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## Marvel Makes Films.

### *The Shared Universe* as a New Trend in Hollywood Cinema

*Ant-Man* (directed by Peyton Reed), the twelfth part of the film series featuring superheroes called the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), premiered in July 2015. It has already been made public that Marvel Studios will be adding more elements to their profitable franchise for at least a few years to come. The studio's plans include two to three new releases per year, and, as the studio announces, completing the next projects will go on till the end of the second decade of the 21st century (Cecchini 2015).

The enormous financial success of the Marvel blockbusters along with the legions of devoted fans have led to a new fashion in the Hollywood cinema: production studios aspire to have their own *shared universe* modelled on the Marvel standard – an extensive, fictional universe which serves as a setting for a series of films not necessarily closely related to each other.

Warner Bros. studios, together with DC Comics publishing house, which belongs to the same corporation (Time Warner), started building their own shared universe known as the DC Extended Universe with the film *Man of Steel* (2013, dir. Zack Snyder). The magical world of Harry Potter will also expand – a new film trilogy, unrelated in plot to the main series, is in development. Universal, on the other hand, having no rights to famous superheroes, made use of the catalogue of classic monsters and decided to create a Monster Universe around them. The first film of the series is *Dracula Untold* (2014, dir. Gary Shore). These are just a few examples of the Hollywood studios' plans, selected from numerous press reports (Collinson 2015, Parrish 2015).

It is almost certain that in the upcoming years big-budget cinema industry will follow suit and adopt the shared universe aspect, so it is worth becoming familiar with the features of this strategy. And the best way to approach this is by analysing its flagship example – the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

### *The shared universe* – an outline of the issue

*The shared universe* is a concept that has developed best in the comic books published by the two largest companies in the industry: Marvel Comics (the so-called Marvel Universe) and DC Comics (DC Universe), although earlier literary

examples can also be found. The term owes its growing popularity primarily to fandoms, i.e. fan groups of original stories, but also films and series based on the comic books issued by the previously mentioned publishing houses.

In short, a *shared universe* is a fictional world shown in books, comics, movies, serials or games, which is shaped by many creators at the same time. Their works are equivalent and complementary to each other, and the events and characters they describe are only fragments of a larger fictitious reality with its own mythology, history and laws. The authors developing the *shared universe* must take into account the events presented in other works so as not to compromise the foundations of the common world and risk its decomposition (TV Tropes 2015).

When, in the mid-20th century, critics from the “Cahiers du Cinéma” magazine introduced the auteur theory to the film discourse, they pointed to the director as the person who gives a motion picture their characteristic, recognizable style (Helman 2010). In the case of the *shared universe*, the role of the author is taken over by a producer appointed by the studio, whose role is to oversee particular projects. The director’s influence is limited – he is supposed to implement the concept mapped out by producers, and his film should be compatible with the framework developed in the series. It is the producer who determines which people will be contracted to carry out the project, the direction the series is heading, and the style it is to adopt. Therefore, a *shared universe* is not an effect of the reflection and work of an author-director, but it develops basing on the decisions of the studio and the corporate ecosystem to which it belongs.<sup>1</sup>

To indicate how the *shared universe* differs from the ordinary fictional world presented in movies we will use an example. Quentin Tarantino’s films are set in a single universe, and attentive viewers will recognize references to the director’s/screenwriter’s other works, which he has placed in his movies (Coolidge 2013). He supervises the content of the films he directs, and decides how they will be linked. He is an author in the classic understanding. His films may be produced in various studios, but the director-author retains full creative control over his works – it is he who is their linking agent.

The situation is different in the case of the *shared universe*. Individual works are created by various directors and screenwriters, and the way they are interconnected is determined by the producers and marketers. The studio keeps creative control over the production process and it is a link between particular parts of the series. Thus, although in both cases we deal with fictitious worlds created in various cinematographic works, the fundamental differences lie in the production process and business circumstances.

Copyright, which belongs to film studios, is another key issue. Most often, the studios own the licenses for film adaptations of literary works or comic books, in this way safeguarding the right to the characters or stories described there. Obviously, original projects not necessarily adapted from previously published texts,

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<sup>1</sup> The functioning of the Hollywood film-making model and corporate interdependencies have been discussed by Marcin Adamczak (2010: 29–74).

may also appear within a *shared universe*. Sometimes it comes down to bizarre situations and frictions when, for example, a particular word may not be used, or some events, core in the original text, cannot be alluded to in a film.

Unlike conventional film franchises, the *shared universe* is not limited by the chronology of events or the storyline of one character. It is the presented reality that acts as a link of the individual plots in the series, and not the characters, although their significance should not be underestimated. Consequently, the stories presented in individual episodes do not have to maintain continuity. This non-linearity allows to present events that occurred parallel to each other in successive chapters of the series. The *Star Wars* series, which currently consists of six films, may be considered an example of a conventional franchise.<sup>2</sup> Their plot can be shown chronologically on one timeline, whereas in the *shared universe* there may be many lines, and they will occasionally cross within the so-called crossovers.

An important aspect of the shared universe is the transmedia narration,<sup>3</sup> which tells stories on various media platforms, such as feature films, TV serials, computer games or related comics or books. They are all legitimate sources of knowledge about the presented reality and they all equally participate in its creation. In contrast, for example, to the *Harry Potter* series, where films and games were based on particular parts of the novel which constituted their foundation, *shared universe* narratives complement each other, instead of adapting the same story to the needs of various media.

The *shared universe* has recently been so popular in Hollywood primarily because it is a great source of income for the film studio, with minimum risk at the same time. Successive premieres of the series have become widely commented upon events in popular culture, and the characters themselves go far beyond the screens of the cinemas and home TVs. The prosumption phenomenon<sup>4</sup> occurs when fans create their own variations on movies and characters (fanfiction, music videos, graphics, etc.). Although such activities often balance on the edge of copyright infringement, they actually act to the studio's advantage in terms of both advertising and marketing, but also ramping up interest in the upcoming productions.

By diversifying the content to various media, studios are able to reach a wide audience, and further multiply their sources of income. An important aspect is also *merchandising* – i.e. the sale of toys and gadgets related to films – as well as extensive franchises, which greatly inspire interest and, hence, demand. In the

<sup>2</sup> The series consists of: *Star Wars*, 1977, directed by George Lucas, *Star Wars: Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back*, 1980, directed by Irvin Kershner, *Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi*, 1983, directed by Richard Marquand, *Star Wars: Episode I – The Phantom Menace*, 1999, directed by George Lucas, *Star Wars: Episode II – Attack of the Clones*, 2002, directed by George Lucas, *Star Wars: Episode III – Revenge of the Sith*, 2005, directed by George Lucas. Another part of the saga is coming up. It will appear in cinemas after this text is submitted for publication.

<sup>3</sup> The concept was introduced by Henry Jenkins (2007).

<sup>4</sup> The term was introduced in the academic discourse by Alvin Toffler (1997). More about contemporary prosumption and its relation to the popular culture can be found in *Prosumpcja. Pomiędzy podejściem apokaliptycznym a emancypującym* [Prosumption. Between the Apocalyptic and Emancipatory Approach] (Siuda, Żaglewski 2014).

time when film studios are merely divisions of international corporations, films often become advertising channels for other parts of the company.<sup>5</sup> Ultimately, the fictitious world has a much greater capacity for expansion than the adventures of the character, whose plot potential can be quickly exploited. This opens up an opportunity for studios to stretch in time these wide-ranging series of films that are no longer dependent on actors or creators.

## The Marvel method

The MCU is the flagship model of the *shared universe*: it is a world created on the basis of characters from comic books issued by Marvel Publishing. It currently comprises twelve feature films, five short films (added to Blu-ray releases), as well as three serials. The series is supplemented with accompanying comic books extending the storylines presented in the movies. It is this franchise, created by Marvel Studios, belonging to the Walt Disney Company, that is the very model in today's Hollywood cinematic industry, imitated by producers associated with other studios.

However, before the Marvel film studio was created, the publishing house focused on the comic book market, and licensed rights to film the adventures of its characters to other companies. As early as in 1944, in the era of the so-called film serials, adventures of Captain America produced by Republic Pictures were released in episodes and shown in movie theatres. Then Marvel's superheroes made it to television for many years, where popular – albeit kitschy – serials and films were produced, including the adventures of Spider-Man and Hulk (Dillard 2014a).

The first feature film based on characters from the Marvel Comics collection was not made until 1986. This was *Howard the Duck*, directed by Willard Huyck. The film, which was produced by George Lucas himself, turned out to be an artistic and financial flop. A comic book adaptation which was appreciated both by critics and viewers was made only in 1998. It was *Blade*, directed by Stephen Norrington, produced by Amen Ra Films and distributed by New Line Cinema. The "Golden Age of Marvel Movies" (Dillard 2014b) began with this film, and was reinforced with *X-Men* (directed by Bryan Singer, produced by 20th Century Fox) two years later. *Blade* was also the first movie licensed to an outside production company by Marvel Studios.

The division of Marvel Entertainment responsible for film production acted only as a co-producer in the first years of its operation; proper production and distribution was carried out by other companies. The situation changed in 2008 when *Iron Man* was released (directed by Jon Favreau): the first movie produced independently by Marvel Studios (Dillard 2014c). Initially, outside companies dealt with the distribution. However, in 2009 Marvel Entertainment was purchased by The Walt Disney Company and thus both the production and distribution of films could be handled by the same corporation (Marvel.com, 2009).

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<sup>5</sup> The details of the marketing system in Hollywood are discussed by M. Adamczak (2011: 39–49).

The “godfather” of the whole series is Kevin Feige – the head of Marvel Studios since 2007. We owe him the idea of transferring the universe from the comic books issued by the publishing house onto the screens in movie theatres. And it is him who, in the context of earlier considerations, can be deemed the “author” of works associated with the franchise in question.

It all started with a review of the copyright for the characters that are still in the possession of Marvel, and which have not been licensed to other companies. It turned out that although most of the most popular superheroes had been sold to other production companies, the studio retained the rights to those less recognizable ones, comprising the Avengers group<sup>6</sup>. Consequently, a decision was made to attempt a production about Iron Man. The motion picture proved successful, advancing the character of Iron Man to the list of the most popular Marvel heroes.

The scene after the final credits (so-called *aftercredits*) featured Samuel L. Jackson in the role of Nick Fury, who was telling Tony Stark (played by Robert Downey Jr.) about the Avengers initiative. The comic book fans were utterly delighted. It appeared that Marvel was setting out for something spectacular – an adaptation of a comic story that so far had seemed impossible.<sup>7</sup>

The next film was *The Incredible Hulk*, released in 2008 and directed by Louis Leterrier. Several times the film mentioned the character of Tony Stark (Iron Man) and the events presented in the previous film of the studio. And Robert Downey Jr. himself appeared in the *aftercredits*. This was one of the first, if not the very first case in the history of cinema, when a film that was neither a sequel nor a reboot referred to events presented in another production and took them into account.

The motion picture *Avengers* (directed by Joss Whedon) was released in 2012. It was preceded by the previously mentioned films about Iron Man and Hulk, as well as movies about Thor and Captain America. All these superheroes, played by the same actors (with one exception – Edward Norton was replaced by Mark Ruffalo as Hulk), appeared together on screen and created a great spectacle, which turned out to be a huge financial success of the studio. And at the same time this production put an end to the so-called “first phase” of the MCU, which received the subtitle *Avengers Assembled*.

*Ant-Man*, a film mentioned at the beginning of the article, concluded the second phase of MCU. This chapter featured the popular characters known from earlier episodes, like Iron Man, Thor and Captain America. But the audience was also presented with new superheroes: Guardians of the Galaxy and the said Ant-Man. The productions that followed confirmed Marvel’s position as a leader in the superhero cinema segment, and the MCU series itself has become the most profitable franchise in the history of the film industry (Box Office Mojo 2015).

In 2010, Marvel opened a division (Marvel Television) with a goal to produce TV serials. They are also part of the MCU, often developing subplots which originated in feature films. Three serials have been produced so far: *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*,

<sup>6</sup> I am citing the following documentary: *Marvel Studios: Assembling a Universe*, 2014, ABC Studios.

<sup>7</sup> Until then it seemed impossible, primarily due to financial reasons. There was also no idea how to fit so many iconic comic book characters into one film without marginalizing their role.

2013, and *Agent Carter*, 2015, for ABC television, as well as *Daredevil*, 2015, for Netflix. More series are being planned.

The strong position of the studio and its anchoring in Walt Disney corporate structures allowed it to openly enter into competition with other motion picture studios and consequently dominate the sector of superhero films. It started with regaining the previously sold character's copyright. In this way *Daredevil*, *Punisher* and other less prominent heroes returned to Marvel (Jackson 2013). Marvel also managed to cooperate with Columbia Pictures, part of the Sony corporation, which owned the rights to adapt the adventures of the most popular superhero of the Marvel publishing house, namely *Spider-Man*. Hence, a film which is set in the MCU will be produced by Marvel Studios, and then it will be distributed by Columbia Pictures (Fritz 2015).

Competition with the other rival on the market, 20th Century Fox, belonging to the corporation of Rupert Murdoch, has been going less "smoothly". That studio has been assembling its own shared universe based on the Marvel superheroes linked with the X-Men group; it also owns the rights to the *Fantastic Four*.

One of the contentious issues is the rights to the superhero siblings of Quicksilver and Scarlett Witch, who appeared both in the film produced by 20th Century Fox: *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, 2014, directed by Bryan Singer, and in Marvel's super-production: *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, 2015, directed by Joss Whedon. They are members of X-Men and Avengers as well, so both studios have the right to these characters. However, a problem regarding their characteristics occurred: in comic books they are mutants, children of Magneto. Yet Marvel was not allowed to mention this in their film, because the rights to the comic concept of mutants and the Magneto character are in the hands of Fox (Kendrick 2015). So Marvel decided to make use of comic books to provide their new biography, according to which they are no longer mutants but rather Inhumans (a group covered by the Marvel copyright), and their father is no longer Magneto (Steinbeiser 2015). Thus, the comic prototypes approached their film incarnations.

The competition between Marvel and 20th Century Fox has its "casualties", too. In a short time the publishing house ceased to issue comic books about the *Fantastic Four* (Schedeen 2014) and got some of its popular superheroes killed: *Wolverine* (Franich 2014) and *Deadpool* (McMillan 2014). It just so happens that the rights to these characters belong to Fox, which is preparing movies based on their adventures...

## The features of the Marvel Cinematic Universe

Although the copyright and financial aspects play a huge role in the construction of Marvel Cinematic Universe, the films themselves have developed a distinctive style and established a number of recognizable conventions.

Marvel movies resulted from transferring the format known from comic books into the medium of film and television. The most important superheroes have their own movies (or even series of movies) just as they are protagonists of their own series of comic books, occasionally appearing in a minor role in a story of

another character. Still, they meet on equal terms in large MCU crossovers, that is, in the Avengers movies.

Independent crews are responsible for various productions, so the studio is not limited by chronology and thus is able to produce successive episodes simultaneously. The stories themselves are not closely related, and only individual scenes make reference to other parts of the cycle. The essential rule is that every movie or serial must be an autonomous entity, but it also needs to fit into the common universe.

The ensuing releases of the series are scheduled for several years in advance. Such a long-term strategy helps to identify the direction in which the history of the universe is to develop. The crew responsible for making a particular film knows how to tell the story, so that it would be an introduction to the events presented in the following movies.

Due to the studio's long-term plans, actors playing the superheroes are also contracted for several productions ahead. Robert Downey Jr. has played the character of Tony Stark / Iron Man six times so far, Chris Evans has played Captain America five times, and Chris Hemsworth has been Thor four times. The importance of background characters is also growing, because they constitute an important part of the universe despite the lack of their own films. And so Samuel L. Jackson appeared as Nick Fury in seven films and a few episodes of the series Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., Clark Gregg played Agent Coulson in four feature films, two short films, and is one of the protagonists in the above mentioned serial, and Scarlett Johansson has been Black Widow four times.

The atmosphere of MCU films and their general stylistics are consistent with the trend known in Polish film studies as the Cinema of the New Adventure (Szyłak 2011: 5–19). These are great shows, full of action and humour, in which superheroes defend the world from menace. The plot usually ends with a bombastic finale when the protagonists triumph and the forces of evil are overcome. This is how MCU films follow the blockbuster strategy (Jajko 2015: 23–39).

With every new production Marvel creates genre hybrids as well, mixing well-known patterns and imageries with superhero motifs. Films about Iron Man are a variation on the science fiction cinema, productions with Thor are part of the fantasy trend, Captain America is a character from a war movie (part one) and a spy thriller (part two), The Guardians of the Galaxy is a kind of space opera, and Ant-Man is a heist movie. Therefore, the audience receives something new every time, although it fits into the generally recognizable stylistics of the series.

An integral part of each of the MCU movies is extra scenes during closing credits (*midcredits*) and after them (*aftercredits*). Representatives of the studio joke about this: "Marvel has taught viewers to stay in the cinema until the credits have rolled" (Marvel Studios: Assembling a Universe 2014). Furthermore, it has become a tradition that Stan Lee – the originator of most of Marvel's superheroes – guest stars in different roles in each film (in a so-called cameo).

MCU is also a flagship example of transmedia narration. The world is being expanded not only in feature films, but plot threads are developed in serials, short films, and related comic books. In the future, animations and video games might also be added.

## What is next?

The shared universe model, which has been developed and refined by Marvel Studios, is a high ideal for other Hollywood producers. Due to the huge profits that this business strategy brings to the studios, we can be sure that the term *shared universe* will be often heard in the years to come. This is the more so in that it is not only new series that take this direction of development, but also classic franchises are being modified to meet new standards. Certainly, viewers around the world will be given new products that they already know perfectly well.

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### The Content of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (in chronological order)

#### *Feature films*

- Iron Man*, 2008, director: J. Favreau, screenwriters: M. Fergus, H. Ostby, A. Marcum and M. Holloway, producer: A. Arad and K. Feige, USA.
- Incredible Hulk*, 2008, director: L. Leterrier, screenwriter: Z. Penn, producers: A. Arad, G. Anne Hurd and K. Feige, USA.
- Iron Man 2*, 2010, director: J. Favreau, screenwriter: J. Theroux, producer: K. Feige, USA.
- Thor*, 2011, director: K. Branagh, screenwriters: A. E. Miller, Z. Stentz and D. Payne, producer: K. Feige, USA.
- Captain America: The First Avenger*, 2011, director: J. Johnston, screenwriters: C. Markus and S. McFeely, producer: K. Feige, USA.
- The Avengers*, 2012, director and screenwriter: J. Whedon, producer: K. Feige, USA.
- Iron Man 3*, 2013, director: S. Black, screenwriters: D. Pierce and S. Black, producer: K. Feige, USA, China.
- Thor: The Dark World*, 2013, director: A. Taylor, screenwriters: C. Yost, C. Markus and S. McFeely, producer: K. Feige, USA.

*Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, 2014, directors: A. and J. Russo, screenwriters: C. Markus and S. McFeely, producer: K. Feige, USA.

*Guardians of the Galaxy*, 2014, director: J. Gunn, screenwriters: J. Gunn and N. Perlman, producer: K. Feige, USA.

*Avengers: Age of Ultron*, 2015, director and screenwriter: J. Whedon, producer: K. Feige, USA.

*Ant-Man*, 2015, director: P. Reed, screenwriters: E. Wright, J. Cornish, A. McKay and P. Rudd, producer: K. Feige, USA.

#### *Short films*

*Marvel One-Shot: The Consultant*, 2011, director: Leythum, screenwriter: E. Pearson, producer: K. Feige, USA.

*Marvel One-Shot: A Funny Thing Happened On The Way to Thor's Hammer*, 2011, director: Leythum, screenwriter: E. Pearson, producer: K. Feige, USA.

*Marvel One-Shot: Item 47*, 2012, director: L. D'Esposito, screenwriter: E. Pearson, producer: K. Feige, USA.

*Marvel One-Shot: Agent Carter*, 2013, director: L. D'Esposito, screenwriter: E. Pearson, producer: K. Feige, USA.

*All Hail the King*, 2014, director and screenwriter: D. Pearce, producer: K. Feige, USA.

#### *TV series*

*Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, 2013, producer: ABC, USA.

*Agent Carter*, 2015, producer: ABC, USA.

*Daredevil*, 2015, producer: Netflix, USA.

### Summary

#### *Marvel Makes Films. The Shared Universe as a New Trend in Hollywood Cinema*

The shared universe is a business model that is effectively gaining popularity in the Hollywood film industry. This article attempts to explain this phenomenon, as well as describe its features, advantages and disadvantages. Practical aspects are exemplified by the Marvel Cinematic Universe – a series of films produced by Marvel Studios.

### Keywords

film industry, Hollywood cinema, transmedia storytelling, media franchises, copyrights

*English translation: Anna Moroz-Darska*

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