THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE (MCU): THE EVOLUTION OF TRANSMEDIAL TO SPHERICAL MODES OF PRODUCTION

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Joseph P. Davies

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The thesis of Joseph P. Davies was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Kevin J. Hagopian  
Senior Lecturer of Media Studies  
Thesis Adviser

Matthew F. Jordan  
Associate Professor of Media Studies

Matthew P. McAllister  
Professor of Media Studies  
Chair of Graduate Programs of Media Studies

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School.
ABSTRACT

As a brand, Marvel has undergone large changes in the past thirty years. They have gone from a popular comic book brand, to bankruptcy, to a licensor of products, to an independent film studio, and finally ended up as the latest branch in the super conglomerate Disney. The brand has been a popular topic of study, as the past few years have seen Marvel grow to be the most lucrative franchise in film history. Past studies have either focused on Marvel's trade story and the economic backdrop that led to such success, or the cultural elements of the films such as plot and theme. In this paper, I want to construct a fusion of these two narratives while taking a close at Marvel's past and present. While fusing the cultural and economic elements of the Marvel brand, I have discovered a distinct new paradigm of production and storytelling that will change the relationship consumers have to franchises. What makes Marvel different is that their franchises utilize a spherical model of production. What I mean to suggest by this spherical model is that many franchises are being linked together through character cross overs between films in different franchises. The metaphorical visualization of such a process could be thought of as a sphere, since the many connections can be rotated and perceived from different angles and origins. Why has this strategy not been used in the past, and where did Marvel get the idea for such a bold paradigm shift? I argue that these two questions can only be answered together, and to do so requires a sharp examination of the economic and cultural landscapes surrounding Marvel in the past thirty years. Marvel will fade as time moves forward, but the paradigm they will leave behind is why this study is so important. Already, companies are making an attempt to emulate this model (as will be explained in greater detail). As consumers, we may be witnessing a shift in the way we view franchises. Understanding where this shift came from and what it means for the world of entertainment are questions worth answering as we move into this new era.
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Chapter 1: Introduction and Critical Concepts

Looking back into history, storytelling has always been something human kind has engaged in. From cave paintings to the incredibly lucrative entertainment industry of today, people love to tell and listen to stories. They began as spoken word, being passed down from generation to generation through memory alone. The ways stories are produced have gone through major shifts over the years. Because stories are so powerful, who gets exposed to them and how is extremely important.

When thinking about storytelling, film has been a major media platform for the practice. The stories told through film that were most successful were disseminated broadly, and this allowed perspective storytellers to emulate the aspects that made these stories great. As film history progressed, the blockbuster was introduced by way of Jaws in 1975. Jaws is a film about a giant man eating shark that is terrorizing tourists. A group of brave men go on a boating voyage to put a stop to the beast. This type of larger than life plot has been the calling card of the blockbuster ever since. Blockbuster films were game changers, and they brought audiences in droves due to star power and high budget.

However, it was not until 1989 and Tim Burton’s Batman that the type of blockbuster we are more familiar with today emerged. Batman was not just a big film, it created a mania with merchandising and advertisements that will be discussed thoroughly in this thesis. Batman brings the iconic character of the caped crusader from comic to film in the dark and whimsical way only Tim Burton could manage. The story follows the bat as he duels with his arch-nemesis Joker for control of Gotham. This was the first of three major paradigm shifts in story and media production that will be explored.

A second paradigm shift occurred when the Wachowski siblings broke the stagnation in
1999 with *The Matrix*. *The Matrix* is a cerebral thriller about a computer hacker named Neo who discovers the world he knows is nothing but a simulation created by the hyper intelligent machines who have taken over the real world. He must attain skills via computer programs to do battle with the evil agents in the simulated world. Using multiple media platforms, the Wachowskis found a way to tell a story which was free to grow and change with each new iteration of the universe (or at least they did a convincing job making their audiences feel that way). The whole story was not presented in the trilogy of films, so fans were tasked with seeking out the story on other media platforms such as video games, animated series, bonus DVD features, and the internet. The story was now being produced in a myriad of media, each adding its own unique set of properties to the story as a whole. Once the Wachowskis set this style in motion, other media franchises began to follow suit, as I will outline in my literature review.

I propose that a third paradigm shift in storytelling and production is taking place in the cultural present. Where the Wachowskis required their audiences to fill in the gaps in their major blockbuster films with ancillary products which provided story continuity, Marvel has accomplished the same kind of story flow by linking together many different franchises. They have also utilized the mania introduced by *Batman* to bolster each individual franchise. With that many franchises, each generating mania, linked together with direct character cross-overs, a universe has been built which transcends franchise fatigue in a way that the previous two paradigms could not.

I intend to prove throughout this thesis that these paradigms of production exist, and that Marvel is currently responsible for the evolution of the *Matrix* paradigm into one that is much more complicated. This is important because it will (and already is) changing the way
consumers interact with media products. Concepts such as character and brand autonomy, the power of stories, and the economics of entertainment will be brought to bear as the timeline of storytelling paradigms is carefully scrutinized in this thesis. Furthermore, it is not just the political economy perspective that is bolstering the success of this paradigm. Marvel’s partnership with broadcast television and Netflix has opened the door for risk taking in the form of progressive concepts which have allowed Marvel to reach for audiences outside of those in the lowest common denominator targeted by huge blockbuster spectacles.

With the use of a new paradigm and a partnership with Netflix, it becomes clear that Marvel seeks to attain a foothold in every possible market. Big PG-13 blockbuster films appeal to many people, but there are still markets that remain out of reach. Additionally, the interest of the demographic sought by blockbuster films will logically decline over time if the same formula is repeated at length.

In order to make my argument about the existence of this third story production paradigm, I will be using three visual models to indicate the evolution of story production. This theory will be fully fleshed out in my second chapter, but first, I want to explore what has been written about the previous method, one that is known as transmedia storytelling. Transmedia storytelling, at least in the realm of film, was arguably pioneered by the Wachowskis, and it remains an integral part in Marvel’s new paradigm. Many of the sources throughout the literature review are dated, but each article which takes transmedia and intertextuality as its subject matter helps to build the story production theory I would like to expand on.

In order to grasp the way Marvel first became wedded to transmedia storytelling and evolved into the front runner in a new system of production, we must first understand the complex relationship between comic books and their new age adaptations.
Though the shift from the comic book format to film and television has been a lucrative one for publishers (especially Marvel), the transition was far from smooth. McAllister et al. (2006) identify a trend among big blockbuster sequels where the opening weekend starts strong, but revenue immediately drops off in the second weekend. They attribute this to the habit of blockbuster films to rely on big action rather than characters. The authors contrast large tent-pole (productions that support the financial performance of networks or studios) films like the 1978 Superman, where Christopher Reeve dons the cape as the orphan of Krypton who matures into the world’s greatest super hero with smaller, more character-driven films such as Sin City. Sin City depicts a grimy reality filled with sex and violence from the perspective of multiple characters who end up being connected in various ways. The irony is that audiences are put off by these smaller films for different reasons, such as dark themes. This is evidence that dark themes and brooding characters have a marginalized place in blockbuster Hollywood. These large films are meant to appeal to a diverse demographic, and films like Sin City, (a stylized and hyper-violent noir based on the graphic novel of the same name), though more true to its roots, alienate large audience portions. McAllister et al. (2006) describe this as “the seemingly yin-yang nature of the relationship between comic art and motion pictures” (p. 109).

Lefevre (2007) points out that comic book success and film success is not one to one. The fan base for comic books is much smaller, so the films must bring in audiences that do not align as comic fans. He notes that many comic artists and comic fans are skeptical about film adaptations, because they are not considered terribly relatable. Lefevre (2007) argues that despite these concerns, the film and comic mediums are very similar. He makes the observation that both are based on the image, while written mediums are not (Lefevre, 2007).

The comic is a print medium, but it is also a visual medium. This situates comics in a
very unique niche. Comics have been used to reach audiences from children to adults, and they have managed to do so with the same stable of characters. This is accomplished because comic story worlds are threaded together in a way that allows for any type of cross-over or re-imagining. As time passes and artists and writers come and go, the super hero universe shifts in terms of aesthetic and theme, but the narrative chronology remains the same unless otherwise stated (i.e. alternate timelines). However, the skepticism harbored by comic book fans of film adaptations is about more than just chronology.

The skepticism is also an issue of primacy. People resonate most strongly with the first version they consume. This issue also occurs when novels are adapted to the screen. However, as Lefevre (2007) points out, with a novel you compare the film to your imagined vision of what you should see. On the other hand, when a comic is adapted, the visual version of events is indisputable. Thus, when characters or events differ on screen than they appeared on the page, a feeling of perceived betrayal may occur with certain audience members (Lefevre, 2007).

Marvel has often taken liberties with its characters and events, often drastically altering the events in the comics. Non-comic readers remain oblivious to this, but do comic readers understand that many of these changes are necessary to ease the transition? If they do not understand, does it greatly matter? Marvel/Disney is not dependent on comic fan patronage for filmic success, as Lefevre (2007) points out early in his article. However, if the community at large decided to boycott the films, would this information get out and turn casual viewers away from the tent-pole films? A big part of Marvel’s brand is its trade stories. A large part of those trade stories revolve around “nerd cred”, or credibility given by individuals steeped in geek culture. Now that Disney has bought Marvel, and the brand appears all but immortal, is that nerd cred falling by the wayside? As my spherical model of production will show, nerd cred can now
manifest itself in many ways, all relating to the Marvel brand.

Comic book films have always been innovators, both in the formation of huge blockbusters and in shifting the paradigm of accepted visual styles. Comic book-based media fills an interesting cultural space, as it attracts young crowds by way of targeting the demographic but also holds a default older audience by association to a nostalgic past in comic books. Comic book film makers have taken the methods and stories used by comic book creators and adapted them to the screen. Blockbusters often struggle to balance a target audience and draw as many people to the theater as possible. Because comic books have such a special position in the market, the advent of comic films has made huge strides in bolstering blockbusters as a staple of the Hollywood film industry (McAllister et al., 2006).

*Superman*, which was one of the first hugely successful comic based blockbusters, utilized big name actors and was one of the forerunners of transmedia practice. Cashing in on the appeal of Superman as a character in and of himself, licensing and merchandising deals were made to spread the brand beyond the theater. On top of that, Superman grossed more globally than it did domestically, foreshadowing another huge media trend in terms of Hollywood (McAllister et al., 2006).

However, as pointed out by Walt of “Comics Talk Blog”, Superman had a Hollywood agenda, and any connections to the comics were simply utilized to make more money on screen. Walt mentions, “Of course the movie was not made to increase sales of comics but to make money on the big screen for Warner Bros. Pictures” (*Comics Talk Blog*, 2013). McAllister et al (2006) agree with this assessment, leading to their argument of comics being pushed out while adaptations gain traction.

*Superman* utilized an aggressive vertical scheme by filming much of the sequel
concurrently with the original. This method has been duplicated by film franchises ever since, along with a reliance on product placement and sponsorship deals to bolster revenue and cash flow for subsequent films. In a sense, *Superman* was the progenitor of the mania that was to come in 1989 with *Batman*. Comic book films, since their advent, have been pioneers in the way film is marketed and produced. They did not simply set up a precedent for blockbuster films to this day, they continue to shift the way we consume films, with Marvel leading the charge as the powerhouse of comic-based films (McAllister et al., 2006).

Despite the optimism presented by McAllister et al (2006), Lefevre’s article written the following year focused more on the impact for the fan base and the specific logistical issues. Lefevre (2007) states that there are four main problems adaptations must face: “(1) the deletion/addition process that occurs with rewriting; (2) unique characteristics of page layout and film screens; (3) the dilemmas of translating drawings to photography; (4) the importance of sound in film compared to the silence of comics” (p. 4). With these things in mind, Lefevre’s (2007) main question is how film can diverge from comics the least?

The creators of adaptations understand that a healthy amount of changes and rewrites are required to make a transition less clunky. Some elements of comic books would simply not play well on screen. However, Lefevre (2007) notes that diehard fans do not approach these changes as necessary or welcome.

Kevin Wilson of “Screen Rant” provides distinct examples of this type of unwelcome change in his article titled, “12 Worst Movie & TV Adaptations of Beloved Comic Book Characters”. One such adaptation was *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* in 2009. *Origins*, as can be gleaned from the title, depicts the roots of the most iconic X-man Logan and the trials he faces as he becomes the Wolverine. When discussing the adaptation of Deadpool, Wilson states,
“Why…did they make the character, famous for his wisecracking mouth, mouthless?” (*Screen Rant*, 2016). These changes are viewed as betrayals. Lefevre (2007) states this betrayal is in part attached to the desire by these fans to impress others with their deep knowledge of the original content, and the adaptations often rob them of that opportunity. As Wilson’s example shows, however, it is clear that very obvious character dimensions may be twisted beyond recognition, and not always for any sound reason.

If diehard comic book fans are left unsatisfied by these adaptations, why keep making the changes? Lefevre (2007) points out that these fans do not possess much cultural capital. Simultaneously, faithful films that would pacify these fans would not make for a successful film beyond that niche. He argues that this is not primarily a case of Marvel championing their bottom line over their most faithful fans. Quite simply, these films are a different medium, and it would be impossible to remain true to the original without sacrificing core movie making elements. He supplements this argument by adding that very poor decisions are still made, and some changes are made for no apparent reason (Lefevre, 2007). Though comic book adaptations face many narrative and stylistic problems and inconsistencies, they are still proving very successful in the market, so much so that comic book fans may become unnecessary to the success of the films.

As comic book films set the tone for the film industry in a myriad of different ways, comic book publishers are coming to the realization that their success in the film medium may be hurting their success in the print medium. Instead of an attempt to recuperate their initial revenue stream, “comic book publishers are, ironically, de-emphasizing the medium of comics” (McAllister et al., 2006, p. 111).

McAllister et al. (2006) discuss Marvel, and the way they borrowed money from Merrill
Lynch to gamble their property as independents. Marvel’s plan was to make “central characters as commercial as possible” (p. 111). An interesting case study is the Hulk. The original 2003 Hulk suffered from the complaints made about the lower budget character driven comic book films as discussed earlier. Hulk serves as the origin story of the hero as genetics researcher Bruce Banner is involved in an accident which turns him into a rage filled green force of destruction. The film had dark and complex themes, and the audience wanted something light and fluffy. As a result, Marvel created a “diet Hulk” (McAllister et al., 2006, p. 112). In order for these character to be marketable, they needed to be malleable and easily transferred in the mediascape. The same strategy was applied to Logan’s character as X-Men was adapted to the big screen.

This watering down process did not escape notice from fans and critics. Another example from Wilson’s “Screen Rant” article is Bane’s character from the 1997 Batman and Robin. In this installment of the Batman saga, Batman is joined by his famous sidekick Robin as the pair battle Mr. Freeze and Poison Ivy. The popular villain known for his sinister mix of brawn and brains was reduced to the former, as Wilson labels him “little more than a musclebound stooge in a mask” (Screen Rant, 2016). Luckily, this painful error in character canon was amended when Tom Hardy reprised the role in 2012’s The Dark Knight Rises. Rises is the third film in the Batman trilogy directed by Chrisopher Nolan. The film follows Christian Bale as Bruce Wayne as he fights the insidious terrorist Bane while simultaneously struggling with his age and efficacy. Hardy’s Bane fit more in line with what fans were used to regarding Bane’s character in the rest of the canon. With the creation of flat characters, Marvel attempted to ease the transition from comic to film by removing complicating factors, opting to ignore the critical backlash. This trend, though initially lucrative, was not sustainable.
Some outspoken talents in the industry took the practice to task. Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu, director of the 2014 dark comedy *Birdman*, a film about an aging star who was known for his huge blockbuster role as Birdman trying to make it in the world of theater, was quoted in a *Deadline Hollywood* interview. In regard to superhero films, “I always see them as killing people because they do not believe in what you believe…hate that…They have been poison, this cultural genocide, because the audience is so overexposed to plot and explosions and shit that doesn’t mean nothing about the experience of being human” (*Deadline Hollywood*, 2014). Without fully developed characters, motives become flat constructs, and actions serve nothing more than to add entertainment value through violence.

In Marvel’s new paradigm, characters primarily reside in the same medium, allowing them to develop much more pronounced characteristics. Not only would Marvel pioneer a new system of production, they would use it to break free from these flat and toxic characters. How did Marvel films go from standalone texts to the spherical model of production? It all began with intertextuality.

As a concept of scholarly debate, commercial intertextuality predates the rise of Marvel screen cultures by a significant period. However, a brief summary of its evolution helps to distinguish the manner in which Marvel studios was able to push the idea much farther.

The 1989 *Batman* film is the origin point of the first paradigm shift in media production. Meehan (1991) notes the immense popularity of Batman as a text in the general sense, and the appeal he garners from all ages, genders, and races. (This article ages well because of the ubiquitous status of Batman). She argues that it is very tempting for cultural critics to strip down the text in order to find what resonates with wide audiences in such a visceral way. However, Meehan (1991) wants to argue that this assumption about a text gaining its popularity because
audiences identify with it is flawed. She does not believe that consciousness, culture, and media are directly affected by each other (Meehan, 1991).

After setting up the error often made by cultural critics, Meehan (1991) maintains that economics must be factored in for a more thorough analysis of texts and intertexts, in this case, specifically Batman. Meehan (1991) makes the argument: “American capitalism organizes the creation of cultural artifacts as a process of mass production carried out by profit-oriented businesses operating in an industrial context. Profit, not culture, drives show business: no business means no show” (p. 48).

Meehan (1991) makes it clear that she does not mean to imply some sort of social coercion by the big bad corporations. She clarifies the concept by drawing attention to the fact that large cultural texts are a business and profit drives business. In other words, film is only one aspect of a larger force that includes all manner of paraphernalia. As a result, one cannot simply study text and intertext, but must incorporate an economic analysis (Meehan, 1991).

In line with the concepts explored by Meehan (1991), Hardy (2011) conducted an analysis of contemporary cross-media/cross-platform intertextuality through a case study of True Blood. True Blood is an HBO series about the hidden community of vampires living in Louisiana and their interactions with each other and the humans they live amongst. Hardy (2011) begins by defining commercial intertextuality as “the production and interlinking of texts like blockbuster films or TV series with allied paratexts and products, such as spin-offs, reversionings, promos, online media, books, games and merchandise” (p. 7) This quote refers to all the elements that make up the first paradigm of media production. Note that these elements do not relate to narrative, but simply reference the main text by way of political economy.

Hardy (2011) mentions Meehan (1991) and the way she describes intertextuality as a way
to cultivate and exploit audiences. He says this is the political economist’s way of looking at it. He then evokes Profitt et al. (2007) (who will come up further on in this Lit review) and the way they discuss ‘narratively necessary purchases’. Hardy (2007) also mentions the culturalist approach, looking at intertextuality as a creative and expressive way to promote participation and collaboration amongst consumers. This is the opinion presented by Jenkins (2006). Hardy (2011) wants to get beyond critical and cultural approaches and delve into an analysis of a single intertextual brand: *True Blood*.

An important aspect of Hardy’s (2011) article is how *True Blood* was promoted. Instead of the usual advertising done for network television, HBO utilized online and social media platforms to create an intertextual cult following. Popular music and celebrities were used to promote the show. Guerilla marketing schemes were also used which utilized paid individuals to hold fake rallies or appear in bars. Fake vampire themed websites and TV spots were subtly disseminated by HBO, all creating a climate where fan sites could find and spread these “Easter eggs”. Essentially, HBO manufactured a social media revolution to get the ball rolling, and fans of the show online picked it up and ran with it. All of the promotional work was spread across a myriad of texts from the internet to *Entertainment Weekly* to *Playboy* (Hardy, 2011).

Hardy (2011) argues that HBO was innovative in its promotional strategy. Instead of trying to do all the work themselves, they pushed for cult status so the fans would spread the word. Not only does this diminish the effort of HBO, but it makes the buzz feel much more authentic. However, problems arose when people started to see through the veil. Complaints were raised that corporate agendas were being disguised as the autonomous production of fans. (Hardy, 2011). Here, Hardy justifies the position taken by Meehan (1991) regarding corporate practice and the drive of profit.
Hardy (2011) holds that it is important to examine the way corporations attempt to order intertextual space. He wants to note that autonomy can and does exist in textual space, but that commerce and corporate interest will always act upon that space. He argues that political economists and cultural scholarship is necessary to parse out these dynamics as they become more complicated (Hardy, 2011).

For *True Blood*, blogs were created by HBO in order to gauge audience engagement in the text. That strategy built off one that was used back in 1991. Meehan (1991) discussed a specific economic strategy employed by Time-Warner where *The Dark Knight Returns* comic was used to test audience reception to a darker Batman. In other words, the comic market was clearly less valuable to Warner, reinforcing points made by McAllister et al. (2006). For Meehan (1991), promotion, advertising, and licensing were required to make Batman a must-see film. Similarly, Hardy (2011) argues that *True Blood* became must see television on the back of its promotional scheme.

HBO attempted to shift the paradigm of production with *True Blood*. However, the model did not come to fruition because of what was mentioned about the audience picking up on the ruse. Audiences will pay money to consume media products even if those products are obviously driven by a corporate agenda. However, when HBO tried to disguise that agenda, the savvy consumer public called their bluff. Marvel’s new paradigm is very open about the corporate agenda (as the trade stories attest in a following chapter), and has met with much more success.

Thematically, Meehan (1991) argues that *Batman* presents a “rich and often contradictory set of understandings and visions, about justice and corruption in America” (p. 59). According to her article, these themes do not come up because the producers felt they were important to think
about in the current political climate, but because they were what the manufacturers felt would target audiences in the most effective way and create profit (Meehan, 1991). Does this suggest that creators of large cultural texts try to estimate the current anxiety of their target audience? This would indirectly suggest that texts and cultures do in fact reflect off one another. Large cultural texts are more to do with economics and profit margins than cultural fatalism, but the result remains the same.

Meehan’s (1991) last segment focuses specifically on film. She begins by arguing that film depends on advertising to stimulate consumption, discussing the way the market for films is not driven by demand. She talks about how people needed to be convinced that they wanted a Batman film. She says consumers must be enticed to buy a ticket. She then goes on to talk about the way films are always in competition with one another, even multiple Warner films. Thus, releases are split between summer and winter in order to force consumer decisions (Meehan, 1991).

When discussing all these factors, Meehan (1991) concludes that films require “high production costs, limited seasons, limited number of releases, and extensive advertising to cope with the vagaries of the market” (p. 60). By vagaries, she means the unpredictability of the film market. She feels that big studios need to be very careful about the way they release their films and when they do so. She also mentions that word-of-mouth can kill a film before it even gets started (Meehan, 1991).

Marvel has been able to cash in on this release flow by creating films from their universe at a fast enough clip to be released at both of these crucial times every year. Sometimes, they are even able to release films in between those times as well. The Marvel universe, because of its connected nature, has evolved past the time Meehan (1991) describes. They do not need to be
careful, because they have woven the type of ‘mania’ created around *Batman* into each of the releases in the MCU. The audience is already on the hook for each of these films, regardless of franchise. Thus, the rapid fire method of release is warranted and effective.

Meehan (1991) talks about the way all this economic posturing is hidden behind the experience of the text and the ideology it pushes. She points to the emotional response elicited from film and how it allows us as an audience to look past the obvious calculations that went into its production. She says we are “sold” ideology. Meehan’s (1991) argues: “to understand our mass media, we must be able to understand them as always and simultaneously text and commodity, intertext and product line” (p. 62).

This hiding that Meehan (1991) discusses is different than the hiding done by HBO with *True Blood*. Instead of selling the audience ideology, HBO attempted to sell the audience autonomy, and they were not convinced.

In regard to the concept of intertext, Meehan (1991) understands it as a vehicle for “mania”. In her opinion, audiences need to be convinced of their desire for something like Batman through pervasive merchandising and media buzz. Her perspective leaves the audience with very little autonomy.

It is for these reasons that *Batman* is often looked at with a mixture of reverence and foreboding. These concepts are vocalized in an article written by Scott Mendelson of *Forbes* in 2014. The article is titled “Tim Burton’s ‘Batman’ at 25, And Its Wonderful, Terrible Legacy”. Mendelson, like many, fondly remembers *Batman* as one of his all-time favorite films. However, he also takes note of the way the film and the mania that came with it changed Hollywood forever, and in his opinion much for the worse.

Mendleson observes that *Batman* shifted the importance of big stars in blockbusters to an
emphasis on concept. Michael Keaton and Jack Nicholson helped bring in audiences, but the concept bolstered by the bat-mania is really where the film found success. In his words, “after the success of Batman, Hollywood raided their property pantries and have been doing so ever since” (Mendleson, 2014). Because of the popularity of his character, Batman was a non-sequel that behaved as a sequel in the marketplace. Today, as pointed out by Mendelson, we see mass quantities of adaptations, and it has taken its toll on Hollywood originality. (Mendleson, 2014).

In this section, corporate agendas and commodity fetishism as explained by political economy have held sway. These concepts are related to the first paradigm introduced in Chapter 2. This next section will be about the narrative elements used as media production techniques continued to evolve.

Transmedia storytelling was first discussed academically by Henry Jenkins. According to Jenkins (2006),

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction (p. 95-96).

If Jenkins is the tool, the Wachowski siblings would undoubtedly be the creative progenitors of the concept Jenkins helps us understand.

In his book, Convergence Culture, Jenkins argued that The Matrix trilogy was cut from a different cloth from boilerplate franchises. Because of the esoteric nature of the first film, audiences were either left reeling or pushing for more. According to Jenkins (2006), “No film franchise has ever made such demands on its consumers.......To truly appreciate what we are
watching, we have to do our homework” (p. 94). That homework is precisely where transmedia storytelling comes in.

In 2012, *Den of Geek* published an article by Luke Holland called “Looking back at The Matrix”. The article discusses the elements that made the late 90’s cerebral action film so successful. High among those reasons was the marketing campaign. In discussing the campaign, Holland recalls, “The film was an instant smash hit, and yet the tantalizing ads only accounted for part of its success because, more than any film of recent memory, it was a film sold on excitable word of mouth” (Holland, 2012). In other words, the autonomy which HBO attempted to manufacture seemed to manifest itself organically in the case of *The Matrix*.

Interestingly, trade stories about the revolutionary paradigm of production used by the Matrix trilogy are conspicuously missing in the years that surrounded the films. Almost all of these articles occur years later, with the full perspective of the campaign firmly in place. This suggests the complexity of what the Wachowskis accomplished, and how consumers had to spend too much time deciphering what they were seeing to analyze the method.

The story is deliberately made too large to consume within the confines of the theater. Instead, other media must be consulted to get all the answers (or at least most of them). (Jenkins, 2006, p. 95). Jenkins believes this strategy is in response to the way redundancy kills franchises by boring its fans. Because *The Matrix* played itself out across multiple media platforms, the last two installments seemed to be filled with plot holes and inconsistencies from the perspective of critics. As a result, the films were met with some hostility from those who tried to analyze them. A perfect example of this hostility comes from a 1999 *Rolling Stone* review by Peter Travers. His synopsis reads as follows,

“A futuristic kung-fu fantasy with terrific stunts and a stunted script. Keanu Reeves plays
Neo, a computer hacker who thinks he’s living in the twentieth century but is really a pawn in a giant virtual-reality game controlled by twenty-second-century programmers.

Dude! Damned if I can explain more about this muddled mind bender” (Rolling Stone). Jenkins (2006) views this as resulting from a lack of “aesthetic criteria for evaluating works that play themselves out across multiple media” (p. 97).

In sum, Jenkins agrees that *The Matrix* may be viewed as a failed experiment, but he stresses the importance of what was set in motion, a new paradigm of franchising. What Jenkins cannot see from his 2006 perspective is that reviews got better and better as years passed since the initial release of *The Matrix*. Once critics began to recognize what was being done in the paradigm, their frustration shifted to praise. Thus, the transmedia paradigm of production was technically successful, but not when it really counted.

A year later, Proffitt et al. (2007) make an argument for the way *The Matrix* trilogy set up a distinct transmedia model for global Hollywood. This was accomplished through linked commodity narratives, which they label “commodified intertextual flow” (p. 239). The authors claim this very fact served to undermine the anti-consumer culture theme the films were pushing (Proffitt et al., 2007).

The authors begin by pointing out the way corporate controlled media shifted from separate and discrete to integrated systems in the late 20th century. Factors contributing to this shift included new media outlets such as television and VCR and encouragement from global markets. To serve as an example, the authors point to Meehan (1991) and her *Batman* analysis. They argue that the way the property was synergistically spread across film, music, video games etc. contributed to a change in the way the word “text” is understood. Batman is considered a “commercial intertext” because of the way multiple corporate owners come together to
contribute success to a singular brand (Proffitt et al., 2007).

However, Proffitt et al. (2007) argue that Meehan (1991) only looks at the way the brand is repeated in multiple areas through brand identification. These authors, on the other hand, are also interested in a continuous narrative arc across media platforms. To move in that direction, Proffitt et al. (2007) discuss Couldry’s (2000) use of a concept called “textual environments”.

Textual environments include (a) “the material structures of textual production,” (b) “the material structures of distributing texts,” and (c) “the process which tend to order how we read, what connections we make between texts, what texts we screen out, and so on” (p. 81). This concept adds a crucial element to Meehan’s (1991) model, a focus on the order a text is read and the connections made between texts. Instead of a passive duplication, this idea implies a text which requires the audience to study it (Proffitt et al., 2007).

Proffitt et al. (2007) discuss the internet as a specific vehicle for the way this concept operates. Brooker (2001), while discussing Dawson’s Creek (a drama that began in the 90’s which follows the lives of four friends as they grow up in California) and its website is quoted as saying, “the internet permits the illusion that the characters have ongoing lives between episodes, and pulls it off convincingly” (p. 461). For Marvel in their new paradigm, the internet is not necessary to create an illusion about the ongoing lives of characters. These Marvel heroes are shown to have ongoing lives through their appearances in other franchises as well as references to their whereabouts during films in which they do not appear.

Jenkins (2006) makes the distinction between an old Hollywood and the new Hollywood. He states that the old Hollywood relied on redundancy. They wanted to make sure that an audience member could follow the narrative even if they missed a few chunks of it. However, “The new Hollywood demands that we keep our eyes on the road at all times, that we do our
research before we arrive at the theater” (Jenkins, 2006, 104). According to Jenkins (2006), this homework, while initially embraced, began to leave a bad taste in the mouths of consumers as they felt their wallets were now a requirement of a cult following.

However, Jenkins (2006) projected that these initial reservations would soon even out when consumers realized their franchises were opening up new narrative possibilities through their ancillary materials. Soon, a two-hour film will simply not be enough for audiences; they will expect more from the world they just experienced. In order to achieve this depth, Jenkins (2006) speculated that a single creator or creative unit would be necessary. He noted that in 2006, collaboration was not being executed smoothly. This is precisely the reason *The Matrix* continues to emerge as one of the first successful transmedia franchises. The Wachowskis personally wrote and directed much of the content for the ancillary products, or at least were in very tight communication with the outsourced creators.

Toward the end of his article, Jenkins (2006) provides an emblematic quote about the way franchises are changing from Tobias Van Veen, a blogger and self-proclaimed renegade theorist and pirate,

> When I first started, you would pitch a story because without a good story, you didn’t really have a film. Later, once sequels started to take off, you pitched a character because a good character could support multiple stories. And now, you pitch a world because a world can support multiple characters and multiple stories across multiple media (Van Veen, 2003).

A story is powerful in and of itself, but that story must end within the confines of a single film or a group of sequels. With a world, that story can be picked up in any medium that is a part of that world. The concepts of world building and transmedia storytelling are symbiotic. One cannot
exist without the other.

A shift occurred in story production. Instead of transmediality representing the broad production of story (plot), transmediality ushered in the process of world building. This shift is where the third paradigm of production emerges.

Fast and Ornebring (2015) were interested in the attempt by transmedia franchises to present a coordinated and organized world. However, the attempt to move a franchise from one platform to another often resulted in contradictions and inconsistencies. They wanted to ask the question, “how exactly, are transmedial worlds built up (or torn down) over time, and how do they change when worlds move across media platforms” (Fast and Ornebring, 2015, p. 4)?

According to Wolf (2012), a world can become transmedial in two ways: adaptation and “world growth”. World growth refers to the other medium adding to the canon of the original, presenting new knowledge. Much of what the authors discuss is the way a world is initially built, such as Tolkien’s Middle Earth, and over time it is added to by other professional creators and fans. Worlds are massive, and as such they contain a multitude of gaps and spaces ripe for improvisation. Transmedia storytelling acts as the thread that loosely connects all the elements of the world. But the strings can never be pulled tight, because that would lead to a strict and structured world with nowhere left to build.

Throughout this literature review, it has been established that comic books have faced many challenges in their move from the page to the screen. Not only did the characters in the comic books follow their own set of rules in terms of stylized action and camp, they were emblematic of a unique and expansive system of production. Comics by nature are inter-related, so a single film based on a comic character without transmedia tie-ins often did poorly. *Catwoman* (the story of a woman who is given catlike powers and uses them to simultaneously
fight crime and steal jewelry) and *Daredevil* (a film about Matt Murdock, a man living in Hell’s Kitchen who loses his sight but gains exaggerated versions of his other senses, which he uses to fight crime) are both strong indicators of that trend. Both films stood alone and both films were slammed both critically and at the box office. Luckily for comic publishers who were looking to expand, intertextuality and transmedia storytelling were beginning to fuse in a way that accommodated the structure of comics.

In the past, transmedial worlds have consisted of media platforms that all relate to each other, but only through the loose threads of narrative. This allowed new platforms, as well as offshoots of the original platforms, to pop up and thread themselves into the overall world. The problem was that these threads ran in every direction, crossing and tangling with one another. Each attempt to organize was thwarted by inconsistencies caused by the constraints of the new platform or the differences in creative vision by the parties producing the texts.

The new paradigm I outline in this thesis reflects that fact that much of the transmedia narrative thread manifests between texts in the same medium. However, multiple media platforms are utilized in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. As a result, transmedia is an integral part of this paradigm, but it only accounts for a portion of the production model.

While I seek to outline this new paradigm as I write about the present status of Marvel, other scholars are also writing about the MCU, but still in terms of transmedia. Publishing their book in 2016, Flanagan et. al. agree that the MCU represents “a key moment of recent film history” (Flanagan et al., 2016).

Their work represents a very thorough examination of the MCU as a transmedia universe. While I agree with them that this phenomenon has transmedia at the core, scholars need a larger scope to work with in order to fully flesh out what is currently occurring.
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework: Spherical Model of Production

In the next few chapters I explore an in-depth analysis of Marvel’s rise from bankruptcy to massive success story from a political economic perspective, as well as an examination of the way this new production paradigm has manifested in the content of Marvel texts. Before that, however, I would like to introduce the theoretical framework I will be using for the rest of this Thesis as I discuss Marvel, its properties, and its partnership with Netflix. The theory is called the spherical model of production and it visually displays the way Marvel not only utilizes intertextuality and transmediality, but maintains consistent temporality without the need for seriality.

The best way to introduce this concept is through a comparison to the old method used by franchises to maintain continuity between texts and ancillary products. As discussed by Meehan (1991), film franchises are primarily based around their major tent-pole films, such as the 1989 Batman. Branching off from the film, a plethora of ancillary products added to the mania surrounding the film. However, I do not wish to think of these relationships in the metaphor of a trunk and its branches, because this is not the way Marvel evolved. Instead, I would like to examine the intricacies of franchises in terms of a flat plane evolving into a sphere.

Before the advent of Marvel, franchises operated chronologically from a central point. For the sake of continuity with my literature review, I will be using the 1989 Batman franchise as an example of this system of production.

As stated by Meehan (1991), when the 1989 Batman was greenlit, the film was not simply released with the hopes that the public would embrace it. Instead, a campaign was launched by Warner Bros. to create what Meehan calls a mania. This included a partnership with Coke and music videos featuring Prince to name a few key components. The mania that
surrounded *Batman* during its run-up and release was all directly connected to the single film it was referencing. All of the ads and songs associated with the film were tied to marketing, not any sort of storytelling. As such, I do not count these as cross-overs. Cross-overs will be explained at length when I discuss Marvel’s paradigm.

Three years later in 1992, Warner Brothers released a second bat film starring Michael Keaton. The film was titled *Batman Returns* and featured the same director (Tim Burton) and aesthetic. This time, Batman must take on the Penguin as he threatens Gotham from the sewers. This film is another addition to the same franchise that was started in 1989. New advertising and marketing schemes were devised for the new film, but it all connected to Batman at large. In order to make a clear distinction between the way these films were produced (the old paradigm) and what Marvel is doing in the present, a visual representation will be valuable.

Figure 1 below is a diagram showing the way the Batman franchise produced its story in films, comics, songs, ads, and merchandise. The only continuous story is told across *Batman* and *Batman Returns*. As you can see, the nodes on the coordinate plane can be connected, creating a closed loop. This loop signifies a franchise and all of the ancillary materials associated with it. Most importantly, this loop does not represent a storytelling process. The line that connects *Batman* and *Batman Returns* indicates the only place where the story is being progressed.

The nodes and the loop that connect them in Figure 1 are a visual representation of the Bat-mania discussed by Meehan (1991). This is the way franchises produced their products for the next 8 years. A big summer blockbuster was announced, and everywhere a consumer looked, that franchise was being promoted. This production technique was effective because it created a symbiotic relationship between the media product and the merchandise that surrounded it. The merchandise built hype and got consumers to the theater. Once they saw the film, they wanted to
purchase the merchandise in order to associate themselves with the film. Effective though it may have been, this closed loop of production lacked longevity.

As time passed from the release of a film like Batman, the mania began to fatigue and eventually leveled off at a fraction of its former efficacy. This lead to the release of sequels such as Batman Returns. The mania was revitalized, and all the merchandise purchased during the first film was once again relevant. Thus, a cycle was created where franchises made big money based off a mania.

Of course, after a certain amount of sequels are made (there is no magic number; it varies vastly from franchise to franchise), the next film in the series does not revitalize the mania. Instead, attendance plummets and merchandise is no longer consumed in mass quantities. This is where the concept of the reboot comes in.

Batman as a character and a concept is ubiquitous, but the same man playing him across too many films grows tiring. This is called the Roger Moore effect in scholarly circles. Instead, the franchise is allowed to lay dormant until studio executives feel the time is ripe to bring back the icon. The new franchise that follows, (in this case Christopher Nolan’s Batman trilogy) uses the same source material but makes some major changes. The entire cast is new, the setting is often modernized to fit the current culture, and the tone may change. These new Batman films could not be understood in terms of Figure 1 because the franchise was new, the mania needed to be started fresh. The toys, ads, and sponsorship deals all changed to reflect the rebooted character. Franchise fatigue was bypassed, but a lag period was necessary, and money is not made during that period.

As referenced in chapter 1, the Batman system of media production is one of three paradigm shifts that have occurred in relation to this topic. The second shift occurred in 1999
with the release of *The Matrix* and it provided a unique way to cut away some of the time between films in order to maintain franchise fervor. The Wachowskis, who directed the film, are known for being pioneers in the film industry. The siblings spent 5 years on the initial film, and their approach was unconventional. The film making duo had formerly written Marvel comics, and they incorporated comic-book stories into their web site as part of their multi-media approach (Proffitt et al., 2007).

*The Matrix* fell in the transition period between VHS and DVD. Thus, the series was perfectly poised to be the progenitor of a brand new style of home video and the marketing that surrounded it. The Wachowskis capitalized on this by placing additional content in the collectors VHS and DVD versions of the film. As the consumer, one needed to pay the extra money in order to get the full picture. On top of that, the directorial duo set up an interactive screening so they could answer questions in real time. This required a copy of the DVD and internet access (Proffitt et al., 2007).

The Wachowskis were not done blazing trails in terms of Hollywood market practices. The two sequel films (*Matrix Reloaded* and *Matrix Revolutions*) were filmed simultaneously and released just six months apart. In *Reloaded*, Neo finds out he has 72 hours before the machines discover Zion, the last human city. He must find a way to save Trinity from a deadly fate before the time is up. In *Revolutions*, Neo must defend Zion from the deadly swarm of machines that threatens to wipe out the human race. *Revolutions* had a simultaneous global release. These strategies were used to keep momentum for the series (Proffitt et al., 2007).
Batman Production Model

Figure 1
In the wake of *The Matrix*, Warner released *Matrix Revisited*, including new material, as a way to monetize their upcoming *Reloaded*. They also released the video game, *Enter the Matrix*, and promoted it as a bridge between the original *Matrix* and the final two films. Even after the film series was finished, the MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) *The Matrix Online* served as a continuation of the universe after *Revolutions*. To add yet another tether, the animated collection of shorts, *Animatrix* was meant to bridge the games and films. These items were must-buy for those who considered themselves “true” *Matrix* fans (Proffitt et al., 2007).

We begin to see an intricate web being created where the film franchise is being expanded and molded by other related products. That web is visualized in Figure 2 below. *The Matrix* exists as a central entity consisting of its three films. Branching from that are all the ancillary nodes which add depth to the universe, but also serve as narratively necessary purchases. These nodes are not simply part of the mania that Meehan (1991) described. They were not badges to be worn to show fandom and solidarity with the franchise. These nodes were crucial to fans that wanted the most complete understanding of *The Matrix* universe as possible. For huge fans, the choice to make these purchases was not a difficult one.

The important thing to note is that these nodes shifted the medium. The ancillary material consisted of DVD extras, video games, and anime episodes. This allowed fans to engage in the story world transmedially. The world of *The Matrix* took what Meehan discussed in relation to *Batman* and the old paradigm of production and utilized a unique method to sate audiences who would normally fall victim to franchise fatigue. Audience members were not
exposed to the mania via advertisements and merchandise tie-ins. The tie-ins were utilized in the form of narrative elements, media texts. This practice that began with *The Matrix* was not just a novelty. It opened the door for franchises to present ancillary purchases in the form of storytelling continuity.

*The Matrix* was released in 1999. Just two years later, the Peter Jackson-directed *Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* was released. *Fellowship* is the large-scale live action adaptation of book one in J.R.R Tolkien’s high fantasy series, *Lord of the Rings*. The film follows a young hobbit named Frodo as he is tasked with destroying an evil ring which may herald the return of the evil Sauron. He must work with a team of dwarves, elves, and men to achieve his goal.

Following the lead of what the Wachowskis were accomplishing, New Line Cinema released an extended addition of each of the three films in the trilogy. The extended version of the film would come out between the release of the original and the sequel. Thus, instead of waiting for *The Two Towers* (sequel to *Fellowship*), fans could purchase the extended version of *Fellowship* in the down time. The extended versions featured at least 30 minutes of additional content that added depth to the original script and also bridged the gap to the next film. The practice was identical to the narratively necessary purchases pioneered by the Wachowskis.

Furthermore, in the years following the *Matrix* trilogy, “.5” versions of films were cropping up in the DVD marketplace. As a foreshadow of the spherical model to come, Marvel released *X-Men 1.5* as a DVD exclusive, claiming to bridge narrative content between *X-Men* and *X2: X-Men United*. Though these examples may not be as ambitious as what was done by the Wachowskis, they prove that the means of adding these narrative purchases was available. Though under-utilized, I still consider this a paradigm shift because it added a new element to
franchise production and provided a direct segue-way to what Marvel is currently accomplishing. The glaring difference is that in the Marvel model, the narratively necessary purchases are not ancillary, but part of other franchises.

While the Batman model in Figure 1 features a closed loop of nodes, Figure 2 features ancillary materials woven together with feature films to create a continuous story, as indicated by the arrow that starts at *The Matrix* and ends after *The Matrix Online*. A consumer could simply watch the film trilogy and understand the plot in a general sense, but the universe created by the Wachowskis was frustratingly esoteric without having the gaps filled in.

As a result, this paradigm allowed consumers to seek narrative answers and continue to engage with the story while sequels were in production. However, the task of jumping down the rabbit hole and bouncing from medium to medium to seek answers was a large commitment, both financially and temporally. Without a universe such as the Matrix which proved to be simultaneously intriguing and elusive, transmedia storytelling would not have been adopted so enthusiastically.

While the transmedia method of storytelling and production used by the Wachowskis bolstered the model used by franchises like *Batman*, the original problem still emerged when the dust settled. After the final Matrix film was released and the MMO became obsolete by technological standards, Matrix mania fizzled out and died. The Wachowskis went on to new projects and Warner Brothers appeared content to let the franchise stay in the past. Of course, a reboot may appear in the future, but with a new paradigm shifting production standards in Hollywood, such a reboot would look vastly different.

The third paradigm I am speaking of is the current paradigm of media storytelling, and it accounts for all previous pitfalls related to franchise fatigue. In the following chapter, I will be
giving a detailed account of Marvel studios as they evolved into something nobody could ignore.

This production does not exist on a flat plane like Batman or The Matrix. Because of the level of complexity and the myriad of connections, the visual representation of Marvel’s model of production has developed into a three dimensional sphere.
Matrix Production Model

Figure 2
Below, Figure 3 represents that very sphere. For the purposes of this paper, so readers are able to clearly see the way the story world interconnects, the visual is shown in two dimensions. However, it should be thought of as a three dimensional sphere as viewed from a top down perspective. The curved lines indicate the way the nodes in the model exist in three dimensions.

However, one cannot simply understand the Marvel universe by looking at it from one perspective. Much of this is related to the fact that Marvel’s universe does not consist of just one franchise, but twelve. Those franchises are color coded and labeled on the lower left-hand side of Figure 3. All of these franchises exist on one model because they all make up one distinct story world.

The franchises differ in regard to location and often in regard to time period. However, all the characters act and react to the same set of stimuli. For example, the events of *Avengers* shook New York to its core. In the *Daredevil* and *Jessica Jones* Netflix series, characters reference the battle and newspaper headlines covering the story can be spotted in the background of some of the scenes. Though *Agent Carter* (a series which follows Peggy Carter as she founds S.H.I.E.L.D) is set in the 1940’s, Carter interacts with characters that directly link to current Avengers, such as Tony Stark’s (Ironman) father. She is also heavily involved with the fledgling S.H.I.E.L.D organization which oversees superhero activities in the modern films.

As a result of all these franchises existing in the same narrative universe, characters from each individual franchise are often seen directly interacting with characters in films where they did not originate. When such an event (or crossover, as I call it) occurs, it is represented visually in Figure 3 by a line drawn between franchise nodes. The color of the line indicates that a character crossover occurred in the franchise node that corresponds to that color. For example, *Captain America: Winter Soldier* is connected to *Iron Man 2* with a blue line. The blue line
represents that a character from Iron Man appeared in the Captain America film, since that franchise node is partially blue.

Additionally, a distinction has been made between cameo appearances which often occur during post-credit sequences, and full-fledged character cross overs. The cameos are represented by dashed lines, while the full cross overs are solid lines. In the post-credit sequence of The Incredible Hulk, Robert Downey Jr. as Tony Stark is seen in a bar talking to General Ross from the Hulk film. This constitutes a cameo and can be seen in Figure 3 as a dashed green line between the first Hulk and Iron Man films.

Proximity to the central Marvel node indicates the number in the series of a franchise. As such, the Iron Man, Hulk, Thor, and Captain America nodes that appear clustered around the central point indicate the first film in each of those franchises. The nodes branching out on the same line as those films toward the edge of the sphere represent the second and/or third installment.

The sheer number of lines making connections between franchises indicates the high level of complexity exhibited in this new paradigm. The story is not continuous like The Matrix paradigm, yet it is constant and ever expanding. Franchise fatigue has been greatly reduced by presenting the overarching story of the universe across many different franchises simultaneously. Consumers do not need to wait for a reboot or the next sequel in a single franchise, because a different franchise in the same universe will doubtless be releasing a new film or season in the down time.

Franchise fatigue was not the only issue that plagued the transmedia paradigm seen in figure two. In order to better understand what stunted the second paradigm, a careful look at narrative theory is important. First of all, a categorization of the Matrix trilogy will help to put
matters into perspective. The complex sci-fi model of production can be viewed as postmodern.

Postmodern films can be “characterized by the scrambling of temporal order, the mixing of genres, a pastiche of quotes taken from previous films or other cultural forms, and a leveling of light and heavy discourses” (Ben-Shaul, N.S., 2008). In other words, the postmodern filmmaker challenges the natural order of how films operate. Thus, the use of other media to fill in the narrative gaps of blockbuster films would most certainly fall under the postmodern moniker.

Though the postmodern style is an attempt to give a film or text a distinct flavor that can be separated from the average, many pitfalls are associated with the practice. Some of these issues include “origin, creativity, coherence, closure and identity, along with textual depthlessness, loss of affectivity and viewer disorientation” (Ben-Shaul, N.S., 2008). Though few would doubt the creativity and depth of the Matrix trilogy, the fledgling transmedial model which demanded narratively necessary purchases suffered from lack of coherence and viewer disorientation. That much can be gleaned from the early critical reaction to the films.

I want to argue that Marvel’s spherical model remains postmodern by virtue of spinning a single narrative through twelve different franchises, all situated on one temporal plane. By that, I mean to say that these films and shows are reactive to one another in a way that shows that many of the events seen in each individual text may be happening simultaneously to events in the adjacent franchises, only to be referenced later in passing. So, how does this model bypass the pitfalls of postmodern media?

Unlike the Matrix trilogy, which had built-in gaps to accommodate the narrative presence of other media, the texts in the spherical model began by operating under the traditional narrative form. Each film had a distinct beginning, middle and end. Additionally, the events in each of the
films associated with one individual franchise such as *Iron Man* had a narrative arc that could easily be followed from the first film to the third without any lack of confusion or viewer disorientation.

The postmodern element appeared in the way the characters from these franchises interacted with one another and directly impacted events in other franchises. However, these impacts were never enough to derail coherence, they are mostly mentioned in passing. Characters like Nick Fury or Tony Stark would appear in post-credit sequences to assemble the team, or a glimpse of Captain America shield could be spotted. Thus, rather than being narratively necessary, the viewing of all twelve franchises is narratively optimal. The order an audience member consumed these franchises was not important, as they were only loosely connected.

This of course is how the model began, but it has since begun to change drastically. Instead of temporality and seriality being in flux, the ordering of events and timeline began to matter. In the recent *Ant-Man*, for example, a film about a criminal named Scott Lang who is enlisted to fight crime using technology capable of shrinking him to the size of an ant, finds himself in a fight with Falcon. Falcon is a character introduced the year before in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. He is another member of the military who is also in possession of a rocket powered flight suit. After the events of *Winter Soldier*, Falcon is added to the ranks of the Avengers, and left to guard their facilities. When Lang goes to break into those very facilities, a battle ensues.

For those who had not seen *Winter Soldier*, this scene would be disorienting. Since Marvel so carefully avoided postmodern pitfalls up to this point, why did they begin to embrace them? My theory is that the Marvel model has become so popular based on ticket sales and hype
that Disney/Marvel felt confident that those who go to one Marvel film are going to all of them. If not, a little disorientation may rub some viewers the wrong way, but the pleasure derived by fans who are initiated is invaluable for brand loyalty.

In essence, Marvel carefully created a media monolith by loosely connecting many franchises. Once they picked up enough of a following, the brand began to make more subtle connections and more direct cross overs dependent on seriality and temporality. They have also proven that this method is working, given that the complexity has ratcheted up while ticket sales continue to soar.

There are several other elements to the Marvel universe that are not listed on the model. The comics are left out of the model because I wanted to focus on the screen elements of the universe, as these are the most well-known and lucrative. However, starting in 2008, tie-in comics were released. These comics were not necessarily adaptations from the films, but were related to elements that may have been mentioned briefly in the films or happened off-screen. These comics and the way they operate are very similar to what the Wachowskis did with their multi-media tie-ins. As I have just described, however, Marvel found themselves immune to postmodern pitfalls in the individual films due to the existing popularity of the universe.

Additionally, in 2011, Marvel announced Marvel One-Shots. These are direct-to-video shorts that are directly tied to the MCU. They are used to experiment with characters that may eventually be given their own franchises, as well as to bolster the backstory and information on characters and events introduced in the main franchises. I do not depict these One-Shots as nodes in the model because they are not established franchises. However, they can be thought of as floating in the empty white space among the nodes and lines on the model.

Another element that can be attributed to that white space was introduced in 2015 by Cort
Lane, Marvel’s Vice President of Animation Development and Production. Marvel partnered with Google to create a news program on YouTube called WHIH Newsfront with Christine Everhart. This has been used as viral marketing for the universe.

These examples show that Marvel has paid close attention to the production models and ideas that preceded the spherical model. They borrowed heavily from the transmedia practices of the Wachowskis, and even emulated the fake blog created to promote *True Blood* with their fake news program. The use of a single postmodern production tactic always seemed to fail in the past, but the conglomeration of many, with the proper execution, has proven immensely lucrative.

Marvel films are currently being released on a six-month cycle, but that pace is going to pick up as we move toward 2020. Marvel’s goal is to have another piece of their universe almost constantly releasing on one of three media platforms. Those platforms consist of blockbuster films, Netflix original content, and television series. These three platforms are split into sections in Figure 3 and labeled accordingly. Not only does the utilization of three platforms allow for a steady release schedule, it allows for the acquisition of new demographics and niches.

Blockbuster films are designed to appeal to the broadest possible demographic of consumer. Thus, they do not take many risks and deal with generic themes. Television is a bit more targeted, yet the shows on broadcast networks must abide by strict standards that do not allow for anything terribly shocking. As a result, you can see that lines directly connect the blockbusters and television series. Either set of texts can be enjoyed by a large demographic, and thus direct connections will not alienate those who would be unable to cross from one platform to another.

In contrast, Netflix does not need to abide to any set of rules or regulations. They have
free reign to do whatever they wish with their Marvel characters. Instead of playing it safe and creating more generic heroes, Marvel went in a dark direction with its Jessica Jones and Daredevil heroes. As a result, no lines directly connect the Netflix nodes to any other nodes in Figure 3. They are solely connected to one another, and are only obviously connected to the broader Marvel universe by various references. I will spend the final two chapters of this thesis talking about each of these series in turn, and the way they are able to pull in new audiences while remaining a part of the Marvel canon at large.

Now that this new organization of franchises has been established, it is important to grasp the logic behind the re-structuring. While the initial inspiration clearly emerged from Marvel comic book worlds, the partnership between Disney and Marvel indicates something much deeper. Congruency and continuity in story worlds is not only appreciated by audiences, but expected. As such, the complex web used in the spherical production model is risky. Juggling so many different stories and characters on the same timeline while using many different creative talents can very easily lead to plot holes and mistakes. What better way to mitigate risk than to have access to the capital and resources of one of the most powerful entertainment conglomerates in the world? I mentioned in chapter 1 that the motivation behind this new paradigm was to have access to many markets. We can see this hypothesis beginning to shift out of its ephemeral form into something solid by looking at Marvel's trade stories as they built themselves from a comic book publisher to the biggest powerhouse in Hollywood.
Figure 3
Chapter 3: Marvel Trade Narratives and Netflix

I have mentioned Marvel’s transformation from comics to film to television. Now that I have established that Marvel is a new type of franchise (or system of franchises) and that I believe they are motivated by the desire to be a pervasive brand in all demographics, a full chapter on their history will put matters into context. Rather than look at the stories told in the media texts, I will examine stories told by executives, analysts, fans, and critics. This perspective depicts the way Marvel wants to be viewed, how they are actually viewed, and the way they utilize partnerships and acquisitions to make their spherical system possible.

The best place to begin when thinking about the political economics of Marvel is with an outline of the company’s market practices between 2005 and 2009. This allows for an effective analysis of Marvel’s trade stories. Trade stories should be understood as the stories told about a brand by the brand itself, industry insiders, and in the case of this thesis and the new paradigm it is trying to explain, the fans as well. Trade stories are constituted as a mixture of facts about brand mergers and acquisitions, opinions of analysts and fans, and powerful myths spun by those most invested in the brand (Marvel executives).

Johnson (2012) argues that Marvel’s independent film production allowed it to accrue creative and economic power from major studios. Marvel negotiated these changes through trade stories which gave power to comic book managers (Johnson, 2012). Due to the success of the properties licensed by Marvel to big studios, the company was able to pull itself out of bankruptcy and even dive into the world of independent production. The first film created by Marvel independently was Iron Man, and Derek Johnson (2012) argues that this marked the launch of “a unique model for cinema production in the age of convergence: an independent company with expertise in a different media industry drove block-buster film content” (p. 1).
Iron Man is a film about Tony Stark, an extremely wealthy engineer/businessman, who finds himself taken as a prisoner of war. In order to escape, he builds an iron suit, and ends up refining himself into a crime fighting dynamo.

Though he did not know it at the time he was writing, Johnson was making reference to the origin point of the spherical model of production. Marvel's success prompted Disney to buy the company in 2009 for $4 billion. Johnson (2012) views film as central when looking at converged media economies. As a result, it was more important for Marvel executives to stay in line with film styles than to remain loyal to comic book logic.

Looking at where Marvel is today, it is important to focus on what Marvel did in their brief moment of independence as a film studio. Johnson (2012) finds that Marvel's “self-production initiative constituted a significant economic reorganization of Hollywood modes of production” (p. 2). He views these changes in terms of trade narratives in which Marvel's independence was described in a teleological fashion. Johnson (2012) wants us to think about how the convergence of comics and film has altered both industries, specifically in relation to production. He also wants to focus on the role of the comic book fan in these changes (Johnson, 2012).

Johnson (2012) argues that companies like Marvel and WingNut studios (Lord of the Rings) are Hollywood outsiders. Instead of these properties being controlled by the Hollywood system, they work independently to create deals and partnerships which converge books, comics, games, merchandise and film on their own terms. With Hollywood holding so much power, Johnson wonders how these outsiders garner such support and success (Johnson, 2012).

He comes to the conclusion that ancillary texts are utilized by these secondary outlets in order to justify their existence in the mediascape. Specifically, “stories that film producers tell
about their labor play a direct role in reproducing conditions in which that labor occurs” (p. 4). He suggests that these producers construct the production context into which their work can flourish. Johnson (2012) goes on to examine Marvel production strategies and trade stories in order to back up his claims. He argues that “Marvel Studios narrativized itself and imagined its ability to serve established Hollywood production communities in spite of its outsider status and even its bid for material independence” (p. 4-5). With the context firmly in place, Marvel went to work creating a new model for filmmaking practices (Johnson, 2012).

Nick Fury first appears in a post-credit sequence of Iron Man. This was the first independently produced Marvel film, and they wasted no time setting up a convergence of narrative universes. Nick Fury represents the character in the Marvel universe who brings the heroes together. I have discussed an intangible thread that connects transmedia texts, and Fury is the humanization of that thread for the MCU.

From the start, The Avengers movie itself and all the movies required to lead into such a powerful media force were being slated and announced by Marvel. The Avengers is the first film in Marvel’s spherical model which features characters from many franchises, allowing Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, and Hulk to battle together to take on an earth shaking interdimensional force. In order to remind audiences of universe continuity, subtle clues such as Thor's hammer and Captain America's shield were included in films that did not feature those characters. Intelligently, rather than toss these characters into other franchises from the beginning, Marvel teased these connections. Thus, when the origin films for these characters were released, the jump between franchises felt less far-fetched to consumers.

These films became “mere episodes in a larger work” (Johnson, 2012, p. 6). Prior to Marvel independence, Marvel films were licensed to different studios. As a result, continuity
and convergence would have been next to impossible. The speed at which Marvel began its transmedia campaign suggests that their bid for independence was not simply to absorb all financial assets from the films, but to create an entirely new paradigm of film production and consumption.

Johnson (2012) also argues that the links established by Marvel between franchises lead to higher DVD sales, as they “encourage careful, repeated, often frame-by-frame viewing” (p. 7). Beyond the DVD sales, Marvel was careful to use tie-ins via other media outlets. Using transmedia, Marvel continued storylines through video games and television series, creating synergy (Johnson, 2012). I want to argue that these claims made by Johnson about Marvel and its aims are accurate, but a product of the time the article was written, conditions have evolved since 2012. DVD sales have fallen as a percentage of total film revenue in the current market. As a result, the subtlety of narrative tie ins was replaced by overt cross media interactions.

An important element of the Marvel trade story is sorting out who has creative control over production. With so many properties feeding into one large universe, many creative minds with different visions are utilized to oversee each separate production. How does this group maintain continuity? Even before those questions needed answers, Marvel sought to increase creative control, as they began by licensing their properties to large established studios. Johnson (2012) makes the argument that Marvel paved the way for a non-cinematic outside firm to have a place in Hollywood. He outlines why licensing has its advantages, such as revenue without risk or production costs. However, without creative power, Marvel's direction was left to the whim of the big studios. Due to the competition between production partners, it became increasingly difficult for Marvel to keep fans interested in their toys and video games in a consistent fashion (Johnson, 2012).
In order to branch out on their own, Marvel secured a credit deal with Merrill Lynch. They were required to prove the viability of their first four films as a worthwhile investment. *Iron Man* was Marvel's first film as an independent studio, and "Marvel Studios profited more than from its previous sixteen films combined" (Johnson, 2012, p. 11). Marvel had proven its viability, and thus moved into its years of independence (Johnson, 2012).

As part of its quest for universe continuity, Marvel's independence made great changes in the organization of production communities. For instance, Marvel employed different directors and had them work together on a large project. In addition, unique deals were signed with actors, such as Scarlett Johansson, who made appearances in multiple Marvel films. These deals are discussed by Johnson in relation to cameos made by Scarlett and Samuel L. Jackson across many films. These cameos often occurred in the post-credit sequences of Marvel films, and they are represented by dashed lines in Figure 3 above. Today, not only are these cameos being made by much larger characters, they are doing more than popping up in post-credit sequences. In the upcoming film, *Captain America: Civil War*, Iron Man is a main character. Iron Man and Captain America are at cross purposes as the world tries to grapple with how super heroes could be regulated by the UN, sparking a feud which leads to violence between two groups of heroes. As described in the theory chapter, these cross overs are represented by solid lines in Figure 3.

However, Hollywood talent was not always terribly warm to the idea of participating in such a sustained project. In order to circumvent these types of issues, Marvel utilized a creative committee in order to streamline all aspects of making their films, shows, and video games (Johnson, 2012).

Marvel established new creative and economic methods for large Hollywood films. In doing so, they challenged existing ideology. This brought out two tensions in Hollywood: who
could cross media borders, and who could control the combination of comics and film? Marvel put itself in an authoritative position regarding these tensions, and Johnson (2012) questions why Hollywood did not resist this move (Johnson, 2012).

The answer to this question lies in trade narratives. Marvel used them to legitimize their control, reassure the existing fan base, show expertise in the brand, and use teleological claims like destiny and inevitability to explain their dominance (Johnson, 2012). The justification used by Marvel when writing these trade stories was that the next logical step was to cut loose from outside studio control. The word “destiny” is used repeatedly in stories about Marvel in trade publications like Variety and Hollywood Reporter between 2002 and 2009. For instance, the phrase, “control our own destiny” was used by analyst Anthony DiClemente, Marvel Studios president Michael Helfant, and David Maisel, the man responsible for arranging the sale of Marvel to Disney, in a short span of time between 2006 and 2007.

Using their creative control, the films and games Marvel created operated in terms of characters, not individual media platforms. In this way, a relationship could be formed between the characters and the fans. Marvel used Elektra, what they deem to be their “one bad film” (Avi Arad in Johnson, 2012, p. 17), as evidence that without creative control, disaster was a real possibility. Elektra is a film about a character seen in Daredevil who is trained as an assassin at a young age. Industry analysts like Borys Kit picked up on this and criticized DC for not following suit. On top of that, Marvel executives, in working closely with comic books, claimed to have a special understanding of what their fans want, even identifying with these fans. (Johnson, 2012)

Johnson (2012) points out that it is not in the interest of Marvel to please these “fanboys”. They simply do not make up a large enough demographic to sell the millions of tickets necessary
to make a film successful. Instead, the trade stories pandering to fans were used to justify Marvel’s existence in the industry (Johnson, 2012). Thus, Marvel is not overly concerned with pleasing comic enthusiasts, but they absolutely need to act as though they are. A blatant lack of loyalty to the canon looks bad to any audience. However, if the trade stories reflect a concerted effort to remain true to the source material, mass audiences feel reassured that they are being ushered in to a larger narrative universe.

Yes, the fanboys may rage in the forums, but they still pay the money to see the film. Not only did Marvel use trade stories to secure audiences, it also made reference to itself as a community for laborers to join (Johnson, 2012). Because Marvel has large film franchises that are interconnected, they also use large interconnected labor forces. Unlike other large Hollywood productions where laborers finished a project and looked for another one, Marvel provided a steadier model of employment.

Even back in the late 2000’s, Marvel had its eyes on the big picture. Establishing themselves as an extension of their comic books gave Marvel credence in the eyes of their oldest and most devout fan base. However, film is about getting theater seats filled, and that requires ubiquity. This is where the spherical model of production comes in, with cross-overs allowing for seamless extension into any market or niche with minimal risk of any narrative fau paux.

To re-iterate why these cross overs differ from those seen in the cartoons and in a few Hollywood films, these examples reach relatively static markets. Cartoons are always going to be consumed primarily by younger age groups. Thus, before the MCU was created, these iterations of Marvel remained in those groups. With the spherical model of production, new cartoons can be created which directly reflect plot points and character attributes from the MCU. That way, established fan bases of older generations for the large tent pole franchise films will be
more likely to show their kids Marvel cartoons, and may even watch themselves. When those kids reach the age where they can go see PG-13 films, the odds are higher they will be attending the vast majority of films in the MCU.

Marvel had only recently been acquired by Disney at the time Johnson (2012) was writing, so he only mentions it briefly in his conclusion. I will discuss some highlights from Marvel's trade history from 2009 to the present. What was the media saying when the Disney acquisition occurred?

The reception to the idea was resoundingly positive in the trade world. In August of 2009, The New York Times was quick to point out the symbiotic benefit that would occur for the two companies. Disney has long found it difficult to tap the male market, with their most viable properties pertaining to little girls. Marvel, on the other hand, was about to access a very large sum of capital. “The acquisition points to the film industry's biggest issue at the moment: access to capital. Those who have it are finding opportunity; those who do not may be left behind” (Times, 2009). The Times also pointed to market analysts who felt this purchase would not only catalyze more media consolidation, but that it was a “smart and ambitious move” (Times, 2009).

Analysts and the general media were in agreement that this merger would benefit both companies, but what about the fans? Paul Young of Screen Rant addressed the rumblings in the Marvel fan community that a merger with Disney would water down their favorite characters. Young pointed to other Disney-owned producers such as Miramax and the fact that they released films like Kill Bill (a film about the bloody murder of a woman’s husband and family and her violent journey toward revenge) under Disney. Young provided further evidence that Marvel characters were safe by discussing Disney's track record of letting production companies do what they do best, as is the case for Pixar. For him, Disney just means more money for Marvel
Studios to pump out even higher quality content. (*Screen Rant*, 2009)

Much of what was being talked about in the trade world at the time of Disney’s purchase was how Marvel would be able to integrate their own characters into the broader Disney universe. This is exactly what both companies wanted. Not only does Marvel use cross-overs in their own films and shows to seek new fan bases, they cross over into other media conglomerates to merge with their universes as well. Disney thinks the same way, as they have been buying up smaller studios for many years, so the purchase was by no means spontaneous.

At this point in their history (circa 2010) Marvel had a firm hold on the tent pole blockbuster action film and young male demographics as far as the MCU was concerned. Looking at these groups, the glaring weakness in market saturation were women and adults looking for mature/progressive themes. By progressive, I mean to suggest themes that promote the strengthening of identity movements such as feminism and racial equality. Progressive themes detach themselves from the ideological status quo seen in popular media, allowing for the maturation of society. To maintain consistency, the films making up the MCU are geared toward a broad, low common denominator audience. The films are the largest cash cow for Disney/Marvel in the media, so maintaining ideological status quo is in their best interest.

Considering the track record of large conglomerates, settling for current profit margins is a death knell, as it was for franchises in the former two production paradigms. Remaining dynamic is important to insure longevity, and Netflix has made that dynamism possible.

Netflix took the streaming world by storm in 2010, offering a service with a plethora of content for a marginal fee. Without the need for advertisements, Netflix quickly became a new frontier of film and television production. Shows that were put to death on cable networks were finding themselves resurrected on this platform, and consumers were, (and still are) in love.
Netflix, like Marvel, began as a media company that promoted redundancy. Marvel would license their heroes to big studies who would endlessly churn out origin stories and a handful of sequels. The model was lucrative, but unsustainable. Netflix offered content to subscribers by way of old syndicated television series’ and films you may also have found in the dollar section of a video store. However, Netflix was willing and able to evolve into something with more substance.

Given their astounding success, Netflix was able to produce original content, starting with *House of Cards* in 2013. *House of Cards* is a political drama about Frank Underwood, a corrupt whip who will stop at nothing to make his way to the top in Washington. With Marvel sitting on the cutting edge of unique film worlds, a partnership with the company re-inventing home media was a match made in entertainment heaven.

When the announcement was made that Marvel would partner up with Netflix late 2013, what was the trade reaction? To start with, I will return to *Screen Rant*, who situate themselves as an independent film and television news outlet. As such, agendas and biases based on the industry itself should be minimal.

The article by Rob Keyes begins with some benign factual observations about the partnership. Marvel and Netflix had plans to develop four shows and a miniseries. The characters attached to these installments were Daredevil, Jessica Jones, Luke Cage, and Iron Fist. After that, Keyes quotes the president of Marvel Entertainment, Alan Fine:

This deal is unparalleled in its scope and size, and reinforces our commitment to deliver Marvel’s brand, content and characters across all platforms of storytelling. Netflix offers an incredible platform for the kind of rich storytelling that is Marvel’s specialty. This serialized epic expands the narrative possibilities of on-demand television and gives fans
the flexibility to immerse themselves how and when they want in what’s sure to be a thrilling and engaging adventure.

Keyes gleans from this quote that Netflix will offer these new shows in full seasons. In other words, fans will be able to sit down and binge-watch the new Marvel programming. Keyes also points out that unlike *Marvel’s Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* (a series about the missions of those who work for the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division) which is reactive to the films, and thus plays itself out over long time spans, these Netflix shows will provide concise and independent stories about new characters being introduced within the Marvel universe (*Screen Rant*, 2013).

When looking at Fine’s quote from the perspective of the stories media companies tell about the stories they are telling, key words are important to focus on. Just like Johnson noticed the repeated use of “destiny” when looking at Disney/Marvel merger trade stories, particular words are strategically used here as well. “Scope”, “Platforms”, “Storytelling”, “Flexibility”, “Expand”. All these words are used to evoke Marvel’s main objective, the acquisition of new audiences while remaining in continuity with the rest of their brand. Not only can the fans be flexible, as Marvel provides them with the means to watch these Netflix shows on their own terms, but people reading these quotes will also be subtly reminded that Marvel is flexible as a brand. Marvel is able to provide content across platforms with a wide scope and expanded storytelling techniques.

Keyes correctly predicts that the Netflix format will allow for more adult themes. He hopes for “something like *House of Cards* but with superheroes” (*Screen Rant*, 2013). These adult themes are exactly what Marvel needed to bring in new audiences. It further proves their expanded flexibility as a brand, allowing a foothold for those who have not yet been seduced by
the Marvel craze while simultaneously providing a safety valve for those older audiences who may be experiencing Marvel fatigue.

Once again, the trade story coming from *Screen Rant* is all positive, and it focuses on the connections between franchises (spherical production). *Variety* contributed a few interesting additions to the burgeoning trade story. Todd Spangler, a New York Digital Editor, seems to be the voice of authority on all things Marvel/Netflix at *Variety*. In his first article, Spangler puts special emphasis on the New York filming location. He notes the amount of jobs created and the economic bolstering such a project will provide for the state. (*Variety*, 2014). In another article, Spangler quotes Marvel chief content officer Ted Sarandos, “Marvel’s *Iron Man* and *The Avengers* are very popular on Netflix today, and the new series will draft off that fan base. Like Disney, Marvel is a known and loved brand that travels.” He was also quoted as saying Marvel provides “new approaches to storytelling and to global distribution” (*Variety*, 2013).

The motives behind the Disney and Netflix Mergers with Marvel are not terribly difficult to figure out, but Marvel is not trying to subtly gain fan bases through strategic moves around the industry. The connections and potential for an ever-expanding universe are presented by Marvel as transparent aims, and with repeated reminders, fans are not likely to forget it.

When looking back at the old flat plane model of branding seen in Figure 1, references (symbols, settings, style) were all used incessantly to make sure audiences drew connections between different iterations of the same brand. As such, trade stories at the time were relatively silent on the topics of inter-connected properties. Instead, academics like Meehan (1991) were doing extensive research on the strategic moves made by brands such as Batman.

Marvel, on the other hand, when moving across to another medium, streaming television, has been explicit about the way they are connecting their universes in these trade stories.
However, as I will describe in greater detail in the following two chapters, the references occurring in the actual content are infrequent and subtle. As a result, individual media texts can be watched and enjoyed independently of the greater Marvel universe.

Now that *Daredevil* and *Jessica Jones* have both been released on Netflix, speculation is no longer needed to uncover what Disney/Marvel/Netflix intend to make of these intellectual properties. How exactly does Marvel utilize the Netflix platform to reinforce and expand their model of a multi-faceted, multi-dimensional story universe? The key to answering such a question is to look very closely at the first season of each of these shows, carefully noting the tone and cross-over moments. That is precisely what I will be doing in the final two chapters of this Thesis. Examining the history of storytelling paradigms and trade stories is important, but close critical cultural work is where the theory is put into operation.

Over the course of these final two chapters, I will be using the two existing Marvel Netflix series as case studies for what can be accomplished under the new paradigm set up by Marvel and visualized in Figure 3 above. I have mentioned in some detail the way the films are connected in the MCU. However, these films have a fairly static tone, and are thus susceptible to franchise fatigue. In order to break from that and provide the audience with something different, Netflix has gone in a different direction with the heroes it has acquired.

For *Daredevil*, this happens by way of allegorically grounding the setting of the show to something rooted in the real world. For *Jessica Jones*, it is accomplished by using Jones as a symbol for a more progressive version of feminism than Marvel has previously represented. To further connect the series to one another, they are both set in Hell’s Kitchen, and they both utilized elements of 9/11 allegory. In this way, Marvel has demonstrated that they will not only use their spherical model for a new tone, but as a mouthpiece for important societal issues.
Chapter 4: The Devil of Hell’s Kitchen

Chapter four takes a very close look at season one of Netflix/Marvel’s Daredevil and the way it uses 9/11 allegory and dark themes to carve out a space for a new audience while simultaneously making connections to the material seen in the major tent pole films. Themes such as autonomy, violent obsessions, and the god/demi-god disparity will be explored.

From the outset, it is apparent that the Daredevil Netflix series is not the same Marvel from the MCU. The series is set in New York like the Avengers, but the borough of Hell’s Kitchen is not a place you want to take your kids. The opening scene is set in the daylight. The visual aesthetic is akin to what you would see in a Marvel film. However, the content of this scene is emotionally profound, depicting a young Matt Murdock (Daredevil) in the aftermath of a chemical accident. The viewer gets a POV shot of Murdock as darkness closes in and his sight is lost forever. As Murdock’s sight fades to black, the aesthetic and tone of the show follows suit.

Marvel and Netflix were sure to place Daredevil in the position of an allegory. With adults being more steeped in the world around them than youthful audiences, allegory is a strong method to bridge the gap between fiction and reality. The narrative world of Hell’s Kitchen is not only darker and grittier, but serves as an allegory for post 9/11 New York.

When the World Trade Centers were attacked on September 11th, the whole world was set on edge, so ground zero must have been a place of great fear and uneasiness. In the rest of the country, the news presented the 9/11 events as a cultural and political narrative. This narrative pitted radicals in the Middle East against the United States. Thus, people began to mistrust Arab people, as well as the U.S. military and government whom were supposed to keep massive terrorist threats at bay.
For the people of New York, however, these issues needed to be dealt with in a very real manner from day to day. In the Marvel universe, the Avengers proved victorious in their fight against the evil dimensional beings who were attacking the city. In the film, this victory is celebrated, and the feats of the “gods” who made up the team were gawked at by millions of audience members. However, this clash of large forces came at a high cost. Whole sections of New York were leveled, many people died, and the city was thrown into disarray. *Daredevil* and *Jessica Jones* seek to answer the question of what happens to all the individuals caught in the crossfire during these earth-shaking events.

Matt Murdock serves as an allegorical character who stands in for the concept of blind rage in the face of atrocity. He had his sight and his father taken from him as a youth, and as he tells his priest in confessional, “Murdock boys got the devil in em”. One could argue that the other Marvel characters have their fair share of anger and violent tendencies. The Hulk by himself brings a very violent element to the MCU. However, the Hulk is a godlike figure, and when he enters the battle, he fights other godlike figures. Murdock is merely a man with extraordinary sensual perception. He has no powers, he cannot heal, he has no iron suit or hammer. When he takes a hit, he feels every ounce of it. Additionally, Murdock takes on other men who are simply flesh and bone. As a result, those bones can be broken, and they very often are.

Not only does Daredevil fight against men, he fights men who commit very real crimes that could easily be committed outside the world of superheroes. Very early on in the opening episode, Daredevil tracks a group of men to the Hell’s Kitchen docks. They are herding a group of screaming women into a storage trailer, clearly implying sex trafficking. This kind of evil is not represented in the MCU. Instead, we are given larger-than-life villains with doomsday plans.
These villains are allegorically similar to world powers such as Sadam Hussain and Osama Bin Laden. In Daredevil, however, these smaller men stem from the underbelly of society, they represent realistic violence against everyday people. Murdock, then, is allegorical of the force of average people trying to put a stop to this hateful behavior.

Murdock does not don a shiny uniform and engage in high-flying stylized fight scenes. He operates in the dead of night wearing nothing but a black body suit and a scarf over his face. He remains simultaneously anonymous to his foes as well as the rest of the city. He does not want recognition, just to clean up his streets. His fighting style is not neat and tidy. Instead, he audibly breaks bones, and when he has an enemy down and incapacitated, he repeatedly punches them in the face until they are a bloody mess. All the while, he is taking hits. To the godlike Avengers, these hits would be nothing more than a minor inconvenience. For Murdock, they mean spending the next day being stitched up and stabilized. At one point, he is even stabbed in the chest with a needle to provide air to his collapsing lung.

This stitching brings me to the aspect of these Marvel/Netflix shows that adds them to the spherical model of production. The woman who stitches up Murdock in the aftermath of his bouts is named Claire (Rosario Dawson). She is a nurse in Hell’s Kitchen, and was directly exposed to the aftermath of the invasion in Avengers. For the majority of season one, Claire is the only who knows the true identity of “the devil of Hell’s Kitchen” as he is called by the Hell’s Kitchen public. However, the larger purpose of her character is to serve as the Nick Fury for the Netflix Marvel characters.

Looking at the differences between Fury and Claire, we are once again reminded of the allegorical significance of these streaming series. Fury is in charge of a large organization called S.H.I.E.L.D. He has access to powerful information that many of the Avengers don’t even have,
a legion of personnel, fancy machinery, and a stable of super heroes to call upon. He represents the organizational power that operates behind large powers like world governments and terrorist cells. Clair, contrastingly, is a regular woman whose job is to help the sick and the wounded. The only information she has about super heroes is what she sees on the news, and she puts herself at risk by helping these vigilantes.

It is impossible to doubt the connection between the narrative worlds of Daredevil and Jessica Jones because Claire is featured in both. This constitutes a cross-over and thus, the Netflix/Marvel television series exists in the spherical model of production of the Marvel media brand. (This connection is visualized by a pink line drawn between the nodes of Daredevil and Jessica Jones in figure 3). However, the cross-over occurs within the universe of the television series, it does not bleed into the MCU. This can be seen by a lack of lines connecting the Netflix nodes to any other nodes in the sphere.

Strategically, Marvel avoids direct cross overs between the MCU and the Netflix Marvel universe. This is due to a conflict of interest related to subject matter and an impulse to woo mature audiences without advertising the fact that these shows are extensions of the tent-pole blockbuster installments. Marvel also wants to avoid linking the more family-friendly texts to one where drugs, alcohol, sex, and heavy violence are prevalent.

Just because Marvel does not want to make an overt connection between the MCU and the Netflix series, does not mean they will not take great care to connect the two in a subtler fashion. In order to accomplish this, Marvel hearkens back to the model in Figure 1 discussed in chapter 2. Instead of direct cross overs, the flat plane model deals with reference, and reference is exactly what you get in Daredevil.

Less than ten minutes into the show, Matt Murdock and his partner Foggy Nelson are
attempting to pick out office space for their new law practice. A line of dialogue between
Murdock and the agent serves as the first instance of reference to the MCU.

   Real Estate Agent: “This office was barely touched by the incident”.

   Murdock: “Incident, is that what we’re calling it”?

   Agent: “Better than death and destruction raining from the sky” (Daredevil).

To those looking for it, this is a fairly clear reference to the events in the first Avengers film. However, to an audience who is not paying close attention or who has little to no knowledge about the MCU, this brief dialogue could be a reference to any number of things in the diegetic world of Daredevil. The exchange is only three lines and does not name anything specific to the MCU.

   This type of reference serves a dual purpose in its vagueness. Those initiated into the Marvel universe will have the background knowledge to pick up on what is being discussed. Because it is vague, the pleasure derived by those initiates is greater because it requires that the viewer has, in Jenkins words, “done their homework.” On the other side of the coin, the uninitiated audience member does not feel self-conscious about the missed reference because they may either take no note of it or assume it will be explained later on.

   Though this is not the only reference to the MCU in this series, the references are strategically placed and usually front-loaded. Later on in the first episode, Murdock and Foggy investigate Union Allied Construction in relation to possible foul play. They discover that the company has been heavily involved in government contracts after the “incident.” Union Allied were making money hand over fist in the wake of the dimensional catastrophe, and Murdock notes that they were able to secure lots of sympathy after New York was half destroyed.

   Allegorically, this reference is also getting political, implying that crooked companies
took advantage of the 9/11 tragedy to further their economic aims. As a result of this allegory, the uninitiated may take this reference to be about the 9/11 tragedy instead of the Avengers battle. This keeps the show grounded not just by featuring more human characters, but potentially deferring fictional references to real world events. Simultaneously, Marvel once again winks at its more devout, initiated fans.

Before the pilot episode is over, we get a third reference to the MCU. The forces of evil at work in Daredevil include a drug pushing Chinese woman, two Russian brothers who distribute the drugs, a Japanese business man who secretly leads the Yakuza, and a crooked financial analyst named Leland. The figurehead of this organized criminal cell is named Wilson Fisk. In the Daredevil comics, he is known as the King Pin. Once again, that title is not used to maintain a grounded tone. In that vein, Murdock is only referred to by his hero’s title (Daredevil) at the end of the final episode.

The reference to the MCU comes when these villains (minus Fisk) meet to talk shop. They get to a discussion of the sex trafficking incident earlier in the episode and the man in black. While the others in the group are angry about the inconvenience, Leland remains insightful:

“Heroes and their consequences are why we have these opportunities. Each time one of them punches a guy through a building, our margins go up” (Daredevil).

This time, heroes are explicitly mentioned, but the word “hero” is ambiguous. Though the initiated know he is referring to the Avengers, a less knowledgeable viewer may assume hero is used to describe vigilantes like Daredevil. Because Murdock does not possess any kind of super strength, he is not the type of hero Leland is describing. The series takes up the stance that the large powers like The Avengers and world governments may deter the immediate threat with
brute force, but leave a tear in the fabric of society in their wake.

Characters like Daredevil are more akin to demigod’s and their job is to clean up the remains of the clash of titans. Thus, Leland’s insight is accurate, but he misappropriates the type of hero Daredevil represents. Wesley, Fisk’s right hand man, begins to grasp the dynamic later on in the series. When more trouble occurs in terms of the drug distribution, Wesley states: “An iron suit or magic hammer would maybe explain why Russians keep getting beaten up.” Gods are highly visible; they do not have secret identities. As a result, they are more reckless in their actions. They are distracted with their large scale battles, heedless of the repercussions. When the Avengers aren’t suited up, they are billionaire playboys, military dogs, scientists, and princes of Asgaard.

Murdock, on the other hand, is a lawyer. Not just any kind of lawyer; he and Foggy made the conscious decision to abandon a high profile firm to create their own in order to serve the public interest. Murdock attempts to battle injustice through legitimate avenues, and only acts as a vigilante when he deems it necessary. The Avengers are fairly one dimensional. They prep for large scale events when they aren’t in costume, and battle when they are. Allegorically, Murdock represents the average activist. Such activists do battle with evil forces on their own time, but they still need to get up the next morning and earn a living. In this way, a more mature audience has many opportunities to identify with Matt Murdock, to identify with his battles in the dark as well as in the light.

As I have described, episode one contains a heavy concentration of subtle references to the MCU. These references serve to complicate the allegory, hook established audiences from the MCU, and maintain a spherical model of production while strategically blending in the original paradigm in order to avoid direct connection between contrasting content. So as not to
alienate the uninitiated audience members, the references lower in magnitude and occur sporadically as the series progresses.

Instead of any MCU references in episode two, audiences are met with a different kind of reference. This episode is incredibly gritty and violent. Murdock tortures an enemy to get information, and drinks heavily to numb pain. He fits many attributes of a noir hero. We want him to succeed, but his methods are often hard to stomach. The final fight scene in the episode extenuates this grittiness, but contains a very specific reference.

The scene is shot in a long hallway with several doors along the walls. The fighting is all shot from the perspective of a person standing at the end of the hall, and no cutting occurs. When the character’s fight in the various rooms, we only hear the thumps and see the muzzle flashes. As Murdock beats on the thugs, very real exhaustion is choreographed. The fighters often take small breaks to lean on the walls and catch their breath. Many of the punches are heavy and sloppy, indicating a loss of stamina. Though this scene seems unique, it is far from original.

*OldBoy* is a South Korean neo-noir thriller directed by Park Chan-wook in 2003 in which a man, Oh Dae-su is imprisoned for 15 years over a crime he is unaware of committing. Upon his release, he seeks answers by any method available to him. The film was critically acclaimed, winning awards at the Cannes Film Festival and accolades from Quentin Tarantino. To this day, the film sits at 80% critical consensus and a 94% audience approval rating on Rotten Tomatoes. Even Roger Ebert, a notoriously harsh film critic, had only positive things to say. Simply stated, *OldBoy* is a film appreciated by film lovers. What is the relationship of this film to *Daredevil*? The scene I described in the previous paragraph is a direct homage to an iconic scene from *Oldboy*. 
In the film, the main character Oh Dae-su has been captured and held in solitary confinement for 15 years. He spends much of that span attempting to piece together who he wronged. Open his release, Oh Dae-su seeks revenge, and part of that revenge is making his way into a compound to interrogate a lead. Armed with nothing but a hammer, he takes on a hallway of at least 20 men. The fight is filmed in one shot, but from a side perspective. As the men fight, Oh Dae-su is beaten badly and stabbed but fights through his pain and fatigue. Just like in *Daredevil*, the men often stop and lean on the wall to rest or writhe in discomfort. Even the walls have the same two-toned nature to them.

Once again, *Daredevil* throws out chum to film buffs who know and love *Oldboy*, offering another level of pleasure to this scene. Not only that, but they are nodding to something outside the Marvel universe, implying broader capabilities. Entertainment outlets took notice of the homage, and greeted it with applause. Entertainment journalist Nate Scott at *USA Today* labeled it “the greatest fight scene in TV history” (*USA Today*, 2015). A compilation of fan comments on FanFare.com proves that audience members felt much the same way. A few comments include, “Holy shit, I cannot believe they did an homage to the hallway scene from *Oldboy.*” “TBH, I think it’s possible that they might have outdone the *Oldboy* scene” (*Fanfare*, 2015).

Association with a well-known cult film favorite is extremely important to what the merger of Marvel and Netflix means for the spherical model of production. References to R-rated films would simply not be practical within the MCU section of the sphere, but moving the Netflix series to a different section and bridging the gap through references creates depth by association with the huge money making blockbusters. Marvel is able to represent a spectrum of content from young children to critically savvy adults, all while maintaining continuity.
As the series elapses, the *Daredevil* world continues to be associated with the MCU, but only fleetingly. A headline from the “Battle of New York” can be seen hanging in the office of a journalist. Super heroes are incorporated into jokes and colloquiums made by characters. When discussing the man in black, Murdock suggests he is trying to help. Foggy fires back with, “I can say I’m Captain America, doesn’t make it true” (*Daredevil*). These moments occur quickly and offer no follow-up. They subliminally plant the idea of the MCU in the viewer’s head without alienating those who do not appreciate the association.

Not only does Marvel use *Daredevil* as an allegorical vehicle for a more mature demographic, they also use it as a means to acquire a more diverse demographic, as well. Though the main characters are primarily white, many other cultures and languages are represented. Throughout the show, subtitles are necessary when the Russian, Spanish, Chinese, and Japanese languages are used. Interestingly, this diversity is almost entirely attached to the villains of the series. All the Russian, Chinese, and Japanese characters are associated with the crime syndicate. This asks the question, does this series justify the rampant xenophobia that was prevalent post 9/11? It is difficult to argue otherwise. Thus, while *Daredevil* represents a new paradigm, it also demonstrates that the ability to pull in a new demographic does not necessarily come packaged with more progressive themes. *Jessica Jones*, however, capably remedies the missed opportunity to present those themes.
Chapter 5: The Feminist Side of Marvel

Chapter 5 is an exploration of the first season of Netflix/Marvel’s Jessica Jones and the way it perpetuates the mission put in motion by Daredevil in chapter one though a focus on a female protagonist and post-feminism. In this chapter, I will explore how such themes as post-feminism, progressive feminism, the patriarchy, noir, and violence are used as a problematic response to patriarchal control in Jessica Jones. I also deal with allegory and the connections between Netflix and the MCU, as in chapter 4. The contrast between how these issues are executed between the first and second Netflix productions suggests the way the sphere of production evolves as it grows.

The second series produced by Netflix, Jessica Jones, is also set in Hell’s Kitchen in the wake of a 9/11 style attack. In addition to the dark themes dealt with in Daredevil, this series deals with the loss of autonomy in the aftermath of a crisis. Marvel and Netflix made the decision to frame this serious social issue in a feminist light.

Given the current social and political landscape, ignoring or even circumventing feminist aims would be ill-advised by any large media being scrutinized by the public eye. Marvel saw an opportunity with their feminine protagonist Jessica Jones to engage the positive side of the conversation. Dark themes have always been present in Marvel comics, so Daredevil is an adoption of those themes. Jessica Jones, however, is actively re-writing the way Marvel has treated females. To demonstrate the sharp contrast, I will be explaining the concept of post-feminism and the way it manifested itself in one of the films released before Marvel became independent, Elektra.
In the final portion of the chapter, I will provide an analysis of *Jessica Jones*, exposing the major shift that has occurred in Marvel’s portrayal of women. Marvel comics and films released before the advent of the spherical model of production portrayed their female characters in skin tight outfits. Though they were fighting and exhibiting power, they often did so under the traditional gender assumptions of pre-feminist ideology. This notion of simultaneously giving power and removing it is called post-feminism.

I will be using post-feminism as a lens for my historical analysis, so it is useful to give an outline of what post-feminism means. McRobbie (2007) describes post-feminism as a concept which “draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasize that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force” (p. 12). To be clear, feminist media scholars agree that feminism is most definitely still needed. For these scholars, McRobbie included, post-feminism is a confounding force for the feminist movement. That being said, if we are to believe that culture and media are symbiotic in some way, post-feminism is looked at as a desirable state outside the circles of academia. This fact makes the concept that much more pervasive.

Postfeminism walks a line between women who are scatterbrained, frivolous, and desperate to find a man but who also maintain a feminine witiness. McRobbie (2007) describes this as a celebration of old-fashioned femininity that is not quite out of reach. Coupled with the nostalgia is a constant reminder that women now have “sexual freedom, the right to drink, smoke, have fun in the city, and be economically independent” (p. 12). Bridget Jones is an example of this postfeminist tightrope walk. She is a character marketed toward women, and she embodies something McRobbie (2007) calls a double entanglement, an intermingling of conservative values and tropes of liberation. She argues that under the initial definition of post-
feminism, the term can be deployed in very different ways. One iteration of post-feminism is that of irony. The use of overtly sexist themes in a tongue in cheek fashion to suggest that we know what is wrong here, but it is no longer an issue. I argue that in terms of the Marvel enterprise, these forms of post-feminism emerge, with a distinct divide between the spherical universe and the rest of the canon.

To date, out of the 42 films based on Marvel comics, only one has a female protagonist. *Elektra* was released in 2005, and follows a character of the same name played by Jennifer Garner. An important thing to note is that *Elektra* came in the wake of the Marvel film, *Daredevil*. Elektra's character comes from the Daredevil universe and is featured in that film as a secondary character. Thus, *Elektra* emerged as a spin off film from another male-led Marvel production, not of natural origins. On top of that, Elektra dies in *Daredevil* (she is also killed off in the *Daredevil* comic series). In the case of the comic, due to her popularity a comic series was created for her. In the case of the *Elektra* film, Marvel resurrected her in the wake of Ben Affleck and Colin Farrell refusing to reprise their roles in a sequel to *Daredevil*. Elektra is introduced as a love interest for Murdock to complicate his character. To make Daredevil even more tragic, she is killed in the story arc. However, once an opportunity to commodify her popularity presented itself, Elektra is brought back to spur revenue. She is not important on her own; she is a tool in the Marvel media-scape.

The poster for the film depicts Jennifer Garner's face in full makeup holding a knife. The tagline reads, “Looks Can Kill”. Already in the promotional content, Garner is portrayed as a mix of beauty and brutality. The question is, does she push beyond that in the film? Postfeminist discourse maintains that girls are liberated, feminism is not necessary. *Elektra* is certainly liberated. She is not only free and independent, but she is an accomplished martial
artist, and her targets are primarily men. However, a mistake of post-feminism is to draw attention to such liberated characters as women in a traditional sense. *Elektra* as a film is guilty of this double entanglement from the very beginning. However, is this post-feminism taken for granted as an objective truth, or is it presented ironically? Both are a problem according to McRobbie (2007). Elektra is celebrated in her physical prowess, but under what circumstances?

In one of the opening scenes of the film, where *Elektra* assassinates a male victim, postfeminist dynamics present themselves immediately. Elektra fights a bodyguard with her physical prowess and renders him unconscious. This scene has been shot in relative shadow, no focus is placed on Garner’s female characteristics. Immediately following the violence, Garner slowly turns as wind blows her styled hair out of the way to show her features with perfectly applied makeup. The entire sequence resembles a Cover Girl advertisement and borders on absurd. However, irony is not present. The next shot is of Elektra walking toward her target. The camera cuts directly to her backside, and slowly pans upward. Elektra does not engage her opponent directly. Instead, she throws a knife all the way across the room to do the job. The man is sitting in a chair and does not get a chance to fight back.

To recap, the audience sees a strong, capable woman fight toe to toe with a man. However, this man is just a thug, not a main target. Thugs of his ilk are dispatched en masse by traditional male heroes. Whatever progress is made here is instantly erased by the indulgence of the male gaze. Elektra is dressed provocatively and the camera itself objectifies her. Instead of a showdown between target and assassin, the more dangerous foe is murdered from afar, causing the audience to question female strength against an accomplished enemy. In reference to the evidence thus far, Marvel is not attempting to be ironic with their post-feminism. Instead, they use the expected Bridget Jones format. Because the female in question in this film is an assassin,
the double entanglement dynamic is meant to be subtle, but comes off jarring when one focuses on it.

*Elektra* was released three years prior to the creation of the MCU. Since Marvel was still licensing its characters rather than producing its own films during this time, the film was produced by 20th Century Fox. But even within the MCU, a female led film will not emerge until 2019. After 11 years, does this suggest that the failure of *Elektra* gave Marvel Studios pause when considering another female lead, or could it be connected to an unwillingness by Marvel to give females any major positions of power within the MCU?

Recently, as if in response to such questioning, Marvel released a Netflix series titled *Jessica Jones*. This series is overtly feminist, giving much of the power to female characters. It lacks many of the post-feminism pitfalls listed previously, and serves as a bit of a foil to the way women have been represented in Marvel products up to this point. Was this an all-in attempt by Marvel to avoid bad press and improve reputation? The spherical production paradigm and its aims serve as an answer to this question. The goal here is to simultaneously blot out the brand’s weak stance on women and access a progressive demographic who will appreciate a truly feminist character.

Though these may have been the aims of *Jessica Jones* with regard to feminism, the show stumbles in several key areas. Progressive feminism, that which seeks to dismantle the patriarchy, views the ideal society as one filled with empathy and community. Though we are given glimpses of this this kind of society through victim therapy sessions, our hero Jones scoffs at them. For her, violence and force are the only effective paths away from patriarchal influence. I will be providing examples throughout this chapter of the way Jones is powerful, but under her own terms. However, those terms look eerily similar to the terms our stereotypically masculine
and patriarchal heroes operate by. Thus, Jones may escape postfeminist, but falls instead into the trap of patriarchal impulse.

During this chapter, I will be invoking the term film noir and using it to describe the general style used in *Jessica Jones*. Noir could also be used to describe *Daredevil*, but to a lesser extent. At the core of the concept, noir is usually thought of as an aesthetic. In other words, one can just look at the mise-en-scène (composition of a scene or frame) and narrative tone of any given film or show and be able to pick it out as noir. This is due to several stereotypical elements such as cynical private investigators, dark lighting, femme fatales, flashbacks, and bourbon.

However, as pointed out by James Naremore, “a slightly more complicated discourse on noir has grown steadily over the past three decades” (Naremore, 1998). The main staples of this more complicated view of noir includes the “cynical treatment of the American Dream, complicated play with gender and sexuality, and foregrounding of cinematic style” (Naremore, 1998). As I will be illustrating in this chapter, *Jessica Jones* holds elements of the aesthetic tradition of noir as well as the thematic tenets outlined by scholars over the years.

Noir is at once a broad concept that can be applied to many screen spaces based on certain tenets, and a complex term used to track both filmic style and the constant use of temporality to remix the past in the present. I argue that in *Jones*, generalizable tenets of noir are strategically utilized to further the depth of the Marvel universe.

This association serves Marvel well. As Naremore (1998) points out, “film noir has become one of the dominant intellectual categories of the late twentieth century, operating across the entire cultural arena of art, popular memory, and criticism” (p.2). Like *Daredevil’s* overt use
of *Oldboy*, the overt use of the noir style by *Jones* translates into cultural capital derived from those audience members who are familiar with the concept.

*Jones*, like *Daredevil*, is a part of the Marvel sphere, but fits into the Avengers saga through reference. What can be learned from the way the series is situated within the Marvel machine?

The series follows a tough, powerful woman (Krysten Ritter) in Hell’s Kitchen as she battles a formidable enemy and alcoholism. From the very beginning, the tirelessly repeated origin/hero story used by Marvel is inverted. Jessica is not a normal person who discovers power and uses it to fight for good. Instead, we are brought into her world in the aftermath of her crime fighting career, as she attempts to rebuild her life as a private investigator following an extreme trauma. The protagonist is dealing with her own personal trauma while the city deals with the trauma of a widespread attack. Once again, allegory comes into play as Jones represents a microcosm of the struggle for autonomy after events led to the loss of control. Postfeminism seeks to control the image of women, to limit autonomy.

This series is centered around a powerful woman (she possesses super strength), but so was *Elektra*. To repeat a question I asked earlier, under what terms is she powerful? A character’s introduction tells the viewer a great deal about the way that character will be represented throughout.

The series *Jessica Jones* begins with two noir tropes that have been distinctly remixed. First of all, we are given a voice over. Jessica explicates the events on screen as if she were recounting them to a curious stranger. She describes her job as getting dirt on people, and states that she excels at it. This method is very frequently used in noir, with *Double Indemnity*, a noir from the 40’s about an insurance man who follows a woman down a dark path leading to murder.
and fraud, serving as a perfect example. Visually, the viewer is presented with a voyeuristic shot of two people having sex. This view is captured through the lens of a camera, as the adjustment in focus and shutter movement signify. PI work is a common noir theme, and voyeurism is almost always associated with it. What makes this a remix is that the voice over and voyeurism is from the perspective of a female, our lead character Jessica Jones. Noir films almost exclusively deal with male protagonists, as the term “femme fatale” emerged from the genre to describe the dangerous female from the perspective of the male. Instead of gazing at the heroine, the viewer forced to take on her perspective.

Shortly following this voyeuristic montage, the viewer’s first physical glimpse of Jessica occurs when she breaks the glass of her apartment door window by throwing a man through it. After just one minute of screen time, Jessica has demonstrated skill and power, all in terms of her own perspective, not in terms of audience scrutiny. However, she engages in violence to prove her point, and she seems unable to communicate through progressive female avenues such as discussion and the written word.

Jessica's best friend and confidante, Trish, is a successful talk show host. She lives alone and is completely self-reliant. She knows Jessica is being stalked by a powerful enemy, and is shown training to fight in her apartment. A poignant scene occurs late in the season when Jessica is being attacked by a man using black ops steroids. The drugs allow him to compete with Jessica's super strength, but the fight is only fair because of Jessica's previously sustained injuries. To defend Jessica, Trish takes the same drugs, and is able to compete equally with the violent assailant. At no point is male physical strength shown dominating over women. Across the board in Jessica Jones, women are portrayed as smart and capable, and most importantly, they operate independently of men.
Though Jessica and Trish are independent, we are once again presented with patriarchal behavior. Trish is able to best the man, but only by stooping to his level. She does not use her brain to figure out a plan to subdue him, she simply follows his lead in order to emulate his strength. Much of the power displayed by women in this show is derived by an emulation of patriarchal forces.

Two important scenes involving Trish occur in episode 5. A flashback occurs about halfway through the episode, where Trish unveils a super suit for Jessica to wear as she fights crime. This suit is a mockup of the one her character wears in the comic books. Jessica looks disgusted as she claims the outfit would only work in a kinky role-playing scenario. Instead, Jessica hides her identity by wearing a giant sandwich and acting like the saleswoman for a sub restaurant. Her “costume” is completely utilitarian and non-sexualized. Instead of showing off all of her curves with a skin tight garment, she purposefully hides them.

This scene is a direct disavowal of the gender and beauty standards employed by comic books. Once again, the points made by McAllister et al. (2006) are given credence. Marvel's film and television properties have been slowly but surely distancing themselves from a dated comic book culture. Jessica Jones essentially turns her nose up at the thought of her comic book persona, inviting the audience to do so as well. This moment with Trish represents something progressively feminist. The women disavowal the old post-feminist system without any type of patriarchal corruption.

The second important Trish-related scene happens earlier in the episode. It begins with Trish receiving oral sex from Simpson, the man who will later take stimulants and be beaten into submission by the two female friends. This is important because women's pleasure is often censored in our society, and the act puts Trish in a position of power and value. Trish and
Simpson are interrupted by Jessica, and Trish opens the door, leaving Simpson unseen in her room. Jessica (unaware of Simpson's presence) begins to discuss plans to take down Kilgrave, (the central villain of the series) with Trish. As the two talk, Simpson walks out wearing nothing but a pair of briefs and begins to argue with Jessica about her plan.

After Jessica disagrees, Simpson shows his value by listing off his expertise as a former black ops specialist. Jessica repeatedly ignores Simpson and his suggestions. When he discovers Trish will be driving the get-away vehicle, Simpson insists she let “one of his boys” do it. Trish snaps back, “Hey, last night was fun but that doesn't mean I want your opinion” (Jessica Jones).

Any avid viewer of film would find this scenario distinctly familiar. The important difference is that the genders are reversed. Normally, a strong male would be receiving oral sex in the beginning of the scene, only to be interrupted by another man. The two would start talking business, and the pretty young women would emerge in lingerie. She would claim she could help, and list off a skill the two men didn't have. Feeling emasculated, the two men would tell her to stay in her place, only to eventually agree because of her charm. Here, both women are fully clothed, and the man is sexualized as well as trivialized.

This scene definitely fits the feminist theme of the series. However, is this the proper way to use media to fight against a patriarchal society? Instead of creating a climate where gender is irrelevant, and value is associated with skill and moral fortitude, this scene simply puts the man in the role women have been trying to escape. However, the writers remedy this regressive foray with their key male character.

The main villain in the series is named Kilgrave (played by David Tennant). His power is mind control, and he is able to exert his will over any person simply by giving them a command. Before the events of the series, Jessica was put under control by Kilgrave, and repeatedly raped.
She had absolutely no autonomy. When we are introduced to her, all of her actions are based around maintaining her autonomy now that she has it back. People in New York post 9/11 had a similar response, rallying together to rebuild. Plans for an even larger tower were drawn up, and many citizens felt the urge to join the armed forces and directly fight the evil that attacked their city. Jones represents this need for autonomy in the wake of trauma.

An initial reading of Kilgrave’s mind control could be that even with super strength, men still hold all the power over women. Even with the power of the masses, terrorist cells still hold power by their constant threat of violence hiding in the shadows. However, as the viewer becomes more acquainted with Kilgrave, they realize he is a petty, childish, and love-struck character. His only motive for the mayhem he causes is to get the attention of Jessica, who he is hopelessly in love with.

Kilgrave’s terror comes from a misplaced attempt to charm a woman. The terror of Islamic extremists comes from a misplaced perception that their religious gods wish it to be so. The allegorical similarities between Jones and post-9/11 America are subtle, yet they provide a progressive element to a universe steeped in masculine strength and violence. Additionally, likening the plight of rape victims to the war on terror is a powerful association likely respected by those in our society who wish rape victims to be given more credence.

In the present world of the story, Jessica realizes she has become immune to Kilgrave's powers. Rather than fight her, Kilgrave cowers behind his ability to command people to commit suicide. He is a vain, cowardly, violent sociopath and his power is used as a device in the series to illuminate the pretenses of patriarchal control and dominance. It is meant to show that the power wielded by men is not a product of them being more intelligent or capable, but that they hold an unfair means of coercion. In the real world, this coercion manifests itself in the threat of
violent attack or nuclear strike. The realization that this alleged stockpile of weapons was nothing more than fiction is identical to Jones’ realization that she can no longer be controlled. In relation to feminist discourse, the mind control powers of Kilgrave, which nobody on the show believes are real besides the ones who have suffered at his hands, as analogous to the glass ceiling faced by women in today’s society.

This logic continues to make sense when thinking about the past of the two characters. Jessica was once a super hero, actively going out into the city to fight crime and save lives. This persisted until Kilgrave got a glimpse of her power and decided to use it for his own criminal purposes. After that experience, Jessica decided to relinquish her hero status and live a relatively normal life under the radar. Her career ambitions were quashed by the invisible powers wielded by a man.

Jessica does have a love interest in the show, Luke Cage. Cage has unbreakable skin, putting him in the same category as Jessica and Kilgrave (enhanced individuals). She enlists his help over the course of the series, but only as an equal. When he finally meets Kilgrave, he is put under mind control. As a result, Jessica is tasked with saving him from a situation where he finds himself helpless. A main theme of the show is that power has the ability to coerce, but can also corrupt. Kilgrave has power and uses it to sate his sociopathic tendencies. Luke has power, but has to hide it because he knows it either leads to people asking for help or trying to kill him. Finally, Jessica has power, but despite being the “hero” of the series, she often uses her power carelessly or maliciously to get what she wants. Even in objectively good hands, power is unpredictable and dangerous.

Cage is a foil to Kilgrave. He behaves ethically toward women, and Jones respects his kindness. The two have sex multiple times throughout the series. However, this sex is
consensual, and Jones is generally shown on top asserting her strength. This is again tied to autonomy. In the wake of Kilgrave, she is having sex with who she wants and she is in control.

This relationship is complicated by a secret held by Jones. When she was under control by Kilgrave, he forced her to kill Cage’s wife. She feels immensely guilty, but does not divulge this information and continues to sleep with Cage. An entire episode is devoted to Jones going to great length to keep this secret. Looking at the themes in the series, Jones is not simply being selfish and lacking remorse, she is ashamed of her loss of autonomy. She is trying to live a new life free of Kilgrave, and if Cage found out about the murder, his influence would still be controlling her life.

The post-feminist heroine would be depicted as strong and powerful, but only in terms of stereotypical feminine norms. Jones is not only strong on her own terms, she is shown to have faults and emotional scars. However, these faults are part of her struggle to grapple with her place in the world as a new woman.

One could argue that of the two new Marvel/Netflix series, the female protagonist is the one we see as a sexual being. However, for progressive feminists, autonomous sex is a very important issue. Having Jones resist Kilgrave’s influence and rapist tendencies is not enough. She must be shown bouncing back, not shying away from the type of sex she desires. This is not used in the series to sexualize Jones; Cage’s body is objectified much more. Jones uses her strength to tear Cage’s shirt off his body. When he attempts the same thing, she grabs his hands and forces them behind his back. She cannot and will not be controlled. We are not invited to assert our male gaze on Jones. We are mostly only shown her back, and from afar. She is not voyeurized by the camera.
Cage also serves the purpose of creating two important connections. At the beginning of episode 3, Jessica and Luke have a conversation about their powers. This discourse leads to Luke saying, “So it's you, me, the big green dude and his crew. You think there's more of our kind out there” (Jessica Jones). This quote, though vague, directly connects the MCU with the events of Jessica Jones. It also gives the audience pleasure knowing that there are in fact more out there, one in particular right there in Hell’s Kitchen. Once again, the referential model is employed by Jessica Jones, but this time the references are even fewer and subtler.

I will provide a brief breakdown of cross overs and references to the MCU in this season of Jessica Jones in order to demonstrate the way Marvel is able to associate their more generic tent-pole texts with the progressive texts made possible by a partnership with Netflix. Not only are the characters deeper and more complex, the world they live in is grounded in events that reflect real world situations. With this type of grounding, Marvel has opened the door for more franchises to appear in their sphere which could go in any number of directions. We may see westerns, thrillers, horror, etc. The possibilities are endless now that consumers have shown their acceptance of these different types of heroes. For these ambitious extensions of the MCU, the spherical transmedial thread must be utilized. For example, Jones’ friend Trish Walker is actually a Marvel comic character who goes by the name Hellcat. Though no direct reference has been made yet, it is not farfetched to think Trish will join the Defenders as more content is added.

When Jessica goes to interrogate a criminal in a warehouse, burn marks are visible on the walls. This is no coincidence, as the warehouse is the same one from Daredevil where he fights a drug ring and has to flee from the flames.
Sergeant Mahoney is a cop with a heart of gold that helps Murdock and Foggy fight corruption in *Daredevil*. Lo and behold, he appears once again in *Jessica Jones*, helping her out of a sticky situation at his precinct. Finally, in the same precinct scene, a clipping from Ben Urich’s article on Union Allied corruption can be seen on a bulletin board in *Jessica Jones*. Urich was a journalist helping the heroes in *Daredevil* and the headline is direct reference to those events.

These references are subtle and at times very difficult to spot. This difficulty has direct relationship to the pleasure derived by those who not only spot them, but understand the reference. This fan service is not the only reason for these minute references. Because it is the second Marvel/Netflix series, direct character cross overs are possible.

Claire, as the Nick Fury of Hell’s Kitchen, makes an appearance toward the end of the series, solidifying the direct connection between the two shows. Luke Cage is introduced and given a small origin story. Because he will soon have his own series, I label this a pre-crossover. Finally, Sergeant Mahoney, mentioned above, adds one more facet to the connection.

The important thing to note is that Cage’s reference to “the big green guy” is the only time the Marvel films are brought into the mix in *Jessica Jones*. All the other references are in relation to *Daredevil*. This creates an interesting dynamic where *Daredevil* provides a referential link to the MCU, while also linking to *Jessica Jones*. However, *Jessica Jones* only really relates to the MCU by proxy through *Daredevil*. The Marvel/Netflix section of the sphere is now operating autonomously, not needing to constantly remind the audience of the broader universe it shares.
*Jessica Jones* is a Marvel product that continues the post 9/11 allegory while situating itself in a progressive feminist perspective. The show thoroughly does away with the regressive post-feminist discourse seen up to this point in Marvel products.

Characters like Black Widow, Scarlett Witch, and Jane Foster (all female characters in the MCU) are strong women, but they are either portrayed in skin tight clothing and perfect hair or used to prop up the male protagonists. Thus, Jessica Jones is a much more progressive female icon in the Marvel Universe, but she is distanced from the post-feminist Marvel through layers of subtle references. This raises the question, does the Netflix Marvel world exist to reach new demographics and pacify those who would accuse Marvel of lacking progressive tendencies, or will it be utilized in the future to push these progressive ideas into large tent pole blockbusters? That remains to be seen, but with these two Hell’s Kitchen anomalies, one can maintain hope.
Conclusion

The world of media and entertainment is not just about any one thing. It is not just about content, it is not just about economics, and it is not just about academic theorizing. In light of this, I wanted my Thesis to reflect elements of all of those aspects of media.

The spherical model of production utilized by Marvel at this time may appear complex and abstract. However, this paradigm was not simply created by corporate masterminds when it was deemed viable. Influenced by their origin in comics, production modes used by those before them, and the business models that were fused together by partnerships with Disney and Netflix, Marvel and their paradigm are all about building on what was already established.

The foundation was a rapidly evolving system for the production of large franchise texts. That system is ephemeral and hard to follow, but the research of academics has grounded its practices in a way that can be understood. These scholars were not just looking at the content of texts in franchises, but the ways they interconnect.

That big picture has led me to the study of Marvel and the way they have evolved in their method of production. In the case of Marvel, singular franchises with sequels and reboots were cast aside in favor of an ecosystem of franchises that relate and build off one another.

In terms of my visual model, Marvel has created a sphere of texts. As such, when a consumer tires of one section, they simply need to look in another direction to be exposed to a new and exciting text that still relates to the universe as a whole. Such a thing would not work if the sphere only dealt with one medium and demographic. By utilizing three major mediums of visual storytelling and changing the tone to fit new demographics, a sphere like Marvel’s could allow a system of franchises to last for decades.
This longevity implies a massive half-life for the economic potential of companies like Disney and Netflix based solely off one IP like Marvel. It also means the cultural power held by big media is becoming increasingly homogenized. Though this has a negative connotation, such entertainment entities would not survive without appealing to current cultural and political issues such as feminism and post-terror environments as we already see in *Daredevil* and *Jessica Jones*.

As a result, these mega-franchises may start with the lowest common denominator in audience appeal, but if Marvel is any indicator, they will develop new perspectives as they fight to maintain dominance. If there are doubts as to whether this new paradigm is affecting the rest of the media-scape, Universal Studios puts them to rest.

Universal is rolling out “a Monster Mash of interconnected horror movies” and *Cinema Blend* is calling it their answer to the MCU. Universal has put together an all-star team of screenwriters (Noah Hawley, Aaron Guzikowski, Ed Solomon, Chris Morgan, Alex Kurtzman) who are being referred to as “Monster Men”. These men are being tasked with creating the scripts to films about The Mummy, Dracula, The Wolfman, Frankenstein, The Invisible Man, The Bride of Frankenstein, and Van Helsing. This is a long list of monster films, and they key is that they will all be connected via a central character in the same vein as Nick Fury (*Cinema Blend*, 2014).

As such, cross overs between the characters in these new franchises will be routine, and another spherical model of production will be created. Without the model of Marvel, some of these monster films may be been made over the years, but not with such a comprehensive plan of cohesive entertainment.

If Universal is any indication, consumers should be ready for their entertainment to come in this spherical form not as a novelty, but as a norm. As Marvel has demonstrated, this large
spheres have the power to squeeze out the competition in the box office, making it difficult for standalone films to own a release weekend.

Film and television is called mass media because it is consumed by the masses. As such, entertainment franchises and the ideology they promote can hold very powerful sway. The possibility presented by this new model of production seems to be that franchises need not be contained narratives. Instead, they can be made up of many texts and many genres led by creative teams of many backgrounds. This may imply that big conglomerates like Disney and Marvel can create franchises so vast that they can occupy such a large place in the market that other films may not survive. We must ask ourselves as scholars, consumers and professionals, is this a good thing? When we can answer this question, we can better interrogate our entertainment and use it as a lens for critical thought.
References:


