

Assembling a Cinematic Universe

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ABSTRACT / The following essay will touch on the way that the Marvel Cinematic Universe has shifted on its storytelling method in order to maintain the genre of the superhero genre relevant in such an overcrowded market. The themes added to the movies as time has progressed and the mesh of different genres, are some of the ways in which the genre has been kept fresh, as well as the addition of filmmakers who have never worked in Hollywood mega-productions with massive budgets and huge audience expectations.

KEYWORDS / cinematic genre, superhero films, audiences, cinematic universe.

RESUMEN / El siguiente ensayo analizará la forma en que el Universo Cinematográfico de Marvel ha cambiado su método de contar historias para mantener el género de superhéroes fresco y relevante en un mercado tan congestionado. Los temas añadidos a las películas mientras ha progresado el tiempo y la mezcla de diferentes géneros, son algunas de las formas en que el género se ha mantenido fresco, al igual que la suma de directores que nunca han trabajado en superproducciones de Hollywood con presupuestos masivos y expectativas gigantes de audiencias.

PALABRAS CLAVE / género cinematográfico, cine de superhéroes, audiencias, universo cinematográfico.



The Avengers (Joss Whedon, 2012). Marvel Studios.

Superheroes have been present in our society for a long time, with comic books being a source of entertainment long time often reflecting themes that show the context of their own times. A superhero such as Captain America, which is a reflection of traditional American values, is further discussed by Mietinnen:

A nation is therefore created through narratives which are simultaneously consumed and produced in our cultural memory, and in the U.S. one of the most potent popular culture characters to produce these settings in the 20th century has been Captain America. From his looks to his actions, Captain America literally is America, offering an excellent example of the way the popular geopolitical narratives and scripts of America have been produced (2011, p. 59).

Superheroes are often looked up at as an ultimate goal of what we want to become as a society, as they have strength and values that help them keep the world safe, sometimes from their own point of view. But the way we as a society, tell stories, has changed, with the film adaptation becoming the primary source of contact for hundreds of audience members around the globe to superheroes. Each year, thousands and thousands of audience members fill the multiplexes with the several releases per year that spin around the genre.

The era of the superhero movie is upon us and there is no denial about it. Year after year, the masses fill the multiplexes, with advanced ticket sales selling out in matter of minutes, if not seconds, and with box office debuts rolling without any precedent in the industry. For example, for the last weekend of April, *Avengers: Infinity War* (Joe Russo & Anthony Russo, 2018) is projected to open with two hundred and fifty million dollars for its first weekend, and that is only in the domestic market. The scale of these movies constantly grows, with stakes becoming higher, ever expanding the genre, calling in new directors, and creating new visions for a type of movie that can easily find itself trapped in a static formula that could finally wear out audiences. Upon our immediate future, there seems to be no sign of these audiences growing tired of the superhero flicks, with numbers rising and releases becoming more frequent throughout the calendar year.

Agresta (2013), addresses the lack of variety of themes in westerns, which played a great part in the genre reaching a dead end and finding itself without any sort of new and fresh ideas. On the other hand, what the current landscape of movies have (such as superhero and sci-fi movies) is that they can easily resonate with current themes that are happening around the world, thus being able to reach the contemporary audiences in a more organic way. This represents a turning point for heroes. When addressing the modern iteration of superheroes. Růžička (2010), while citing Coogan, says

They were 'further revolutionized' when leading characters had some kind of 'weakness or defect, such as the Hulk and Spider-man', explains Coogan in his book. 'They were persecuted and misunderstood outsiders and spoke directly to public disorientation'. As times have changed, the definition of what it means to be a superhero, and a villain, has dramatically changed as well.

To add to what the author says, in today's age, superhero movies dare to delve deeper into the meaning of becoming a superhero, such as *Spider-Man 2* (Sam Raimi, 2004), in which the character of Peter Parker/Spider-Man, temporarily

backs away from being the arachnid superhero. Another example of new themes, is the inclusion of PTSD in the film *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013), in which the character of Tony Stark is facing the consequences of the events that took place in *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012). Nowadays, superhero movies that blend with heist, war, postmodern, thriller (political and psychological), space operas, and character studies are making their way into the industry and expanding it, pulling away from what could be a finite circle and a constant repetition of storylines, precisely something that could easily make audiences grow tired.

Nowadays, four main studios own the rights to the biggest superhero franchises in the world: Marvel Studios, Sony Pictures, Warner Bros. Pictures, and 20th Century Fox. For 2018, Warner Bros. will release one movie under the DC mantle, with *Aquaman*, by director James Wan, hitting theaters on December 21st; Sony Pictures will release one movie, with *Venom* by director Ruben Fleischer opening on theaters on October 5; 20th Century Fox will release one movie as well, with *Deadpool 2* (David Leitch) coming to theaters in May 18; Marvel Studios will have a total of three releases, with *Black Panther* by Ryan Coogler, which was already released on February 16, followed by *Avengers: Infinity War* by the Russo Brothers which will open on April 27, while *Ant-Man and the Wasp* by director Peyton Reed will hit theaters on July 6. The current landscape is massive, with more and more releases coming out every year and the sense of repetition easily being able to grow. Every year, it feels like the release dates are shorter between each other, with almost no breathing time between movies; at the most, its a couple months what separates these massive productions.

For 2015, it can be seen that out of the ten highest grossing films in the worldwide market (Box Office Mojo), only one of them can be labelled as a superhero movie, it being *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon) with a worldwide gross of 1.4 billion dollars. 2015 saw a total of three wide superhero film releases, with the already mentioned *Avengers: Age of*

Ultron, *Ant-Man* (Peyton Reed), and *Fantastic Four* (Josh Trank). Another important piece of information, is the fact that the Joss Whedon movie made 67.3% of its money in the overseas market, proving the worldwide effect that superhero movies have. The biggest ones are not only seen as movies, but rather as cinematic events [TABLE 1].

For 2016, things took a turn, when out of the ten worldwide highest grossing movies (Box Office Mojo), four superhero movies managed to make their way inside the list. A big finding here, is that *Captain America: Civil War* (Joe Russo & Anthony Russo) managed to become the highest grossing movie of the year, even with a Star Wars movie, in this case a spinoff, being released on the same year. Another important fact is that *Deadpool* (Tim Miller), a rated R movie, managed to break its way inside the list in a clearly crowded market. While discussing the character of Deadpool, Day says:

Deadpool has become a veritable pop culture icon. In accounting for his dominance in the market, fans, 41 writers, and artists cite, almost unanimously, his unique ability to break the fourth wall, his intertextual engagement with the readers' reality, his black humor, and his overall anti-heroic qualities. In short, Deadpool is popular because, like *Watchmen* in 1986, he is an exception to the current "rule" of superheroes. Deadpool begs for critical examination simply because he stands in such stark contrast to the rest of the mainstream superhero cast (2015, pp. 40-41).

Deadpool, in its core, is a character that carried his charisma and themes with him to his film adaptation, arriving in a moment where the genre needed a revitalization, which reflected in its terrific box office performance, which led the film to become the highest grossing R rated film of all time [TABLE 2].

For 2017, a total of four movies also made it into the top ten worldwide highest grossing movies list (Box Office Mojo). In this case, one of them belonged to the DC Extended Universe, while three of them to the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The shift can be seen, as the themes of the movies present in this list are genre mashups. For example, the influences of John

Hughes movies in *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Jon Watts) are quite evident, with the setting of the movie being Peter's high school, as well as scenes that mirror *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986). On the other hand, *Wonder Woman* (Patty Jenkins) is a movie that contains a powerful and consistent feeling of a war movie, with severe action sequences taking place in the battlefield [TABLE 3].

How is it that the superhero movie will avoid wearing out or at least make the euphoria last longer? Is there a way in which the formula can be altered? Throughout this article, the way in which the Marvel Cinematic Universe, usually labelled as MCU, has shifted its storytelling method from its so called Phase One to its Phase Two, in order to continue reinvigorating the genre and remain relevant to the eyes of audiences and critics alike, will be analyzed. It will be studied how the movies have changed in genre, storytelling methods, directors, themes, and topics throughout the years that have passed, but never pulling away from a formula that has proven to be successful throughout its iterations. In other words, each film is different but remains part of a shared universe, appealing to its rules. Even though the MCU can constantly be regarded as excessively formulaic, this paper seeks to explain and analyze how the singularities in its storytelling have shifted and adapted to the world around it, stepping away from archaic methods of storytelling and becoming a narrative pioneer.

PHASE ONE: CHARACTER OVER PLOT

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) divides itself in Phases, with three of them having already being released. Phase One kicked off with *Iron Man* in 2008, directed by Jon Favreau. The movie is one that highly concentrates on building its main character and presenting its origin story, such as many other films in this first wave of MCU movies. Marvel's constant focus, which sometimes can be excessive,

over its heroes, has been a developing issue throughout the films, with a lack of interesting villains throughout several movies, as they are constantly overshadowed by the protagonist. Here is what Kevin Feige, president of Marvel Studios, says in a video interview with the team of Rotten Tomatoes: “We really believed in Tony Stark. We really believed in having a character as interesting, if not more interesting, outside of the costume” (Rotten Tomatoes, 2018a). Marvel took a risk, taking a B character, someone not so popular amongst comic book readers, a practical unknown to general audiences, and decided to build upon him what now is a fifteen billion dollars plus empire.

More than anything, the distinct personality and bigger picture became what set Marvel apart from its competitors and started changing the game, because it was a movie full of risks, a distinct personality from its peer superheroes, and a protagonist who embraced his flaws and proudly declared, “I am Iron Man.” Tony Stark is the same guy, but a more powerful one who claimed a sense of purpose, even though that purpose isn’t entirely noble and sunny (Goldberg, 2018, April 9).

Besides the character choice, Robert Downey Jr., well known for his problems behind the scenes, was the man chosen to portray a character with whom he shares several characteristics. And for the cherry on top, Marvel hired Jon Favreau, who had the Christmas Movie *Elf* (2003) with Will Ferrell as his presentation card.

The Incredible Hulk (Louis Leterrier, 2008) is a film that even if it is officially considered as part of the MCU, it sometimes feels like a movie that does not ultimately belong in it. Edward Norton never came back to play the role of Bruce Banner, the world building in the movie is reserved to the opening credits, where we see several names and S.H.I.E.L.D archives that ultimately point at a wider universe, and an appearance of Tony Stark at the very end of the movie; the existence of a wider universe is vaguely mentioned. Nevertheless, what the film shares with other Phase One movies, is the constant trope of a villain that resembles the hero. Mark

Reilly, while discussing the film, says: “The MCU falls in this trap a lot, it’s the villain becomes the same thing that our hero is” (Collider Videos, 2017, November 10). Phase One movies follow a general formula, with the male hero constantly finding an enemy who maximizes the negative side of their character: Iron Man with Iron Monger in the first movie, Hulk and Abomination, and Iron Man and Whiplash. A commonly used trope used during the films is described by *TV Tropes* (n.d.), Upgrade vs. Prototype Fight, with the Iron Monger suit worn by Obadiah Stane in the first *Iron Man* coming from research from the first armor Tony Stark used. This can also be seen in *The Incredible Hulk*, where Emil Blonsky, who is portrayed by Tim Roth, becomes Abomination, and battles Hulk after being injected with a mixture of Banner’s blood and a failed attempt of the super soldier serum. One last example is the villain Ivan Vanko, who is portrayed by Mickey Rourke, and the moment in which he becomes Whiplash, using an upgraded suit, similar to the one Tony Stark uses throughout the movie.

Iron Man 2 (Jon Favreau, 2010) grew in efforts of establishing itself in a wider universe, with perhaps too much focus on building up other movies beyond it. Its storytelling, ultimately, ends up becoming structurally similar to that from its predecessor, with its main villain lacking in a strong characterization, any sort of character development, and ending with a familiarity within the conflict of the film. Nevertheless, it succeeded in expanding a world that was two years prior to the release of the biggest ensemble in superhero movies, until that date. The film introduces the characters of Nicky Fury, portrayed by Samuel L. Jackson and Black Widow, portrayed by Scarlett Johansson.

Thor (Kenneth Branagh) in 2011, is the first exploration of the MCU out of Earth, and the opening to space travel and a wider universe, which transcends the boundaries of Earth. Even if the movie doesn’t focus too much on that, as most of it takes place on our planet, the dynamic of a whole galaxy out there is introduced. The movie plays with a fish

out of water story, as Thor is followed after being exiled from Asgard by his father, Odin. “**Thor** is about laying groundwork, and the story and even the style are secondary. The movie needed to hit a checklist: 1) Make audiences accept Asgard and how it relates to Earth; 2) Cast Thor; 3) Cast Loki; 4) flesh out S.H.I.E.L.D. and their responsibilities” (Goldberg, 2018, April 12). **Thor** serves as a movie that connects a wider story with the grounded themes of the previous entrees in the MCU, as well as introducing a number of characters that will be seen throughout the rest of the movies in the MCU, such as Hawkeye, played by Jeremy Renner. The true standout of the first Thor movie is the introduction of Loki, one of the most solid villainous characters in the whole Marvel franchise, which is something that down the line becomes a problem for the studio.

For the solo movies of Phase One, the standout in matter of narrative is **Captain America: The First Avenger** (2011), directed by Joe Johnston. The movie is a period piece that takes place during World War II, but never fully grasps into becoming a war movie, shying away from it and concentrating more, like its predecessors, in building the character of Steve Rogers. But beyond the sepia tones and the charming score by Alan Silvestri, there is a sense of a shared identity with the spectator, even if the character stands up for one of the most polarizing countries in the world. “Captain America also contributes to the American geopolitical narrative by being ultimately defensive in nature. There is a conceit in the American geopolitical narrative that America acts only in the name of defense and security rather than in the name of offense or empire” (Peitz, 2013, p.15). Steve Rogers is a character who does not aspire power above all else, but rather someone with such a strict moral code, that is willing to sacrifice everything for what he believes in. The character build up is effective, building ultimately around self sacrifice and the importance of a major good. To bring a character to the screen, who is labelled and often portrayed as extremely square, was a huge risk and a difficult task for Marvel. By shifting the movie into

a period piece, the values of the character resonated with those of the time that the movie takes place in. By making the setting in accordance to the character, the study of the character itself was much more effective and laid ground to a franchise that in the next two movies, wouldn’t need to explain who Steve Rogers is.

THE AVENGERS: EARTH’S MIGHTIEST TEST

In 2012 came the conclusion of Phase One, with Joss Whedon elected to bring to life one of the most ambitious projects of all time: **The Avengers**. While discussing the film, Sweeney says:

This kind of crossover cohesion between movies which are not direct sequels or prequels is unprecedented in American cinema, although it is perhaps implicit in the appearance of the character Ray Nicolette as played by Michael Keaton in Quentin Tarantino’s **Jackie Brown** (1997) and Steven Soderbergh’s **Out of Sight** (1998) both of which are based upon novels by Elmore Leonard: **Rum Punch** (1992) and **Out of Sight** (1997) respectively. The keyword here, however, is “implicit”: set in the same place (Los Angeles) in the same era (the 1990s) and based on inter-linked novels by a single author, it is plausible that the two Leonard adaptations could share the same fictional world even though the films were produced by different studios. Regardless, the continuity between the two is not made explicit (2013, pp. 9-10).

To add to his words, the amount of trust that Marvel Studios placed on audiences was tremendous, expecting them to have seen all the previous Phase One movies or at least be somewhat familiar with the characters appearing on screen. Clarke Wolfe, while discussing the film, says: “How does one person oversee all of this? It is such a juggling act to be able to balance multiple character continuity and arch, set things in motion going forward, build off of things that have come before and on top of that, all of the digital and special effects” (Collider Videos, 2018, January 9). The movie plays with a

group dynamic, having the challenge of balancing out the amount of characters it has in screen. Here, the origin stories from Phase One, reach a moment in which they have to pay off. Sweeney (2013) recalls the importance of Whedon as the director, as he is someone who has worked in comic books, such as *Astonishing X-Men*, and projects that involve transmedia storytelling, such as *Firefly* and *Buffy The Vampire Slayer*, which went on to become a comic book series after its final season, as well as having a spin-off series in *Angel*. “Genre is necessarily archival; it operates across a class of media, finding form through repetition. Transmedia works are also archival; however, works based on a continuity structure demand meaningful transitions between forms, so the necessary motif needs to be adaptable rather than replicable” (Beddows, 2012, p. 150).

MacLeod (2015) also emphasizes that Whedon was not an experienced filmmaker at the time that he was chosen, but rather a successful showrunner, with both *Firefly* and *Buffy The Vampire Slayer* under his helm. Well before beginning to film *The Avengers*, with the filmmaker being involved in the post-production stage of *Thor* and a script polish of the first Captain America film. Along that, he became a center consultant for Phase Two of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which kick started with *Iron Man 3* (2013).

When analyzing Whedon’s involvement, Brundige says the following:

In viewing Whedon as an auteur, it is vital to consider his creative vision as what Rhonda Wilcox calls “a unified body of work”, while also acknowledging the role of established fandom. This can be seen as Whedon foregrounds material specific to the Avengers comic texts through his own specific vision. In terms of Whedon’s authorship, repeated suggestions of a cohesive world view come in the form of his continued use of anti-authoritarian narratives, featuring characters rejecting or undermining rigid power structures, as in *Firefly*, *Angel*, and the *Buffy* series. In *The Avengers*, the titular heroes are ultimately let down by S.H.I.E.L.D., the government agency that recruited them, and they instead decide to act on their own to save the world. Whedon’s predilection for the “under-dog” can be seen as he portrays the team as a motley crew who must come

together in the face of incompetent government militarization. Similarly, Whedon’s work repeatedly features strong women situated in rebellion against a patriarchal system, as in *Buffy* and *Dollhouse* (2015, p. 40).

One of Whedon’s biggest and most important traits was to take themes that had been proven successful in television to film, thus helping to shape a cinematic universe in reflection to that of a television show composed of several seasons. It can be argued that each of the so called phases in the Marvel Cinematic Universes could be seen as seasons in a gigantic television show.

Goldberg (2018, April 14) states that doing five movies before *The Avengers* not only introduced characters, but it also helped the studio to find a tone and a personality. It is the pay off to effective storytelling, but nevertheless, a secure one. The stand alone movies in its Phase One are the foundations, with heroes being centerpieces of the films, and with narratives that stay, in a sort of way, grounded. Yes, there is a man who turns green when he is angry and an eccentric billionaire who can create a new element, but in the Marvel scope, that’s not even the tip of the iceberg.

On the book, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe* (2015) the authors touch on the so called Marvel Formula and the organizational identity in the studio. A huge challenge is to appeal to several audiences, but at the same time remaining with a self identity and a distinction from other movie studios. The big risk here, is to explore other realms of narrative without splitting too much from the central story of the movies. Think of it as a TV Show, where we have a main narrative that goes along an entire season, but each particular episode also has a much shorter conflict that is resolved throughout the running time of the episode. Each Phase in the MCU is a season, and each movie is a particular episode, only that there are no filler episodes here. The movies are complemented by TV shows, both on networks and on streaming services, which revolve around the events of the movies and serve as bridges between them. The TV

shows are barely referenced on the movies, thus showing that Marvel values any kind of audience; if someone watches the shows, they will get a richer experience from the movie, but it is not intended to be crucial information, but rather background events. If someone only watches the movies, they will get a sufficient experience that is designed to not depend on the shows.

PHASE TWO: EXPANSION, UNIQUENESS, AND RISKS

After the tremendous success of *The Avengers*, the easiest thing Marvel Studios could have done was to continue the same methods that the last movies did. The studio was safe, with several movies that had raised a more than envious amount of money in theaters; the easy path would have been to continue handling the narrative of the movies in a similar way. Kevin Feige, on an interview with Rotten Tomatoes (2018b), explains how when they were entering Phase Two, they wanted to make the same choices in regards to filmmakers, choosing directors who hadn't made necessarily massive blockbusters. He goes on to explain how he had always wanted to handle a part three of any franchise, he always dreamt of doing something completely unique, as it could be very easy to fall into more of the same.

Jon Schnepf, director of *The Death of Superman Lives: What Happened?* (2015), states the following while discussing *Iron Man 3*: "It felt much more like a spy movie, like an action spy film starring Tony Stark who is like a James Bond type character who would occasionally wear this super armor" (Collider Videos, 2017, November 8). The film was met with a divided opinion amongst fans, but in a positive way by critics. This was something completely new, as Marvel had substantially changed the way of telling a story that had proven to be financially successful, and turned it hundred and eighty degrees around. Maybe it was not Iron Man going to space and joining the Guardians of the Galaxy (a storyline

that many comic book fans have always wanted to see in the big screen), but the movie was daring enough to take the most iconic character from the Iron Man comics, The Mandarin, a character who was teased since the first movie, and turn him into a British actor who was pretending to be him. Yes, the result was divisive, but the intention was there; Marvel was not going to do things the same way, concerning narrative, for its second phase of movies.

Things were being told differently, with a shift in these new characters and the ways their stories being told expanding into new directions. So came *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Joe Russo & Anthony Russo, 2014), a movie that departed from the story that was seen in the first movie and showed a different kind of man in Captain America; a man who is on the run after feeling betrayed by his own government. Carpenter (2014) analyzes the relationship and the influences of post-Watergate movies, in which he mentions *The Parallax View* (Alan J. Pakula, 1974), *Three Days of the Condor* (Sydney Pollack, 1975), and *Marathon Man* (John Schlesinger, 1976) as being similar in tone to *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. Even the casting of Robert Redford, a familiar face of political dramas in the 70's, is substantial to the film and its dynamic: it transcends the superhero genre and blends with something else.

While discussing the film, Lumish says:

The idea of S.H.I.E.L.D. being the intelligence apparatus for the United States is an interesting concept. It seems obvious at first: it is based in the United States, with its major buildings in the major cities of the United States. The Triskelion—the headquarters of S.H.I.E.L.D.—is located on Theodore Roosevelt Island in the Potomac River. Most of the members are American, and one of the only ones who is not originally American defected from the Soviet to join the Western bloc after a S.H.I.E.L.D. member sent to kill her changed his mind. On the other hand, though, following the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D., the antagonistic relationship between S.H.I.E.L.D. and the American military becomes clear (2016, pp. 1131-1132).

The real life parallels are what enhance the themes in the movie and ultimately end up grounding it, thus resonating better with real life situations and scenarios.

While discussing the film, John Rocha says:

It showed that you can go into different areas of films and still make them about superheroes, right? We're going into political thrillers with Captain America; it's amazing. ***The Winter Soldier*** showed you it didn't have to be just a straight up superhero film. We can do more and say more about our society, we can say more complex things about our society through the prism of superheroes (Collider Videos, 2018, January 8).

What the movie did to the superhero genre, not just the MCU, was proof that the stories told through the screen could reach a much bigger scope and touch on themes that not only dwelled on the villain who wants to destroy the world or an origin story; it shifted its storytelling and adapted to the political themes of its era, helping the character of Captain America avoid looking archaic and outdated in an ever changing world, a world that could easily leave him behind.

Kevin Feige (2018b) explains how they did not want to be known as a studio that only made Iron Man or Thor movies, and how in Phase Two they took another risk in ***Guardians of the Galaxy*** (James Gunn, 2014). The movie is a space opera, a complete departure from the grounded and Earth oriented themes of the previous MCU movies. ***Guardians of the Galaxy*** could have easily been a flop, both with audiences and critics alike, as it had red flags all over it: a departure from the heroes that the public has grown accustomed to and embraced, taking place far away from Earth, no big stars in its cast (at the moment), and a director who had not dwelled into the scenario of blockbuster movies in his career.

Kristian Harloff says the following about the movie: "A talking raccoon should be scary for anyone to put on the screen, much less in a space opera" (Collider Video, 2017, December 27). What Marvel Studios did with ***Guardians of the Galaxy*** was beyond daring and risky, giving audiences

a complete set of unfamiliar figures. Yet, the public and critics responded in a positive way to the gamble that it was. As Kerbey, the author of *Guardians of the Galaxy: The Use of Compilation Score and Nostalgia in the 2014 Marvel Hit* (2015) puts it: "While Quill has been unexpectedly thrust into this alien world, the music acts as a homing device, allowing him to stay connected to his home planet at all times. Music does the same for us" (p. 5). There is a key in which the director, James Gunn, grounded the movie with a soundtrack that includes songs from David Bowie, Elvin Bishop, and Norman Greenbaum as anchors for the public.

The movie is an example of a risk and a complete curve when it came to the material that Marvel usually provided. The movie had to happen in order to expand the universe (quite literally) and bring the cosmic world to light, after the events in both ***Thor*** and ***Thor: The Dark World*** (Alan Taylor, 2014) dwell too much on a familiarity and an immediate closeness between characters. In other words, there is an specific amount of traveling around the cosmos that the characters could do in those movies, as it was still tied to the Avengers dynamic very closely.

"Marvel Studios used this backing not to create yet another superhero film, but almost something else entirely—a sci-fi adventure movie that jumped ahead to a team dynamic. It's also the Marvel film that is least related to all of the others that came before" (Goldberg, 2018, April 18). Now, the space opera theme was explored in ***Guardians of the Galaxy***, making it yet another incursion of Marvel Studios into meshing a superhero movie and a genre movie, in the hopes of offering something fresh to an audience that was six years deep into the development of a cinematic universe.

Avengers: Age of Ultron dwelled on darker themes than its predecessor, ***The Avengers***, establishing itself as a grimmer movie with different themes, one of them being the use of Artificial Intelligence in order to preserve worldwide security, a similar theme to those present in ***Captain America: The Winter Soldier***, where Steve Rogers

questions if information should be exchanged for security, or if crimes should be punished before they even happen. In the darker tone of the second Avengers movie, the stakes were established as higher with the death of Quicksilver, as played by Aaron Taylor-Johnson. In his death, Marvel Studios made a clear message that no hero is safe in this movies, making the public realize that they might as well be gone if the studio so wishes, or if it serves the story in the right way. After the movie, which was criticized for resembling its predecessor too much, lacking with the development of its villain, and being a build-up for other movies rather than its own story, came ***Ant-Man***, directed by Peyton Reed and starring Paul Rudd, Evangeline Lily, and Michael Douglas. ***Ant-Man*** came with intense problems behind the scenes, with Edgar Wright leaving the project just six weeks before principal photography of the movie was scheduled to take place. Marvel had to act quickly, and they found a man behind the chair in Peyton Reed, who had previously directed ***Yes Man*** (2008) and ***The Break-Up*** (2006), two of his most successful movies, although nowhere near the scale of what this project was set to be. But, perhaps, that was one of the biggest hits of this movie: the self- containment of its story, that seemed like it belonged somewhere else, but not necessarily a superhero movie. ***Ant-Man*** is a movie based on relationships, well timed comedy, and a heist film placed into a superhero movie. Once more, Marvel dwelled into genre and dared to explore beyond its own ceiling, taking another risk and daring to add unseen themes to a genre that could easily fall in repetition.

Kristian Harloff says the following about the movie: “It was this fun, crime, heist film mixed inside the MCU that just vibed” (Collider Videos, 2017, December 7). With ***Ant-Man***, for the third time in two years, Marvel took an unexpected turn and dwelled further into meshing superhero movies with genres, a trend that the studio had gotten comfortable with and had proven to be successful. It reached such heights, that ***Ant-Man***, a film featuring a self contained and personal story, managed to gain a positive reception with critics and fans alike.

CONCLUSION

When it comes to an specific genres of movies being constantly exposed and, in this specific case, being released by several studios, it can easily result in an overexposure and ultimately a decline in the profitability of the titles in question; a clear example are westerns, which suffered from this problem. What Marvel Studios and Walt Disney have done is shift the themes behind its stories, adapting to an ever changing world, maturing along with its audience, and touching topics that transcend the traditional superhero movie and go beyond that. In their growth, they have managed to successfully blend the genre of superhero movies with well known genres, such as political thrillers and heist movies, resulting in stories that can attract a wider audience, keep the genre from wearing out, and avoiding a fatigue in audiences. 🧠

TABLE 1. 2015 Worldwide Box Office Results. Source: Box Office Mojo.

Rank	Title	Studio	Worldwide	Domestic / %	Overseas / %
1	<i>Star Wars: The Force Awakens</i>	Buena Vista (The Walt Disney Company)	\$2,068.2	\$936.7 / 45.3%	\$1,131.6 / 54.7%
2	<i>Jurassic World</i>	Universal	\$1,671.7	\$652.3 / 39.0%	\$1,019.4 / 61.0%
3	<i>Furious 7</i>	Universal	\$1,516.0	\$353.0 / 23.3%	\$1,163.0 / 76.7%
4	<i>Avengers: Age of Ultron</i>	Buena Vista (The Walt Disney Company)	\$1,405.4	\$459.0 / 32.7%	\$946.4 / 67.3%
5	<i>Minions</i>	Universal	\$1,159.4	\$336.0 / 29.0%	\$823.4 / 71.0%
6	<i>Spectre</i>	Sony	\$880.7	\$200.1 / 22.7%	\$680.6 / 77.3%
7	<i>Inside Out</i>	Buena Vista (The Walt Disney Company)	\$857.6	\$356.5 / 41.6%	\$501.1 / 58.4%
8	<i>Mission: Impossible - Rogue Nation</i>	Paramount Pictures	\$682.7	\$195.0 / 28.6%	\$487.7 / 71.4%
9	<i>The Hunger Games: Mockingjay - Part 2</i>	Lionsgate	\$653.4	\$281.7 / 43.1%	\$371.7 / 56.9%
10	<i>The Martian</i>	20th Century Fox	\$630.2	\$228.4 / 36.2%	\$401.7 / 63.8%

TABLE 2. 2016 Worldwide Box Office Results. Source: Box Office Mojo

Rank	Title	Studio	Worldwide	Domestic / %	Overseas / %
1	<i>Captain America: Civil War</i>	Buena Vista (The Walt Disney Company)	\$1,153.3	\$408.1 / 35.4%	\$745.2 / 64.6%
2	<i>Rogue One: A Star Wars Story</i>	Buena Vista (The Walt Disney Company)	\$1,056.1	\$532.2 / 50.4%	\$523.9 / 49.6%
3	<i>Finding Dory</i>	Buena Vista (The Walt Disney Company)	\$1,028.6	\$486.3 / 47.3%	\$542.3 / 52.7%
4	<i>Zootopia</i>	Buena Vista (The Walt Disney Company)	\$1,023.8	\$341.3 / 33.3%	\$682.5 / 66.7%
5	<i>The Jungle Book (2016)</i>	Buena Vista (The Walt Disney Company)	\$966.6	\$364.0 / 37.7%	\$602.5 / 62.3%
6	<i>The Secret Life of Pets</i>	Universal	\$875.5	\$368.4 / 42.1%	\$507.1 / 57.9%
7	<i>Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice</i>	Warner Bros.	\$873.6	\$330.4 / 37.8%	\$543.3 / 62.2%
8	<i>Fantastic Beasts and Where To Find Them</i>	Warner Bros.	\$814.0	\$234.0 / 28.8%	\$580.0 / 71.2%
9	<i>Deadpool</i>	20th Century Fox	\$783.1	\$363.1 / 46.4%	\$420.0 / 53.6%
10	<i>Suicide Squad</i>	Warner Bros.	\$746.8	\$325.1 / 43.5%	\$421.7 / 56.5%

TABLE 3. 2017 Worldwide Box Office Results. Source: Box Office Mojo

Rank	Title	Studio	Worldwide	Domestic / %	Overseas / %
1	<i>Star Wars: The Last Jedi</i>	Buena Vista (The Walt Disney Company)	\$1,332.5	\$620.2 / 46.5%	\$712.4 / 53.5%
2	<i>Beauty and the Beast (2017)</i>	Buena Vista (The Walt Disney Company)	\$1,263.5	\$504.0 / 39.9%	\$759.5 / 60.1%
3	<i>The Fate of the Furious</i>	Universal	\$1,236.0	\$226.0 / 18.3%	\$1,010.0 / 81.7%
4	<i>Despicable Me 3</i>	Universal	\$1,034.8	\$264.6 / 25.6%	\$770.2 / 74.4%
5	<i>Jumanji: Welcome to the Jungle</i>	Sony	\$961.8	\$404.5 / 42.1%	\$557.3 / 57.9%
6	<i>Spider-Man: Homecoming</i>	Sony	\$880.2	\$334.2 / 38.0%	\$546.0 / 62.0%
7	<i>Wolf Warrior 2</i>	H Collective	\$870.3	\$2.7 / 0.3%	\$867.6 / 99.7%
8	<i>Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2</i>	Buena Vista (The Walt Disney Company)	\$863.8	\$389.8 / 45.1%	\$473.9 / 54.9%
9	<i>Thor: Ragnarok</i>	Buena Vista (The Walt Disney Company)	\$854.0	\$315.1 / 36.9%	\$538.9 / 63.1%
10	<i>Wonder Woman</i>	Warner Bros.	\$821.8	\$412.6 / 50.2%	\$409.3 / 49.8%

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