

Comic Book Takeover: The Ubiquitous Influence of the Medium in Hollywood

The Marvel *Transmedia* Universe and Quality/Cult

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Since the release of Jon Favreau's *Iron Man* in 2008, Marvel Comics and their filmmaking wing Marvel Studios have undertaken what can be considered one of the largest efforts in cinematic world building yet. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has grown from a handful of actors reprising their roles in cameos in post-credit sequences to suggest some level of interconnectedness between Marvel films properties, to enormous multi-character crossover events such as Joss Whedon's *The Avengers* in 2012 and its upcoming sequels. Since *The Avengers*, which was considered the conclusion of "phase one" of Marvel's ever expanding plans for pop-cultural domination, Marvel has moved full steam ahead with sequels for its established heroes, as well as putting into production films which will introduce more of the Marvel Comics lineup of superheroes (at least whose rights are not still in the hands of Sony Pictures or other companies). In addition the MCU has also expanded to include television programs, prompting me to refer to it for the purpose of this paper as the Marvel *Transmedia* Universe (MTU).

In maintaining the canonical interconnectedness of this media universe, strict narrative and stylistic guidelines must be adhered to, so that while separate directors, writers and producers will craft each new film release, in-world consistency must be maintained. This has lead critics to accuse Marvel of a sort of aesthetic whitewashing of its properties. While each new film has some creative flavor of its (often "edgy") respective director, the tone, content and style remains homogenous with the rest of the MCU's output. This has already continued beyond the cinema, and onto the television screen; *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* carries over the tropes of high action and comic irreverence of its filmic predecessors, albeit with a somewhat low-rent version of the bright glossy aesthetic of these drastically higher budget installments of the canon.

Recently, as is the primary interest of this paper Marvel and NetFlix announced a succession of superhero programs. They will star the Marvel heroes: Daredevil, Jessica Jones, Luke Cage and Iron Fist, who will then join together in their own crossover event, the *Defenders*. Unlike the broad canvas of film, or the easily malleable ABC network, NetFlix has to some degree already defined its own unifying aesthetics, types of content and style with its recent output of HBO/AMC-competing Quality short series' *House of Cards* and *Orange is the New Black*. As explosion-filled or punch-up-happy as Marvel's films can be, they are very much PG-13 entertainment, whereas NetFlix trades in "mature" drama programming. NetFlix wouldn't shy away from characters representing marginalized or underrepresented types of characters, but the MTU might. If the characters chosen to feature are any indication (for example, Daredevil's girlfriend is a former pornographic actress and drug addict and a key element of Jessica Jones' character is her period of

sexual slavery) some level of 'rawness' will be presented, but then how will this mesh with the squeaky clean narratives of the broader MTU. Does Thor have an opinion on sexual violence? How will the more fantastical elements of the greater MTU come into play on the small screen? Will Daredevil try to prosecute low level thugs in a Hell's Kitchen that has only recently been invaded by aliens? How will these more personal narratives perfect for television feel important to the audience when just a starship ride away a talking raccoon is guarding our entire galaxy.

Whether or not the results of these smaller-screen superheroes' programs are deemed successful by audiences, critics and executives, what will remain interesting is what they "look" like and how they fit into the larger MTU and Marvel's future plans. What we know is that the properties chosen are amongst the more adult-orientated and obscure of Marvel's comic book output, some from the niche MAX R-rated imprint. This suggests an attempt to channel a less mainstream or "cult" appeal than the broadly accessible Marvel movie franchises. At the same time the choice to partner with NetFlix to adapt these properties (as opposed to ABC for *Agents of Shield* and the in production prequel *Agent Carter*) suggests a desire to tap the Quality drama market traditionally ruled by cable networks such as HBO and AMC, and in which NetFlix has made impressive inroads in thanks to *House of Cards* and *Orange is the New Black*. Now as Catherine Johnson's ideas of Quality/Cult suggest, television creators can, have and continue to combine these two niche styles into coherent programs. What I am interested in, and put forward to this panel to discuss further, is if and how Marvel and NetFlix might coherently combine the "high class" style of Quality television drama, the intense and anti-mainstream fandom of cult media, with the broad-appeal, definitively mainstream Marvel film world?