



Make ours marvel: media convergence and a comics universe

edited by Matt Yockey, Austin, TX, University of Texas Press, 2017, 364 pp.,
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BOOK REVIEW

Make ours marvel: media convergence and a comics universe, edited by Matt Yockey, Austin, TX, University of Texas Press, 2017, 364 pp., US \$29.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1477312506

In a recent interview with *Empire* magazine, director Martin Scorsese criticised Marvel Entertainment movies as he declared, ‘that’s not cinema’ (de Semlyen 2019). After fans responded to his interview, Scorsese retorted in the *New York Times* that Marvel movies ‘seem to me to be closer to theme parks than they are to movies as I’ve known and loved them throughout my life, and that in the end, I don’t think they’re cinema’ (2019). Scorsese denigrates the Marvel movies, but his remarks touch upon a particular truth: Marvel Entertainment has fostered an experience through films, comics, tv shows and other media, which extends beyond the discrete panels of the comic or the frame of the movie screen. However, this participatory media experience has never been unique to Marvel, so it is far too narrow a critique to lay against the film studio to declare their productions, ‘not cinema.’ Indeed, Marvel Entertainment and its fans only continue practices of engagement that have been part of the consumption of comics culture. From the early twentieth-century fans have read the stories of their favourite character in comic strips published in newspapers or magazines and would then watch them on the nickelodeon screens.¹ Media participation has also taken on various other forms from the fanzines of the twentieth century to fan fiction and fan art that pervades the internet – notably these forms have emerged from the bottom up. The point is that media engagement has always been interconnected and has never been discrete. Rather than simply malign Marvel movies as ‘not cinema,’ we should dig into the granular of the experience and explore it. The question is: how has Marvel changed the media landscape? Matt Yockey’s edited collection, *Make Ours Marvel: Media Convergence and a Comics Universe* seeks to answer such a question. The contributors to this volume explore what Marvel Entertainment has tried to achieve, the success that no one could have predicted, and how the company continues to change the media landscape.

This collection of essays covers the new comics and media world Marvel created from their Silver Age new beginnings in 1961 with Stan Lee and Jack Kirby’s creation of the Fantastic Four through the company’s bankruptcy in the 1990s and their rebirth as a film studio in the 2000s. From the start of this new beginning for the company, Marvel Comics encouraged participation by inviting readers to send in letters in response to storylines and other fans’ reactions. But the letter pages were not a free for all space like much of social media and internet forums where many of the current debates take place. In those early years, Marvel Comics modelled what participation might look like as Yockey writes, ‘[Stan] Lee himself wrote some of these early letters using various pseudonyms, showing that modelling and shaping practices of participatory consumption were central strategies by which Marvel branded itself and by which the consumer/producer binary was blurred’ (11). As the company developed, they also attempted to control their story, curating how fans engaged and perceived the company. For example, in 1981 Stan Lee tried to tell the origin story of Marvel Comics in a biblical style Genesis narrative, which Yockey rightfully counterpoints with the ‘big bang’ as a more useful metaphor to describe the birth of the company, as he writes, ‘the collision of artistic vitality, the superhero genre, and a more sophisticated readership, the Marvel comic book revolution of the 1960s incited the birth of

a narrative universe and a media empire that continues to grow far beyond anything imagined back in 1961' (37).

The 'big bang' is a useful metaphor for post-1961 Marvel because after reading the introduction, this reader does feel like the possibilities for discussion in this book are limitless. Though at times the chapters feel unrelated, they are linked by the evolving concept of transmedia: a narrative experience occurring across media forms. And this term does reflect the narrative experience Marvel Entertainment offers. Since individually Marvel Entertainment as well as transmedia would be subjects nearly impossible to cover in a single volume, rather than aim to be comprehensive (an impossible task for this subject!), this collection succeeds by offering twelve distinct essays exploring Marvel's history and media. Yockey explains, 'the collection of essays could serve as a vital starting point for further academic explorations of this fascinating universe. 'Nuff said? This conversation's only beginning' (38). Indeed, the collection itself mirrors the reading experience of a mainstream comics fan who reads twelve different Marvel comics each month all set in the same universe but exploring different corners of that world. From essays ranging from the digital comics and motion comics, the birth of Stan Lee as a mogul, female legacy in superhero comics, to an exploration of the actors who have played Peter Parker, Spider-Man, the collection usefully brings together many scholars with different trainings to offer multi-disciplinary approaches to comics focusing not only on texts and paratexts but also the methods of production and the marketing that followed. The essays can be categorised into three general topics: analyses of Marvel comics, Marvel's marketing initiatives and branding, and studies of the films and the paratexts associated with them that the company has produced (or Sony in the case of Spider-Man). Each one of these subjects from the study of comics and film to marketing and branding grant us valuable insight into how fans interact and consume these stories. Rather than try to summarise each essay in this review, I will offer highlights from the book, which I believe will be valuable resources for the future study of Marvel Entertainment and reflect the variety of subjects the book covers.

In an essential essay for the future of comics and gender studies, Anna F. Peppard considers the ways that feminism has influenced Marvel comics but has simultaneously been misused by creators and the company. She reviews how historically few female characters have been written or drawn by female creators (with recent notable exceptions) or how as recently as 2013, Marvel Comics partnered with Hyperion Books to create romance novels with some of their most visible action heroines. These stories were more than problematic as they circumvented the power of these characters. Despite a history of violence and erasure, Peppard does look hopefully to the future as she turns to 'mentorship and community' (123) in the *Captain Marvel* and *Ms. Marvel* comics by writers Kelly Sue DeConnick and G. Willow Wilson, respectively. However, she reminds us by the end of the essay that 'At present, however, the newsworthiness of female superheroes proves that it is still far too unusual to see superpowered girls and women doing what real girls and women are doing every day: fighting back, and saving the world' (131). So, while there has been a major development in the world of mainstream comics for women in the last decade, there is still much work to be done by comics companies.

Darren Wershler and Kalervo A. Sinervo linger over the convoluted history and precarious status of Marvel's motion comics in their chapter. As the authors document, Marvel has returned to the idea of motion comics many times over the past two decades with each iteration declared an entirely new comics experience! Included in this list are the 'Cybercomics' produced for AOL in 1996 to Marvel 'Dot.comics' in 2001 to the more recent iterations of AR (Augmented Reality), motion comics have taken many forms. The authors question why Marvel pursues this idea over and over again, suggesting that 'Perhaps there is something specific about the production of the superhero comics as a genre that accentuates the general tendency toward

reinvention and the disavowal of older forms' (188). The motion comic has not become a vanguard for the medium, but Marvel appears invested in the idea of sequential art that moves as the authors observe, 'From Cybercomics to Infinite Comics and AR, all of Marvel's iterations of the motion comic form are predicated on the same basic notion: animating the static comic page' (203). The moving static image appears to be an interest of Marvel's and one that fans return to even though it remains an unsuccessful endeavour.

Finally, Felix Brinker considers how the serial production of the Marvel movies has allowed for fans to respond to and influence the evolution of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. He writes, 'what further sets serial narratives apart from other cultural forms is their recursivity, that is, their openness to audience response, which is made possible by an overlap of production and reception' (214). Fans taking on this role, feeling like they have some say in what comes next is perhaps part of the excitement about the participatory role that Marvel has fostered. Brinker further considers this when he opens the discussion to transmedia as he paraphrases and quotes Henry Jenkins stating, 'the allure of transmedia texts is in their intertextuality, arguing that successful franchises would offer a wealth of "archetypes, allusions, and references drawn from a range of previous works" as a central narrative attraction' (Jenkins 98 qtd in Brinker 213). Though it is difficult to define the Marvel Cinematic Universe and Marvel Entertainment as Brinker admits, what they have achieved is a media experience that is unlike anything else we have yet seen considering the rate of expansion and its success. Whether this will last remains to be seen though.

These representative essays offer a sample of the collection. While at times the volume feels like a series of loosely related essays, the contributors do lay the groundwork for the future study of Marvel Entertainment, a great achievement unto itself. The audience for this book may be wide considering the popularity of the subject matter, but more specifically it is highly recommended to those scholars invested in studying Marvel Entertainment. This strong collection of essays on transmedia study is undoubtedly made for those studying Marvel Entertainment across its permutations in comics, film, TV, and more.

Note

1. See Jared Gardner (2012, 29–67).

Disclosure statement

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