

Coexistent perspectives

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Abstract

Why meme culture and marvelization are changing cinema for the better

Drawing on concepts from Dawkins, James, and other contemporary scholars this essay explores the transformative impact of both meme culture and Marvelization in cinema. It delves into the attention economy and uses the metaphor of the internet being a slot machine highlighting the effect of meme cultures addictive and attention inducing environment. It highlights the positive aspects of marvelization, including the building of fan-built communities, the promotion of diversity within film and the use of meta referencing to give the audience a positive nostalgic feel. Alongside this there are also potential drawbacks examined such as the toxicity that online communities can bring and the gender-based scrutiny that comes along with those toxic fan bases. This essay also highlights the global reach of marvelization which using Barbenheimer as an example of the reach of meme culture and Marvelization. In conclusion, this essay argues that Marvelization is a positive force as it fosters a community of inclusivity and fan engagement within the cinematic landscape through audience behaviours and their preferences.

Why meme culture and marvelization are changing cinema for the better

Introduction

For the past twenty years, and since the induction of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, abbreviated to the (MCU) for the purpose of this essay, there has been a shift in the way that modern blockbusters are consumed by their audience, and a shift in the way that they are formulated, for the better. This essay seeks to explore how the attention economy has stimulated that change through the use of the slot machine as a metaphor for meme culture and the distribution of those memes. It will also explore the ways in which the slot machine uses meta references and nostalgia baiting to maintain the audience of the (MCU) and the positive effect that nostalgia has on its audience. As well as the sense of loneliness that is so common in the world we live today, with an emphasis on why the communities and fandoms of Marvelized cinema are so helpful to the modern world for said lonely individuals. It will then explore both the good and bad that these communities do, with the radicalisation of specific individuals within these online communities. Lastly this essay will also seek to explore Barbenheimer and how the effects of meme culture and Marvelization impacted the success of the two movies involved, as well as the Globalization of Marvelization and the (MCU) towards the wider world.

Main body

For the purpose of clarity, it is best to first define the important words and phrases within this essay. Firstly, Meme is a term used to describe “an idea that is passed from one member of society to another, not in the genes but often by people copying it.” (Oxford, 2023) With this in mind, an internet meme is the passing of an idea, and one’s culture, from one user to another in some form of data. That data could take the form of an image, video, or GIF.

Meme itself is a term first coined by Richard Dawkins in his book '*The Selfish Gene*' published in 1976. In his book he states, "Most of what is unusual about man can be summed up in one word: 'culture.'" (Dawkins, 1976, p. 189) Dawkins was an evolutionary biologist who argued that most of what makes humans unique is our culture and the passing of a "memes" from one individual to another. He also states that "Cultural transmission is analogous to genetic transmission in that, although basically conservative, it can give rise to a form of evolution." (Dawkins, 1976, p.189) With this the idea that memes and the culture surrounding them can shape and evolve both the audience and the formula of cinema through the audience's participation of that cinema.

Secondly, The Marvel Cinematic Universe, is a shared universe based on and around the Marvel comics and the superheroes within them. It started in 2008 with the release of '*Iron Man*' (2008 Directed by Jon Favreau) and has continued to present day, with movies set to release a few years into the future. It spans across multiple phases and takes the form of both block buster style feature films and television. It is through this decades long run time that the (MCU) has now become a staple in modern day film making and has impacted the film industry in a huge way. It is debatable on whether this impact is for better or worse with film directors the likes of Martin Scorsese and Quentin Tarantino being particularly critical of the (MCU). In fact, it was originally Quentin Tarantino who coined the term "Marvelization", in a podcast with Tom Segura. He stated that "Part of the Marvelization of Hollywood is...you have all these actors who have become famous playing these characters". (Tarantino and Segura, 2022) in this Tarantino is describing the idea that with the (MCU)'s monopolisation of the film industry, the actors and individuals within theses films become less than their character. Tom Holland is no longer Tom Holland but Spiderman, Robert Downy Junior is Iron Man and the list goes on.

Marvelization itself is both the (MCU) and its own set of ideas within the cinematic landscape. It is the formula that the (MCU) has given to cinema, the drive to create cinematic universes and a continued stream of content for consumers. Marvelization is the drive to diversify cinema. In the words of Chloe Yeo:

Without the Marvel-ization of Cinema to help keep film interesting to audiences, there may have never been an increase in roles played by people of color, and without that crucial diverse representation in film, cinema would not have been as successful today as it was during the "Golden Age of Cinema." (Yeo, 2023)

To first explore how marvelization and meme cultures impact on cinema the first thing that must be explained is what attention is;

Every one knows what attention is. It is the taking possession by the mind, in clear and vivid form, of one out of what seem several simultaneously possible objects or trains of thought. Focalization, concentration, of consciousness are of its essence. It implies withdrawal from some things in order to deal effectively with others, and is a condition which has a real opposite in the confused, dazed, scatter-brained state which in French is called *distracted*, and *Zerstreuung* in German. (James, 1890, p. 404)

With this James tells us the fundamentals of attention. That being, attention is concentration and focus. In the past, before the (MCU) was established and memes were so prevalent, block buster movies would only take modicum of attention. However, in the modern age in which memes are passed from user to user in an online space, this is no longer the case. Before the internet and the dawn of the (MCU) block busters would take attention from the time that they were watched or rewatched and the time in which they were discussed verbally. However, with the internet being so prevalent and inescapable block busters not only take up the aforementioned two points of contact but also take place in memes and are frequently shared through the use of social media platforms.

The positive affect to this being that meme culture can make the release of films massively greater than they ever would have been. However, a point to consider is the fact that, “Almost every day, we hear or read about someone being addicted to the internet.”

(Greenfield, 2020, p. 27) It is notable that the culture behind memes and the social media platforms in which they are distributed can become an unhealthy and toxic environment if used unsafely. Not only can the use of these platforms as mentioned become addictive but cyberbullying and trolling are also negative effects of meme culture and internet use.

Cyberbullying and trolling becoming more excessive when considering that the internet in the form it has developed into today has become almost inescapable, being that everyone has a smartphone. With this we can understand that social media platforms and the internet can be a double-edged sword for block buster movies and the people within them.

Meme culture in and of itself is so prevalent because of the way that attention works for humans. Attention can be broken down into four aspects “The four key aspects of the model are the following: 1. Attention is limited. 2. Attention is a key requirement for many cognitive processes. 3. Attention is subject to both internal control and external manipulation. 4. Attentional control is a developmental process, and what attracts attention can change.” (Lane and Atchley, 2020, p. 15) Meme culture influences people. It is a process of external control which, through use of algorithms and sharing, courses and manipulates an individual into paying their limited amount of daily attention to watch a short clip or view an image. The longer a person partakes in meme culture the more susceptible they are to viewing and sharing memes, thus developing them within the domain of memes and creating some form of addiction.

The internet medium might be described as the world's largest slot machine in that the internet operates on a variable ratio reinforcement schedule of neurobiological reinforcement; that is, when you go online for anything, you never quite know what you are going to find, when you are going to find it, or how desirable or pleasurable the content will be. (Greenfield, 2020, p. 32)

The slot machine metaphor may at first appear negative, and in context of addiction is most definitely negative. However, for the use of the (MCU) and the marvelization that it has caused within the cinematic context, the uses of dopamine hits and easily consumable content has only helped to advertise block buster films and perpetuate the use of meme culture within a cinematic context. For example, the slot machine has helped skyrocket (MCU) films in the past. Most notable would be '*Spiderman: No Way Home*' (2021 Directed by Jon Watts) which had its trailer meticulously watched and shared through social media platforms before release. With theories about previous spider men actors' involvement also being shared on social media. Thus, meme culture and the slot machine that is social media helped in the drive towards the marvelization of cinema through the referencing of previous films and the perpetuation of nostalgia baiting.

Within '*Spiderman: No Way Home*' fans were delighted to see that their theories were correct, not only did the previous spidermen appear, but so too did their villains.

'*Spiderman: No Way Home*' uses its references to older films and as such pop culture to great success and as such helps to perpetuate the idea of the meta reference within film.

Meta references themselves being used as memes for the public. This is because "This referencing of pop culture may be connected to the videos' success." (Shifman, 2014, p. 84)

Whilst Shifman is referring to YouTube videos within this chapter of the book, movies which have Marvelized have also taken the idea of referencing pop culture, within their meta references, to help in their connection to their audience.

Marvelized movies like '*Spiderman: No Way Home*' will often use meta references to also create generational appeal towards the film, thus driving up the target audience. As stated previously '*Spiderman: No Way Home*' does this with the use of its characters from previous films, but it also uses popular meme templates passed around on social media.

An example of this would be the use of Willam Dafoe's character Norman Osborn and a line which appeared in both films.

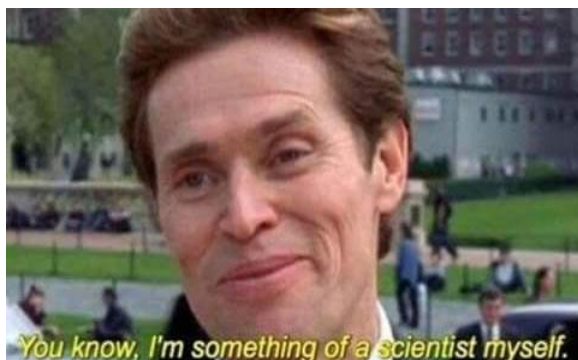


Figure 1 -Raimi, S. *Spiderman* (2002)



Figure 2 -Watts, J. *Spiderman No Way Home* (2021)

This first of which, appearing left, happened within '*Spiderman*' (2002 Directed by Sam Raimi) almost twenty years before its reemergence. Before this happened in '*Spiderman: No Way Home*' it had become a popular meme template. To assist in my argument, the use of memes and meta references from the past within Marvelized cinema is a good because "Nostalgia is a predominantly positive experience in which many individuals engage quite regularly." (Routledge, et al, 2013, p. 808)

The (MCU) can base most of its success from nostalgia, it is a driving force within the concept of a shared universe. It also helps, if done correctly, to perpetuate Marvelized films and help maintain their viewership. The idea that you can watch a character in one film and have them appear in an entirely different context within a differing film is in itself a positive one. That is because of the use of targeted nostalgia, also known as nostalgia baiting, within these films.

In a world more connected by slot machines and less connected by human-to-human communication “nostalgia serves to counteract the effects of loneliness and to restore the sense of connectedness.” (Routledge, et al, 2013, p. 827) This means that through the use of said nostalgia baiting and the connection felt within nostalgia itself, Marvelization in films is also by virtue of memes and meta references, making its audience feel more connected to both the movies and the fandoms that have built around them. In addition, this also reinforces the argument that Marvelized films have more of a positive impact with their creation as it, through its connection with meme culture and the attention that both the movies themselves and the memes surrounding them create, enforces a connected atmosphere around and within the audience who consume the media.

It is because of this nostalgic positivity that the slot machine becomes less negatively impactful and lonely. “The feeling of belonging to a community is not confined to a nation or race.” (Gray, et al, 2017, p. 171) Loneliness is an ever growing epidemic and a thorn in the side of many nations. However, whilst loneliness grows, the creeping of community also rears its head in the form of fandoms. Whilst an individual may feel alone, perpetuated by the wheels of a slot machine gripping their attention, that same individual can find solace in the idea that they belong to a group of people who share the same interests.

Ever since the beginning of Marvel comics in 1939 there has been a steadily growing community that erupted with the beginning of the (MCU). Now with the formula that the (MCU) created and refined, that of Marvelization, multiple differing communities have appeared. Each of which share their own memes and have their own references further connecting people. This is because “global media fandoms encourage a sense of transcultural fan community belonging among globally dispersed individual fans.” (Gray, et

al, 2017, p. 179) With this community, barriers are broken and friendships between fans blossom.

However, with everything, there is good and there is bad. In her book exploring online spaces and culture, Angela Nagle explains that:

observing these online spaces, it is simply impossible to deny the rampant hateful misogyny, bitterness, conspiratorial thinking and generally foul character that seems to run through them. (Nagle, 2017, p. 72)

Although this book is specifically about 4chan, an online messaging forum, there is something to be said about the validity of this statement when it comes to online spaces like Instagram and TikTok and the toxic hate speech that comes with the anonymity the internet gives. Even with the (MCU) creating and fostering a mostly positive community and an accepting environment much like with most places on the internet there is still hate.

This hate is predominantly directed towards the female talent that acts within these movies.

“Female superheroes are typically placed under much closer scrutiny than their male counterparts.” (James, 2023) Misogyny online runs deep in almost all communities and is difficult to remove. An unfortunate reality of today's society is that with the rise of meme culture there has also been a platform in which hatred and misogyny can be spread.

However, even with the horror that is the online “manosphere”, the majority of fandoms around Marvelized cinema remain positive. This positivity can also be seen offline, in a report “at one stage 53 per cent of all Americans considered themselves Star Trek fans.” (Sandvoss, 2005, p.3) This means that at the time over half of Americans could connect in person to one another over a show. That was before the (MCU) became the mainstream and before memes as a cultural phenomenon became mainstream.

Nowadays with the (MCU) and memes being as big as they are people, even those who wouldn't consider themselves fans can have a discussion in person about Marvelized movies.

It would also be wrong when talking about meme culture and cinema without mentioning Barbenheimer. In July of 2023 two movies, which released in theatres on the same day, garnered massive amounts of hype through memes shared on social media platforms. Both movies built their fandoms before realising to the public and both were pushed through the algorithm. "Instead of one film receiving all of the discourse, both have been gifted what is essentially a free marketing boost." (Walters, 2023) Using '*Barbie*' (2023 Directed by Greta Gerwig) and '*Oppenheimer*' (2023 Directed by Christopher Nolan) as an example of the positive good that meme culture, and the all-encompassing slot machine of reels that we are subjected to, does for fandoms and community. The short period of Barbenheimer memes will soon also become subjects of nostalgic thought as well as meta references for their communities to use and look back on with pride.

Not to mention that '*Barbie*', a movie with a female lead and director, was the top grossing movie in 2023, grossing a total of "\$636,208,326." (Domestic Box Office For 2023, no date) This caused by meme culture and is a direct result of the Marvelized theme to include diverse casts and crew.

Without Marvelization, and its consistent push for these diversity's, it is difficult to know when a film directed by a female and starring a female would take the top of the box office.

The persistent formula of Marvelization also takes effect with the creation of cinematic universes in this instance because:

A recent article in the New Yorker went behind the scenes at the Mattel dream factory, revealing that the toymaker has at least 45 new film adaptations of its toy-based properties already in development, to follow the \$100 million plastic-fantastic bombshell dropping on 21 July. Move over Marvel, there's a new MCU in town. (King, 2023)

With this article also paying homage to the (MCU), because of this, fans of '*Barbie*' now get to enjoy the new creation of a universe as well as a growing community in which they can create and grow relationships with other likeminded fans. It is also because of Marvelization and the cinematic universes it creates that fans get to also build relationships with the talent who work on these films. These relationships can grow through years of on-screen performances and off-screen contact, through social media.

"There is no doubt that film is one of the most influential art forms of modern times."

(Gordana, et al, 2021) It is because of the influence of film in the modern age that Marvelization of contemporary cinema is so relevant and necessary. As stated before in the introduction to the definition of Marvelization it as a concept encourages inclusion, and with this inclusion comes more acceptance within the communities that Marvelized cinema create. This combination of community and prosperity educates those individuals who hold hatred and seeks to draw them toward a realm of inclusivity.

However, with the Globalisation of cinema and the fact that Marvelization is all encompassing, the hatred that these individuals hold wont last long. Combine the idea that Marvelized cinema includes more diverse characters with, especially for the (MCU), the idea that Marvelization also encourages the use of unknown and less contemporary directors, it

also then encourages more artistic cinema. As diversity begets more diversity. This is good for fandoms and communities because “art cinema has from its beginnings forged a relationship between the aesthetic and the geopolitical.” (Galt, et al, 2010, p.3) As an example of aesthetic and geopolitical brought to a contemporary audience, we need only view the film ‘*Black Panther*’. (2018 Directed by Ryan Coogler) ‘*Black Panther*’ is a film celebrated and given astonishing praise for its use of black African culture. ‘*Black Panther*’ has “demonstrated the strong economic power of diversity and inclusion on screen, and restarted nostalgic conversations on the potential of black power.” (Lee, 2018) Thus showing that the globalisation the Marvelized monopoly of the (MCU) has gained not only conjures those feelings of nostalgia that have been previously stated to be positive but also allows for those in the BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic) groups to feel empowered within a new Marvelized cinematic formula.

Conclusion

In conclusion,

Within the topics discussed in this essay and the ideas behind meme culture as a slot machine and Marvelization as the conceptualisation of cinematic universes, nostalgic meta referencing and the memes surrounding them and the globalist nature of its inclusion for everyone. To answer the question of why Marvelization and meme culture are improving cinema for the better I would argue that:

The framework and formula that Marvelization provides to other publishing studios is inherently a healthy one. Its push and drive for a continually developing and growing community of fans, cast and crew allows for a wider range of globalised inclusion.

Marvelization pushes for groups of people to come together and to bond through the

individuals' uses of memes and the shared nostalgic feeling that communities get when viewing said memes or films.

With movies like '*Black Panther*' and the newly released '*The Marvels*' (2023 Directed by Nia DaCosta) continuing to diversify both cast and crew, its rapid growth and continued decade long fan base the (MCU) has been a step in the right direction for film makers and producers the world over.

One could argue that the (MCU)'s monopolisation could gate keep films outside of the (MCU) and push them out of any light that they may find. However, I would argue that the world benefits more from Marvelized films than it loses. Film makers get to produce, hone, and build their worlds and through marvelizations focus on shared universes, generate continued content within said universe. Growing communities who share and market your films through the meme culture and algorithmic slot machine. Marvelization, alongside the slot machine as a facility for it, can never gate keep good cinema nor can the (MCU).

Lastly with the idea that Marvelization uses meta referencing within Marvelized cinema, it in and of itself is akin to an advertisement within said film. The references within these films to old pop culture and its iconic film moments draws audiences into the older films that the newer films reference. Whilst simultaneously providing a positive experience for the people within the audience who can understand the reference. From the dawn of the (MCU) to the current Marvelized formula we have today it has all been backed with the idea of inclusion of everything and everyone. It, by design, is a platform in which to accommodate all manner of people and as such has forced the cinematic landscape to follow suit.

As mentioned before, loneliness is an epidemic. An epidemic that grows within the slot machine filled algorithmic world of screens and indirect contact. In a world of growing

anxiety, melancholy, and unease, would it not be a healthy system to have a platform in which all of humanity can come together, as a community and discuss their favourite universes?

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Figure 3 Raimi's Scientist – Raimi, S. 2002. [Spider-Man]

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