auteurs’ success that was the blockbuster also proved to be their undoing. These big-budget films were aimed at mass audiences, and consequently, there was no longer a need to target particular demographics, and therefore no need for the auteurs’ creativity once a formula for revitalisation had been found. Nevertheless, the need for ‘brand recognition’ in studio marketing remains, and as such, the “American auteurs are, often and largely, defined by their commercial status and ability to promote a film, sometimes regardless of its distinction” (Corrigan, 2003, p.86). Timothy Corrigan’s argument is of particular relevance, considering that since “its inception, auteurism has been bound up with changes in industrial desires, technological opportunities and marketing strategies” (p.83). In a contemporary film environment, the auteur-director, the figure responsible for, at the very least, unifying a film’s creative elements, continues to retain an important role within Hollywood production and marketing, albeit a comparatively marginalised one in terms of creative control. In my analysis of auteurs, I am not suggesting their inherent creativity brought about change, but rather, that they signify a culturally and economically valuable form of authenticity that is useful for studios like Marvel.

The integration of the auteur into industrial studio practices has been demonstrated through the Hollywood blockbuster, particularly in the superhero film. One notable early example would be Tim Burton's *Batman*, which clearly demonstrates horizontal integration and synergy. The film was a product of studio conglomeration through Warner Bros. merging with Time Inc. The terms 'horizontal integration' and 'synergy' broadly refer to the involvement of blockbuster films, for example, in the production and distribution of a chain of inter-related cultural products, including books, television shows, music, clothing, toys and games, as well as tie-ins and merchandising arrangements with an entire array of consumer goods. For Richard Maltby, "in these aspects of their economic organisation, [films] have moved ever closer to the heavily commodified aesthetic of broadcasting, by which the viewer is led not into a work for consideration of its thematic and ideological elements, but away from the text itself into those commercial frames that surround it" (1998, p.27). Burton's *Batman* was notable for its flagrant use of product placement, for instance in the scene where Prince's "Party Man" (available on the soundtrack) was played from a boom box by the Joker. Regardless of criticism though, the film made approximately \$1 billion from its merchandise. The way in which the blockbuster and, by extension, the superhero film, is bound up in Hollywood's industrial desires is important for understanding the auteur's current role within this context. Understood from the poststructuralist approach, authorship continues to position the auteur as one source among many in a film's production of meaning. My argument here is that the auteur's creative and industrial position allows them to personify the cycle of appropriation and revitalisation that I have put forward as being a definitive and significant aspect of the Hollywood blockbuster.

In order to illustrate this cycle, I turn to Will Brooker's discussion of Christopher Nolan's transition from indie-oriented director to bona fide blockbuster-auteur. In his chapter "The Nolan Function: Authorship" (2012), Brooker discusses Nolan's transition by analysing how the director was presented during the marketing, and in reviews of, *Batman Begins*,

Inception (2010), and *The Dark Knight*. In the marketing for *Batman Begins*, Nolan was all but ignored in the film's promotion, which relied more on the 'Batman' brand and its star power. Brooker notes Nolan was "presented as a new kid, a smart guy and a fresh pair of eyes, but certainly not as bankable guarantor of value in this project" (p.12). References to Nolan's 'personal stamp' typically looked to his earlier films rather than his biography (but only nine out of twenty-seven reviews, one third, referred to Nolan's previous features). From this analysis of the paratexts surrounding *Batman Begins*, we can note here "the key finding that when the individual author carries comparatively little voice in the discourse around a film, and has not yet become a commercially powerful 'function', other aspects rise in volume to fill that space" (p.17). Brooker refers specifically to critics emphasising Tim Burton and Joel Schumacher over Nolan in reviews for the film. Here, Barthes' idea of the auteur as editor is useful for understanding this early marketing, with Nolan positioned as less of an individual creator, and more as an editor of pre-existing meanings, and recycler of previous texts surrounding Batman. Instead of being regarded as an auteur, 'Nolan' was simply a function that guaranteed 'fidelity' and 'realism' in his interpretation of the Batman mythology, the former of which I have established is key to securing fans' engagement and amplification of comic book adaptations. At this point then, Nolan is a "distinct but faint signal ... almost drowned by the noise of other competing discourses ... The sheer scale of the 66 year mythos, at this stage, overwhelms the relatively unknown director" (p.25).

This changed dramatically however, after the release of Nolan's subsequent feature, *The Prestige* (2006), which helped to further cement Nolan's reputation as a modern auteur, outside of the *Batman* franchise. As a result, Brooker comments, "in the absence of other associations, Nolan's name began to come into its own as a signifier of quality and a guarantor of certain values: as a function, in Foucault's terminology" (p.26). The paratexts surrounding *The Dark Knight*, while still emphasising its star power and the 'Batman' brand, now presented Nolan as

a stronger authorial presence in line with the cultural and artistic expectations of an auteur. To this end, Nolan was now increasingly associated with filmic themes of psychological complexity and a cerebral style of storytelling. For Brooker, “‘Nolan’ has, by this point, become a distinct, recognisable term, carrying an agreed set of traits: a ‘function’ with enough presence to hold its own in this dynamic of meanings, and strong enough to establish a perceived tension between the impulses of authorial style and the generic demands of a Batman narrative” (p.33). In Nolan’s role, we can recognise neither the ‘death’ of the conventional author, as Barthes expressed, nor its triumphant return. Instead it has developed into “a different type of creative authorship: from the author as sole provider of meaning to the scriptor as, in Barthes’ words, ‘a compiler or arranger of pre-existing possibilities within the language system’, a role that involves the individual agency, creativity and vision through the editing process” (p.43). This understanding of authorship corresponds with Foucault’s idea of the author-function which, to Jonathan Gray, “allows a middle ground, wherein the author is denied outright authority, but exists as a discursive entity that channels and networks notions of value, identity, coherence, skill and unity” (2010, p.109). In regards to recent developments in blockbuster authorship, Nolan’s author-function demonstrates how a director can achieve this status in such a commercialised industry and, in turn, how his success would set the foundation for subsequent directors charged with the creation of blockbusters, particularly, superhero films.

3.4 – The Contemporary Auteur: Conveying Creativity in a pre-authored Comic Book World

In positioning himself as an auteur within blockbuster filmmaking, Nolan was also able to appeal to fans’ desire for fidelity and authenticity in his adaptations of Batman in his *Dark Knight* trilogy. I have established the vital role of the fan in ensuring the mainstream success of superhero films, using amplification (as discussed in 1.3) for example. Consequently, due to the important role of fans in the success of superhero films, Marvel, DC and their competitors have been increasingly engaging with fans with each film they produce, selling their franchises

as authentic representations of the source material. In doing so, they promote their directors as ‘fanboy auteurs’. Suzanne Scott describes this person as “a textual authority figure that appeals to fans [and so] is better positioned to engender fans’ trust, and thus has greater potential to channel fan interpretation and participation in ways that best suit the industry’s financial and ideological interests” (2013, p.43). Scott’s interpretation of these films’ directors is that they serve as an intermediary between the studios and the fans, due to their own (perceived) fannish background. Citing Travis Langley, Brundige notes that the authorial vision of filmmakers such as Joss Whedon or Christopher Nolan is satisfactory to fans since they do not “[demean] the characters and the importance of their lives” (Langley, 2012, p.260). Essentially, “the goal of the fanboy auteur is to harmonise fandom with studio filmmaking, creating a product that is marketable to a mass audience through its exemplary status to the fans of the property” (Brundige, 2015, p.31). Consequently, the fanboy auteur reflects the ongoing centrality of the auteur to films as creative and commercial products. Thomas Elsaesser argues for instance that in contemporary cinema, the auteur’s name signifies quality and authenticity. For Elsaesser, the auteur is a “seal of endorsement on an industrial product” (1995, p.12). Therefore, contemporary approaches to auteurism account for the modern auteur’s role as a creative and commercial legitimiser, a role that is clearly expressed through the fanboy auteur. The fanboy auteur arguably serves as a means of classification through legitimisation, exemplifying poststructuralist accounts of the auteur as being *a* source of meaning, as opposed to *the* source. To this end, Brundige comments, “Scott largely discusses the fanboy auteur as marketing construction and Jenkins ascribes a much greater level of altruistic involvement” to this figure (2015, p.32). Like Brundige, I would argue that the fanboy auteur’s role lies in the middle of Scott and Jenkins’ definitions. Although the fanboy auteur does ultimately function as another marketing tool in the superhero film production process, they also bring their own unique ‘vision’ to the films they are assigned to direct whilst also avoiding becoming the primary source of meaning with respect to the superhero’s wider textual origins and branding.

In his work, Brundige highlights Christopher Nolan and Joss Whedon as prime examples of the fanboy auteur, albeit two variations of the figure. Brundige comments that, the ‘seal of endorsement’ Elsaesser describes, legitimises Whedon and Nolan’s films for Marvel and DC respectively (1995, p.33). As with most who tackle the superhero genre, Whedon and Nolan are not exceptional enough to deviate significantly from their respective properties’ pre-existing canon, resulting in these filmmakers being forced to focus less on creating original work, and more on adaptation. Although Whedon and Nolan both work as writers and directors for their films, as fanboy auteurs their authority lies with their choice of source material to draw influence from. In adapting the characters, worlds and stories of these superhero mythologies, these fanboy auteurs exercise what authority they do possess in order to appeal to the fans the studios are looking to mobilise in support of the adaptations. According to Brundige, “for these figures to be accepted by ... fans, there has to be some relation between the established ‘world view’ or ‘artistic vision’ of the fanboy auteur and the ‘essential shared traits’ of the story and characters” (2015, p.35). So, despite not being able to create original characters, for example, Whedon and Nolan can still incorporate them in such a way that it is faithful to the overarching ‘vision’ attributed to their previous work whilst simultaneously remaining faithful to the superhero texts that they borrow from. Nolan’s work on the *Dark Knight* Trilogy (*Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight*, and *The Dark Knight Rises*) reflects his other work in *Memento* (2000), *The Prestige* and *Inception*. These films, to varying degrees, utilise elements of the crime and mystery genres, similar to the noir and detective elements often seen in iconic Batman stories including Frank Miller’s *Batman: Year One* (1987) and Alan Moore’s *The Killing Joke* (1988). Likewise, Whedon’s earlier work as the creator of cult science-fiction and fantasy television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003) and the short-lived *Firefly* (2002-2003), demonstrated not only his expertise in the aforementioned genres, but his preference for bringing together a motley group of outcasts – ‘loners’ if you will – who form a platonic family

or team. It was this aspect of his work in particular that led to many fans' support of Whedon as the prime choice for bringing together the titular characters of *The Avengers* (see Bergamini, 2010).

However, even though they were able to bring their creative expertise to the table, the two prominent fanboy auteurs' names also became reliable brands of their own – another part of their studios' marketing machine. In relation to the MCU, Leora Hadas argues that Whedon's role within the transmedia franchise contributes further to the commodification of the auteur-director. She argues that transmedia storytelling provides another means of branding for companies, for instance, the inclusion of Marvel's logo before all of their films, television shows and short films (as discussed in 1.3). The logos contain fragments of their comics and films in rapid motion, building upon the idea of maintaining consistency within a transmedia brand in order to retain a coherent overarching story-world. Hadas notes that Marvel has relied on the 'brand' of Joss Whedon's involvement in the MCU, or more specifically, his name, to reinforce the credibility of the projects produced within this universe (2014). This was evident in the initial marketing for *AoS.*, during which Marvel promoted Whedon's involvement, despite his role being minimal; in fact, it was Whedon's brother Jed, and Jed's wife Maurissa Tancharoen that worked as the show-runners. Regardless, Marvel used this positioning of Whedon's name to capitalise on the huge success of *The Avengers* and the storytelling elements associated with Whedon's work, namely, characterisation and teamwork, and a particular style of knowing pop-culture humour. Like Whedon, Nolan's name has been used in promotion for DC's answer to the MCU, the DCEU, notably in the marketing for Zack Snyder's *MoS* which he co-produced. Consequently, we see how, through their commodification, the fanboy auteur demonstrates the practical, commercial benefits of their position within the superhero film's production process. This demonstrates the fanboy auteur's creative and commercial potential within the superhero film's production process.

Within a blockbuster (and transmedia) franchise like the MCU, the auteur occupies an important position, providing an assurance of quality and authenticity for fans from a creative perspective. Meanwhile, from an industrial standpoint, the auteur provides a source of legitimisation for these franchises since their involvement has the potential to raise these films' middlebrow expectations. With these factors in mind, we can consequently see how the auteur falls into the blockbuster's cycle of appropriation and revitalisation. The auteur's (assumed) creativity, and the influence this carries over fans (and by extension mainstream audiences) demonstrates another means by which studios like Marvel appropriate creative practices to their benefit. The appropriation of genre, as discussed in 2.4, and the use of actors' star personas in a paratextual relation to the source material (2.6), also evidences how revitalisation can be successfully maintained through experimenting with certain creative and production practices until a successful formula is found. In regards to this latter point, I have established some of the idealised physical expectations of the superhero characters' actors, which can be seen through the muscular, toned bodies of both male and female characters. In addition, the studio's casting choices, as well as their use of actors' star narratives (where relevant), convey a calculated use of paratexts and marketing. Over time, fan, and wider media, expectations of Marvel's stars have gradually solidified with their physical appearance (God forbid Chris Hemsworth or Chris Evans try to film a Marvel movie without their muscular physique!) and their interpersonal skills in promoting the films. In various forms of marketing (particularly press tours), these actors must be constantly and consistently amicable, presenting themselves as funny, sensitive and tough both on and off screen. For example, both Chris Evans and Jeremy Renner faced (justified) backlash when they called the Black Widow character 'a slut' in an interview (Ungerman, 2015). Both actors quickly issued official statements apologising for their insensitivity. Likewise, Whedon faced considerable criticism for his writing of Black Widow in *Age of Ultron*, in which she describes herself as a monster, presumably, for her inability to

have children. Although Whedon clarified, eighteen months later, that “she said she was a monster because she was an assassin” (Whedon as cited in Armitage, 2016), there was considerable fan and online consensus that it was her infertility that was construed in the film as monstrous. Fortunately for Marvel, these criticisms of specific actors and directors are generally limited as these individuals ‘stick to the script’. These examples outline Marvel’s marketing strategy, as well as how their stars become commodified with their creative role(s), subsequently being appropriated by Marvel to both legitimise their products and minimise bad press.

Through their appropriation of the creativity and paratextuality of these stars and directors, studios such as Marvel are able to guard, in part, against franchise fatigue. As established in my Introduction, the very nature of a transmedia franchise prevents against franchise fatigue. As noted by Joseph P. Davies, “[f]ranchise fatigue has been greatly reduced by presenting the overarching story of the [Marvel Cinematic] universe across many different franchises simultaneously. Consumers do not need wait for a reboot or the next sequel in a single franchise, because a different franchise in the same universe will doubtless be releasing a new film or season in the down time” (2016, p.34). In relation to their choice of directors to suit their respective films’ generic and thematic content (as discussed in 3.2), Marvel successfully perform another form of revitalisation, namely, media interest in their franchise. The auteur-function, in the context of a blockbuster/transmedia franchise, serves as a brand, in that hiring a director for a particular film can generate media interest, thereby revitalising a property based on the creative vision or identity politics of the auteur. Subsequently their involvement can serve to enhance Marvel’s own brand. The hiring of directors with backgrounds in independent filmmaking like Jon Favreau and James Gunn, allows Marvel Studios to continue promoting themselves as the studio they started as, operating outside of the reach of the larger studios that dominate the industry, whilst enjoying all the advantages of their

parent company, Disney. Similarly, hiring Ryan Coogler to direct *Black Panther*, or a female director for *Captain Marvel*, allows Marvel to counter criticisms of their films' lack of diversity and showcase, at the very least, superficial efforts to practice industrial equity. By utilising their directors, and stars, in this way, Marvel are countering franchise fatigue by generating media and fan interest in their properties which then allows them to continue the expansion of the MCU.

In capitalising on the creative and commercial potential of these fanboy auteurs, major studios, particularly Marvel, have made a habit of hiring directors with backgrounds in low-budget, independent filmmaking. These filmmakers are typically hired after achieving critical and commercial success with their first film(s). Recent examples with Marvel include James Gunn, whose previous films such as *Slither* (2006) and *Super* (2010) preceded his successful entry into the MCU, *GotG*, and the Russo Brothers (Joe and Anthony), whose previous work included *Arrested Development* (2003-2006, 2013-present), *Community* (2009-2015), and *Welcome to Collinwood* (2002). Consequently, as well as lesser-known, indie-oriented directors, Marvel has also hired directors whose background fulfil the genre purposes of the films they helm. *The First Avenger* was directed by Joe Johnston, known for both his work in special effects (having worked on *Star Wars* and *Raiders of the Lost Ark*) and his ability to “take a period setting and make it feel modern without resorting to cynicism” (Goldberg, 2016), as seen in his previous films such as *The Rocketeer* (1991). Likewise, the directors of *Thor* and *Thor: The Dark World* each brought something with them from their previous work. Kenneth Branagh's pedigree in Shakespeare and costume dramas was suited to *Thor*'s generic homage to Greco-Roman films, while Alan Taylor had worked on *Game of Thrones* (2011-present) prior to *The Dark World*, lending the film a more overt fantasy tone. This trend of utilising more specific genre directors with indie backgrounds can be seen in the choices for upcoming films, such as Scott Derrickson, a supernatural horror director who was hired for Marvel's first foray

into magic, *Doctor Strange*. Marvel has therefore made this strategy a bona fide business success that has paid significant creative and commercial dividends.

Marvel's willingness to take a risk with these directors – and the rewards those risks have garnered – has likely legitimised the potential of this strategy to other studios. Over the 2010s, this trend has extended beyond the superhero genre, into the general practices of the blockbuster's industrial model. Now, this strategy of hiring directors with independent filmmaking backgrounds is steadily becoming a staple of the industry, being utilised by several major studios as a means of further legitimising their product(s). Other recent, non-superhero examples of this strategy include: Gareth Edwards, whose \$500,000 homemade science-fiction film, *Monsters* (2010) led to his direction of Warner Bros.' \$160 million *Godzilla* (2014) reboot and *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016); Marc Webb, who went from his romantic-comedy debut, *500 Days of Summer* (2009) to directing Sony's reboot, *The Amazing Spider-Man* and its sequel *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*; Rian Johnson, who will be directing *Star Wars Episode VIII* (2017) after his success with small budget films *Brick* (2005) and *Looper* (2012); and Colin Trevorrow, who, after his debut with *Safety Not Guaranteed* (2012) was hired to make *Jurassic World* (2015) and will be directing *Star Wars Episode IX* (2019). The budgetary ascension of these directors is fascinating because of the way that studios appear to be relying on their creativity as a means of legitimising what is ultimately a commercial product to audiences. Furthermore, by hiring these directors so early in their filmmaking careers, it is assumed that studios can subsequently wield a greater degree of influence over them, due to their inexperience. Their creativity is used as another tool in blockbuster marketing since, in hiring them, studios demonstrate that they are taking a franchise seriously, from a creative standpoint, thereby appealing to middlebrow expectations. The need for 'brand recognition' is hugely important for the blockbuster, and by extension, directors who are increasingly defined by their commercial status and whether or not they can promote a film. The current industrial position

of auteurs is of particular relevance due to the way in which industrial desires are affecting the creative influence of directors within blockbuster production. In a contemporary film environment then, the auteur-director now serves as both a commodity and form of creative legitimisation, operating under a form of what I have chosen to refer to as ‘co-dependent authorship’.

3.5 – Finding the Middle Ground between Auteur and Studio: Co-Dependent Authorship

In developing the term ‘co-dependent authorship’, I am referring primarily to the current climate within the blockbuster’s industrial model, wherein both the filmmaker(s) and major studio(s) have to rely on each other out of necessity in what is ultimately a mutually beneficial relationship. It is important to acknowledge that when I use this term, I am not referring to a ‘toxic’ definition of ‘co-dependence’, in the sense of an addicted form of dependence. Instead, I use it as a way of referring to the directors’ indie-oriented backgrounds as well as the aforementioned cyclical relationship between the creative and commercial interests of the Hollywood blockbuster. I also acknowledge that in terms of authorship studies, and the relationship between auteurs and studios across film history, this term is not necessarily addressing a unique phenomenon or theory, as this relationship between studios and directors has been prominent throughout discussion of film authorship. This is in keeping with poststructuralist author theorists, such as Roland Barthes, whose arguments positioned the auteur as one code, or source of meaning, among many. Furthermore, the fanboy auteur is focused on superhero or comic book films. Although the term offers an important perspective on the contemporary auteur’s role within mainstream Hollywood, it also disarticulates the fanboy auteur from the *structure* of the industrial practices surrounding the blockbuster. Because of this structural role, the fanboy auteur does not identify the current trend occurring within the blockbuster’s contemporary industrial model. That is, in an effort to further

legitimise their product, major studios are hiring directors with backgrounds in indie (or genre) films and not necessarily because the directors themselves are fans of the source material (nor are they all male). In doing so, they hope to provide a similar brand of authenticity and fidelity associated with smaller, cult films much like the fanboy auteur's knowledge of comics makes them reliable caretakers of beloved properties. With co-dependent authorship, the goal of studios is to appeal to middlebrow expectations, thereby achieving critical and commercial success and treading the fine line between innovation and faithfulness that leads to the 'perfect' blockbuster. It is because the term fanboy auteur does not fully acknowledge the cyclical relationship between creative and commercial interests inherent to the Hollywood blockbuster or, more specifically, the superhero films on which the fanboy auteur focuses that I have chosen to refer to this trend as co-dependent authorship. Therefore, my use of the term offers a platform for discussion of this trend in contemporary cinematic authorship, allowing for ideas such as the fanboy auteur to be acknowledged and incorporated into an examination of creative commodification in the contemporary blockbuster.

Interestingly though, despite the apparent success of this model for co-dependent authorship, examined in relation to Nolan and Whedon, there have been prominent examples of this strategy failing in the past year. A previous example of co-dependent authorship via a fanboy auteur was Marc Webb, who failed to revitalise the Spider-Man franchise with his film *The Amazing Spider-Man* and its sequel, with both films performing poorly critically. This led to the franchise being taken back under Marvel's wing with Spider-Man and his associated characters returning to the fold of the MCU as part of a deal made between Marvel/Disney and Sony as discussed in 1.5. Likewise, Josh Trank, who first came to fame as a result of his debut feature, *Chronicle* (2012), was brought on to direct Fox's reboot of the *Fantastic Four* (2015), a film which bombed both critically and commercially. According to some reports, Trank struggled to cope with the pressure of directing such a large film, making him difficult to work

with, while other reports attributed studio interference as factoring into the film's failure, with Trank's budget being cut with little warning, rewrites being ordered and so on (see Shaw-Williams, 2015). Although Fox has repeated these standard forms of studio oversight in recent history, with its smash-hit *Deadpool* having \$6 million cut shortly before filming, it seems likely that the fault for an incoherent film lies with both Trank and the studio. Regardless, Trank's work here resulted in him missing the opportunity to direct one of the planned anthology films for the *Star Wars* films, although whether this was Trank's decision or the studio's remains unclear (see Masters, 2015). Finally, the most recent example of the underlying risks of an imbalanced co-authorship is Zack Snyder's direction of the DCEU. Although Snyder is not an indie-oriented director like other filmmakers discussed earlier (which demonstrates why the term fanboy auteur is inappropriate to discuss blockbuster production practices at large), he does exemplify the creative auteur potential to provide authenticity and fidelity in his adaptations since his films largely borrow from already established source material but retain a distinct directorial style and look. This can be seen in his previous comic book adaptations, *300*, *Watchmen* (2009) and *MoS*, which, although somewhat divisively received among fans and critics, were at the very least visually faithful to their source material (see Ito, 2006, Kolan, 2009, and Outlaw, 2013).

His latest entry into the DCEU, *BvS*, was far from a critical success. As I pointed out earlier, this film received at best mixed reviews and divided audiences and fans. Many pointed to his grim interpretation of the titular characters, particularly the usually optimistic Clark Kent/Superman (Henry Cavill), who was reduced to scowling and brooding, while the character of Bruce Wayne/Batman (Ben Affleck), despite being a point of praise for the film (Child, March 2016), was considered by fans to have been severely compromised. This is due to the creative decision that saw Batman brand and even *kill* criminals; which is consistent with the stylistic violence of Snyder's films but contrary to the source material for Batman's character.

This was problematic, as Batman's reasons for killing were poorly explained, but, more importantly, the character's crime-fighting code has been centred on an anti-killing mantra, which supposedly separates him from the criminals he fights. In terms of world-building, this added dimension to Batman's modus operandi was seen by fans to have the potential to weaken any future conflict between Affleck's Batman and Jared Leto's Joker (who appears in *Suicide Squad*), since the characters' conflict often revolves around Batman's 'one rule'. This failure to meet fans' expectations and provide a faithful adaptation of the source material and characters (in this case, Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*) is seen as one of the primary reasons for *BvS*' critical failures (see Kevin Smith as cited in Child, March 2016). I noted earlier that the film featured DC Comics' Trinity (Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman) and this unique introduction of the latter (for the first time in film) alongside the former should have at least crossed the \$1 billion mark at the box office. This suggests that Snyder did not realise the commercial potential of this film as a crossover event in the same manner as the MCU's *Avengers* films. These examples highlight the underlying risks when co-dependent authorship is imbalanced, in that a blockbuster is more likely to fail to meet fans' expectations – and by proxy, those of mainstream audiences – if the film tilts in favour of either the auteur-director or the studio during the production process.

3.6 – Conclusion

I have argued that the superhero film has helped develop the contemporary auteur's creative and commercial function, allowing them to achieve success within the context of blockbuster filmmaking. However, although this position offers opportunities for success and large-scale filmmaking to the directors in question, this success does have a catch. Directors' creativity is inherently limited by the franchise in which they operate, they are there to *adapt* not *create* original content and, as shown with Nolan, they will always be overshadowed by the brand they work under, regardless of their own personal achievements. Yet, despite these restrictions, the auteur-director plays a crucial role in the continuing success of blockbuster franchises through

the creativity they bring to their respective projects, at least in terms of the cultural importance ascribed to the director. My notion of co-dependent authorship, offered as a means of mapping this industrial relationship between studio and creator, also highlights the risk contained in this strategy. Namely, that this conservative system openly benefits white, young male directors, whilst rarely providing opportunities to upcoming people of colour or female directors. Co-dependent authorship then, highlights how both parties are locked into the cycle of appropriation and revitalisation that defines the blockbuster (franchise). They both need one another, whether they like it, or not, and if this relationship becomes imbalanced, critical and/or commercial failure is the likely result.

Conclusion

Since the resurgence of the superhero film in the 2000s, the Hollywood blockbuster has undergone significant changes. Marvel Studios, who stand at the forefront of this genre, have successfully taken advantage of the media of the comic book, film and television to develop their Cinematic Universe into a unique franchise that has yet to encounter an equal – though not for lack of trying from their competitors – in terms of their consistent commercial and critical successes. They have built up a transmedia franchise that has managed to balance genre, paratexts, and authorship (on the part of both director(s) and studio), in a creative partnership that simultaneously appeals to and takes advantage of their loyal fans. Thanks to these factors, the superhero film now stands at the zenith of the filmmaking industry, the culmination of its own potential as a genre, combined with new storytelling strategies, has made it a perfect fit for the cycle of appropriation and revitalisation that defines the Hollywood blockbuster. Because of these aforementioned factors, I contend that the superhero genre can avoid franchise fatigue, if it remains faithful to the industrial and creative elements discussed throughout Chapters One, Two and Three. In this conclusion, I will discuss the sustainability of the MCU and by extension the superhero genre.

In Chapter One, I looked at how Marvel Studios achieved their current financial and critically successful position within the industry. In doing so, I reviewed Marvel's development as a company, from the highs and lows of the 1980s and 1990s, to the company's restructuring which led to the creation of Marvel Studios. I discussed how Marvel developed their Cinematic Universe gradually, with each successive film, before expanding into tie-in comic books, television and online content via Netflix. This medial expansion demonstrated the success of the MCU as a transmedia franchise in terms of *how* it was nurtured through inter-media relationships and how it was developed as a shared universe. This chapter then turned to the role of fans, as both critics who set the standards for faithful and authentic adaptation of the

films from the comic book source material, and their role in the marketing of films, particularly through the process of amplification. Next, I looked at criticisms of the MCU on a textual level, their poorly developed villains and lack of major character deaths, and industrially, the fallacy of their 'It's All Connected' slogan, inter-studio politics and the problems presented by Ike Perlmutter. Finally, this chapter examined how Sony, 20th Century Fox and Warner Bros./DC compare to Marvel, in relation to their respective superhero film franchises. Chapter One then, established how a transmedia franchise such as the MCU can be successfully developed, how it functions on both a macro- (within the film industry) and micro- (within the franchise itself) level, and how important fans are within this framework on both a creative and industrial level.

My second chapter was devoted to exploring the superhero genre, primarily through a paratextual lens. In this vein, the chapter looked into the role of paratexts, such as film trailers, in promoting these films, and the importance of hitting the right emotional and tonal notes in marketing a superhero film. Next, I looked at how paratexts operate in relation to fan-made time – specifically in terms of encouraging speculation through the announcement of film releases over several years – and how this fan engagement between film releases, in conjunction with amplification, reinforces the vital role of fans in the marketing of the superhero genre to both the devoted fans, and more casual mainstream audiences. The chapter then looked into the superhero genre and how it utilises genre appropriation on a macro- (through genre hybridity) and micro- (through genre fractals) scale. In analysing the use of genre in relation to superhero films, I established their versatile nature, and how they operate within the cycle of appropriation and revitalisation that defines the Hollywood blockbuster's conflicting creative and commercial interests. From here, I turned to an exploration of the paratextual role of the star and how lesser-known actors are being hired more often to perform the various leading superhero roles, allowing studios like Marvel (and their competitors) to appeal more to middlebrow expectations, and further legitimise their products by prioritising the creative direction of their

storytelling rather than appealing to mainstream audiences through celebrity actors. To close this chapter, I discussed the star's paratextual role from a more specific angle, namely, their 'superhero body'. Here, I highlighted how the contemporary superhero embodies idealised traits of the ever-developing action genre, particularly in terms of the necessity for these stars to have both the idealised physical body and emotional depth to update the cultural relevancy of the action star and further legitimate the genre. Overall, this chapter established how paratexts offer superhero films various means of gaining box-office appeal for both mainstream and fan audiences, whilst differentiating individual superhero films from one other, be it through tone or genre.

My third chapter continued the discussion presented in Chapter Two by exploring issues of race and gender in relation to both the superhero film (particularly the MCU) and the fan communities that support the wider genre. This in turn, highlighted how the mediation of diversity has begun to affect studios' selection and promotion of directors for particular projects. Here, I put forward my notion of co-dependent authorship as a way of mapping the industrial relationship between studio and creator (director(s)), whilst simultaneously highlighting the risks of this strategy when auteurism or studio control become imbalanced. Although this strategy provides opportunities for experience and potential success in blockbuster filmmaking, the directors' creativity is inherently limited by the franchise in which they operate. This is because they are ultimately there to *adapt* the comic book source material for film. They can rarely, if ever *create* original content, and will be consistently overshadowed by the brand they work under since studios also value fan perceptions of source fidelity and authenticity. Furthermore, although this strategy suggests an increase in diversity among filmmakers, it has exemplified the conservative system underlying blockbuster production, namely, that it openly benefits white, young male directors, whilst rarely providing opportunities to upcoming people of colour or female directors. As demonstrated throughout

my thesis then, although diversifying the hiring strategies for directors suggest progressive change, they ultimately solidify the idea that the Hollywood blockbuster – and by extension the superhero film – are locked into the cycle of appropriation and revitalisation that mobilises innovation only to the extent that it is economically viable. Once a formula for revitalisation is found, creative strategies of genre and storytelling appropriation as well as industrial practices of promotion and production remain limited until the blockbuster suffers fatigue. I have gestured towards the latter possibility in the discussion of the superhero genre throughout this thesis and now turn to a more precise and in-depth examination of the constitutive features of blockbuster and genre fatigue.

Of the various threats to the superhero genre, the most dominant is franchise fatigue. At the time of writing, Marvel Studios are planning to increase their production to three films per year, while competitors DC will release two per year, and 20th Century Fox continues to produce various entries into their *X-Men* franchise. This of course, does not even take into account the various television shows being produced by Marvel and DC respectively across ABC, Netflix, Fox, and the CW. It is franchise fatigue, whereby general audiences, fed up with the oversaturation of a particular franchise or genre, stop giving those films their support and which poses the greatest threat to the continuing success of superhero films. As discussed in Chapter One, the process of amplification, in which fans market superhero films (for example) to more casual mainstream audiences, demonstrates the small but important role of the fan in the success of these films. However, the key word here is ‘small’ as, even if fans continue to back these films, their numbers are simply not enough to sustain them. Of course, a truly worst-case scenario would be for the aforementioned studios to lose the support of said fans, which would most likely result from a failure(s) to remain faithful to the source material they are entrusted with adapting. Marvel must then ensure that their increasing production is matched by a

balanced approach to co-dependent authorship to maintain the authenticity and fidelity of their adaptations.

Historically, the Western and the Musical are well-known for being at the forefront of Classical Hollywood cinema and then falling out of audience favour alongside this era of filmmaking. At its height in the 1950s, the Western was the most popular film genre around, with the number of Western films produced outnumbering all other genres combined (Indick, 2008, p.2). Likewise, the Musical enjoyed a similar, if not quite as prominent level of popularity. These genres fell out of fashion, due to changes in the society around them. More specifically, changing (younger) audiences, who in addition to being put off by the oversaturation of the genres, were better versed in filmmaking than their comparatively casual elders. Over the ensuing decades, the Western and Musical suffered because they were viewed as a ‘product of their time’ and were unable to appropriate generic or storytelling elements to revitalise their viability. The Western had to contend with its nostalgic historical setting and its related negative aspects – like the poor treatment of people of colour, for example – that the genre had largely managed to ignore prior to the identity politics and movements of the latter part of the twentieth century. As the politics, and indeed demographics, of the United States has changed over time, so too, has the Western been forced to face its demons alongside it. The Musical, on the other hand, was simply restricted by the theatricality inherent to these films, with audiences generally associating the genre with the older, Classical Hollywood cinema. Yet, both genres have continued to endure, and occasionally, find great success, as has been the case recently with both *No Country for Old Men* (2007) and *La La Land* (2016). Subsequently, we can say that changes in audiences and their attitudes, which worked in conjunction with the oversaturation of these films in their contemporary industrial environment led to these genres falling out of popularity.

As discussed above, a genre's sustainability is arguably dependent on the context within which their films are produced. In turn, audiences' subjectivity will affect these films' cultural standing. Audience response is increasingly applicable in the age of the Internet and social media, which encourage intense, if not obsessive, discussion and speculation about upcoming and released projects. The immediate nature of online interactions has, as mentioned, allowed for the amplification of superhero productions by fans, but has also ensured that these films will often have numerous theories and expectations surrounding them before they have even been released. This is enhanced and exacerbated by the release schedules of the MCU, and now the DCEU, both of which have announced production schedules for several years in advance. A key difference between the two franchises though, is that Marvel has taken the time to 'earn' their franchise's status as a Cinematic Universe whereas DC, by comparison, have not, seeming all too eager to catch up to Marvel as quickly as possible and get on board the transmedia storytelling bandwagon. DC may well achieve transmedia success, but they are taking big risks in rushing their crossover event film that, thus far, has not fully met critical, fan and commercial expectations. From a franchise- or world-building perspective, DC are content to rush development, something that Marvel consciously tries to avoid by promoting the standalone films first.

This careful planning does not minimise the dangers of franchise fatigue. Essentially, the elements that brought down genres like the Western and the Musical have the potential to do the same on a more specific level, by lowering the popularity (and thereby marketability) of a franchise. For the sake of argument, I will focus broadly on three key franchises that began during the 1970-80s: *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones* and *The Terminator*. *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones* are both franchises that drew upon the serials of the 1930-40s, with *Star Wars* being influenced by the *Flash Gordon* serials (1936), and the *Indiana Jones* films serving as a homage to these serials. *The Terminator* (1984) meanwhile, combined elements of slasher horror with

science-fiction, incorporating them into an action film that paid relatively equal tribute to each genre, a narrative strategy that followed through into its sequel, *Terminator 2: Judgement Day*. All of these films highlighted the advantages of well-utilised special effects, particularly practical effects, although *Terminator 2* also demonstrated the potential of digital effects, or Computer-Generated-Imagery (CGI). Yet although these franchises were ahead of their time creatively, they have recently had entries that tarnished that reputation. *Star Wars* saw its infamous Prequel Trilogy (2001-2005), three highly anticipated and later, much contested entries into the franchise. Likewise, the 2000s saw the return of both *Indiana Jones* with *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008) and *Terminator* with *Terminator 3: Rise of the Machines* (2003) and *Terminator: Salvation* (2009). In the case of *Indiana Jones*, the latest entry failed to live up to expectations (see Berardinelli, 2008). This was due to a weak story, an overuse of CGI, and importantly, an attempt to break away from its own tradition by paying homage to the science-fiction B-films of the 1950s, whilst retaining the serial-based narrative structure that had worked so well for its predecessors. The latest *Terminator* films (which now includes the negatively received (see Morgenstern, 2015) *Terminator Genisys* [2015]) have shown a gradual slide into more spectacle-driven action. Furthermore, in doing so, they have allowed increasingly convoluted science-fiction elements to enter their films (especially in the latest film), muddying up the narratives in the process, and have almost completely moved away from the horror elements that so greatly enhanced the franchise's first two entries.

What these developments reveal in relation to franchise filmmaking is that it is important to retain a degree of consistency, be that from a storytelling or genre-based perspective. In the case of individual franchises then, their (perceived) failures can largely be attributed to a lack of authenticity or, more specifically, that they did not achieve fidelity to the source material, leading to their fans turning against them. This highlights the advantages of Marvel's consistency throughout the MCU and how their appeal to fans has not only succeeded

but been maintained over time. In terms of the superhero genre, Marvel's utilisation of genre fractals and hybridity, in addition to their use of paratexts and fans, has ensured that their individual entries into the MCU, as well as their 'crossover' *Avengers* films are able to retain that tone while still being individually different from one another. An interesting point here is that although the MCU, as a whole, is a franchise, it is comprised of several individual franchises, with each character's respective standalone films. Indeed, *The Avengers* could not have happened had it not been preceded by the introductory films of the Hulk, Captain America and Thor, as well as Iron Man's origin and sequel. This establishment of superhero characters through individual franchises presents one way in which a transmedia franchise, or shared universe of films, may have some degree of immunity to franchise fatigue. That said though, the wider superhero genre itself does not possess such immunity, and will always be susceptible to the flaws, such as oversaturation and/or audience disinterest, emphasised above.

As a trend within blockbuster filmmaking, the superhero genre is currently at the top of the mountain, so to speak, able to determine its own fate (particularly in Marvel's case). As far as sustainability is concerned, the genre's critics will struggle to attack it. Considering the Western managed to stay on top of the cinema food-chain for approximately fifty years, the superhero genre should feasibly be able to comfortably match, if not outlast it, with almost a century's worth of source material to draw upon, and new comic material being consistently published today. Arguably, so long as Marvel, for example, are producing content that is drawing positive critical reception, such as their Netflix shows, then even if one medium, say film, starts to falter, they can adjust accordingly whilst promoting the successful medium (television, for the sake of argument). In fact, Marvel's long-term thinking through planning and scheduling enable them to not only just adjust their plans according to the popular mood, but also go back to the drawing board completely. The Hollywood blockbuster is demonstrably capable of rebooting at any point, so there is nothing to stop Marvel rebooting their Cinematic

Universe into the MCU 2.0. The same applies to their stars, should one become too old for the role, or give it up, they can recast with minimal hesitation and to great effect, something they have done already when recasting the role of Bruce Banner/the Hulk from Edward Norton to Mark Ruffalo. In addition, as discussed, Marvel have also shown a knack for the appropriation of genres, creating films that effectively utilise genre hybridity (and fractals), showing an understanding of the necessity to differentiate their products from one another. Finally, while we are on the subject of Marvel Studios, they have shown a remarkable understanding of their fans, never failing to appreciate their support and worth to their brand. It is due to these various factors, which I have discussed throughout this thesis, that I posit that Marvel Studios are, relatively, ‘safe’ within the industry. So long as they stick to this path, and retain this careful level of forethought, their brand and franchise(s) should be able to avoid downfall from internal failures.

As I have mentioned, Marvel’s attention to detail is what arguably separates them from their competitors, almost all of whom are desperate to catch up to Marvel’s success. 20th Century Fox have done well with their *X-Men* franchise, both critically and commercially, yet have not managed to maintain the same level of consistency as Marvel. Likewise, Sony essentially fell on their own sword in their hurry to turn *The Amazing Spider-Man* into the next big ‘shared universe’ franchise, resulting in them working alongside Marvel. DC, have in turn, seen great successes – the *Dark Knight* Trilogy will always be a staple of the genre – but also produced some notable duds (*Green Lantern* for one). Marvel’s affinity for the creative individuals behind their projects is one factor that separates them from their competitors. I have discussed in Chapter Three how DC is seemingly emulating Marvel’s hiring strategy, exemplifying my notion of co-dependent authorship, which highlights the cycle of appropriation and revitalisation inherent to the Hollywood blockbuster. In the past few years, fans have been vocal in their disappointment of poor-quality superhero films, more often than

not crying ‘studio interference!’ and blaming the nameless corporate executives over the creative talent. Several films saw fans blaming the studio (based on rumours and speculation) for their failures to remain faithful to the source material, the character Deadpool, in particular (see Colbert, 2016). Examples include Fox and *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (see Billington, 2008), Sony and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (see Beaumont-Thomas, 2014), and more recently with DC and *Suicide Squad* (see Shaw-Williams, 2016). As I identified in Chapter One, creative authenticity and production fidelity is vital for the success of a superhero film and thus, it is imperative for studios to realise the commercial importance of meeting fans’ expectations.

Although Marvel have certainly been willing to take risks – for example, their loan to produce *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk* or announcing a *GotG* film when those characters were unknown even to most fans – they do not rush production decisions, while their competitors have. Audiences’ general confidence in Marvel and the media they produce can be attributed to Marvel’s own self-confidence in their creative and industrial process. Marvel Studios’ knowledge of the genre they operate in, and particularly of the characters and stories they are working with, is what has allowed them to occupy their current position and impressively, retain it. They have kept to the promise discussed in Chapter One, to do right by their fans and the source material, taking steps where necessary to ensure they do not break it. Yet, Marvel’s consistency, one could argue, also equates to mediocrity: they make decent (too-similar) films, but not necessarily *great* films. Here, I believe, is where DC has attempted to step up and surpass Marvel, but have unfortunately fallen short. DC’s grandiose efforts (such as *BvS*) have demonstrated an aesthetic interest in distinguishing themselves from the less serious Marvel, but their approach to characters and stories often fails to live up to fans’ expectations or understandings of the source material. Although DC could counteract Marvel’s consistent tone by allowing themselves more freedom tonally, whilst offering a more serious

(or at least alternative) take on the genre from Marvel, they do not seem to have a similar understanding of the market.

Likewise, Fox have found that a reflexive, self-aware take on the superhero genre, such as *Deadpool*, opens up a new approach to these films which, in turn, provides another method of countering franchise fatigue. That said, unlike Marvel, Fox have yet to demonstrate that same willingness to take risks on films like *Deadpool* since, as mentioned, they were reluctant to support it throughout production (3.5), never truly believing, or understanding, its potential. As a result, even though DC and Fox could challenge Marvel with their own consistently high-quality content, thereby forcing Marvel to raise the aesthetic bar for themselves, their priorities are seemingly on the commercial rather than creative benefits of a successful transmedia superhero franchise. Of course, the argument could be made that DC prioritise their creative talent to the detriment of their commercial success, as exemplified through Zack Snyder's seemingly unhindered influence over the DCEU. Their attempts at 'course corrections', however, suggest otherwise, as seen with *Suicide Squad*, which came across as a film caught, tonally, between Ayer's sombre vision and the studio's lighter, 'pop' version, corroborating various reports (see Shaw-Williams, 2016). Conversely, Marvel's mediocrity stems from their more balanced approach to co-dependent authorship, in that they recognise both the creative and commercial imperatives that must be met in order to build and sustain a franchise. Consequently, if the superhero genre fails it will be because an imbalance in the creative or commercial vision of the various franchises fail to stimulate fan and broader audience interest in an already oversaturated market.

Unfortunately, due to the vast array of superhero genre content that could have been discussed in my thesis, I have not been able to cover every available angle. Future work could explore the role of global audiences in my discussion of fan amplification and engagement,

particularly the emergence of the Chinese market and the effect this may have on the continued success of the genre. Relatedly, the wider geopolitical context of 9/11 and the War on Terror in enabling the success of the superhero genre, as both a reason for escapism and source of inspiration for films like *The Dark Knight* or *CA:TWS*, needs to be discussed in greater depth; I touched on it very briefly in Chapter Two. I have however, shown how the superhero genre has demonstrated not only the viability of transmedia storytelling in contemporary blockbuster production, but how and why such a franchise, in this instance the MCU, has been so successful and ground-breaking. As an exemplification of the Hollywood blockbuster, the superhero film can better help us to understand the cycle of appropriation and revitalisation and how it enables the continuing success of these films. Throughout this thesis I have endeavoured to demonstrate how Marvel have used transmedia storytelling, fans, paratexts, star power, genre, and authorship, to develop their Cinematic Universe so effectively. Their use of these creative and industrial elements in turn, emphasise the importance of the aforementioned cycle and its role in balancing the commercial and creative interests that are always underlying these films, and to a less overt extent, their ancillary media. The influence of this genre on the industry today is telling, particularly through the effect it is having on up-and-coming directors and calls for the industry to be more gender and racially diverse, as shown through my discussion of co-dependent authorship. The commercial need for studios to keep the properties through rebooting, industrial practices that rely on the success of the blockbuster as a staple of major studio production, and the co-dependent auteur relationship connected to creative innovation and differentiation, are all points that, I argue, highlight the necessity of discussing the role of the superhero genre within contemporary filmmaking and how it has influenced the wider industry. Overall, the cycle of appropriation and revitalisation inherent to the Hollywood blockbuster and by extension, the superhero film will likely determine the viability of this genre in the years to come. For now though, we will have to wait and see as, regardless of whether you love them or hate them, we are truly living in the age of the superhero.

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