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# **Avengers Disassembled**

## **Examining the Decline of the Marvel Cinematic Universe**

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**June 14, 2024**

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**ABSTRACT****Avengers Disassembled****Examining the Decline of the Marvel Cinematic Universe****Jordan Vuong****School of Humanities, University of California, Irvine**

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has become the most popular film franchise in the world, setting box office records that are unlikely to ever be beaten. Due to the ongoing nature of the MCU, the superhero franchise has left an irreversible mark on society due to its transmedia storytelling abilities. Research has shown that the MCU's depictions of race, gender, violence, and morality reveal something about the real world in terms of the social constructs that govern people's way of life. Although the characters and events in the MCU are nothing more than speculative fiction, the influence these films have had on society couldn't be any more real. In recent years, the MCU has seen a decline in popularity and Marvel Studios has made various efforts to reignite the excitement surrounding superhero culture. However, Marvel's studio crisis may reveal something about the world that at first glance many might not recognize as a direct correlation between the societal issues today and the declining interest in the superhero genre. While the MCU has taken steps toward adapting to an ever changing world and political landscape, there is still much progress to be made before Marvel Studios can return to its golden days when superhero films were regarded as a worldwide phenomenon, cementing them in cinema history.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I was first drawn to this topic about a year ago while taking an Honors Philosophy and Biology of Sex course during the Winter quarter. It was designed around understanding the role social values play in the creation of science and biology. This included examining the sciences of sexual selection, the sex differences in humans, and the factors that shape our sense of identity. Together, these inform our understanding of gender, in turn influencing our social interactions.

The midterm for the course had me choose one example of popular media to explore these issues of gender. At that point, I had been following the Marvel Cinematic Universe for quite some time, and I knew almost instantly that the MCU was what I wanted to write about. It was through that assignment that I began thinking about Marvel in a different light, specifically in terms of how those films reflect the real world and influence our perceptions of gender and race. Since then, I have thought about the MCU more broadly, and the opportunity to explore this in more depth was one that excited me.

The following thesis is largely based upon my own knowledge as a committed fan of the MCU, along with extensive research aimed at dissecting the corporate history of the Marvel brand and how it has grown to be one of the most influential franchises of our time.

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Joseph Jeon, for his guidance and support throughout the research process, as well as Professor Wasserstrom for keeping me on track and making the Humanities Honors Program possible.

## INTRODUCTION: A STUDIO IN CRISIS

The Marvel Cinematic Universe commonly referred to as the MCU, is one of the most popular film franchises in the world, with over thirty-three films and eight TV shows that all share continuity towards one singular narrative, not to mention a fandom that is second to none. With 85 years of history in comics, the MCU has had an influential power like no other through its transmedia storytelling abilities. In each of these installments, each medium serves a specific purpose—To introduce a story with the intent of expanding that story through television, novels, and comics. Sometimes the world these films create is explored through gameplay or even experienced as amusement park attractions. However, such a rich history in comics has also given Marvel the ability to adapt storylines and characters to better reflect or challenge modern-day norms, some of which reinforce the societal values of today or push the envelope to what is and should be accepted. Due to the natural structure of these films, where every installment is essentially a piece to a larger story, the MCU has influenced audiences over an extended period, most notably with the official start of the MCU back in 2008 with the release of Iron Man. For more than fifteen years, Marvel has dominated the box office. Kids who grew up watching Marvel movies ten to fifteen years ago are now adults in 2024. Adults who've watched these films since the beginning, now have children of their own who watch these films too.

Over the last sixteen years, the MCU has had a total of five distinct phases, and with the announcement of phase six, the MCU has already made plans that will lead audiences into 2027. Whether someone is a fan of these movies or simply a casual viewer, there's no denying that the MCU will continue to have a profound impact on society in the years to come. This is why the MCU, a franchise that many do not take too seriously in an academic setting, is rather important to understand and consider when looking at the relationship between society and popular media.

The declining state of the MCU in the year 2024 reveals something about the world that at first glance many might not recognize as a direct correlation between the societal issues today and the studio crisis currently happening at Marvel Studios. The question is: How does a studio like Marvel respond to an ever-changing world and political landscape while remaining true to the brand and faithful to the comics that started it all? And more specifically, what does one misstep at the studio level mean for the greater Marvel Universe, a brand that largely depends and thrives on the assumption that audiences will be excited enough about each film, to come back opening day for the next?

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Marvel began setting up its characters in movie deals all across the film industry. The 1990s was a pivotal time for the comic book genre, and arguably the period when audiences first began recognizing the potential comic book movies had of becoming blockbusters. Starting in 1989, Tim Burton's *Batman* was a huge financial success bringing in over 400 Million dollars<sup>1</sup> at the Box Office and igniting the idea that there was an interest in comic book movies. With such high acclaim after becoming the fifth-highest-grossing film in history at the time of its release, Warner Brothers was quick to greenlight a sequel under the title *Batman Returns* released in 1992, which led to a follow-up sequel *Batman Forever* in 1995. While both sequels weren't as successful as the original, critics and audiences still showed much interest in continuing the franchise. Only two years after the last film, Warner Brothers released *Batman and Robin* in 1997, a prime example of a movie that was damaged by studio demands that prioritized the commercial success of toys and advertisements rather than the quality of the film itself.<sup>2</sup> To this day, the film is regarded as the worst superhero movie of all

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<sup>1</sup> IMDB Box Office Mojo, 2024

<sup>2</sup> Eclarinal, 2023

time. After the film's poor reception, it was clear that Warner Brothers needed to step away from the franchise.

As a result, audiences began to question the future of comic book movies in Hollywood and even doubted studios' ability to produce superhero films that were capable of telling compelling stories. With the future of comic book movies remaining as uncertain as ever, the late 1990s was also a time when the company Marvel found itself in financial trouble, which led to the search for a lifeline when public trust in the genre seemed to be lost. In an attempt to save the Marvel Brand, Marvel offered a deal to Sony Pictures which entailed selling the movie rights to Spider-Man and almost every other character under its control for around \$25 million. But as it turned out, Sony was only interested in acquiring the rights to Marvel's most popular character, Spider-Man, believing audiences wouldn't be interested in any of the other Marvel-related characters.<sup>3</sup> With a new deal, Marvel offered the movie rights of Spider-Man to Sony for 10 million dollars. After Sony accepted, Marvel was left with one goal—To prove that its non-Spider-Man characters were valuable and could be successful too.

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<sup>3</sup> Ryan, 2020



## CHAPTER 1: AVENGERS ASSEMBLED: THE CREATION OF THE MCU

In 2000, 20th Century Fox released *X-Men* which was based on the Marvel title introduced back in 1964. As a film property, the project was a calculated risk for Marvel. While *X-Men* was a popular property coming straight off of the hit 1990s animated series, and writer Chris Claremont's top-selling comic, *The Uncanny X-Men*<sup>4</sup> which both helped catapult the *X-Men* into the public eye, there was nothing that suggested the success of the TV series and comic would translate into success on the big screen. The biggest risk—The film didn't feature well-known characters such as Superman or Batman who were the only two comic-book characters ever to launch blockbuster franchises up until that point.

Considering that the release of *X-Men* was planned only a few years after Marvel recovered from bankruptcy, Marvel was faced with a huge financial threat that could potentially backfire and dictate the trajectory of comic book films for the next decade. But as it turned out, on July 14, 2000, *X-Men* debuted to solid reviews with the second-biggest opening weekend then on record. The results represented a huge turning point for the Marvel brand indicating that comic book properties not named Superman or Batman could find success in Hollywood too. For Marvel producer Lauren Shuler Donner, the film's success opened the possibility of exploring brand-new franchises that didn't involve comic book characters that audiences had seen before.

The film *X-Men* also marked Kevin Feige's first on-screen credit, who would later on become the President of Marvel Studios in 2007. Working as an associate producer on the film and as Donner's production assistant, Kevin Feige helped build the film's universe<sup>5</sup>. During the two years after his initial involvement, Feige immersed himself in the world of *X-Men* mutants and comics. According to Feige, the plan for success was already there, right in the pages of the

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<sup>4</sup> The Uncanny X Men is the longest-running series in the *X-Men* comics franchise running from 1963-2016

<sup>5</sup> Ryan, 2020

comics. The studio just needed to find a way to bring it to life on screen. Feige believed that compelling stories and complex characters already existed within the comics. The biggest challenge was placing trust in the comic book source material, and using it as a blueprint for future films. Then in 2000, the same year of *X-Men*'s release, Marvel's toy exec, Avi Arad, hired Feige as an executive vice president of Marvel's new film department. At this point, Marvel Studios was entering the early stages of building its team.

### **Character Rights**

After multiple deals between Marvel and other studios during the 1990s, Marvel found its characters spread out across multiple franchises and companies. Sony Pictures had the rights to Spider-Man. 20th Century Fox had the rights to the Fantastic Four, Silver Surfer, Daredevil, Elektra, and the X-Men. Universal Pictures had the Hulk. New Line Cinema, a sister company of Warner Brothers, had the rights to the Blade franchise and Iron Man. As a result of these deals, each studio was allowed to make movies using the Marvel characters they had acquired.<sup>6</sup> Sometimes this meant collaborating with Marvel and receiving creative input during production, while other times, this meant the studios were able to adapt the Marvel characters and related material however they saw fit.

With no collective vision or direction across the various studios, the films released between 2000 and 2005 produced inconsistent results. In 2002, director Sam Raimi released the film *Spider-Man*, a wildly successful film that proved the popular character could launch a franchise just as Sony had predicted when they first signed the deal back in 1999. Coming off of its wild success, the possibility of a sequel was almost inevitable, and in 2004, Sony released *Spider-Man 2* which is still held today by audiences as one of the best comic book movies ever

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<sup>6</sup> Ryan, 2020

made.<sup>7</sup> However, only a year after the success of the first Spider-Man, Ben Affleck's *Daredevil* proved to be a modest financial success that the New York Times called "tacky and disposable."<sup>8</sup> The 2005 spinoff to the film titled *Elektra*, was also a huge box-office failure that lowered the standard for Marvel Comics page-to-screen adaptations.

While Marvel was making progress in establishing that other characters could spark public interest, the studio deals and decisions made in the late 90s made it almost impossible for Marvel to regulate the quality of the films being released using Marvel properties.

In 2005, Marvel Entertainment received a reported 525 million dollar loan<sup>9</sup> to make 10 films that Marvel would have full creative control over. There was only one problem: Marvel Studios couldn't make films for any character it wanted—its A-list characters (Spider-Man, Fantastic Four, Hulk) all remained tied up in outside deals. Other characters such as Captain America, Black Panther, Doctor Strange, Nick Fury, Hawkeye, and Ant-Man were all popular from the comics and were ones Marvel Studios hoped would translate to success on screen, but the idea of adapting them on film wasn't something audiences were particularly excited for.

### **The 10 Film Marvel Plan**

Ever since superhero films began gaining traction, new projects were often greenlit according to the amount of profits it was projected to make early in development—One of the biggest markets in the world—Toys. In 1997, Director Joel Schumacher saw the success of the Batman Franchise and quickly began developing a new film that would appeal to larger audiences. This time, the story would be less dark and serious than the Tim Burton Films, and would be more "kid friendly." Brighter colors, more gadgets, more costumes, cooler vehicles, anything that could easily translate into designs that toy companies could replicate and mass

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<sup>7</sup> Brehmer, 2024

<sup>8</sup> Ryan, 2020

<sup>9</sup> Chin, 2023

produce as action figures and playsets. And what better way to make a profit, than to use the film as one big marketing campaign to sell toys? This strategy fell flat with the release of Schumacher's *Batman and Robin*, a film that even Schumacher wishes he had never made. Oddly enough, this marketing plan was one Marvel was leaning towards in the year 2005. Marvel's 10-film plan was not about making great movies. In fact, the original plan was all about making movies that would sell toys. At the time, Marvel Studios was led by Ike Perlmutter, a billionaire who had found much success in the toy industry.<sup>10</sup>

As studio executives began developing the 10-film slate, much consideration was placed on whether or not certain characters would translate well into toys. With a gallery of characters to choose from, the studio spent a significant amount of time deciding which properties would be the best to commit to the film, so much so that Perlmutter organized a focus group of children to help with the decision. After the study, it was determined that the character Iron Man was the one children wanted to play with the most. And as luck would have it, the film rights to the Iron Man properties had just recently returned to Marvel after New Line's rights to it expired.

### **Iron Man**

Once Marvel Studios settled on Iron Man as its first film, the rest of the film slate fell into place. If the Iron Man film was successful, they would continue with a Hulk film. If the Hulk film was successful, they would carry through with the rest of the slate. The road ahead wasn't easy by any means. With comic-con lurking around the corner, the studio quickly struggled to begin early development on the project. At the time there was no cast, no script, and no actor to take on the leading role of billionaire industrialist, Tony Stark. Who would Marvel cast as Iron Man? Hire the right actor, and Marvel Studios could become huge. Hire the wrong

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<sup>10</sup> Johnston, 2023

actor, and everything planned for the rest of the slate would end before it even started. And so the search began.

In the mid-2000s, Robert Downey Jr. was known to audiences as an Oscar nominee who had starred in a handful of films. Infamously known as an actor who had tainted his career with substance abuse problems, Downey was on the road to cleaning up his name in Hollywood. At the time, Downey was well known, but not overly famous, and Director Jon Favreau thought that Downey's career paralleled the story of Tony Stark, believing his charisma was perfect for the role. However, Paramount Pictures, the studio to distribute *Iron Man*, wasn't too keen on the idea. Still, the Marvel team and Kevin Feige pushed for Downey's involvement in the project. In an interview, it was noted Feige had never fought for anything harder than Downey's casting. But while screen tests continued to progress in the background, Downey's appearance in the PG-rated Disney remake, *The Shaggy Dog* in 2006 was quick to change opinions. To Paramount Pictures, Downey's involvement and casting in a Disney film was a clear indicator that he was more than capable of being a part of a "family-friendly" film. Only six months after *The Shaggy Dog's* release, Downey was officially attached to the film, as Tony Stark, aka Iron Man.

In 2007, Marvel Studios began production on the film *Iron Man*, starring Robert Downey Jr. in the lead role with nothing more than a goal to release a respectable comic book movie that would sell toys and launch a brand new slate of franchises. With the goal of creating a shared universe between different Marvel properties, the studio wanted Nick Fury to have a minor role in the film.<sup>11</sup> The character of Nick Fury would serve as a pillar, a connective throughline between *Iron Man* and the rest of the film slate. The biggest dilemma came with where to include Nick Fury's involvement without taking away from the main character of the film. At first, the idea was to put the scene in the middle of the action serving as a way to lift up

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<sup>11</sup> Favreau, 2008

Downey's character. Later the studio explored alternate possibilities—The climax of the film, the very end, after the credits roll. As it turned out, the scene with Nick Fury came at the very end of the film, and so the famous MCU post-credit scenes were created.

### **The MCU**

In order for the MCU to work, Marvel had to focus on releasing good movies that people of all ages would resonate with. Each film had to build on the other. Each film had to excite fans for the future, so much so that audiences would be compelled to sit through the credits just to see a small glimpse into what was next.

Success for Marvel Studios meant that countless things had to go right. It meant that *Iron Man* had to make \$102 million during its opening weekend at the domestic box office. It also meant that the sequel, *Iron Man 2*, had to do better than its predecessor. The next movie in the slate, *The Incredible Hulk*, had to get audiences excited for other characters and the potential for crossovers with already established characters. The introduction of Thor, had to explore worlds other than Earth, establishing that there were heroes throughout the universe audiences hadn't met yet. The film *Captain America: The First Avenger*, had to showcase that Marvel was capable of making films with distinct tones and flavors that were unique and different from the ones that came before. The very success of the MCU also meant that the culmination of these different properties in *The Avengers* became a \$1.5 billion-grossing event. It meant that Marvel had to secure a deal with Sony to gain back the rights to its most popular character Spider-Man.

From 2008 to 2019, The Marvel Universe was expanding, and excitement for comic book films was at an all-time high. It seemed like Marvel had done the one thing no other studio had ever done—Build multiple franchises that all exist in the same timeline, and follow the same continuity. What started as 10 films, quickly turned into 23 films that were broken up into three

phases of films. The collection of these 23 films became known as the Infinity Saga, in which 8 of those films made over 1 billion dollars<sup>12</sup> with the release of *The Avengers* (\$1.52 Billion), *Iron Man 3* (1.21 Billion), *Avengers: Age Of Ultron* (\$1.40 Billion), *Captain America: Civil War* (\$1.15 Billion), *Black Panther* (\$1.35 Billion), *Avengers: Infinity War*<sup>13</sup> (\$2.05 Billion), *Captain Marvel* (\$1.13 Billion), and *Avengers: Endgame* (\$2.80 Billion). With the end of the Infinity Saga, made up of 23 films that all came to a climactic ending in *Avengers: Endgame*, audiences were quick to ask—What next? But as the story goes, all good things must come to an end. The MCU was no exception.

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<sup>12</sup> Nash Information Services, 2024

<sup>13</sup> Russo and Russo, 2018

## CHAPTER 2: THE MCU AS AN EPIC OF OUR TIME

For thousands of years, epics and creation stories have been essential to human societies. They have helped define existence, they have given meaning to life, and they have entertained civilizations by introducing them to extraordinary events and individuals. But above all, epics have sought to explain the greater universe by delivering powerful narratives that have outlived the civilizations that once gave them a voice. It is through these narratives that societies have learned to form their values and beliefs. And it is without question the reason societies have come to understand the formation of group identity, social relationships, definitions of ethical behavior, and the construction of gender roles and class hierarchies for millennia.<sup>14</sup>

In the modern world, the MCU has functioned as an epic for our time—One large narrative that explores heroic figures and their journeys. While superhero films are often fantastical and full of spectacle, the reason for the MCU's success lies in the fact that at the core of these larger-than-life stories, there is something for everyone to connect with. Underneath all of the explosions, elaborate costumes, alien planets, and living gods, each film tells a very human story, one that often allows audiences to find a greater sense of meaning and progression in their own lives. The MCU gives one the ability to briefly escape into an unthinkable world. It allows the viewer to imagine the unimaginable, and for the duration of the film, the viewer is able to exist in a world where dreaming and living are one in the same.

Even if for only a short moment, these films show audiences what the world could be if everyone became their own hero. But being a hero doesn't mean that they need superhuman strength or the ability to fly. These films inspire audiences to become heroes by choosing to be the best versions of themselves. The very creation of the Avengers and the Eternals are

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<sup>14</sup> Jones, 2024



metaphors for the kinds of good people could create if they came together. To an extent, these superhero team-up films suggest that if the world is in turmoil, it will be the people who band together to become its savior. In this way, these films depict the best and worst of humanity by pushing the existing issues in the world today to their extremes, all in an effort to communicate a message that hopefully resonates with the viewer. While the fictional world of the MCU might appear vastly different from the real world, it is more or less the same.

### **The Cultivation Theory**

To further explain the cultural significance of the MCU, it is also important to consider the ongoing influence it has cultivated by being a franchise that has spanned over 16 years. The cultivation theory first came about in the late 1960s when a man named George Gerbner was studying television and violence.<sup>15</sup> According to the theory, it was found that when compared to casual viewers, more committed viewers expressed notions of reality that were closer to television's depiction of it.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, it is this idea of influencing reality that speaks to the real-world repercussions of popular culture through the persuasive and repetitive messages that are sent to the public through such media.

For years, most cultivation theory research has been primarily focused on television due to it being a system of messages made up of repetitive images and representations to which entire communities are exposed to over long periods of time.<sup>17</sup> However, while television has been the main medium of focus in the cultivation theory, in recent years, this theory has expanded to other forms of media including the MCU. Superficially, it would appear that the MCU wouldn't be relevant to the cultivation theory on the grounds that the MCU generally consists of films, not television. Yet in a way, despite being a film-based franchise, the MCU works much like a

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<sup>15</sup> Signorielli & Morgan, 1990

<sup>16</sup> Gerbner, 1969

<sup>17</sup> Signorielli & Morgan, 106

television series that has no definitive end. In this consciousness, each phase of the MCU could be thought of as one season of a TV show. If such is true of the MCU, then *Avengers Endgame* (the highest-grossing film in history at the time of its release, making over 2.7 billion dollars at the box office) could be held as the Season Finale of phase three of the MCU. Phases four, five, and six of the MCU would then hold the same level of significance as a new season of a renewed television show. Currently, no other film franchise has adopted this television episode-like quality which may speak to the MCU's wide success. Much like television, the MCU has been made up of repetitive patterns and representations that viewers subconsciously absorb over long periods of time.

The notion of repetitiveness begins to scratch the surface of the relationship between society and popular culture, specifically the MCU's depictions of gender binaries, racial representation, and gender roles. Oftentimes, these representations on film can either reinforce or challenge the social constructs that are widely rejected or accepted by society. However, the MCU's influence doesn't just stop at gender. These depictions also hold power over the moral standards that determine what kinds of people society views as good or evil/what characteristics make a person a hero or a villain.<sup>18</sup> It also reinforces how society views violence and the reasons violence exists within people's social interactions. For example, whether or not a character in the MCU is rewarded or punished for the violence they participate in influences how a viewer perceives violence more generally.<sup>19</sup> These effects are especially prominent in child audiences who may find violence to be more acceptable, whenever the hero of the film is praised for violence regardless of the reasons behind it. At the same time, superhero films that place an emphasis on action highlight the ways in which women and men use violence differently in

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<sup>18</sup> Krakowiak & Oliver, 2013

<sup>19</sup> Wilson et al, 28

addition to the kinds of circumstances that prompt such violence.<sup>20</sup> All of these factors work in tandem to subconsciously impact the viewer's perceptions of reality by normalizing certain behaviors that shape their perceptions of people. The fact that the MCU has existed for almost 16 years only amplifies the effects it has on society. However, in a franchise that has had such staying power in society, the MCU is not only affecting people as viewers. It's also impacting people as consumers.

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<sup>20</sup> Campbell, 1

### CHAPTER 3: THE MULTIVERSE: THE END OF A SAGA

In 2021, Marvel Studios kicked off its fourth phase of movies with the film *Black Widow*, premiering exclusively on Disney Plus due to pandemic-related concerns. Coming off of the widely acclaimed “Infinity Saga” which ended with *Avengers Endgame* bringing in over 2.5 billion dollars in box office profits, plans to launch a new Saga that would continue to build and expand Marvel’s extensive catalog of characters and worlds seemed like a natural next step<sup>21</sup>. In November of 2022, with the release of *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (which marked the end of phase four), Marvel Studios head Kevin Feige officially announced that phase five would begin with *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantimania* and even gave fans a look into the future projects that would be released throughout the rest of phase five and phase six. The culmination of phase four, five, and six releases would be titled “The Multiverse Saga” introducing an entirely new concept to the Marvel Universe that would change everything.

Throughout the “Infinity Saga” Marvel Studios' success was largely a result of its continuity throughout its 23 films. Up until this point, no other studio or company ever attempted such an ambitious task where individual characters would each have their own sequels and trilogies, let alone an extensive universe where characters from different movies, following the same continuity had the potential to appear in projects other than their own. It was exciting for audiences to see one shared universe where their favorite characters could interact with one another—One big comic book coming to life on the big screen. But what happens when a studio creates a universe so large and extensive that it becomes difficult to control? Enter the multiverse.

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<sup>21</sup> Richter, 2016

The introduction of the multiverse in phase four of the MCU can be seen as a direct response to the studio crisis happening at Marvel. After *Avengers Endgame* saw many of Marvel's most popular characters die, the multiverse was a concept that made it possible to bring characters back from the dead. More heroes, more planets, more villains, alternate stories, and different versions of characters from the ones fans know. As a business strategy, the multiverse allowed screenwriters to overlook plot holes and inconsistencies within the scripts which served as a way for people to let go of cohesiveness and continuity. For this reason, the MCU was no longer confined by logic. Even if a film didn't make sense, the fact that the multiverse existed meant that it didn't have to make perfect sense since the film could take place in a different reality, one that had no effect on the greater MCU timeline. However, in a studio that has found much success with connectedness and continuity, the concept of the multiverse was one that directly opposed what many have come to expect of the Marvel brand.

### WHAT IF?

On August 11, 2021, Marvel Studios released its first animated series *What If* which reimagined some of the most pivotal moments in the MCU so far and explored different realities, creating a multiverse of infinite possibilities. At the time of its release, the series was the first project in Marvel's phase four slate to touch on the multiverse by bringing back characters from the past three phases that audiences hadn't seen in some time. Some episodes created new storylines of their own, but many episodes were retellings of familiar MCU movies or events throughout the greater MCU with a twist. The first episode in the series was titled *What If... Captain Carter Were The First Avenger?*<sup>22</sup> which was a direct reference to the film *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011). In the episode, Steve Rogers who fans know as Captain America, never gets the super soldier serum that turns him into the star-spangled hero. In an

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<sup>22</sup> List of What If...? Episodes, web 2024

alternate turn of events, the serum ends up in the hands of Agent Peggy Carter, who in this multiverse reality takes the serum to become Captain Carter, the first Avenger.<sup>23</sup> In another episode titled, *What If... Thor Were an Only Child?*<sup>24</sup>, the god of thunder never comes to have a nemesis in his adopted brother Loki. Contrary to the films, this alternate reality shows Thor as an irresponsible party boy, who never gains the life experiences the character needs to become one of Earth's mightiest heroes. This theme of changing one minor thing in the greater MCU continues throughout the series and plays on the idea of creating a ripple effect across the different realities which results in the characters in each episode becoming different than the ones audiences know.

### **Spider-Man: No Way Home**

*Spider-Man: No Way Home*, which came to theaters on December 21, 2021, marked the end of the MCU Spider-Man trilogy that began with the film *Spider-Man: Homecoming* in 2017. Critically held as one of the few Marvel projects to be financially successful throughout phases four and five, after making around 1.916 billion dollars in box office revenue, the very idea of a Spider-Man movie integrating the concept of the multiverse excited Spider-Man and MCU fans alike. Ever since the first trailer dropped on August 23, 2023, earning more than 355.5 million views<sup>25</sup> in its first 24 hours online, fans were shocked at the fact that Alfred Molina was reprising his role as Doc Ock from the film *Spider-Man 2*, released back in 2004. But the thing that surprised fans more than anything was the realization that Molina's Doc Ock wouldn't be fighting against his franchise's version of Spider-Man played by Tobey Maguire. Now, seventeen years after audiences last saw him on screen, Molina's Doc Ock would be going head to head with the MCU's version of Spider-Man portrayed by actor Tom Holland. Was the Doc Ock in the

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<sup>23</sup> What if?, Season 1, Episode 1

<sup>24</sup> What If?, Season 1, Episode 7

<sup>25</sup> Ushe, 2021

trailer the same one from *Spider-Man 2* (2004)? Or could it be a variant from an alternate dimension? It was a question that remained unanswered until the film was finally released in theaters.

Less than ten years ago, the idea of having a Spider-Man film set in the larger MCU universe seemed impossible since the character rights to Spider-Man belonged to Sony. For years Sony had made several movies using the Spider-Man character, most notably with director Sam Raimi's interpretation starring Tobey Maguire in *Spider-Man* (2002), *Spider-Man 2* (2004), and *Spider-Man 3* (2007). These films were held by many comic book enthusiasts as the films that made the MCU possible. From the trilogy's faithfulness to the comics, to its ability to tell grounded stories that drew audiences in as well as its groundbreaking use of CGI for the time, Raimi's trilogy became a blueprint for what a successful comic book movie franchise should look like. After the third film in the franchise *Spider-Man 3* (2007) was released to mixed reviews, Sony executives continued working behind the scenes to collaborate with Sam Raimi to start production on a fourth film. However, after multiple failed scripts and conflicting interests between Raimi and the studio over the direction the franchise should go, Raimi and leading actor Tobey Maguire decided to step away, leaving Sony with a blank slate to create a new interpretation of the character, one that would better reflect the modern, more technologically advanced world that society was approaching around 2010.<sup>26</sup>

Shortly after the studio decided that they were going to reboot the franchise, executives, and screenwriters began forming the scripts and storyboards that would reinvent the character for a new generation of fans who weren't born during the time Tobey Maguire's Spider-Man<sup>27</sup> was in the mainstream. However, trying not to repeat the same things done in the past was a dilemma

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<sup>26</sup> Finke and Fleming, 2010

<sup>27</sup> Raimi, 2007

that the studio wrestled with. Did audiences even want another Spider-Man franchise? Why would anyone care for another film featuring a character they had already seen? At the executive level, the only guiding hand in the decision was knowing that the comic books themselves had reinvented the character of Spider-Man for years, each with different storylines, different artists, and different creatives who put their own spin on the iconic character. Still, one thing remained certain—No matter how much studio executives wanted to differentiate this new version from Raimi’s Spider-Man, there were certain characteristics at the fundamental level of the character that had to remain the same, certain tropes that defined Spider-Man, ones that were left consistent across the various comic book iterations.

Studio executives knew that the character of Peter Parker/Spider-Man had to be in high school, but they also knew that he couldn’t be the kind of stereotypical nerd that was commonly depicted in the early 2000s. In the modern world, they believed a nerd would be more of an outcast, a loner, someone who was misunderstood. But beyond that, the one thing executives and writers knew had to stay the same was that this new version of Peter Parker would also have to lose his Uncle which would ultimately teach him the lesson that audiences had associated with the character: “With Great Power, Comes Great Responsibility.” As long as these elements remained tied to the character, the world in which the studio placed the character could be as different as they wanted. Having Peter Parker live in a world where technology surrounded him, ensured that the comic book character would change and adapt alongside the modern world.<sup>28</sup> With a script underway and a concrete vision of where they wanted to take the character, the studio began its casting search for their new Spider-Man which would be found in Andrew Garfield.

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<sup>28</sup> Webb, 2012



Despite a relatively successful reboot starring Andrew Garfield as Peter Parker in the films *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014), Sony found itself in a position similar to the one they were in back in 2007 when studio executives were first deciding whether or not to reboot the franchise. Although the first film had made 758.4 million dollars at the box office and the second, 709.4 million dollars,<sup>29</sup> it was clear that the new franchise was underperforming in comparison to the films Marvel Studios was producing at the time. In the same year, Sony was hacked by a hacker group that identified themselves as “Guardians of Peace.” Commonly referred to as the “Sony Hack of 2014”<sup>30</sup> information was leaked to the public concerning the personal lives of Sony Pictures employees, confidential emails, and copies of then-unreleased Sony films which included plans for future films and the scripts attached to them. As Sony began picking up the pieces, they began to reevaluate their plans, which included a third film to the Amazing Spider-Man franchise, titled *The Amazing Spider-Man 3*. Considering that *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* turned out to be the lowest domestic grossing film out of any Spider-Man movie at that time, and the fact that it was outgrossed by Marvel Studios *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), *Iron Man 3* (2012), and *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), it became very clear to studio executives that audiences were far more interested in the cinematic world Marvel Studios was building. Also adding to the crisis at Sony were the leaked emails between Marvel President Kevin Feige and head of Sony Pictures Amy Pascal who were entertaining the idea of working together. After seeing how excited fans were at the prospect of Sony and Marvel teaming up, Sony realized that the best financial decision during their recovery from the hack would be to sign a new contract

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<sup>29</sup> IMDB Box Office Mojo, 2012

<sup>30</sup> James and Lee, 2015

with Marvel Studios which would allow the character rights of Spider-Man to be shared between Sony Pictures and Marvel Studios.

For the first time in history, this new agreement would mean that Spider-Man could make an appearance in the larger MCU, where he would be able to interact with the wide gallery of heroes that Marvel Studios had already established in their cinematic universe. The only thing the studio had left to decide was whether Andrew Garfield would reprise his role as the famous wall-crawler, or if they should cast someone entirely new in the role, to dissociate audiences from the prior Spider-Man films<sup>31</sup> that were quite divisive among audiences. Ultimately, Sony Pictures and Marvel Studios decided that it would be best to cast a younger actor who could pull off the innocence and naivete of a child. Both studios wanted the character of Spider-Man to represent someone who was brand new to this world of heroes which would also add a fresh perspective on the MCU as a whole. At the same time, having a younger, more inexperienced Spider-Man who was just starting to find his footing in the MCU would serve as a parallel reference to the events happening behind the scenes that eventually led to the new contract sharing the rights to Spider-Man. Who would play this role? After a rigorous casting process with more than 1,500 people auditioning for the role, the two major studios eventually decided that the role of Peter Parker for a third reboot of the Spider-Man franchise under the new merger would go to the then-relatively unknown Tom Holland whose interpretation of the webhead would go on to become one the great standouts in MCU.<sup>32</sup>

The agreement to share the character rights to Spider-Man turned out to be lucrative for both Sony Pictures and Marvel Studios. Not only could Spider-Man exist within the greater MCU, but he could also appear in other non-Spider-Man-related projects including *Captain*

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<sup>31</sup> Webb, 2014

<sup>32</sup> Noraas, 2023

*America: Civil War* (2016), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019).<sup>33</sup> In addition to becoming a member of the Avengers, Spider-Man would also have a series of solo films *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019), and *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021) all of which would be under the creative direction of both Marvel Studios and Sony Pictures collectively. The idea of having a younger Spider-Man excited fans more than anything at the time.<sup>34</sup> The fact that audiences hadn't seen anything like this before coupled with the growing popularity of the MCU as a franchise quickly catapulted the third reboot of the Spider-Man franchise to new heights, with Holland's second film *Spider-Man: Far From Home* earning just over 1.1 billion dollars worldwide, making the Sony/Marvel Studio film the highest-grossing Spider-Man film to date.<sup>35</sup> Just a few years later, this record would be topped with the addition of *Spider-Man: No Way Home* to the franchise, a film that celebrated almost 20 years of Spider-Man cinema by bringing back past villains from the previous franchises along with both versions of Spider-Man played by Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield. It was a film that used the concept of the multiverse to deliver one of the most memorable moments in superhero film history—Seeing the three different versions of Spider-Man from the last 20 years all in the same film.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Russo and Russo, 2016

<sup>34</sup> Watts, 2017

<sup>35</sup> Watts, 2019

<sup>36</sup> Watts, 2021

## CHAPTER 4: THE FALL OF THE MCU

As much as *Spider-Man: No Way Home* was a record-breaking feat for both Sony Pictures and Marvel Studios, the rest of the MCU slate for phases four and five never fully stuck their landings and proved to be major stepbacks for the studio. After the climatic end to phase three with *Avengers: Endgame* (2018) and *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019), the world was faced with the COVID-19 Pandemic which consequently meant that movie theaters and premieres were forced onto streaming platforms, most notably on Disney Plus. Back in 2009, Disney bought Marvel for 4 billion dollars, and ever since then the MCU has brought in major box office revenue over the years. In 2009, The New York Times reported that Marvel Studios was facing financial difficulties when it came to making some of its major movies.<sup>37</sup> As a result, Marvel Studios struggled to meet a requirement to raise a third of its budget by selling off overseas distribution rights, and not long after, Marvel ended up needing to finance that third all on its own. At the time, the CEO of Disney Bob Iger was focused on growing the Disney brand and the prospect of acquiring the rights to Marvel's characters seemed like an opportunity that Iger and other Disney executives didn't want to pass on despite some believing that the Marvel Universe didn't fit with Disney's family-friendly brand. Nevertheless, Iger made his interest in the Marvel Universe known, and in response, Marvel Studios decided that raising a third of its budget would be much easier if Marvel was a subsidiary of Disney, and so a deal was struck.

On November 19, 2019, Disney launched Disney Plus,<sup>38</sup> a streaming service that became the one place where every single MCU film could be viewed in the order they were released.

Around the same time, Marvel Studios had already cemented a slate of original shows that would

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<sup>37</sup> Barnes and Cieply, 2009

<sup>38</sup> Disney+ is a streaming service that offers thousands of hours of content from Disney, Pixar, Marvel, Star Wars, National Geographic, and more. It includes movies, series, and originals, such as documentaries, live-action and animated series, and short-form content.

build on the expanding universe along with several films that would kick off phase four of the MCU. One of these films was *Black Widow*, Scarlett Johanson's first solo film which was initially scheduled to release on November 6, 2020, but after assessing the state of the pandemic, it became clear that releasing the film during a time when many movie theaters were closed would greatly hurt how the film would perform. In response, the studio decided to push back the film's release date to May 7, 2021, in hopes that things concerning the pandemic would change.<sup>39</sup> However, as May approached, the entertainment landscape had changed, and even though some theaters had reopened, many fans were reluctant to return to public venues. As the studio recognized these concerns and the potential consequences that could follow from releasing a film during this time, Marvel Studios once again decided to push back the film's release date to July 9, 2021—For the first time in Marvel's history, they would release a brand new film simultaneously in theaters and on Disney Plus for one month with an additional fee of \$30.<sup>40</sup>

The release of *Black Widow* (2021) on Disney Plus marked a huge turning point for the MCU as a franchise, one whose success depended on the excitement generated by premieres, fan viewings, and theater experiences. Now that these events were no longer possible under the conditions of the Pandemic, audiences started to lose the urgency of seeing these films on opening day. Even after most theaters reopened in April of 2021, the Marvel fandom wasn't the same as it was before the Pandemic. The studio took this as a sign to change their approach to content production, as they placed more emphasis on projects and series that could be easily adaptable to streaming services, something that had grown in popularity because of quarantine mandates during the Pandemic. Then in December of 2021, Bob Iger, CEO of Disney, announced that he was formally retiring from the company,<sup>41</sup> leaving the Disney Brand and Marvel in the

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<sup>39</sup> Pallotta, 2020

<sup>40</sup> Isenberg, 2021

<sup>41</sup> Grothaus, 2023

hands of Bob Chapek. On February 25, 2021, the board of directors named Bob Chapek – then-chairman of Disney Parks, Experiences and Products – the new chief executive, while appointing Iger executive chairman to oversee the transition. It was under Chapek’s supervision that the MCU underwent some of its major changes.

The new business model for the MCU prioritized quantity over quality. Under Chapek’s direction, the studio began shifting its creative focus to Disney Plus series which would tell smaller stories that would work to expand the MCU as a whole. Throughout 2021 Marvel Studios released *Black Widow* (2021), *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), *The Eternals* (2021), *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), and the series *WandaVision* (2021), *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (2021), *Hawkeye* (2021), and *Loki* (2021). Then in 2022, Marvel Studios released the films *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022), *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022), and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022), along with the series *Moon Knight*, *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law*, *The Guardians of the Galaxy Holiday Special*, and *Ms. Marvel*. To put things into perspective this meant that on average Marvel Studios was putting out three to four films a year, along with three to five Disney Plus series a year. With so much content released simultaneously across film and television, Marvel Studios was spreading itself too thin, and President Kevin Feige could no longer remain heavily involved in each of the separate projects as he was when Marvel’s production rate was much lower.<sup>42</sup>

While some of these projects were well received by fans, a quick look at the box office earnings for films released between 2021-2022 reveals that something was different at Marvel Studios, which wasn’t particularly a good thing. Compared to the financial success of phases one

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<sup>42</sup> Mercuri, 2024

through three, the films released in phases four and five failed to ever reach the highs that the earlier films received, with the exception of *Spider-Man: No Way Home*.<sup>43</sup>

Below is a list of the worldwide box office earnings throughout the film history of the MCU:<sup>44</sup>

| <b><u>PHASE 5 (AS OF NOW)</u></b> |                                |               |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------|
| Nov 10, 2023                      | The Marvels                    | \$199,706,250 |
| May 5, 2023                       | Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 3  | \$845,468,744 |
| Feb 17, 2023                      | Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quant... | \$463,635,303 |

| <b><u>PHASE 4</u></b> |                                |                 |
|-----------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| Nov 11, 2022          | Black Panther: Wakanda Forever | \$853,985,546   |
| Jul 8, 2022           | Thor: Love and Thunder         | \$760,928,081   |
| May 6, 2022           | Doctor Strange in the Multi... | \$952,224,986   |
| Dec 17, 2021          | Spider-Man: No Way Home        | \$1,907,836,254 |
| Nov 5, 2021           | Eternals                       | \$401,731,759   |
| Sep 3, 2021           | Shang-Chi and the Legend of... | \$432,224,634   |
| Jul 9, 2021           | Black Widow                    | \$379,751,131   |

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<sup>43</sup> Gerring, 2022

<sup>44</sup> Box Office History for Marvel Cinematic Universe Movies, web, 2024

**PHASE 3**

|              |                               |                 |
|--------------|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| Jul 2, 2019  | Spider-Man: Far From Home     | \$1,132,107,522 |
| Apr 26, 2019 | Avengers: Endgame             | \$2,748,242,781 |
| Mar 8, 2019  | Captain Marvel                | \$1,129,576,094 |
| Jul 6, 2018  | Ant-Man and the Wasp          | \$623,144,660   |
| Apr 27, 2018 | Avengers: Infinity War        | \$2,048,359,754 |
| Feb 16, 2018 | Black Panther                 | \$1,336,494,320 |
| Nov 3, 2017  | Thor: Ragnarok                | \$850,482,778   |
| Jul 7, 2017  | Spider-Man: Homecoming        | \$878,646,712   |
| May 5, 2017  | Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 2 | \$869,087,963   |
| Nov 4, 2016  | Doctor Strange                | \$676,343,174   |
| May 6, 2016  | Captain America: Civil War    | \$1,151,899,586 |

**PHASE 2**

|              |                                 |                 |
|--------------|---------------------------------|-----------------|
| Jul 17, 2015 | Ant-Man                         | \$518,858,449   |
| May 1, 2015  | Avengers: Age of Ultron         | \$1,395,316,979 |
| Aug 1, 2014  | Guardians of the Galaxy         | \$770,882,395   |
| Apr 4, 2014  | Captain America: Winter Soldier | \$714,401,889   |
| Nov 8, 2013  | Thor: The Dark World            | \$644,602,516   |
| May 3, 2013  | Iron Man 3                      | \$1,215,392,272 |



**PHASE 1**

|              |                                |                 |
|--------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| May 4, 2012  | The Avengers                   | \$1,515,100,211 |
| Jul 22, 2011 | Captain America: The First ... | \$370,569,776   |
| May 6, 2011  | Thor                           | \$449,326,618   |
| May 7, 2010  | Iron Man 2                     | \$621,156,389   |
| Jun 13, 2008 | The Incredible Hulk            | \$265,573,859   |
| May 2, 2008  | Iron Man                       | \$585,171,547   |

**Oversaturation and Spherical Modes of Production**

In the last three years, the quality of recent Marvel projects has significantly reduced, which is a direct result of too many projects being released within a given time frame. On a studio level, the oversaturation of MCU films means that many projects are being filmed, edited in post-production, and released without thorough edits and oversight by the President of the MCU, Kevin Feige. Ever since the launch of Disney Plus and the addition of TV shows that are all canon<sup>45</sup> to the Marvel Universe as a collective, there has been much content for audiences to keep up with which leaves fans in a position to pick and choose what they want to spend their time watching. Considering that the majority of Marvel's appeal is that everything feels connected and relevant, this proves to be a significant issue for maintaining the Marvel brand. Back in 2019 before the release of *Avengers: Endgame* movie moviegoers used to watch Marvel films with a different mindset. At the time, every single MCU leading up to *Avengers: Endgame* felt immersive and large in scope. In each respective film, there was a perfect balance between telling a compelling individual story while also adding something new and refreshing to the

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<sup>45</sup> all works of fiction that are officially said to create a fictional world

MCU collectively. This connected universe is what made the “Avengers” films stand out from any kind of film any studio was able to pull off. However, after an in-depth look into the box office earnings of phase three compared to phases four and five, it becomes evident that Marvel hasn’t been able to generate the same level of interest. In Marvel’s current state there are just too many things to keep up with, leaving fans feeling as if they have to do homework by watching 3 or 4 Disney plus shows just to understand the latest movie to release in theaters. The latest example of this would be Marvel Studio’s latest film *The Marvels* starring Brie Larson which was released back in November of 2023.

While there are still some big successes in the MCU, it’s becoming more of a “wait and see if it’s good” situation. Even a popular franchise like *Guardians of the Galaxy Volume 3* had opening numbers lower than expected, indicating a growing hesitancy to rush to the theaters for every new release. Some of this has to do with inflation and the rising costs for a movie ticket as well as a change in mindset due to the pandemic. It’s clear that changes are currently happening at Marvel Studios, and fans are becoming more discerning when it comes to what they invest their time and money in. While it would be inaccurate to refer to the more recent MCU films as a failure by general standards, film analysts and MCU fans alike know that the MCU has had more misses than hits in the last three years. The biggest flop that comes to mind—*The Marvels*.

Though there had been several films that had underperformed in phases four and five it was *The Marvels* that saw Marvel Studios suffer a true failure at the box office for only the second time in studio history (the first being 2008’s *The Incredible Hulk* at \$264 million). The poor results of this film can be attributed to a few different factors. For one, it was likely that there was audience confusion due to the title of the film, which obscured the fact this was a sequel to the \$1.1 billion *Captain Marvel*, which made the promotional material of the film sound more like a new season

of the *Ms. Marvel* series on Disney plus. In addition to this, many fans didn't feel ready to pay for a movie ticket when they weren't familiar with the supporting characters that had only ever been seen in their respective Disney Plus series. For current fans, the shows did not invest audiences in the characters enough to justify going to see those same characters in a movie. For new fans of the MCU, following the movie's plot without the proper context from other series and shows, made the storyline too convoluted and complex which led to a percentage of people skipping the film entirely. At the same time, it was also likely that the rest of the year had already soured viewers on superhero content. This is an epidemic referred to as superhero fatigue.<sup>46</sup>

### **Superhero Fatigue**

Marvel Studios diluted the MCU brand by rushing so many Disney Plus streaming series to release, while still attempting to continue releasing movies theatrically every year in the aftermath of the record-setting ending to MCU Infinity Saga. For general viewers, the MCU appears to be a franchise that just won't end, with every film serving as a sort of advertisement for the next one. For this reason, the formula of the MCU has made it feel as though the events in the meta-cinematic narrative franchise are only relevant so long as they do not conflict with the needs of future installments. In this way, the MCU has been able to craft stories, but it has failed to establish compelling plots that have any sense of causality or meaning.<sup>47</sup> After sixteen years of watching MCU films, many have grown tired of the more or less predictable formula of the superhero genre. In recent times, there has been a certain blandness to the MCU that relies on hastily produced CGI effects, uninspired writing, and subpar cinematography choices that lack artistic vision and originality which have traditionally defined and shaped the superhero genre. For this reason, the only true logic that governs the significance of the MCU and the guidelines

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<sup>46</sup> the idea that audiences are less interested or receptive towards superhero movies in general because of the sheer quantity and lack of originality or quality

<sup>47</sup> Canavan, 2018

that reveal to audiences which events actually matter and which don't, is a line of reasoning that is entirely determined by whose contracts are up, and whose sequels have been green-lit.<sup>48</sup>

Though this might not be true of the entire MCU, phases four and five have shown that the most recent films are not as concerned about characters, choices, or consequences; the films primarily exist to aid in the permanent extension of the MCU itself as a franchise.

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<sup>48</sup> Canavan, 2018

## CHAPTER 5: MARVEL SOCIETY: RACE, GENDER AND IDENTITY IN THE MCU

Before understanding how the expansion of the MCU demographic led to the MCU's decline, it's necessary to establish the way MCU films support or challenge social and cultural constructs within society. To do this, it's first important to recognize how MCU films portray topics of race, gender, and identity in an attempt to make sense of how these depictions fit into the ever-expanding demographic of the studio. The following information uses a select few films from the MCU to highlight the portrayals of gender and race in such a popular franchise.

In many films, gender and gender stereotypes are interwoven into characters and plot lines, but in the case of the MCU, these portrayals of gender are not limited to just one film, they are constantly being built upon with every installment. Back in 2014, *Avengers: Age of Ultron* was released in theaters, and in it, was a prime example of how gender and sex are represented through popular media. The film sees a romantic relationship between Black Widow (aka Natasha Romanoff) and the Hulk (aka Bruce Banner)<sup>49</sup>. According to Susan A. Basow's book *Gender: Stereotypes and Roles*, men are agential, active, aggressive, and dominant, they don't care about appearances<sup>50</sup>. They are blunt and loud and in many ways, the Hulk character is the epitome of male aggression and masculinity. He yells, smashes cars and buildings, and takes down helicopters with ease. The Hulk is at the far end of masculinity on the gender spectrum. During the opening sequence, there is a scene where Natasha is told by Captain America to calm the Hulk down so that he transforms back into Dr. Bruce Banner. In her attempts to calm him, she gently caresses the Hulk's hand and softly gives him a lullaby, a notion that supports the

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<sup>49</sup> Whedon, 2015

<sup>50</sup> Basow, 5

gender stereotypes Basow suggests which are that females tend to be more passive, communal, dependent, emotional, submissive, tactful, gentle, neat, quiet, nurturing, and giving.

Coupled with the way Natasha interacts with the Hulk are also the ways they both are physically portrayed as well. The Hulk, who embodies the inner beast and the more primitive nature that's innate within men, stands 8 feet tall, with bulging muscles, and disheveled hair, wearing nothing but torn-up pants. Natasha on the other hand has red wavy hair, wears a skin-tight black suit, and has a finely-curved athletic figure that greatly embodies femininity and what is seen as attractive and beautiful in the male gaze. Both of their physical appearances support the concept of sexed bodies and the physical differences between male and female humans that Basow describes. As she gives him a lullaby, the Hulk almost instantly transforms back into Bruce Banner, a brilliant scientist who is sophisticated, nerdy, and proper. Londa's Schiebinger book *Nature's Body* explores the relationship between apes and humans, with males being aggressive and females being passive. In many ways, the Hulk is what happens when civilization is taken out of man, and many times, it is the role of the more passive, modest, and civilized female to essentially put humanity back in the uncivilized male.<sup>51</sup> This notion of females being the more civilized and passive gender isn't anything new as this has been seen countless times throughout film history with movies like *Beauty and the Beast* and *King Kong* just to name a few. In the case of the Hulk, it's Natasha who can return him to his human self. This connection between people and apes is prevalent with the creation of the Hulk back in 1962 and suggests that theoretically in the "Tree of Being,"<sup>52</sup> The Hulk as a fictional character would take the place of an ape, acting as a species that separates mankind from monkeys. Perhaps the

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<sup>51</sup> Schiebinger, 74

<sup>52</sup> The tree of being is a metaphor used to describe the system of patriarchy in the animal kingdom

Hulk is the manifestation of the “ape-man” concerning the progressive evolution that Schiebinger mentions.

Later in the film, Bruce and Natasha have a conversation about leaving the Avengers to pursue a life together. While Black Widow as a character in the comics, is a master in the covert arts of espionage, infiltration, and subterfuge, all of which actively challenge the key stereotype of passivity in women that Basow implies, gender stereotypes persist towards the middle of the film when Natasha urges Bruce to quit the Avengers and leave with her. Although she is a skilled fighter and a valuable member of the team, she wishes to quit her life as an Avenger so that she can live a normal life. This greatly shows how Natasha wasn't breaking the societal gender norms out of choice, but rather because she had to and yearned for a life that would better suit and satisfy the roles that are expected of her being a woman. In response, Bruce says that she shouldn't be with him because being the Hulk means they can never have kids or start a family.<sup>53</sup> Bruce's inability to commit to Natasha indicates that the sporadic nature of turning into the Hulk or rather his tendency to lose his humanity and fall back on his innate male aggression suggests that he is not capable of being in a relationship, or at least one that is socially seen as normal. In this moment Natasha responds by sharing with Bruce that during her time training for the Soviet Union, all of her eggs were removed so she would never have the urge to start a family, as a way to ensure her loyalty to the missions she was assigned.

Here both Bruce and Natasha to a certain degree, are prohibited from exhibiting the gender norms that support the societal framework that serves as a code for human interaction. Bruce is unable to be a civilized man, and Natasha is not capable of having children, the one thing that biologically, she was meant to do. Still, they choose to be together despite the fact they can never have a family which ties in with Joan Roughgarden's theory of social selection in her

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<sup>53</sup> Whedon, 2015

book *Evolution's Rainbow* which suggests that mating and relationships are not confined to producing offspring and passing genes but instead include other societal factors that lead to relationships between people, such as personality traits and physical attraction.<sup>54</sup>

In recent years Marvel Studios has actively tried to challenge gender norms by pushing for more superhero movies led by female protagonists. In 2018, Marvel released *Captain Marvel*, the first Marvel film in history to be led by a female. The movie's slogan, "Higher, Further, Faster" was in many ways a subtle message that women can be powerful too, which challenges the norm that females are passive. Two years ago, the fourth installment to the Thor franchise, *Thor Love and Thunder*, saw Natalie Portman take on the mantle of Thor, a traditionally male character, who demonstrates that women are just as "worthy" as anyone else when it comes to wielding the magical hammer Mjolnir.<sup>55</sup> Also in the film were supporting characters that represented the LGBT community with characters such as Korg, a homosexual Kronan warrior made of rocks, who belongs to a species solely made up of males, and Valkyrie, a bisexual superheroine who is the leader of the fiercest warriors that defend the throne of Asgard, the home of the gods.<sup>56</sup>

In the film *Thor Love and Thunder*, the character Korg creates a baby boy with another Kronan<sup>57</sup> by joining hands and submerging themselves in a pit of lava, a traditional Kronan mating ritual that is performed when two Kronans want to mate. But as crazy as that sounds, it's very reminiscent of Roughgarden's piece *Evolution's Rainbow* where she describes the various same-sex relationships in different species and assigns the term "gender" to animals, even though gender is a socially constructed human idea that shouldn't apply to animals since they lack the

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<sup>54</sup> Roughgarden, 106

<sup>55</sup> Olufidipe, 2021

<sup>56</sup> Waititi, 2022

<sup>57</sup> Kronan - a race of all-male rock-like humanoid beings native to the planet Ria, who worship Ninny of the Nonny as a god.



capacity to form cultural beliefs in the way humans do and thereby can't be gendered.<sup>58</sup> Though Korg is essentially a rock, gender is still assigned to him and shapes the way he interacts with others in his species.

Similarly, Valkyrie's character embodies a lot of masculine traits in her combat and leadership skills, which is demonstrated when she bows and kisses the hand of another woman, an interaction that would typically be seen between a male and female which supports Cecilia L. Ridgeway's work in her book *Framed by Gender* which explores gender differences and their role in coordination problems. But even though Valkyrie and her love interest are both females, Valkyrie is the one who performs the actions that are typically seen in males, which demonstrates that even in bisexual and homosexual relationships, binary gender persists.<sup>59</sup> Both Valkyrie and Korg, represent groups of people that don't agree with the fundamentally binary framework that society has built and even suggest there is a sense of otherness in terms of what gender identity means that goes beyond simply being male or female.

In November of 2022, the sequel to *Black Panther*, titled *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* was released to the public which saw the nation of Wakanda struggling with the loss of T'challa, who was both their king and protector, the Black Panther.<sup>60</sup> To a certain degree, this is somewhat reminiscent of the idea of patriarchy and the notion that gender is a primary frame for organizing social relations which are seen in Ridgeway's work. In this case, Wakanda is left with no king and no protector, and for the first time in Wakanda's history, the queen is forced to step up from her role of passivity and lead the nation against global affairs. In some ways this film reinforces the fact that males, throughout our history, have been the leaders, making the important decisions that females are largely excluded from. But at the same time, the film breaks

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<sup>58</sup> Roughgarden, 2013

<sup>59</sup> Ridgeway, 2011

<sup>60</sup> Coogler, 2022

these gender stereotypes by showing that the nation of Wakanda is just as capable of defending itself without its king. This impression is further reinforced when T'challa's sister Shuri, steps into the mantle of the Black Panther at the end of the film which insinuates and projects that women can be aggressive and protective too.

This notion of patriarchy and the role of gender as a primary frame for organizing social relations is nothing new. Even in many mammalian societies, there appears to be a clear unequal distribution of social influence among males and females. Concerning human societies, historically and cross-culturally speaking, women have always been underrepresented in positions of power with many suggesting that women are not fit to be leaders.<sup>61</sup> Why is that? Many argue that there are some innate biological differences such as hormones, testosterone, and psychological behaviors that make males more suitable for holding power and making decisions, but this argument has failed to provide any sort of conclusive evidence making it just another case of underdetermination. This is due in part to the fact that we lack consistent evidence that women leaders perform worse than men, not because of some natural phenomenon, but rather because of the way our social and cultural values have influenced our view of the world in terms of what it is and what it should be.

Interestingly enough, there are already discernible flaws with this method of thinking, for how can one accurately conclude that female leaders perform worse than males if society is continuously being framed in ways that don't give women the opportunities to lead? Mainstream films such as *Black Panther*, *Captain Marvel*, and *Thor Love and Thunder* have worked to make it more common and acceptable for women to be in positions of power, which in turn influences the general public's willingness to either reject or accept these atypical gender roles<sup>62</sup>. Time and

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<sup>61</sup> Okruhlik, 2020

<sup>62</sup> Ameter, 54

time again, much of the conclusions science has drawn are tainted by the preexisting beliefs and biases in society that fuel the search for information and evidence supporting certain hypotheses, leading researchers to conclude that there is a good and justifiable reason as to why there are fewer female leaders than men.

The scientific article, *An Evolutionary Explanation for the Female Leadership Paradox* by Jennifer E. Smith et al takes an in-depth look at the effects sexual selection has on leader emergence in relation to gender. More specifically, the authors argue that sexual selection plays a large role in shaping gender-specific competition strategies, which ultimately influences the cultural transmission of institutions and norms. When considering the sex differences in males and females, these specializations in different forms of expectations regarding gender-appropriate behavior, also known as prescribed gender roles, influence one another which can either increase or decrease “gender differences in competitive strategies and shape the kinds of gendered divisions of labor that emerge.”<sup>63</sup> Following this method of thinking, the article makes a wide array of assumptions about gender using sexual selection as a lens to justify gender biases in leadership and how this correlates with men’s larger bodies and strength in comparison to women. Coupled with these physical differences, the authors also point out that sexual selection leads to behavioral differences in males such as the “greater tendency among men for physical or other risk-taking behaviors when pursuing leadership roles.”<sup>64</sup> Essentially the authors suggest that due to the principles of sexual selection, males are more likely to exhibit aggression for the purpose of competition, while females have evolved to avoid riskier actions and more passive behaviors for the sake of reproductive success from parental investment. It’s in this way that MCU films such as *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* actively address real-world issues that

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<sup>63</sup> Smith et al., 8

<sup>64</sup> Smith et al., 8

push back against the work of scientific studies that aim to provide a well-informed explanation of the lack of female leadership in today's society.

When looking at gender within the MCU, especially with the emergence of female superheroes, it's important to look at how these films portray gender and gender schema. According to West, Zimmerman, and Ridgeway, gender schema<sup>65</sup> is the way society organizes people by gender and bases our interactions with others accordingly. In the book *Doing Gender*, West and Zimmerman also suggest that gender is not something people are, but rather something people are constantly doing and creating through their actions with the normative nature of gender.<sup>66</sup> In regards to popular media, with such an immense reach, the MCU is setting an example of what gender is and what it should be across multiple generations. What this means is that it's crucial to examine and understand the ways gender values are supported or challenged within these films as these portrayals not only influence how people behave according to their gender but also can greatly determine the ways people interact with others according to someone else's gender.

While a fictional franchise, the portrayals of gender in the MCU are principal to the way society reconceptualizes gender, "not as a simple property of individuals but as an integral dynamic of social orders" that "implies a new perspective on the entire network of gender relation" (West and Zimmerman). While the characters in the MCU are nothing more than speculative fiction, the impacts their portrayals have on the world around us couldn't be any more real and conspicuous.

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<sup>65</sup> Gender schemas refer to mental structures that organize incoming information according to gender categories and in turn lead people to perceive the world in terms of gender

<sup>66</sup> West and Zimmerman, 134

## CHAPTER 6: THE MARVEL DEMOGRAPHIC

When the MCU was first started in the late 2000s it appealed to a wide demographic. In each film, there was something for everyone. Males, females, and children alike were all equally entertained. A good mix of action, humor, relatable characters, and a compelling storyline. In the last few years, there's no denying that Marvel projects have become less inclusive. Now there are different projects for different demographics. More light-hearted shows for teenagers, female-led superhero films for women, and more serious and mature projects for adults. Compared to earlier films, such as *Avengers: Age of Ultron* which seemed to reinforce typical gender stereotypes for the roles of men and women, the MCU has begun to intentionally try and attract a new demographic in the underrepresented portion of its viewership. Before, there was a broad appeal, but now there is just too much content, each designed for a specific demographic in mind. The MCU no longer has that same broad appeal, leaving people uninterested. As a result, the MCU feels more fragmented, disentangled, and niche-specific, but the very success of the MCU in the past has always been because of its cohesiveness and natural fluidity throughout its first three phases of films.

### She-Hulk

The Disney Plus series *She-Hulk* was controversial among the Marvel fan base for its emphasis on feminism and mockery of the many complaints fans have had about the franchise.<sup>67</sup> In the season finale of the show, the protagonist Jennifer Walters (She Hulk) breaks the fourth wall<sup>68</sup> and leaves her own show entering the real world. Once in the real world, Walters interrupts a pitch meeting with Marvel screenwriters who are actively writing the script for the finale of the show. In this moment, Walters speaks to the Marvel executives/producers, and

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<sup>67</sup> Goa, 2022

<sup>68</sup> an imaginary wall that separates the story from the real world

rewrites the climax of the finale, changing it from the stereotypical superhero ending that fans have come to expect from the genre. Just a few moments later, Walters stumbles across a robot named K.E.V.I.N. which is a direct reference to Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige. Much like Feige, this enhanced artificial intelligence (Knowledge Enhanced Visual Interconnectivity Nexus (K.E.V.I.N.)) is the author of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. At the end of the show, K.E.V.I.N. reveals that he was the one who made all the creative decisions of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and that he would answer Walters' questions. In an effort to poke fun at the haters of the MCU, K.E.V.I.N. asks Walters to revert back to the human form, since the VFX team had already moved on to another project. In the final moments of the finale, K.E.V.I.N. reveals to Walters that he possesses one of the most advanced entertainment algorithms in the world, while also asserting that he is the one to decide how her show will conclude. Although this approach was something radically different from what fans had seen before, the on-the-nose references to the studio crisis happening in the real world, along with the jokes made in reference to the fan base, left audiences feeling as though the studio had gone too far.

### **Ms. Marvel**

Before appearing alongside Captain Marvel in *The Marvels* (2023), Ms. Marvel was introduced into the MCU with her own six-episode series titled *Ms. Marvel*.<sup>69</sup> Ms. Marvel, also known as Kamala Khan, is a Pakistani-American superhero, making her the first ever Pakistani hero to be seen on screen. The series was heavily geared towards younger girls, with a lighthearted tone that focused on Pakistani culture treating being Muslim as ordinary. Up until this point, many of Pakistan's biggest TV shows and movies depicted women as victims, the typical damsel in distress. *Ms. Marvel* was the first time people in Pakistan saw women characters in positions of power. Throughout the show, Ms. Marvel defies Pakistani gender

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<sup>69</sup> Ali K., 2022

norms by displaying great courage in the face of hardship. The series also grapples with Pakistani history by devoting an entire episode to the Partition of British-ruled India in August 1947, which held great significance for the Pakistani community given that The Partition, particularly the violence and upheaval associated with it, was not commonly mentioned in Pakistani mainstream.<sup>70</sup>

However, the very demographic-specific nature of the show, left some fans feeling that it was okay not to watch certain projects if they decided it didn't appeal to them. Since the MCU had already been diluted, and the studio was clearly trying to expand its appeal, audiences began to experience the MCU on their own terms, meaning that they had come to accept that they didn't need to see every single piece of MCU content just to remain in the loop. The interconnected nature of the MCU has made many believe that in order to enjoy any of it, they must consume all of it, but the expanding nature of the MCU has convinced audiences that this is not true.<sup>71</sup> Now that the MCU appears to be prioritizing sheer quantity over quality, taking a more selective approach may be the only way fans can avoid burnout from the superhero genre. But while this strategy is one fans can adopt to enhance their experience as viewers, Marvel Studios will surely continue to experience plummeting financial results as a business if more and more people begin to become increasingly selective in the films they are willing to pay to see.

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<sup>70</sup> Siddiqui, 2022

<sup>71</sup> Mellon, 2022

## **CONCLUSION: THERE'S NO ENDGAME FOR MARVEL**

Superhero films aren't going away anytime soon. In fact, superhero companies like Marvel and DC Comics will be around for generations to come. While different franchises may come and go, the characters these companies have created have already been cemented in popular culture and will continue to be adapted throughout history so long as studios are able to keep the characters relevant to modern-day society. In its current state, the MCU has continued to dominate the box office even if it has struggled to reach the success it once had at its peak leading up to 2019. Currently, some fans have lost hope in the studio's ability to reach that *Avengers Endgame* level excitement, but Marvel Studios has assured that what's to come is something worth waiting for.

The only film Marvel Studios is releasing this year is *Deadpool and Wolverine*, starring Ryan Reynolds and Hugh Jackman. Scheduled for a July 2024 release, the teaser trailer and official trailer for the film have already broken the record for the most viewed trailer in 24 hours which is an indication that Marvel fans are anxiously anticipating a reason to return to theaters to become a part of the Marvel Fandom once more. Critics and movie analysts have already predicted that based on the number of trailer views, *Deadpool and Wolverine* could be the first MCU film in a long time to make 1 billion dollars at the box office. Much of these early projections also have to do with the fact that *Deadpool and Wolverine* is the first *Deadpool* film in the franchise since Disney acquired 21st Century Fox in 2019, which marks the first time characters from the X-men and other related characters could exist in the greater MCU. Couple this company merger with the nature of *Deadpool*, a character who's famously known for breaking the fourth wall, and it's very likely that *Deadpool and Wolverine* could fix some of the MCU's mistakes in the last five years or even directly acknowledge and poke fun at the studio



crisis all while celebrating different characters from various franchises and studios. Other films currently planned for the future Multiverse Saga of films include the fifth and sixth installments of the Avengers film franchise with *Avengers The Kang Dynasty*, projected to release in 2026, and *Avengers Secret Wars*, slated for 2027.

While it hasn't been confirmed by the studio, the very titles of these films suggest that the studio is aiming to adapt one of the most popular comic book storylines in Marvel Comics history—Secret Wars, a multiversal event that takes heroes from both the main MCU and alternate universes and places them into one world, The Battleworld, a space which exhibits aspects of all the various universes. If such is true, fans could expect to see Sony's Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield return to play their respective roles of Spider-Man, and characters from Fox's original X-Men franchise to make an appearance. It might even mean that the original cast of the Avengers— Robert Downey Jr., Chris Evans, and Scarlett Johanson could return to play multiverse variants of Iron Man, Captain America, and Black Widow, characters that have already died in the main MCU timeline. Meanwhile, the MCU isn't the only superhero company making plans for the next couple of years.

Other companies like DC Studios have already well into development with rebooting their entire universe under the direction of new DC CEO James Gunn, who plans to kick off this brand new DC universe with the newest iteration of Superman in his film *Superman*, previously titled *Superman Legacy*. Only time will tell if either of these Studios can return to the days when superhero films had people rushing out on opening day, or waiting in line for hours just to see the film. But one thing is for certain—Whether or not these future films are successful, there's no reversing the social effects that superhero culture has already left on society.

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