

de Groot, Kees , ed. Comics, Culture, and Religion: Faith Imagined. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Bloomsbury Collections. Web. 28 Sep. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350321618>>.

Accessed from: www.bloomsburycollections.com

Accessed on: Thu Sep 28 2023 08:29:54 sentraleuropeisk sommertid

Copyright © Sissel Undheim. Kees de Groot and contributors 2024. This chapter is published open access subject to a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International licence (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>). You may re-use, distribute, and reproduce this work in any medium for non-commercial purposes, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

The Magic of the Multiverse: Easter Eggs, Superhuman Beings, and Metamodernism in Marvel's Story Worlds

Sissel Undheim

Popular culture provides a fertile ground for a host of narratives, symbols, and characters known from history of religions. Dispersed and consumed on a multitude of new emerging media platforms, these narratives, symbols, and characters become ingredients in artistic processes of imagination and adaptation where religion can be played with in a variety of ways. In these processes of production, consumption, and engagement, there are high stakes, but they also create new room for exploring and combining humor and playfulness with awe and “great mystery” in ways that resonate with, but also contribute to contemporary cultural production of religion. Comics has been a very prolific medium in these processes (e.g., Chireau 2019; Clements and Gauvain 2014; Lewis 2014; Salazar 2020; Thomas 2012). In this chapter, I will look at three recent TV series from the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Like other MCU products, these series engage in complex intertextual story worlds based on the Marvel Comics where the protagonists originated. How do various narrative and literary devices, such as “Easter eggs,” multiverses, and contemporary cultural tendencies categorized under the term *metamodernism*, provide means for engagement and social bonds that are reminiscent of contemporary religious engagement? I am particularly interested in how these fictive story worlds open for larger narratives that explore non-empirical “truths” in a post-postmodern universe.

Marvel and Awe in the Cinematic Universe

While the world was in pandemic lockdown, Disney+ and Marvel provided the perfect distraction and entertainment in peoples' own living rooms through their new format: the TV series. Launching what is called the "Fourth Phase" of MCU—the stories that picks up after the closure of one epic cycle with *Avengers: Endgame*—*WandaVision*, *Loki*, and *Moon Knight* marked a new era with a new stage and a new mode of storytelling in the expansive narrative. In addition to the TV-series format available for streaming, the story world of the Fourth Phase is simultaneously developed in comics and in movies for the big screen, such as in *Spiderman—No Way Home* (2022), *Dr Strange and the Multiverse of Madness* (2022), and *Thor, Love and Thunder* (2022).

In the following, I have chosen to focus on three of the first Disney-Marvel TV-series, *WandaVision*, *Loki*, and *Moon Knight*, emphasizing the complex intertextuality and creative productivity that the transmedia story world of Marvel provides and that these three narratives tie into on many different levels.

One of the perhaps most striking aspects of these three TV series (at least for scholars of religion) is how so many of MCU's main characters fit the category "superhuman agents" (Gilhus 2016). In *Moon Knight*, the protagonist is an avatar of the ancient Egyptian God Khonshu,¹ while *Loki* is the Norse god of mischief himself. Wanda Maximoff, the protagonist of *WandaVision*, is in the course of the nine-episode long series revealed to be a witch—the Scarlet Witch, known from Marvel's comics. Her powers are no longer explained to be merely the result of scientific experiments, as in her previous MCU appearances, but are now overtly caused by magic (Dagsland 2022).

All three protagonists are popular characters in Marvel's comics series, and like most other products from MCU, the TV-series work in an intertextual yet independent relationship with the comic books. The levels of realities, characters, and cross-references are almost overwhelming. The combination of comedy, puns, and apocalyptic as well as relational drama take viewers on emotional roller coasters, with new spectacular reveals at almost every turn. One of the things that unites the three examples is the way that these adaptations for a new media format not merely build on and refer to the original comic books characters, but creatively and playfully adapt in sometimes quite innovative ways.

WandaVision

WandaVision was the first of the MCUs and Disney+ move from big screen movies to TV-series format, and much anticipation had been built up among fans prior to its release. The first episode was released on January 15, 2021, and then a new episode was released once a week regularly for nine weeks in total, until March 5. Episode 1 begins as an unmistakably recognizable black-and-white episode of a 50s show, like *I love Lucy*, or *Dick van Dyke*, heavily nodding at the rich self-referentiality of contemporary pop culture. According to Jane Barnette:

To call *WandaVision* “meta” underestimates the levels of self-conscious reflexivity that abound within the larger Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), where referentiality and citation form the very foundation upon which stories are told. Not only do the films pick up on storylines from one another, but they exist within a universe—a multiverse—that includes decades of comic-book iterations of these characters and their backstories (and retcons). (Barnette 2022, 41)

While the format of following episodes was modelled after popular TV-series formats from the subsequent decades, something was still clearly off in Wanda’s world. Not before episode four, however, does the “outside world” break into the television-like life of small-town Westview, or the “Hex,” which turns out to be Wanda’s making. Though not excluding viewers unfamiliar with the comics, small hints along the way rewarded the fan community as bits and pieces were folded into an increasingly more coherent explanation of all the weird things that apparently rubbed against the otherwise so harmonious atmosphere in Wanda’s Westview. Looking at representations of witches in the Scarlet Witch comics from the 1960s and onward, alongside other famous witches from popular culture, Sophie Dagsland has demonstrated how traditional as well as neo-pagan movements and Wicca have influenced the representations of Wanda and Agatha in the original comics, and then have been further elaborated in the TV series (Dagsland 2022).² Powerful, subversive, and, in the comics, difficult to assign to either side of a divide between good and evil, MCUs Wanda from *WandaVision* (and later *Dr. Strange: Multiverse of Madness* 2022) is portrayed as a highly complex woman. No prototypical villain, her emotional pain and humanity is portrayed in ways to make the audience empathize and even side with her. Unaware of her own immense magical powers, it is her grief and pain

that cause her to bewitch the town and everyone in it, in order to recreate her best childhood memories. The viewers learn that in her war-ridden childhood, American TV series provided a calming comfort because her parents put them on to deflect from the loud noise of bombs and fighting. The TV-series format is thus not a funny format gimmick but explained as a result of Wanda's trauma and emotional pain.

Barnette points out how the late-nineteenth-century discourse linked hysteria to witchcraft: "Both seen as afflictions affecting primarily women, witchy and hysterical behaviors have noticeable overlaps as they are described in scientific studies. Even for those unfamiliar with this scholarship, however, the extreme physicality of the [scene where Wanda creates the Hex] communicates the emotional intensity of conjuring the Hex and especially the Vision for Wanda" (Barnette 2022, 50).

When Agatha (the "evil witch") and Wanda are confronted in the last episode, Wanda points out one important distinction that somehow redeems her: "You see, the difference between you and me, is that you did this on purpose" (S1, E9).

Even the fake commercials that are inserted into the "fake" TV shows that still structure the "fake" world of Wanda and her family, convey this post-ironic, emotional trauma.

Voiceover: Feeling depressed? Like the world goes on without you? Do you just want to be left alone? Ask your doctor about Nexus. A unique anti-depressant that works to anchor you back to your reality. Or the reality of your choice.

Side effects include feeling your feelings, confronting your truths, seizing your destiny, and possibly more depression. You should not take Nexus unless your doctor has cleared you to move on with your life. Nexus. Because the world doesn't revolve around you. Or does it? (*WandaVision* S1E7, 14.10–50)

The commercial adds yet another level to the made-up world of Wanda's Westview, blending the magic and the "real" by adding even more layers and complexity to Wanda's emotional and cognitive confusion.

In many ways, Marvel's Wanda echoes discourses about contemporary witches and their focus on power and magic, but also on the role of emotion, suffering, and healing as central to the often immense and dangerous powers witches can (or attempt to) control. Emotions, be them love, loss, pain, or jealousy, are often depicted as cause, as what unleashes the magical powers, and they can be too powerful even for the witch herself to control. The tension between the good witch/bad witch stereotypes plays out in the final battle between Wanda and Agatha Harkness, in the last episode of the season. Even then, though, the

question of Wanda's intentions and control of her powers remain unsettled in the final scene. In the apocalyptic battle between Agatha and Wanda, exposing the frail postmodern, constructed, and hyperreal ontology of Wanda's Hex, and in extension the reality of everything else, only her emotions—her love, pain, and grief—can be trusted as real.

Loki

While the Scarlet Witch taps into numerous aspects of modern paganism and New Age spirituality, as well as traditional conceptualizations of “evil witches” and dark magic, Loki at first sight appears to be fully at home in Norse religion—an apparently more distant tradition than that of contemporary witches. Ancient Norse religion and culture have in recent years provided a treasure trove for pop cultural production. Marvel's Thor, of which Loki has been a central character to now become protagonist of his own show, is perhaps the most well known, yet by no means the only one (cf. Skjoldli 2019).

Unlike many other games and TV series that aim for a somewhat historical authenticity in their portrayal of the Vikings and the gods, Marvel's Asgard is placed in the Sci-Fi universe as a planet among countless others. Though the gods have retained many of their characteristics known from Norse mythology, they interact with people and other heroes and villains in narratives set in our contemporary world.

The plot of *Loki* is no less complicated than previous MCU narratives. Diverging timelines create a bewildering number of deviants that the Time Variance Authority (TVA) tries to regulate, sometimes quite violently. Loki is arrested “for crimes against the sacred timeline” and forced to collaborate with the TVA to hunt down variants of himself who cause trouble on diverging timelines. Loki's role as the god of mischief plays on some of the same ambivalence that Wanda Maximoff's witch identity did in *WandaVision*. The constant doubt about whether he is the villain or the hero—whether he is evil or eventually on “the good side”—takes an even larger role in this narrative. He simply cannot be trusted, and this character trait has already been well established in the comics and in previous MCU productions. The writers thus have an even richer intertextuality, from the story world of Marvel as well as that of Norse mythology, to play on.³ The Loki trapped by the TVA seem, however unlikely, to develop and even express genuine heartfelt emotions for the other characters, Sylvie and Mobius. They are however not easy to convince. In a key

scene at the end of time (and their quest), with He who remains, there is the following exchange:

Sylvie: I don't believe you!

Loki: Sylvie. The Universe is in the balance. Everything we know to be true. Everything ...

...

Sylvie: What was I thinking, trusting you. Has this whole thing been a con?

Loki: Really? That's what you think of me ... After all this time. Sure. Why not. Evil Loki's master plan comes together. Well, you never trusted me, did you. What was the point? Can't you see? This is bigger than our experience.

Sylvie: Why aren't we seeing this the same way?

Loki: Because you can't trust ... And I can't be trusted.

Sylvie: Then I guess we're in a pickle. (S1 E6)

Trusting and giving in to emotions comes with a high risk for both Loki and Sylvie, but only Loki is the one who chooses trust. Mobius, whose friendship with Loki develops throughout the episodes, becomes a trustworthy anchor to Loki. When the season comes to an end, Loki realizes that he is back in another timeline where Mobius does not know even him.

Kim Bell commented on the finale of the season:

What, after all, does it mean to "survive," if in the memory of the people for whom you care most, you never even actually existed? What's more, when Mobius casually asks, "Who are you?" Loki is left with the realization that, having lost the one person by whom he felt truly seen, Loki is the only one who might be able to answer that question. It's the kind of universally harrowing realization that makes a viewer feel not just for the god, but also for anyone who's ever struggled to come to terms with who they are, and what exactly their purpose and place is in this world—in other words, just about everyone. (Bell 2021)

In the end, despite being a god, it is Loki's humanity and his emotions that ground him and win the viewers over. Despite the lies, betrayal, and selfishness—not to mention the apocalyptic chaos that follows him everywhere—the affective connection that is created between Loki and the viewers becomes, as Bell points out, real on an emotional level, as his pain, compassion, and love conveyed on the screen evoke recognition and empathy. The very fact that we don't know—that

the audience, as well as Loki himself, know he can't be trusted, makes the stakes of engagement in how he and the story develops next even higher. As a classic cliffhanger ended the season, Marvel left the audience wanting to know more.

Moon Knight

In the first episode of season 1 that premiered on Disney+ on March 30, 2022, the viewers were introduced to museum shop clerk Steven Grant, a shy and seemingly goodhearted man. As in *WandaVision*, however, there are hints that complicates the identification of the protagonist as either good or bad in this narrative, too. Later episodes reveal that Steven has a dissociative identity disorder (DID). His other personality, Marc Spector, has a much more complicated and violent life as the *Moon Knight*, the avatar of the Egyptian moon god Khonshu. In the Comic series (1974), Spector is also called "The fist of Khonsu," hinting to a kind of violence that would seem incompatible with Steven's personality. Other Egyptian gods are included in the MCU narrative, most importantly Ammit and Tawaret, but gods like Isis, Osiris, and other central deities appear as well.⁴ Steven/Marc's antagonist is Arthur Harrow, a former avatar of Khonshu, now a devout disciple of Ammit. Harrow is a complex villain portrayed as a religious sect leader obsessed with a twisted idea of divine justice. Ethan Hawke, the actor who portrays Harrow, has in interviews revealed that among his inspirations for the role was David Koresh, leader of the religious group Branch Davidians, who after long conflict was killed under siege by Texas police: "I liked the idea of playing a cult leader, you know, I always find those kinds of figures fascinating Someone who thinks of themselves as a spiritual guru, someone who considers themselves enlightened beyond the rest of humanity" (Lang 2022).

In addition to the unstable epistemology caused by the shifting perspectives of Marc/Steven's DID, there are also shifts between different levels of realities. The last episode of the season, episode 6, is called "Gods and monsters." Here, the conflict between Khonshu and Ammit and their avatars Steven/Mark and Harrow culminates in spectacular battle scenes in Kairo city and on the slopes of the great pyramids of Giza. Securing victory, Marc/Steven refuses to kill Harrow, as Khonshu demands.

Returned in a flash to the psychiatric ward, Steven and Marc alternate in a dialogue with Harrow as head doctor (a reality level we have encountered also in earlier episodes):

- Steven:** So this is what reality looks like.
- Harrow:** The imagination is very real. This chair, desk, the light were all first created in the imagination.
- Steven:** But do you believe that Khonshu and Ammit are real?
- Harrow:** Do I? No.
- Marc:** What if we disagree, Doc?
- Harrow:** Marc...
- Marc:** What if we believe something different?
- Harrow:** Then our work here continues.
- Steven:** For how long?
- Harrow:** For how long is a piece of string?

[We see blood-stained footprints as Harrow walks to his chair, picking up on the opening scene of the series, where he filled the soles of his sandals with broken glass before he stepped into them, thus making two of the different levels of “reality” align: the one where Harrow is the disciple of Ammit and the one where he’s the doctor in charge of the psychiatric ward.]

- Marc:** Hey, you see that, don’t you?
- Steven:** Oh yeah. I see it. I see it.
- Harrow:** Why am I bleeding?
- Steven:** Yeah, I don’t – don’t think you know as much as you think you do
- Marc:** And while it is tempting to accept our diagnosis, Doc.
- Steven:** We’d rather go save the world. Laters gators. (*Moon Knight* S1E6. 33.44–35–10)

The scene fades and Steven wakes up in his own bed in his own apartment, where the first episode started, only this time he knows about Marc. The same music, Engelbert Humperdinck singing “Everyday I wake up” in the song *A Man Without Love* intensifies the repetitiveness of Steven’s reality, and yet something fundamental has evidently changed.

The layers of different realities that we have encountered in *WandaVision* and *Loki* are even darker and more destabilized in *Moon Knight* because they so explicitly may or may not be a result of Marc’s dissociative identity disorder, caused, as the viewers have learned, by a terrible childhood trauma. Similarly, Wanda’s pain and grief stem from the traumatic loss of her parents as a child, and then her brother and Vision in adulthood, and the realization that instead of the future she and Vision had planned together, she only has loneliness left.⁵

Even Loki's mischievous personality is partially explained in terms of guilt and childhood trauma. These complicated heroes/villains thus become recipients of the audiences' sympathy as they emotionally invest and engage with these traumas that are also the cause of flawed, and even immoral, behavior.

Destabilizing the set narrative of heroes and villains, neither *The Scarlet Witch*, nor *Loki* or *Moon Knight* will settle as either good or bad characters. Their appeal is rather enhanced by the fact that the audience never quite knows where they stand, or what their next move will be. This is also what encourages the audience to engage, both online and on fan forums, where fans present and discuss their theories while they wait for the next episode.

Hunting Easter Eggs

The addition of TV series to the Marvel universe, where new story lines are drawn up and characters further developed, further emphasizes what Sarah Iles Johnston calls "serial narratology." She stresses the importance of "episodes" in mythological narratives: "audience members continue to think about the story in between installments" (2015, 202). This, according to Johnston, allows for the audience to get to know the characters better, and to engage and invest more in their fates. Further, such episodic narration, Johnston points out, allow for longer and more complex story arcs.

This is seen in another favorite feature on Marvel (as well as the *Star Wars* Universe and a number of other big franchise pop cultural products), namely crossovers. Crossovers occur when a character who is familiar from one context appears in another, such as when Iron Man suddenly appears in a Thor movie, or Bruce Banner and Captain Marvel enters a scene in *Shang Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (cf. Johnston 2018, 139–40). According to Johnston:

Crossovers may also reward audience with a sense of having special knowledge, which makes them feel complicit with the narrator and thus further encourages them to buy into the narrative—somewhat like the "Easter Eggs" that contemporary viewers spot in movies and television show. (Johnston 2018, 142)

The audience thus become actively engaged in the story as they are invited to interpret the clues and fill holes in the narrative. Crossovers in Marvel thus not only appear when a character from one narrative arc enters another but also across media, from comics to the cinematic universe (and back). Johnston further explains:

Crossovers, in sum, can do a number of things very efficiently: establish the existential, ethical, and operational rules of a new story; lend it credibility and authority by their mere presence; and establish a particular climate or mood by gesturing towards other stories.” (Johnston 2018, 142)

We are now in the world of hyperserials (Johnston 2018, 134–40), endless narratives that intersect and interweave, which also allow for the introduction of new characters and plots. For Marvel, this is of course very profitable business, but these complex narratives also play with ontologies and epistemologies that we recognize from contemporary religion.

Dictionary.com defines Easter eggs (Movies, television) as “a hidden message, as a cryptic reference, iconic image, or inside joke, that fans are intended to discover in a television show or movie.” They presuppose and play on common knowledge, most often about characters and previous stories leading up to the one in question. As such, the comics play an important role for everyone hunting Easter eggs in MCU. Easter eggs originated in video games in the 1980s, but have by now become almost mandatory features in any big production. They are thus puns, jokes, and messages that are intentionally hidden for audience to spot or even actively look for.⁶

As *WandaVision*, *Loki*, and *Moon Knight* so clearly exemplify, narratives and characters are weaved together, picked up again and elaborated in an endless weave of self-referencing, rewarding those who have done their “research” or have invested in the larger mythology, and leave room for engagement and speculation. The comic books are perhaps the richest source for such Easter eggs (Dagsland 2022). Fans turn to them to look for “prefigurations” and hints that can help resolve some of the mysteries that are woven into the narratives to keep the audience hooked. The hunt for, and online discussions interpreting these Easter eggs, further engage and create communities where fans can present their exegeses and develop them with peers who are equally engaged. As several scholars have pointed out, these fan communities can have many traits that are similar to religious communities, and sometimes they may overlap (cf. Anker 2017; Davidsen 2016a). In her study of so-called Otherkin, Danielle Kirby pointed out that active extension of narrative is a shared feature: “Such narratives may involve continuing narrative for favorite characters, new characters continuing within a familiar secondary world, or perhaps mash up approaches to texts where multiple separate narrative worlds are combined” (2013, 119–20).

To sum up, narratives, and particularly narratives that traverse modes and media, allow for ubiquitous hidden clues and “treasures” that are meant to be

discovered by the audience, as a means of engaging and making the audience invest in the narrative (or episodic instalment). These stories and characters are again weaved into even larger and more complex narratives. The comics play an important part here, not only as providers of intertextuality and Easter eggs, but as some kind of flexible developing canon against which new narratives relate, whether it is as extensions, developments, or contradictions, contrasts, and rewritings. The richer the narrative becomes, with characters, symbols, and storylines, the more material there is to play with for writers, directors, and producers.

Multiverse

Interviewing spiritual seekers in Sedona, Arizona, in her recent book, Susannah Crockford noted how notions of multiverse were part of the worldviews of many of her interlocutors. According to them, they had access to portals that allowed them to transcend realms and universes, not unlike Dr Strange and several other pop cultural story worlds from companies like, for instance, Marvel, Lego, and Disney.⁷

Crockford notes how the idea of multiple universes, or multiverse, seems to correspond to current scientific interest in quantum physics, not unlike how Big Bang theories correspond to (or respond to) theological concepts of creation *ex nihilo* (2021, 79):

God is no longer required to create the Universe, God *is* the universe. Peter's innovation was to describe the individual within this self-contained oneness as a simulation, analogous to a computer program or video game, a way of having different experiences. Portals were his way through from this universe to other universes in the infinite multiverse. (Crockford 2021, 79)

There appears then to be a connection between the scientific of pseudo-scientific theories about multiverses and the fictional fascination for the multiverse in comic superheroes' transmedia narratives.

As Danielle Kirby explains, the notion of the multiverse, referring to the coexistence of seemingly endless parallel realities, has been popularized since the 1960s. What she points out that may be of particular interest here, "is the way in which the idea of the multiverse opens up the potential for massive intertextuality, and to a degree paves the way for a macro structure that interweaves disparate worlds without damaging the integrity of each individual

constructed reality” (Kirby 2013, 116; cf. Johnston 2018). The multiverse idea has opened up to thought experiments that seem to appeal to a metamodern cultural sentiment, precisely because it exposes the fragile postmodern reality, subject to so many deconstructions that it constantly falls apart. The idea of a multiverse where reality hinges on emotions and belief, thus appears to be the perfect setting to explore the metamodern as a contemporary cultural trend. (Cardenas 2021; Dember 2022; Undheim 2019).

Metamodernism, Emotions, and Realities

These almost exhausting shifts between different ontological levels in the *WandaVision*, *Loki*, and *Moon Knight* narratives, and the role of human emotions in grasping for “the real” in all these unstable realities may echo some aspects of the post-postmodern sentiment described by Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker as “metamodernism” and developed in religious studies by Linda Ceriello (2018a, 2018b; Undheim 2019). Metamodernism in this sense is a term meant to describe a yearning for modernity’s sincerity and the sublime, one that is unattainable due to postmodern ontologies and the impossibility of “undoing” postmodernism. This leaves the metamodern in an existence of constant oscillation:

A continuous oscillation, a constant repositioning between attitudes and mindsets that are evocative of the modern and postmodern but are ultimately suggestive of another sensibility that is neither of them. A discourse that negotiates between a yearning for universal truths but also an (a)political relativism, between a desire for sense and a doubt about the sense of it all, between ... sincerity and irony, knowingness and naivety, construction and deconstruction. (Van den Akker and Vermeulen 2010, quoted in Ceriello 2018)

In an analysis of the TV series *Buffy the Vampire*, Linda Ceriello points to enhanced “reflection on their epistemic situatedness, ... and a reliance on relationships to evince something ‘true’” (2018b, 217) as characteristic of metamodern sentiments. The scenes from *Loki*, *WandaVision*, and *Moon Knight* discussed above also dwell on and explore these issues. When the worlds around Loki, Wanda, and Steven as they know it fall apart and their perception of reality destabilized, it is their emotions and relationships with others that recenter their sense of identity and self in this new reality. When Wanda learns that her TV-series’ perfect world, even her husband and children, are constructs of

her own magic, when Loki realizes that his sometimes even more mischievous variants are causing new branches in the sacred timeline, or when Steven has to come to terms with Marc as part of himself, it is their relationships to others and the emotions (however painful) that grow out of these that still give them purpose and hope. They (and the viewers) cannot ever be certain that this will be enough, though, because “new storylines will emerge that could render anyone capable of evil” (Ceriello 2018b, 225).

When Wanda, Loki, and Steven’s realities become destabilized, what seems to keep them going, may sound like Timotheus Vermeulen’s quote from the TV show *Girls*: “Just because it’s fake doesn’t mean I don’t feel it” (Vermeulen 2015). This aspect of metamodern affect, the relationship between reality and feelings, is also discussed in the anthology *Metamodernism. Historicity, Affect and Depth after Postmodernism*. Gry Rustad and Kai Hanno Schwind argue that:

Unlike in postmodern equivalents, metamodern sitcoms use devices such as irony, pastiche and parody to articulate emotive affect. Irony clashes with authenticity to render characters as flawed and complex subjects; a hyperreal style such as animation is used not to flatten the characters (and confine them in viewers’ eyes to performers) but to render emotional depth. Unlike the cool, flat, unemotive postmodern sitcom, metamodern sitcoms have ... a “warm” tone, urging viewers to vicariously connect with the social, human situation they depict and empathise with the characters therein.” (van den Akker, Gibbons, and Vermeulen 2017, 86)

This, Rustad and Schwind stress, is derived from a very particular cultural logic in Western societies, where we now see metamodern sentiments in increasingly more sitcoms. “It is here that a clash between irony and authenticity emerges, reconciling audiences with flawed and complex, but ultimately loveable characters” (2018, 145).

Combining pop cultural nostalgia and self-referentiality with a post-postmodern, post-ironic sense of humor, being both tongue-in-cheek and utterly sincere, the metamodern jokes of *WandaVision*, *Loki*, and *Moon Knight* likewise tend to leave a bittersweet aftertaste. Is this because they make the audience really want *to believe* their realities? (cf. Undheim 2019). Just like we want to believe that even the trickster can be trustworthy when it is needed the most? Or is it because the seemingly mad person with DID, actually is a neoromantic prophet for the gods, a messenger of a deeper, a more real truth hidden behind the surface of the multiverse? (cf. Johannsen 2016). The direct impact of popular culture on contemporary religious ideas and practices is, of course, difficult to

measure. A number of scholars have however demonstrated how popular culture inspires religious ideas and practices, and supply the feedback loop between the cultural production of religion and the production of popular culture (e.g., Clark 2003; Cusack 2016; Davidsen 2016a, 2016b; Hjarvard 2011; Possamai 2012).

As Crockford describes one of her interlocutors: “Media provided him with clues through which he constructed his own narrative of individual messianism” (2021, 82). It may seem like finding the truth is all about finding and deciphering the Easter eggs, and for some, this is also where fiction, or fantasy, and the real-world merge.

So, where can we end such an ever-expanding narrative of gods, witches, Easter eggs, and multiverses? Carol Cusack (2010) has pointed out, and rightly so, that playfulness also was a large part of fiction-based religion in the 1960s and 1970s, like the neo-pagan Church of all worlds. Yet it seems that playfulness, as well as the “lack of sense of it all” has speeded up considerably in our new digital media age, and not least because of the multiple platforms and the multiverse of multiple realities. When it all seems to fall apart, though, and there are too many realities in the multiverse to keep track of, the metamodern solution will be flawed human relationships and the emotions they generate.⁸ The metamodern oscillation in the MCU multiverse, between deconstruction and construction, between apathy and emotion, and between relativism and the characters’ desires for universal truths, is what eventually allow you to believe in the gods and the reality that make you feel.

Notes

- 1 Divergent spelling, but evidently inspired by the ancient Egyptian god Khonsu.
- 2 For contemporary Wicca, see, for example, Magliocco 2004; Urban 2015; Hutton 2019; and Quilty 2022.
- 3 In many ways, Loki’s urge to always stir things up make him seem like the perfect god for groups like Discordianism and The Church of SubGenius, where humor and culture jamming is central to their “creed” (Cusack 2010).
- 4 An aspect of the series that has also gained a lot of attention from fan communities, is the fact that Marc Spector is one of very few Jewish protagonists in MCU. This is for instance clear in the scenes depicting his mother’s shiva, where he wears a kippah, but is even more present in the comics, where his father is a rabbi. (ref.)
- 5 *WandaVision* S1 E6, 23.40–24.25: Pietro: “How’d you even do all this?” Wanda: “I don’t know how I did it. I only remember feeling completely alone. Empty. I just ... Endless nothingness.”

- 6 A quite well-known example, and perhaps not so secret anymore, is how “insiders” can tell those who know (that is, the MCU) from those who don’t, by watching who leaves their seats in the movie theatre when the end credits start. Those who know will remain seated, because Marvel (as well as increasingly more entertainment movies) inserts one or more small scenes in the end credit, loaded with references and hints as to what might happen next. There are YouTubers and TikTok-personalities who specialize in producing “Easter eggs” videos, where they identify and analyze the hidden clues and try to predict how the plot will develop.
- 7 Multiverse narratives have appeared in a number of pop cultural story worlds, such as DC (e.g., *Flash*), *Lego* (cf. Undheim 2019), and *His Dark Materials* (Feldt 2016). The Academy Award winning animation movie *Spiderman—Into the Spiderverse*, is another example.
- 8 This is interestingly also very much the tone of *Thor, Love and Thunder* (2022).

References

- Barnette, J. (2022), “What is Wanda but Witches Persevering? Palimpsests of American Witches in *WandaVision*.” *Theatre Journal* 74 (1), 41–57. doi: 10.1353/tj.2022.0003.
- Bell, K. (2021), “The Saddest Loki Episode 6 Moment according to Fans Will Surprise You.” *Looper*. Available online: https://www.looper.com/461245/the-saddest-loki-episode-6-moment-according-to-fans-will-surprise-you/?utm_campaign=clip (accessed April 13, 2023).
- Cardenas, J. (2021), “You’re Like Me’—A Metamodern Reading of Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse.” In *What Is Metamodern?* Available online: <https://whatismetamodern.com/film/spider-man-spider-verse-metamodernism/> (accessed April 13, 2023).
- Ceriello, L. (2018a), “Toward a Metamodern Reading of Spiritual but Not Religious Mysticisms,” in W. B. Parson (ed.), *Being Spiritual but Not Religious Past, Present, Future(s)*, 200–18, New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315107431-13>.
- Ceriello, L. (2018b), “The Big Bad and the Big ‘Aha!’ Metamodern Monsters as Transformational Figures of Instability,” in Michael E. Heyes (ed.), *Holy Monsters, Sacred Grotesques: Monstrosity and Religion in Europe and the United States*, 207–33, Lanham, MD: Lexington.
- Chireau, Y. (2019), “Looking for Black Religions in 20th Century Comics, 1931–1993.” *Religions* 10 (6: 400): 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10060400>
- Clark, L. S. (2003), *From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media and the Supernatural*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Clements, J., and Gauvain, R. (2014), “The Marvel of Islam: Reconciling Muslim Epistemologies through a New Islamic Origin Saga in Naif al-Mutawa’s *The 99*” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 26 (1): 36–70.

- Crockford, S. (2021), *Ripples of the Universe: Spirituality in Sedona, Arizona* (Class 200, New Studies in Religion), Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cusack, C. M. (2010), *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction and Faith*, Farnham, England: Ashgate.
- Cusack, C. M. (2016), "Fiction into Religion: Imagination, Other Worlds, and Play in the Formation of Community." *Religion* 46 (4): 575–90.
- Dagsland, S. K. (2022), Religion og Film: Wanda Maximoff (Scarlet Witch) og Agatha Harkness i WandaVision (2021). *En utforskning av den moderne heksen i populærkulturen*, MA thesis, University of Bergen.
- Davidson, M. A. (2016a), "The Religious Affordance of Fiction: A Semiotic Approach." *Religion* 46 (4): 521–49.
- Davidson, M. A. (2016b), "From Star Wars to Jediism: The Emergence of Fiction-Based Religion," in Hemel E. van den, Szafraniec A. (eds.), *Words: Religious Language Matters. The Future of the Religious Past*, 376–89, New York: Fordham University Press. Available online: <https://scholarlypublications.universiteitleiden.nl/access/item%3A2837728/view> (accessed April 13, 2023).
- Dember, G. (2022), "Everything Metamodern All at Once." *What Is Metamodern?* Available online: <https://whatismetamodern.com/film/everything-everywhere-all-at-once-metamodern/>.
- Endsjø, D. Ø., and Lied, L. I. (2011), *Det folk vil ha: Religion og populærkultur* [What People Want: Religion and Popular Culture]. Oslo, Norway: Universitetsforlaget.
- Feldt, L. (2016a), "Contemporary Fantasy Fiction and Representations of Religion: Playing with Reality, Myth and Magic in *His Dark Materials* and *Harry Potter*." *Religion* 46 (4): 550–74.
- Feldt, L. (2016b), "Harry Potter and Contemporary Magic: Fantasy Literature, Popular Culture, and the Representation of Religion." *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 31 (1): 101–14.
- Gibbons, A., Vermeulen, T., and van den Akker, R. (2019), "Reality Beckons: Metamodernist Depthiness Beyond Panfictionality." *European Journal of English Studies* 23 (2): 172–89, doi: 10.1080/13825577.2019.1640426.
- Gilhus, I. S. (2013), "All Over the Place: The Contribution of New Age to a Spatial Model of Religion," in S. J. Sutcliffe and I. S. Gilhus (eds.), *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion*, 35–49, Durham, NC: Acumen.
- Gilhus, I. S. (2014a), "Medialisering og refortrylling: Religiøs endring i Norge [Mediatization and Re-enchantment: Religious Change in Norway]." *DIN: Religionsvitenskapelig tidsskrift* 2014 (1): 9–26.
- Gilhus, I. S. (2016), "What Became of Superhuman Beings? Companions and Field Guides in the Study of Religion," in P. Antes, A. W. Geertz, and M. Rothstein (eds.), *Contemporary Views on Comparative Religion: In Celebration of Tim Jensen's 65th Birthday*, 375–88, Sheffield: Equinox.

- Gilhus, I. S., and Sutcliffe S. (2013), "Conclusion: New Age Spiritualities—'Good to Think' in the Study of Religion," in S. J. Sutcliffe and I. S. Gilhus (eds.), *New Age Spirituality: Rethinking Religion*, 256–62, Durham, NC: Acumen.
- Hjarvard, S. (2011), "The Mediatization of Religion: Theorising Religion, Media and Social Change," *Culture and Religion: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 12 (2): 119–35.
- Hutton, R. (2019), *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (New ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johannsen, D. (2016), "On Elves and Freethinkers: Criticism of Religion and the Emergence of the Literary Fantastic in Nordic literature," *Religion* 46 (4): 591–610.
- Johnston, S. I. (2019), *The Story of Myth*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Karthauser, K. (2011), "The Awesome, or the Metamodern Sublime," *Notes on Metamodernism*. Available online: <http://www.metamodernism.com/2011/10/28/the-awesome-or-the-metamodern-sublime/> (accessed April 13, 2023).
- Kirby, D. (2013), *Fantasy and Belief: Alternative Religions, Popular Narratives and Digital Cultures* (Approaches to New Religions), Sheffield: Equinox.
- Kirby, D. (2012), Readers, Believers, Consumers, and Audiences: Complicating the Relationship Between Consumption and Contemporary Narrative Spiritualities," *Australian Journal of Communication* 39 (1): 119–31.
- Lang, B. (2022), "Moon Knight's Ethan Hawke Says Harrow is the Show's True 'Good Guy,'" *cbr.com* published April 14, 2022. Available online: <https://www.cbr.com/moon-knight-ethan-hawke-arthur-harrow-hero-mcu/> (accessed April 13, 2023).
- Lewis, A. (2014), *American Comics, Literary Theory, and Religion: The Superhero Afterlife*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Magliocco, S. (2004), *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America* (Contemporary Ethnography), Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Possamai, A. (2012), *Handbook of Hyper-Real Religions*, Leiden: Brill.
- Quilty, E. (2022), "Witchlife: Witchy Digital Spaces," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 37 (1): 29–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2021.2018801>
- Salazar, M. (2020), "One with the Universe: The Construction of Doctor Strange's Magic in 1973," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* 32 (3): 163–82.
- Skjoldli, J. (2019), "Guder til salgs (støvete, men pent brukt). Hva formidler Thor, Vikings og American Gods om norrøne guder?" *Chaos – Skandinavisk tidsskrift for religionshistoriske studier* 71 (1): 29–64.
- Thomas, J. (2012). *Drawing on Tradition: Manga, Anime, and Religion in Contemporary Japan*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii.
- Undheim, S. (2019), "Made Up Prophecies: Metamodern Play with Religion, Spirituality and Monomyth in the LEGO Universe," in R. C. Hains and S. R. Mazzarella (eds.), *Cultural Studies of LEGO: More than just bricks*, 97–121, Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Urban, H. (2015), *New Age, Neopagan, and New Religious Movements: Alternative Spirituality in Contemporary America*, Oakland: University of California Press.

- Van den Akker, R., Gibbons, A., and Vermeulen, T. (2017), *Metamodernism: Historicity, Affect, and Depth after Postmodernism*, London: Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Vermeulen, T, and van den Akker, R. (2010), "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics Culture* 2 (1): 1–14.
- Vermeulen, T. (2015), "The New Depthiness," *E-Flux Journal* 61, Available online: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/61/61000/the-new-depthiness/> (accessed April 13, 2023).
- Woodhead, L. (2016), "Intensified Religious Pluralism and De-Differentiation: The British Example," *Society* 53: 41–6.
- Zogbi, Emily. (2022), "Moon Knight: Why Ethan Hawke Wanted to Play the MCU Cult Leader," *cbr.com*. Available online: <https://www.cbr.com/moon-knight-why-ethan-hawke-wanted-play-mcu-cult-leader/> (accessed April 13, 2023).