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How the Marvel fandom made Avengers: Endgame the most financially successful movie of all time.

Bachelor's project in Film- and Videoproduction

Supervisor: Julia Leyda

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Introduction

Superhero stories have for a long time been ignored by academic contexts and been left out of conversations about significant pieces of literature. Comic books have been looked down upon, banned from schools, ignored by academics, and critiqued as juvenile. Still, superhero stories have entertained and inspired both kids and adults alike for more than 70 years now (Romagnoli & Pagnucci, 2013, p.1-2). Now with Marvel and DC frequently dominating the cinemas with their superhero movies, they should get the praise they deserve. By creating a cinematic universe, they have steadily released more and more superhero movies, and brought in more and more people to the theaters watching their films. In 2019, Marvel released their biggest superhero-movie ever: *Avengers: Endgame* (Russo Bros. 2019).

With a lifetime gross of \$2,797,800,564, *Avengers: Endgame* is the most successful movie of all time financially, barely beating *Avatar* (Cameron 2009) (Box Office Mojo, 2020). The film is probably the most ambitious project ever, due to its length of 3 hours and 1 minute and the fact that it's not only the fourth direct sequel to *The Avengers* (Whedon 2012), but also the final film of a saga with 21 movies leading up to it! (*Spider-man: Far From Home* (Watts 2019) concludes the Infinity Saga). You would have to watch 42 hours and 38 minutes of different superheroes fighting villains, supervillains, and each other to understand all the characters, relationships, and plot in this movie. They also had a grand budget of \$400 000 000 and a total of 32 lead ensemble members, or big/important actors in the film, according to "The Numbers" (The-Numbers 2020).

Media specialist and scriptwriter Mark Hughes explains that an underlying recipe for the most successful blockbuster movies usually have; a popular trusted brand, a great story, a major genre, popular actors, and that they represents popular trends, ideas, or storytelling approaches (Hughes 2018). The book "Think Outside the Box Office: The Ultimate Guide to Film Distribution" also emphasizes on marketing hooks like having a core following, popular actors, a compelling story and rewards from festivals as well as good reviews (Reiss 2010, p.32)

Avengers: Endgame follows Hughes' success recipe and has all of the mentioned marketing hooks. What I believe is the major factor in *Avengers: Endgame*'s success is however in it being the conclusion of a big saga. While there are other factors at play, I will analyze Marvels use of serialization and its approach to create a big event. How did they grow Marvel's audience into creating the success story of *Avengers: Endgame*? Being the

conclusion of a saga of that scale is the one major thing *Avengers: Endgame* has that sets it apart from every other blockbuster movie. I will also discuss if people getting tired of the superhero genre had an impact on the release of *Endgame*.

It is important to know that Marvel is owned by Disney, and that their marketing is big and professional. – “Disney is the best in class for distribution.” Anthony Russo (One of the directors behind *Avengers: Endgame*) said during a Bloomberg interview (Bloomberg Technology 2019). With great power comes great responsibility, and with a big audience comes great success.

Serialization in the MCU

First off, we need to talk about the Infinity Saga within the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe). A cinematic universe is not the equivalent of sequels. You do not need to see *Iron Man* (Favreau 2008) to have a better experience when watching *Captain America: The first Avenger* (Johnston 2011). However, it does mean that the characters in both films lives in the same fictional world, meaning they must abide by the same rules that applies for that world. This includes the Infinity Stones as the most powerful objects in the universe, Vibranium as the strongest metal on earth, high tech science and inventions, and super-powers. My last point never occurs naturally on earth throughout the MCU, and if one film decided to introduce a superhero who was born super without any explanation, it would break the laws of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

Though not all films are directly connected, this still means we can have some hefty crossovers. In *Avengers: Endgame*, it is a crossover between every film in the MCU. That is 10 franchises, not counting the Avengers – franchise. This means that the more movies you have seen, the better the experience when watching *Avengers: Endgame*. It is like watching a TV-show like *Game of Thrones* (Benioff & Weiss 2011-2019). It gives you the same type of strong connection to the characters, as well as you want to watch more. This style of storytelling is called serialization. A serial narrative is defined by author Jennifer Hayward as an ongoing narrative released in successive parts. It includes a refusal of closure; intertwined subplots; large casts of characters with an increasing diversity; interaction with current political, social, or cultural issues; dependence on profit; and acknowledgement of audience responses (Brinker, 2016, p.469).

Anthony Russo explains how movies and television shows have been merging over the last couple of years. *Game of Thrones* is as ambitious as anything on the big screen, while Marvel uses serialized storytelling, which always was the province of TV-shows (Bloomberg 2019). Film researcher Felix Brinker explains how modern blockbuster movies that practices serialization creates audience activity, which encourages viewers to follow a serial franchise over longer periods of time and across media platforms. Marvel movies in particular constitute exemplary cases of blockbuster cinema's turn towards serial formats as they combine different modes of serialization (Brinker, 2016, p.433-435). With adaptations from the comics, reboots from cartoons and older films and TV-shows, as well as the MCU having an interconnected universe of blockbuster movies that also have multiple sequels and crossovers, Marvel is the king of serialization. They even have multiple TV-shows, like *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* (Tancharoen & Whedon Bros. 2013 -) that are connected to the same universe, though these stories never influence the MCU movies in any meaningful way. However, the films have influenced the TV-show. Agent Coulson dies in *The Avengers* but reappears in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*. This is a smart move to lure the fans over to the TV-shows while they do not demand you to watch the TV-shows to understand the blockbuster films.

Serialization of Tony Stark

Using Tony Stark / Iron Man as an example, we can see how his journey has been serialized across multiple films that even go outside of the *Iron Man* – franchise and *The Avengers* – franchise. Not to mention his origin in the comics and the cartoons.

Iron Man's first appearance was in the comic book: *Tales of Suspense* #39 (Lee, 1963). Since then he has made 2755 appearances in the comic books (CMRO, 2020). In the late 1970s and 1980s the traditional perceptions of heroism in superhero literature began to evolve as well as creators began writing superhero stories for adult audiences (Romagnoli, & Pagnucci, 2013, p.86). This is big and might be some of the most important changes which has led to the grand audience Marvel have today.



From:

https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Tales_of_Suspense_Vol_1_1_39

[1 1 39](https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Tales_of_Suspense_Vol_1_1_39)

Iron Man has also appeared in multiple cartoons. The first one being *Iron Man* (Lieber 1966). The story being told in the comics and the cartoons do not transcend over to the MCU blockbuster movies but are used as a source to shape the story in the MCU movies.

The MCU started with Robert Downey Jr. as Tony Stark / Iron Man in *Iron Man* in 2008. Tony Stark is a billionaire industrialist who produce weapons, making warfare even more dangerous. He is portrayed as a selfish genius that puts his own self-interest before the greater good. He gets captured by terrorists to create weapons but manages to make his first iron suite and escapes instead. He then becomes Iron Man.

In *Iron Man 2* (Favreau 2010) he deals with the consequences of announcing himself as Iron Man. to the world and people wanting to exploit his suits. At the end of the day he becomes the hero we all need and announces “I have successfully privatized world peace” – Tony Stark.

In 2012 with *The Avengers*, Tony Stark and other heroes from the MCU are put together by Nick Fury, to act as a team to protect the world from evil. After an alien invasion, Tony sacrifices himself by flying a nuke into space like a true hero. Luckily, he barely survives after being captured by Hulk.

In *Iron Man 3* (Black 2013) he takes responsibility of all the power he gained with his iron suits, realizing how dangerous they are in the wrong hands.

In *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Whedon 2015) he tries to create a global defense program. Instead, he creates Ultron who tries to exterminate all humans in order to save the world. The Avengers team up once again and defeats Ultron. In a vision, Tony Stark sees the defeat of the avengers, foreshadowing *Avengers: Infinity War* (Russo Bros. 2018) and *Avengers: Endgame*.

In *Captain America: Civil War* (Russo Bros. 2016) and *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (Watts 2017) he develops an almost fatherly relationship with Peter Parker / Spider-Man (Tom Holland). He also gets in a fight with Steve Rogers / Captain America (Chris Evans) and splits up the Avengers.



From:

<https://freepng.pictures/download/ironman-tony-stark-3/>

In *Avengers: Infinity War* the team is still split up after the events from *Civil War*. He tries to save all life in the universe by stopping Thanos only to fail and lose many people that he loves including Peter Parker.

In *Avengers: Endgame* he starts a new life and gets a daughter with Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow). Yet, he manages to invent a time machine which takes him and the other avengers on a time heist journey, visiting scenes from previous films to restore the Infinity Stones and bring back everyone that Thanos snapped away. However, as Thanos' forces return, an all-out war results in Tony Stark sacrificing himself for real this time, by snapping Thanos and his allies away at the expense of his own life. In the first film he announces himself as a superhero with the famous line "I am Iron Man". In *Endgame* his last words are also "And I am Iron Man", completing the circle of Tony Starks amazing journey.

From a selfish playboy with a moral displayed to be the opposite of Steve Rogers / Captain America, Tony Stark became the man who put the greater good before himself. He became a friend, a father-figure, a husband, a father, and the greatest hero to have ever lived.

The Payoff

This is just a quick summary of Tony Stark's journey, but the point is that seeing this long journey with Tony Stark and how he changed as a person and a hero is something that really pays off in *Avengers: Endgame*. It gets to an extremely emotional, satisfying, and epic ending that could only be achieved with such a long journey, through serialization. And of course, if you have not seen every movie, then you will not receive the same payoff. This includes every character in the MCU. They all have incredible journeys that can be seen from film to film, and they all have incredible payoffs in *Avengers: Endgame*. And if you have read the comics or watched the cartoons, you might have had some expectations for what was going to happen. But there is so much material to take from, so it is nearly impossible to predict everything that was going to happen based on the comics/cartoons. It does not share the linear continuity from the comics/cartoons. They use preexisting storylines, character assemblages, ideas, and iconographies, and restage these elements in a different context in order to present them as familiar, but also new (Brinker, 2016, p.451-452). Therefore, whether you have read the comics, watched the cartoons, and/or watched the previous films, this was an epic conclusion that can be considered the biggest cinematic event ever. This is the power of serialization of Hollywood blockbusters!

To further credit the achievement of this movie and its method of achieving it; LA Times TV & media writer Stephen Battaglio explains how great of a movie *Avengers: Endgame* was, in an interview on “The Exchange”:

“Even if you did not see all these movies, this was a very satisfying, big event. Obviously if you were a fan, you loved it because it answered a lot of questions for you, and the stakes were really high.” – Stephen Battaglio

He continues by saying that with streaming people can watch their favorite shows whenever they want to. But an event like this creates excitement, and that makes people talk about it. (CNBC Television, 2019). Battaglio’s comments encourages the idea that the success of *Avengers: Endgame* is due to its serialization and creating a big event for a big audience. But we got to wonder though, *Avatar* is not a serialized movie, and was just barely beaten on the box office by *Endgame*. *Avatar*, which came out in 2009, was also a big event however, as they built up expectations for a long time, and with their VFX work being revolutionary for its time. Have serialized films become more popular the last decade?

General popularity of serialized films

Felix Brinker mentions that top 10 on the box office 2014 were all serializations in one way or another (Brinker, 2016, p.433). When I look at top 10 on the worldwide box office in 2019, they too are all serializations. 3 of them are MCU movies. 4 others are direct sequels of other films. Then there are 2 Disney remakes. And then *Joker* (Phillips 2019), which follows a character that originated from comics and have been seen in multiple Batman-movies, much like the MCU movies (The-numbers, 2020). *Avengers: Endgame* are both a comic book adaptation, a sequel, and a big saga crossover blockbuster. If using the numbers from the box office is enough source material to tell whether serialized films are popular or not, then the answer is certainly “yes”.

This might be something that has become more popular these past ten years. Going back to 2009 when *Avatar* reigned the box office, there were multiple standalone films on the top 10 list (The-numbers, 2020).

Going back to *Avengers: Endgame*; while each film leading up to it has somewhat different plot, they are all still about superheroes and their conflicts with villains or each other. Is it not tiring to watch so many similar films? If anything, the repetition or imitation of

established success formulas allows producers to take advantage of material that have already proven their mass appeal. You could say it is commercial orientation and producers' attempts to meet popular demand (Brinker, 2016, p.434-437). Most people want to watch the sequel of a movie they enjoyed, or an adaptation of a book they liked or even a remake of a film they enjoyed as a kid. This still does not mean that people won't get tired of a certain kind of movies.

Disadvantages of serialization

Felix Brinker suggests that it is Marvel's particular combination of linear serial storytelling, a trans-medial serialization of content across different platforms, and the less linear seriality typically associated with remakes and adaptations, that provides these superhero blockbusters with a competitive advantage over non-serial film releases (Felix Brinker, 2016, p.435). It creates a loyal fanbase that is ever expanding with each iteration to the universe.

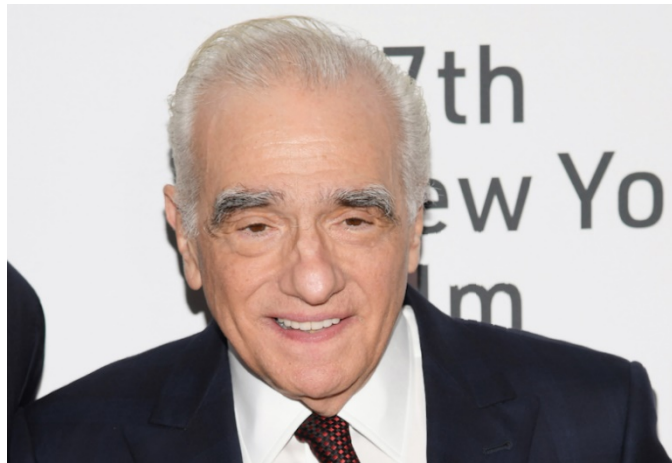
However, this cinematic universe strategy has both its benefits and disadvantages. The disadvantages are that it might be too many movies to watch for some people and they fall off. And when you miss one movie, you might just skip the rest of them. It is also very hard to get into. If you got into the universe by watching *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018), you have a lot of movies to catch up on if you want to enjoy the universe to its full extent with its crossovers. It is more than 45 hours of content to consume. Streaming nowadays are easier than ever, so watching one movie each day is not an impossible feat. But not every movie is accessible for streaming, so it might get pricey as well.

Another negative is that it might just be too much of the same. An argument I find common when discussing Marvel films with people who dislike Marvel, are that it always ends like every other superhero movie; the good guys beat the bad guys. And let us be fair, that is usually the case, but at the same time, that is not unique for superhero movies at all. In most movies, we follow a protagonist who is a good guy or girl and must defeat some sort of evil force, which they evidentially do. It is an established formula. Superheroes embody the ideals that pop culture holds dear: The good will in the end always triumph over evil - With great power comes great responsibility - The hero will always save the day in the nick of time. Superheroes are a metaphysical representation of our desire for a better world (Romagnoli & Pagnucci, 2013, p.97). It is part pop culture, but not everyone likes it.

“Superhero movies are not cinema”

An acknowledged reference that dislike Marvel movies is none other than the famous director Martin Scorsese. In an interview with Empire Magazine he said:

“I don’t see them. I tried, you know? But that’s not cinema. Honestly, the closest I can think of them, as well made as they are, with actors doing the best they can under the circumstances, is theme parks. It isn’t the cinema of human beings trying to convey emotional, psychological experiences to another human being.” – Martin Scorsese (Sharf, 2019)



From:

<https://www.indiewire.com/2019/10/martin-scorsese-marvel-movies-not-cinema-theme->

So clearly, he is talking about the films as purely entertainment, while it lacks depth. In a follow up post on New York Times he further explains:

“The fact that the films themselves don’t interest me is a matter of personal taste and temperament. I know that if I were younger, if I’d come of age at a later time, I might have been excited by these pictures and maybe even wanted to make one myself. But I grew up when I did and I developed a sense of movies — of what they were and what they could be — that was as far from the Marvel universe as we on Earth are from Alpha Centauri.” – Martin Scorsese.

He further discusses what cinema is about to him and how they developed it as an art form back in the days. He mentions Alfred Hitchcock and how his films were like big events that never disappointed. He actually compares that to theme parks as well, but in addition to having a great climax, Hitchcock films also had more emotions and complexity. He explains how Marvel films lack revelation, mysteries, and/or genuine emotional danger. Nothing is at risk. The pictures are made to satisfy a specific set of demands, and they are designed as variations on a finite number of themes, Scorsese says. MCU films have an age limit of 11/12 years old, meaning they are made to be consumed by rather young audiences. If the films were too complex, too violent, or too scary, it could scare off most of the younger consumers.

That is what you would think at least. *Avengers: Endgame*, which Scorsese has not seen, deals with tons of psychological distress, character developments and emotional dangers. I do not think *Endgame* has any big mysteries, but they have lots of revelations. First off, the film has a very long, slow-paced beginning showing our remaining superheroes dealing with PTSD after the loss of 50% of all living creatures in the universe. They all deal with it in different ways. Tony Stark starts a new life, trying to put it behind him. Steve Rogers and Natasha Romanoff refuses to let go of the past and while helping others, suffers the most. Thor becomes fat, dismisses all responsibility, and settles for a life with beer and Fortnite. Clint Barton becomes an assassin after losing his entire family. This has emotional impact, and it takes them 5 years before they can reverse it!

When Scorsese says that nothing is at risk, we can just look at Tony Stark. He was among the lucky ones who did not lose that many. He becomes a father, yet he invents a time machine to get everyone back, risking his own life and potentially his daughter's life. And in the battle at the end of the movie it is an all or nothing war. If they lose, everyone dies. Scorsese is right though in a way. We know that it is going to work, because it would not be a film with an epic conclusion otherwise. *Avengers: Infinity War* on the other hand, had a lot more shock value with the superheroes losing. But even that film followed the antagonist Thanos, as if he were the main character. So, in a way they told a story about a guy winning, and not a story about the heroes losing.

Scorsese further discusses the problem with serialization, and how they do not bring anything new to the cinema:

“They are sequels in name but they are remakes in spirit, and everything in them is officially sanctioned because it can't really be any other way. That's the nature of modern film franchises: market-researched, audience-tested, vetted, modified, revetted and remodified until they're ready for consumption.” – Martin Scorsese (Scorsese, 2019).

Marvel films seem to follow a formula of storytelling that takes away the feeling of watching something completely new. From a marketing standpoint, if the majority of the audience enjoy the films and want more, reusing a formula of storytelling they know works is a safe way to go. From a cinema-lovers standpoint, this is however a negative with serialization. *Avengers: Endgame* have already proven that the formula still works for the general audience, but it is going to be interesting to see if it ever will stop working as more and more people gets tired of it. As for now, their audience is still really big.

The Fandom of MCU

As *Avengers: Endgame* is the most successful movie on the box office ever, their audience ought to be big. Lots of people probably watched it more than once but let us discuss who Marvel actually try to reach. A lot of young adults today grew up with *Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk* (Leterrier 2008), *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Thor* (Branagh 2011), meaning this generation will want to watch it. And as the comics have been popular for so many decades in the second half of the 1900s, nostalgia brings even older generations to the cinema. As it is a superhero movie that is PG12, it will also appeal to a younger audience which also brings their families. The movie basically hits all ages except young children and maybe the very old. And then you have all the different films with different genres and diversity, just to reach out to about anyone.

We can break down the audience into core audience, niche audience, secondary audience, and tertiary audience. The core are the ones who most likely will buy the film and promote it. A niche audience is almost the same as the core, but they are just a little less passionate. They represent a group of people with a shared select interest or preference. Secondary and tertiary audiences are just layers of audiences with more common interest or preferences. (Reiss 2010, p.33-34). We could assume that their core audience are people who have watched all or most of the previous films in the cinematic universe, fans of the MCU. Their niche audience are probably people who love superheroes. This also includes people who have grown up with superhero comics and/or superhero cartoons, especially Marvel. The secondary audiences could be people who enjoy spectacles and big blockbusters. Tertiary audiences might consist of people who like all the different genres *Avengers: Endgame* have. These are action, adventure, fantasy, science fiction, drama, and even heist-film and war-film. Tertiary audiences could also include feminists and black activists that came on board the Marvel hype train with *Captain Marvel* (Fleck & Boden 2019) and *Black Panther*. Even people who are interested in science and time travel or ideologies about overpopulation could count as a tertiary audience, as these are relevant in the film. In other words, *Avengers: Endgame* has a really big audience!

On the Exchange Stephen Battaglio said that in the beginning the audience was 57% percent male and the biggest age group where 25-34 years old. These mostly represent the people who grew up with the MCU films, in other words the core audience. Then after the premiere, the demographics spreads out to older people, families etc. representing the niche audiences, secondary audiences, and tertiary audiences (CNBC Television, 2019).

I have mentioned the massive age group this film reaches as well as how different interests attracts people to the movie. However, there is one more important factor that I need to go more into detail with – diversity.

Diversity

Representing other ethnicities and cultures have been more and more important, especially the last decade. Marvel have been open about trying to become more diverse and Anthony Russo explains how diversity is always a value:

“As we travel the world with these movies, we see how these films transcend cultural boundaries and are popular everywhere. It becomes even more important to represent everybody that is part of the fandom of these films within the films.” – Anthony Russo (Bloomberg 2019).

He also emphasizes how there have been a growing diversity within the cinematic universe up until this point and that going forward Marvel will become even more diverse.

The first four superheroes that were introduced in the universe with their own respectable films was Iron Man, Hulk, Captain America, and Thor – All white men (Hulk turns green). Thor is however not American, which might have had an impact on the demographics outside of the USA.

Nordic representation

I will argue that Thor, being the God of thunder based from Norse mythology, is a superhero that Nordic countries in particular enjoy being represented. He is played by Australian Chris Hemsworth, but with his blonde hair and blue eyes, he fits the stereotype of Nordic looks. Thor is however historically known to have red hair and beard.

In the films, Thor switches between striving to be good enough, and goofing around with a good sense of humor. His hammer Mjolnir, given to him by his father Odin, can only be lifted by those who are worthy. It is never explained just what it takes to be worthy in the MCU films, but based on the 3 people we have seen lifting it; Thor, Vision and Captain America, we can assume that you are required to be pure of heart, have good intentions, and be a warrior that will use it for the greater good. Maybe some superpowers are required as well, since none of the heroes without superpowers can lift it. In any case, these are all traits

Thor possess. While not everyone from the Nordic countries should relate to Thor in this manner, he is presented as a symbol of an ideal man, based on old Nordic mythology that is important for their history.

Looking at the box office will give us an indication whether this mattered for bringing Nordic countries into the theater. Looking at the first movies will also eliminate some influence from serialization. In 2011, *Thor* grossed \$6,111,597 in the Nordic countries (Not including Finland). *Captain America: The first Avenger* grossed in the same year \$4,175,215. In comparison, the domestic box office shows that *Thor* grossed \$181,030,624, while *Captain America: The first Avenger* grossed \$176,654,505 (Box Office Mojo, 2020). *Thor* overall was more popular both domestically and in the Nordic countries, but in the Nordic countries *Thor* grossed about 46% more, while domestically it grossed about 2% more than *Captain America: The first Avenger*. This is not proof on its own that having a story about a character that is historically important to other countries than the US will expand their audiences outside of the US, but it is a good indication that it does. Going back to the US, their representation is also important.

American representation

Iron Man, Hulk and Captain America are all Americans. Hollywood being the epicenter in the world of filmmaking, naturally makes tons of movies that is about an American protagonist in the USA. And we have all heard about the “American Dream” where attaining success no matter where you come from is possible through hard work, risk-taking and sacrifice. Captain America is the American dream made flesh. He is a bio-engineered human that transformed from a scrawny little man into the symbol of America. He has long represented an ideal—he is a true patriot who will do the right thing no matter what. He is presented as everything an American should want to be. He bears the American flag on his suit and even has the American flag on his iconic shield. He is a creation of the '40s, an All-American born in a time of war. And he kicks ass (Weiner 2009, p. 121 - 123). This is a very interesting character for nationalistic Americans, or just Americans in general. Ever since *Captain America: The first Avenger*, Steve Rogers / Captain America has been the most heroic-looking and well-mannered superhero who just never gives up. As a scrawny man in his first film he said “I can do this all day” after being beaten up by a bigger bully. He also speaks of how he does not want to kill anyone, when he says he wants to join the army. He

just does not like bullies. And this is very inspiring and relatable for many Americans especially, living in a capitalistic society.

Captain America saved his country in *Captain America: The First Avenger*, but he also crash-landed with a plane in the cold sea. Nearly 70 years later he is thawed out of the ice and brought back to life. Unfit for the society, but still a hero, he joins The Avengers. As one of the main heroes of the team, and one of the survivors after the snap in *Infinity War*, he is arguably the second most important character in *Endgame* after Tony Stark. In the final fight he is the center of some of the most epic and memorable shots in the film. Thor is about to be killed by Thanos, when Captain America proves his worthiness and lifts Mjolnir. It is an amazing callback to *Avengers: Age of Ultron* when he attempts to lift it, but only budes it.

Later, when Thor and Iron Man are out of battle, beaten by Thanos, America's hero is still fighting. Badly hurt he rises as he sees Thanos call in his army of aliens. Even though it is an impossible battle, he will never give up! Then he hears his lost friend on the radio: "Cap it's Sam, do you hear me?... On your left"

In the most epic manner, every hero introduced in the MCU, brought back to life, enters the battlefield through Dr. Strange (Benedict Cumberbatch) and Wong's (Benedict Wong) portals. Ready for war, the symbol of the United States of America calls out the famous words: "Avengers... assemble".

Captain America represents America, the American people, and the American dream. On the box office, *Captain America: The first Avenger* had 47,7% grossed domestically, which is a high domestic gross compared to *Thor* with a 40,3% domestic gross. Still, it does not prove anything, and *Iron Man* even had 54,4% grossed domestically (Box Office Mojo, 2020). Yet, I believe that Captain America is a character that appeals to Americans in particular, and therefore brings more Americans to the cinema watching Marvel movies.

Representation of women

The superhero genre has always been dominated by men. Most of the heroes are men, and most of the target audience for superhero comic books were boys or young men. However, there are still a lot of female superheroes in the comics. MCU presented their first female superhero Natasha Romanoff / Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) in *Iron Man 2*. She does not have superpowers, but she is a highly skilled and a highly trained fighter with a background as a professional spy. In the comics there was an iconography of female

superheroines that privileges hypersexualized physicality over crime-fighting practicality. They were usually drawn with a physically impractical hourglass shaped form and with little and/or tight clothing. It was highly influenced by socioculturally loaded depictions of the female form (Romagnoli, 2013. P.90-96).

In the MCU movies, Natasha Romanoff is indeed a sexy hero, usually wearing a tight suit, and she has even used seduction to her advantage. However, her physical form is not impractical and obviously not impossible to achieve as it is Scarlett Johansson and not a drawing. It is also important to note that while women in superhero stories often are idealized, the same goes for men (Romagnoli, 2013. P.90). Superheroes are meant to look good. In other words, she is depicted as both sexy and cool with inspiring abilities that are achieved through training and studying (though it was forced).

Most of our heroes have their own movies, but Natasha Romanoff does not have that yet. She has been included in 7 MCU films and are finally just now about to have her own film *Black Widow* (Shortland 2020), after her heroic sacrifice *Endgame*.

Wanda Maximoff / Scarlet Witch (Elizabeth Olsen) shares a similar fate as Natasha Romanoff. She first appears in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, not including her mid-credit scene in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Russo Bros. 2014). Since then she has appeared in 3 more MCU movies. She however will not have her own movie, but rather a TV-series called *WandaVision* (Shakman 2020).

As the runner-up for *Endgame* is *Captain Marvel* (Boden & Fleck 2019). This is the first MCU movie with a female lead superhero. Carol Danvers / Captain Marvel (Brie Larson), as well as Scarlet Witch are among the strongest MCU heroes introduced. So strong in fact, that for discussions about who the strongest Avenger is, both of these girls are worthy contenders. They both have their powers from Infinity Stones.

MCU also picks up a couple important female warriors of color in *Black Panther*; Okoye (Danai Gurira) and Shuri (Letitia Wright). We are also introduced to Hope Van Dyne (Evangeline Lilly) as Wasp in *Ant-man and the Wasp* (Reed 2018), Valkyrie (Tessa Thompson) in *Thor: Ragnarok* (Waititi 2018), Gamora (Zoe Saldana), Nebula (Karen Gillan) and Mantis (Pom Klementieff) in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol.1* and *Vol.2* (Gunn 2014 & 2017). All these fantastic women, in addition to Pepper Potts in an iron suit and with the exception of Natasha Romanoff, assemble in one of the most epic moments in *Avengers:*

Endgame to carry the gauntlet through Thanos' forces. It is a real crowd-pleaser that empowers female representation as well as female strength.

Women are still not as represented in the MCU as men, but Marvel have been sure to please and grow their female audience over time with these female additions. And maybe most importantly; they have been represented in an empowering manner that is not over-sexualized. This is extremely important. In *Montages Magazine*, Julia Leyda describes the experience after watching *Wonder Woman* (Jenkins 2016). She writes that there was so many people (women in particular) that felt personally affected by the film's gender representations in a way that surpassed questions of plot, narrative coherence, plausibility, and faithfulness to the source material (Leyda 2018). This just shows how important female representation is in these popular blockbusters. And in my experience from watching *Avengers: Endgame* in the theater, women were applauding when all the female heroes gathered to export the gauntlet.

Representation of people of color

Colonel James Rupert "Rhodey" Rhodes (Terrence Howard in *Iron Man* and Don Cheadle in *Iron Man 2* and onwards) is the first African American superhero to enter the MCU as War Machine. He appears in *Iron Man* but gets the iron suit from Tony Stark in *Iron Man 2*. They do have some fights among each other, seeing how much power an iron suit gives you, but he eventually becomes Iron Man's trusted sidekick. He is also the only African American superhero that survives Thanos' snap and takes part in the time-heist.

The second African American superhero to appear is Sam Wilson / Falcon (Anthony Mackie). He appears in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and becomes the sidekick of Captain America. At the end of *Endgame*, Steve Rogers went back to the 40's and lived out his life with the generation he was born with. As an old man, Steve passes on the mantle in form of his iconic shield to Sam Wilson, making him the new Captain America. He does not have any superpowers, so it is going to be interesting to see him becoming the new symbol of America.

Black Panther is however the first MCU film with a black lead superhero. Chadwick Boseman is playing T'Challa / Black Panther who is the king of the worlds most advanced kingdom. Taking place in the fictional country Wakanda in Africa, almost every important character in this film are people of color, which is revolutionary for American cinema. There have been superhero movies with black leads before, like *Hancock* (Berg 2008), but having an

almost all-black cast with a black director as well, is something we have never seen before combined with the superhero genre.

Film Studies professor Julia Leyda mentions how viral videos of dancing fans in South Africa, director Ryan Coogler speaking at the Oakland premiere, and the countless articles detailing the film's production process – all attest to the success of *Black Panther* and how it appealed to so many (Leyda 2018). *Black Panther* became the most successful Marvel film on the box office outside of the Avengers franchise with a global lifetime gross of \$1,346,913,161!

Media specialist and scriptwriter Mark Hughes explains how broader diversification to include people of color, and people from other nations and cultures in general, makes those communities happy. By using the successful movie formula and making it more diverse as well results in more enthusiasm among audience demographics who are getting better representation, because *of course it does*. He explains that *Black Panther* is the obvious example of this. It is a great film with all of the necessary elements for blockbuster success, with the added benefit of caring about diversity (Hughes 2018).

And a big part of the demographics that liked *Black Panther* watched *Avengers: Endgame* as well and would probably not have watched if it were not for *Black Panther*. When T'Challa comes in through the portals in *Endgame* with all of his armies and you can hear the audience rejoice and shout "Wakanda forever!", you know *Black Panther* made a major impact to the MCU and brought in more fans to the epic saga.

Globalization

As the MCU have become as diverse as it is and as globalized as it is, Joe Russo (Director of *Avengers: Endgame*) points out the importance of releasing such an epic conclusion that generates conversations on social media, at the same time all across the world.

"Everyone in the world wants to celebrate at the exact same time, have a conversation at the exact same time, so you have to give the movie to all of them together." – Joe Russo (Bloomberg 2019).

That is just how big of an event the release of this film was. Releasing it across the world at the same time prevents people from being spoiled the plot and they are all able to discuss is online at the same time.

Conclusion

When it comes to making a successful blockbuster movie, Marvel did everything right with *Avengers: Endgame*. Marvel and Disney are trusted brands that fans expect good movies from. *Avengers: Endgame* had a great story with an epic conclusion to satisfy its fans. It currently has a score of 8,4/10 on IMDb, and on Rotten Tomatoes it has 94% on the Tomatometer and 90% on the Audience Score with the critics consensus: “Exciting, entertaining, and emotionally impactful, *Avengers: Endgame* does whatever it takes to deliver a satisfying finale to Marvel's epic Infinity Saga.” (Rotten Tomatoes, 2020).

The superhero genre is still super popular, despite there being so many superhero movies and TV-shows. We will see how long it lasts, and if Marvel will continue reigning the film market. Martin Scorsese is not the only one who thinks poorly of superhero movies, so it is going to be interesting to see if more people will become tired of the same recipe. Or maybe Marvel will change up its strategy to make sure fans do not grow tired of the genre?

All of the great actors playing in the movie obviously also contributed to its success. There are too many to mention them all. The actors also became more popular from the previous MCU movies, meaning they were also affected by the benefits of serialization. Robert Downey Jr., who is the one who started it all as Tony Stark in *Iron Man* is one of the world's most famous actors now, and it is mostly because of his role in the MCU. Being a fan of him alone is enough to make you see all of the MCU films. But there are so many more great actors that all have their fanbase, mostly because of their inclusion in the MCU films.

I believe I can confidently say that *Avengers: Endgame* is the most serialized blockbuster movie of all time. The Infinity Saga consists of 23 movies – 21 of them leads up to *Avengers: Endgame* which consists of 10 franchises, not counting the Avengers franchise. *Endgame* being the fourth direct sequel in the Avengers franchise manages to make a crossover between all of the movies in the MCU, assembling the audiences from each respective film. By becoming more and more diverse in the Infinity Saga, Marvel have expanded their demographics and made one of the most, if not the most globalized movie of all time. The box office proves that. Representation of women and people of color in particular has given the MCU wider demographics than they previously had. How will their box office look like when they continue this trend of making the MCU even more diverse? And let us not forget that the MCU has its source material from the comics which has been popular for decades, especially in America, making older generations part of its fanbase. In

addition to this, there are Marvel cartoons, older Marvel movies, Marvel TV-shows, Marvel Spin-offs, Marvel shorts, Marvel games, and there are unlimited Marvel merchandize.

With MCU's use of serialization and concluding it all with a big, epic, globalized event of a movie that is *Avengers: Endgame*, Marvel has managed to make the most successful movie of all time on the box office. It only barely beat *Avatar*, so this does not mean that movies are required to be serialized to become among the biggest movies on the box office, but *Endgame* definitely utilized this strategy to its full extent, and it proved to be very successful.

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