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## "I Love You 3000": Marvel Studios, Fandom, and their Symbiotic Relationship

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“I Love You 3000”: Marvel Studios, Fandom, and Their Symbiotic Relationship

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of the Arts  
of Bard College

by  
Katrina Aronovsky

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2022



*To my father*





This paper is the culmination of a lifetime of movie-watching and would not be what it is today without many people in my life. First, I would like to thank my advisor, Ed Halter, for always encouraging me with this project, pointing me towards new directions, and providing his insight. Secondly, I thank my friends, both online and irl, who gave their listening ear to me and lifted me up when I needed it. Lastly, I want to thank my family, especially my parents for always supporting me in everything I do and without who this thesis would not exist.



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## Introduction

I wrote this paper not because I think Marvel movies are great. I did not think they were rich enough to call for a deeper analysis or theorize about any aspect of their filmmaking. But from my personal experiences, I knew that these films meant a great deal to a lot of people. One of those people was me. I considered myself a fan of Marvel Studios' movies from January 2018 until the beginning of 2020. I watched all the Marvel films on the day they were released, sometimes multiple times, if not on the Thursday night before. I read fan fiction\* and frequented hubs of Marvel fan activity like the subreddit R/Marvelstudios and the #marvel on Tumblr. I scrolled through Twitter for hours on end, waiting for news to break from various conventions where Marvel would have panels. It was not until I found another fandom\* that I enjoyed and Marvel did not release new media for over a year due to the COVID pandemic that my interest in Marvel waned and became more subdued. I still watched Marvel films as soon as I could, but it was more out of an effort to avoid spoilers than a burning desire to watch the films. But as time passed and I reflected on what I witnessed growing up — a time of mass fandom and record-breaking box office scores — I began asking myself, why now? What was so different about movies from the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) than from what had come before? Through the course of this paper, I have discovered that what makes MCU films unique is the numerous storylines that weave within all of the films in the MCU, creating a situation where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and the films would continue to be exhibited theatrically while making a large profit.

It is necessary to define the parameters of the media I am studying. “Marvel film” is a broad term that can apply to many different movies, but for the purpose of this paper, I am only

looking at films that are considered part of the MCU. I define the MCU by what several fandom wikis and online sources consider the MCU to be, as there is no written down text that defines it in black and white on Marvel's or Disney's website. Wikipedia defines it as "an American media franchise and shared universe centered on a series of superior films produced by Marvel Studios. The films are based on characters that appear in American comic books published by Marvel Comics." There are also some commonalities, like the logo that appears in the beginning of the movie that helps identify it as belonging to the MCU and the names seen in the credits of the films. Many of them, like the executive producer, casting, and music supervisor are common throughout all of them. This comprises film produced and released by Marvel Studios, from *Iron Man* (2008) until *Spiderman: No Way Home* (2021). It also extends now to television shows exclusively released on Disney Plus, including *WandaVision*, *Falcon and the Winter Solider*, *Loki*, *Hawkeye*, and *Moonknight*. They are also all live-action, with one exception — the animated series *What if...?*. This excludes films that Marvel produced before the release of *Iron Man*, like *Daredevil* (2003), *Elektra* (2005), and *Blade* (1998), as well as the Netflix television shows, like *Jessica Jones* and *Punisher*. I am also not including any of the animated television shows, from the Spider-Man cartoons in the seventies to current Marvel animated series.

My focus on films that had theater exhibitions is important to my analysis and narrows my scope of media. They are all live-action and have an overarching narrative that ties everything together. For the first twenty-three films (dubbed "The Infinity Saga") this main story revolved around the Infinity stones — magical stones that combined could grant the user the power to end all life in the universe with a single snap — and Thanos, the main antagonist that is searching for them. The superheroes that come to make up the Avengers learn about Thanos' plan

and try (and fail and then succeed) to stop him. This storyline culminated in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019).

One of the challenges (and joys) in studying the MCU is that there are so many angles one can take in researching it. One can look at the movies individually and make note of the various things these films accomplish on their own, but in the context of the MCU I have found that this is not the most effective way to study these films. One of the main themes I want to emphasize in this paper is that the movies in the MCU are not powerful by themselves, but are instead embedded with meaning when looking at them as part of a bigger whole. Many if not all Marvel films are made with the idea that they will not be the only one starring that character, but in fact will be part of a longer series. This is spelled out at the end of every Marvel film when the text “[character name] will return”, with the next film sometimes specified. An apt metaphor would be a puzzle. Each film in the MCU is a puzzle piece, individually beautiful, lined with holes and pegs that show how it is supposed to connect with other pieces, with the full picture only becoming clear when looking at it from afar. Another theme is that fandom plays a large part in Marvel films’ popularity and more importantly, the ambiguity of what it means to be a Marvel fan. Similar to how there is no official definition of the MCU, there is no clear criteria for what kind of behavior constitutes a Marvel fan. For some people, like me, it can just mean attending the premiers of the films, while for others it can comprise of reading and creating fan theories and fan art. This vagueness when it comes to defining a Marvel fan adds a richness to studying Marvel films because there is no sense of gatekeeping and means they are accessible to everybody.

My relationship with Marvel movies has changed many times throughout my life. Before I was in high school, I was aware of the Marvel films and had watched plenty of them, but in a casual way, like if it was playing on television or my father wanted to watch. It was not until I was seventeen, when *Avengers: Infinity War* was about to come out did I start watching the films with my undivided attention. I knew these films would be popular and a constant presence in popular culture and I wanted to be in on the action. This began a three-year long obsession with Marvel movies that eventually branched off into Marvel comics, especially ones about Captain Marvel, Invisible Woman, and Lady Thor. In 2020, Marvel was not releasing any content and I began engaging with a different fandom. By the time Marvel began releasing new content again, I was much more subdued in my viewing practice; only watching the films once, not checking various centers for Marvel fans. Because of my past as a passionate fan, I have a unique perspective on this fandom in particular and this is partly why I choose to focus on the MCU. I am very familiar with it and can easily parse through different discourses and know where to go to find information that I need.

However, my familiarity with the subject is also my biggest challenge. Because I already know so much about this topic, and because the people I grew up around and engage with are also Marvel fans, I have had little need to explain what the MCU is or how the fandom functions. Things and phenomena I may think are obvious are not as clear to someone who is not already knowledgeable in the MCU. Because of this, I have added a glossary at the end of this paper and attached an asterisk (\*) next to words that are included on it. This paper not only analyzes why the MCU is so financially successful, but also constructs a narrative from the beginning of the MCU to the most current place, at the time of this writing, *Spider-Man: No Way Home*. This was

done through personal recollection, magazine and blog publications, as well as behind-the-scene featurettes that were released as bonus features with the MCU films.

This paper is an interdisciplinary study, incorporating theories from film, media studies, and internet archival work. There has already been scholarly work done on the subject of superhero films and Marvel comics in general, notably by Carolyn Cocca (2016), Scott Bukatman (2011), and Robyn Joffe (2019). The media I look at varies from the movies themselves to press reviews and Reddit posts. In studying the MCU and the fandom that surrounds it, it was necessary to study the state of social media as well. This was another challenge in researching this paper. Many of the events in the MCU that fans and the general public alike would remember as important in shaping the MCU happened entirely online, in a context that is now long forgotten. Many times my own memory helped me in locating certain tweets and other media that I remember consuming at the time, as there is no official register. As social media has grown and evolved, so has the way that the Marvel fandom interacts with itself and with Marvel Studios. Even when Marvel was only a comic book publisher, they had close ties with their fans, publishing letters from their fans at the end of different issues. Now, fans of Marvel movies can express their opinions at conventions, or various online gathering places with the assurance that someone in power would see their suggestions.

Part One of this paper addresses the history of superhero movies as a genre and looks at *Iron Man*, the first film in the MCU. By looking at the trends that began in the past, it becomes clear that many of the aspects that the MCU is recognized for actually began decades before and follow a long pattern of blockbuster films and that the MCU in some aspects is not actually unique. Part Two looks at a period of the MCU when it was most successful, the fourteen months

from when *Black Panther* was released in 2018 and when *Avengers: Endgame* came out in 2019. Part Three traces the journey of Black Widow — the first female superhero in the MCU — and how gender politics and fan activity impacted her character’s development. Part Four looks at *Spider-Man: No Way Home* and pulls together everything introduced from the previous chapters to show how this fandom activity impacts films still being released and will continue to keep theatrical exhibition profitable.

## Part One: The History of Superhero Movies and the Birth of *Iron Man*

Before superheroes were portrayed on the screen they were birthed in comic book panels. The earliest widely-circulated publication of a person with special abilities was *Hugo Hercules*, published in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1902. Written and drawn by Wilhelm Heinrich Detlev Körner, it followed Hugo, a man imbued with superhuman strength as he helps the people he comes across. It only ran for five months, before being discontinued, but it already featured several aspects of superheroism that would become common in the American canon — an everyday man that uses his abilities in service of those around him. There were other stories published in the serial format and newspaper comics for the first few decades of the twentieth century featuring people in extraordinary situations or possessing fantastical abilities, but the “superhero” didn’t take off until the publication of Superman in 1938 by Action Comics. A child from the planet Krypton, Clark Kent grew up on a farm in Kansas raised by human parents that kept his alien identity a secret until Kent realized that he could use his super powers for good and became the superhero known worldwide as Superman. Batman (Bruce Wayne) appeared a year later, published by Detective Comics (DC). For the next fifty years there was an explosion of superheroes in comic books — ranging from a man that’s part hawk to a woman that goes by Nelvana of the Northern Lights (considered the first national Canadian superhero). As movie theaters became more popular during the Great Depression and the serial format of films was already well established, it was not long before superheroes jumped from the 2D panels of comics books to live action iterations.

Before superheroes were canonized on film, other comic book heroes were brought to the silver screen, the most influential arguably being Flash Gordon. First released in 1936, *Flash*



*Gordon* followed its titular character and his gang of heroes as they traveled to the planet Monog and encountered the evil Emperor Ming the Merciless. Buster Crabbe, the actor that played Flash Gordon, originally rose to fame as an Olympic swimmer, winning the bronze medal in the 1500m freestyle at the 1928 games and the gold medal in the 400m freestyle in 1932. He transitioned to acting soon after, starring in several films as a Tarzan-like character before being casted as the famous Flash Gordon. Although he had been in several movies and television shows since, playing a variety of characters, he was most well-known for portraying the galactic hero. A similar situation happened with the actor that portrayed Dick Tracy in his serial that ran throughout 1937. It was Ralph Byrd's most famous role and would end up defining his career. He worked on Dick Tracy productions for the rest of his life until he died of a heart attack at forty-three. Even before superheroes were introduced to the wider audience that did not read comic books, there already was the beginning of the actor-character symbiosis that has become ubiquitous now in the MCU.

The first superhero to be adapted into a serial was Captain Marvel (now known as Shazam) in 1941. Captain Marvel was first published in 1940 by Fawcett Comics. The serial follows Billy Batson in an original story after he is chosen by the ancient wizard Shazam to inherit the powers of Captain Marvel and protect whoever is in danger from the curse of the Golden Scorpion. The serial was wildly successful on a technical level, the stunt work ahead of its time (Dixon and Graham, 2017). After *Captain Marvel*, there were Batman, Captain America, and Superman serials throughout the forties. Most of these serials acted as propaganda for World War II and had small budgets that prevented the final product from achieving relevance outside the time it came out. This all changed in the 1950s with the introduction of television.

Although Superman was first introduced in 1938, he did not reach the global awareness that he now receives until the *Adventure of Superman* television show premiered in 1952. George Reeves starred as Clark Kent throughout the six-year run of the family show, eventually becoming pigeonholed in the role and unable to find work outside of the Superman persona. His death in 1959 at age forty-five was ruled a suicide, possibly because of his inability to act in the roles that he wanted to, but that is mostly speculation (The Maverick Files, 2021). The television show was the first time that Superman was portrayed on the silver screen and was commercially successful, both among children and adults. Nearly ten years after *The Adventures of Superman's* end, a live-action Batman television show was made, starring Adam West as Bruce Wayne and Burt Ward as the trusty sidekick Robin. The series followed the duo as they came into conflict with several villains of Gotham, including Catwoman, The Joker, The Penguin, and The Riddler. Even after the series ended in 1968, the principal cast continued to reprise their roles for animated films or live-action specials. Wonder Woman was the next superhero to receive the television treatment. Lynda Carter played the Amazon for the entirety of the show's four year run and this role is still reflected in her current acting choices. In the 2005 children's movie *Sky High*, Carter is the principal of the high school for children with superpowers, drawing an intentional connection between her unique role here and her Wonder Woman portrayal. Carter also had a cameo in *Wonder Woman: 1984* and it was announced that she would have a crucial role in the third installment of the trilogy directed by Patty Jenkins (Warner, 2021). As the seventies ended, superheroes moved from television sets back into the movie theaters, this time as the main event.

The first live-action feature-length superhero film naturally was the oldest most famous superhero character: Superman. The 1978 film appropriately titled *Superman* starred Christopher Reeve (no relation to the aforementioned George Reeves) as the Kryptonian alien, and Marlon Brando as Jor-El, Superman's father. *Superman* was filmed at the same time as *Superman II* (the movies were sold as a package deal to Warner Brothers), so production lasted for 19 months and ended up becoming the most expensive film ever made at the time. One of the reasons for this was that Brando was paid a large sum for his work, 3.7 million dollars and a percentage of the box office profits. He refused to learn his lines and utilized cue cards throughout the filming of the movie. When the first *Superman* was finally released in December 1978, it set numerous box-office records for Warner Brothers, earning 18.5 million dollars its opening week (all box office projections are cited from BoxOfficeMojo). Film critic Robert Ebert gave the film four out of four stars, saying that "*Superman* is a pure delight, a wondrous combination of all the old-fashioned things we never really get tired of: adventure and romance, heroes and villains, earthshaking special effects, and -- you know what else? Wit." On Reeve's casting as Superman, he wrote "[Reeve] sells the role; wrong casting here would have sunk everything" (Ebert, 1978). The second *Superman* was just as well received. Creative differences between directors, actors, and producers led to a change in director and a total rewrite of the script, but that did not stop the film from being the third-highest grossing film of 1981 (breaking a record previously set by *Star Wars*). The Superman movies proved that superheroes were not just commercially viable on television, but also on the big screen. The second most famous comic book hero was soon to find his own Hollywood treatment as well.

Unlike Superman, Batman was losing his popularity. By the early 1980's, his television show had been off the air for over ten years and *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* were all the rage. That didn't stop the producers Benjamin Melniker and Michael E. Uslan from purchasing the film rights for the character from DC Comics and setting out to make a film for Batman. The most notable aspect of this is that they intended on making a "darker" Batman film, a departure from the campy television show of the sixties. A script was written by Uslan, but the film was stuck in limbo for years as no production company was willing to produce it. That was, until the commercial success of the *The Dark Night Returns* comic run in 1986, written by Frank Miller and the graphic novel *Batman: The Killing Joke*, written by Alan Moore in 1988. Both had the darker tone that Melniker and Uslan envisioned and it was not long before Warner Brothers became interested and agreed to produce the film. They hired Tim Burton, an up-and-coming director at the time who had just directed the wildly popular *Pee-Wee's Big Adventure*, who casted Michael Keaton, an actor better known for his work in comedies. This decision caused an uproar among comic book fans. In a 1989 New York Times article on the matter, Maggie Thompson, the then co-editor of the "The Comic Buyer's Guide" said, "The discrepancy between the fan's idea and the average guy's image of Batman is a real problem for Warners... You have to win the fans to insure the film's success" (De Vries, 1989). Despite the fans' initial trepidation, the anticipation about this movie's arrival was sky-high. The first trailer, released in late 1988, was met with applause and cheers in theaters, and as was expected, the film was a massive financial success. It grossed over \$400 million dollars in its entire theatrical run and won the Academy Award for Best Art Direction. Twenty years later after its release, the film would still be talked about by film critic Scott Mendelson, who credited *Batman* with many features of

the current theatrical pipeline, like the importance of opening weekend, the shortened theatrical window, the standardization of the PG-13 rating for superhero flicks, the emphasis on merchandise and hype, as well as the focus on adaption of already established franchises (Mendelson, 2009). Another trend that Mendelson points to Batman as starting is the trend of “against type casting”. Superheroes and villains no longer needed to be enormous men played by actors that were already recognizable for their physical prowess, but could be actors who grew into the role. In the next ten years, three more Batman movies would be released, all sequels to the original Burton one, despite the change of directors and actors playing Batman, Robin, and other principal roles.

When it comes to Marvel properties, the late 20th century is a mixed bag. Besides the popular *Incredible Hulk* television show that ran from 1977 to 1982, there were no live-action films or shows. There were plenty of animated children’s shows, including several iterations of Spider-Man, The X-Men, and others, but nothing on the scale of DC properties at the time. By 1998, Marvel changed its tune by releasing *Blade*, its first live-action movie. Marvel Enterprises was in a precarious place at this time. As Richard Newby put it in 2018,

“Less than two years earlier, Marvel Entertainment Group filed for Chapter 11, facing bankruptcy in the aftermath of several failed publishing initiatives, the loss of a number of its top artists to Image and an overall decline in the interest of comic books... The last theatrical movie based on the company’s characters was the critically panned *Howard the Duck* (1986). Straight-to-video releases *The Punisher* (1989) and *Captain America* (1990) didn’t fare any better” (Newby, 2018).

*Blade* was Marvel’s chance to establish themselves as a quality film producer. *Blade* follows the vampire-human of the same name who utilizes his skills to take down vampires. The film took a fresh take on vampire lore, giving them a dark, gritty undertone that is more akin to a horror film

than a superhero one. That didn't stop the masses from turning out in droves. *Blade* earned 131.2 million dollars in its theatrical run — not bad for a character that had little to no recognition outside the comic book fandom. Even though it received mixed reviews, the film and its two sequels have developed a cult following in the twenty years since its release.

The 21st century changed everything with the release of Bryan Singer's *X-Men* in 2000. A 20th Century Fox production, Marvel licensed their characters to them, as had been their practice for decades. Marvel Studios mode of operation was to license their characters to film production companies that had the resources to make them, while Marvel would provide notes on the script and take a share of the profit. *X-Men* was the first "team" superhero film and one that prided itself on its "realistic" atmosphere. The film was in development for over a decade, with several different writers providing different scripts that highlighted various characters and storylines from the comics. Joss Whedon, who eventually wrote and directed the first two *Avengers* films provided rewrites on the *X-Men* script that were ultimately rejected because of its "quick-witted pop culture referencing tone" (Seymour, 2000). As was the case with Burton's *Batman*, there was a lot of anticipation for this film, both from the fans, and Marvel itself. In a 1999 interview, Avi Arad, president-CEO of Marvel Enterprises at the time, said that Marvel's future business plan would encompass, merchandise, purchasing, and licensing. In other words, "You jump-start things with an event movie, follow up with a TV show for continuity and fashion a high-quality video game. When the three are combined and introduced successfully, that creates a very powerful brand" (Fleming, 1999). Little did he know that Marvel would only need one third of their plan to become widely financially successful. *X-Men* grossed 296.3 million dollars and had the sixth biggest opening of all time. As Kenneth Turan put it in the *Los*

Angeles Times, “So much is happening you feel the immediate need of a sequel just as a reward for absorbing it all” (Turan, 2000). As it would seem for Marvel, each successful film since *Blade*, set them up to make another on a bigger scale with different characters. A sequel for X-Men was immediately commissioned, leading to four other X-Men films and countless spin-offs. By the time the original X-Men was released, Marvel had a different movie in the pipeline that would reinvent the superhero movie genre once again.

Since the 1980s, Marvel Comics had been looking to bring their most popular character to the big screen. After several scripts and treatments were written, and the rights to Spider-Man were bought, sold, and absorbed by different production companies, Spider-Man finally found a home at Sony. The film, *Spider-Man*, was released in May of 2002 and became the first film ever to make over a hundred million dollars in three days, raking in almost 115 million dollars during opening weekend. Tobey Maguire, Kirsten Dunst, and all the actors that starred in this film experienced an explosion of popularity. Two other sequels were made with the same principal cast, introducing several iconic Spider-Man villains. Unlike the previous Batman and Superman films that took place in fictional metropolises, Spider-Man was set in New York City, just like how *Blade* took place in the seedy underground of Los Angeles. Despite the still campy costumes and impossible stunts in a world that was meant to be reminiscent of the real one, the film continued the trend that X-Men started. CGI was utilized to great effect in combination with practical effects to make the film appear grounded in reality. A good example of this is the razor fight scene towards the end of the film, when Norman Osborn, now under the control of the Green Goblin, lures Spider-Man into a burning building to attack him. Throughout this sequence there are scenes where stuntmen crash through glass and fight amidst real flames, while

intercutting with a computer-generated Spider-Man that dodges flying razors and swings through the air on his web. As a child, these action scenes were highly impressionable on me. This was the first superhero film I have a recollection of watching. I was a toddler and didn't have strong emotions about it, but what I do remember is watching it with my father and seeing him get all excited because Spider-Man was his favorite comic book character. That's what I remember about these films most — how much joy they brought my father. Judging by the box office returns, the rest of the world felt the same.

The next bombshell in the superhero film market came four years later with Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* in 2005. It had been eight years since the last Batman film and Warner Brothers wanted to make another one to compete with Sony's Spider-Man and Fox's X-Men. Christopher Nolan, was selected to direct, with David S. Goyer to pen the script. Nolan and Goyer described their vision in a *Variety* article from 2004, saying ““The world of Batman is that of grounded reality... Ours will be a recognizable, contemporary reality against which an extraordinary heroic figure arises” (Graser & Dunkley, 2004). The film was released in 2005 and made 48 million dollars over its opening weekend, and while it was not record-breaking in the same way as Spider-Man, its focus on story and its “dark and gritty” atmosphere had evolved from the Tim Burton versions and now fit a world post 9/11 and Spider-Man. The film has been listed by several publishers and important people in the filmmaking industry as majorly influential, both for the superhero genre and movies in general. According to Laura Rosenfeld of the *Tech Times*, *Batman Begins* revolutionizes the superhero origin story, thanks to Nolan's signature style of filmmaking. The “reboot” also became a favorite of the production studio, demonstrating how one can inject a familiar character with new flavor, while still keeping what



made the character successful in the first place (Rosenfeld, 2015). Its successor, *The Dark Knight*, which premiered in 2008, was even more successful. Released in 2008 (a few months before the first *Iron Man*), it starred Christian Bale as Bruce Wayne and Heath Ledger as The Joker, among other A-list talents. As a sequel to a very popular first installment, anticipation was through the roof. Two different forums — one for Walt Disney World and another on a website titled, “[myreviewer.com](http://myreviewer.com)” — have hundreds of posts combined chronicling the fan build-up and reception of the film. Reading through the posts paints a picture of excitement, skepticism at Heath Ledger’s casting of the Joker, and overall positive reception of the film with many people saying that it should be in the talks during awards season. As one forum poster put it, “That was one flawless movie, forgetting Heath Ledger for one moment, the story itself was solid, dark, with some jaw dropping moments” (floyd\_dylan). *The Dark Knight* premiered to record-breaking numbers, grossing 197 million dollars worldwide its opening weekend. The film went on to make over a billion dollars, the fourth film to ever gross that much (at the time). It not only caught the attention of the public, but it also caught the attention of award organizations. *The Dark Knight* was nominated for eight Academy Awards, winning two: Best Sound Editing and a posthumous Best Supporting Actor for Heath Ledger. At the time, critics and people in the film world were already recognizing the film as majorly influential, and with time this sentiment has only become more true. *The Dark Knight* gave the comic book film cultural and critical credence — as David Sims put in an article for The Atlantic, “*The Dark Knight* legitimized comic-book movies—not with audiences (who, after all, made the original *Batman* a huge success in 1989), but with studios” (Sims, 2018). The one billion dollars it made transformed the superhero genre into something very enticing from a financial standpoint. The premier of *Iron*

*Man* made many of the same statements, but unlike *The Dark Knight* which was the second film of a trilogy, *Iron Man* was the beginning of an interconnected universe of movies and TV shows that still continues today.

In the history of Marvel Comics, *Iron Man* was a key turning point. Marvel Studios had to dig a little into their arsenal, as they had already licensed their other more popular properties away to other production companies. But more importantly, it the first movie produced entirely in-house by Marvel Studios. This new business model between the comic publishers and the movie producers is one thing that made *Iron Man* different from what came before. It would allow Marvel to receive a larger percent of the revenue when these films premiered in theaters, and it allowed a greater sense of creative control for the executives of the studios — something that is very important for both the fans and creatives of Marvel. When Marvel Studios was purchased by the Walt Disney Company in 2009, this image of Marvel Studios as an independent entity remained the same. Even though Marvel now presents at Disney Investor Day meetings and its characters walk around California Adventure Park, there has rarely been a complaint about corporate interference from the fan side. For all intents and purposes, Marvel Studios was its own being and Kevin Feige — a life-long Marvel comics fan that was became the president of Marvel Studios — was the leader.

From the very beginning, Marvel Studios approached their films from a fan-based angle. Organized fandom had been around since the sixties, with fans organizing conventions and other gatherings on their own accord. As these gatherings got bigger, the owners of the intellectual properties that these conventions surrounded took notice and began to use them as an opportunity to promote more films. What does this mean in a digital age? It means paying close attention to

social media and other websites that draw a lot of fans became more important. *Iron Man* came out at the birth of social media and Marvel understood the importance of conventions in marketing the film and releasing promotional material. Several Comic-Cons\*, and D23 (Disney's annual convention), allow Marvel Studios to share new materials to a friendly audience and on scheduled times with great anticipation. This was evident in the first Comic-con in which Marvel Studios participated. In the summer of 2007 at San Diego's convention, Jon Favreau did an interview with popular online blogger at the time. When speaking about the material from *Iron Man* that would be shown during Marvel's multiple panels, Favreau said, "We wanted to show the fans that they aren't being forgotten with the first MARVEL STUDIOS production" (Quint, 2007). The idea that fans could be forgotten is not a new concept to fandom. In Henry Jenkins seminal work, *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins looks at the fandom surrounding the 1980s television drama, *Beauty and the Beast*. The third season was very controversial and many fans complained that the studio went in a direction that did not fit the characters. This was a situation that Marvel and Job Favreau wanted to avoid.

Another technique of endearing the films to the fans is through casting. Casting has been an essential part of movies since the teens when the first movie stars were created. Actors became an attraction and selling point for studios that would influence the marketing of the film and its monetary performance. This was in effect in the early days of the superhero genre with Flash Gordon. Buster Crabbe, the actor who portrayed the titular character, was an Olympic swimmer before he transitioned to acting. He was well known to a certain group of people before he earned a role that he was never able to fully shake off. The same thing happened with George Reeves, Christopher Reeve, Lynda Carter, and even Tobey Maguire: they became so inextricable

from their characters that their careers were never the same since. Marvel Studios also carried on the tradition of outside-the-box casting from Tim Burton's *Batman*. A similar situation happened with Marvel Studios, but it was as if they saw the positives of this social phenomena and capitalized on it. When it was the time to cast the character, Jon Favreau thought of Robert Downey Jr., an actor who was most well-known for his roles in dramas and his alcohol and drug problems. Marvel did not want to cast him initially, but Favreau said that “[Downey Jr.] understood what makes the character tick. He found a lot of his own life experience in Tony Stark” (O’Loughlin, 2009). Favreau was referencing the alcoholism that the fictional Tony Stark/Iron Man deals with in the comics. The rumors of high improvisation on set that was discussed in promotional interviews circulated online in fan communities that bolstered the idea that Tony Stark and Robert Downey Jr. were the same person. The press interviews and convention panels that he participated in allowed the boundary between character and actor to blur. Downey Jr. dressed in a similar manner as Tony, with square glasses, well-tailored suits with colorful accents, and styled brown hair. This even resulted in videos being made and titled “Rdj being just like Tony Stark for 10 minutes” where fans compiled moments from different interviews and presented them in a cohesive format for other fans to watch and discuss in the comments.

Even though there was no guarantee for sequels before *Iron Man* was released, the film teases the audience with the inclusion of S.H.I.E.L.D — the fictional government agency that deals with super heroic events — with the character of Agent Coulson before outright sharing what is to come with a post-credit scene\* starring Samuel L. Jackson as S.H.I.E.L.D director Nick Fury. This scene plays after all the credits, in a spot that had historically been used for

bloopers or an extra scene that has no effect on the storyline but is purely for the audience's entertainment. Marvel does not use these scenes in the same way. Over time, these scenes have grown from thirty-second bits to full-on one to two minute scenes that have the same production value as the rest of the film, often expanding to add a mid-credits\* scene that runs between the above and below-the-line credits. They are used to hint at future Marvel productions of important characters, and sometimes just for a little giggle. This means that technically, the last lines of *Iron Man* are not "I am Iron Man", the last words spoken before the credits started, but "I'm here to talk to you about the Avenger Initiative" (2008). It is not the nature of Marvel movies to stand on their own — they *have* to interconnect. This connective tissue is the most pleasurable aspect of the film and is part of what makes a Marvel movie a Marvel movie. After all, it is called a cinematic universe for a reason. Overtime this creates a uniform aesthetic and narrative, with a common plot weaving through every film and special effects that are meant to make the film appear like they occur in the same universe and operate under the same laws of physics. One glaring exception to this rule is the casting change of James Rhodes — Tony Stark's best friend — in the second *Iron Man* movie. Rumors of contract negotiations struggles between Terrance Howard and Marvel swirled around the entertainment sphere, but Don Cheadle's casting was met with mixed opinions. Some viewers were excited to see a "good" actor like Cheadle take on the role, others thought that Howard was the better fit, but there was a common concern about "continuity" from all parties. As one commenter said on an entertainment discussion forum firstshowing.net, "I hate when they have to change actors its [sic] such a distraction" (2008). The creatives at Marvel seemed to take this concern to heart. When Cheadle's Rhodey is introduced in *Iron Man 2*, he walks into the room, back to the camera as the crowd focuses their attention on

him and approaches Tony Stark. Tony greets him with “Hey, buddy. I didn’t expect to see you here.” Rhodey turns to be parallel with the camera and responds with “Look it’s me, I’m here. Deal with it. Let’s move on.” Not only does this line of dialogue fit in the context of the scene, the *mis en scene* and pacing of the scene plays to the audience’s knowledge about the casting change. It’s not an easter egg\* or a retcon\*, but a “wink” to the viewer, letting them know that the makers of the film are in on the joke. This is not unique to Marvel movies, but Marvel chooses to capitalize on these moments.

What is unique about *Iron Man* and other films in the MCU is that they are a catalyst to introduce other Marvel properties and storylines. This is different from the *Dark Knight* or other planned trilogies or sequels. Marvel inserts characters and subplots into their films that, at the moment, act as cameos or treats for the fans with a deeper knowledge of the comics, but in hindsight — after the characters and subplots are given their own films — serve as clues for what will happen in the future. This is demonstrated by the inclusion of Agent Phil Coulson (played by Greg Clark) who is a representative of S.H.I.E.L.D. The aforementioned post credit scene with Nick Fury was the first mention of S.H.I.E.L.D. in the MCU, teasing the members of the audience that were willing to stay through the credits with future movies and more characters. The following Marvel movie, *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), while it does not have any characters seen in *Iron Man* during the main run time, it does have Tony Stark make a post-credit appearance, implying that he is there to recruit Bruce Banner for the Avengers Initiative on behalf of S.H.I.E.L.D.. This creates a viewing experience where there is never a complete ending. When there is always another film to watch, another new character to keep track of, new lore to fit into the existing facts, it is not encouraged to go into a Marvel film showing with an

empty slate. There are always a few threads left purposely undone to be picked up on in the following production, *Iron Man 2* (2010) is a much better example of this, having been made and released after other Marvel movies like *Thor* (2011) and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) were confirmed to go into production. *Iron Man 2* features allusions such as a prototype of Captain America's shield that acts as a leveler and reference to a "situation" going on in New Mexico (where *Thor* takes place). Both hints involve Agent Coulson's character, one of the few players, along with Nick Fury, that is allowed to be a part of all these movies, acting as a guide for the audience to introduce the different facets of the MCU (the mythical/fantasy, the scientific/technocrat, the realism). His death in *The Avengers* (2012) — although retconned so he could be a part of the television show, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-2020) — marks the end of the introductory phase of the MCU and acts as the final motivation for the heroes to unite and fight as one. If the audience was first introduced to Agent Coulson in *The Avengers*, or if he *only* appeared in *Iron Man* prior to his inclusion in *The Avengers*, his death would not be as powerful for the characters or for the audience. It was the first multi-film payoff in the MCU that required the viewer to have prior knowledge of the characters for the beat to have emotional payoff. Since then there have been many more instances of character development and payoff that occurred over a broad stretch of movies which will be greater explored in the following sections.

Despite the relative newness of Marvel Studios' movies, superhero films have a long history. Soon after the first superheroes were published in comic books, the characters were brought onto the big screen. As these films grew from serials to television shows to feature length movies, casting and filming practices came into being that would remain until the MCU which took these practices such as the conflation between actor and character, while also crafting

their own ways to maintain continuity between the difference films, such as dropping hints to future films and including common characters over many films. Marvel Studios continued those practices, which led to massive success ten years after the release of *Iron Man*, which is the topic of the next chapter.



## Part Two: The Golden Year of 2018-2019

The fifteen months between February 2018 and April 2019 were monumental ones for Marvel Studios. In that time span, four of the five movies that Marvel Studios released grossed over a billion dollars, including *Black Panther* (2018), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), *Captain Marvel* (2019), and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). *Black Panther* won three Academy Awards and was nominated for Best Picture. *Avengers: Endgame* broke all kinds of box office records within a few weeks (Fuster, 2019). It had been ten years since *Iron Man* premiered and yet it seemed that the MCU was just getting started. How did this happen? What occurred in these fifteen months that allowed Marvel Studios to reap so much money and made the industry recognize the superhero genre for its filmmaking in a way that hadn't been done since *The Dark Knight*? This chapter seeks to answer these questions and analyze what led Marvel Studios to this position by looking at the development of *Black Panther* and *Captain Marvel* — movies that introduced new, diverse characters to the MCU — and the release of *Infinity War* and *Endgame* — movies that concluded the Infinity Saga. I also describe my own fan experience to better illustrate the myriad of ways that fans express their passion for the MCU and to show why these films are important in the history of Hollywood and theatrical exhibition.

When *Black Panther* was released in February 2018, it was a long time coming. The first attempt to make a film for Black Panther was in 1993, with Wesley Snipes being the driving force. He tried for many year to get a film off the ground, but after he was cast in *Blade* and spent time in jail for failing to file a tax return, he quietly stepped away from the project. In those intervening years, many different writers and producers developed scripts and treatments for a film, but nothing ever happened. Hints to Black Panther and the fictional country from which he

hailed — Wakanda — was included in several MCU movies. Captain America's shield in the first *Avengers* is said to be made of vibranium — a fictional metal alloy that is only found in Wakanda and the second *Iron Man* displays a map in the background of a scene with Wakanda highlighted on it. These were the only signs of Black Panther, until 2014 when Feige announced that Chadwick Boseman was casted as the titular character and gave a Black Panther film a set release date.

Like with Iron Man and Robert Downey Jr, Boseman was inseparable from his character, Black Panther. In a video recorded from an audience member that was later uploaded to YouTube of the same press conference from 2014, Robert Downey Jr. (Tony Stark/Iron Man) and Chris Evans (Steve Rogers/Captain America) walk onto the stage, acting like they have beef with each other. Together, they introduce Chadwick Boseman as Black Panther for the first time. The crowd never stops screaming in the five minutes of this interaction (Marvel Studios Movies). It is notable that even outside of the third party framework that is Comic-con or other conventions, Marvel Studios is able to be an event in themselves. Boseman was already well known to the critic circles for his roles in dramas like *42* (2013), but this announcement launched his career into the stratosphere.

As I explained in Part One, this is not the first time that the actor and the character were conflated. However, this was the first time that the actor passed away while still in the middle of portraying the character. Boseman died from colon cancer in August 2020 at the age of 43. His death and the cause of it was a surprise to everyone except his close friends and family. Immediately, the question on whether to retire the MCU version of T'Challa or to recast the character was asked. As I scrolled through Twitter, I was amazed that the retirement of a fictional

character was even a possibility. In a world where *Black Panther* made over a billion dollars and brought Marvel Studios its first Oscars, how did it make fiscal sense to prevent any possibility of presenting that character again? Kevin Feige rationalized this decision in an announcement during Disney's Investor Day in December 2020. At the end of Marvel Studios' presentation, Feige said:

“Chadwick Boseman was an immensely talented actor and an inspirational individual who affected all of our lives professionally and personally. His portrayal of T'Challa the Black Panther is iconic and transcends any iteration of the character in any other medium from Marvel's past. And it's for that reason that we will not recast the character. However, to honor the legacy that Chad helped us build through his portrayal of the king of Wakanda, we want to continue to explore the world and all the rich and varied characters introduced in the first film” (2020).

Marvel selected the retirement route because these films value the whole of the MCU over the individual films. As Feige said, there are characters and places that can be explored without the main character, yet at the same time, the actor and character symbiosis is too strong and the fans' outcry too great to even attempt replacing Boseman. It is too early to say whether this had an impact on the production on the second installment in the Black Panther franchise, but the blowback from this decision - while it may be small - is still overly vocal at the writing of this paper in the spring of 2022. #RecastTChalla has been an outlet for disgruntled fans on Twitter to express their disagreement with Marvel Studios' decision to retire the character. It has become a place where people can share their personal connection with the character, suggest alternate actors and/or characters that are worthy of the Black Panther mantle.

After *Black Panther* premiered in February of 2018, it was immediately praised for the excellent filmmaking and its representation of Black culture and the Black experience. Historian N.D.B. Connolly detailed the historical and cultural importance of the film for Hollywood

Reporter, drawing a thread from the slave revolutions in the European colonies of the Americas to the Black Panther comics of the 1960s, to the film that is *Black Panther* itself. He says,

“Ryan Coogler’s *Black Panther* taps a 500-year history of African-descended people imagining freedom, land and national autonomy. Wakanda conjures this past, even as it professes to stand outside it. It’s a land, again like Haiti and much of *actual* Africa, about which everyone has a notion, even if they’ve never been there. Worlds must be dreamed, after all, before they can be made” (Connolly, 2018).

It would have been impossible for *Black Panther* to have this kind of power if it was not for the black filmmakers and artists that worked on this film. When I watched it for the first time, I recognized within the first few minutes that this film was different from other movies that Marvel Studios had put out. It meant something to people and Marvel Studios knew this. There was a segment on Jimmy Fallon’s late night show, where people would stand in front of a movie poster for *Black Panther* and share what the film and the character meant to them before Chadwick Boseman walked out from behind a curtain to the fan’s surprise. Many of the fans’ reactions involved crying and being grateful for both Boseman’s performance and the graceful way he carried himself, with one man saying, “Thank you from the bottom of my heart for really being a hero that we need in a time like this” (NBC, 2018). This clip went viral after Boseman’s death because it exemplified the tight hold that character and actor had for fans of the MCU.

Since *Black Panther* came out in February, it had to wait a long time for awards season, but once it was time, it won dozens of awards, including three Oscars (Variety, 2019). For Marvel fans, this was validation that Marvel films had the artistic credence to stand on their own, outside of the MCU. In an article for The Guardian, Ben Child elaborates on this sentiment, claiming that,

"The usual, simplistic rules of superhero movies are largely thrown out, and that makes [Black Panther] a far more enticing watch... Those of us who love comic book movies can simply be grateful that Hollywood is capable of delivering a superhero film of such thoughtful, daring quality that it can justifiably challenge for [Best Picture]" (Child, 2019).

However, this recognition has not been seen since, much to the fans disdain who thought that *Endgame* was award worthy. One Twitter user put it nicely when *Endgame* lost the only Oscar it was nominated for in the 2020 ceremony, Best Visual Effects to *1917* (2019):

“Avengers *Endgame* broke enormous new ground, in an area the Oscars have no category for: Achievement in Continuity. *Endgame* was the conclusion of a 22-film plot with a scope and complexity of continuity far beyond what any film series has done before” (barrydeutsch).

Unlike *Endgame*, *Black Panther* came out at very specific point in time in Hollywood. The #OscarsSoWhite debacle took place only two years before and was still fresh in the minds of members of the Academy of Motion Pictures, Arts, and Sciences. In 2015, Twitter user April Reign first tweeted the hashtag in response to all twenty of the Academy Awards acting nominations going to white actors. The hashtag went viral and the Academy responded by diversifying their invitees to the Academy (Yousuf). A few years later, the Academy announced that they were making a new category — Outstanding Achievement in Popular Film — with no additional information on eligibility requirements (Feinberg, 2018). This was met with such enormous backlash that the Academy announced only a month later that they were postponing introducing this category “and will examine and seek additional input regarding the new category” (Kilday, 2018). *Black Panther* was a film that featured almost an entirely black cast and came out at a time when the Oscar ceremony’s ratings were dwindling. All of this could have contributed to the three Oscars that *Black Panther* won that year.

*Captain Marvel* was announced at the same press conference that *Black Panther* was announced. The film would be the first Marvel Studios production with a female titular character. Although a film adapting this specific character had been on Marvel's vision board for many years, it was not until 2014 that they settled on portraying Carol Danvers as the cosmic superhero (Storm, 2014). The film was pushed back several times to its eventual March 9, 2019 release date. Coincidentally this was a day after International Women's Day, a fact that was hinted at in the trailer of the movie with the phrase "Her" appearing before turning into "Hero" (Marvel Entertainment, 2018). Marvel announced the casting of Brie Larson as Captain Marvel at the 2016 San Diego Comic-con. With a recent Oscar win under her belt, Larson served as validation of Marvel's filmmaking efforts, much in the same way as Boseman, or even Robert Redford in *Captain America: Winter Solider* (2014).

Larson was greeted in the convention hall with roaring applause. Online however, there was much stronger pushback by a small number of "fans". In the year or two before and after *Captain Marvel* was released, dozens of online content creators built a brand on criticizing Larson for various things that she'd done and said — things like calling for more inclusivity in film criticism and equal pay. I got up close and personal with these people in the fall of 2019 when I conducted a small reception studies on this phenomenon. I looked at four YouTube channels and watched over twenty hours of videos on Brie Larson in order to ascertain why they disliked her so much. After conducting my research and analyzing the data, I deduced that it was the high amount of engagement that encouraged the creators to make so many videos about her. Some of them even said as much (Aronovsky, 2019). Through this project, I realized that while there was a small minority of fans that did not like the casting, there were extremely loud and

did not represent the whole, but in an online ecosystem that rewards those with the most hits it can be hard to forget that sometimes.

Another crucial part of *Captain Marvel*'s marketing was that it was the last film before *Avengers: Endgame*'s release. It was hinted that Captain Marvel would play a “big” role in the conclusion to the Infinity Saga and that it would be necessary to watch her film in to fully understand *Endgame*. This was hinted at in the end-credits scene for *Infinity War* where the last shot of the film was her logo on Nick Fury's decked-out pager. Marvel had never done this before. Yes, they marketed films together, but never where it was explicitly said that in order to watch one movie, one had to see another. It is unclear if this was why *Captain Marvel* made over 450 million dollars its opening weekend and grossed over 1.1 billion dollars overall, but what is clear is that the end-credit scene from *Infinity War* directly leads into the opening of *Endgame*. When Tony Stark is on the verge of dying, stranded in deep space, Carol rescues him and brings him back to Earth. Without seeing *Captain Marvel*, a viewer may wonder how Carol knew that Tony was in trouble or even to bring him to Earth. In the next scene, she's taking part in the group discussion without introductions. By including the connective tissue between these movies in the end-credit scenes, it requires more casual viewers to watch other films they may not be interested in otherwise.

I remember the year between the release of *Infinity War* and *Endgame* as a Marvel fan renaissance. Everyday the subreddit was bursting with new theories getting thousands of upvotes and photo and video edits getting pumped out weekly. I have distinct memories of scrolling through the cache of content, my heartbeat elevating as I thought of all the possibilities that could be and getting excited for the future. Nobody was convinced that anything we saw in

*Infinity War* was permanent or unchangeable. Even though Loki — the villain turned hero over a span of four movies — was choked to death on screen, there was a large number of fans that thought this was yet another illusion by the trickster god and Loki would appear in the second half of the story or in some kind of Marvel material (u/IanMoone13). The summer of 2018 was the pinnacle of my time in the Marvel fandom. For three months, the only films I watched were Marvel ones because I wanted to absorb as much information about the MCU as I could in case I missed anything and to pick up clues that could pay off in *Endgame*. This practice of rewatching or “rereading” is not unique to the Marvel fandom, although it is important due to the sheer volume of media. In *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins discusses the importance of rewatching media that one has already consumed in the context of *Star Trek* and other television shows in the 1980s. Fans rewatched for different reasons, sometimes it was to tide them over in the week between new episodes, sometimes it was to capture new information, or to introduce other people in their lives to the media. As Jenkins put it, these television shows

“become enmeshed in the viewer’s own life, gaining significance in relation to when they were first encountered and evoking memories as rich as the series itself; these experiences alter viewer’s identifications with characters and the significance the place upon narrative events” (Jenkins, 69).

The rewatch habit of Marvel fans is no different. As a fan I conducted rewatch marathons each time a new film was released, watched the films regarding a single character, and single movies because of a special connection I had with that particular one. But what is interesting about both rewatching habits is that the practice is entirely pushed by the fans. None of the television networks or Marvel Studios themselves encourage the rewatching of their products. This means



that the enthusiasm for their films is self-maintained by the fans themselves — something that turned out to be very important during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to watching the films, I read fanfiction, watched fan-made edit videos, and even started reading Marvel comics, something that I had never felt the urge to do until I watched *Captain Marvel*. I printed out online fan art on glossy paper and taped it to the walls of my dorm room. It felt like there were so many possibilities and I wanted to be a part of the excitement. I wanted to feel the utter joy of seeing my theories come true. I bought tickets for the earliest possible viewing of *Endgame* and dragged my friend to come along with me. I ended up watching *Endgame* two times in theaters and I saw with *Captain Marvel* four times. This is a common practice for Marvel fans, to see movies multiple times in theaters, sometimes over hundreds of times. One man in Wisconsin saw *Captain Marvel* 116 times, breaking a world record. His motivation: he saw that the current record for the most times a film was watched in theaters was 103 times for *Avengers: Infinity War*, and he decided to break it. He was not a *Captain Marvel* fan or even a cinephile. He has several other world records for random things: the faster time for chugging a liter of gravy, for one thing (Schulte, 2019). This is another example of someone watching and experiencing a Marvel film over and over again not because they like the content, but because they want to say they have seen it.

The release of *Avengers Endgame* was a big event in my life and in the lives of many others. I watched the livestream of the red carpet for the worldwide premier the Monday before its wide release Thursday night. As I watched it, I made the decision to stay off social media until I saw the film, in order to avoid any kind of spoilers. This was a very big decision for me, but I felt it was necessary. That was how exciting and paranoid being a Marvel fan was at the time. I

watched Marvel films not just for the film themselves, but the experience around them. I wanted to gasp and cry with the audience as I watched the movie in the theater — I wanted to feel like I was experiencing something collectively. When my friend and I arrived at the theater to watch *Endgame*, it was packed. I did not see anybody in cosplay\*, a la Harry Potter premiers (Carney, 2011). There were some people wearing graphic t-shirts with Marvel icons on them, but nothing that wouldn't be worn outside of this context. Once the lights went down, the room was silent. I cried, I laughed, I sat with my mouth open, trying to soak in as much information as I could. Watching the film took a physical toll on my body — I do not remember having this kind of reaction to any film before or since. My memory of *Endgame*, and most other Marvel films, had nothing to do with the movie itself, but everything around it. This is similar to the theories put forward in *The Remembered Film* by Victor Burgin. Published in 2004, Burgin writes about the way that movies and other video media are collectively remembered in our minds, often in images, and how this can change their original meaning. He writes that “The experience of a film was once localized, in space and time, in the finite unreeling of a narrative in a particular theatre on a particular day” (Burgin, 2004), but now a film is seen in trailers online, in movie posters on billboards, and in pictures from the newspaper. This adds another dimension to the film and is especially relevant to Marvel films, where a large experience of my Marvel fandom was from material that were not the original movies.

If one was a Marvel fan when *Endgame* came out, one was counting down the days until *Endgame* would become the highest grossing movie in history. Ever since the first *Avengers* film, there had been a conversation on which Marvel film would be the one to break the barrier. In the mind of a Marvel fan such as myself, this milestone held a lot of importance, even more than

their films winning awards or being recognized for artistic innovations. Marvel Studios making the movie that makes the most money in history would mean that it was also the most popular movie in history. There were several YouTube channels that hosted box office livestreams, which compared the grossing of *Endgame* with *Avatar*, the James Cameron film from 2010 that at the time was the highest grossest film. The numbers adjusted in real time, going higher and higher with each second (Rabo, 2019). I remember watching these videos whenever I had a free second in the day. It was exciting, watching *Endgame* get closer and closer to breaking the record. It made me feel like I was a part of history. I looked at the percentage drop of ticket sales between weeks, celebrating when the drop was only between thirty to forty percent. The fastest film to reach 500 million dollars, the only film to make over a billion dollars in its opening weekend (Both *Avengers: Endgame*), all these phrases were facts that I held in my head and could unleash at a moment's notice. A Marvel film had never made less than its budget (Bean, 2021) — because of this, there have technically never been any Marvel flops, only flops in relation to other Marvel films.

Ten years after the release of *Iron Man* and the beginning of the MCU, Marvel Studios hit its peak. The first black and female superheroes had their debuts and the culmination of the Infinity Saga premiered, spread over two films. Over the course of these fourteen months, Marvel made almost eight billion dollars. This would not have happened if it were not for the fandom that Marvel had courted over the past ten years. In the year between the release of *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, it felt as if the idea of *Endgame* was more important than the actual film, a parallel with the practice of seeing the film multiple times not because of the film's artistic meaning, but because of the desire to break a record. This does not happen outside of

Marvel films because the network had years to develop and now they are self-sustaining. The ambiguity of what it means to be a Marvel “fan” allows more people to participate in fandom culture and therefore interact (and purchase) more with Marvel material. One of the ways that Marvel fans utilized their power was to advocate for a Black Widow movie, an incident that will be looked at in the following chapter.

### Part Three: Black Widow and Gender Politics

The lack of female characters in the MCU has given the few that exist with an unusual amount of power in the imagination of Marvel fans and non fans alike. Unlike their male counterparts, female characters often must be everything for all people and Black Widow/Natasha Romanoff was the first super-heroine to carry this load. In the comics, she is written as a *femme fatale*, a woman that borders the boundary between hero and villain and looks good while doing it. Her portrayal in the MCU washed out most of her questionable loyalty and instead replaced it with family-friendly general female badassery. Her backstory as a Russian agent was erased and instead adjusted to a radical assassin group, on par with other criminal organizations, that had little ties to the Soviet government. Over the course of her ten years on screen, her character expanded and changed, like all the original Avengers, but with a distinctive difference: fans had to actively campaign for her character's greater involvement in the MCU, specifically her own film. This turned Black Widow into not just any old superhero, but a medium through which fans and companies alike could share their sociopolitical commentary and have an ability to flex commercial power that would become even more important in the wake of the COVID pandemic.

Black Widow first appeared in *Iron Man 2* (2011), as an undercover S.H.I.E.L.D. agent that was tasked to look after Iron Man. From the very first moment that she appears on screen, she is seen as a sexual object. Tony Stark makes flirtatious remarks about her as he flips through her resume which features photos from a boudoir photoshoot. A few seconds later, Natasha takes down Tony's security guard. Her introduction plays closely with her depiction in the comics. The rest of her appearance in *Iron Man 2* continued to be highly sexualized, with a camera shot

focused on her bottom and a scene where she changes clothes in the back seat of a car while the driver tries to sneak a peak through the rearview mirror. The camera is positioned in front of the car, with Happy Hogan (played by Jon Favreau) driving on the right side of the screen with Natasha sitting in the back seat in the center of the screen. It is night time and soft white light covers Happy while Natasha remains slightly in the shadows, but as soon as she takes her shirt off, revealing pale skin and a black bra, she leans into the light and Happy is seen looking at the rearview mirror to look at her. She scolds him and is quickly covered back up, but for a moment, the male character in the scene and the audience are encouraged to focus on Natasha's breasts. The press coverage for Black Widow's introduction to the MCU, focused on the same physical aspects by drawing attention to her physical assets and perceived beauty. In an IGN article reporting on Kevin Feige's speculating about filming a Black Widow movie (the byline being "Scarlett Johansson + More cat suit = Nerdvana") the writer Phil Pirrello refers to Johansson as "Mrs. Ryan Reynolds" (her spouse at the time) within the opening paragraph, describes her acting as "pouring herself into Natasha Romanoff's outfit" and closes with "Hollywood plans to keep Cleavage Johansson fighting crime and wearing only tight things for quite some time. It's good to be a geek" (Pirrello, 2010). Robert Downey Jr., Chris Evans, and every other leading man did not receive such an article from Mr. Pirrello. While there are articles that focus on the muscle build up of certain actors, these are balanced by in-depth interviews or questions that do not address their physical appearance at all. In fact, this is not something specific to Marvel, but the entertainment industry as a whole. Women in action pieces are often reduced to the appearance of their bodies in their costumes rather than their acting or the portrayal of their character. In a study conducted by the Geena Davis Institute and Plan International in 2018,

where the highest grossing movies of the year in 20 countries were analyzed, it was found that characters who identify as female are four times more likely than their male counterparts to be shown completely naked and more likely to be sexually objectified or harassed than other male leaders (Fang, 2019). This treatment of female characters and their actors carries over into the press coverage. Pirello was not looking forward to more movies with Black Widow because they liked her character — they wanted more movies because they wanted to keep looking at her. And in fact, this is how the marketing of her character was done in her first few years of life in the MCU.

Black Widow's next appearance after *Iron Man 2* was in Joss Whedon's *Avengers* in 2012. Joss Whedon had an enormous impact in the early stages of the MCU. After directing the first *Avengers* movie, he signed a deal with Marvel Studios where he agreed to write and direct the *Avengers* sequel, develop a live action television show (*Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*), and “contribute creatively to the next phase of Marvel's cinematic universe” (Vary, 2012). For a short while, he was perceived to be as powerful as Kevin Feige. Before Marvel, Whedon had a long history of developing television shows with small, but devoted audiences like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Firefly*. *The Avengers* would be his largest production yet, but if there was any doubt, it vanished after it came out and became one of the highest-grossing movies of all time. In the words of one Reddit user on r/MarvelStudios, “we all treated him like a god for 3 years” (JizzleNerps). I use this example because the Marvel subreddit is a great indicator of what the most passionate Marvel fans think. Like with any fandom activity center, it does not reflect the greater community, but it is one of the most popular places online for a Marvel fan to be. Whedon left Marvel amicably after the second *Avengers* film *Age of Ultron*, and the fans moved

on. Then the accusation of workplace harassment against Whedon came out. Nobody at Marvel accused him, but with his predatory behavior come to light, all his creative work went under a microscope in an attempt to find evidence of his personal inclinations. One scene that went under the most scrutiny was in *Age of Ultron*, where Natasha Romanoff falls onto her back and then Bruce Banner (played by Mark Ruffalo) falls on top of her, his face landing on her breasts. The camera pauses here as Bruce apologizes and Natasha tells him not to worry about it. This scene would most likely not be a focus for attention if it was not for a very similar scene in DC's *Justice League* (a film that Whedon co-directed and wrote with Zack Snyder). Gal Gadot's Wonder Woman also lays on her back as The Flash (played by Ezra Miller) lays on top of her, in an identical position as Bruce. Both of these moments were played for comedy, but amidst the Whedon drama, it came out that Gadot did not want to film this scene and a body double had to be used. Whedon was also accused of threatening Gadot and her career for refusing to participate in the scene (Tapp, 2021). Through this lens, his portrayal of Black Widow fits into a pattern of powerful woman that are sexualized — or desexualized — under the male gaze (specifically Whedon's). One of the most controversial scenes involving Black Widow takes place in the second half of *Age of Ultron*, when her and Bruce Banner are having a personal moment. Bruce tells her that he can't ever have children because of the Hulk. Natasha says that she can't either because she had a forced hysterectomy when she was in her Black Widow training. In her words (written by Whedon), "You're not the only monster on the team" (Whedon, 2018). This quote implies that Natasha perceives herself as a monster because she is not able to bear children — an emotion that Natasha is allowed to feel. But this scene and these characters are a work of fiction,



written by a man that did horrendous things and this should not be forgotten in Natasha's portrayal.

After *Age of Ultron*, Natasha's character went stagnant as the greater MCU narrative focused on other characters. She was a supporting character in *Captain America: Civil War* and was next seen in *Avengers: Infinity War* in 2019. She shared screen time with the other Avengers and even had a girl power moment with Okoye and Scarlet Witch in the final battle of *Infinity War*. In both of these films there was little to no character development or depth revealed — she was just a body acting out cool fight scenes and spouting off witty one-liners. This is not problematic in itself, but it speaks to the fact that Black Widow is not allowed to have her own dilemmas — everything is centered around the male characters and the way she is characterized reflects that. Not until *Avengers: Endgame* did her character have the power to make important decisions. To acquire the Soul Stone and defeat Thanos to bring everybody back, either Natasha or Clint Barton have to sacrifice themselves. They fight each other, neither wanting the other to die, but eventually Natasha wins and she becomes a martyr. The camera pulls out on her bleeding corpse as the screen is overcome with white and we cut to a different location with Clint retrieving the Soul Stone. It is a very emotional moment, and the other Avengers take a moment to mourn her death before getting back to work. This conversation takes place on a dock, with no visual symbol or physical piece of remembrance to stand in for Natasha. Later, when Tony Stark dies for the same purpose — to save the universe — he gets a funeral service, with Tony's Arc Reactor placed amid a bed of flowers in the lake. Natasha never does get a funeral. It can be argued that this is appeased in the post-credit scene of *Black Widow* when Yelena visits Natasha's grave — a simple tombstone reading Natasha Romanoff with her Black Widow

symbol engraved — but as the film came out three years after *Endgame*, much of the emotional punch was gone. Like with all creative choices in the MCU, there were those that were disappointed with the way that Natasha’s character arc and death was handled.

Planning for *Black Widow* began in the fall of 2017, in the aftermath of the #MeToo movement. In a 2021 Yahoo Entertainment article, Johansson (who starred in and executive produced the film) said “We had to comment on what is this incredible movement of women supporting other women... you cannot miss the opportunity to draw the comparison between these two things [abuse of women at the hand of Harvey Weinstein and the fictional Black Widow program]” (Polowy, 2021). It is important that *Black Widow*’s solo film was only able to get off the ground when there were calls for change in how women in the film industry (both behind and in front of the camera) were treated. *Wonder Woman* was released in May earlier that year and made over 800 million dollars — the appetite for more female superhero was tangible. The financial success of *Wonder Woman* and the #MeToo movement were the jumpstart needed to get the ball moving.

From the beginning, Marvel Studios wanted to hire a female director. Feige and others in the inner circle thought it was important and necessary for *Black Widow*’s solo film to be directed by someone assigned female at birth because of the lack of diversity in the past. Even though Feige had been the head of Marvel Studios since practically the beginning, the first non-white person to direct a Marvel film was Taika Waititi — director of *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017) and the first woman was Anna Boden, who co-directed *Captain Marvel* (2019) with her creative partner Ryan Fleck. In 2018, Feige said “I think you’ll see more and more [diversity] in front of the camera, behind the camera... Certainly with the support of Bob Iger and Alan Horn at

Disney, we want these movies to reflect the world in which they are made” (Erbland, 2018). Just like how *Black Panther* was not just a film about a black superhero, but also about Black identity, *Black Widow* was meant to be the same catalyst for women. Even though *Captain Marvel* came out a few years before, her character did not have the same history with the fans as Black Widow. Neither film was able to just be its own film to propel the character development and plot of the MCU, it had to also be a political statement a burden that none of the white male lead characters had to carry.

A prominent theme in *Black Widow* is her bodily autonomy: she was raised to be an assassin by the State since she was a child and when she got out, she was a soldier for an American (and then independent) military force. She’d had surgeries done to her body against her will and the camera shoved in front of her naked body for no other logical purpose than to show her changing clothes. *Black Widow* was supposed to be the antithesis to the previous treatment of her. Somewhere along the way, this meant not sexualizing her at all. In a test screening for the film, there was a shot of Natasha in a t-shirt and underwear getting out of bed. The audience complained that this was the male gaze (Clarke, 2021). The director Cate Shortland did not think of it that way. “I enjoy how sexy she is, as long as she’s in control” (Clarke, 2021). There are still signs of this attitude in the final cut of the film: a shot of Natasha’s sweatpants-cloaked behind as she carries an empty gasoline can to her car. A shot of her bruised back as she changes clothes in front of her adoptive sister. Although there was a consensus that *Black Widow* “deserved” her own movie, there was no agreement on the right way to do that. This is not unique to Marvel — the modern feminism movement is constantly fighting a battle against those that seek to corporatize or capitalize on the images or symbols of feminism without

arguing for any sustainable change or being intersectional. In a study conducted by San Diego State's Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film, not only were female characters outnumbered by male characters 2 to 1 in movies released in 2021, but more than half of these female characters were white. Importantly when movies like *Encanto* (2021), *Shang-Chi and the Ten Rings* (2021), other films which feature a minority, majority cast, this percentage becomes greater (Sun, 2022). So far, all the female Marvel superheroes we have seen on the big screen — Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, Captain Marvel — have been white. At the time of this writing, there are set plans for super-heroines of color to be introduced, but again, this was a conscious choice made by people in power to only introduce these characters after the most popular ones had already passed away or moved on.

In *Avengers: Endgame*, there is a sequence in the final battle where all the female superheroes line up perfectly in the frame of the camera. The camera starts on Captain Marvel as she takes the Infinity Gauntlet from Spider-Man, then Scarlet Witch and Valkyrie join her on her left side, with Wanda saying “Don’t worry.” “She’s got help”, Okoye finishes, with Pepper Potts, Mantis and Shuri, circling around Captain Marvel as the camera pans across and then pulls out, widening the frame and allowing the Wasp, Gamora, and Nebula to join the group. The music swells and for a moment, it is clear that this was supposed to come off as a celebration of girl power. Watching it, it is impossible to not think about the woman that started it all and yet was absent. Now that Black Widow’s journey in the MCU was over, people look at who she passed the torch to. Yelena Belova, her adoptive sister, was introduced in *Black Widow* and was recently featured in the Disney Plus series *Hawkeye*, alongside Jeremy Renner’s Clint Barton and the new character of Kate Bishop (played by Hailee Steinfeld). Yelena and Clint’s relationship in the

show is defined by Natasha's death. Yelena blames Clint, he blames himself, and together they both come to terms with the fact that it is no one's fault and they both have to move on. Tony Stark's death and Steve Roger's absence, while acknowledged, are not treated the same way — their removal from the MCU is not seen as something that should not have happened or is debated by characters in the film. Natasha is the only one who seems to haunt those that loved her.

Just like how the fans had been campaigning for a *Black Widow* movie, so had Scarlett Johansson been working on getting paid what she was owed. She made an effort to point switch while she was one of the highest-grossing actresses (that is, the movies she was in made a lot of money), she was not one of the highest-paid. While her net worth was estimated at 165 million dollars, she served as a flashpoint for what a female action star's salary should be. In July 2021, Johansson sued the Walt Disney Company for breach of contract for releasing *Black Widow* in theaters and on Disney Plus simultaneously, arguing that this decision cost her potential bonuses from ticket sales, on top of her 20 million dollar salary for the film (Masters, 2021). When news of this lawsuit went public, many on social media painted this as a “girl boss” moment, an example of a “real life superhero” fighting for herself and all those that would come after her. The lawsuit was eventually settled with undisclosed terms in September of the same year. Male actors of Marvel films never had to deal with this issue.

*Black Widow* has a long and colorful history in the printed Marvel comics and in the MCU. Scarlett Johansson portrayed the character in every live-action iteration of the character. She started as a supporting character in *Iron Man 2* and ended as the titular character of her own movie in 2021. Unlike other male characters that she shared the screen with, Natasha

Romanoff's fate was dictated by the fans to a much stronger degree. If it was not for the fan's insistence on a solo movie for her, there probably would not have been one. *Black Widow* came out after *Endgame* and instead took place in-universe after *Captain America: Civil War*, a movie that came out in 2016. Marvel guaranteed its rewatch ability by including the character Yelena Belova — *Black Widow* may be the last chapter of Natasha's story, but it serves as the first chapter of Yelena's. Someone can now watch the movie not just for Black Widow, but also for Yelena, a character that has already been featured in two different Marvel productions. Marvel has more female superheroes already lined up, including Ms. Marvel and Kate Bishop, all of them connected to already established superheroes, demonstrating once again that these films and television shows benefit from their relation to other movies. This same phenomenon happened with the third Spider-Man film, *No Way Home*.

#### Part Four: *No Way Home* and the Power of Fans

The COVID-19 pandemic changed many things about life that were thought of as unchangeable and one of those things was the importance of theatrical exhibitions to movie production companies. What was once a guaranteed way for production studios and distribution companies to make a profit disappeared overnight. Production companies dealt with this problem in a myriad of ways: some released their films on affiliated streaming platforms, others postponed their releases a year or two in advance. *Black Widow* was one of these effected films, released on Disney's streaming platform Disney Plus and in theaters simultaneously in July 2021. *The Eternals* was released exclusively released in theaters in November 2021 before being shared on Disney Plus in January of 2022. When it came to the next Marvel film, *Spiderman: No Way Home*, Marvel decided to stick with an exclusive theater release. Theaters were open by December 2021 and the executives at Marvel seemed to think that enough people would risk exposure to a pulmonary virus in order to find out what happens in the highly anticipated conclusion to the MCU iteration of Spider-Man. This bet paid off, with *No Way Home* making over one billion dollars in twelve days, the first film to make that much since the pandemic started (Pallotta, 2021). This would not have happened if it was not for the fan culture that Marvel had been building for the last thirteen years.

Spider-Man has had a long history on the silver and big screen. Various children's cartoons of the character have been on television since the sixties, but it was not until 2002 that a live-action Spider-Man grace the big screen. Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy could be thought of as a precursor to much of the MCU: setting box office records, pigeonholing the actors with their characters, and a combination of practical and computer generated effects. Not until ten

years later did Sony make another Spider-Man film, *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), to keep their copyright of the character. Since the beginning of the MCU, Spider-Man and Marvel fans alike had been hoping that Spider-Man could make an appearance, despite the legal complications of a character owned by Sony being used in a Disney production (Stewart, 2014). Unknowingly to the fans, Sony (specifically producer Amy Pascal) and Marvel (Kevin Feige) came to an agreement and announced in 2015 the joint venture between Sony and Disney to produce a new Spider-Man film (Marvel.com, 2015). Sony would continue to finance, distribute, and have final creative control over the Spider-Man films, as well as secure most of the profits, but one would only know this if they read the news — this did not come across on the screen. For all intents and purposes, Spider-Man films made after 2015 were Marvel films. The Marvel comic book origin of the superhero and the films inclusion of a Marvel Studio's logo, made it impossible to forget.

Now that Spider-Man walks around in Disney's California Adventure theme park greeting guests, the bond between Spider-Man and Marvel Studios is much tighter than its bond with Sony. Tom Holland's casting as the famous superhero was announced in 2015 to an approving consensus — people were excited to see the new iteration of the web-slinging hero. Holland's Spider-Man was first seen in *Captain America: Civil War* (2017). This interpretation of his character was markedly different from others that had come before, primarily in the lack of an origin story. When the audience is introduced to Peter Parker in *Civil War*, he has already been bitten by a radioactive spider and been sneaking around as Spider-Man for months. He is taken under the wing of billionaire Tony Stark and is gifted advanced technology by a mentor that acts like he's annoyed by his pupil, but in reality is quite caring about him. This departure



from past iterations made the new Spider-Man quintessential to the MCU, in that his plot and character development was closely tied with other characters and subplots from other films. His individual film, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* came out in 2017, after a long and extensive marketing program that included a Dave & Buster's arcade game and an application that would give users access to Peter Parker's cell phone. The film was well received, grossing over 800 million dollars and was praised for its youthful energy and Holland's interpretation of the character (Robinson 2017, Lee 2017). While Sony's logo played at the beginning of the film, the inclusion of Iron Man and other iconic Marvel characters and settings turned that logo into something that meant the movie was Sony in name only. Spider-Man would not appear again until the double feature of *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, two years later.

At the end of *Infinity War*, when (spoiler alert) Thanos snaps his fingers and erases half of all life in the universe, Peter Parker is one of the casualties. His is the last character death we see in *Infinity War*, and is given the most screen time. When his character is resurrected in *Endgame*, he received the second-largest cheer in my theater on opening night, right behind Black Panther. *Endgame*'s conclusion positioned Spider-Man as the successor to Tony Stark's mantle. He was one of the three people that spoke with Tony before he died and was in the front of his funeral procession.

The second Spider-Man film, *Far from Home*, was released in 2019, two months after *Endgame*. The film dealt with the aftermath of Tony's death and Spider-Man's new position in the world. It ends on a cliffhanger with Spider-Man's true identity being leaked to the whole world, for the first time in the character's cinematic history. Nick Fury and Maria Hill, who were actually Skrulls — alien creatures that were first introduced in the MCU in *Captain Marvel* —

and S.H.I.E.L.D. were a major presence in *Far from Home*, with a post credit scene that disclosed the location of the real Nick Fury. All of Spider-Man's suits (with the exception of his original one) were built and given to him by Tony, a large deviation from the comic book origin of the character who is working class and manufactures his own suit and web technology. Although there was discussion about this change by fans when *Homecoming* came out, the general consensus was that if these changes were made in exchange for the Marvel connectedness, then it was worth it. An engadget article from 2017 summed up this sentiment, saying,

“the technology in *Homecoming* isn't frivolous. It's all tied back to the characters in some form. The first few features we come across make it clear that Tony Stark is trying to mold Peter Parker into an ideal superhero, ... At the same time, all of the built-in safety features show how much he thinks about protecting his protege. And when Peter decides to hack the restrictions in his suit, it's a classic act of teenage rebellion” (Hardawar, 2017).

This quote sums up an attitude that has been present throughout this paper — that as long as changes to the source material are done for the benefit of the characters, then it is acceptable. In the case of Spider-Man there was so much source material to draw from, Marvel Studios needed to do new things.

It is nearly forgotten now in the consciousness of Marvel fans, but there was a time when *Far from Home* was Spider-Man's last Marvel film. After this movie's release, Sony and Marvel's contract was up and neither company could come to an agreement on new terms, so Spider-Man reverted to Sony. This caused an outrage unseen in the Marvel fandom, with fans casting Sony as the greedy villainous corporation and Marvel Studios as the down-on-its-luck company that was just trying to bring pleasure to the fans. In a popular post from the Marvel

subreddit (over thirteen thousand upvotes) made on August 20, 2019, one user expresses their outrage. The comment is titled, “This is bullshit. I won't watch any Spider-Man related material made by Sony going forward. I'm fucking done. We can't have anything nice” with the body of the post being

“Why are they [Sony] so greedy? Marvel have given them their highest grossing Spiderman film to date and then this. Fuck Sony... Hopefully Feige can step in for some mediation... the MCU just won't feel the same losing the set up in FFH [Far from Home]” (WolverineKuzuri93).

The thousand of replies to this comment expressed much of the same sentiment, anger at Sony, hope in Kevin Feige, dismay that the cliffhanger ending of *Far From Home* would never be resolved. Sony Picture’s chairman and CEO at the time Tony Vinciguerra addressed this anger at a Variety summit on September 5, 2019, saying that there was no ill will between the two companies and that there is always the possibility of him returning to the MCU. However, Sony has its own universe of superheroes and are able to put together franchise films just fine (Will, 2019). Fans of MCU’s Spider-Man were not appeased. The situation became so dire, that even Tom Holland personally spoke with Disney’s CEO at the time Bob Iger and Sony’s chairman Tom Rothamn several times to plead his case for keeping Spider-Man in the MCU. In a Hollywood Reporter story from October 2019, writers Tatiana Siegel and Borys Kit paint his actions like a David versus Goliath situation. They said, “But in true Peter Parker-underdog fashion, an unlikely hero emerged to reconcile the two warring factions... Tom Holland” (Siegel and Kit, 2019). The hashtag #SaveSpiderman was omnipresent on Twitter those few weeks between when the announcement that Spider-Man was leaving the MCU and when it was announced that Marvel and Sony had come to an agreement and Spider-Man would indeed stay

within the MCU. Later in an appearance on the Jimmy Kimmel show, Iger recounted Holland's efforts to push for a reconciliation between the two companies in the context of a familial dispute. Kimmel prompted him, saying "Like two divorced parents coming together and figuring it out," and Iger responded "Sometimes companies when they're negotiating, or other people are negotiating, they forget there are other people who actually matter" (Kimmel 2019). After the Spider-Man dispute, it was clear the MCU was no longer (or maybe never) media that was made by others and then handed to the audience in a completed form, never to be altered. In moments of stress, fans utilized their collective power and reversed a decision that they did not agree with.

Once it was finalized that Holland's Spider-Man would remain in the MCU, the hype began to build around the third installment of the MCU Spider-Man trilogy. The plots of all Marvel films are kept under wraps to an unusual level to avoid spoilers and this third film was no different. The only confirmed characters by the end of 2019 were Peter Parker, MJ, and Doctor Steven Strange. The mystery only heightened the hype for the film. A year passed and no one even knew what the title was. There was a lot of attention on this fact when at the end of February 2021, Tom Holland, Zendaya, and Jacob Batalon (the actor who plays Ned, Peter Parker's best friend) released new stills from the film along with fake titles on their Instagram accounts. This trolling was received very positively by the fans and with the new images that were shared in conjunction, more hype was generated for the film (Sharma, 2021). I can speak for myself that before these Instagram posts, The third Spider-Man film was not on my radar, but after the Instagram posts (which I shared with my dad and sister), I was more excited for this film that for the longest time was simply words on the screen or an idea. It was now a real concrete thing with pictures and a logo. A few days later, Sony posted a video titled "The New

Spider-Man Title is...” that feature Holland, Zendaya, and Batalon in front of Jon Watt’s office (the director of the previous two Spider-Man movies), exasperated because Watts keeps giving them fake titles. When Holland asks why he keeps doing that, Batalon and Zendaya quickly explain it’s because he keeps leaking spoilers to the press. Holland is aghast as they walk through the Sony offices, past a white board that reveals the title of the film, *No Way Home* (Sony Pictures, 2021). This short thirty second video garnered millions of views and many guesses about what the plot of the film would be, but it also assumed that the viewer was already knowledgeable about many facts of the MCU and its actors. For example, one must already know that Jon Watts directed the first two Spider-Man films. Secondly, the joke about the principal cast being given fake titles was dependent on the fact that the viewer was aware of Holland’s past antics. There was no verbal identification of the actors with their characters — the onus lied entirely with the viewer to make the connection.

With the inclusion of Doctor Strange and the newly revealed film title, many fans began to suspect that the plot would involve the multiverse. The multiverse is a concept from the Marvel comics that there are multiple universe with numerous variations of the same superhero. In the context of this film, fans thought that the Spider-Man and their villains from the past Sony films would make an appearance. In the years since Raimi’s *Spider-Man* trilogy premiered, it developed a cult following. There is an entire subreddit titled “Raimi Memes” that is entirely dedicated to the creation and sharing of memes made from material from the Raimi trilogy. *The Amazing Spider-Man* trilogy has a different fandom. This was probably because Andrew Garfield was marketed during the time of social media and was more in tune with the younger generation. Markedly, Garfield’s Spider-Man interpretation was not as widely positively received as

Holland's or Magurie's Spider-Man (Betancourt, 2022). Part of the reason for this was that fans did not see a point for a remake, while others thought that Garfield's character was not "nerd" enough. But as time passed, the initial negative reaction of Garfield's Spider-Man faded away and grew more positive over time (Lue, 2021). When the concept of the multiverse came up, the idea of both other Spider-Men being there was nothing other than fantastical. The reunion of all live-action Spider-Men was attractive not because people liked all the Spider-Man individually, but because of the idea of them being all together at once. Reactions from fans after *No Way Home* premiered demonstrated how important this was to fans of the superhero. Comments from a YouTube video that is a compilation of behind the scene footage and interviews with the three Spider-Man actors showcase the emotional reactions fans had to this film:

"We will remember this for the rest of our lives telling our kids about how 3 Spider-Man came together in one film that was over 20years in the making but the theater experience was amazing it can't be repeated" (RyoofWildfire).

"Honestly, it's just beautiful the way Feige's putting together all the disparate elements of Marvel's lore (which Marvel had to sell off to various companies) elegantly, harmoniously and touchingly. As a casual fan, I feel like Stan Lee's legacy is so very secure and honored under Feige's leadership" (Hizzad Dinno).

"My favorite moment was the last hug of the spideys, felt like it was the actors who are expressing their love to each other" (TheDrunkenBeast).

While in hindsight this looked like a successful idea, it was not until the animated Sony film *Into the Spider-verse* (2018) premiered proved that multiple Spider-Men interacting was a profitable film concept and it may have influenced the direction that Marvel wanted to take.

On August 23, 2021, Marvel released the first teaser trailer for *No Way Home* as a part of San Diego's Comic-Con. It shows that Spider-Man's identity is revealed, and to reverse this, Peter Parker visits Doctor Strange to cast a spell. It goes wrong and different villains and heroes

from various universes appear in the MCUs. The trailer quickly garnered millions of views, reaching over 355.5 million global views over the first twenty-four hours, eclipsing the previous record of most trailer views set by Avengers Endgame of 289 million (D'Alessandro and Tartaglione, 2021). The reveal of Otto Octavius/Doctor Octopus at the end of the trailer, the villain from *Spider-Man 2* (2004) and a fan-favorite was a source of immense pleasure for fans, me included. People created side by side images of his character in the 2004 movie and the 2021 version, comparing how much (and how little) the physical presentation of the character had changed (Together We Know 2021, Hyperstar Heroes 2021). The shot of a Green Goblin bomb with his signature laugh haunting the voice-over was also a point that many fans obsessed over, ecstatic that the first live-action Spider-man villain was all but confirmed to be in the film, as comments on the first trailer demonstrated. Here are some examples, all these comments with thousands of likes:

“I LOST MY SHIT AT THE GREEN GOBLIN BOMB” (CistReactZ).

“The nostalgia just seeing Green Goblins pumpkin grenade and Willem Dafoe's perfect evil laugh” (EaglezZ 830).

“Green Goblin's grenade with his terror, fiendish, bone-chilling laugh and Dr Oc's "Hello Peter" gives me alot of goosebumps. I'm so thrilled right now” (Erwin Smith).

“The thing that everyone is so hyped about Green Goblin and Doc Octopus is how well the actors played their roles so many years ago.....” (Sarvad Paygude).

“That ‘hello peter’ of doctor oct was the greatest comeback of 2021” (Silver Lemonade).

There was little to no conversation around Holland's Spider-Man, MJ, Doctor Strange, or any of the other characters specific to the MCU on the popular forums of Reddit and Twitter — the focus was entirely on the new (relative to the MCU) characters that the audience might be able to

see. The official trailer released on November 16, 2021 was not all that different. It featured more shots of the different Spider-Man villains, including Electro, Lizard, and Sandman. Two shots that sparked a lot of conversation and theorizing was one where all three villains are lined up in a row and Holland's Spider-Man is the only one going against them. Based on the shot composition, many fans thought there are actually two other Spider-Men in this shot that were covered up for the sake of the trailer (Hood 2021, Coulson 2021). Another shot that fans gathered around was the last one of the trailer which showed MJ falling off some scaffolding and Spider-Man jumping down to try and reach her. This immediately drew comparisons to Gwen Stacy's death (another one of Peter Parker's love interest) in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014). People even edited together videos quickly cutting back and forth between the two films to emphasize the similarities and played a Taylor Swift song in the background ("I think I've seen this film before / And I didn't like the ending") (zdimpleillegirl, 2021). This moment was also made into gif sets that one could easily post on various social media sites without the risk of copyright infringement (nikkio, 2021). As a casual fan watching this play out, the fan and meme material that was cultivated from the official trailers made me more interested in watching the film. The jokes were funny and I knew there would be more made after the film came out and I wanted to understand those as well, even if at the time of this writing, I barely remembered any of tweets I thought were so funny. They didn't stick with me, but at the time they felt important. Like with *Endgame*, I wanted to be included in the fun. I wanted to see if the theories would end up being true. By November, the hype was at an all time high.

*Spider-Man: No Way Home* premiered on December 17, 2021. It opened exclusively in theaters, as early as six in the evening the Thursday before its official release date. I managed to



remain spoiler free until I watched it with my family Saturday of its opening weekend. The audience was comprised of people of all ages, ranging from people in their fifties like my dad to children that looked like they were not even alive when *The Amazing Spider-Man* came out in 2012. I suspected that most of them had already seen this film based on their subdued reactions to the several cameos in the film, the first one being Charlie Cox as Matt Murdock — blind lawyer during the day, the superhero Daredevil at night. Cox played the same character in a television show made by Netflix that ran from 2015-2018. Before *No Way Home* came out, Murdock's occupation as a lawyer and Peter Parker's forthcoming legal troubles made fans believe that it could be possible for Cox to reprise his role as Daredevil for *No Way Home*. And to fans' excitement, this was exactly what happened. He was included in one scene of the film, but because of his inclusion, it was memorable. The camera is unfocused at first when a white cane suddenly moves into frame. My audience gasped as the camera turned and panned up to reveal Matt Murdock. He talks with Peter Parker and Aunt May about the best course of action for them to take now that Peter's cover is blown, but the conversation itself is entirely meaningless. The shots are simple shot, reverse shot of the different characters talking, but the mere presence of Cox's Daredevil made it difficult to focus. I remember having to ask my father in the theater if this was the same actor from the Netflix series.

One of the main themes running throughout the films is references to memes from the other Spider-Men films. One of the first examples of this in *No Way Home* is a line by William Dafoe's Norman Osborn. In the first *Spider-Man*, there is a scene where he smiles and says, "You know, I am something of a scientist myself" (2002). In the twenty years since this film came out, this line became a popular meme, circulating outside of Raimi communities and into

the general internet population. As the website Know Your Meme chronicles, the quote was first used in a joke on 4chan in 2016 before spreading to the Raimi subreddit and then eventually spreading to the general internet as people altered the quote to make their more convoluted jokes (Know Your Meme). In *No Way Home*, there is a scene where Osborn interjects into a conversation and says the same line, with the exact same voice inflections and tone. When I watched this in theaters, the audience chuckled a little at this moment. There are several other moments like this, where characters refer to moments from their previous movies that became fan-favorites to the pleasure of the audience — even if it feels out of left field in *No Way Home*, and like it does not fit the tone of the moment. It was more important to have those bits for the sake of the audience’s pleasure, rather than the story. The scene where MJ falls off the scaffolding — the one where fans thought that Andrew Garfield’s Spider-Man would save her — turned out to be correct. He does save her and the camera lingers on his face afterwards as he soaks in his redemption — a redemption that came eight years later and in a totally different film in a totally different universe. This affected the visual nature of the film, with certain shots and sequences being included to satisfy the audience. This practice of crafting situations and making artistic choices to make fans happy is a popular phenomenon called fan service\*. It can happen in written works, as well as television shows and movies, with the creator purposely adding things, sometimes as superficial as a specific costume or as meaningful as a plot point, but either way, this means that the creator is aware of what the fans want and are willing to satisfy the demands. Fan service is extremely common in the MCU.

*No Way Home* made a lot of money quickly, eventually making over a billion dollars, the first film since the COVID pandemic to accomplish this feat. This would not have happened if it

was not for the long emotional build up that Marvel and Sony encouraged and the fan service that people wanted to see. In the comments section of a YouTube video titled, “Spider-Man No Way Home: Tobey and Andrew's Theme | EPIC EMOTIONAL (Fan-Made)”, people expressed their emotional relationship with the characters and *No Way Home*. One user wrote,

“This movie....  
it was a love letter to the Tobey Fans.  
It gave Andrew the respect, conclusion and redemption he deserved as Spiderman  
It evolved Tom to more than just someone who was apprenticed by Iron Man, taught him  
the true meaning of being a hero and set him on his path to be his own Spiderman  
Brave New Worlds for them all” (Tekunin5).

This comment reflects on the different take aways that fans came away with after watching the film. The fans of the different Spider-Men focused on their character and ignored every thing else about the film. In the aftermath of *No Way Home*'s theatrical release, many fans went onto social media and expressed their different desires for the various characters in the film. One of the most popular sentiments that I saw was that Andrew Garfield's Spider-Man should have a third *Amazing Spider-Man* film. In a new Sony film coming out next year titled *Morbius* which supposedly takes place in the same Sony-Marvel universe, as *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Venom* (2018) because there is a shot in the trailer where there is street art of Spider-Man in the background with “Murderer” graffitied across it. Another one was that Tobey Maguire's Spider-Man deserved the fourth *Spider-Man* film that was cancelled in 2010 when it was still in pre-production. The fact that *No Way Home* included so much fan service and brought what the fans wanted, it made them think that these other films had the same possibility existing as *No Way Home*. After all, if all three Spider-Men could be in the same film, why couldn't all these other films happen? This is also reflected in the marketing for the digital and Blu-Ray release for the

film that is unfolding at the time of this writing. One video on Twitter that has over one million views posted by Sony promoting the at home release of *No Way Home* is centered entirely around Andrew Garfield's Spider-Man. It makes the same connections as the fans did with Gwen Stacy and MJ falling. The reaction to this promotional material is mostly positive, with fans replying with their fan cams\* and demands for a third *Amazing Spider-Man* film. This can be found in all social media posts from Marvel and is something that has remained a constant for years.

Spider-Man is one of Marvel's most popular characters. The box office performances of the films that prove that. Maybe what makes Tom Holland's Spider-Man so successful is the knowledge that at any moment, there is the possibility that the legal contracts that enable the collaboration between Sony and Marvel could collapse at any moment, as the incident in 2019 showed. Everything was built on each other, so when *No Way Home* was released nearly two years into a global pandemic, it was still able to perform well above average. It is difficult to say if this was just a fluke. *Black Widow* and *The Eternals* did not have the same box office performance, but this could have been for many reasons outside of the pandemic. *The Eternals* introduced completely new characters and *Black Widow* was released in theaters and Disney Plus simultaneously. As time passes, it is impossible to know how theatrical exhibition will evolve to adjust to this state of things, but at the writing of this paper, it is clear that franchises with tent-pole pictures that have long developed audiences will continue to be the films that have the widest releases and make the most money.

## Conclusion

This paper set out to show how the MCU has courted its fan base over the past ten years and because of this successful activity, theatrical exhibitions will continue to be profitable. I analyzed the MCU through different frames of reference to take advantage of the wide range of films and nuances that Marvel films and television shows have. Afterwards, it is clear that the fandom has great power in determining the narratives that the MCU pursues as well as keeping theatrical exhibitions profitable. As the MCU continues to develop and focus more on its television shows, it is probable that Marvel Studios will lean even more on the fans desires — as has already been hinted in the casting of Evan Peters (who played Quicksilver in Fox's *X-Men* franchise) as a fake Pietro Maximoff in WandaVision — in order to keep their audience happy.

Part One of this paper summarized the history of superhero movies in Hollywood and contextualized it in the case of *Iron Man*, the first film of the MCU. The films I looked at in the history of superhero movies were narrowed down to live-action flicks that were marketed as films for the general audience because these were the most similar to films in the MCU. In the nearly eighty years of superhero films prior to the MCU, certain practices were informally established that the MCU built on and made their own, making *Iron Man* and the other Marvel films that came after indisputable successes.

Part Two of this paper looked at a specific period of the MCU — the months between February 2018 and April 2019 — and analyzed why this time period was so important for Marvel. Films like *Black Panther* and *Captain Marvel* were many firsts for Marvel while *Infinity War* and *Endgame* were the conclusion of a drawn-out saga. By looking at a specific period of time, I wanted to show how quickly circumstances could change and that these films and the fan

conversation around them were often years in the making. This period was also the first time that the spotlight was on superheroes who identified as women and people of color, previewing the new direction that Marvel Studios would be taking. *Eternals*, released in November 2021, featured a cast of many people of colors and sexualities in front of and behind the camera.

Part Three traced the journey of Black Widow in the MCU, as played by Scarlett Johansson, and studied how the politics of the time influenced the fans' attitude towards her and her story. Even though Captain Marvel was technically the first MCU film with a female superhero as the titular character, Black Widow's film was still important because of the overdue nature of it. The fact that there are still only two superhero films starring women (three if one counts *The Ant-Man and the Wasp* — a male and female duo), shows that there is still a lot of unexplored characters and conflicts from the comics. Catherine Shortland was also the first solo female director of an MCU movie, and it is not an encouraging thing that filmmakers who identify as female are only able to get work when the film is about a woman. There has been much more diversity in the creative roles of the MCU television shows, with women and people of color directing numerous episodes and acting for both *WandaVision* and *Loki*.

Part Four took all the lessons we learned from the previous three chapters and applied them to the case of *Spider-Man: No Way Home*. The success of this movie in COVID times is in part due to the power of fandom. This film, along with *Black Panther*, are also examples of how the award circuit struggled with the pressure of fans to recognize these films yet also maintain the perceived high art reputation of awards like the Oscars. In 2022's Oscar ceremony, the Academy included a "Fan Favorite Moment" and "Favorite Movie of 2021" award, where people could cast their votes online for the most cheer-worthy moment of a film and a fan favorite

movie of 2021. Out of the top five clips chosen in this year's Oscars, two of them were from MCU movies, one of them being *No Way Home*. *No Way Home* was also included in the top five fan favorite movies of 2021. No award was given to these films, just a soft round of applause by the people in the audience, but it did speak to the struggle of reconciling majoring financially successful movies with the fans that believe these films are award-worthy.

Like I said at the beginning of this paper, one of the difficulties with writing about the MCU is that it is still ongoing. Movies are coming out, TV shows are being released on Disney Plus and there is always speculation about what Marvel will focus on next. The fact that Marvel has never seen a dip in box office returns over the near fourteen years of its existence is a feat that is unmatched, and only comparable with franchises like *Star Wars* (Bean, 2020). But even then, there are markable differences between these two — the main one being that Marvel Studios has retained its creative executive team, for the most part. I mentioned the fact that these films are planned out years in advance. The actors that played Black Panther and Captain Marvel were casted in 2016, years before their respective films were released. This rigorous planning gives fans freedom to not worry when the next installment will be or if the universe will ever come to a close. After fourteen years and a global pandemic, it seems that Marvel films are here to stay. Despite the rising cost of tickets and possibility of watching the film at home through streaming services, people are still willing to come out to the theater to watch these films. Why? One reason is because Disney waits to release their films exclusively in theaters before putting them up onto Disney Plus a few months later. This encourages people to go to the theater and watch the film before spoilers are circulated online and the marketing of the digital release. Another is because the theater still provides a unique experience that cannot be replicated at

home. This promise is what brings the public into the theaters even with the possibility of infection. The appetite for Marvel media is still unsatisfied, with a new generation of people that grew up watching these films and the deep well of comic characters that are waiting to be adapted. The large variety means that there is something for everybody and that it is only a matter of time before one that speaks to everyone will be brought to life on the screen.

In this paper, I set out to show that the MCU should not be written off as blockbuster movies or junk food, but are actually doing something in cinema that has never been done previously. Franchises and multi-media intellectual property are nothing new, but the way that Marvel Studios has integrated different storylines into its over a dozen and growing number of films is new and may be the key for maintaining profitable theatrical exhibitions for both production companies and distributors alike. The audience reaction is another aspect of the film that can be just as entertaining as the film itself. There is an entire genre of videos on YouTube that catalog the audio and sometimes visual reaction of theaters during certain aspects of a film. Many of the popular ones are for Marvel films. This is the factor that separates them from other large franchises and will keep theatrical exhibitions a risk-free venture for years to come. Unlike other franchises like *Star Wars*, merchandise or video games are not a large part of the formula when it comes to Marvel Studios making money. Whenever I browse the toy aisles at Target or other department stores, I am always struck by the lack of merchandise for Marvel films. There are actions figures and gauntlets for the most popular character, but there is no collectable culture like there is for *Star Wars* or other franchises. There are also not a large variety of video games that feature superheroes in their MCU iteration. At the beginning of the MCU, video games were often released in tandem with the films, but this practice faded out with time. The first video



game that was supposed to use the imagery and likeness of the characters from the MCU was Square Enix's Avengers, released in 2020 to mixed reviews. Many people did not appreciate the format of the game that relied on multiplayer gaming and paying for extra characters instead of unlocking them through the story. Disney is also just starting to tap into the theme park potential of the MCU, opening a new land in California Adventure Land called "Avenger's Campus" which consists of a Spider-Man ride, a food court named after Doctor Strange and a multitude of cast members walking around dressed like superheroes.

Over the course of writing this paper, my view of Marvel changed. In studying the way that the Marvel fandom operates, I looked back on my own history as a fan and recalled a moment in 2018, when I was deep in my fandom experience. I was on vacation at California's Adventure Park with my family at the base of the Guardians of the Galaxy ride (what used to be the Hollywood Tower of Terror), when a cast member dressed as Captain America appeared out of nowhere. I gasped and raced to my dad so he could take a picture with his camera. But as soon as he had appeared, Captain America was gone, disappearing into the backstage area. When we looked at the pictures later, we discovered that my dad had taken a perfect shot of him. I studied his costume and could not find a single fault — it was as if he had jumped out of the film screen and stood right in front of me. Captain America was never my favorite character in the MCU — nor was Chris Evans a favorite actor of mine. But in that moment, when the scent of funnel cake filled my nose and the Black Panther theme played over the loudspeakers, I felt like a child meeting their idol. This same trip I had seen princesses and characters from animated films, none of them elicited this kind of response from me. Even now, looking back at this moment, I can't remember a time where I felt as starstruck. I know that the emotions that I experienced were

unprecedented for me and would not happen again. It didn't matter that the man bared little resemblance to Chris Evans, he was Captain America to me and everybody else in the park. Through the powerful narratives constructed through their movies and television shows, Marvel Studios has created and maintained a media ecosystem that relies on spectacle and group experiences that will keep theatrical exhibitions a necessary component of the Marvel experience. Only time will tell if this continues or if Marvel stretches itself too thin and starts to compete against itself, with Marvel content now permanently on Disney Plus. However, with a company that has always seemed to defy the odds and is still making box office history fourteen years after its inception, my bet is on the Avengers.



## Glossary

Comic-Con International: More colloquially known as Comic-Con, or Comic-Con San Diego, Comic-Con is a convention that is “dedicated to creating the general public’s awareness of and appreciation of comics and related popular art forms, including participation in and support of public presentations, conventions, exhibits, museums and other public outreach activities which celebrate the historic and ongoing contribution of comics to art and culture” (SDCC Mission Statement). The convention has origins in the 1970s and as the decades have passed, attendance has only gone up, peaking at 130,000 people. Comic-Con has become a place for Marvel to make major announcements for the films, such as the casting of major characters, showing trailers for the first time, and sharing the release dates of movies. Casts of movies soon to release hold panels and sign autographs, allowing an opportunity for fans that are present to reconnect with Marvel and the fans throughout the world to follow along on social media.

Cosplay: Short for “costume” and “play”, cosplay refers to the practice of dressing up like fictional characters from a movie, television show, video game, etc.. Costumes can range in intricacy from a couple of thrift store finds to handmade costumes worth thousands of dollars. Popular contexts for cosplaying in the Marvel fandom are fan conventions and film premiers.

Easter Egg: The term “easter egg” originally referred to a message, image, or feature hidden in the software of a video game. Over time, this term has loosened in its definition and is now applied to any hidden thing in media. In film, this usually takes the form of props in the background of a shot or a throwaway line of dialogue that hints at future or other movies in the

same cinematic universe, or made by the same production company, or even signatures of the director.

**Fandom:** The state of being a fan of something, usually in the context of a large community.

Historically, fandom first came into existence at the time of serials in the late 19th century with Sherlock Holmes. This practice extended into science fiction literature, when the first conventions were held in the early and mid 20th centuries. Newsletters and mailing lists were the primary way that fans communicated and stayed connected. With the advent of the internet, this all changed, with message boards becoming another outlet for fan gathering. Social media was the next evolution in fan relations and has de-stigmatized fandom and their activities.

**Fan fiction:** A broad term that is used to describe fiction writing that is based on existing characters or media, often done by an amateur writer who receives no compensation for their work. This work was originally published in zines and circulated through photocopies mailed or hand-given to other people. Nowadays, fan fiction is primarily published online on one of the various websites for it, such as [fanfiction.net](http://fanfiction.net), [archiveofourown.org](http://archiveofourown.org), and [Wattpad](http://Wattpad.com). Like all franchises, Marvel has a rich array of various fanfics, some with hundred of thousands of views.

**Fan video/Fan cam:** A fan video, now more recently known as a “fan cam” is a video that is created by an amateur using footage from a movie or television show and editing it to music that either was not in the original work, or reordering the scenes to focus on a specific theme or character arc. This fan practice has roots in the 1980s, where fans of television shows like *Star*

*Trek* and *Blake 7* would record episodes on VHS tape and then use them to edit videos with their choice of music played over them. As technology has advanced, fan cams are now exclusively digital and easier to make, with editing software becoming more advanced and accessible. In the context of Marvel, this manifests in fan cams for specific characters that are meant to be shared on social media and in longer edit videos that are uploaded on Youtube and have multiple layer of visual and sound effects.

Fan Service: Material in a fictional work that is added to please the suspected audience. This can take many forms, such as including sensuality or nudity, or — as in the context of Marvel — include scenes of certain characters interacting or lines being said.

Intellectual Property (IP): According to the World Intellectual Property Organization, IP “refers to creations of the mind, such as inventions; literary and artistic works; designs; and symbols, names and images used in commerce” (WIPO). IP is protected by law in the form of copyrights, trademarks, and patents. For example, different movie production companies own the rights to various superheroes.

Mid-Credit Scene: A bonus scene from the movie that plays in between the above the line and the below the line credits. For Marvel, these scenes usually hint at the next film that is due to come out, or the next film that the character will appear in.

Post-Credit Scene: A bonus scene from the movie that plays at the end of the credits. For Marvel, these scenes are either comedic bits that do not add anything to the plot or a longer scene — sometimes lasting two to three minutes — that connects the present film to a future one.

Retcon: Short for “retroactive continuity”, retcon can be used as a noun or a verb to describe new information that is introduced in a film, television show, novel, or other form of a fictional work, that imposes a different interpretation or meaning to previously described events.

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