Unmasking Marvel's Superheroes:

A Genre Analysis of the Marvel Cinematic Universe

By

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Abstract

There is a common perception that superheroes have been the rulers of Hollywood since the turn of the 21st century. A perception that partially based on the success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). With the long-lasting prevalence of superheroes in general and the MCU in particular, it is not uncommon for industry analysists and scholars to wonder why this genre has survived in the limelight for so long. This thesis attempts to solve that mystery, as it questions the conventional wisdom that superheroes have been dominating Hollywood blockbusters for the past two decades. Given that genres are not unchanging entities and since movies do not need to declare themselves as a specific genre, it can be difficult to create clear dividing lines between genres. However, if the ambition is to predict the trend of superhero movies, it must first be established exactly what this trend entails. This thesis delves into how the MCU actually consists of movies pertaining to widely different genres and how this might be why the MCU has managed to persist for as long as it has.

This is shown by applying Rick Altman's semantic/syntactic approach to genre, in order to show how the movies in MCU's phase 1 adhere to different genre conventions. This is followed by an analysis into Liam Burke's attempt to categorize contemporary Hollywood blockbusters as "comic book movies"; a genre label Burke himself has defined. Burke attempts to include the MCU as part of the comic book movie genre, but this is critiqued for its poor applicability and lack of explanatory power. Since genre theory, in part, is a tool to explain audience engagement with narrative patterns, it is argued that this lack of explanatory power represents an oversight in Burke's approach. Instead, it is proposed that the MCU as a film series represents the emergence of a new genre for Hollywood blockbusters.

This new genre (christened "worldbuilding cinema") has evolved from the trend of transmedia narratives. Henry Jenkins describes transmedia narratives as stories that unfold over multiple forms of media, with each text adding to a greater whole. The MCU has adopted this approach to

storytelling, but instead of spreading across multiple media platforms, the MCU offers the enjoyment of a transmedia narrative through a single medium: movies.

Ultimately, the following is concluded: any attempt at confining MCU movies to a single genre either suffers from reductionism or lacks explanatory powers in terms of describing the MCU phenomenon. Instead, it is proposed that worldbuilding cinema as a genre label for film series can describe the genre conventions of film series, and thus avoid the issue of applying genre labels to individual movies within a given film series. Hereto, it is offered that worldbuilding cinema can explain blockbuster trends over the past decade, as well as unveil the business model that Hollywood studios are currently trying to achieve.

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Introduction

The conventional wisdom regarding contemporary Hollywood is that its blockbuster scene is overrun with superheroes. This view is in no small part due to the commercial success of Marvel Studios and their Marvel Cinematic Universe (henceforth referred to as the MCU). Starting with *Iron Man* in 2008 (Favreau), the MCU has expanded, launching more and more solo films that each build up to eventual team-ups in the form of *Avengers* movies, where the characters crossover in order to fight a greater threat than what the heroes could overcome on their own. Through this model, the MCU has acquired a massive mainstream following, which has catapulted it to a level of success where it today resides as the most profitable movie franchise in cinematic history. Success of such a magnitude always create copycats, and Warner Bros. has attempted to match the Disney subsidiary with their own universe of heroes, albeit with a more divisive critical reaction and overall less commercial success than Marvel Studios. With the steam the MCU has amassed, Marvel Studios now operates under a production schedule that allows them to release movies at an incredibly steady pace. Since the Avengers assemble in theatres in 2012, every blockbuster season since has involved the premiere of at least two MCU movies. With Warner Bros. trying to make their own counterpart to the MCU using their DC characters, it is perhaps no wonder that the superhero genre is seen as dominating the Hollywood blockbuster scene.

However, the success of this genre has started to raise questions among scholars, pundits, and members of the moviemaking industry alike. Brown has observed that the success of a superhero movie almost always produces a new wave of articles and think pieces suggesting or speculating the

genre's inevitable downfall and discussing the prospects of superhero fatigue (150-153). Director James Cameron has even expressed a hope that general audiences will soon get fed up with superhero movies so that the industry can move on to other stories (Stowe). Summarily, the common wisdom says that the superhero genre is currently experiencing a cycle of popularity with Marvel Studios being the main benefactor of said popularity. Genres tend to experience a certain lifecycle, and, at this point, there seems to be an expectation that the fad of superheroes will eventually go away. Though, despite this common agreement on the existence and long-lasting prevalence of the superhero genre, basic agreements on constituent parts of that belief are hard to find common ground on. What is a superhero movie? Narrowed down further, what is a superhero? Given the expectation and, in some cases, hope that the superhero genre will eventually fade away, an obvious question to pose to said expectation is this: what exactly is it that is that is expected to go away? In moment of writing, the MCU has existed for 11 years and seems to have every intention of continuing to exist. The purpose of this thesis is to answer why Marvel Studios has continued to reach new heights despite the common expectations that the MCU would eventually induce audiences with genre fatigue. To wit, I propose the following solution to mystery of why the expected genre fatigue has not yet set in: Marvel Studios has not induced genre fatigue because, for the most part, the studio has not made superhero movies.

The idea that the MCU is not a collection of superhero movies is, of course, rather counter-intuitive. That statement flies in the face of the common appraisal of the contemporary blockbuster scene in general and of the Marvel brand in particular. However, since the current roster of main characters in the MCU include and is not limited to scientists, thieves, assassins, Norse gods, aliens, an archer, a World War II soldier, and a talking racoon who is also an engineer, perhaps it is time to reexamine the idea that the MCU represents a single genre's success, as this listing alone could question that statement. Genre fatigue tends to set in because of over-familiarity with motifs and story

structures, but the MCU has been an amalgamation of disparate genre elements since phase 1 and only become more diverse since. Genres are not prescriptive, and nothing prevents anyone from simply categorizing the MCU in whatever manner they please but given how different the MCU movies are in terms of motifs, I question the analytical value of ascribing the label of "superhero" to the MCU movies. Indeed, I question the analytical value in ascribing any single genre to all the MCU movies.

To demonstrate this, I have undertaken the following steps: firstly, I have conducted an analysis of phase 1 of the MCU using Altman's semantic/syntactic approach to genre. Secondly, I looked into why laymen and scholars alike so readily use the label of "superhero" movie to describe the current blockbuster scene; this mostly takes the form of analyzing why Liam Burke's definition of the genre he calls "the comic book movie" either fits the MCU poorly or fails to achieve any descriptive and analytical value of significance. Dismantling of the MCU's ascribed genre label and thereby rebutting that Marvel Studios coasts on the success of an unusually persistent genre does create a gap in explanatory power. If not by creating excitement for the superhero genre and capitalizing on said genre's popularity, what is it then that has catapulted the MCU to the levels of success it is enjoying? The answer to that question is what I ultimately set out to prove in this thesis: the MCU is not a collection of superhero movies but instead represents the emergence of a new genre. This new genre, which I have dubbed "worldbuilding cinema", has evolved from transmedia narratives and represents the opportunities for cinematic storytelling afforded by the media saturation of the 21st century.

Theory

Genre

The Critical Problems with Genre and the Definition of "Genre"

Genre as a critical tool has a tradition stretching all the way back to Aristotle. However, despite this long tradition, common agreement regarding the term "genre" has been an issue in academia for decades. The most basic definition of "genre" is shared conventions between stories within a body of works; or, in Kitses' phrasing for film genres in particular, "[…] a varied and flexible structure, a thematically fertile and ambiguous world of historical material, shot through with archetypical elements which are themselves ever in flux" (as quoted by Tudor 4). While Kitses' phrasing is perhaps not what the average movie-goer would use to describe genre, it still ties back to the idea of categorizing stories and understanding the conventions of such stories. The issue, when applying this line of thinking through an analytical lens, comes into being when scholars attempt to establish genres without traces of agency.

Tudor outlines this issue regarding the circular logical that comes about when critics attempt to create a category;

> "To take a genre, such as a western, analyze it, and list its principle characteristics is to beg the question that we must first isolate the body of films that are westerns. But they can only be isolated on the basis of the "principle characteristics," which can only be discovered from the films themselves after they have been isolated" (Tudor 5).

Herein lies the issue of approaching genre in a scientifically consistent manner: comparing and analyzing genre conventions cannot be done without a portfolio of works, and a portfolio of works cannot be created without genre conventions. An additional challenge, especially for the purposes of this thesis, is to establish when a movie is outside of a genre (however, theories exist, as will be explored

later, that can assist in classifying genres). Tudor amends his empiricist dilemma by suggesting that genre critics can: "[…] lean on a common cultural consensus as to what constitutes a [genre] and then go on to analyze it in detail" (ibid). A cultural consensus is a starting point from which conventions can be gathered and applied to movies, but this does little for exclusionary purposes. Is *Iron Man* a western? The instinctive answer is likely "no," but pushing for an answer as to why can only lead to a listing of what is absent. There are no horses in *Iron Man*, nor does it take place in the old west, for example. On the other hand, *Iron Man* does feature guns, desert landscapes, and a main character who is a weapon-wielding vigilante: all common elements in westerns. Ultimately, claiming that a movie is not part of a given genre is a matter of forming a post-structuralist argument of what it is not, all while lacking a clear line for when the movie is sufficiently not like the genre it is compared to. This conundrum is easily solved using the common cultural consensus regarding genre; *Iron Man* is not widely considered a western and is therefore not a western. Does that mean that comparing *Iron Man* to westerns is pointless? Perhaps this myriad of questions and dilemmas raised by critical application of genre explains why so many scholars have seen it as a futile pursuit in terms of film theory (Buscombe 14). The question then turns to this: what exactly is the critical purpose of genre?

The Purpose of Genre Theory

As Tudor outlines the empiricist dilemma, he also highlights the need for clarity of purpose when applying genre theory:

> "Evidently there are areas in which such individually defined categories might be of some use: a sort of bibliographic classification of the history of film, for instance, or even an abstract exploration of the cyclical recurrence of certain themes. The films would simply be defined by the presence or absence of the themes in question. But this is not the way in which the term is usually employed. On the contrary, most writers tend to assume that there is some body of films we can safely call the western and then move on to the real

> work – the analysis of the crucial characteristics of the already recognized genre" (Tudor 4).

Within this quote lies what appears to be the generally desired outcomes for film genre theory: recognizable and categorizable patterns stretching across multiple films; these can then be analyzed by comparing and contrasting the patterns in question. This desire for categorization is likewise echoed by Kitses and Altman (Kitses as quoted by Tudor 4; Altman 223). This purpose of genre theory is rooted in an analytical desire. However, genre theory is not just an analytical tool; it is perhaps unique among critical theories in that it exists, in part, outside of academia.

Unlike terms such as "cognitive film analysis" and "structuralism", "genre" is a term that sees wide usage outside of scholarly debates. As a result, there seems to be a general desire to have critical usage of the term "genre" either compliment or at least not clash with the widely used version of the term. Tudor's solution to the empiricist dilemma of using common cultural consensus outright depends on widely shared views about genre. Buscombe also comments on the issues of a gulf between genres as understood by the general public and scholars;

> "No one would suggest that we must be bound by the aesthetic criteria of the man on the street. Yet anyone who is at all concerned with education must be worried about the distance between much of the criticism now written and the way the average audience reacts to film" (22).

The general understanding of genre is also used when trying to analyze individual films in terms of how they affect audiences. Grant talks about how conventional understanding of genre is critical in understanding how Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) managed to shock audiences by subverting their expectations rooted in genre; "In [the gangster genre], gangster's conventionally pay for their

flamboyant denial of social restraint […] Thus the death of Marion in *Psycho* is all the more shocking […] because [she] dies at an unexpected (unconventional) moment in the narrative" (119).

Grant's engagement with how audience expectations, based on genre, influences the movie-watching process also unveils a third ambition with genre theory: a means of understanding and exploring why certain patterns are popular. Buscombe is less overt about this purpose for genre theory, but he does criticize Kitses' description of westerns as being primarily concerned with America's past by saying "[…] if that is what westerns chiefly present, it is hard to see why half the world's population should spend its time watching them" (19). Buscombe's critique of Kitses' quote betrays the perhaps most desired analytical purpose of genre theory: since the critical application of genre involves looking for patterns in narratives, it may also assist in explaining why certain narrative patterns become popular. This can range from explaining how audiences engage with individual films, such as how Grant analyses *Psycho* and *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero 1968) with a focus on audience expectations rooted in genre familiarity. It may also explain why a specific genre attracts audiences in general. Indeed, Altman cites the benefits of a syntactical genre analysis as providing an outline of meaning-bearing structures while, unfortunately, surrendering broad applicability (225).

Presented in summarized form, the ambitions (or "genre conventions") of genre theory are as follows:

1) Devising methods for broadly categorizing portfolios of films
    a. This being accomplished by the films sharing narrative patterns that may themselves be analyzed
2) Conceptions of genre categories that do not clash with conventional usage of genre terminology. Indeed, the most preferred outcome is for the terminology to compliment the conventional usage.

3) The ability to explain audience engagements with films; either on an individual basis for movies, with analysis rooted in expectations arising from genre conventions, or for entire categorizes of movies, with focus on why certain narrative patterns become successful at any given instance.

It is precisely because of these ambitions that I mean to use genre theory to analyze the MCU; it both carries the ability to categorize the movies, thus helping to determine how well the terms "superhero movie" and "comic book movie" are applicable, and it may assist in explaining why the MCU has become such a continually successful franchise. As will be explored later, merely comparing a given movie to a genre checklist contains issues – both in terms of how few films fulfill all the "criteria" of their respective genre but also since genres tend to evolve over time. For these reasons, genre exclusion and inclusion are difficult to work with, but the three points outlined above can serve as a cornerstone: so long as a purpose for genre analysis is clear, some analytical value may be obtained in grouping certain movies. To achieve that it is necessary to find means of systematically categorizing films.

Altman's Semantic/Syntactic Approach

As an appendix to *Film/Genre*, Rick Altman added his article from *Cinema Journal* 23, no. 3 in which he proposed a new method for applying genre analysis to cinema by combining the two most dominant approaches: semantic genre analysis and syntactic genre analysis. Altman remarks how some scholars emphasized the tautological elements of a genre, and how any given genre can be identified by recurring motifs. For example, Altman notes how the western, according to Vernet, has "[…] emphasis on basic elements such as earth, dust, water, and leather[…]" as well as frequent use of stock characters, such as "[…] the tough/soft cowboy, the lonely sheriff, […] and the strong but tender woman" (220). For marketing purposes, posters featuring cowboys in contemporary attire, horses, and a sandy/dusty scenery signal the genre to audiences, and, during the movie-going

experience, the appearance of familiar character archetypes further affirms the genre to audiences. A purely semantic approach to genre has the advantage of broad applicability. Not only is it useful for scholars in terms of categorizing films, it also permits for insight as to what motifs have the ability to signal genre to audiences. However, the semantic approach offers little in terms of insight into a genre's typical narratives; this is a short-coming, which the syntactical approach does not suffer from.

The syntactical approach to genre has greater emphasis on how various elements are linked, as opposed to what those specific elements are. By way of example, Altman cites how Kitses views the western as storytelling the struggle "[…] between culture and nature, community and individual, nature and past" (220). One advantage offered by this approach is that it can clarify why audiences seek out certain narratives and what meaning a given genre may have in the popular culture. On the other hand, a syntactical approach risks both excluding and including texts that by all other rights should belong to a given genre. *Blazing Saddles* (Mel Brooks 1974) has significantly more emphasis on racial tensions than any of the previously cited conflicts typical to westerns. Likewise, many science-fiction movies detail the struggle of an individual vs. society, yet this alone would not place them as westerns. The weaknesses of these approaches on their own are perhaps best summarized by Altman, who wrote that, "while the semantic approach has little explanatory power, it is applicable to a large number of movies. Conversely, the syntactic approach surrenders broad applicability in return for the ability to isolate a genre's specific meaning-bearing structures" (220).

Altman's contribution to the study of genre was to argue how a semantic and a syntactic approach need not be mutually exclusive, but instead could be outright complimentary when applied in conjunction; Altman calls this the semantic/syntactic approach to film genre. More specifically, Altman argues that once a genre has been established, in terms of conventions and audiences, the semantic elements of a genre assist in signaling the syntactic elements. In other words, a *semantic signal* forms a *syntactical expectation* (Altman 225). For example, in a western, the arrival of a gun-carrying

stranger in a town creates the syntactical expectation of a violent conflict between him and the orde lies of the town. Furthermore, Altman emphasizes that the semantic signal and syntactical expectation need not be a one-way street. Familiarity with the western genre could mean that "[…] regular alternation between male and female characters creates expectations of the semantic elements implied by romance […]" (ibid).

However, as Tudor points out with his empiricist dilemma, pinning down the tendencies of a genre, even when looking for its semantic and syntactic conventions, has multiple complications. Firstly, a movie does not have to cross everything of a metaphorical checklist in order to be part of a genre. *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939) fits within the western genre, even though it "fails" to include everything associated with the genre; there is no duel at high-noon, no gunslinging stranger who rides into town, and, given that the movie is an ensemble piece, there is no singular protagonist. That having been said, the setting and motifs such as horses, Indians, and six-shooters, combined with a narrative of people carving new lives for themselves in the wild west still situates *Stagecoach* as a western. Similarly, a comic book movie, according to Burke, need not be about a superhero. Indeed, Burke argues that superheroes and comic books are overly conflated and references *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* as a movie that is not about a superhero, yet the movie, in his view, still fits within the comic book movie genre (78); precisely because of this common conflation, the terms "superhero movie" and "comic book movie" will be analyzed separately in the analysis. The consequence of given genre elements being absent from a movie which, ostensibly, fits within said genre is that some leeway must be allowed for movies to deviate from a given genre's semantics and syntax.

Another challenge in pinning down a genre's semantic and syntactic elements originates from the fact that genres are not static entities. Because genres never spring fully formed into existence, but rather emerges gradually, the early naming of genres tend to borrow vocabulary from elsewhere. Returning to the western as an example, "[before] westerns became a separate genre […] there were

western chase films, western scenics, western romances, [etc.]" (Altman 52). This speaks to the fact that any given genre potentially exists in flux as part of an on-going process and that the genre's semantic and syntactical conventions may vary over the course of time. Such changes may also impact a genre's intended audience. Richard Donner's *Superman* (1978) opens with a child's narration which acts as a hint of the eponymous character's intended audience. In the 21st century, however, the audiences for movies based on comic book properties are not automatically assumed to be children. Muñoz-González argues, in his discourse analysis of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, that the movie primarily deals with issues regarding security and surveillance (72); this subject matter does not automatically exclude adolescent audiences, but certainly hints at a more mature movie-going demographic.

Genres are, therefore, continually in a state of flux, as the precise definitions of genre are negotiated between the filmmaking industry and the movie-going public (Altman 16). This variance caused by an on-going process can make it difficult to create precise borders between one given genre and another, if not make it outright impossible. Essentially, it must be understood that a movie need not check of everything on a genre's "checklist", in order to qualify as a member; differences can occur over different periods, and the application of genre is, by nature, an attempt to categorize something that is continually evolving. If one wishes to categorize genres despite this, further theoretical frameworks are required.

Fuzzy Sets of Genre

"Fuzzy sets" is a term that originated in mathematics, but genre critics have found the concept to be of use in terms of categorizing genres by means other than binary inclusion or exclusion. For the mathematical application of fuzzy sets,

> "[…] inclusion, is constituted by a plurality of […] operations. The fuzzy set therefore includes elements with any of a range of characteristics, and membership in the set can bear very different levels of intensity, since some elements will have most or all of the required characteristics while others may have only one. In addition, one member of the set may be included by virtue of properties a, b, and c, another by properties d, e, and f, so that any two sufficiently peripheral members of the set need not have any properties in common." (Rieder 194).

It is perhaps already obvious how this concept may aid in genre critique; if a "super category" can be devised, other members can be compared to said super category for the purposes of determining degree of inclusion.

In terms of pragmatic application, one might take the western as an example. For the purpose of a thought experiment, a western is proposed to have the following properties (not meant to be exhaustive and not given in any particular order):

a) A setting in the old west
b) Horses
c) A theme of individual vs. society
d) A theme of civilization vs. nature
e) Native Americans
f) A lone gunman
g) Bank robbers

If this is our super category, we can then apply it to various movies to form points of comparison. *Stagecoach* contains elements a, b, c, d, e, f, and, to a certain extent, g. Meanwhile, *Django Unchained* (Tarantino 2013) only contains a, b, and c. *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977), sometimes classified as a space

western, could be said to include the elements d and f. *Star Wars*'s inclusion is significantly weaker than both that of *Stagecoach* and *Django Unchained*, as *Star Wars* mostly borrows imagery and archetypes from the western. Furthermore, under the super category, which has here been devised for the western, *Django Unchained* and *Star Wars* do not directly share any properties related to westerns, yet they still both share some degree of inclusion in the western genre. In other words,

> "[…] [the] categorical entity constituted by a fuzzy set or family resemblance, from this point of view, simply allows any number of incompatible versions of the textual dominant to operate silently, side by side, producing in the guise of a narrative genre a motley array of texts with no actual formal integrity" (Rieder 195).

For the purposes of broad categorization, fuzzy sets applied to genre grants the ability of sorting films while managing potential contradictions, due to lack of directly shared properties.

Still, fuzzy sets are not without its own set of problems. Firstly, there is the issue of creating a super category for any given genre. Once more, the genre critic runs into the circular issue of the empiricist's dilemma: in order to define, we need a portfolio, but to get a portfolio, we need a definition. Furthermore, fuzzy sets' original purpose was created for mathematics, and its application to the subject of genre will produce issues over time as, "[…] the quasi-mathematical model of the fuzzy set can never be adequate itself to the open-ended processes of history where genre formation and reformation is constantly taking place" (ibid). In other words, even if a super category could be devised, that category would not remain immune to change forever.

Genre Theory's Current Abilities

All in all, genre theory represents this dilemma: answers in principle vs. answers in practice. In principle, it is not impossible to imagine that, eventually, a means of genre category will be devised that suits all the needs of the genre critic. In moment of writing, however, this is beyond the means

of genre critique. Nevertheless, that does not mean we know nothing about genre and that we cannot use it to gain insight into the workings of pop-culture. Westerns were a dominant cultural cornerstone of cinema, and critics have been able to gleam some answers of why that was the case. In the end, even if we lack perfect categorization, we still know enough to obtain some answers in practice. If Hollywood, audiences at large, and critics can agree on a genre, albeit with varying means, this presents a field for analysis and the possibility to obtain answers about said genre's tendencies and meaning bearing structures.

Paratexts

Transtextuality is a theory developed by Gérard Genette detailing and codifying the relationship between various texts. Genette details five types of transtextuality: intertextuality, paratextuality, metatextuality, hypo- /hypertextuality, and archietextuality (1-7); of these, only paratextuality is of significance for this thesis. Paratexts are texts in their own right, yet they require a main text in order to exist. For example, a foreword to a book needs a book for which it is the foreword of; without this, the text in question fails to be a foreword. Similarly, a trailer that is advertising a movie needs an actual movie which it advertises (barring trailers that are meant to be jokes). For movies, paratexts, such a trailers and posters, can set expectations for audiences; given that audience expectations forms part of a genre, some genre critics use these paratexts to place movies within a given genre. As trailers are intended for advertisement, movie trailers naturally try to show the best sides of a film, but they also try to give audiences a taste of the film (Qinghuai 19-20).

Audiences convinced to see a movie because of its advertising will naturally form expectations – expectations that may, for better or worse, influence their viewing of any given movie. To what extent are paratexts part of the main text and therefore needed as part of a full analysis? As an example of how complicated this question is, Genette points out how *Ulysses* by James Joyce had chapter headlines tying a chapter to a specific part of *The Oddysey* (3); should scholars ignore or include these

removed paratexts from *Ulysses*? Indeed, as Genette himself phrased it, "Paratextuality is […] first and foremost a treasure trove of questions without answers" (ibid). However, in the interest of attempting an answer regarding a given movie's marketing influencing vis a vis a movie's genre, I present the following position: a movie trailer is, first and foremost, a marketing tool. As a marketing tool, a trailer is created to sell the movie first, and accurately form expectations second. As a result, some trailers may misguide expectations in order to fulfill their first and foremost reason for existence; this has not bearing on a movie's actual genre in the end.

While paratexts might not form a lasting part of a movie's genre placement, they are still instrumental in understanding how the MCU works as a phenomenon works. Where trailers and posters are paratexts created by studios themselves, reviews, essays, and critiques are created by reviewers/fans and serves as examples of 3rd party paratexts. Especially the fan-created ones are of significance since, as the analysis will show, they not only serve as free advertisement for MCU movies but can also assist in forming an understanding of how the MCU is interconnected. Jenkins describes this phenomenon as texts acting as cultural attractors and cultural activators (95). A cultural attractor is a text that draws in common ground between diverse communities where a cultural activator inspires the creation of speculation and interpretation as well as inviting viewers to hunt for hidden clues (ibid). As will be shown in the analysis, this is a natural consequence of living in, as Jenkins phrases it, "the age of collective intelligence," and part of how the MCU has created such widespread engagement from global audiences (ibid).

Method

As explained in the introduction, my position is that using the terms "superhero movies" and "comic book movie" as genres and further stating that the success of the MCU is because of said genre's popularity, does active damage in explaining how the MCU has achieved such tremendous success. In summarized form, these are the steps of my analysis:

1) Use a conventional syntactic/semantic analysis of phase 1 of the MCU in order to outline how most of these movies are inhabiting their own genres.
2) Outline issues in the current literature and general discussion surrounding comic book movies.
3) Detail how, if genre is to explain the success of the MCU, the scope of the theory needs to be expanded. In the process of doing so, I will also examine how this extended scope can assist in explaining the success of the MCU.

Step 1) serves as a rudimentary genre examination, which reveals just how difficult it is to establish most MCU movies as superhero movies or even just as belonging to the same shared genre. This is greatly at odds with a conventional approach to the MCU, used by laymen and scholars alike, which is to assume it is part of the superhero phenomenon that is sweeping the Hollywood blockbuster scene. There is a strong assumption from the outset that superheroes are a bizarrely continuous phenomenon and the MCU is part of it. Indeed, Stork, in his chapter on how *The Avengers* (Whedon 2012) reframed the superhero movie, describes the change Marvel Studios has created for superhero movies, without any reference to what a superhero movie is. In fact, Stork uses the term "superhero movie" in a manner that suggests not only broad familiarity with what is meant by the genre, but also as though the genre's popularity and success is a matter of scholarly consensus. Of course, Stork is not alone in labeling the MCU a success of a genre. Several scholars are analyzing the trend and

success of the superhero movie in the 21st century, though some more nuanced analysis, such as the one Liam Burke conducts in *The Comic Book Film Adaptation*, describes the current phenomenon as "comic book movies" instead. This scholarly consensus creates a view that is antithetical to the arguments produced in this thesis. Herein lies the raison d'etre for step 2): an examination into how and why other scholars (and laymen) so readily believe Hollywood has been dominated by the superhero for nearly two decades.

Step 1) takes a two-prong approach. Firstly, as a matter of posterity, it explains how the term "superhero movie" does not actually match the majority of movies in the MCU – for the sake of a manageable sample size, this analysis is limited to the movies in phase 1 of the MCU. In essence, this step establishes that if every movie in the MCU qualifies as a superhero movie, work needs to be done in order to explain why a sizeable portfolio of other movies do not also qualify as superhero movies; the aim of this is to illustrate how phase 1 of the MCU is actually composed of movies mostly belonging to different genres.

Step 2) primarily takes form in a rebuttal of Liam Burke's points in his book *The Comic Book Movie Adaptation* pertaining to his view that the MCU is part of a trend he calls "comic book movie" (228-263). In his book, Burke puts forth his views regarding comic book movie adaptations and expands upon what he sees as the genre conventions of Hollywood's current go-to source for adaptation material. Indeed, Burke has done extensive work and virtually formed a meta-analysis by virtue of all the scholarly works he includes in his analysis of contemporary Hollywood. This makes Burke's work close to the definitive volume on comic book movies, but it therefore also makes for a collection of arguments that I mean to prove are erroneous. In short, I intend to demonstrate how condensing the MCU to consisting of movies that all inhabit the same genre is overly reductionistic and hinders overall understanding of the MCU phenomenon. Of course, such reductionism does not happen

uniformly by coincidence, so an explanation for public and academic reductionism is also offer as part of step 2).

However, in having examined how conventional genre theory does not assist in explaining the MCU phenomenon, are we not merely more confused than before? What lies in the rubble of the temple torn down? In arguing that the terms "superhero movie" and "comic book movie" do not assist in explaining the success of the MCU, I propose that the MCU presents an emerging new genre. I mean to take a tentative step in exploring what genre landscape has been created in the wake of the MCU as well as explain why this genre succeeded when it did. To wit, step 3) takes the form of arguing how and why the MCU has succeeded in the way it has by suggesting that it represents a new genre. Specifically, a genre that could only come into existence in the 21st century, as it relies on audiences' ability to be exposed to paratexts. What Marvel Studios has done is seize upon the opportunity presented by a general public who can engage with movies via commercials and the internet. It is significantly easier to communicate that disparate films share a universe in the age of the internet. Even if it is not every audience member who goes to see each individual movie, it is still likely they understand the central conceit, by being exposed to the marketing and cultural discussion surrounding the MCU movies. The aim of step 3) is to illuminate how this happens as well as look into what enjoyment this new genre might bring audiences.

Analysis

Step 1: Reducto Ab Generic

Given how readily the term "superhero movie" is used in common parlance, as well as within academia, the claim that superhero movies are, in fact, not dominating the silver screen in contemporary Hollywood is rather counter-intuitive. The assumption of superheroes being pervasive in Hollywood blockbusters is likely born of the fact that many characters who hail from comic books are presumed to be superheroes. Bongco describes how "[the] superhero dominated the pages of the early comic book", in her recounting of the history of comics (86). These superheroes made so firm an impression that, to this day, they are seen as ubiquitous to comic books (ibid). This ubiquity is still present in the movie-making industry as "there is a perception in Hollywood that superheroes and comic books are synonymous" (Uslan as quoted by Burke 100). Of course, this view is not solely held within Hollywood but also by modern comic book readers. As Burke puts it, "Following that early success, the “Big Two” publishers (Marvel and DC Comics) increasingly focused on superhero titles to the point that any books that did not feature a mask or a cape were branded “alternative.”" (8). All in all, as this selection of quotes demonstrates, it is by no means an unusual view among scholars, moviemakers, and comic readers to conflate comic books and superheroes. This conflation creates a blind spot in terms of appraising the success of movies based on comic books. If the term "superhero" is more closely defined, how many of the MCU movies do actually qualify as superhero movies?

Narrowing Down the Term "Superhero"

Naturally, in order to answer that question, it is necessary to first define the term "superhero". Bongco, in her book *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the Superhero*, offers a definition of the superhero genre: "superheroes are characters endowed with dual identities – they both possess extraordinary abilities while they are also "one of us" "(Bongco 91). Additionally, the

superhero works alongside the "establishment", be that fire and rescue or the police, in one form or another (ibid). Examples of this can be seen in *Spider-man* (Rami 2002) where the titular hero assists firefighters by rushing into a burning building to save trapped citizens and *The Dark Knight* (Nolan 2008) where the caped crusader helps bring the money launderer Lau (Chin Han) back into Gotham PD's jurisdiction (Raimi, 2002, 01:20:41-01:20:57 and Nolan, 2008, 00:37:44-00:37:58, respectively); in both cases, the superheroes' relationships to the law are in flux – Spider-man and Batman both assist the establishment, while they are also working outside of it.

In their encyclopedia, Peterson and Duncan defines superheroes merely as individuals with exceptional powers or technology, who use said means to fight evil and preserve good. Beyond mere powers, Peterson and Duncan also add that superheroes typically wear costumes to hide their secret identities, as to keep their civilian lives and their crime-fighting existences separate. Peterson and Duncan do specify that a superhero need not come from science-fiction or magic but could just as well come from impressive physical and mental abilities. Brown narrows down his definition even further than Peterson and Duncan, simply defining the live-action superhero as "[…] filmed stories about costumed/superpowered characters […] who battle villains and defend the greater community" (5). These definitions do raise the question: what keeps certain characters separate from the grouping of "superheroes"? James Bond has impressive abilities and advanced gadgets, yet he is not counted among the ranks of superheroes, despite fitting Peterson and Duncan's definition. Brown's definition is slightly more exclusionary, but, for the purpose of genre, it runs into a handful of issues. Firstly, everything an actor wears on a filmset is technically a costume; this might sound like a vague point, but when are characters costumed heroes? James Bond is famous for saving the world in a suit, while Star Lord from *Guardians of the Galaxy* (Gunn 2014) is "just" wearing a leather jacket. Furthermore, should Luke Skywalker be considered a superhero, because of his powers and his recognizable garments? This lack of exclusion makes it difficult to analyze superheroes, as a precise definition seems

to be elusive. Merely by attempting to narrow down "superhero" as a term, the conventional wisdom that Hollywood is overflowing with superheroes runs into a problem: since a precise definition of "superhero" is so elusive, why is it that numerous scholars so readily declares the times we live in as "the age of the superhero"? While a more precise dismantling of the failures found in typical categorizing of superheroes will be displayed in step 2, this step will look closer at the patterns that can be gleamed from the body of works that are considered to be superhero movies

Applying the semantic/syntactic approach to superhero films would mean unveiling which recurring motifs the genre holds as well as the narrative conflicts the genre frequently revolves around. A common motif for superheroes is that of the double identity: In *Spider-man*, Peter Parker (Toby Maguire) spends much of the movie struggling with both being New York's friendly neighborhood Spider-man and finding time for his own life as Peter Parker. In a similar vein, Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) in *Batman Begins* (Nolan 2005) partakes in theatrics pertaining to a playboy billionaire lifestyle, in order to ensure that no one suspects that he is Gotham's caped crusader. While the two protagonists in *Spider-man* and *Batman Begins* have widely different living standards, they both deal with the motif of struggling with a dual-identity; this is a recurring semantic element in Altman's parlance. This motif of a secret identity is also within the scope of Bongco's, Brown's and Peterson and Duncan's definitions of a superhero. Furthermore, both Spider-man and Batman undergo journeys that force introspection into who they are. At the end of *Spider-man*, Peter Parker rejects the girl of his dream, Mary Jane Watson (Kirsten Dunst), having understood that the responsibility of being a superhero brings too much danger to his loved ones. Via voice-over narration, Peter concludes this lesson, learned over the course of the movie, by stating "I am Spider-man" (Rami, 2002, 01:51:12-01:51:15), thus fulfilling Peter's journey of discovering who he really is, ironically, by inhabiting two identities. While less of a revelation and more of an unveiling, Bruce Wayne also deal with how Batman affects his definition of his own identity. When Rachal Dawes (Katie Holms) asks Batman

who he is, Bruce answers by saying "It is not who I am underneath, but what I do that defines me," a call-back to dialogue between the two characters from earlier in the movie (Nolan, 2005, 01:57:40-01:57:44). Ultimately, both *Batman Begins* and *Spider-man*'s protagonists have the motif of a masked identity to carry them through a journey towards discovering their true selves. Additionally, this discovery is fulfilled using the motif of a female character whose love is unattainable while the heroes still need to don their masked identities. Phrased in Altman's terminology, the use of a superhero alter-ego is a semantic signal creating the syntactic expectation of a protagonist's struggle to find their true self through said alter-ego. To ascertain whether the MCU constitutes examples of the comic book or superhero genre, all that is required, via Altman's approach, is to look for the semantic and syntactic tendencies of said genre.

As established, the singularly most unique motif of the superhero story is that of the secret identity. The originators of this motif, i.e. Zorro and the Scarlet Pimpernel, were perhaps not recognized as superheroes, given how the concept had yet to fully emerge, but it is nonetheless part of the genre's inception in the form of Superman. From a genre semantic viewpoint, Superman blending in among the populous as Clark Kent is a formula replicated by pantheons of superheroes, such as Peter Parker and Bruce Wayne. Speaking from a genre syntactic viewpoint, the struggle of a double identity tends to follow two paths:

1) What is the character's true self? This is often portrayed as a question of whether the masked alter-ego, ironically, is a truer representation of the hero than their secret identity.
2) A conflict between what the hero wants but cannot achieve as a consequence of keeping their identity secret.

The first convention can be seen in *Batman Begins* where Rachel Dawes states, at the conclusion of the movie, that Bruce Wayne's Bruce Wayne persona is his true mask. An example of the second

genre syntax can be seen in Richard Donner's *Superman*, when Clark (Cristopher Reeves) chooses to actively hide his identity of Superman from Louis Lane (Margot Kitter), despite the fact that her much-desired affections would be won if he revealed himself to her. The question then becomes, do these motifs see recurrence in the MCU?

As mentioned in the theory section, genre is not a matter of crossing items of a checklist. Just like westerns are famous for the duel at high noon, lacking such a moment does not eject a movie from the western genre. Similarly, Batman and Iron Man can both qualify as superheroes, even though they do not possess powers that, in-universe, are meant to be superhuman. Just like Batman's resume of fields of expertise makes him nigh-superhuman, Tony Stark's (Robert Downey Jr.) engineering prowess, demonstrated by him building superweapons in a cave, handily situates him as a superhero, as per the definition given by Peterson and Duncan. Additionally, Iron Man's work alongside the US Military (the establishment as per Bongco's definition) and his maintenance of a secret identity means he fits within the confines of the superhero genre.

The typical superhero elements are all present in the first *Iron Man*. After presenting his new weapons to the military in the Middle East to the US military, Tony Stark has both a metaphorical and literal change of heart. Terrorists capture Tony and he witnesses how the technology he has created is used to harm innocent people. After escaping capture by creating a super-armor, Tony's internal journey begins; he steers his company away from weapons manufacturing and starts developing the Iron Man suit, so that he may personally intervene and right the wrongs of himself and his company. By the genre conventions of a superhero story, Iron Man is the identity Tony Stark creates in order to fulfill his journey of moral realignment. That Iron Man represents a change in persona can be seen by how it is referenced multiple times through dialogue in the movie; Tony Stark announces his change of character in a press conference, saying that "I had my eyes opened. I came to realize that I have more to offer this world than just making things that blow up" and Obadiah Stain (Jeff

Bridges) tries to relate Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow) by saying that "Tony never really did come home, did he?"(Jon Favreau, 2008, 00:44:20-00:44:25 and 01:29:35- 01:29:38, respectively). Tony's journey of redemption through the Iron Man persona also carries the syntactical elements of struggling with two identities; Tony's single-minded determination to rescue the world from his own weapons almost drives a wedge between himself and his love interest, Pepper Potts (Favreau, 2008, 01:25:06-01:25:59). To summarize, the motifs/semantic elements that help situate *Iron Man* as a superhero movie are vigilantism and a secret identity. The secret identity signals the syntactical element that Tony attempts to create his superhero persona, as a means of forging a new path/identity for himself, albeit while causing personal challenges as he goes to live a double life. The last seconds of the movie does do away with the secret identity motif, but, for most of the movie, Tony's crafting of his Iron Man persona includes hiding his involvement with it.

However, besides *Iron Man*, the movies in phase 1 of the MCU do not fall that comfortably within the confines of the superhero genre, as per the recurring motif of a secret identity. Captain America does possess superpowers, but he does not work alongside an institution as much as he works within it. In the first 15 minutes of *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Johnston 2011), Steve Rogers (Chris Evans) attempts to sign up to join the US military to fight against the Nazis in WW2. Part of the movie's initial drama involves Steve's difficulties in joining and being accepted by the military. While Steve does have a moment of disobedience, as he goes behind enemy lines to liberate prisoners of war against orders, this moment lasts 15 minutes out of the movie's 2-hour runtime; after this, Steve Rogers only works with and within the U.S. military. That is to say, the semantic element of vigilantism hardly fits. Additionally, Steve does not work through the Captain America persona as part of a journey to discover his "true self". In fact, Steve does not go through any character development of significance during the movie, but rather needs to fight in order to prove to the world he is as righteous and capable of fighting evil as he appears to be right from the start. Additionally, the persona

of "Captain America" does not hide Steve's identity, seeing as everyone, both civilian and officials alike, knows who he really is. *Captain America: The First Avenger* is a retro-futurist take on a WWII movie – retro-futurist in the sense that it is a WWII movie featuring beamweapons and supersoldiers. The only tangential relation *Captain America: The First Avenger* has to the superhero genre is the semantic element of an alter ego for the main character, and even this does not form the basis for its associated syntactical elements of the superhero genre. Arguably, *Captain America: The First Avenger* does get a little closer to the proposed genre of superhero movie, in the sense that its protagonist acquires superpowers; however, as will be argued later, this semantic element causes a slew of problem when held by itself, in terms of categorizing genres. All in all, when *Captain America: The First Avenger* is analyzed for its place in the superhero genre, not only does it have little qualification for being there, it also does not share the semantic and syntactical elements that places *Iron Man* in the superhero genre.

In the best of cases, *Iron Man* and *Captain America: The First Avenger* inhabit grey areas in terms whether they are in the same genre, which only gets foggier if *Thor* (Branagh 2011) is also placed under the same scrutiny. For both *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Iron Man*, part of their origin stories revolves around coming to terms with their new powers – for Steve Rogers that involves learning to work with his improved physique and for Tony Stark that means crafting and learning to wield his new gadgets. Meanwhile, Thor (Chris Hemsworth) starts his first movie with superpowers (at least, they are "super" by human standards). A significant portion of the movie revolves around him trying to reacquire his lost might as he is separated from his magic hammer, Mjölnir, though even in this state, he is able to combat the agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. with relative ease. Additionally, Thor does not work as a vigilante in his first movie. For a brief stretch, Thor combats The Destroyer, a task that S.H.I.E.L.D. demonstrably cannot handle. This is done for the duration of a single scene; after this, Loki's scheme to become the king of Asgard (the principle antagonistic force

of the movie), once more becomes the focus. To top it of, Thor does not even use an alter-ego – the name that makes Thor the eponymous character is both his superhero persona and his "civilian" name. As mentioned previously, Tony Stark has a secret identity and Steve Rogers has an alternate moniker, but Thor is "just" Thor. To further differentiate *Thor*, *Iron Man* fits comfortably in as a science-fiction movie and *Captain America: The First Avenger* uses retrofuturism, a sub-genre of science-fiction, while *Thor* fits better as an urban fantasy movie. The Asgardians and their powers are explained via their alien physique, but Loki's tricks and Mjölnir's powers are more easily described as "magic" for all practical purposes. Science-fiction and fantasy are notorious for how difficult it can be to create a clear dividing line between them, yet *Thor*'s fantasy semantic elements do not help towards placing it in the same genre as *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Iron Man*.

Trying to narrow down the definition of a "superhero movie" makes it incredibly difficult to argue why *Iron Man*, *Thor*, and *Captain America: The First Avenger* should be categorized in the same genre. However, is this attempt at drawing clear lines between genres not at odds with genre mutability? Indeed, genre should not come down to a checklist of requirements, but genre analysis should still carry analytical value. So far, a semantic/syntactic approach does little to describe phase 1 of the MCU as consisting of movies inhabiting the same genre, but, if we truly wish to have these in the same category, what has then been obtained from the perspective of a genre analysis? So far the method represents no consistent effort towards categorizing the movies nor does it reveal any clear meaning behind structures and means of engagement, which could then help explain the foundation of audience engagement. What remains is a shared label that, from an analytical perspective, leaves something to be desired. All in all, if narrowing down what "superhero" means is not helping, perhaps meaning-bearing structures can be uncovered if the definition is expanded? Unfortunately, this approach creates new issues of its own.

Broadening the Term "superhero"

Even under generous circumstances, applying a syntactic/semantic approach reveals it is difficult to place *Iron Man*, *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Thor* all in the same genre. However, if one truly wishes to say they are in the same genre, it creates a slew of new questions pertaining to why other movies do not also qualify as superhero movies. James Bond lacks a secret identity, he uses gadgets just like Tony Stark does, and often goes against instructions given to him by his bosses. If the genre of "superhero film" is so vague as to permit *Captain America: The First Avenger* to fit it on the basis of an alternate moniker and an operation not sanctioned by superiors, should 007 and his films not also qualify? *Hercules in New York* (Seidalman 1970) features Arnold Schwarzenegger as Hercules visiting modern-day New York; if *Thor* qualifies as a superhero movie, why would *Hercules in New York*, with its similar semantic elements, not also qualify? If a superhero movie is just a matter of a protagonist with superpowers, would it not then be necessary to include the *Star Wars* movies and the eight *Harry Potter* films as part of the superhero trend? The comparisons may seem silly, but they represent the root of the problem in trying to explain the MCU's success as a matter of a genre trend – either the MCU represents nothing new in terms of genre, as there is a plethora of other movies that also qualify as superhero movies, or something else is needed to adequately explain its sustained success.

At the turn of the century, there was a trend of movies featuring masked vigilantes (i.e. Batman and Spider-man) discovering hidden truths about themselves through their secret identities; these mark the unifying genre elements of a superhero story. Since then, more movies, especially in the MCU, have been fitted, erroneously, with the term "superhero movie". Herein lies the reason for asking what makes *Thor, Iron Man,* and *Captain America: The First Avenger* qualify as superhero movies and what aspects any given James Bond movie, by comparison, lacks to not also qualify to fit within this genre. Ultimately, if one wishes to explain the success of Marvel Studios as a matter of

a genre trend, one of two options are available: 1) try to narrow down the genre "superhero movie", which results in excluding a significant portion of the MCU movies, or 2) broadening the term "superhero movie" which opens up for the inclusion of other movies hitherto not considered superhero movies, which, consequently, lessens the explanatory power of describing the MCU as a genre trend. However, "superhero" is not the only term used to describe the MCU movies. Liam Burke describes the current blockbuster trend as the success of the "comic book movie genre" (8). Every main character in the MCU has their origin in comic books, and so it might seem intuitive to assume that such categorization would work to better explain the MCU phenomenon; however, as I examine in detail in step 2), this explanation has some significant shortcomings of its own.

A Superheroes Supercategory

Since there is broad consensus of the MCU being part of the sweeping superhero trend, perhaps it is possible to reverse-engineer a genre for these movies: what would happen if a super category was devised on the basis of the common themes and motifs found in all phase 1 MCU movies? The most obvious common element is that they all feature action sequences. All protagonists engage in some form of combat, and all movies feature at least one explosion. Additionally, each movie includes fantastic elements, meaning that these they elements do not exist in reality. However, even these fantastic elements are not reducible to pertain solely to sci-fi or fantasy. Iron Man's suit and the genetic engineering of Captain America and the Hulk are, in moment of writing, beyond the grasps of science, whereas Thor's hammer is not even meant to appear scientific and is best described as magical in nature. That leaves us with the following elements to apply to all MCU movies:

1) They are action movies.
2) They contain fantastic elements.

These two genre markers are not only incredibly broad, but they are even less descriptive than the genre labels "fantasy" and "science-fiction".

If we continue expanding this super category by adding the semantic elements discussed previously, it appears as follows:

1) Action
2) Fantastic elements – these can be from either science-fiction or urban fantasy
3) War
4) Secret-identities
5) Redemption
6) Legacy

Point 1) and 2) are, by far, the most pervasive elements in phase 1 of the MCU. Point 2 is incredibly broad and could be broken further down into retro-futurism, urban fantasy, and science-fiction. War, making for point 4, does appear in some form in each movie in phase 1, but that would make the movies a hybrid genre of war, science-fiction, and fantasy. As for the other elements on the list, they appear less than 50% in the six movies that comprise phase 1 of the MCU. Fuzzy sets, by design, is meant to create a spectrum of inclusivity, as opposed to making categorizing a binary in-or-out. Even so, not all aspects of a genre are equal in importance. A crime-drama must have a crime that needs solving. All other semantic elements, such as detectives and social intrigue, are secondary to the semantic element of a crime. By the same token, science-fiction movies might have once had a syntactic convention of maintaining the status quo, but if no new technology or contact with new phenomena occurred, they would not be readily categorized as science-fiction movies (Wright 46). The secret identity would be obvious as a central semantic element, but even a cursory glance reveals that

this element is absent from most MCU movies. The application of a super category from which fuzzy sets can be derived, ultimately results in one of two outcomes:

1) Either the listed genre elements are incredibly broad and do not unveil a genre a specific such as "superhero" as being central to the MCU
2) The super category becomes a list of ever more desperate items, with less and less analytical value.

This issue only becomes more complex as the rest of the MCU is taken into account, as opposed to merely handling phase 1 of the MCU.

The Purpose of an MCU Genre Critique

Before delving into the current issues in terms of categorizing superhero movies, there is a matter of purpose that needs to be addressed: if there is common consensus, both among laymen and academics, as to identifying the MCU as being superhero movies and describing them as part of a trend of superhero movies, what is then the point of criticizing this categorization? After all, categorization with broad agreement is one of the prerequisites for a genre. For clarity's sake, the purpose of this thesis is not to say that the term "superhero movie" is without value. If deployed in casual conversation, it serves a communicative value given its overall high level of recognition within the common population. Additionally, the aim is not to stop people from using the term in the way it is being used – especially since that would be far beyond the scope of what a single thesis could reasonably achieve. Instead, the answer to what purpose of my critique has lies within the broader purpose of genre theory as a whole. To reiterate, the purpose of genre theory is:

1) Devising methods for broadly categorizing portfolios of films
    a. This being accomplished by the films sharing narrative patterns that may themselves be analyzed

2) Conceptions of genre categories that do not clash with conventional usage of genre terminology; indeed, the most preferred outcome is for the terminology to compliment the conventional usage.
3) The ability to explain audience engagements with films; either on an individual basis for movies, with analysis rooted in expectations arising from genre conventions, or in broad terms, with focus on why certain narrative patterns become successful at any given instance.

Point 2) is achieved without much room for doubt when the MCU is labeled as superhero movies. Likewise, there is common agreement that the DC Extended Universe (henceforth referred to as 'DCEU') likewise hosts examples of superhero movies, and, thus, broad consensus is achieved in ascribing the current trends of blockbuster cinema as an era of superhero movies. However, the issue arises when one attempts to fulfill the purposes of points 1) and 3).

There is no approach grounded in genre theory that helps explain why the movies in the MCU should be considered the same genre. It may be argued that they automatically fall into the same genre because they take place in the same universe, though this reasoning presents problems of its own: James Egan describes Stephen King's *Dark Tower* as a gothic western but *Dark Tower* is a book that unveils how various stories made by King really take place in the same multiverse (95). As a consequence, if shared universe means shared genre, then King's other stories *The Shinning*, *Kujo*, *It*, and *Pet Cemetery* would also qualify as gothic westerns. Ultimately, stories that take place in the same universe must still allow for variation of genre, if the categories are to have any meaning. Applied to the MCU, the Netflix original *Daredevil* (DeKnight 2015) is part of the same universe as the MCU films. *Daredevil* is a legal drama with a vigilante twist and decidedly not a retro-futurist period piece, like *Captain America: The First Avenger*; if genre categories are to have any meaning, these two narratives must be permitted to have different genres.

Of course, this may be amended by viewing the entirety of the MCU as a super category and its constituent parts as fuzzy sets. This allows for *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Netflix's *Daredevil*, and *Thor* to effectively inhabit the same genre while allowing for the lack of overlap in genre trends between the different narratives. This would accomplish points 1) and 2) of genre theory but does leave 3) unexplored. Yet, from a non-academic perspective, it is unlikely moviegoers would be able to square the circle of genre categorizing of the MCU by deploying the idea of fuzzy sets, thereby undermining point 2). Moreover, the application of fuzzy sets within this context only serves to explain the MCU itself as a genre, which consequently disregard the other studios, e.g. Warner Bros. and Sony, that create movies which are popularly considered to be superhero movies. All in all, while it is possible to reach agreement in applying the 'superhero' label to the MCU, the analytical benefits of doing so seem minuscule. This does beg the question: why are academics and laymen both ready to claim that the MCU is part of an overall superhero trend?

Step 2: Analytical Misguidance

The purpose of this section is two-fold. Firstly, I aim to point out why the preexisting literature describing the MCU and contemporary Hollywood at large as a genre's time in the limelight is misguided. Secondarily, I mean to explain why said genre label is pervasive even outside of academia, as systematic errors of this kind do not spring into existence without cause. Having detailed how a conventional application of Altman's genre theory does not help establish the MCU as solely occupying the superhero genre, it is worth dedicating some time to why other scholars still assert the genre's presence. In his book *The Comic Book Movie Adaptation*, Liam Burke attempts to shift the focus by broadening superhero movies into the category of "comic book movies" (of which he states that the MCU is included). Burke claims that scholars not only fail to view comic book movies as a genre, but outright refuses to do so, preferring instead to see them as "a trend" (93). Burke's analysis

of the comic book movie genre is multifaceted, but can overall be summarized into the following points:

1) Audience expectations
2) Comic book protagonists sharing an overabundance of traits
3) The protagonists described in 2) also tend to appear side-by-side similar motifs
4) Use of a comic book aesthetic to signal heightened reality
5) Adaptation to film is, in and of itself, a genre

While I have not intention to partake in the typical lack of acknowledgement towards comics which Burke implies to be plaguing academia (4), I nonetheless intended to showcase how his arguments for why the MCU serves as an example of his broaden genre definition does contain some significant errors. Where examples from movies are directly concerned, I intend to limit the applications of Burke's genre conventions to phase 1 of the MCU, as to not be overwhelmed by material to choose from.

Audiences' Say Over Genre

Burke's analysis of audience expectation is based on surveys he conducted with audience members about to see movies that were based on comic book properties. By interviewing audiences about to see *The Adventures of Tintin* (Jackson 2011), *Green Lantern* (Campbell 2011), and *Thor*, Burke asserted that the people questioned were overwhelmingly able to describe their expectations as pertaining to being about to see a comic book movie (89). Given how a genre is formed through a collaborative mechanism between the movie industry and movie audiences (Altman 16), it is of course entirely valid to survey audiences. Additionally, the fact that these audiences so readily use the same terms does support the idea that there is a genre awareness present. Nevertheless, there are two problems with this conclusion; firstly, audiences did not necessarily compare the movies they were about

to see to one another, and, secondarily, the use of the term "comic book movie" can be accounted for via looking to the paratexts surrounding the movies in question.

Addressing the latter point first, in the case of *The Adventures of Tintin*, both the movie and its marketing try to highlight the existence of the source material. For example, one of the posters for the movie, seen below references the iconic image of Tintin and Snowy running while being hit by a

Fig 1. (left): The Adventures of Tintin poster (IMDB)
Fig 2 (right): Tintin in Spotlight (World of Art)

searchlight. Additionally, one of the first sequences in the movie is a character looking like the Tintin author, Herge, sketching a portrait of Tintin, with the result looking exactly like the protagonist's comic book appearance (Spielberg, 2011, 00:04:39-00:04:54). Indeed, this reveal of the portrait leads to the camera panning to reveal the actual face of the movie's protagonist. While not everyone in the audience will get the reference, nor recognize the sketcher as being Herge, the time and dedication spent to reference the source material suggests that the moviemakers had confidence in general familiarity with the movie's source material. Thus, it could be argued that audiences ascribing *The Adventures of Tintin* as a comic book movie, could be based on the marketing making paratextual connotations to the source material as well as a basic familiarity with said source material.

The marketing for *Thor* and *Green Lantern* can likewise be said to deliberately direct attention towards the fact that they are based on comic book properties. In the trailer for *Thor*, the Marvel logo appears 45 seconds in and in the case of *Green Lantern,* DC's logo appears at 01:03 (Marvel Entertainment; moviemaniacsDE). Given how a significant component of the financial reasoning for making movie adaptations is that adaptations come with a built-in audience, it is no wonder that marketing

for such properties would highlight their origins (Burke 45). That also carries with it the implication that audiences are made aware of said source material, and therefor mentions it when interviewed. Marketing, of course, attempts to present the best possible image of the promoted movie, which can cause misleading advertising.

By way of example, going by the second trailer for *Inglorious Bastards* (Tarantino 2009), the movie is an action-comedy, full of action beats, one-liners, and the general pulp-action associated with other Tarantino movies (Movieclips Classic Trailers). However, if the opening scene is anything to go by, *Inglorious Bastards* is not a pulp-action comedy. After the opening credits, the next 20 minutes of *Inglorious Bastards* is a slow-paced dialogue between Hans Landa (Christoph Waltz), a nazi officer searching for Jews, and Perrier LaPadite (Denis Ménochet), a man who is trying to hide Jews (Tarantino, 2009, 00:00:00-00:20:22). In other words, the opening 20 minutes include no jokes, no actions scenes, and no one-liners; the impression given by this opening scene fits better within the confines of a historical drama rather than a pulp-action comedy. Of course, since genres infer expectations and given that trailers create expections, marketing does possess the power to alter the perception of a movie at the time of release. This is likely only the case in the short term, however. While trailers may create expectations and even mislead, it is far more likely that the movie itself, absent of its trailers, will have the chance to stand the test of time. Using *Inglorious Bastards* as an example is perhaps a more extreme case, since neither *The Adventures of Tintin, Green Lantern*, or *Thor* were similarly misleading in their advertising. All the same, the argument stands that audience expectations based on marketing does not actually affect what genre a movie falls within in the long term.

Beyond merely describing the movies as comic book fare, the audiences interviewed by Burke also made comparisons between *Thor* and *Green Lantern*. Talking of both movies, comics were frequently mentioned, and the movies were even compared to other properties with comic book origin. In Burke's own description, "[…] most participants referenced previous adaptations when discussing

their expectations of Thor and Green Lantern with responses including “similar to Iron Man 1 and 2” and “Superman in Green”" (87). The reason for this closer comparison likely stems from the companies that own these characters: Marvel and DC are culturally framed as rivals, meaning that movies based on their properties are frequently compared by the general public. If Burke also wants to use *The Adventures of Tintin* as part of his comic book genre portfolio, he runs into the problem that "[…] Indiana Jones was cited by eleven of the twenty-eight respondents, with no other film generating more than two mentions […]" when he surveyed the audience for that movie (Burke 88). I see an issue for this approach as Burke does further examine this expected similarity expressed by the surveyed movie-goers. Burke's intention of placing *Thor*, *Green Lantern* and *The Adventures of Tintin* all within the comic book genre, creates the challenge of trying to explain why other movies do not fit in this category. If audiences are already comparing *The Adventures of Tintin* to *Raider of the Lost Ark*, why not include all the other Indiana Jones films as comic book movies? An immediately intuitive answer might be that Indiana Jones did not originate as a comic book character. However, Burke does not wish to limit the comic book movie genre to adaptations, saying "[…] to only include those films based directly on comic books would omit films that have attempted to align themselves with the genre, particularly since its rise in popularity" (99). Indirectly, Burke may be said to mend the issue by referring to other genre trends than audience expectations, but unfortunately these seem to not apply to the MCU when placed under closer scrutiny.

The Comic Book Protagonist

In identifying the trends of the comic book protagonist, Burke primarily ties modern comic book heroes to those of old western films. Borrowing the words of Harvey, Burke explains that, "[the] superhero, after all, is but the western heroic persona elevated to near omnipotence. And in the superhero’s vigilante adventuring outside the law (though ostensibly on the law’s behalf), the internal conflict in the national mythology once again finds expression” (94). In this quote, one of the defining

qualities of a comic book movie protagonist is stated to be vigilantism. What superheroes add, which differentiates them from the western protagonist, is a greater exaggeration of abilities. Few to none western gunslingers have gadgets on par with Iron Man and it was not common either for any of them to be literal gods with superpowers, as is the case for Thor. Outside the MCU, even characters that are human have exaggerated traits. None of Batman's abilities in Nolan's films are presented as supernatural, yet few, if any have the talents to become both a master criminologist, martial artist, and gadgeteer, to name just a few of the feats on Batman's resume. Exceptional people are absolutely a common trait for MCU movies.

There are, however, some issues in using vigilantes with heightened abilities as a basis for the comic book persona. How many of the protagonists in the MCU's phase 1 qualify as vigilantes? As mentioned, Iron Man certainly qualifies. The only hindrance is that neither *Iron Man* nor *Iron Man 2* deal with conventional street-level crime. Unlike any cinematic iteration of Spider-man in the 21st century, Tony Stark does not spend his time catching purse thieves or bank robbers. On the other hand, Iron Man does run into complications with the U.S. military in *Iron Man*; while Tony is handling a military conflict/hostage situation in the Middle East, the U.S. Military is seen as perplexed and looking for answers from other agencies, such as CIA (Favreau, 2008, 00:19:29-00:10:40). Indeed, the confusion grows to such an extent that Tony is forced to wrestle American fighter jets. All in all, Tony Stark, while handling a military conflict on behalf of the U.S. military, is unequivocally working outside of it. Tony working outside the system is also seen in the sequel *Iron Man 2*, where he must participate in a senate hearing determining if he should hand over his weapons technology to the government. Again, while not the typical image of what one imagines when the word "vigilantism" is used, it does fit within the thematic confines of it.

That having been said, as far as vigilantes go, Iron Man represents the only example in phase 1 of the MCU that unequivocally fits. In *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Steve Rogers is a soldier

in the army during World War II which would place him as working within the system. From 00:55:00-01:10:51, Steve disobeys orders and launches a rescue mission of prisoners of war. However, besides this instance, Steve only works with sanctioned missions. Unless one wishes to make the case that a 15-minutes long scene qualifies Steve Rogers as a vigilante while he, for the rest of the movie, either attempts to enroll in the military or execute orders issued from the same, then Steve hardly qualifies on this point. In the same vein, Thor can hardly be considered a vigilante either, as he is a part of Asgard's royalty and is, principally, working against Loki's machinations towards taking over the throne of Asgard. These points have already been dealt with in the section titled "narrowing down the term superhero", yet they are repeated here to clarify how they preemptively refute Burke's ideas pertaining to comic book protagonists.

Comic Book Realism

Burke perceives the surrealist aspects of comics as a genre convention and states that audiences are prepared to accept greater distancing from reality because the genre conventions of comic book movies:

> "[…] are pitched at a heightened reality that is not confined to key moments such as action sequences or musical numbers. Even comic book movies based on actual events display this heightened reality, such as 300’s inclusion of giants, crab-like warriors, and goat-headed musicians at the Battle of Thermopylae […]" (Burke 104).

This description does cover a significant portion of movies adapted from comic books. As mentioned earlier, when Marvel Studios incorporates historical events, such as World War II, they can include hovercars, bombs that are also tiny planes, and even genetic engineering in spite of the movie ostensibly taking place in the 1940's. As Marvel Studios has moved beyond phase 1, these fantastic elements have only become more numerous, allowing for the existence of cosmic entities, sorcerers, and

the opportunity for these beings to meet and interact with one another. Despite this description being apt, there is one labeling issue to add here: does this not merely describe fantasy and science-fiction movies?

Of course, it is possible to sub-divide genres with descriptive purpose. Just because *Captain America: The First Avenger* fits as a science-fiction movie does not mean there is no value in specifying the sub-genre of retro-futurism. In the same vein, *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) also fits the description of a science-fiction movie, yet it can be further specified as part of the science-fiction sub-genre 'afrofuturism'. The value of this categorization can for example be seen in Myungsung Kim's dissertation on afrofuturism in which he explains that, "Contextualizing Afro-diasporic futurity in such an extensive manner makes it possible to reread some African American texts not typically categorized as canonical" (3). The question then becomes: is there any value to attributing a sub-genre of "comic book movie" to categorize the fantastical elements of the MCU? If it could assist in explaining a new phenomenon then maybe, but the fantastical elements Burke describes have existed elsewhere for decades prior to the comic book adaptation boom of the early 2000s, as seen in, for example, *The Terminator* (Cameron 1984) which includes both android assassins and time travel.

Burke does specify that an advantage a comic book movie has is the ability to have characters achieve nigh-on impossible things, without much in the way of explanation; in *Sin City*, Marv, who in-world is not presented as superhuman, can wrestle a SWAT team and leap out of a seven-story window without suffering significant harm (Burke 102). This is a form of heightened reality which does not make use of science-fiction or fantasy elements, but rather something fantastic that the audience is meant to just accept via suspension of disbelief. The problem in this regard is that most action movies operate on this logic in one way or another. John McClane (Bruce Willis) would likely be dead based on the wounds he sustains in *Die Hard* (McTiernan 1988) and the commandos' assault on the guerilla fighters in *Predator* (McTiernan 1987) hardly seems to follow any actual tactics and

strategies. Action movies have already operated on heightened reality since at least the 80's, yet Burke seems to describe this trend as new and attributable to a newly popularized genre of comic book movies.

Burke's idea of specific comic book visuals being more liberally borrowed does hold up to scrutiny, however. *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* (Wright 2010) makes frequent use of the onomatopoeic words that appear in comic books, and, more than once, the frame is cut into panels similarly to how a page in a comic book might look (Burke 104). Other examples include Ang Lee's *Hulk* (2003), which "[…] attests to the influence of the semiotic characteristics of comics and of their reading modalities on filmic devices (in this case the split screen)," (Bateman 138), thus serving as a movie that has its aesthetic permeate with visual influences from comic books. These visual ques represent distinct semiotics that are derived specifically from the medium of comic books to film, and there is therefore an argument in favor of these visual ques operating as genre markers or semantic signals. Furthermore, in the cases of *Wanted* (Bekmambetov 2008) and *Scott Pilgrim vs. The World* the use of onomatopoeic words helps create a cartoon-like aesthetic which, as a semantic signal, helps the audience to understand the syntactic expectation of cartoon-like logic for these movies. In Western culture, American comic books are thought of as a children's medium or, at the very least, as a juvenile source of entertainment; clear connotations to comic book source material is consequently a signal for audiences to expect "comic book logic". This signal of "comic book logic" fits rather well with the general expectation of heightened reality that Burke says dominates the genre of comic book movies. However, outside of translating individual panels to the big screen and creating transtextual references (for example, through Stan Lee cameos), Marvel Studios seems less keen on specifically signaling the connotations of silliness that specifically arises from comic books as a medium. Naturally, that is not to say Marvel movies are not, from time to time, silly in their own way, but they operate at a different level of heightened reality than onomatope like "kaploom" appearing out of thin

air. All in all, Marvel movies do operate on a level of heightened reality, but in a way that is signaled and understood differently than when movies such as *Wanted* and *Scott Pilgrim vs. the World* employs heightened realism. Thus, while Burke may have a point about a recurring semantic element with a corresponding syntactical expectation that could aptly be described as a comic book movie convention, such a semantic signal appears to be missing from the MCU movies.

In terms of condensing his points into a single definition, Burke attempts to offer this definition for the comic book movie genre: "The comic book movie genre follows a vigilante or outsider character engaged in a form of revenge narrative, and is pitched at a heightened reality with a visual style marked by distinctly comic book imagery" (Burke 106). The issue with the description of the protagonist is that an outsider out for revenge could cover a wide spectrum of Hollywood action movies. The book *American Revenge Narratives* features a collection of critical essays that analyze a range of cinematic revenge stories, none of which are popularly considered superhero or comic book movies (Wiggins). By virtue of Burke's definition, Dirty Harry and James Bond could both be considered comic book protagonists, which speaks to too broad of a categorization to be purposeful.

However, Burke's definition also includes stylistic aspects. As discussed previously, it is possible for movies to adapt visual conventions from comic books, but, even here, despite the source material, the MCU is light on borrowed visual conventions. In a video interview with Vanity Fair, the director of *Thor Ragnarok* (2017), Taika Waititi describes how the sets of the planet Sakaar featured a lot of interconnected lines and circles, as a nod to the art style of Jack Kirby (00:03:30-00:03:40). This is an example of an intended inclusion of an art style referencing Thor's source material, but visual stylings tying directly back to the medium of comic books are somewhat rare in the MCU, to the point that they are seemingly entirely absent from phase 1. What Burke describes could actually be a nascent genre marker, which include, for example, *Wanted* and *Scott Pilgrim vs. the*

World as part of their genre, but there is little sign of this marker in the MCU, which means a significant portion of the MCU cannot be included based on this genre criteria.

That leaves Burke's genre definition with "heightened reality", which is an apt description, but is not sufficient on its own in creating a dividing line between genres. As stated previously, "heightened reality" as a stand-alone genre marker invites questions such as whether movie phenomena such as *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* should also be considered part of the sweeping trend of comic book movies. Using phase 1 as the sample size for genre analysis is charitable in terms of trying to codify a genre, as these at least have Earth centric stories. As the MCU has continued to expand, space and mysterious dimensions are added to the roster of settings, and the character pool has likewise only become more diverse. A straightforward semantic/syntactic analysis of phase 1 of the MCU does not reveal the overwhelming presence of a superhero genre, and Burke's definition of a comic book movie genre likewise has little applicability to phase 1. Ultimately, looking to the semantic elements of the MCU, there seems to be little that can classify the MCU as part of the superhero or comic book movie genre as defined by Burke. However, if nothing internal to the MCU can help in identifying semantic genre elements, perhaps we then look to the elements surrounding the MCU to help identify a genre. There exist theoretical frameworks which view adaptation itself as a genre. While this genre approach can give some insight into how the MCU operates, but it does not codify the MCU as belong to a single genre.

The Genre of Adaptation

Burke makes the point that adaption, in and of itself, constitutes a genre. In this, Burke draws on the work of Leitch, who "[…] proposes a different model based on a different context by defining adaptation as a genre with its own rules, procedures, and textual markers that are just as powerful as any single ostensible source text in determining the shape a given adaptation takes" (106). In his article "Adaptation, the genre", Leitch argues that since genres rely on audience expectations, and

since foreknowledge of a text adapted into a movie creates expectations, this can be said to form its own genre. Of course, it is entirely possible for audiences to go see *Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring* (Jackson 2001) without having read, or even heard of, the original book, but by Leitch's argument it is similarly possible for someone to see a western without familiarity of the western genre. Taking this example further, it is even possible for a person to see *Blazing Saddles*, a movie that sets out to critique and parody the western genre, without familiarity with the genre conventions of the western. This is no different when a movie adapts a single character rather than a specific story. For example, there is no single comic book which any movie in phase 1 of the MCU is based on; instead they borrow liberally from a plethora of comic book sources. The phenomenon of adaptations of comic books creates unique expectations which is also observed by Grey and Rae, who wrote of the first *X-men* (Singer 2000) movie,

> "[…] the viewer's experience of a film that has been adapted from a favorite comic book will involve, and rely upon, significantly more ties and connotations […] than it would for a non-comic book reader, who is likely to approach the text as an individual text[…]. One group of viewers, it would appear, are intertextually "rich", yet likely a minority in a theatre audience, while another is intertextually "poor", yet likely a majority […]" (89).

The familiarity, or intertextual richness, assumed to be held by some audience members, is also why Cyclops (James Marsden) can quip at Wolverine's (Hugh Jackman) mockery of the x-men uniform with the rejoinder, "what would you prefer? Yellow spandex?" (Singer, 2000, 01:09:30-01:09:35). Without familiarity with the typically yellow x-men uniform, Cyclops' quip seems like a non-sequitur, but instead it is a knowing nod at the characters' origins. This represents the unique genre territory that an adaptation can occupy: the ability to play with audience expectations, based upon the assumption of intertextual richness. Ultimately, since adaptation can, in and of itself, be a genre, could adaptations of comic books not be seen as a sub-genre?

The answer to that is two-fold. On one hand, yes, as previously discussed through Burke's analysis, it is possible to borrow visual conventions from comic books, even to a point of denoting a genre. On the other hand, it would suggest a rather reductionist view of comics to hold them as occupying a single genre once adapted. Books adapted into movies may themselves be afforded additional genres. *The Hunger Games* can be adapted into a dystopic science-fiction movie, *Lord of the Rings* into epic fantasy movies, and *The Godfather* can be adapted into a drama/gangster film. Adaptation as a genre is not a label which can stand on its own; the final text must have a genre or genres in addition to that of adaptation. It is not without value to assess how a viewing might differ between individuals who are familiar with the source material and those who are not, but, in the end, the adaptation inhabits a genre of its own - likely the same genre as its source material. If movies adapted from books enjoy the benefits of diverse genre classification beyond that of adaptation, why should comic books be treated any different?

The Life Cycle of a Genre and Parody

In his article "Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films", Cawelti offered an outline for a genre's life, stating that,

> "One can almost make out a life cycle characteristic of genres as they move from an initial period articulation and discovery, through a phase of conscious self-awareness on the part of both creators and audiences, to a time when the generic patterns have become so well-known that people become tired of their predictability" (206).

Building on this understanding of a genre's life cycle, Burke offers a selection of westerns to denote this cycle: *The Great Train Robbery* serves as the genre articulating itself, *Stagecoach* and John Ford's Cavalry trilogy denotes the genre's rise in popularity, with *The Searchers* as a peak of the genre's popularity (Burke 108). After this peak, commercial flops such as *Heaven's Gate* and movies

ridiculing the genre, such as *Blazing Saddles*, are released (ibid). This model, as proposed by Cawelti, has received criticism for being too rigid and thus unable to adapt to the inherently mutation-like quality that genres possess (Neale 65-66); all the same, the model does help in highlighting when a genre's tendencies become so prevalent that it is possible to mock them and have said mockery be understood by general audiences.

With Richard Donner's *Superman* from 1976, we see a commercially successful superhero movie, and thus a metric for Hollywood that is a genre they can start exploring, as studios look for material to adapt. This carries over to the rise and fall of the Batman movies (which is to say Burton's *Batman* (1989), Burton's *Batman Returns* (1992), Schumacher's *Batman Forever* (1995), and Schumacher's *Batman and Robin* (1997)), with the genre becoming revitalized in 2002 with Rami's *Spider-man*. What this means, is that the superhero genre has started producing successes in 1976 and gradually produced more and more towards, and shortly after, the turn of the century. If the genre has only become more prevalent since then, it should follow that genre conventions are more broadly understood, and that works that parody and ridicule the genre should start appearing.

And, indeed, there is a selection of works that knowingly tip their proverbial hat towards the genre tendencies of the "superhero movie" of the 21st century. In Disney's *Big Hero 6* (Hall and Williams 2014), a group of teenagers decide to craft crimefighting identities, in order to stop a supervillain dressed in a kabuki mask. As they decide to become a crime fighting team, the character Fred (voiced by T.J. Miller) says "Can you feel it? This is our origin story!" (Hall and Williams, 2014, 00:54:27-00:54:31). Brown's analysis of the reception of *Deadpool* (Miller 2016) also details how the movie is a comedic take on a superhero's origin (Brown 151-153). However, at time of writing, the convention of the origin story is the only thing about the MCU and superheroes that has been consistently mocked. Indeed, to date, the most recognizable pattern to emerge from the MCU is the first outing for any one character, detailing their origin story, which is to say, detailing how the

character/group of characters became a hero/a team of heroes. Mockery of this trend does suggest a recognizable pattern that might be identifiable as a semantic convention of the superhero movie; it could even be seen as a semantic convention that could assist in categorizing MCU films and superhero movies, but in terms of establishing a genre for the MCU, some analytical precision is lost when stand-alone sequels are considered.

The reason the pattern of the origin story comes into existence is likely tied to the circumstances of production for serialized cinematic storytelling. In the book *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins quotes an anonymous screenwriter as saying,

> "When I first started, you would pitch a story because without a good story, you didn't really have a film. Later, once sequels started to take off, you pitched a character because a good character could support multiple stories. And now, you pitch a world because a world can support multiple characters and multiple stories across multiple media" (114).

This illustrates why the origin story is a recognizable pattern in the MCU, as the goal, from a commercial perspective, is to create a vibrant world populated by multiple characters. Therefore, an origin story that explains a hero's central conceit and shows them becoming a hero serves as a solid jumping-off point from which multiple films can be created. After a hero has been realized, future movies can hit the ground running and feature the character doing heroics without needing to spend time on explaining how and why. The value of this model lies in the versatility of storytelling going forward; once the more formulaic origin story has been detailed, it opens for a plethora of storytelling possibilities that can go in all manner of directions. This versatility is likely also why there are few works that parody this supposed trend of superhero movies: beyond the origin story, what recognizable patterns are there to ridicule?

This lack of recognizable patterns also represents another issue with trying to apply superhero movies as a genre to the MCU. As discussed previously, movies that center on Superman, Batman, and Spider-man easily fall into the same genre, as the motif of the double-identity fosters some of the narrative throughout their movies. However, beyond this, the only genre convention that can consistently endure scrutiny past this point is the origin story, as is evident by the fact that this element is referenced by parodic works. This raises a question: if the sequels that continue from the point of an origin story are not tied down by genre conventions, is there any point to categorizing the sequels in the same genre? What analytical value is obtained via this grouping?

If anything, there is something to be said that describing the MCU movies as not belonging to the same genre assists in explaining why the culture has not burned out on the franchise, even after more than a decade of movies. It is a commonly cited fact both by filmmakers and film industry analysts alike that the era of the superhero movie will eventually pass (Brown 150-153). Nevertheless, since the critical acclaim of *The Dark Knight* and Marvel Studios' first success in the form of *Iron Man* in 2008, comic book adaptations have only gone on to break more and more records. At this point, perhaps we should invite ourselves to ask, "why should this go away?" but the more prescient question at hand might as well be, "what exactly is it we think will go away'?". Industry analysist keep expecting audiences to get sick of superheroes, but if there are no consistently forming patterns to ridicule, no recurring motifs to lament, and a cast of characters that only gets more diverse, what exactly is there to get sick of? With the record-setting success of Rami's *Spider-man* in 2002, the perceived genre of superheroes is approaching two decades at the top of the pop-culture hierarchy. If there really were easily discernible genre patterns, there ought to be more works of parody ridiculing the genre at this point. With nearly 20 years at the forefront of blockbuster cinema, we should expect audiences to understand where such ridicule would be directed. Conversely, this absence of the

supposed genre's final stage in its life cycle can easily be explained, by embracing this statement: there is no genre to ridicule, because there is no single dominant genre to begin with.

Cultural Confusion Concerning Comic Books

Unfortunately, in reaching the conclusion that we are not living in an age of the superhero movie, and that "comic book movie" suffers under significant flaws as a genre label when applied to the MCU, another question arises: why do so many people think we live in the age of the superhero blockbuster? This question is especially interesting in that the perception of superheroes being the rulers of Hollywood is not just held by laymen but also permeates academia. Jeffery A. Brown has written the book *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television: Popular Genre and American Culture*, David Bordwell makes blog posts detailing superheroes in Hollywood, such as "Superheroes for Sale", not to mention Burke's attempts to examine the comic book movie genre in, *The Comic Book Film Adaptation: Exploring Modern Hollywood's Leading Genre*. Brown's work also details how analysis of superheroes spills over into the general discourse, mentioning newspaper articles and online commentators fervently debating the twists and turns of the Hollywood superhero (151). "Superhero" systematically occurs in discussions concerning Hollywood blockbusters and such widespread usage of a term does not happen out of nowhere. As mentioned, if there truly is no genre to speak of, where is this perception and talk of a genre then coming from?

The answer lies in western culture's approach to comic books. As Ndalianis observed in "Why comic studies", describing why comics tend to have negative associations in Western culture,

> "In Western culture, the comic's book early association with the superhero genre […] brought with it a large, youth-oriented audience. Despite its immense popularity, the public perception for a long time was that comics were […] a young boy's medium. As such,

> it was generally perceived (in higher circle, of course) as the lowliest of popular culture media" (113).

Essentially, Ndalianis argues that the circumstances of comics inception in Western culture continues to paint how the medium is perceived; however, "Western culture" might be too broad, as France and Belgium has a comic book culture that deviates from American culture, but Ndalianis point in respects to American comics still stands. This would also serve to explain why American comics and comic adaptation so easily fall victim to unnecessary reductionism: the medium is overall perceived as geared towards an adolescent male mindset, and there is so strong a connotation at play that, once the word "comic book" is mentioned, superheroes are assumed to make up the content. This is also evident in how "alternative comics" is applied to everything that does not feature superheroes (Gibbons as quoted by Burke 8).

To this day, comic books still make up a niche medium, even as movies adapted from comic books are among the most successful Hollywood blockbusters, which likely does little to shift the actual perception of comic books. However, characters from comic books are still absorbed by the culture at large via cultural osmosis. Even though people who have actually read a Spider-man comic constitutes a minority, cartoons, action figures, lunchboxes and t-shirts, not to mention the movies featuring Spider-man, all assist in ensuring that a wider populous are familiar with the character. What this means is that only the most famous characters from comic books are well-known by the wider culture, as these are absorbed through cultural osmosis. Consequently, not only are comics "tainted" with having invented the superhero, but the medium at large has difficulties in altering the perception of itself, as this perception is not formed by reading comic books, but, more likely, by intertextual references to comic books.

The most popular comic book publishers are DC and Marvel, and the most popular characters from comic books are probably Superman, Batman, and Spider-man - all three of which constitute clear examples of superheroes. Since DC and Marvel's characters each have their other characters share a universe, and since both publishers are most famous for creating superheroes, the perceptions of these companies start to take on a circular logic. Marvel makes superhero comics, which means that all characters from Marvel are perceived as superheroes. Where is the evidence that all Marvel characters are easily identified as superheroes? It lies in the pantheon of characters that are all considered superheroes. Herein lies the circular logic: the idea that Marvel only makes superheroes comes from the perception that all their characters are superheroes, but the reason those characters are unilaterally considered superheroes comes from the fact that they are created, owned, and published by Marvel. The first movies based on comic books with cultural staying power, were those that adapted Superman, Batman, and Spider-man to the big screen. Since then, more properties belonging to DC and Marvel have been made into movies, but because of the perception DC and Marvel operate under, all these adaptations are assumed to be superhero movies before any analysis of genre, be that public or academic, has been conducted. Furthermore, the general reductionist view of comic books leads even the more nuanced critiques, such as the one Burke employs in formulating a comic book movie genre, still misses the mark of describing the cinema landscape charted by Marvel Studios. This leads to broad confusion and speculations as to when the genre will go away and musings as to how the genre can sustain popularity way past the point of other genres inducing audiences with genre fatigue. Marvel Studios' ability to avoid general genre fatigue lies in the fact that they are not just regurgitating a genre. The fact that their "superhero movies" continue to soar to new heights in terms of commercial success, should serve as evidence of that fact. Yet, this answer primarily serves to unveil another question: if Marvel Studios is not just enjoying the benefit of the superhero genre's time in the limelight, what is the root of their success than based on?

Step 3: The Cinematic Landscape and Audience Expectations in the 21st Century

Having at this point analyzed how current genre theory cannot be used to firmly situate the MCU in the superhero or the comic book movie genre, the question remains of how to categorize and analyze the phenomenon that is the MCU. The purpose of this 3rd step of the analysis is to elucidate the following points:

- What exactly is it the MCU offers audiences and how does this work from a business perspective?
- How and why are audiences connecting with this? What are the sources of enjoyment?
- Can a genre based on the reasons for success and those sources of enjoyment be defined?

The Unique Selling Point of the MCU

The model of movie-making that Marvel Studios has charted is unique for cinema in the 21st century. Other studios have made long-running movie series such as the *Harry Potter* film series consist of 8 movies with the same cast, telling the same continuous story, albeit with movies that also feature individual and self-contained narratives. What differentiates the MCU from the grand endeavor of the *Harry Potter* films phenomenon is that the Marvel universe is not telling the story of a single protagonist leading to a singular confrontation. Instead, the various eponymous characters in the MCU each have conflicts contained and dealt with in their own individual film series, while still leaving room for crossing over and helping each other in team-up movies. There is no singular protagonist in the MCU and while Thanos (Joss Brolin) has been teased since the end of *The Avengers*, the majority of conflicts found within the MCU movies, do not deal with, or even reference, him. Even to the extent that the MCU can be said to have been built up to the point where the Avengers fight and defeat Thanos, that matter has been dealt with in *Avengers: Endgame* and the cinematic universe still has every intention of continuing passed this point. As Rauscher describes it in *Superhero Synergies*, "The Marvel films can be analyzed on a formal level as a prototype for a new form

of serial non-linear storytelling and on an aesthetic level as hybrids combining the iconography of several genres" (228). The idea of separate characters going through storylines that co-exist within the same narrative universe is by no means new; indeed, this is the model that Marvel Comics and DC has been publishing their comic books with. What makes the MCU unique is the fact that this is the first time it is applied to blockbuster films.

The *X-men* film series did serve as an early proto-example of the movie making the Marvel Studios would later polish to the point of mega-success. The first 3 *X-men* films (*X-men* (Singer 2000), *X2: X-men United* (Singer 2003), and *X-men 3: The Last Stand* (Ratner 2006)) follows the more typical structure of a movie trilogy, but the movies made after these focused on individual characters and told stories at various points in the films' timeline. As Rauscher puts it,

> "[…] the X-Men franchise adapted a patchwork structure typical of interconnected comic book series taking part in the same story world at different points in time. *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009, Gavin Hood, US) and *The Wolverine* (2013, James Mangold, US) deal with standalone adventures of Hugh Jackman's popular main character outside of the ensemble structure characteristic for the other X-Men films[…] At the same time the prequel *X-Men: First Class* (2011, Matthew Vaughn, US) delves deeper into the conflict between former friends and rival mutant leaders Magneto (Michael Fassbender) and Professor Xavier (James McAvoy) with Wolverine only appearing in a short cameo" (227).

Rauscher goes on to point out how the X-men prequels add retro-continuity to the universe, which adds information for when the original trilogy is revisited by audiences. This approach of splitting a film series into focusing on characters and telling stories from various points in a cinematic series' timeline does seem to match the model that Marvel Studios have been using to cultivate excitement

for the MCU. Yet, the *X-men* series should be considered a prototype rather than an ur-example, despite this.

The reason for this lies within the scope and focus of the MCU. Marvel Studios geared their movies for crossovers from the very start, as evident by Nick Fury's (Samuel L. Jackson) cameo at the end of *Iron Man*. Conversely, it is highly unlikely that any serious considerations had been made towards *X-men Origins: Wolverine* while *X-men* was being made. Additionally, Marvel does not have a central film series or events around which the entirety of the universe revolves, which, again, contrasts with the X-men films, whose first outings after the original trilogy had to situate themselves in relation to said trilogy. It was not until *Days of Future Past* (Singer 2014) that the X-men films were "liberated" from the bonds of their original trilogy through means of time travel to mend the continuity, but at that point the MCU was already moving along at full steam. In essence, Marvel Studios was the first to offer a narrative universe teeming with characters and independent yet interconnected storylines, realized through the production power of modern Hollywood blockbusters. As the head of Marvel Studios, Kevin Feige, described it "almost nothing is cooler than three or four of your favorite heroes coming together for some mega event" (as quoted by Stork 85).

The Marvel Industrial Complex

Exactly how Marvel Studios runs blockbusters has already been dealt with expertly by other scholars. Stork goes into details as to how Marvel Studios offered something brand new to audiences, in the book *Superhero Synergies*, describing how, "It offered a new type of movie cycle that incorporates and adapts the logic of comics production and is designed to update and energize the genre and its commodity value within the market sphere" (80). Stork is rather vague on exactly what genre is being energized, but, all the same, my point as to what Marvel Studios uniquely offered with the MCU echoes what Stork already observed. Where Stork does go into detail is in how Marvel managed to sell the assembly of the avengers,

> "The design of the Marvel universe de-emphasizes the traditional notions of character origin and progress over time in favor of a gradual build-up to *The Avengers* as convergence spectacle— virtually every universe entry organized the narrative around the Avengers Initiative, setting up characters for what was to come rather than fully grounding them in their own world" (90).

To wit, *Thor* was, according to Stork, not seen as an origin story for the main character, but rather as a piece that would later be assembled into a greater whole. *The Avengers* marked the end of phase 1 for the MCU, and, since then, every phase has gradually built up to the team of heroes assembling once more in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon 2015), *Avengers: Infinity war* (Russo and Russo 2016) and, most recently, in *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo and Russo 2019). The effect, according to Stork, is that the individual movies are seen as teases with the "actual movie" being the team up; this serves for the team-up movie as being perceived as a grander cultural event/spectacle and the point of catching the stand-alone movies is to be able to enjoy the cultural landmark that is the convergence of several other movies. However, a point that Stork seems to undersell in his emphasis on how grand an event *The Avengers* was, is that if the movies leading up to the team-up did not connect with audiences, it is unlikely there would have been excitement for *The Avengers* to begin with. This represent the gamble Marvel Studios made in creating the MCU, as critical failure for any movie leading up to *The Avengers* could damage its overall success.

This risk can also be seen as a marketing advantage for Marvel Studios. During the time where phase 1 was being completed, individual audience members might not have cared so much about the Marvel characters, the Marvel brand, or the wider comic book culture, but the stand-alone movies each represented a potential jumping-on point. If someone decided to catch *Iron Man* and went on to become invested in the character of Tony Stark, that would automatically spark interest for not just *Iron Man 2* but also for how the character's story would continue in *The Avengers*. Additionally, there

is virtually nothing in *The Avengers* that requires having seen previous Marvel movies, and the movie could thus serve as an introduction to Thor, Captain America and Hulk as characters. Retroactively, audiences who have seen *The Avengers* might be spurred on to catch up on the films they missed, as well as keep up with the movies that would be released going forward. Each stand-alone movie released after *The Avengers* featuring one of the original Avengers have out-grossed their own stand-alone predecessors, which is suggestive of an increased fan-base for the individual characters. All in all, Marvel Studios' serialized approach to cinema gives audiences multiple chances to engage with the universe; this may only be for the duration of a single film, but it could also trigger wider interest in the overall universe and lead viewers to catch up and keep up as the MCU continues to unfold.

This also explains exactly why the first experiment in interconnected movies was based on comic book characters. Characters co-existing in a shared fictional universe has been the norm for DC and Marvel Comics for decades now. These characters sometimes team up in each other's books and sometimes meet in crossover mega-events where the fate of the universe hangs in the balance. This is precisely the storytelling that Marvel Studios has adopted for movies. As Stork observed, Marvel Studios,

> "[...] capitalizes on comic book conventions to construct an event within an established— and, most crucially, increasingly oversaturated— mainstream genre. In this regard, the story extends beyond the frames of the text itself into a broader cultural and economic sphere" (83).

The MCU, back when it was launched with *Iron Man*, was an experiment, and a risky one at that, given how nothing like this had been attempted before. A classic method for Hollywood to mitigate risk is to rely on pre-existing IP. Given how it is possible to maintain a series of interconnected movies in the 21st century, it would only make sense that such an experiment would adapt material from the

medium that had already done so for decades: comic books. Unfortunately, being based on comics, the MCU has, in terms of genre analysis, been reduced to inhabit the genre of superhero movies or, in more nuanced attempts, a comic book movie genre. As previously discussed, this is due to Western culture's preemptive assumptions of the comic book medium (at least with respects to American comics). From a business perspective, it makes sense that comic book characters would make for the first attempt at a consistently shared universe of movies. What remains to be explored is: why did it occur when it did?

Keeping up with the MCU

That the MCU qualifies as a hitherto unseen level of success is difficult to dispute. However, what does foster debate is how it achieved this success. Stork's focus in *Superhero Synergies* is on how Marvel Studios offered a level of spectacle that had never been served by Hollywood before, as well as argue that the MCU has revitalized the superhero genre. The questions I have raised in this thesis have thus far been focused on whether or not the MCU can truly be said to represent the success of the superhero genre, with the evidence analyzed primarily arguing that such a view is overly reductionist. Having thus far in step 3 analyzed exactly what the MCU then is, it is natural to look into the circumstances that helped it into existence and towards commercial success.

Firstly, an easily overlooked aspect of how the MCU avoid alienating audiences is that the majority of MCU movies do not require knowledge of previous movies. Any given movie in phase 1 can be enjoyed without having seen any other films. This includes *The Avengers* even though the movie serves as the pay-off to five previous movies' worth of build-up. For example, as Thor arrives, Captain America has no idea who he is, but he, and the audience members not already in the loop, are enlightened by Black Widow (Scarlet Johansson) saying, "I'd sit this one out cap. These guys come from legend. They are basically gods" after she has asked if Thor is "Another Asgardian?" (Whedon, 2012, 00:44:14-00:44:32). Additionally, Thor and Loki shares a heart-to-heart immediately

after Black Widow's incidental explanation of Thor, during which the two characters touch upon their family dynamic and conflicting desires (ibid 00:45:01-00:47:03); none of this is an overt recap, but it does serve to inform/remind audiences of Thor and Loki's characters and shared history. Continuing in phase 2, it can still be questioned if previous viewing is actually required. *Avengers: Age of Ultron* does not bother re-explaining how the Avengers assembled nor does it recap the superpowers of the individual members. Even so, team functions and dynamics are clarified: Black Widow has a special connection with Bruce Banner which assists in controlling the Hulk (Whedon, 2015, 00:12:58-00:13:04), Tony Stark is not the boss, just the financier (Ibid 00:15:00-00:15:10), and the world is so accustomed to heroes that different tiers of heroes are established, as evident by the fact that Rhode's (Don Cheadle) story fails to impress Stark and Thor (Whedon, 2015, 00:23:25-00:23:50). Some time is also dedicated to catch audiences up on the events of stand-alone movies, as Stark says, "We have been after this thing since S.H.I.E.L.D. collapsed," (Ibid 00:13:55:00:14:00) referencing events from *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Russo and Russo 2014). These recaps and reminders are not perfect and by themselves do not eliminate all confusion; audiences who have only seen *The Avengers* may find the reference to S.H.E.I.L.D.'s collapse confusing and same goes for audiences whose introduction to the MCU is *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, but to combat this confusion, Marvel Studios has the benefit of cultural osmosis in the 21st century.

Blockbuster marketing in the 21st century is virtually ubiquitous. If a movie studio is dedicated to creating awareness of a movie, individuals must, more or less, take an active effort in avoiding it. Trailers are shown during super bowl half-times, as interest in TV fades, TV spots move on to new platforms such as Instagram, and all that is not to mention the contractually obligated events actors must participate in to create PR for the MCU movies (Ravenola). These paratexts and press events ensure a decent chance of broad awareness of MCU movies, even if individual audience members do not go to see every single one of them. Furthermore, there is a significant amount of fan-made material

available that revolves around the MCU. On Youtube.com, several channels frequently take time to discuss, analyze, hypothesize, and suggest re-writes for MCU movies. These channels include, but are not limited to, "Nando V. Movies", "WhatCulture", "Looper", "ScreenJunkies", "Lessons from the screenplay", "Every Frame a Painting", "MovieBob", and "Geek.com". None of the mentioned Youtube channels are exclusively about the MCU, but they do frequently feature content that revolves around it. Additionally, while not all of the online content is laudatory of the MCU, these paratexts, be they essays, fan-letters, thought experiments, critiques, reviews, or anything that falls in between, still serve to create awareness of the MCU as well as an understanding of its breadth and scope. Bear in mind, this is just the engagement created on Youtube, which is to say nothing of podcasts and other websites featuring fan art, cosplay, news articles, and other online reviews. The MCU has likely also reached critical mass in terms of consistently enjoying the benefits of word-of-mouth. Since, as Stork points out, the team-up *Avengers* movies are the current pinnacle of Hollywood spectacle, any interaction with the demographics Marvel Studios is aiming (which, at this point, is quite a sizeable portion of people) includes the possibility of hearing talk about the MCU. Therefore, when MCU movies reference events that individual audience members have not seen, it is quite likely that they can categorize the information as something that is detailed elsewhere. In the best of cases (from a commercial perspective), knowing that certain events are detailed elsewhere can spark interest and thereby create incentive to catch-up. This amounts to a state where, even if audiences have not seen *Doctor Strange* (Derrickson 2016), his appearance in *Thor Ragnarok* is less likely to cause confusion, because, on some level, people are aware of the existence of Doctor Strange in the MCU.

Another cultural aspect the MCU has been the beneficiary of is a movie-going culture which has shifted towards demanding more of the audience. Jenkins describes this as new Hollywood demanding, "[…] that we do research before we arrive in the theatre" (104). Part of this arises from hard-core fans' ability to crowdsource information. As showrunner Damon Lindelof described when

interviewed about his issue with creating plot twists, "[Audiences can] Reddit this information […] By the time it airs a month later, the audience just goes “Duh!” That’s not the storytellers’ fault. It’s just the sophistication [of the audience’s ability] to figure things out […]" (as quoted by Ryan). After phase 1, the MCU has gradually become more and more complicated, meaning that even though Marvel Studios tries to keep the stand-alone movies self-contained, there is a greater and greater demand that audiences have a more in-depth understanding of the MCU. This increased demand is perhaps most evident in *Avengers: Infinity War* where little to no time is dedicated to explaining or recapping the stories of the heroes and only the new characters, i.e. the villains, are given screen time to be explained. The podcast *Show Me the Meaning* is a movie podcast which analyses movies and attempts to look at them through a philosophical lens. During the podcast's discussion of *Avengers: Infinity War*, the contributors discuss an article from The New Yorker, which criticized *Avengers: Infinity War* for being incomprehensive to newcomers. The discussion also references how the article was heavily criticized by Marvel fans for not understanding how the serial storytelling of the MCU works (Beck). As *Show Me the Meaning* discusses The New Yorker article for its merits, the cast becomes perfectly split down the middle as to whom has the better case: the fans or the New Yorker (00:34:10-00:00:38:34). All of this is, of course, a tiny sample size, but the New Yorker article, the backlash from the fans, and the inability of the cast of *Show Me the Meaning* to reach a decisive conclusion, does speak to a wider cultural debate. A debate that centers in the fact that it is no longer a given whether or not a franchise movie needs to introduce all its elements (characters, worldbuilding, etc.) or if it is okay to simply expect audiences to have seen all previous instalments in a film series.

What makes this more confusing is that the MCU is not a linear movie series and it is sometimes difficult to intuit which movies have causal relationships to one another. *Captain America: The Winter Solider* makes use of the relationship between Steve Rogers and James "Bucky" Barns Sebastian

Stan) which was established in *Captain America: The First Avenger*, to drive the emotional conflict between Captain America and Winter Soldier. The relationship between *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* should be easy to intuit as the latter is a direct sequel to the former. However, *Ant-man and the Wasp* (Reed 2018) is a direct sequel to *Ant-man* (Reed 2015) but a major conflict in the movie stems from Scott Lang (Paul Rudd) being under house arrest because of his involvement in *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo and Russo 2016). In fact, all issues that Scott Lang, Hank Pym (Michael Douglass), and Hope Van Dyne (Evangeline Lily) face with law enforcement, which makes for an on-going conflict through the entire movie, are directly tied to Scott's actions in *Captain America: Civil War*. This does raise the question: how are audiences meant to know which movies are prerequisites to have seen before other movies in the MCU and which are not? Given that the amount of demand that can be placed on audiences is now an open question and because of Marvel Studios' continued commercial success, a more pressing question would be why Marvel Studios continue to reap the benefits of said open question and experience comparatively little backlash from it?

The answer to this is two-fold: 1) cultural osmosis means there is some degree of familiarity with characters and events for audiences, even if they have not seen the movies that are being referenced, and 2) barring an assumption of interest, it is now easier than ever before to catch up and be reminded of events in the MCU. Consider the following thought experiment: if an individual had become interested in the MCU because of *The Avengers* and heard the news that a sequel, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, was coming out, that person could, using the internet from the comfort of their own home:

1) See the trailer for *Avengers Age of Ultron*
2) Look up what movies are in the MCU canon

3) Watch and/or re-watch *The Incredible Hulk*, *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2*, *Thor*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, and *The Avengers* via the affordances granted by streaming culture.
4) Read the comic book series *Age of Ultron*, which *Avengers: Age of Ultron* has its title from
5) Look up articles and think-pieces recapping past events and speculating on future ones
6) Sift through forums and reddit analyzing the *Age of Ultron* trailer for Easter eggs and clues.
7) Ask a friend

In fact, all of the above need not be done within the confines of the home but could, theoretically, be achieved on the go and all with the same mobile device. The only bar would be time and money, and through extra-legal means, easily available to all with an internet connection, money might not even be an impediment. Of course, this thought experiment does suggest the actions of a person who has become a dedicated fan, but even in the absence of the dedication described above, more casual viewers can just catch-up via online summaries. For example, the Youtube channel "ScreenJunkies" has the on-going series titled "CRAM IT", which recaps events leading up to certain movies, such as *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: End Game*. These 3rd party paratexts mean that people who want to be up to date on the most recent Marvel movies can do so without needing to put down the money or the time that watching 20+ movies would entail. Ultimately, the media saturation that we live in today means that Marvel can tell intricately interconnected stories without confusing a mainstream audience, simply because some degree of familiarity is guaranteed via the torrent of paratexts, regardless of whether these are first-party advertisement or fan-made contributions.

Such fan engagement is not an unexplored event in academic circles. As early as 2009, meaning before the MCU had become a cultural behemoth, Jenkins discussed the possibilities of spreadable media on his blog, saying, "Spreadability [refers] to the capacity of the public to engage actively in the circulation of media content through social networks and in the process expand its economic value and cultural worth". In fact, Jenkins' invention of the term "spreadability" was meant as an elaboration

on a chapter in his book, *Convergence Culture* from 2006, which is to say before the MCU even existed. In the chapter *Searching for the Origami Unicorn*, Jenkins describes how artists can use engagement across multiple media platforms, "[…] to produce more ambitious and challenging works. At the same time, these artists are building a more collaborative relationship with their consumer: working together, audiences can process more story information than previously imagined" (96). This describes exactly the practices discussed above regarding the various options audiences have available to explore and keep up with the MCU.

That this practice was observed as early as 2006 means that Marvel Studios did not create the practice and the means for fans to spread their media, but they were among the first to truly capitalize on the media saturated landscape of the 21st century with respects to blockbuster filmmaking. In summary, the business model of Marvel Studios operates by,

1) Creating multiple jumping-on points for audiences
2) Mitigating confusion by not relying too heavily on the interconnectedness of their movies to tell the story of self-contained movies
3) Benefitting from its position in popular culture such that audiences are, to some degree, aware of the events and characters populating the MCU, thus granting enough comprehension as to not alienate audiences.
4) Relying on enough audience participation that, when certain movies do require knowledge of past movies, audiences are and can be expected to "do their homework".
    a. This is a tactic used in a minority of cases, and only truly feasible because,
    b. contemporary audiences have immense access to information on the MCU.
5) The intense audience engagement the MCU creates assists in the PR of Marvel Studios, which ensures they frequently are mentioned in discourse of and on popular culture, which in turn enhances the effect of spreading awareness and interest through cultural osmosis.

All of this only explains how and why the MCU works from a business perspective. However, it is evident that the MCU consistently connects with audiences emotionally, otherwise the level of engagement just discussed would not occur. So what is it that drives audiences to keep up with the MCU? And where lie the sources of enjoyment?

Spectacle and Novelty: The Enjoyment of the MCU

Discerning why global audiences have become so infatuated with the MCU is a question with no single answer. Especially since the MCU contains individual film series that vary in their number of followers based upon their box office. The take-away from this is that each movie must be analyzed on a case-by-case basis to ascertain what made it a success. To determine why no movie in the MCU has been a commercial failure and why individual films have reached the upper echelons of commercial mega-success is therefore well beyond the scope of this. What I will try to illuminate is the unique appeal that the MCU offers – the outstanding qualities that Marvel Studios has been the first to offer. These unique qualities are still loadbearing in terms of propelling the MCU to the heights of success that it has achieved, but it should be kept in mind that there is no silver bullet answer that can unveil why the MCU is so successful. The unique filmmaking quality that Marvel Studios has pioneered is something that transmedia storytelling have previously offered, but in the case of the MCU movies it has been achieved with one medium. Naturally, to understand how the MCU does this, it must first be understood how transmedia narratives create engagement.

In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins explores how much *The Matrix* franchise as a transmedia narrative demanded of its audiences by expecting them to understand and maintain understanding of the franchise's complex mythology; this demand took the form of what Jenkins describes as a transmedia narrative, which he defines as a story that unfolds over multiple media platforms, with each text adding meaning to the greater whole. In fact, Jenkins cites the Wachowskies as always having had the ambition of spreading *The Matrix* across multiple media, with each element adding to a

compelling whole worth more than the sum of its parts (100-101). As an example, Jenkins describes how *The Last Flight of Osiris*, an animated short, features a suicide mission where the crew of the Osiris attempts to deliver a warning of an attack to the characters aboard the Nebuchadnezzar (i.e. to the protagonists of the movie series). At the end of the story, the message is preserved but not sent, but the first mission in the video game *Enter the Matrix* has the player pick up the message and deliver it to the Nebuchadnezzar. This culminates in the message appearing in the opening scene of *The Matrix Reloaded* with the title of the message being "The Last Transmission of the Osiris" (ibid). Each text (i.e. the animated short, the video game, and the movie) is self-contained and potentially a fulfilling experience for consumers. However, avid fans get to feel especially rewarded, as the message that appears in *The Matrix Reloaded* carries more meaning if one understands the impressive undertakings it took for it to end up where it did.

Jenkins focuses on transmedia storytelling, and while, as Rauscher points out, the MCU is a transmedia narrative, the enjoyment Jenkins describes can also be applied to the main films in the MCU. Each movie is a self-contained narrative, but each of them add to a greater whole, and fans who pay attention are rewarded in various ways with elements of the film which is "just for them". That is to say, the ways each MCU movie adds to a greater whole creates enjoyment in the same way that a transmedia narrative can. What remains to be explored is then just exactly how the enjoyment manifests. With those qualifiers in mind, it should now be possible to highlight the unique appeal of the MCU. Overall, I hold that there are three unique sources of enjoyment to be found in the non-linear serialized storytelling that the MCU offers.

The Enjoyment of Anticipation

Stork has analyzed how the MCU creates enjoyment of anticipation, both in terms of how this has been a conventional means of appeal for mainstream comics, how it was the appeal intentioned by the head of Marvel Studios, Kevin Feige, and how it presented something that was powerfully

novel in the cinematic landscape. However, Stork does overlook the appeal that the knowledge of a team-up movie might have on the stand-alone movies. *Captain America: The First Avenger* is a self-contained story detailing how Steve Rogers managed to turn the tide of war in favor of the allies during WWII, but the final scene has him waking up from cryostasis in the 21st century. Fore-knowledge about *The Avengers* during the movie can create excitement as to what it might be like for Steve Rogers to meet Tony Stark, but as the movie ends and the stage has been set for the meeting, audiences are further invited to speculate what it might be like when Steve Rogers meets the other characters in the MCU. What does the humble soldier from WWII say to the arrogant and self-armed civilian, Tony Stark? How will the soldier react to meeting the Norse god of thunder in the flesh? Musings about such future events are a new-fangled feature, but by the sheer power of their novelty it is easy to overlook the prerequisites for such engagement to be successful. If *Captain America: The First Avenger* did not connect with audiences and no one cared about the character of Steve Rogers, then no one would feel excitement about the prospect of seeing said character meet other characters. As the roster of characters continue to expand, this source of enjoyment grows greater, as there is more and more room to speculate and anticipate how various characters and events might bounce off one another. The MCU movies incorporate more and more team-ups and thereby grant payoffs to the anticipation created by other movies.

The Enjoyment of Rewarded Loyalty

As I have pointed out already, while the MCU does feature interconnected stories, few of the individual movies require a hardcore dedication from audiences in order to be understood. This is especially the case for phase 1 and 2, though seemingly less and less the case as the MCU continues to expand. Even then, if people are interested, it is easy to catch up via the internet. Even if people are not especially interested, they are likely aware of bits and pieces of the MCU via cultural osmosis. Naturally, some confusion will occur for some moviegoers, but in most cases the MCU does not

require audiences to keep track of every franchise. However, if dedicated upkeep with the twists and turns of the MCU are not "required reading", why is it some fans engage in every franchise that exists within the MCU?

The answer lies in the fact that having kept up with the MCU grants viewers tiny sparks of recognition, which means viewers can feel rewarded for having kept up with the other movies. For example, in *The Avengers*, Dr. Selvig (Stellan Skarsgaard) tells Nick Fury that the tesseract is harmless as it only emits low levels of gamma radiation, to which Fury candidly responds, "that can be harmful" (Whedon, 2012, 00:03:23-00:03:34). This banter about gamma radiation and Fury's insistence that it can be harmful is a non-overt reference to the fact that Bruce Banner became the Hulk because of exposure to gamma radiation. People who are unfamiliar with what is referenced are not necessarily even made aware of the fact that they are missing a reference, while people who saw *The Incredible Hulk* (Leterrier 2008) or just have general knowledge about the Hulk are awarded a joke. In a similar vein, Thor in *Thor Ragnarok* mutters "damn you, Stark" as he is forced to identify himself as "Point Break" to gain access to the computer of the Stark-made vehicle, the quin jet (Waititi, 2017, 01:13:45-01:14:14). This is a reference to Tony Stark nicknaming Thor "Point Break" in *The Avengers* in the aftermath of the two characters' skirmish with one another (Whedon, 2012, 00:54:05-00:00:54:08). Thor's attempt to access the quin jet is still funny on its own, as he goes through various attempts to identify himself to the computer and becomes especially insistent on being recognized as "strongest avenger"; the reference of "point break" may be lost on audiences who have not seen *The Avengers* or who do not remember the specific scene referenced, but it does not outright hinder enjoyment of *Thor Ragnarok* while dedicated fans feel rewarded for having kept up and get a joke made just for them. The examples provided are all movies in the MCU that do not reference their own direct predecessors, which exemplifies why keeping up with the entirety of the MCU feels rewarding. What

is more, once someone has felt rewarded for keeping up, they are more likely to try continuing getting that reward, which creates incentive for watching all MCU films.

Of course, these call-backs also extend beyond the realm of jokes. Ant-man shows up to assist Captain America's team in *Captain America: Civil War* and, in this case, people who saw *Ant-man* do not get a joke, but a feeling that the scope of the MCU movies are greater than other movies. This increase of scope occurs because the characters inhabit a world which feels large and more populated as even stand-alone movies incorporate other characters. *Captain America: Civil War* is specifically about the fate of the characters in this world, as the Avengers risk being torn apart as a team. Ant-man's presence serves as a reminder of how far-reaching this world is and, thus, what dramatically hangs in the balance as the narrative of *Captain America: Civil War* unfolds feels greater because the world it takes place in feels larger and more vivid.

The Enjoyment of Change's Improved Impact

It is no secret that, throughout human history, a common method to make a satisfying story is to ensure that a change occurs over the course of the narrative; a day is saved, villains are thwarted, characters have learned lessons and grown as people. Ancient greek theatre could overall be divided into two genres/structures: either the protagonist loses a negative character trait or acquires a positive one and is rewarded or the protagonist maintains a negative character trait and is punished - the story is categorized as a comedy in the former case and a tragedy in the latter. Regardless of what genre was employed, a change still happened: either a protagonist grew as a person or their lives were ruined by the events of the story (Sommerstein 1-32). This structure is not just limited to the ancient Greeks; Jospeh Campbell's monomyth theory, which attempted to uncover the underlying story structure of (virtually) all myths, has the change of the hero as he/she return home as a pivotal element of the structure (Leeming). Essentially, a self-contained story with a character arc and/or a change in the world can lend itself to a satisfying experience, but what the MCU brings to the table is having said

change feel more impactful and meaningful. At the end of *Iron Man*, Tony Stark has become Iron Man, which leaves room for excitement for the future adventures he might have. This is, naturally, not new and has been a common practice ever since Hollywood discovered the value in leaving movies open for sequels.

Where the real game changer comes in, is how the changes that occur in individual MCU movies might spill over into other franchises. *Captain America: Civil War* was described by contributors as "avengers 2.5" likely since the movie heavily features Avengers and has the fate of said team as the central dramatic tension of the story (Romano). At the end of *Captain America: Civil War* the Avengers are effectively split in two and a new status quo is made for the universe. This status quo carries over to movies like *Ant-man and The Wasp* where the main characters' legal issues, which exist because of the events of *Captain America: Civil War*, form part of the obstacles they must overcome. Much in the same way that empathy for a character, formed over the telling of a narrative, can lend dramatic weight to the death of said character, *Captain America: Civil War* has more impact to the fracturing the Avengers, as audiences have build a relationship to the idea and assembly of this team over 12 previous movies. This impact can feel even greater as the narrative universe continues to unfold and exist in the form of other films, which means the change will impact more stories than *Captain America: Civil War* itself, thereby leaving a new status quo for future movies to explore. This is partly connected with the enjoyment of anticipation, with the difference being that this is not just a matter of anticipation, but also a matter of immediate emotional pay-off as world-changing consequences are magnified by virtue of impacting more stories and more characters than "just" the ones that appear on-screen.

This is a dramatic tool that becomes easier and easier to use as the MCU continues to expand. *Captain America: Civil War* can foster events that impact the MCU by virtue of almost being an *Avengers* movie, but at this point Marvel Studios has created a widespread fanbase who are invested

in the fate of the MCU's world as a whole. That means that stand-alone movies can also impact the status quo, which registers as an even more powerful narrative change via the mechanics already explored. For example, *Black Panther* tells a self-contained story about T'challa (Chadwick Boseman) and the fictional nation of Wakanda; T'challa must ascend to the throne of Wakanda and learn to face the errors his own culture made in the past, with this change manifesting in Wakanda abolishing its isolationist policies, revealing its technological supremacy to the world, and endeavoring on international philanthropic missions. T'challa's personal journey and the grand consequences it has in his own narrative can make for a satisfying story in and of itself. The impact of said story feels even greater for MCU fans, as the change impacts the world beyond one movie, and instead, potentially, impacts all future movies in the MCU.

Building Worlds: A Newly Understood Human Instinct

The three points touched upon were meant to elucidate how the MCU fosters a unique sense of enjoyment with respects to blockbuster cinema. Overall, this unique enjoyment rests upon the fact that each movie either takes part or is expected to take part in a greater whole which creates both anticipation, greater emotional impacts, and a sense of ownership through details offered to loyal fans. However, engagement in worldbuilding has in recent years been placed under greater scrutiny. Mark Wolfe has remarked on the absence of critical studies into worldbuilding and tried to mend this gap. To wit, Wolfe points to research that shows how worldbuilding is practically instinctual for humans and carries various evolutionary benefits (4). Additionally, Wolfe also addresses how the popularity of imaginary worlds has been on the rise for a while now, stating,

> "Science Fiction and Fantasy have been major mass-market publishing genres for several decades now, and digital special effects technology has renewed both genres in cinema. Many of the top-grossing movies of all time take place in secondary worlds (such as Middle-earth, Hogwarts Academy, and the Star Wars galaxy)" (13).

That is to say that the MCU has not sprung suddenly into existence, but rather came into being as an evolution of the engagement which was already seen in worlds such as Middle Earth and the Star Wars galaxy.

Wolfe can also assist in explaining why the critical apparatuses have trouble dealing with the growing interest in worldbuilding:

> "Whereas critics tend to be more interested in traditional categories like acting, dialogue, character development, and story for their critiques, audiences are often more concerned with the overall experience, especially of the world that they are being asked to enter vicariously" (13).

While Wolfe only addresses a potential gulf between general audiences and critics, he does touch upon an issue of the enjoyment of visiting imaginary worlds, which critics seem to take for granted. Essentially, scholars and critics might actually have the tools to delve in and analyze imaginary worlds, but per Wolfe's opinion (at least as stated in 2014), such analysis is underrepresented (2). This can also extend towards explaining genre confusion: the MCU has broadly been categorized as superhero movies, but, as I have attempted to showcase, it represents the latest iteration of a phenomenon, which at this point has grown to become a genre of its own.

A New Genre: Worldbuilding Cinema

The success of Marvel Studios has already created copycats. Given the advantage some comic book source material has for being adapted into cinematic story worlds, Warner Bros. are using their rights to DC characters to maintain the DCEU as well as trying to get their monsterverse of the ground, while Universal tried to re-launch its shared universe of horror characters by creating Dark Universe (which, in moment of writing, appears to be defunct). This type of narrative has yet to get a name with widespread usage, so, for the time being, it will be referred to as "worldbuilding cinema".

The listed examples create a sample size of four, which is rather little to establish a genre. All the same, I will attempt to define this genre, though it is worth baring in mind that these genre conventions apply to the collection of texts as a whole, and not the individual movies; as has been established, the individual movies themselves can easily belong to different genres.

Conventions of Worldbuilding Cinema

1) **Each movie exists or intends to exist in a shared narrative universe with other movies**

This is the bare minimum required for the genre to emerge. Dark Universe only managed to include *The Mummy* (Kurtzman 2017), but the movie intended to create excitement of anticipation, for example via references to Jekyll and Hyde. Comedies and horror movies are defined as genres by their intentions to induce certain emotions but failing to do so does not exclude them for their respective genres. A comedy that fails to produce a laugh does not seize being a comedy. Instead, it is simply considered a bad comedy for failing to fulfil its intent. The Dark Universe is included as part of worldbuilding cinema via the same premise of intention.

2) **Each movie expands and/or advances the narrative universe**

Iron Man 2 and *Thor: The Dark World* (Taylor 2014) are often derided as some of the worst and least consequential MCU movies. Nevertheless, they still introduced elements that carrie over into other movies. *Iron Man 2* introduced Black Widow, who went on to become an Avenger, and *Thor: The Dark World* placed a disguised Loki on Asgard's throne, which had to be dealt with in *Thor Ragnarok.*

3) The individual movies feature fantastic elements

"Fantastic elements" in this context is meant as elements pertaining to sci-fi, fantasy, or horror. The reason worldbuilding tends to include such elements is likely because it makes it easier to raise the stakes of the world going forward, while also facilitating the possibility of mixing elements that have hitherto not been mixed before. *The Avengers* exemplifies this perfectly: an alien army threatens Earth (making for raised stakes) while the Norse god of thunder becomes friends with a WWII super soldier (making for novelty).

4) The individual movies can vary in genre

This represents the sticking points that was established in steps 1 and 2 of the analysis. Trying to apply genre theory to the MCU, or otherwise characterizing it as "superhero" or "comic book movies", carries nothing but communicative value. In the best of cases, these labels carry no analytical value, and, at worst, they create confusion as to why these "superhero movies" are not going through the often-observed lifecycles of popular genres. Jenkins describes the power of the cult movie as, not needing "[…] to be coherent: the more different directions it pushes, the more different communities it can sustain and the more experiences it can provide, the better" (98). Although Jenkins is analyzing cult movies, this applies to the MCU perfectly, and this ability to so broadly appeal and yet still create incentive to watch everything is a key component to its success. To wit, *Ant-man* is a heist movie and *Guardians of the Galaxy* is a space opera; each offers different appeals, but both exist within the MCU and up-coming team-ups create incentive to watch everything.

5) Individual movies have different protagonists, settings, and focus points.

This is the element that differentiates worldbuilding cinema from film series such as *Harry Potter* or *Lord of the Rings*. *Harry Potter* follows the same protagonist and builds towards the same conflict with Voldemort in each movie. *Lord of the Rings* has a wide collection of characters, but the story is

ultimately about the destruction of the one ring, which forms the central focus point. In contrast, *Captain America: The First Avenger* was always a planned part of the MCU, yet it mostly takes place before all other movies in phase 1 by virtue of being a WWII movie. *Guardians of the Galaxy* hardly features Earth as a setting, which contrasts to all other MCU movies made at the time of its release. More importantly, each film series within the MCU has its own protagonist, which creates different focus points and different dramatic struggles for each movie.

Some grey areas do appear due to the introduction of this convention: are *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* retroactively part of worldbuilding cinema as all these have prequels focusing on different time periods and different protagonists? Elements that might exclude them is the low number of different protagonists within these series, how each new series has multiple films but with the same dramatic focus point, and the fact that they were not made with the intent of being worldbuilding cinema. That having been said, no genre is without grey areas, and the evolution seen with these film series may very well be an attempt to mimic the success of the genre paved by the MCU.

6) Worldbuilding Cinema Differentiates Itself from Transmedia Narratives by Focusing on Interconnected Cinematic Outings

The types of enjoyment the MCU offers have been offered by other franchises which have been turned into transmedia narratives; what makes the MCU unique is that the interconnectedness and enjoyment of said interconnectedness can be achieved via simply watching the movies. For the *Matrix* franchise, hardcore fans can experience the enjoyment of rewarded loyalty by being familiar with how *The Last Flight of the Osiris*, *Enter the Matrix* and the opening scene of *The Matrix Reloaded* are all interconnected. However, as Jenkins points out, compared to how many people watch movies, video game fans and comic book readers constitute niche audiences (96); by extension, this means

that people who have seen *The Last Flight of the Osiris*, played *Enter The Matrix* and coupled these texts to the opening scene of *The Matrix Reloaded* constitute a minority of a minority. Jenkins also remarks that Lucas Films have had similar success in using transmedia to spread *Star Wars* and *Indiana Jones*. *The Matrix*, *Star Wars*, and *Indiana Jones* each have their movies as their central flagships, with the other transmedia texts serving to add to these and rewarding particularly attentive fans. As Mittell phrases it for TV operating as transmedia narratives,

> "[…] the emphasis still remains on generating high ratings to generate the majority of revenues used to fund both television and its associated forays into transmedia storytelling. The industrial edict to protect and strengthen the core business of watching commercial television creates a creative imperative as well: any television-based transmedia must protect the "mothership," (295-296).

The same logic can be applied to transmedia narratives with movies as their centerpiece, as exemplified by how *The Last Flight of the Osiris* and *Enter the Matrix* orbit and ultimately add meaning to *The Matrix Reloaded*.

While the MCU is also a transmedia narrative, worldbuilding cinema operates by offering the same type of enjoyment as transmedia narratives but solely through the medium of movies. For example, the opening scene of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* shows the Avengers fighting HYDRA over control of Loki's scepter. How the Avengers came to know that the scepter was at this HYDRA facility is neither explained nor important to the plot, but hardcore MCU fans can piece together that the Avengers were assisted in finding the scepter by the characters on the TV show *Agents of SHIELD*. In that example, the MCU offers a transmedia narrative with *Agents of SHIELD* "protecting the mothership" that is the MCU movie. As discussed previously, similar rewards can be found via merely watching the MCU movies. All MCU movies, and their respective individual franchises, act as "the

mothership" (or, perhaps more appropriately, the "mother armada"). It is true that stand-alone movies build-up to *Avengers* films, but *Avengers* films serve just as much to strengthen the stand-alone movies. Worldbuilding cinema can therefore be said to offer a similar type of enjoyment that previous transmedia narratives have offered, as the genre has evolved from transmedia narratives such as *Star Wars* and *The Matrix*. However, the MCU makes experiencing interconnected narratives a more central appeal in and of itself and has succeeded in doing so by lowering the requirements for obtaining said reward. Instead of being obtained via sifting through different media platforms and consuming potentially hundreds of hours of media, the reward can be gained via watching feature length blockbusters.

"World-building Cinema": A Term with Analytical value

With the term "World-building cinema" established, it could beg the question, "what is the point of this label?". To wit, I will revisit the purpose of genre theory. Genre is applied analytically in order to:

1) Discover methods for broadly categorizing portfolios of films
    a. This being accomplished by the films sharing narrative patterns that may themselves be analyzed
2) Develop conceptions of genre categories that do not clash conventional usage of genre terminology. Indeed, the most preferred outcome is for the terminology to compliment the conventional usage.
3) Obtain means by which we can explain audience engagements with films; either on an individual basis for movies, with analysis rooted in expectations arising from genre conventions, or in broad terms, with focus on why certain narrative patterns become successful at any given instance.

Point 1) is achieved to the fullest as the definition given to worldbuilding cinema easily allows categorizing the MCU, the DCEU, Dark Universe and Monsterverse as members of this new-fangled category. There is also room to explore how this genre may be attempting to develop from other pre-existing material such as the non-saga *Star Wars* movies which are currently working on fleshing out the *Star Wars* universe. Furthermore, there is the possibility of exploring how the interconnected narratives themselves may develop narrative patterns over time.

Building on the understanding of these narrative patterns, point 3) is also achievable under the presented definition of worldbuilding cinema. Not only is it possible to analyze how and why engagement is created by interconnected movies, but we can also analyze how the interconnectedness can alienate audiences when applied poorly. In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins argues that *The Matrix* franchise was a flawed experiment in that its application of transmedia storytelling was interesting, but likely so new that no one was able to tell if it was a "good" example of transmedia storytelling (94). Specifically, Jenkins discusses how critics were likely alienated because they reviewed "[…] the film and not the surrounding apparatus" (ibid 104). From this, we can gleam that overreliance on story elements from disparate, yet interconnected texts can serve to alienate audiences, which may be exactly what doomed Dark Universe and why the DCEU has been struggling to keep afloat. *Batman V. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Snyder 2015) has an extended dream sequence, where Batman fights a superman regime on a post-apocalyptic Earth (01:04:52-01:09:54). As the sequence ends, a character, who appears to be the Flash (Ezra Miller), shows up and warns Bruce of events to come. This sequence appears to be for the purpose of set-ups for future events, but they are not paid off in *Batman V. Superman: Dawn of Justice*. It is not uncommon for worldbuilding cinema to set up events that will be explored in later movies, but with a sequence that runs 5 minutes long and which is full of references and foreshadowing that go nowhere in the movie itself can be alienating to audiences, and it likely contributed to the critical pandering of *Batman V. Superman: Dawn of Justice*. Indeed, the

movie may be said to be straining under overreliance of the genre conventions of worldbuilding cinema to foster comprehension, which, in part, explains why the movie was so divisive.

The only problem worldbuilding cinema suffers from, with respects to the purposes of genre theory is point 2), as the term does not have, nor is not likely to gain, widespread usage. However, two aspects may serve to mitigate this issue. Firstly, the genre at hand is so new that only four definite examples of it currently exist. Genre terminology takes time to become adopted, as the conventions are developed and established. Secondarily, a special exception may need to be employed for this genre. Marvel Studios and Warner Bros. are currently the only studios attempting worldbuilding cinema, meaning the genre is inhabited mostly by comic book characters. Given Western culture's inability to properly process American comic books (as discussed during step 2), the label of "superhero movies" is likely not going anywhere, especially since terminology, once adopted, is hard to roll back. Besides, the term "superhero movie" serves a communicative function adequately, so it is unlikely that the circumstances for common usage will foster a need for change. However, beyond common usage, scholars also use the term "superhero movie" to an analytical detriment, which a distancing from the term "superhero movie" and "comic book movie" can assist to mitigate. Hereto I offer the label of "worldbuilding cinema" as a tool with which the MCU phenomenon may be understood.

Conclusion

The purpose of this thesis has never been to eliminate the usage of the term "superhero" pertaining to the MCU and Hollywood blockbusters in general. As has been stated previously, when used in casual conversation, the term communicates that a commonly understood portfolio of films is being discussed and it thereby serves an adequate communicative purpose. Besides, the MCU does contain movies that fit comfortably within the confines of the superhero genre; both the first *Iron Man* and *Spider-man: Homecoming* (Watts 2017) feature semantic and syntactical elements that are central to the superhero genre. Rather, the issue I have tried to highlight is how fitting the MCU movies into a single genre category in terms of semantic and syntactical conventions does, from an analytical perspective, damage to the overall understanding of the phenomenon that is the MCU. The expected end for the supposed superhero genre's lifecycle still seems far away, as *Avengers: Endgame* has broken box office records and the DCEU gradually appears to be releasing more successful movies. The solution I have proposed to this genre's unusually long lifetime has been to look at the MCU through an expanded lens. While I have nascently attempted to explain the MCU as the torchbearer of a new genre, it is worth bearing in mind that film genre theory has, so far, not needed to account for film series the like of which Marvel Studios has pioneered. If the goal is to fit all MCU movies within the same genre, conventional genre theory would try to find commonalities in the MCU movies and give them a genre label based on the aspects they have in common. The result of grouping movies as disparate as the MCU movies is either reductionism or loss of explanatory power. By contrast, worldbuilding cinema acts as a meta-genre. It can describe the genre conventions the MCU movies operate under as a collective whole and thereby it avoids the challenges conventional application of genre theory encounters when it is applied to the individual MCU movies.

What can also be explored via the introduction of worldbuilding cinema is if the reign of the Hollywood superhero did not end about a decade ago. Burton and Schumacher's *Batman* films appear

to have created a rise and fall in the superhero genre. The genre was then revitalized via Rami's *Spider-man* in 2002 culminating in the its peak with *Iron Man* and *The Dark Knight* and diminishing returns hereafter with outings such as *Hancock* (Berg 2008) and *Green Hornet*. Indeed, part of the DCEU's issue in launching itself with *Man of Steel* (Snyder 2013) and *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* may have been that the culture was burnt out on the grim superhero fare which Nolan offered in his *Dark Knight* trilogy. Unwitting, the expected genre lifecycle of superheroes may already have taken place, all the while unremarked and unnoticed by cultural observers.

How useful "worldbuilding cinema" will be as a label going forward is currently unknown. The MCU stands at a tipping point, as several storylines have been concluded in *Avengers: Endgame*, and whether the franchise can succeed past the departure of most of its original stars is up in the air. It is also uncertain whether the various franchises that are attempting to mimic the approach of Marvel Studios will continue and eventually reach a more stable kind of success or if these attempts will also go the way of the Dark Universe. All in all, it has yet to be revealed if worldbuilding cinema, by virtue of being a meta-genre, is more immune to the conventionally expected lifecycle of genres and can thereby become a stable new standard of Hollywood filmmaking. Naturally, it is also possible that the genre will fall from its current position but not vanish completely. Westerns are nowhere near as popular as they once were, but that does not mean that all production of westerns has completely seized. Worldbuilding cinema may, by the same token, be something that sees regular occurrence on the same level as, for example, action and science-fiction movies. Whatever the future may hold, worldbuilding cinema can both explain what has happened on the Hollywood blockbuster scene for the past decade, as well as explain what various studios are currently trying to accomplish. For now, while the future of worldbuilding cinema is uncertain, the past can be decluttered, and all that is left is to see what worlds Hollywood blockbusters will explore in the future.

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