

***You've Become Part of a Bigger Universe. You Just Don't Know it Yet:* Adaptation, Intertextuality and the Case of Total Branded Entertainment**

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Abstract

Storytelling in the 21st century demonstrates a blurring of boundaries, fluid texts, intertextual relations, media convergence, and transmedia storytelling. Power dynamics between producers/consumers are becoming more prominent due to higher audience interaction and engagement. More importantly, as this paper argues, there is an overwhelming presence of texts in Pop Culture whose stature is influenced and affected by branded entertainment in the context of total branded entertainment. Adopting a cultural studies approach, this paper attempts to theoretically combine concepts, such as chronotope (Bakhtin 1981), intertextuality (Fiske 2001), paratexts (Mittell 2014), fluid texts (Bryant 2013), and adaptation (Hutcheon 2006) in order to examine the dynamics of the branded text/context, in the origin stories of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) *Phase One*, and consider how total branded entertainment is achieved. The reason why it is important to consider the intersection of brand entertainment, adaptation, and intertextuality, is that, although they primarily demonstrate a power struggle between producers and consumers, in which the former appear to dictate the way the latter consume and interpret, alternative ways of experiencing a text are revealed in total branded entertainment. Ultimately, it is not just a narrative experience but a brand experience.

Keywords: brand identity, intertextuality, adaptation, superheroes, total entertainment.

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Contemporary pop culture entertainment consists of varied types and modes of storytelling including, although not limited to, the following: adaptations, transmedia storytelling, media franchises, reboots, and original TV series on platforms (such as Netflix and Hulu). It also includes promotional marketing, ancillary market products, merchandise, cross-media distribution, and fan communities. Storytelling is unquestionably a common denominator that ties all the aforementioned pop culture entertainment together. Storytelling, as Robert Stam notes, is the principal means humans employ to make sense of things, not only in written fiction but all the time (10). This paper argues that another feature that ties the aforementioned together—while also driving and enriching the storytelling experience—is branding and, more specifically, the intention of creating a total branded entertainment experience. It is here demonstrated how a total entertainment experience rests on being achieved at both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of intertextuality (Fiske 2001), by pushing or blurring the boundaries between storytelling and marketing via Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope (1981). Since a vast amount of pop culture entertainment falls under the category of adaptation,

elements, such as media convergence, transmedia storytelling, and paratexts, will also be taken into account.

To examine how total branded entertainment and the merging of storytelling and marketing are achieved, this paper focuses on the origin stories in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) *Phase One*. These include *Iron Man* (2008), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Thor* (2011), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), and *The Avengers* (2012). Marvel has set up their cinematic universe so that it consists of phases where the end of each phase is usually indicated by a grand superhero team-up. *Phase One* is the primary focus because it has managed to set a precedent for the entire MCU. What is more, it introduces the primary members and the origin stories of *The Avengers* (2012) film and team. One reason justifying the choice of the case study is the hybrid nature of the superhero genre, thus displaying that genre may play a role in the merging of storytelling and marketing practices to a certain extent, but is driven more by branding. Another reason is the immense popularity and ten-year-long run of the MCU, and, more importantly, the existence of certain intertextual features that appear in other branded types of entertainment. This case study is further enriched with examples of “What If” stories becoming actual “What Is” instances—inspired by Jason Mittell’s transmedia types—to offer an alternative aspect of intertextuality and further demonstrate its connection with chronotopes. Such examples demonstrate that brand entertainment is not solely associated with superhero productions, and will further present how the practices of branding and marketing observable in a blockbuster film franchise extend the concept of total branded entertainment.

The MCU beginning in 2008 with *Iron Man*, and currently having premiered its highest-grossing film yet, *Avengers Endgame* (2019),¹ consists of (but is not restricted to) interconnected films and characters, whose storylines merge in a shared universe, superhero team-ups, and guest appearances. Like most franchises, it is further complemented by ancillary market products ranging from video games to clothing, collectibles, and merchandise. On November 4, 2018, various online sites reported that the MCU is the first franchise to cross the \$5 billion mark at the North American box office (*comicbook.com*; *screenrant.com*; *imdb.com*). The superhero phenomenon is not something new, nor is Marvel the only player in the superhero entertainment sector. What sets Marvel and the MCU apart is not adaptation of comic book intellectual properties per se, but the brand treatment of the character-centered stories and the establishment of an interconnected universe; a strategy that rival companies have also implemented. As this paper will demonstrate, Marvel and the MCU have achieved total brand entertainment and they have done so by branding their intertextual practices uniquely and consistently. According to Steve Marris, total entertainment is predicated on the following notion: “If you can create an environment that is entertaining to your desired consumers and allows them to be entertained in the context of the brand, then you have an ideal form of communication with your consumer that

¹ The film has an 8.6 rating on the IMDB website and, according to Jason Guerrasio, “the movie had a record-breaking \$357.1 million domestic opening and then went on to break a whole lot more box-office record. After a rerelease, it finally topped ‘Avatar’ in becoming the world’s all-time highest-grossing movie before adjusting for inflation, with a \$2.795 billion take.”

is relevant, original, and impactful” (qtd. in Grainge 37). Adopting “the *creative* structure of a ‘mini-Disney,’” Johnson points out that Marvel’s twenty-first-century re-branding strategy places every emphasis on character (71). This is quite logical if one considers how easy it is to recall a character rather than a specific storyline or a story arc, a feature brands rely on. Branding, according to Matthew Healey, signals “the process of continuous struggle between producers and consumers to define that promise and meaning” (6). Beginning in 2000, “through a new focus on adaptation of comic books into other media” (66-67), Marvel sees itself as a producer of licensable, branded superhero intellectual properties (IPs). Another way to consider IPs is as textual identities or brand identities. By treating IPs or texts as brands, the industry appoints a specific identity via which it communicates a promise of ownership and authenticity, satisfaction, and meaning to consumers. This new focus, as Johnson explains, “first required the elimination of difference between the comic book and audiovisual versions of its characters properties,” but, at the same time, it raised the need for clarity between the subbrands in each media, thus creating tension between exigencies of standardization and product differentiation (67). Each superhero character travels across multiple media and appears in numerous versions, thus posing as brand fluid text identities where the character is the same but different.

There are two reasons why these superhero characters can travel with such ease from text to text and from medium to medium. The first reason is due to media convergence which, according to Henry Jenkins, is “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (2). Media convergence has further enabled brands to travel across media and reach both wide and niche audiences through various promotional tactics. Meanwhile, the entertainment industry predominantly works within a context of adaptation. According to Linda Hutcheon, an adaptation should be viewed as “*a formal entity or product*, indicative of an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works (7-8). For example, there are numerous adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. What is more, an adaptation can also be seen as “*a process of creation*, [where] the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation” (7-8). Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo and Juliet* (2006) is an updated recreation of Shakespeare’s play. Finally, Hutcheon stresses that adaptation be considered as a “*process of reception* [where adaptation] is a form of intertextuality” (7-8). In other words, the more versions of *Romeo and Juliet* audience members experience, the more intertextual references we can create.

The consideration of adaptation from these three perspectives can, however, be a bit complex. Hutcheon points out that “[a]n adaptation, like the work it adapts, is always framed in a context—a time and a place, a society and a culture; it does not exist in a vacuum” (142). Therefore, different contexts may also add to or affect the way a text is adapted as well as received by the audience. What is more,

[t]o experience [a work] *as an adaptation* . . . we need to recognize it as such and to know its adapted text, thus allowing the latter to oscillate in our memories with what we are experiencing. In the process, we inevitably fill in any gaps in the adaptation with information from the adapted text. (120-121)

In most cases, however, the audience may not be familiar with the source text or may choose to engage with it at a later time or not at all. This, as will be indicated later on, may affect our ability to identify and engage with intertextual markers.

Adaptations can pose as versions of a source work and present creativity on the part of the author/adaptor. John Bryant, for instance, argues that a “*work* is the sum of its versions; *creativity* extends beyond the solitary writer, and *writing* is a cultural event transcending media” (47). The notion of versions ties in with brands as well, considering the different product lines a brand may produce. To be considered equal to other texts, however, Bryant notes that “we need a broader conception of geneticism in which the notion of *work* embraces all versions of a text, including sources and adaptations, and the *creative process* is extended to include all forms of revision, both authorial and cultural” (48). Considering Bryant’s account, I see brand identity as capable of offering this proper textual legitimacy. Brand management seeks to appoint value to all its content and products. For any text, whether source material or adaptation to be considered less in quality or value would constitute a liability and cause profit loss for an entertainment industry company. This may also explain why companies like Disney are so intent on controlling or managing their brand content. Branded adaptations are becoming more prevalent. By branded adaptations, I mean cases of adaptations where the company does not just adapt an intellectual property but brands it. Nicholas Benson recently made the case for this by focusing on the Disney adaptation *The Jungle Book* (2016), where, as he claims, industrial intertextuality and corporate authorship, via textual and paratextual strategies, enabled Disney to maintain control over *The Jungle Book* text (26). This is not a new practice but one that is gaining attention due to how it affects storytelling practices in connection with issues, such as authorship and copyrights. It further points towards what Bryant notes as “cultural revision,” a term that provides an alternative way of considering adaptations but also connects them with the notion of intertextuality.

Bryant considers “cultural revision” the proper arena of *adaptation*. He sees the fluid text as being

any work that exists in multiple versions in which the primary cause of those versions is some form of revision. Revisions may be performed by originating writers, by their editors and publishers, or by readers and audiences, who reshape the originating work to reflect their desires for the text, themselves, their culture. (48)

One can see this not only in cases of film franchises and television series reboots but also in fan art and fan fiction. Bryant offers a distinction, noting that “[a]daptation [proper] is an announced

retelling of an originating text;” which is why “[a]nnounced adaptations are distinct from but related to adapted revision, [which is] a process where an originating writer or adaptor appropriates a borrowed text and, by ‘quoting’ it, essentially revises it and therefore adapts it, though in an intertextual and necessarily partial rather than comprehensive way” (48). Adaptive revision can also be seen as intertextual reference or association. What can be concluded from Bryant’s account here is that “[b]oth announced adaptation [adaptation proper] and adaptive revision [intertextual reference] are versions of the originating or borrowed text” (48-49). In the case study under examination, this element of revision can be seen in the film origin stories as well as each time a superhero is appropriated by a different narrative medium. Furthermore, Bryant explains that while adaptation is an announced retelling of an originating text that exhibits intertextuality, it is also a version of an originating text; “[w]hile versions are necessarily interconnected, they possess distinct textual identities (48-49). The MCU films display a re-working of the superhero origins, establish the *raison-d’être* of their superheroes in the cinematic timeline, and raise audience expectations towards future films and other products. In other words, while the films can be considered revised versions of their comic book counterparts, they are also distinct textual identities. Richard Reynolds (1992) explains that by retelling a superhero’s origin, new elements will emerge because the production team each time brings in their creative style that ultimately governs the reinterpretation of the character and in spite of the potential for new material occurring, continuity will be preserved. The characters will remain the same but will exhibit notable variations.

Genre pertains to the intentions of brand management to produce a commodity that adheres to certain characteristics, standards and is familiar to the audience whilst also different from other competing brands. The origin stories repeat fundamental elements of the superhero’s origin but introduce updated features and alterations to account for a shared universe and a consistent timeline. Andre Bazin argues that all genres exhibit a “‘super’ potential . . . [one that] at any stage [can] start incorporating elements that had not as yet existed in their *always emergent framework*” (qtd. in Walton 96). Such examples include Tony Stark’s origin reconceived in the era of war against terrorism with the Afghanistan backdrop instead of the 1960’s Vietnam War. Meanwhile, Captain America’s origin adheres more strictly to the 1940’s comic book story; nevertheless, in the cinematic universe, he is awakened many years later, and this affects certain aspects of the character’s cinematic development when compared to the comic books. Hulk’s origin did not have to be re-told because of Ang Lee’s *Hulk* (2003) origin account, although this film production does not belong to the MCU. Instead, *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), which does belong to the MCU, presents as an overview of the film *Hulk* (2003) in a newsreel fashion, providing a concise but brief overview of the character’s origin. *Thor* (2011) emphasizes Thor’s divine nature, Loki’s origin, and the setting of Asgard, unlike the comic book that focuses on the element of suspense and surprise, following the mystery around the character Donald Blake. According to John Fiske, genre

serves the dual needs of a commodity: on the one hand standardization and familiarity, and on the other, product differentiation. But the work of genre is more than economic, it is cultural as well Genre spells out to the audience the range of pleasures it might expect and thus regulates and activates memory of similar texts and the expectations of this one. (223-224)

While Marvel films are primarily superhero productions, they do enrich the superhero genre with origin accounts and plot-lines as well as with other types of genres, such as the spy film *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) and a type of space-opera comedy *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014).

Genres contain elements and characteristics that allow for intertextual referencing and associations. Fiske points out that in addition to being a cultural practice that grants structure and conventions (220), genres “are intertextual or even pre-textual, for they form the network of industrial, ideological, and institutional conventions that are common to both producer and audiences out of which arise both the producer’s program and the audiences’ readings” (221). As a result, genres can guide consumer audiences towards more targeted types of intertextuality if genre texts are seen as new and alternative versions, similar to how Bryant views adaptations. This also reveals that the comparison between the origin stories of the films and that of the comic books is inevitable. This comparison, according to Reynolds, is predicated on intertextual readings of superhero comics where comparisons are made amongst superheroes but also between a specific superhero and prior material concerning that character (40-41). What may prompt this type of intertextual reading even more in the case of the MCU is the utilization of Easter Eggs²—a trending term undoubtedly related to both dimensions of intertextuality—which are meant to involve audiences in uncovering the intertextual web of associations whether with past material, prior films or comic books, other films within the MCU, or by foreshadowing future productions. For instance, the Iron Man films pay tribute to the comics by incorporating the Ten Rings logo, which alludes to one of Stark’s arch-nemesis Mandarin seen in *Iron Man 3*. Other allusions include the Roxxon Corporation that repeatedly tries to kill Tony Stark in the comics. The opening scene of *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) points to Ang Lee’s *Hulk* (2003) and the name Rick Jones pays tribute to the comic book origins of the Hulk. There are various nods to the Hulk TV show, such as Lou Ferrigno as a security guard, the “Lonely Man” TV show theme song by composer Craig Armstrong, and references to the cartoon via the owner of the pizzeria, Paul Soles, who voiced Bruce Banner in the Hulk cartoon. The billboard “Journey into Mystery” is a direct reference to the title of the comics where Thor made his first appearance. The major tribute in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) is the reenactment of the comic book cover (where Captain America punches Hitler), while *The Avengers* (2012) pay tribute to the “Earth’s mightiest heroes” slogan of the comic books.

² An Easter Egg is an intentional inside joke, a hidden message, or a secret feature of interactive work. The name is used to evoke the idea of a traditional Easter egg hunt. According to the *Guinness World Record* website, the first Easter Egg to appear in a video game was in Atari’s 1977 arcade game *Starship 1*.

Aside from references to past superhero products, certain Easter Eggs draw connections between the films, thus promoting a shared cinematic universe. In *Iron Man* (2008), one of the pilots chasing Tony Stark is named Whiplash, which hints at Stark's enemy, Whiplash, in *Iron Man 2* (2010). A replica of Captain America's shield draws a direct connection with the relevant film as do the clips of Howard Stark and his keepsakes, such as a Captain America comic book. The news report segment in *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) is also featured in *Iron Man 2* (2010), thus chronologically aligning the second Iron Man with the events of the Hulk film. In *Thor* (2011), Dr. Erik Selvig offers a connection to *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) and the Hulk's character by referring to gamma radiation that immediately connects with Bruce Banner. In *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), Captain America is treated as the patriotic poster-boy featured in Captain America film reels and comic books within the film. Easter Eggs can also become marketing tools of intertextual commodities. The post-credit scenes create intertextual associations and reveal the intentions of the Marvel brand, posing as open-ended structures. In the *Iron Man* (2008), post-credits scene, Director Nick Fury emphatically asks and informs Tony Stark, "You think you're the only superhero in the world? Mr. Stark, you've become part of a bigger universe. You just don't know it yet." The placement of this scene holds a two-fold significance: narrative-wise, it informs audiences of the Avenger's team-up. It also acts as a marketing tactic announcing the film and raising expectations towards more solo superhero films as well as team-ups and cross-overs. Angela Ndalians (2004) argues that "mainstream cinema and other entertainment media are imbued with a neo-baroque poetics" (5), where

[c]losed forms are replaced by open structures that favor a dynamic and expanding polycentrism. Stories refuse to be contained within a single structure, expanding their narrative universes into further sequels and serials Film companies seek to expand their markets by collapsing the traditional boundaries and engaging in multimedia conglomerate operations. (25)

Hence, just like Tony Stark, audiences are made aware that the MCU expands the superhero narrative beyond Iron Man and film productions, pointing towards a bigger universe. What is noteworthy here is not simply the intertextual web of relations but the allusion to stories that are not able to stay contained in their distinct chronotopes.

Intertextual relations, according to Fiske, work on two dimensions: the horizontal, the relations between primary texts that are more or less explicitly linked, usually along the axes of genre, character, or content, as well as the vertical, the relations between primary text and other types of texts that refer explicitly to it, such as criticism or publicity, in other words, paratexts (219, 227). In the first case, to identify such intertextual relations one needs to be familiar with certain fictional chronotopes to a certain extent. If one, for example, has never read or seen any Marvel superhero comics or film adaptations, then, such intertextual references as the ones noted above will be lost. When it comes to the second type of intertextuality and to instances of film

and TV show reviews, however, these are meant not only to promote and critique texts but also to shed light on interesting and unique aspects of the productions. In other words, if audience members do want to learn about the narrative intertextuality or uncover the Easter Eggs in and across the MCU in order to be part of the total branded experience, then, such paratexts can be of great assistance. This type of reading and viewing is necessary (if not mandatory) in certain cases of pop culture. For example, while it may not be necessary to know that a film is an adaptation to enjoy it, having read the book may offer different insights because it poses as yet one more fictional chronotope or one more adaptive version one can draw upon. When discussing fluid texts, Bryant points out that “[t]he meaning of any adaptation is essentially a measuring of the critical distances between and among adaptive versions,” and “[w]hile versions are necessarily interconnected, they possess distinct textual identities” (48-49). The distances can be understood as Fiske’s space existing between texts, but, for the purposes of this essay, I regard them as distinct fictional chronotopes.

Bakhtin appoints the term chronotope “to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” (84). More specifically, “[i]n the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (84). In a way, each text one encounters poses as a unique fictional chronotope. He further highlights that “[w]ithin the limits of a single work and within the total literary output of a single author we may notice several different chronotopes and complex interactions among them, specific to the given work or author; it is common moreover for one of these chronotopes to envelope or dominate others” (252). One example is the TV series *Castle Rock* (2018), which interweaves Stephen King’s most iconic characters against the backdrop of a new story set in the author’s most disturbing town, with the intent of bringing King’s shared multiverse to life in a way that should, finally, cement exactly how each of his novels connects. As Brian Tallerico notes in his review, the series “doesn’t adapt any single Stephen King story directly, but instead takes place in a world of interconnected short stories and novels set within the author’s favorite creepy Maine town” (n.p.). In this series, one comes across Shawshank Penitentiary, Sheriff Alan Pangborn, the character Leanne Chambers, the casting of Bill Skarsgård as the inmate, the same actor who coincidentally plays Pennywise the Clown in the revived *It* (2017), and a host of other intertextual references to other works of Stephen King. As a result, in the fictional chronotope of this television series, one can see intertextual references to other works and, by extension, to other fictional chronotopes. What is more, this new fictional chronotope, *Castle Rock*, has brought together aspects of different prior fictional chronotopes and, in a way, has blurred the lines between each of these. Though *Castle Rock* serves as a distinct fictional chronotope in its own right, it also merges prior fictional elements into something new or at least alternative.

Bakhtin clarifies that “[c]hronotopes are mutually inclusive, they co-exist, they may be interwoven with, replace or oppose one another, contradict one another or find themselves in ever more complex interrelationships” (252). Noteworthy is the fact that “[t]he relationships

themselves that exist *among* chronotopes cannot enter into any of the relationships contained *within* chronotopes” (252). When experiencing different texts, for example, the films in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *The Shining* (1980), *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001-2003), *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), *Castle Rock* (2018-present), the *Rocky* franchise (1976, 1979, 1982, 1985, 1990, 2006), or any texts related to the Batman character, one engages with the stories but does not enter them or alter them per se. The general characteristic of these interactions is that they are *dialogic*. While the theory of intertextuality proposes that any text is necessarily considered in relation to others and that a range of textual knowledge is brought to bear upon it, Fiske advocates that intertextuality exists rather in the “space *between* texts” (219). One cannot, actually, enter “into the world represented in the work, nor into any of the chronotopes represented in it” (252). The audience and the consumers are “outside the world represented [in a fictional film or TV series], although not outside the work as a whole” (252). One can use both their interpretive skills to discuss it and our imagination to “enter” such fictional chronotopes. The world and the dialogue one engages in creates the text and chronotopes one sees represented in novels, television series, films, video games, and comic books. “Out of the actual chronotopes of our world (which serve as the source of representation) emerge the reflected and *created* chronotopes of the world represented in the work (in the text)” (253). Therefore, this dialogue, and the intertextual knowledge that accompanies it, activates the audience’s readings and understandings of texts. In a way, this displays a potential never-ending dialogue that leads to the creation of additional fictional chronotopes, which one then engages with from their position in their real chronotope, whereby one can critique, interpret, and dissect these fictional chronotopes. The entire process appears open-ended but, in a way, reflective of what one tends to see in contexts aiming at total branded entertainment.

In practice, the notion of open-ended structures is enhanced by the employment of particular Easter Eggs and occurs as a result of serial and hierarchical continuity. Intertextuality, open-ended structures, and revisionism lead to what Saige Walton characterizes as “hastening backwards and forwards to reiterate the past, while moving in unforeseen directions through regulated variance and media renewal” where everything is happening simultaneously (89-90). What is interesting to note here is how even when Easter Eggs are not intentionally placed within the narrative, fans will still search for “Easter Egg clues” in order to support their theories about what comes next in the storyline. This was avidly the case with the last season of *Game of Thrones* (2019), especially since George R. R. Martin’s final book of the series *A Song of Fire and Ice* has not been published yet. The ScreenCrush staff published an article/video on their website, where they display the Easter Eggs and references made in the Amazon TV series *The Boys* (2019). A notable observation is how more and more audiences and fans are seeking out clues across various entertainment franchises and this is influencing their degree of engagement with these projects.

By alluding to the past, re-affirming present connections as well as foreshadowing the future, Marvel demonstrates what Hans Robert Jauss, in his *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* (1982), has termed “the horizon of expectations,” a notion that “links generic production to its outside

effect on the viewer” (qtd. in Walton 91). Walton clarifies that “the continual founding/alteration of our subjective horizons occurs through ‘the relationship of the individual text to the succession of texts that forms the genre’” (88). Similarly, the audience’s expectations are raised by visiting and experiencing the MCU chronotopes. For instance, the post-credit scenes promote the superhero narrative and pose as a marketing tactic, directly pointing to or hinting at future projects (in addition to being entertaining and highly expected). The *Iron Man* post-credits scene clearly announces the Avengers project. *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) post-credit scene hints at Captain America and the Avengers. The main object of interest that results in the Avengers team-up is featured in the *Thor* (May 2011) post-credit scene, confirming Loki as the main villain in *Avengers* (2012). Natasha Romanoff, aka Black Widow, and Clint Barton, aka Hawkeye, foreshadow the additional members of the Avengers team. *Captain America: The First Avenger* (July 2011) post-credit scene shows Dir. Fury informing Cap that he is here with a mission, to save the world; what immediately follows is a short promo trailer of the *Avengers* (2012).

Such Easter Eggs and post-credits scenes establish a particular ambiance of seriality, hierarchy, and intertextuality for the MCU. Drawing on Jim Collins’ “Batman: The Movie, Narrative: The Hyperconsciousness,” Ndalians notes that “the serial logic of contemporary media is reliant on a rampant self-reflexivity” and the “layering of intertexts” are “just as integral to the [consumer’s] involvement and interpretation” (72). Marvel invites consumer audiences to engage with the MCU, distinguish the MCU characters and their stories from productions by other studios, and experience the holistic nature of the shared cinematic universe as a total entertainment experience. This entertainment experience is one where storytelling and marketing merge. By merging storytelling techniques with marketing practices, Marvel heightens audience engagement and maintains a long-term dialogue around the MCU. This dialogue and engagement, however, is not simply sustained via instances of intertextuality and Easter Eggs. It is also achieved via paratexts.

Jason Mittell informs that “[n]early every media property today offers some transmedia extensions, such as promotional websites, merchandise, or behind-the-scenes materials. These forms can usefully be categorized as *paratexts* of the core text, whether a feature film, video game or television series” (254). Mittell distinguishes between those that hype, promote, and introduce a text and those that contribute to narrative expansion, such as in the cases of the television series *Lost* (2004-2010) and *Breaking Bad* (2008-2013). Examples of such paratexts that are meant to inform, hype, and promote texts include newspaper and magazine articles, reviews, blog posts, and *YouTube* videos.³ These cases of paratexts are reminiscent of Fiske’s vertical intertextuality. According to Fiske, “[v]ertical intertextuality consists of a primary text’s relations with other texts which refer to it specifically. These secondary texts, such as criticism

³ Numerous paratexts of this nature can be found if one does a *Google* search for “Leaked Deadpool Test Footage at San Diego Comic-Con in 2015” (Hooton n.p.), “Firefly Reboot” (Liptak et al., n.p.), “Avengers Infinity War: Behind the Scenes” (Leggett n.p.), “GoT-themed Recipes for Beverages” (Cooke n.p.), and “The Defenders Twitter Feed.”

or publicity, work to promote the circulation of selected meanings of the primary text” (227). While the above paratexts may be understood or seen as paying tribute, honoring, and borrowing elements from fictional works for marketing, financial, social, and even political purposes, the following examples will demonstrate how a “What If” chronotope can brand our actual “What Is” chronotope.

Mittell notes two types of transmedia, “What Is” and “What If.” This paper does not focus on these transmedia types per se, but rather it borrows the terms and the logic behind them to account for the connection between intertextuality and paratexts. In actuality, this paper focuses on some “What If” fictional scenarios, characters or stories becoming “What Is” instances in our real-time chronotope, mainly to suggest that brand entertainment is not confined to superhero IPs anymore, and to offer yet another understanding of the latest marketing/storytelling strategies of branding in fluid online media landscapes that affect fans’ offline activities as well. “What If” transmedia “pose hypothetical possibilities rather than canonical certainties. They invite viewers to imagine alternative stories and approaches to storytelling that is distinctly not to be treated as potential canon,” where the goal is “to launch off the mothership into parallel dimensions, with connections foregrounding issues of tone, mood, character, or style more than continuing with canonical plots and storyworlds” (273). As Mittell explains, ““What Is’ transmedia seek to extend the fiction canonically, explaining the universe with coordinated precision” and hopefully expanding viewers’ understanding and appreciation of the storyworld. This narrative model encourages forensic fandom with the promise of eventual revelations once all the pieces are put together” (273). While the majority of paratexts one comes across are those that promote or hype a text, there are examples that demonstrate the second type, those that contribute to narrative expansion, draw attention to the vertical dimension of intertextuality, and demonstrate its intersection with horizontal intertextuality as the “What If” aspect of storytelling becomes an actual “What Is.”⁴ These examples demonstrate how various fictional aspects from a fictional chronotope enter and become part of our actual real chronotope. One does not have to imagine what it is like to live in the Shire, they can, actually, experience it. One does not have to imagine what it would be like to see the Bat-signal lighting up the night sky, they can actually witness it. One does not have to merely view the horrific atmosphere in *The Shining* (1980), they can certainly relive it.

⁴ These examples include: the Rocky Balboa statue, first introduced in Philadelphia in 1982 (*Association for Public Art* n.p.), the Hobbiton experience in New Zealand, commencing in 2002 after the filming of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (*Hobbiton Movie Tours* n.p.), San Francisco transforming into Gotham City for a boy’s Batman wish on November 15, 2013 (NG n.p.), the Bates Motel in White Pine Bay in the “SXSW 2015” context (Wagmeister n.p.), the Makedonia Palace in Thessaloniki reliving Stephen King’s *The Shining* in an interactive viewing that took place on January 6, 2017 (Cinepivates n.p.), the Bat-signal lighting up Los Angeles in Gotham-like fashion in honor of Adam West that took place on June 16, 2017 (Associated Press n.p.), a Game of Thrones pop-up bar in Washington D.C., offering themed drinks between June 22 and August 27, 2017 (Matthews n.p.), the 2018 Women’s Marches in Handmaid’s Tale inspired costumes (Bradley n.p.), and the collaboration between DC Comics and Insight Editions, aiming at giving fans “a taste of Gotham’s finest drinks” with their *DC Comics: Batman: The Official Gotham City Cocktail Book* (Marnell n.p.) in 2021, to name but a few.

The fictional chronotopes have entered our world mainly via branding. The plethora of media that exist have certainly aided such ventures by enriching the variety of adaptations and transmedia storytelling that are produced. In other words, they have multiplied the fictional chronotopes for any given branded intellectual property. As Bakhtin informs,

[t]he work and the world represented in it enter the real world and enrich it, and the real world enters the work and its world as part of the process of its creation, as well as part of its subsequent life, in a continual renewing of the work through the creative perception of listeners and readers. (254)

As a result, the real world is enriched with numerous types of fictional chronotopes that cater to heterogeneous audiences. Seeing, however, that the entertainment industry is first and foremost an industry, the goal, according to Bolter and Grusin, “is to have the child watching a Batman video while wearing a Batman cape, eating a fast-food meal with a Batman promotional wrapper, and playing with a Batman toy. The goal is literally to engage all of the child’s senses” (68). This intention is not limited only to children. It also caters to adult audiences and fans. Overall, in such a branded context, the boundaries between storytelling and marketing begin to blur, thus offering not just a storytelling experience but a branded total experience. Consequently, a total branded experience, essentially, means taking instances of “What If” storytelling aspects and turning them into actual “What Is” experiences for audience consumers. The degree and manner of audience engagement as well as the types of activities that are offered certainly constitute an area that warrants further attention and research particularly if one considers the variety of new media, emerging technologies, storytelling practices, and brand marketing strategies that are constantly emerging.

This hyperawareness towards marketing choices and its fusion with storytelling techniques raises the value not only of the work in question but also of the context within which it is produced and consumed. Stuart Elliot has argued that “the marketing of an entertainment property is becoming the story instead of the property itself” (qtd. in Maxwell 157), and while this may be viewed as a harbinger of meaningless, commercialized, and profitable Hollywood practices, it still contains a grain of truth. For example, one may have never seen the *Star Wars* franchise, but this does not mean that one is completely ignorant of what *Star Wars* is and this is due to pop culture references, intertextuality, and brand marketing creating distinct branded realities. Rosemary Coombe explains that Intellectual Properties exhibit a cultural life and the meaning assigned or appointed to a brand, text or chronotope may be determined by “those who circulate and co-ordinate mass media representations” (qtd. in Grainge 8, 12). It can also be “forged in cultural instances where texts, symbols, and images are used by social agents, interpreted by audiences and taken up by fan groups in potentially unforeseen ways” (qtd. in Grainge 8, 12), thus demonstrating how both producers and audiences contribute to the cultural life of the brand Intellectual Property and its meaning.

Brands enable consumers to express themselves through the personality of the brand and communicate within a brand context where the dialogue taking place aims at “either *add[ing]* to or *reproduc[ing]* the particular qualities that the brand embodies” (Arvidsson 67). The treatment of serial and hierarchical continuity greatly affects the structural continuity evident in the MCU, which is indicative of the company’s future intentions relating to open-ended structures, audience expectations, and strategic power-play. These intentions can affect the power play between companies, but also between producers and consumers. The vital factor that cannot be overlooked, however, is that the producers and the consumers engaging in this context are constantly caught up in a power play, regarding production, consumption, and, by extension, meaning-making.

By engaging with the MCU holistically, audiences ultimately begin exhibiting, in a bottom-up fashion, pressure to different ends, but mainly to see particular characters enter the MCU. The current situation existing between Marvel and Sony regarding the Intellectual Property of Spider-Man, for instance, demonstrates how fans have certain expectations from the industry and their treatment of its products. Fans have petitioned for Sony to return Spider-Man to the MCU after Sony entered an agreement with Marvel so that Spider-Man could appear in the context of the MCU.⁵ It remains to be seen how the state of the deal and potential future negotiations, not to mention pressure from fans, will demonstrate power play fluctuations. Or can make-or-break certain productions because they do not condone certain choices, such as the case of the *Fantastic Four* (2015) reboot, where the actor Michael B. Jordan was cast in the role of character Johnny Storm. This authorial choice resulted in a backlash from certain fans, as Noah Berlatsky notes, and such audience reactions could explain, to a certain degree, why the particular rebooted franchise did not release any more films. Then again, industry changes, such as the new Disney+ streaming service, have resulted in the cancellation of Netflix/Marvel TV series to the dismay of some fans.

Essentially, Marvel offers highly entertaining character-centered narratives which engage the audience, and respectfully leave room to draw one’s own meanings. While the notion of intertextuality is not a new technique, Marvel is the first production company to implement it so forcefully in its films. Recent publications, such as *Make Ours Marvel: Media Convergence and a Comics Universe* (2018), edited by Matt Yockey, exhibit an array of scholars discussing and examining topics, such as the convergence of storylines across media, Marvel One-Shots and transmedia storytelling, Spotting Stan Lee and its function, the seriality of the Marvel universe, motion comics, and many more. Such publications indicate the popularity of superhero franchises still hold in American mainstream pop culture and offer insight into the workings of the industry and the community of fans when engaging with such media franchises. Ultimately, what Marvel achieves with the MCU is to establish the purpose of its brand management, where

⁵ The deal between Marvel and Sony allowed Sony to distribute and have final creative control over MCU films where Spider-Man is the main character. Spider-Man has appeared in: *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), and *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019).

the brand, or in this case, superheroes, as Arvidsson states, are transformed and maintained as popular ideas that people live by or engage with (82-83) and aid audiences and fans in the construction of a common social world (3).

With a refurbished brand personality, Marvel has established the MCU as a sample of total branded entertainment through the implementation of intertextual elements that reference past and present branded experiences and result in a shared universe. The value of any brand is to a high degree dependent on consumers, namely, what they think and how they feel about the brand. Their loyalty is a significant governing factor of the brand's trajectory, strength, and ultimate success. All in all, Marvel and the MCU brands provide audiences with brand tools that help construct identity, social relations, and shared experiences by catering to audience expectations while also seeking to satisfy a wide array of preferences. Even though the degree of audience engagement is not something that producers can fully and consistently control, Marvel, and other entertainment brand companies, by engaging audiences in total brand experiences, present higher chances of achieving this and prompt them to experience these films holistically rather than separately.

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