
The role of the strategic brand policy in the success of Marvel's Infinity War and Endgame

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The role of the strategic brand policy in the success of
Marvel's *Infinity War* and *Endgame*.

Mémoire présenté par HENRARD Alexandra
en vue de l'obtention du grade de
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“There was an idea, called the Avengers Initiative. The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people, see if they could become something more. See if they could work together when we needed them to fight the battles we never could.”

Nick Fury (played by Samuel L. Jackson)

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INTRODUCTION

Endgame (2019) has recently become the highest-grossing movie of all time. Marvel Studios and Disney earned \$2,797,800,564 from only one movie, something which had never been seen before. In 2018, with *Infinity War*, the two companies did already an incredible job, as the movie became the fifth highest-grossing movie ever. It seems, therefore, that with these two movies, Marvel Studios has reached a climax, not only in terms of communication and marketing, but also because its fan base has expanded and become larger than ever. As will be demonstrated, once they have become fans, the audience remain loyal to their favourite cinematic universe “until the end of the line.” The loyalty of these fans is the result of a long adventure and strategy led first and foremost by Marvel and then followed by Disney to build one of the most famous fan communities that the world has ever known. However, to reach such a large group of fans, the brands had to come up with a unique and effective strategy.

As the title of my dissertation indicates, this work is going to study the strategic brand policy of Marvel Studios, and especially focus on two movies: *Infinity War* (2018) and *Endgame* (2019). These two movies were chosen as they represent the apotheosis of Marvel’s strategy for me in terms of engagement to the fans. Being a loyal fan myself, I really perceive these two movies as the end of an incredible journey, the end of eighteen movies that preceded these two, all of which I have watched over and over again. I want to understand and share my understanding with other people about how Marvel and Disney have created a sense of belonging to a community and to their amazing universe, which is the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), but not only, as the brand was and still is much larger than a cinematic corpus. Of course, as far as I am concerned, I regard these two movies as masterpieces that brought the whole series of movies to a perfect conclusion. However, what particularly interests me, more than the content of the movies as such, is to work out how all the marketing and communication around the movies contributed to their unprecedented success. The aim is really to investigate how all the brand’s strategy worked and continues to work on the fans’ minds and how they both worked together to make these movies two of the highest-grossing of all time.

As I am following a master’s in communication, my focus will logically be on the communicational aspect of Marvel’s strategy and on its marketing, without going very deep into the more economic parts, which I am not in a position to analyse correctly. That said, it would not be possible to completely avoid all financial aspects of Marvel’s method and I will therefore bring in some information where I think it necessary. Nowadays, communication for brands has become more crucial than ever in the development of their success. It is important

for me, as a student in communication, to grasp the machinery of these powerful companies, as well as to work out how they build their relationship with a specific audience and mostly, how they maintain it over an extended period of time, not only on the basis of an original text and movie, but also on what is gravitating around it.

The first chapter looks at what a brand is, and, in addition, at what a franchise and license are, as it is what Marvel is. This will be the first step in creating an understanding of how Marvel functions. What is also interesting is looking at how Marvel has succeeded in giving its fans a larger story than what one movie can give on its own and how it has built its own cinematic universe through different characters, evolving over numerous movies, without producing any narrative incoherence. It is also very important to see the importance and impact the audience and the fans really had and still have on Marvel's strategy.

The history of Marvel is an important factor in how people perceive the brand nowadays. Stan Lee appears to have been a vital figure in the creation of the Marvel brand, but the question is: how did he develop the brand and make the commercial foundations of this large narrative universe? Surely, it would have been impossible for him to single-handedly carry out this development and it is important to keep this in mind. However, Stan Lee is the most famous person from the "old" Marvel company and he was always present in the movies of the brand. What made Marvel choose him to be in the spotlight? Marvel's identity and development seemed to depend on him. The basis of this identity gives an impression of continuity within its universe and its dedication to its fans, but has it always been the case? How did Marvel really establish that identity and has it changed since then and if so, because of what or who? Moreover, did it initially have the impact it now has on its audience? Finally, the last part of this first chapter will discuss Kevin Feige's case. He is the president of Marvel Studios since 2007. Each Marvel fan knows Kevin Feige as it has been under his direction that Marvel has developed its transmedia approach and the series of movies sharing the same global plot and universe. The Studios decided not only to remain distributors, but also to become producers. How did they come to the conclusion that it was more interesting for them and how did this shared universe really emerge? Did the comics continue to have an impact on the business? And how did Marvel explore other forms of media in its new Feige area?

In the second part, and after having recontextualized Marvel's history as a brand and franchise, the concept of paratext will be examined. The works of Jonathan Gray and Henry Jenkins written on the subject will be studied. On the basis of the theory offered by Gray and Jenkins and also other authors before them, the notion of text will be outlined and then

developed into the notions of intertext and finally of paratext. Paratexts are parts of a text, but what can really be regarded as paratexts? Advertisements? Trailers? DVDs? Movie posters? The promotion of Marvel is undeniably its strength. It is for this reason that it has so many fans all around the world and why all these fans remain loyal to the brand. The objective here is to create an understanding of how all the extended aspects of the MCU have had and continue to have an impact on the original text and on the fans' consumption, and also how Marvel structured these extensions as paratexts, introducing the original text and not being completely new independent parts of the franchise.

A reading of Gray's work made it clear that there was a distinction between paratexts that introduced the original text and paratexts that extended the original work. The next part of this work will, therefore, explain how trailers, TV spots, movies posters or even interviews preceding the movie can have a deep impact on the fans and the audience in general. These are the paratexts that particularly seem to attract the audience to the movie and it is important to understand how Marvel Studios combine all these extensions together in order to catch the audience's attention without giving away too many details or too much information about the movies, which was the case for *Infinity War* and *Endgame*. Then, true extensions of the movie are clearly the opening credit scenes and post credit scenes in Marvel's movies. Marvel refuses to let its audience fall asleep at the end of a movie and maintains their interest with a new plot, a new character, or a new planet (created by the brand and where characters live their own adventures). Finally, the concept of the DVD will be developed as, even if it is seen as an old extension, in the case of Marvel, it appears to be a very interesting part of its business and it should be included to see how Marvel has used it in order to create a popular derivative product.

Last but not least, in the third chapter of this work, the notion of transmedia will be introduced, as it is clearly the basis of Marvel's brand strategy. It is first essential to seize the notion explained by Henry Jenkins and later H  l  ne Laurichesse, but it is also interesting to catch how the "Seven Principles of Transmedia" created by Jenkins could be applied in the case of Marvel Studios. Next the explicit transmedia strategy of Marvel, it will be demonstrated how the preludes are apparently playing an important role for fans by introducing the plots of *Infinity War* and *Endgame*. These are comic books written explicitly before the release of movie to indeed introduce the next plot and summarize the previous movies. Again, the questions are: how did Marvel develop this idea of prelude and what impact has it had on the fans? Then, of course, as in every other franchise, such as *Star Wars* or *Matrix*, toys and videogames are an essential part of the brand's marketing. The idea is to realise how Marvel distinguishes itself

from others by producing unique toys and videogames to make its fans feel special and immersed. It is also well known that the brand and Disney are planning to create new amusement parks based on the Marvel Cinematic Universe. How are they going to extend the fans' engagement through these new derivative products and creations?

Another very important part of the strategy for me, being a fan myself, is to point out the importance of the fans in the success of Marvel. Even if the brand's strategy is extremely well organised and planned, its success would certainly not have been the same without the fans. This is certainly what Marvel grasped very quickly, even in the very beginning, and this is why it invested so much in them, in their engagement and participation. The fans appear to have a huge impact on the release of a movie, for example in terms of spoilers. But how does the brand keep control of these fans and their comments? Lastly, next to fans, the reviews and critics about the movies were numerous and also had an impact on their release and audience, even if in my personal case, they did not have an influence on my choice, which was to go and see these two movies regardless of what I had read. The many positive reviews proved to the world that the movies were not only made for fans, but that they were also great movies that anyone could watch and enjoy. But did these reviews really have an impact on the image of the movies?

By answering all these questions, this dissertation is supposed to finally display how Marvel's strategy is one of the most complete and remarkable in the world and how it reached a high point with *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, namely but not only, thanks to its past experience. It not only wants to make profit, but it also seems to position its community of fans as an essential part of its success and this has to be proven through analysing all the products and other extensions the brand has created to please its fans and to make them loyal in the long run. Marvel seems, therefore, to have become one of the most famous and admired brands of the world.

I. THE HISTORY OF MARVEL AS A FRANCHISE AND A BRAND

The expansion of Marvel comic books into other media had always been a desire of both the company and its readership, providing that it remained faithful to the existing stories. It was for this reason that, in 1966, Marvel decided to license some of its most famous characters and agreed to their use in other media. It is no secret that Marvel narrowly escaped bankruptcy in 1996 and, in 2009, became the property of Walt Disney Company that purchased Marvel Entertainment for 4 billion dollars (Yockey 2017: 2). In 2008, the story of the ‘Marvel Cinematic Universe’ really began with *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau) as the first franchise of the universe. This universe was created to extend the stories of the comic books and has proved to be very successful all around the world. Disney knew what it was doing when it bought Marvel as the brand has already proven to be financially viable and a symbol of cultural power (Yockey 2017: 2). This is also why Disney decided to keep the “original Marvel editor in chief and principal writer Stan Lee’s spirit of familiarity and audience participation, as well as the spectacular vision of Lee’s chief collaborator, legendary Marvel artist and co-plotter Jack Kirby” (Yockey 2017: 2).

The creation of the Marvel brand has been made possible thanks to the dialectical relationship between production and consumption cultures. The brand has always wanted to please its audience, and this is exactly what they have done with their evolutive coherent brand and their diegetic¹ universe that only asked to be extended to other media. As Henry Jenkins named it, this is known as the “convergence culture” but we will return to that later.

1. The notion of brand

In order to understand how Marvel’s brand was created and has evolved, it is first important to understand how the notions of brand and franchise work. To do so, the work of H el ene Laurichesse, the author of a number of academic articles on the notions of brand, franchise and transmedia in the 2010s will be focused on.

A brand typically builds itself after success in the cultural domain. Laurichesse refers to George Lewi to illustrate that a brand is like a mental landmark, a hint that enables the consumer to distinguish a product or a service from its rivals. This landmark is based on various values that can be tangible (prices, numbers, innovations) or intangible (a story, symbols, values). The aim of a brand is to make a profit but also to make sense of a marketing communication. Broadly

¹ of or relating to diegesis, which means the relaying of information in a fictional work (such as a film or novel) through a narrative (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*).

speaking, it enables people to identify themselves with the brand. A brand sets out to win people's loyalty following a positive experience with a given brand. When a consumer has accepted the characteristics of a brand, trust between the two is created. The brand therefore becomes a promise, a contract that constitutes the basis of this relationship (Laurichesse 2011: 2).

Furthermore, a brand is related to the notion of "marketing de l'offre" and not "marketing de la demande" (Laurichesse 2012: 3), A brand should work independently from the market but needs the market to be able to exist and set itself apart from others. The supplying marketing can be seen as a system that will enable mediation between supply and demand in order to facilitate the meeting between a product and its public. For example, a movie on its own is not exposed to this type of marketing because of its relative short length of exposure. However, a series of movies that belong to the same production and universe are more likely to depend on this brand policy. It is often represented through the production of sequels² that allow a brand to build a community around its movies and in this way, gain added value from the exploitation of the name of brand and of its marketing of derivative products. However, it is through multimedia that a strategic brand policy can be most useful and interesting. Indeed, it puts forward a universe/world of stories that are present on various media platforms (movie, video game, cartoons, books, internet, mobile phone, etc.). Each aspect of a transmedia universe can be taken independently but must always work in association with others in order to build a global story (Jenkins 2008). In this way the audience enters a universe with numerous points of entry. In Marvel's case, this transmedia universe had been imagined from the beginning and was not the product of a successful mono movie. According to Laurichesse (2012: 3), this is precisely the brand that interconnects the different aspects of the universe.

Laurichesse (2012: 4) elaborates the fact that this kind of brand is based on a number of different dimensions: a relational one, an experiential one and a participative one. The experiential aspect is linked to the emotional dimension. The idea behind this is that it improves the whole experience to entice the consumer in and to develop their involvement. In other articles she also discusses that this emphasises the importance of social relationships/the community that will emerge after experiencing a book or movie. This outcome stimulates the relational marketing that tries to build a sustainable connection between the public and the franchise. This sense of community also reinforces the experiential dimension as fans are able

² a book, movie, or play that continues the story of a previous work (*Cambridge Dictionary*).

to share their experiences. Finally, the audience adds to the success of a movie or book in a transmedia work, by spreading awareness on forums, blogs and fanfictions. It also has an important role in a marketing campaign by creating tools for the distributors. To build a brand without the help of fans is, in fact, impossible and is the reason why professionals often reward amateurs (with gifts or invitations) for their contribution to the development of it. These communities help brands develop and become virally marketed, make the existence of a collective experience possible beyond the work itself and welcome derivative products with open arms, which makes the brands even happier.

1.1. The notions of franchise and license

It is well known that Marvel is based on numerous franchises and licenses. Therefore, it is important to understand the concept clearly. In audio-visual production, the notions of licensing and franchise are the main methods in order to develop a brand (Laurichesse 2012: 5). A license can be defined as follows:

To get permission to make, produce, or use something that has been created by or belongs to another person or company, usually by paying for it (*Cambridge Dictionary*).

It therefore concerns, most of the time, the exploitation of a media phenomenon that happens after the purchase of copyrights (Laurichesse 2011: 5). Broadly speaking, this enables the use of a brand with its own characteristics, including its name, its logo, its characters or its universe. For example, people choose to watch a James Bond movie in the cinema because they know they are going to see familiar characteristics from this series of movies, even if the directors or the cast have changed. There are two conditions that are obligatory to make the development of a brand possible: a pre-existing concept and a possibility to extend the brand in the near future. The latter condition is essential as it is mostly exemplified by the development of licenses. In this way a movie that is based on a book, a comic or a soap can be seen as an extension of a brand. Derivative products facilitate coherence between all aspects across the brand. When these kinds of brand are developed enough, they do not need to wait for the next movie of the series to create other derivative products. Nowadays, these products are added to the production of films simultaneously. As Laurichesse judiciously defines it, the transmedia brand deals simultaneously with the account of a given story on various media platforms and with derivative products that spread the values of a universe. This shows that the distinction between promotion and cultural production from now on is very unclear and that all aspects of the transmedia brand are designed for selling.

The notion of franchise is crucial to the development of a brand. According to Henry Jenkins (2008) and Christy Dena (2010), the commercial and artistic dimensions are always intertwined, especially in a transmedia brand. Moreover, companies need to develop their franchises on various media platforms and to create synergies that will improve their chances of finding new financial and commercial opportunities. The movie remains the principal player in a franchise, as a kind of visual promotion that encourages people to buy other products derived from the franchise itself. The franchise is a method of collaboration between a company, the franchisor and the franchised, with a common objective: mutual benefits. It also implies the transmission of expertise and the guarantee of assistance from the franchisor to the franchised. When this expertise is not passed or necessary for the brand, collaboration is more based on the notion of brand license (Laurichesse 2011: 5). At the time of Laurichesse's article (2012), 126 franchises were present in the cinematic world and 59 of them were amongst the 100 highest-grossing movies of all time. This illustrates how the system of franchise is destroying other methods as it is clearly more profitable. *Harry Potter* was the most famous example at the time, as the consumer identified with the various elements relating to the brand, such as its name, its logo, and its visual fantastic universe. The resulting notoriety represented a landmark for the public, who knew what to expect because of what the franchise was and still is. This success was also largely helped by the role of the franchise's community that strengthened the brand with extensions integrated in the process of the productions of subsequent movies of the series. *Harry Potter* had been recognized at the time as the most profitable franchise to date, making 2.8 billion dollars per movie.

However, there is more than one kind of franchise. Laurichesse (2012: 8) describes three types of franchises:

- The "simple" franchises that are essentially based on sequels, accompanied with cultural derivative products, such as DVD, Blu-Ray or video games). They are mainly comedies and represent the major category of franchises with 58% but are not linked to a transmedia dimension.
- The "cross media" franchises that can come from literary adaptation or from video games and that can develop some expansions. They represent 17.4% of all franchises and do not have a specific genre. They are said to be cross media as they can develop one same content on another media and can be escorted by derivative products again.

- The “transmedia”³ franchises that are rich in derivative products and offer a transmedia experience. The dominant types are the science-fiction and fantastic movies. Many of them are adaptations of comics or stories or superheroes. They represent 24.6% of the franchises and are certainly the most accomplished of the three types.

These definitions clearly demonstrate that the link between a brand and the transmedia universe is crucial, as transmedia productions a priori imply a development of the marketing of each movie of a series. Establishing a lasting relationship with its audience is vital for a brand, to propose a unique and variable experience in order to redirect the community in a positive direction. Finally, when one looks at the latest successful results of franchises in the cinematic industry, it is difficult not to realise that it has become a reliable strategy and almost guarantees financial success.

1.2. The notion of “sériabilité”

The idea of “sériabilité” refers to the idea of organising a number of things of the same nature together, a group of identical objects sharing similar characteristics. The presence of a link between these objects is what distinguishes a series from a whole. The series can also be “défini”, such as when a collection has ended or “indéfini” such as with a series where it is impossible to define the precise limits of the work (Letourneux 2017: 28). Moreover, the serial process must always take place between the idea of repetition and a matter of difference. Every new movie or book of a series tells a different story, but is often set in the same environment. For example, in Marvel, the same cinematic universe comes back again and again but with a new extension of this universe (Letourneux 2017: 31). Series may also be said to be “organised”. A series is organised when the link between all the elements inside are legitimate. It is the case with Marvel as all the characters share the same cinematic universe and all their adventures have an impact on others. However, it is not possible for the characters and their stories to be independent of one another. This is known as transmedia fiction when the reader can always find a similarity between all the elements even if they do not appear on the same media (Letourneux 2017: 32-33). This organisation may also be said to be “ordonnée”. It means that each of the components of a series have their determined place. In what is called a “cycle”,

³ Word deduced by myself as there seems to be a word missing in Laurichesse’s work « À la croisée des univers du transmedia, de la marque et de la franchise dans l’industrie cinématographique », *Mise au point*, 4 I, 2012.

the reader is invited to follow events in a chronological order. This is what the fans of Marvel are also invited to do in the case of the series of movies (Letourneux 2017: 34).

What is also important to explain for Letourneux (2017) is what Gerard Genette called “transtextuality”. This notion gathers other notions such as intertextuality⁴, paratextuality⁵, metatextuality⁶, hypertextuality⁷ and architextuality.⁸ Therefore, when one tries to develop a serial perspective, one needs to study the notions of transtextuality first (Letourneux 2017: 35-36). Some of these notions will be discussed later in this paper.

Letourneux also wanted to mention the fact that the creation of fiction and its limits can also be based on serial notions, which can be called transfictionality (2017: 289). This notion can be explained as a situation that occurs when “deux textes, du même auteur ou non, se rapportent conjointement à une même fiction, que ce soit par reprise de personnages, prolongement d’une intrigue préalable ou partage d’un univers fictionnel” (Saint-Gelais 2011). This refers to something that goes further than what Letourneux called the “genres de l’imaginaire” with a fictional universe that shared the same plot and declined through years in different forms such as novels, movies, tv shows and videogames, etc. with a plot that can evolve through different generations and in different places on earth or even in space (Letourneux 2017: 290). There are “logiques sérielles” in the diegesis of these fictional universes and the story of every element of the series depends upon the other elements. What is also very interesting in this serial approach is that the success of it is already guaranteed if the first element of the series was popular. All the elements following the first one will benefit from the publicity of this one (Letourneux 2017: 290-291). What is new is that the professionals do not only develop the characters or the universes on different platforms, they also multiply the derivative products, having also a link with the serial logic of the universe created. The aim is to think about transfictional techniques in the broadest way possible (Letourneux 2017: 291). The current popular culture is overwhelmed with the expansion of one text to a series of other extensions, but what is here important to remember is that there is a difference between a transfictional series and what Letourneux called a “cycle”. The first one refers to the stories of recurrent characters and/or universes that can be read or watched in any order. On the other hand, a “cycle” refers to a set of texts following a certain chronology where time goes, and the

⁴ The explicit relationship between a text and another text (Letourneux 2017: 35).

⁵ A text is surrounded by other materials and has a link with them (Letourneux 2017: 35).

⁶ A commentary made in one text about another one (Letourneux 2017: 35).

⁷ The relationship uniting a first text with a second text (Letourneux 2017: 35-36).

⁸ A text being put into directly or indirectly into a specific generic category (Letourneux 2017: 36).

characters and their world evolve from one episode or movie to the other (Letourneux 2017: 317). This is the case of Marvel Studios, where the viewer is invited to follow a chronological order. What is also typical for a “cycle” and is the case for Marvel Studios is that the different pieces of the work can be seen as a process of in-depth study (Letourneux 2017: 318). There is therefore a convergence of all the transfictional and architextual pieces that emphasise the serial principles of the diegesis of the universe (Letourneux 2017: 318). This is because of this architextual approach of the diegesis that many universes can be further exploited in different transfictional worlds such as parodical diversion, fanfictions, crossover process (the mix of different fictional universes), etc. Finally, the last distinction between a series or a “cycle” is that a particular series will put the emphasis on the independence between each work while the “cycle” insists on the idea of unity. The reader or viewer is therefore waiting for every new episode on a regular basis (Letourneux 2017: 319-321). From this it can be concluded that the “cycle”, which is a serial variation, is clearly based on a chronology that forces the reader/viewer to engage with the universe and to regularly follow the adventures of its favourite characters in its favourite universe, such as in Marvel.

Laurichesse (2011) also wanted to look at the idea of “sériabilité” as a strategy of a cinematic brand. Moreover, this notion seems important as it is one of the principal elements of Marvel’s brand strategy. It is possible to paraphrase this notion when the success and fame of a movie are continued, for example adapting a movie from a best-seller or a video game, or just the sequel to a movie. It enables professionals to feel more confident about future productions or derivative products, as they depend upon a movie’s reputation that cannot often be contested. The financial risks of such projects are therefore almost non-existent. Furthermore, because this kind of series of movies are intended to become sustainable, it promotes customer loyalty, especially thanks to derivative products. In most cases, such as for example with the *Twilight* saga, a movie already has a group of fans because of its reputation based on books. This is the same with Marvel as it already had a reputation based on its comics before starting its project called the Marvel Cinematic Universe. People already knew more or less what was coming as the movies were mostly based on comics. It gives professionals the ability to create a brand strategy, even before a movie is released to the public. What is even more beneficial is that by developing a brand strategy, the professionals are reaching the serial system through different multimedia platforms.

Two other notions that are important for a serial cinematic brand are temporality and price. These are, in fact, issues in the development of a brand as, initially, movies are released across

the globe on a specific date and often for a specific amount of time. Consequently, the marketing of a movie before its release is essential to attract people to theatres. However, this strategy is only effective for the first few days following release as after that, the phenomenon of word of mouth takes over. In such a context, it is difficult to establish a process of trust between the audience and the brand. Therefore, and in order to create the sustainable trust that is crucial for a series of movies, the brand needs to establish a lasting relationship based on its similarities with other elements appearing on other media platforms. In addition, a movie must end with a hook in order to make the audience impatient to see the next movie in the list. This also removes the necessity for an intense marketing campaign for each movie of the series as loyal viewers will already be there. Secondly, the price of a ticket in theatres is something that cannot be controlled by the brand. They therefore have to focus more on how to extend sales and therefore profits than on the price of a ticket. In this situation, the contracts of licenses or franchises are very important as this represents the largest return on their investment. These clearly demonstrate that part of Marvel's brand policy system is to try to establish this relationship of trust between the audience and the movies, notably by incorporating post-credit scenes that keep the audience on tenterhooks. Indeed, these scenes tend to already give a taste of the next movie with a passage from it. This often raises a lot of questions for the spectator who is going to leave the theatre already thinking about the sense of this scene and how it will be incorporated in the following movie in the series.

In the two movies focused on in this work, post-credit scenes are of crucial importance. This is because, since 2012, Thanos, the villain of *Infinity War* (2018) and *Endgame* (2019), has made several appearances in these post-credit scenes of Marvel's movies, including *The Avengers* (2012), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) and *Thor: Ragnarok* (2015). This was a conscious decision made by Marvel to introduce the character to its audience so as to show people that he was going to be the central character of the two last movies of phase⁹ three. Moreover, these post-credit scenes are particularly important in *Infinity War* (2018) and *Endgame* (2019). In *Infinity War*, this post-credit scene introduces the last important hero that will have an impact in the final fight in *Endgame*, in the form of Captain Marvel. This scene also introduces the movie with the same character that was released the same year as *Endgame*. In *Endgame*, the post-credit scene eventually takes a completely new turn as the audience only get a sound. One recalls Stark creating his first Iron Man armour,

⁹ The MCU [is] divided into distinct sections, with the interconnected stories of its individual heroes building towards a convulsive finale every few years in the form of the Avengers team-up movies (<https://www.digitalspy.com/movies/a871567/marvel-phase-4-3-2-1-mcu/>).

referring back to the first movie of this series, *Iron Man* (2008). This post-credit scenes take therefore the form of a “narrative closing-off” as the first series of Marvel Studios has ended. All these scenes always have an impact and message destined to the audience in order to prepare fans for the next movie. The audience is therefore pushed to show how loyal it is as its members are supposed to understand what the producers mean through their messages. This is the way that Marvel maintains audience loyalty for subsequent movies, which is crucial for a series.

The second aspect, which was price, cannot be controlled by Marvel. This is why they do not depend upon profits from ticket sales but more on extensions of the movie, such as toys, soaps, comics and video games. This is going to be discussed later in this study.

Other aspects that are crucial for a series of films were developed by Laurichesse later in her article. For example, the time between each individual movie of a series is essential to keep the audience interested. The shorter it is, the better it is for the audience and, consequently, for the success of the movie. In the case of Marvel, they release on average two movies per year, which keeps the audience satisfied. Then, the title of a movie is also very important, as it is going to have an impact on its assimilation with the original movie. The sequel can either have a number after the title or can be followed by a subtitle. With Marvel’s franchises they have done both. They began by adding numbers after the title, with *Iron Man 1*, *2* and *3* but later developed subtitles for other movies such as *Captain America*, *Thor*, *The Avengers* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*.

Finally, the cast of a movie plays an important part in the success of a series as continuity is crucial for marketing. Changing an actor can be damaging for a series. Marvel did not have such a problem, except between *Iron Man* (2008) and *Iron Man 2* (2010), where the character James Rhodes was replaced by Don Cheadle. This was because the original actor – Terrence Howard – had apparently had some issues with Robert Downey Jr, playing Iron Man. This did not have huge consequences as it only happened at the beginning of the series and it did not concern the major character of the movie. However, the character of Bruce Banner (Hulk) was also changed in *The Avengers* (2012). The original actor, Edward Norton, who played Hulk in *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) did not want to do it again after the first movie, so Marvel had to find another actor and Bruce Banner was then played by Mark Ruffalo from *The Avengers* (2012) until *Endgame*. Again, this change did not seem to have consequences as the audience did not have enough time (or movies) to establish a strong relationship with the original actor.

As demonstrated, building a series is a very important factor in the development of the Marvel brand. In such a process, brands take much fewer financial risks as they largely depend upon the acclaim of previous productions. They have an existing fan community based on those and can count on them to promote and watch the movie without the need for promotion strategies. This also enables them to directly invest in different media platforms as they know the film is going to be successful thanks to the brand's reputation. In order to develop this mutual trust between the audience and the brand, the latter needs to be very cautious with the length of each movie and the suspense they generate at the end of each movie. This not only keeps the audience on the edge but also creates a desire to see the next movie. They will also increase profits by enlarging their product line. These two points demonstrate how Marvel has used its own strategy to develop a special bond with the audience, especially with the post-credit scenes. Other aspects of a brand's strategy are important, such as the time lapse between each movie, the title of the movie and the cast. These have all have been taken into serious consideration by Marvel, and well managed to establish the special relationship based on them.

1.3. The role of the audience

A serial process implies engagement from a reader or viewer. but this reader or viewer must receive the necessary information to understand it, based as well on his previous cultural experiences. If a story is detached from its serial frame and context, the reader/viewer can feel lost in front of the text (Letourneux 2017: 52). This is why it is important to inform the audience correctly before turning it into a series, as it has a very important role in the interpretation and extension of what is watched or read.

In a later article, Laurichesse (2015) developed the notion of affective economics, which was first elaborated by Henry Jenkins. Jenkins developed it as follows:

A new configuration of marketing theory, still somewhat on the fringes but gaining ground within the media industry, which seeks to understand the emotional underpinnings of consumer decision-making. In many ways, affective economics represents an attempt to catch up with work in cultural studies over the last several decades on fan communities and viewer commitments (Jenkins 2008: 61-62).

Moreover, this economy is said to be "hybrid" as it mixes market economy and sharing economy. This dynamic is based on relational and participative marketing. It targets the audience as a "friend" and its first aim is to give pleasure to the audience with content, often freely.

Affective economics is essential in the development of a transmedia story as it helps in the creation of a unique universe. Many productions are invented to encourage and frame participation, while also facilitating immersion in the various universes imagined. In order to establish a relational link, these productions are centred on the notion of consumer's experience. This transmedia strategy is strongly related to the brand strategy as there is always a community management in every brand, constantly interacting with the fan communities (e.g. making proposals to the communities and waiting for their approval or disapproval) or organising events and meet & greets with the real actors from the productions. Marvel introduced interacting with the audience very early on, in particular with Stan Lee, but this will be discussed later. The company sustained its momentum and later tried to keep that special bond with their audience, created by Lee, by regularly attending the San Diego Comic-Con International,¹⁰ for example in July 2006, when Marvel Studios and its CEO, Avi Arad, decided for the first time to come and talk about their future projects with the fans. During this convention, the fans were able to meet the actors of the future first Marvel movies, such as Robert Downey Jr as Tony Stark. The fans were also able to ask questions, and this is when Kevin Feige, at the time right-hand man of Arad, declared that these movies might later lead to the appearance of *The Avengers*, which eventually happened (Detrain 2017: 9-10). In 2010, at their second San Diego Comic Con, Marvel announced the full cast of *The Avengers* (2012) and also gave teaser trailers to increase the impatience of the fans. Finally, during the 2019 Comic Con in San Diego, Marvel announced the future of the brand, after the release of *Infinity War* and *Endgame*. This showed that even if these two movies marked the end of a long generational history, the brand had to immediately react to keep its audience attentive and attracted by subsequent movies.

However, to come back to affective economics, Jenkins (2008: 62) wrote that it is still difficult for companies to evaluate the desires, the connections with the audience, to commodify commitments, and above all to transform all of these into return on investment. Jenkins also explained the fact that audience have a greater influence than before over programming decisions. It is for this reason that companies sometimes decide to reprioritize particular parts of their audience to target, resulting in a shift in program strategies in order to reflect those tastes more specifically. Fans are therefore watching more shows reflecting their tastes and

¹⁰ The SAN DIEGO COMIC CONVENTION (Comic-Con International) is a California Non-profit Public Benefit Corporation organized for charitable purposes and dedicated to creating the general public's awareness of and appreciation for comics and related popular art forms, including participation in and support of public presentations, conventions, exhibits, museums and other public outreach activities which celebrate the historic and ongoing contribution of comics to art and culture (<https://www.comic-con.org/about>).

those shows are designed so that they present elements that appeal to the audience. What Jenkins explained is that if you are wanted by the networks, it is because your tastes are commodified and “to be commodified expands a group’s cultural visibility” (Jenkins 2008: 62).

On the one hand, the groups that are not considered as economically interesting are ignored. On the other hand, however, the ones that are commodified are targeted more fervently and are only exploited for the purpose of mass production and mass market. Recently, fan groups, who wanted certain less popular series to be continued, argued that networks should put the emphasis on the quality of audience engagement and not on the quantity of viewers. Advertisers and networks are slowly coming to agree with them. To shape a reputation brand and to build a long-term relationship with its audience demands focus on customer interactions on multiple media platforms.

Nowadays, a brand needs to understand how and why audiences react in a given way. By successfully building a “brand community”, a loyal audience is created that will be ready to follow a brand on every media platform. These loyal fans are “more apt to watch series faithfully, more apt to pay attention to advertising, and more apt to buy products” (Jenkins 2008: 63). Indeed, and as quoted by Jenkins, “brand communities” are important.

[They] carry out important functions on behalf of the brand, such as sharing information, perpetuating the history and culture of the brand, and providing assistance [to the users]. They provide social structure to the relationship between marketers and consumer. Communities exert pressure on members to remain loyal to the collective and to the brand (Muniz Jr & O’Guinn 2001: 427).

A community also helps a brand to intensify the engagement of casual consumers or to attract potential consumers within itself. It operates online, establishes sustainable connections and plays an important role in the purchasing decisions of the brand. These organizations of consumers have such a power that they are enabled to make demands to the marketers, something that an individual cannot do (Jenkins 2008: 79-80). To conclude, Jenkins repeats that affective economics can be positive as well as negative as it allows advertisers to use the power of collective intelligence and steer it towards their own ends but it can be also be dangerous for companies as it allows consumers to create their own kind of collective “bargaining structure” that can be potentially challenging for the brands (Jenkins 2008: 63).

Marvel’s brand depends hugely upon brand communities. These are everywhere online and influence the production process of Marvel Studios. They mostly operate on forums where fans

can interact and discuss the latest movie, trailer, article, one-shot, prelude or comic, released or published. These communities have not caused any trouble to Marvel Studios to date, as has been the case with some other brands. This suggests that professionals and amateurs know their place and that they can live in harmony, without criticism from the fans. Marvel strongly counts on these communities to enlarge its potential audience and appeal to both new and old fans to enjoy the expansion of a brand and therefore increase their economic benefits. In order to gain the largest potential audience, Marvel Studios has said that their goal is to represent every social and cultural community in their movies. In their latest movies, they have represented African Americans, for instance in *Black Panther*, and Asians with various characters, such as Mantis (*Guardians of the Galaxy 2*) or Wong (*Doctor Strange*). They have also represented women with strong female characters such as Black Widow, played by Scarlett Johansson, and Captain Marvel, played by Brie Larson. In the future, they will certainly try to also include gay characters or Latino ones to incorporate even more fans that will not feel excluded from the fan base anymore (Bonomolo 2018). To understand how this brand community emerged requires looking back 60 years and examining the role of Stan Lee.

2. How did the Marvel brand develop itself?

2.1. The role of Stan Lee in the emergence of the Marvel brand

Stan Lee was hired at Marvel Comics in 1940 and occupied a number of different positions. At the age of 19, he became the editor of the company but also wrote almost all comics at the time. It was only in the 1960s that he created the characters that forged his reputation, e.g. the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, the X-Men, etc (Yockey 2017: 299). Of course, he was not alone in imagining these characters and was helped but from that time, he became the brain of the company. Later, he became very famous for his editorials, as they were “a means of including the text-only pages necessary to qualify for “magazine” status with the US Post Office.” It also ignited an intimate connection between readers and Lee, giving them access to his personal life and voice (Yockey 2017: 299).

In 1974, Stan Lee composed an introduction in the collection *Origins of Marvel Comics* placed in the Fantastic Four section:

In the beginning Marvel Created the Bullpen and the Style.

And the Bullpen was without form, and was void; and darkness was

Upon the face of the artists. And the Spirit of Marvel moved upon

The face of the Writers.

And Marvel said, Let there be The Fantastic Four. And there was
The Fantastic Four.

And Marvel saw the Fantastic Four. And it was good.

Comparing the creation of Marvel with the creation of the world, written in the Genesis was very clever of Lee. This very ironic way Lee had of writing “became Lee’s stock-in-trade as a writer and as a general pitchman for Marvel [...] from 1961” (Yockey 2017: 10). Martin Goodman, Marvel’s publisher at the time, had seen the financial and cultural success of DC Comics’ *Justice League* and decided that his writers should create a second team of superheroes of the same kind. This is when Lee and Kirby buckled down to it. What made the success of Lee and Kirby’s characters is this idea of “verisimilitude”. The heroes experienced the same kind of life as their target audience. Indeed, “Lee and company managed to make them more identifiable for their readers” (Yockey 2017: 13). This once again reinforced the connection between the readers and consumers. It was made possible for them to identify with the superheroes, which was not the case with DC Comics’ heroes. Lee later decided to strengthen this feeling of connection and participation by establishing the No-Prize, “a non-existent prize offered to readers who spotted continuity mistakes or flaws in logic in the stories” (Yockey 2017: 11). Lee himself pretended to be a fan and wrote some letters with “supposed” mistakes to prove how important consumer participation was for the creation of the Marvel brand. Lee also changed the name of his characters or even of himself as author to enable fans to use nicknames that reinforced again that sense of familiarity between readers and creators or between readers and characters. This sense of authenticity and intimacy was crucial in the development of a Marvel brand. The attraction felt by the readers at the time was also down to the context as the 1960s was a period of optimism and self-doubt with events that included the race to the moon and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. It was Marvel’s intention to produce heroes that captured these feelings although they proved to be victims of them. “Their angst-ridden superheroes” (Yockey 2017: 19) always question themselves about their roles in this world and this can be related to by young people who are trying to find their place in this world too. This is especially why Marvel heroes became famous on college campuses. Even if after the 1980s, Lee rarely wrote for Marvel, he remained the voice and the face of the brand until his death in 2018.

The role of Jack Kirby in the creation of the Marvel Universe must not be underestimated either. Indeed, the creation of the universe was only complete when Kirby, the co-plotter working with Lee, created the Inhumans. With their appearance, it became clear that the Marvel

Universe was endless. Kirby was essential because of his world-building through drawing and was recognised by many, at that time, as one of the most talented of his kind and the perfect combination together with Lee, who introduced realistic characters into Kirby's drawings. In the 1970s, this way of producing continued with other writers such as Roy Thomas, Doug Moench, and Steve Gerber and writer-artist Jim Starlin (Yockey 2017: 18). Nevertheless, Kirby was never and will never be as famous and popular as Lee was. This could be due to the fact that, at the time of his collaboration with Lee, the owners of Marvel were keener to promote writers than artists such as Kirby. Some of Kirby's fans would even say that his work was not sufficiently recognized, and that Lee took much credit of it. In fact, Lee was much more of a public figure than Kirby. This could be for the simple fact that the job of writer was much more recognised at the time than that of an artist such as Kirby. Lee really tried to make Marvel a cultural force with his tireless promotion of the brand and of himself.

Because of his way of behaving, and shunning some of this responsibilities, other artists such as Kirby, had to shoulder, more than ever, the creative part of the job Lee was neglecting. This is also why Lee was now present in Marvel Studios' movies with cameos and Kirby or Ditko were not (Yockey 2017: 300). Indeed, another interesting contributor to the Marvel comics was Steve Dikto, who invented many famous Marvel characters, in particular *Spider-Man*, *Iron Man* and *Doctor Strange*. He was, like Kirby, working as an artist for Marvel, and often worked alongside Stan Lee in creating the pictures, as Lee developed the storylines. However, this is, in truth, largely due to the fact that he did not have a particularly positive relationship with Lee and developed such a strong antipathy towards him that the artist, who preferred to stay in the shadows, decided to leave Marvel for DC Comics: a huge loss for the brand (Ecranlarge 2018).

After all these steps, the Marvel Universe was made possible, thanks to Lee's hyperbolic editorial voice, by the illimited creativity and innovation of the company and furthermore by the effective good taste and intelligence of its readers. The Marvel style really wanted to bring about a collaboration, not only between writers and artists but also between writers and readers, as said before. Due to this way of thinking, Marvel differentiated itself from DC Comics in the 1960s as, in the DC Comics offices, writers and artists never met each other. In Marvel, Lee encouraged collaborations with artists by providing them with a brief outline. It was only after the artwork was completed that the writer could begin his job. Marvel had two other important ways of working that distinguished them from DC Comics: the notion of "Bullpen" that "signifies a collective working toward a shared goal in a playful manner, and [the notion of] a

“House of Ideas” that “suggests both domestic security and creative innovation” (Yockey 2017: 17).

Another way for Lee to reinforce this sense of belonging on the part of the fans was to become the voice and the face of Marvel; a new father to the readers that expressed that authenticity felt by the fans. As Marvel narratives became more complex, there were usually captions that reminded the reader of previous comics and plot points. Lee also developed slogans and he and Kirby even appeared in the diegesis of the comics from time to time. This was taken even further at a later date when Lee started appearing in cameo roles in Marvel movies. In this case, producers are seen as intermediaries between fan and object. Lee wanted fans to feel as if they were playing an important and independent role in the creation of the Marvel narratives and when he created the slogan “Make Mine Marvel!”, he was hoping that the readers would engage themselves for a lifetime with Marvel in this wonderful universe. Incorporating himself into comics was also a way for Lee to promote his association with the Marvel brand and to show to everyone that he was an essential “character” in the narrative universe as well as one of its creators (Yockey 2017: 301).

Lee undoubtedly had a huge impact in the creation of the Marvel brand, as previously seen. This impact was repaid by Marvel Studios introducing Lee’s cameos in all Marvel-branded films during his lifetime. These cameos joined all Marvel-branded characters (e.g. Marvel Studios, 20th Century Fox, Sony Pictures, etc.). They were also amusing for the viewers as one of the aims of each movie was to “spot Stan”. They created an interconnection between the comics and the cinematic world and finally they delivered a commentary on Lee’s impact, as well as other writers and artists, on the Marvel Cinematic Universe we know today, based on comics (Yockey 2017: 298). These cameos also contributed to the larger world-building project convergence established between the Marvel Studios movies and therefore, Lee representing within them a recurring figure across the films. In fact, Lee remained a tool for Marvel, a public ambassador of the brand even when he had lost all existing power over the brand, once Marvel had been bought by Disney (Yockey 2017: 300-307). Another feature that characterized Lee’s cameos was humour. Lee, as an old man, was often to be seen with beautiful women, enjoying life. When a viewer spotted Lee, he was rewarded for recognition by the irony of the scene. The other role of Lee in his cameos was one of a bystander. In his cameos, Lee was occasionally put in danger such as in *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi 2002) and *Spider-Man 2* (Sam Raimi 2004) but the more explicit example is in *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier 2008) when Lee is poisoned after drinking a bottle contaminated by Bruce Banner, harming himself. Here, Lee’s

appearance can be seen as a reaffirmation of symbolic importance but also, the fact that he will certainly be killed by the poison suggests his obsolescence (Yockey 2017: 310). Lee also appeared as a working-class individual in his cameos, which is quite ironic as he did not have this status at Marvel. Indeed, he saw himself as indispensable compared to other writers and artists, who were the true “working-class” people (Yockey 2017: 308-310). The final feature of Lee’s cameos is obliviousness. In fact, in some of his cameos, he did not appear to recognize Marvel characters, sometimes characters he created himself, such as in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (Webb 2014) or *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston 2011) (Yockey 2017: 311-312). The last cameo discussed by Matt Yockey is the one in *Spider-Man 3* when Lee says to Peter that “one man can make a difference after all”. By saying this, Lee appeared to be erasing the role of all other writers and placing total responsibility on one person: himself (Yockey 2017: 314-315).

By analysing all these cameos, it can be noticed that they often have a more complex role than simply making the audience laugh. They always try to represent Lee’s important role in the creation of Marvel Cinematic Universe but they also often show him as a victim of his own creations and as an unreliable person, only to demonstrate that Lee is from the past, and that we are part of something larger now. Still, Marvel fans always waited for this cameo during a Marvel movie and felt the sense of pride that came from recognizing one of the men that had given them this universe they were so fond of.

2.2. *The development of Marvel’s identity*

The aim of Marvel was, after the 1960s, to establish a sense of continuity between all the stories, “that its characters and their experiences existed within a shared universe” (Yockey 2017: 164) so that all these stories have an impact on one another. The organizational coherence of Marvel is also a key tool in its success. Defined by Mary Hatch and Majken Schultz (2004: 5) and quoted in Flanagan, McKenny, and Livingstone’s work, it is “a dynamic concept of identity that is both rooted in the organisation’s history and heritage and in its relationships to other identities and images that swirl around and interpenetrate it at any given moment.” Organisations are strongly influenced and interact with many agents, but the notion of legacy is also truly important. This is why it is important to discover which influences had an impact on the development of Marvel’s identity and led to the creation of its cinematic universe, but more importantly, how Marvel itself built its own image towards others (Flanagan, McKenny, & Livingstone 2016: 59).

Marvel must always attract a diverse audience whilst at the same time, remaining faithful to its identity. It is therefore an organization of storytellers, of multiple identities (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 60). It has an obligation to please all audiences by adapting all stories that can be traditional or use innovating structures to overtake their rivals. It must also function as an organization and use these storytellers in a period of capitalism and follow a “happy ending to its own business story” (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 60). Capitalist purposes can only be reached through the creation of a culture industry. Those organisations need to mix capital and art to succeed. In the same way as any other effective movie, Marvel films need to provoke excitement, captivation, annoyance or other emotions if they do not want to be considered as incompetent by the critics and their audience.

Consequently, Marvel needed to find a good financial balance for their movies; not overspending money on one film and also not exposing potential shortcomings, which could have an impact on their reputation afterwards. These effects could also have an impact on the production, on the brand, their franchises and even the universe. Fortunately, Marvel excels at storytelling and has always worked with businessmen and storytellers in their decision making. Indeed, they are seen as one of the best in terms of creating their own stories, making complementary or conflicting stories and then directing them towards different audiences. Nevertheless, this could lead to a form of dual identity that might be dangerous for the brand. The opposition between profit and art can be difficult to manage and Marvel has shown that when the balance was not reached, it could have huge consequences on the brand, such as in 1996 when the company went bankrupt. However, when the balance is fixed, Marvel prospers, and its cinematic universe is one of the reasons for its current prosperity.

Quoted in *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe*, Janette Webb (2006: 4) argued that organisations can also have a huge impact on the identity-building of individuals. Indeed, they are dominant and present all over society. They are not “solely workplaces, and are also sites of social and economic policy making, consumption, education, social welfare and citizenship.” Organisations influence individuals and their way to interact or identify with them. For Webb, organisations are social entities that bear identities, but also control factors. She argues that identities are changeable, through the actions that define organisations. In fact, it is through storytellers’ actions that the organisation reaches its creative as well as public relation goals. In this perspective, one can see how Marvel’s origin and its way to rebuild a failed identity became a success. There is of course a relationship between the past and the present; the past is used to build the images and the needs of the future. The legacy

of an organisation is therefore very important in the development of its current desires, such as with Marvel. These changes are seen as ‘rationalised’¹¹ and not ‘rational’ by Webb and it helped Marvel in a very difficult period of time not to lose its identity (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 61-62).

To go back to the origins, in 1961, Timely Comics, part of Martin Goodman’s Magazine Management, renamed itself Marvel Comics. Timely was originally the title of a magazine, and this new name was chosen on the basis of on a title written in 1939. This change of name was essentially done in order to stay on the right track for Marvel, next to its rivals, such as DC Comics. Under Stan Lee and his fellow comrades Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko, Marvel developed a completely new era of comic books: “relatable superheroes with common problems” (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 63). From then on, all the Marvel characters we are familiar with today were created through the minds of Lee, Kirby and Dikto in only a few years. This ‘relatable’ dimension, and the innovations made the difference so that Marvel could secure its major position next to market leaders DC. Another important feature of that period, which was already discussed earlier in this work, is the development of Lee’s editorials for readers. His attitude helped Marvel to work alongside 1960s self-referentialism, linked to the spirit of the times, reaching a huge recognition amongst an intelligent and affluent generation. His style and the degree of relatability made the connections between the readers and the organisation easier. At that time, it enabled transformation of these readers into loyal ‘Marvel Zombies’ and to strengthen Marvel’s identity by organising conventions in the 1970s. A final feature of Marvel’s success at the time, defined as different from other rivals, was the expansion of a shared universe. This feature became only tied to the Marvel identity (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 62-63).

According to Al Ries and Laura Ries (2000) and quoted by Flanagan, McKenny and Livingstone, a brand can only become dominant if it focuses on a word or category that can only be owned by the organization and be the only one associated with it. If you are not the first in one category, then you must invent a new one or just narrow down your focus. This is what Marvel did, as DC was already associated with ‘superheroes’. Marvel therefore decided to focus more on the notion of ‘fan engagement’, ‘relatable superheroes’ and of course the shared ‘universe’. These decisions were made to distinguish Marvel from its rivals; they were not

¹¹ Webb means that “the actions that define an organization, being rationalized, are often retroactively implemented – or forged, perhaps, by storytellers, armed with flecks of truth and objectives that cleave to creative, as well as public relations goals” (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone, 2016: 62).

purely creative but mostly commercial. The period was therefore based on a “balancing act that placed art and creativity on the one hand, with commercial reality and the competitive environment on the other (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 64). This system confirms Webb’s assertion that organisations are responsible for social variety but are also always trying to make profit. This variety is expressed through Marvel’s staff and system, such as, for example, Goodman as the corporate owner or Lee as the creative editor creating a form of engaged bond with the readers, or even the creative storytelling innovations or characters created by Marvel.

As previously observed, identity can change: an organisation cannot pretend that its identity and the competitive advantages linked to it will never change. This is a constant work-in-progress. The origin of Marvel’s identity was so strong that it enjoyed a relatively long period of stability. Lee and Kirby were holding the reins at the time and Kirby’s style was so unique that it imposed itself on new employees and, therefore, formed a kind of stability. Throughout the 1960s, and through thick and thin, Marvel had maintained its identity thanks to its creators, always respecting the origins of the brand, such as innovation, countercultural references, an expanding and complex universe and a strong engagement with its readers. This process led to economic prosperity and even if Marvel experienced a period of instability, its identity and adherence to its original principles always saved it, even in the 1970s and 1980s. At that time, Marvel commanded 70 percent of the marketplace and its writers and artists had very attractive employment packages.

Unfortunately, after this period of prosperity, Marvel’s organisation began to collapse. Teams broke down and Marvel had another issue with its creators as they mistreated the latter and lacked respect to credit, entitlement and ownership of characters (Raviv 2004: 33). They were also many members staff that did not hesitate to leave the company to join its rivals, DC. Under Goodman, everything worked satisfactorily, and he had total control of the company. The problem would appear to start when Cadence Industries came in 1968 (after having acquired Magazine Management). They demanded the application of changes, which was a strange business decision as Marvel was market leader at that time.

The main problem was that the new corporate owners’ aim was to sell the company at a time where it was “trendy”. Between 1989 and 1997, Ronald Perelman, president of Mac Andrews & Forbes, decided to purchase Marvel, as he thought he was going to own the Superman franchise. When he realised that he was wrong he made even more unintelligent decisions, both for Marvel’s future and its immediate stability. One of his actions was to put

Marvel Entertainment Group on the New York Stock Exchange in 1991. He did not care about comics, all he wanted was to make money from the brand. Other decisions were taken, such as a restriction of creativity, defrauding the organization's money, forbidding creators to use the known features that had made Marvel's success up to that point. On top of all this the decision was made to increase the price of comics, a multiplication of titles and an even more complex universe than before which resulted in a loss of readers. These decisions led to the progressive dismantling of Marvel's identity and left the field clear for DC. To make things worse, a new rival entered the big league in 1992: Image Comics. Their main difference to DC and Marvel was that they "allowed their creators retain the rights to characters they originated" (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 67). In 1994, Marvel accounts were overdrawn, and Marvel's decline continued, giving the image of being openly hostile to creators. It went so far that even the fans boycotted the products (Raviv 2004: 69). As a result, Marvel faced bankruptcy in 1996 although, happily for Marvel's fans, the destruction of the brand was avoided thanks to Carl Icahn, another shareholder. He loved comics more than Perelman but also saw Marvel as a means to making money quickly. A fight between him and Perelman began, arbitrated by the banks.

The first action undertaken was the merger of Marvel with ToyBiz, the company holder of the production's rights of derivative toys. The second action was to create a new cinematic department, called Marvel Studios. The idea behind this was to create collaborations with other studios, based on the comics characters. Its leader was Avi Arad, an Israeli businessman, co-owner of ToyBiz with Ike Perlmutter. While all this was going on, Icahn won his battle against Perelman and became Marvel's owner. However, and eventually, a third plan, proposed by Arad, was accepted by the banks. He cared a lot more about Marvel's characters and their histories and convinced the banks to give him the chance to turn the company around. The management of Marvel was therefore given to Avi Arad and Ike Perlmutter (Detrain 2017). They wanted to rebuild Marvel's balance between art and commercialism and convinced backers and creditors that Marvel's characters were there to stay. So in 1998, Toy Biz became Marvel Enterprises, Inc., which put an end to the bankruptcy proceedings (Raviv 2004: 252). After that, Avad and Perlmutter decided to move things in a new direction with a new facto publisher, Bill Jemas, and a new editor in chief, Joe Quesada. These new changes implied other movements in the storytelling policies but also in the marketing of Marvel, which was now called "NuMarvel" (Yockey 2017: 164-165).

What enabled Arad and Perlmutter to convince backers and creditors to lend them money was Marvel's primary assets: its characters. Marvel needed to reinvent these characters in order to find its original identity again. In 2003, it became debt free and regained its reputation as an innovative storyteller. This was made possible in part thanks to its reactions to the 9/11 attacks and the post-9/11 superhero story named *Civil War* (Millar and McNiven, 2007). Many other factors enabled Marvel to regain its former prosperity: the company decided to reinvent its own image by introducing new core principles. This was known as the reboot and was exemplified at the time by the creation of a new 'Ultimate Universe' (UU). The business part followed the same road and also wanted a "back-to-roots, prelapsarian blend of the ingrained and the contemporary" (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 68). Many new writers that would become popular with their stories at Marvel, tried to rediscover the essence of what made Marvel's characters so appealing in the 1960s, and also to make them appealing to the audience of the time. Bill Jemas, the new Head of Publishing, justified the creation of the UU as a way "to recruit fans who would start a lifetime of involvement with Marvel" (Raviv 2004: 266).

This same idea would also be applied on a larger scale when Marvel created a cinematic universe. Jemas allowed a return to successful principles and became the new commercially mindful businessman that reconstructed the former balance between art and commerce. This balance recalled Goodman's presidency and Lee's promotional editorials. The two saviours were Perlmutter and Arad: the first one playing the cold businessman, who cared about Marvel's history and the second one being the creative persona counterbalancing Perlmutter's seriousness and displaying his love for Marvel's characters. It was in this way that they turned things around and put the company on the road to recovery. Perlmutter also quickly realised that they needed to come up with some new ideas, and that it was the only way to make people talk about Marvel. They had to take advantage of what they held in their hands. Arad also understood that and was the first person to convince already converted fans of new opportunities to invest in Marvel, and demonstrated how they could see the potential value of it in the long run – a true winning team.

A number of projects were initiated, such as the MAX's line with comics for adults, or Marvel Adventures, intended for a younger audience but it was essentially thanks to two initiatives that Marvel regained its place on the market: Marvel Knights and Ultimate Marvel. Marvel Knights' aim was to reboot four characters: Black Panther, The Punisher, the Inhumans and Daredevil. Ultimate Marvel was, on the other hand, a complete reboot of the superheroic universe, imagined in short narrative plots. These kinds of comics were indeed shorter as they

did not develop the storylines as such and selling comics with fewer pages was something that Quesada wanted. It also showed that Marvel adapted itself slowly but surely to the cinema's format (Detrain 2017: 18). Moreover, Marvel started to put a stronger promotional emphasis on its writers and artists and less on its characters. It no longer sought to please 'old' readers, even if this increased sale of some publishers' titles. Nevertheless, because it still focused on the various characters of its universe, Marvel could finally develop its transition to the big screen in the early 2000s (Yockey 2017: 165).

After this long process of reinventing itself, Marvel found a form of stability again. A first feature for this stability was that they had succeeded in bringing their most famous characters onto the big screen, and therefore attracting a much wider audience than before. They released movies such as *X-Men* (Bryan Singer 2000) and *Spider-Man* (Sam Rami 2002). However, the profits from the first movies were not spectacular and licensing deals prevented Marvel having control over the release of films, and the effects of these releases upon its identity, as other studios acquired the rights to produce those films. Marvel rapidly realised that their association with other studios and their lack of control on movies could have a huge impact on their reputation and identity. This episode is best exemplified with the movie *Spider-Man 3* (Raimi 2007), being the highest-grossing film in that series even though it received the poorest critical and popular reception, compared to the other two movies.

The exploitation rights of *Spider-Man* had been purchased by Sony Entertainment at the end of the 1990s. The two first movies produced by Sony involving their new characters were huge box-office successes, but with the third one, Sony was going to encounter disappointment from its audience. Therefore, Amy Pascale, who worked for Sony Entertainment, asked Kevin Feige for his advice. This relationship resulted, years later, in the integration of *Spider-Man* in the MCU. The idea was that Marvel Studios would take control of the complete production (plot, cast, shooting, etc.) process and Sony would keep the creative and management side of the marketing and distribution rights. It was, for both Marvel and Sony, an extremely profitable deal (Detrain 2017: 180-181). Even if Marvel recognised the potential of its characters with these licenses, it was not interesting for them to produce these movies under conditions dictated by licensing deals. Indeed, for example with the two first *Spider-Man* movies which made 1.6 billion dollars at the box office, Marvel Studios only received 75 million of the income, which was for Arad clearly not enough (Detrain: 2017: 19).

Marvel continued to suffer from these licensing arrangements and in 2015 the *Fantastic Four* produced by Fox was reviewed as the worst superhero film of all time. This led to a future

decision where, apart from certain franchises, Marvel tried to become the sole producer of its movies and characters. It is for this reason that they built the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The balance already re-established by Perlmutter and Arad would be used in that new enterprise, as well as the concept of a shared universe, a sense of belonging for fans and a stability that would allow the fixing of its identity. To help them with it, Perlmutter worked with David Maisel, who knew the Hollywood world fairly well. His job was to convince banks to lend huge sums of money that were necessary to launch the project (Detrain 2017: 19).

Thanks to this new control on movie production, Marvel had a stranglehold on everything: it controlled the release schedules, based on other events or areas of the organization, it controlled the quality of production and also “the character traits scripted into the films, policing inconsistency which would help to increase long-term sustainability of characters’ reputations” (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 72). As a result of its imposed longevity, Marvel was able to announce features up to five years in advance, as well as dropping hints about future movies. It was at this time that Lee and Kirby, developed long-running stories for their characters. Unfortunately, a conflict emerged between Arad and Maisel, especially concerning the choice of movies to be produced. In 2006, just after the beginning of *Iron Man’s* (2008) production, Arad left Marvel. Fortunately, a new man was waiting in the wings to take the mantle. His name was Kevin Feige (Detrain 2017: 19) and, in fact, he was already working for Marvel as Arad’s assistant. When Feige took over, he slowly became a film producer, and it is through his work and because of his creative team that Marvel prospered.

The decision for Marvel to go into independent production was thanks to this balance between art and commerce that occurred as a result of Feige’s decisions. Producing its own movies instead of licensing them proved to be a way of protecting itself and to follow a continuity where its characters were incorporated. Marvel developed “casual” characters, but they needed to create more obscure ones in order to ensure long-term viability. This balance was also made impossible because of partnerships with directors, writers or actors. Many people who have worked with Marvel said that they remained quite free in their choices and that Marvel always let them express their ideas. However, Marvel still needed to keep control of proceedings and to ensure that people coming into the company maintained the house style. Even if Feige said that he would always welcome people in his sandbox with much spontaneity and an absence of rules, he still needed to have control over things to keep that stability in the brand. Marvel also used what other people said about itself to forge its identity. Perception is very important, and they tried to adapt themselves and to build their narrative based on

industrial changes as a way of anticipating negative reviews or feedback but also to move away from early naivety. They even used negative press from the past to make its pre-release promotions attractive, referring for example to previous comic writers who invented such or such character (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 74). Another strength developed by Marvel was its interconnected universe, which went on to become its trademark.

In the 1960s, this already set Marvel apart from its rivals and since the MCU has taken the reins this has continued to be the case. In fact, Nick Fury does not forget to remind us of the fact in *Iron Man* (2008), as Iron Man “[has] become part of a bigger universe.” Since then, and given the success of Marvel’s process, all franchises try to follow the same universe-building strategy (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 75). Finally, another way for Marvel to keep its intimate and personable identity has been to construct an image of inclusivity with the fans, such as with the Women of Marvel Podcast, published on marvel.com and similar to Stan Lee’s ‘Soapbox’. These are podcasts made by famous or important members of the brand and they again establish a link between the organisation and the fans, and therefore they participate in Marvel’s self-narrativising. They can go through running themed shows or cover conventions or even interview guests from both within and outside Marvel (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 75). Fans are told to express themselves as they belong to a ‘universe’ that is theirs and this is imperative for them, to participate in the universe they are so fond of. The show also promotes contact on different media platforms with the host or the show’s guests and this idea of engaging inclusivity is best exemplified by the show’s sign off slogan: “This is Marvel, *your* universe” (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 76). Marvel quickly realised the potential contribution of these fan engagement phenomena and their derived activities. Indeed, it carried on their story with fans, playing a key role in the development of Marvel identity and idea of inclusivity (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 76). All these combined show us how, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the publishing company Marvel had attempted to renew its brand as the “House of Ideas”, with its new and parallel company, Marvel Entertainment (ME), becoming a new licensing-driven business.

2.3. The development of the MCU¹² under Kevin Feige

The studio business was now gravitating around three people: President of Production, Kevin Feige; Co-President (since 2009), Louis D’Esposito, and Executive VP of Visual Effects and Post-Production, Victoria Alonso (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 37). Their aim

¹² Marvel Cinematic Universe.

was to find the right balance between creativity, leadership and executive responsibility. Following Disney's purchase, the Marvel Television section was developed in 2010. Jeph Loeb developed a kind of Feige-position in that section. His role was to oversee television content. Both Marvel Studios and Marvel Television were put under the control of Perlmutter and the Marvel Creative Committee.¹³

The 'Studio System' is like a factory system that prepared itself to reach a standardised, effective product for the pleasure of audiences. Many of them emerged in the late 1920s for the first time. Elements such as script, *mise-en-scène* (the meaningful contents of the film frame) or casting that worked and pleased the audience would be repeated in several movies. To sell the film, the company used stars or genre, things that the audience could relate to previous successes. Producing the film, theatre distribution and making sure that it sold its tickets are parts that were often controlled by the studios, such as Paramount, Fox and Warner Bros (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 38). These three stages are called the "vertical integration": "the model was one of mass production, informed by principles of 'Fordism'¹⁴, and it addressed audiences as an 'undifferentiated mass market' which was 'served... [with] a limited array of standardized mass-produced commodities" (Smith 1998: 6). Marvel has successfully managed to develop a transmedia storytelling strategy "that maximizes industrial systems geared to convergence," while also creating an image of itself as one of the most popular Hollywood productions of the time, especially thanks to its owner, Walt Disney Company (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 41). Nowadays, studios are mostly distributors and they leave others to take responsibility for production; "a post-Fordist" period. However, people of today choose to watch a movie at the cinema because they like the franchise. The name of the studio is often irrelevant (with the exception of Pixar). Nevertheless, the aim of Marvel was to establish a studio style that leaked out a unified serial approach. This is notably why every Marvel Studios movie starts with opening credits in the form of an animated logo sequence – a logo that became famous. This sequence refers to all Marvel heroes produced and developed by Marvel Studios before the movie being watched. It is true that there

¹³ The Marvel Creative Committee was a group of individuals who would give notes on Marvel Studios productions throughout the development process. This committee partially consisted of Marvel Comics writer Brian Michael Bendis, former Marvel Comics editor-in-chief Joe Quesada, Marvel Comics publisher Dan Buckley, and president of Marvel Entertainment Alan Fine. The dissolution of the Marvel Creative Committee in 2015 was a direct result of Feige's major executive shakeups regarding the Marvel Studios structure (<https://collider.com/why-the-end-of-the-marvel-creative-committee-has-led-to-bolder-mcu-movies/>)

¹⁴ 'Fordism' refers to an economic system where mass production principles and a rigid division of labour were deployed to bring about economies of scale. Parts should be interchangeable and the end product predictable and standardized, just as were the automobiles produced in the factories of Henry Ford (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: Notes, 216).

are some exceptions: The X-Men for example are not present as they are produced by 20th Century Fox but there is still a mention of Marvel on licensed productions. Marvel is also very strongly dependent on the 'shared universe' concept named the MCU, a way to distinguish itself in the Hollywood industry.

Marvel Studios, the film production subsidiary of Marvel Entertainment, also decided to organise the production and consumption of comics content across media platforms. The production not only included films but also inter-credit sequences or throwaway images. It was a way to reward fans who bought DVDs, Blu-rays or streamed version of the films as they were looking for hints about the future Marvel storyline developments and it certainly helped to forge again this shared universe (Yockey 2017: 166). Marvel later chose to revise its characters and to make them appear closer and more reliable to their cinematic counterparts. They also conceived new packaging for monthly comics and sorted them into collections in order to make them available to a more general audience that might not necessarily know or read the past comics. With these actions, Marvel clearly made the choice to abandon its first traditional audience and replace it by a more cinematic and industrial one. This new marketing method enabled Marvel to create a number of franchises. Nowadays, the Marvel Studios attract all the attention, but it also helps the publishing comics company to remain successful too. In fact, this whole evolutive process has been mutually beneficial for both parts as the comics helped Marvel Studios to achieve the reputation they have today, with everything being based on the comics' stories. In addition to this, Marvel Studios continue to give the publishing comics company a hand as, thanks to its international reputation, people carry on buying Marvel comics massively, so that in 2008, publishing accounted for 18 percent of the company's sales (Yockey 2017: 169)

Authorship is also very important. History has shown how Stan Lee had a huge impact on the promotion and development of Marvel's reputation. Moreover, the successful release of each movie forges the reputation of individual directors like Jon Favreau with *Iron Man* (2008) or the Russos Brothers with *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014). It also implies that if the directors have a good reputation, the studios will also benefit from it. A specific formula was introduced on Marvel movies posters, which was 'From the studio that brought you *Iron Man*' or 'From the studio that brought you *The Avengers*'. This formula also plays a role in strengthening the studio identity. Marvel maintains a link with individual creativity, as it has become a characteristic of the Marvel Studios recent history but is provisional as the charges are handed over to different people in the office as the adventure continues (Flanagan,

McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 47). Today's studios can reach their maximised glory by being associated with creative successes. For example, Pixar is associated with a quality family experience. Marvel has understood that well. Marvel Studios followed the Hollywood mythology, and this is marked by a will to incorporate mainstream practice as it helps the studio self-image, particularly in terms of the pursuit of good reviews and awards. That said, Marvel Studios are an outsider from Hollywood in the way that their own terms are set in relation to franchise film customs. They want to develop their *own* movie. Feige said for example about the Guardians of the Galaxy that it was going to be "against jaded audience expectations of summer movie fare" (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 50). They remain outside the Hollywood frame and they "start trends instead of following them" (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 50).

On 31st December 2009, Disney purchased Marvel. Its aim was to become a huge media conglomerate and a global business entity, based on licensing and merchandising. Although Marvel remains mainly focused on the cinematic division, Marvel Television was created in 2010, in a period where television competed seriously with cinema. Indeed, after the antitrust period vis-à-vis broadcasting services in the mid-1940s, the studios brought more and more independent producers for both theatrical and TV production onto their projects. They therefore played an enormous part in the business of television production. Disney was not one of the first companies to understand what was at stake with TV production (Flanagan, McKenny & Livingstone 2016: 53-54). Concerning Marvel, the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, hosted by ABC, is a good example of how the brand decided to explore and conquer the sector.

However, this is not the most innovative project undertaken by Marvel on television. Indeed, Marvel Studios developed other series released on Netflix, gathering "urbane, globalized moviegoer[s]" (Tryon 2013: 107). Series such as *Iron Fist*, *Daredevil*, *Jessica Jones*, *The Punisher*, etc. Marvel undoubtedly benefits from its link with Netflix. What is particular with these shows is that they are mostly geared towards an adult audience with much more violence and a divergent approach in comparison with other MCU movies. In this way, Marvel keeps its very special and useful bond with Disney, even promoting their relationship, but on the other hand, tries to please another, more adult audience, by proposing more mature shows on Netflix. In fact, it succeeds in pleasing everyone.

II. THE PARATEXTUAL CORPUS AROUND MARVEL STUDIOS

1. What is a text?

A text is the word used to describe a piece of written work. It does not take into account its physical attributes but just the fact that it is made up of words. Within the context of a text, are sections that are added to contextualise or add a timeframe to what has been written. These are known as paratexts. Roland Barthes pointed out that a text never stops changing and that therefore it is impossible to study a text as a “set object”. He also wanted to establish a distinction between a “text” and the “work”: The work “can be held in the hand,” while “the text is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse,” and is “experienced only in an activity of production” (Barthes 1977: 157). A text, in other words, can only be experienced by reading it, in an act of consumption which was seen by Barthes as a kind of production. This is because a text is experienced through the eyes of the individual reader. In fact, no two readers will have the same experience or derive the same meaning from a given text. Interpretation will depend on the reader’s life, mood and/or environment.

By picking up and reading a text, the reader is asked to collaborate in the production and creation of a text. Past textual experiences and knowledge facilitates our ability to make sense of a text the first time we read it and, thanks to intertextuality, allows for the creation of added meaning by establishing links between different texts. This means that one text induces us not only to refer back to other texts we have seen in the past through the connection of different meanings but also to “make sense of texts partly through the frames offered by other texts” (Gray 2010: 31).

Barthes said that even though personal and past experience influence our interpretation of a text, intertextuality can make different readers reach the same meaning, according to Michael Riffaterre (1990: 76). Indeed, every reader will build part of the interpretation on the basis of its personal and personal knowledge, but the other part will be created through intertexts. Riffaterre contends that all texts depend upon other texts for their meaning and value, and that the key to interpretation and to the work is to be found in the intertext. As put forward by Gray, Riffaterre was correct in emphasizing the important role of intertextuality in the interpretation process during the act of reading. Thanks to clues, the reader and viewer is already able to define a text’s genre, based on its past reading or viewing (2010: 32). Each text that a reader has seen or read can serve as intertext and shape the nature and meaning of another text based on their individual cultural memory. Gray also wanted to incorporate Stanley Fish’s argument about text and the fact that interpretation is determined through context but he

believed that interpretation is constrained; the constraints “do not inhere in language but in situations, and because they inhere in situations, the constraints we are always under are not always the same ones” (Fish 1980: 292). He also says that reading can be shaped in advance by an “interpretative community” which establish a strategy prior to reading so as to help us define and understand what is read. Therefore, the meaning of a particular text can become dominant if its reception is controlled by one specific interpretative community.

In a nutshell, it can be argued that Fish attempted to demonstrate that readers are often ready for texts even before they meet them and that it is not only as individuals but as groups, that people are able to create certain interpretations (Gray 2010: 33). To conclude our analysis of Gray’s approach, one can understand that texts refer to other texts, try to establish reading filters and create interpretative communities, and that intertext and paratext are always part of the text itself (Gray 2010: 34-35).

2. Definition of the paratextual notion

In order to really understand the role of strategic brand policy in the two Marvel movies *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, it is necessary to focus on the paratextual aspect of this strategy and think about how paratext does not only apply solely to texts but also to various media platforms, used by Marvel. Jonathan Gray’s work (2010) in his book *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts*, illustrates this concept as he tries to develop how a paratext can have a profound impact on a brand’s policy. This point will be further explored to show how this theory is also partly or sometimes even fully interesting in the case of Marvel.

In this age of advertising we are surrounded by advertisements. They are visible everywhere; from the bus, at the bus stop or on the side of the bus itself, from the car on the radio or on roadside billboards. This is not limited to outside of the house. We are confronted with adverts from inside our own home. They appear on the television screen in between shows or as “sneak peaks” of a future show or movie, trailers, etc. The same goes for the internet, where adverts appear as pop-ups or other formats all over the internet. Then there are the official webpages that can provide information about a show or movie, where there is also space for fan discussion (Gray 2010: 1-2). The online space also allows for the practice of alternate reality games or a creative marketing campaign.

In addition to these, there are the online stores where merchandise related to a favourite movie or show will be sold. Even if they are now less popular than they may have been in the past, there are still bookstores and especially comic book shops selling new editions. More in

demand these days are the videogames and boardgames. Brands appear in fast food stores and are also developed as soundtracks of a movie and sold as CDs of music “inspired by” certain films or shows and of course, the show or movie is released in a DVD or Blu-Ray format with bonus materials often included. These are only few examples of how a brand can promote a show or movie. This strategy is really in response to the fans who favour the brands. If they did not and when they do not, it results in a failure for the brand in question. Such entities can change the nature of a text: they can make it proliferate in mass circulation, or they can even add new meanings to the text itself. Fans will develop their fandom around these, so they are obligatory for a brand if it wants to build a group of loyal fans (Gray 2010: 1-2).

Advertisements are there as brand paratexts and their aim is to generate additional paratextual materials “through the ways in which consumers engage with, use and talk about them” (Hackley & Hackley 2019: 197). Trailers are there to construct early frames through which the future audience might think of the text’s genre, tone, and themes. The discussion sites are there to enable fans to continue discussing what they have seen and imagining what is going to happen subsequently. On the other hand, there are videogames, comics and other narrative extensions that are also there to make this story world a more immersive one (Gray 2010: 2).

A filmic or televisual text cannot be analysed without taking these into consideration, even though, generally speaking, it is true that most of the time it concerns more blockbusters than independent film, or movies with smaller budgets. Indeed, these extensions can change the nature of the text’s address: sometimes, they try to intensify one aspect of the text through mass circulation or they can also add something new or different to the text (Gray 2010: 2). What is also essential is that now all media channels can be accessed via smartphones, and the companies are continually trying to adapt themselves to these new consumption patterns (Hackley & Hackley 2019: 197). It is important to see the film or the program as a package and to analyse every section of it carefully as it enables viewers to build their own ideas about a particular package, based not only on what they have seen, but also on the interactions they have subsequently had with other people. A film or a program cannot therefore be taken alone but have to be considered with the extensions around them. These extensions are deliberately there to help people developing their first formative encounters with a text on their way to the final production. Even if these extensions are often seen as a nuisance by consumers, the latter are expected to realise that these extensions are helpful in our way to understand a movie or program (Gray 2010: 3). For example, it is thanks to these ads that people decide what they choose to watch and how to watch it. This means that when they finally go to the movies to

see the movie of their choice, and thanks to the ads that have been viewed, it is much easier to decode the meaning of what is being seen. This is in fact what people call “to judge a book by its cover” (Gray 2010: 3). Today’s ads are there to establish frames and filters to facilitate the comprehension of the texts they are promoting.

Advertisers need to create frames for everything around us and to edit the object with significant skill and power to give it mass appeal. Nowadays, everything is framed, from dog food to washing machines down to movies. Professionals have a way of making us buy their products or services and their aim is to create a life, character and/or meaning for these products on which the man in the street can relate to: “Hype, in short, creates meaning. And by doing so, it regularly implores us to judge books by their glossy covers” (Gray 2010: 3). Promotions are economically vital for media multinational corporations, such as multi-platforming for the political economy of mass media. The first step is to create meaning and a relationship to entice consumers to purchase their product. Hype is therefore there to help the viewers build their relationship with and understanding of a movie or television show and the aim of Gray’s book is to understand how this media world is formed by all these “book covers” (4).

Hype is the newfound way advertisers use to sell their products or services. The *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)* defines “hype” as “extravagant or intensive publicity or promotion.” This means that it is a step up from traditional promotion. It refers to “the puffing up, mass circulation, and frenetic selling of something. Hype is advertising that goes over and beyond an accepted norm [...] for a brief, unsustainable period of time: [...] the hyped product will need to slow down at some point” (Gray 2010: 5). Such hype is made possible due to its presence in Hollywood’s business within networks of *synergy*.

Synergy is defined by the *OED* as “the interaction or cooperation of two or more organizations, substances, or other agents to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effect.” This means that, within the entertainment industry, it develops a multimedia platforming and creates a link between a media product and other platforms (e.g. toys, DVD, videogames, etc.) in order for each product to be advertised and to improve the consumer experience. Hype is often related to advertising and public relations (PR), and synergistic merchandise and products – “also called *peripherals*” – are often developed for “profit-generation” (Gray 2010: 5). Those notions, however, can have a negative influence, for example “hype”, which can be seen as pejorative and excessive. Indeed, the *OED* has a second definition for the notion: “a deception carried out for the sake of publicity”, while the verb form means “to promote or publicize (a product or idea) intensively, often exaggerating its benefits,”

describing the entity as “illegitimate, inauthentic, and abnormal” (Gray 2010: 5). All these words, such as hype, promotions, promos, and synergy, are terms related to profits, and business or accounting. They could, therefore, be seen as purely economic terms and not as notions that create meaning and enjoyment for the audience. Moreover, the “peripherals” can be seen by their designation as removed from the actual text and powerless while they are, in fact, much more than peripheral. Finally, fan and viewer creations cannot be considered as hype, promotions, promos, synergy or peripherals, even if they are produced in a similar way, because they do not have any official status and are therefore unauthorized by the terminology (Gray 2010: 6).

To use Gray’s theory, it is also important to understand the notions of *paratexts* and *paratextuality*. These notions mentioned and used by Gray in his work were originally developed by Gerard Genette, “who first used them to discuss the variety of materials that surround a literary text” (Genette 1997). “Para-” means, according to the *OED*, “beside, adjacent to,” and “beyond or distinct from, but analogous to.” Therefore, a “paratext” is part of a text. For Gray, the aim is to prove that these paratexts create new texts with meanings deriving from them. Paratexts can have a tangible form, as is the case with posters, videogames, podcasts, reviews or merchandise. Still, there are also intangible forms that can work in paratextual fashion too (Gray 2010: 6). What is also important to understand is that Gray uses the word “text” in a particular fashion: he said that, for some readers, if the film or the television program are seen as “texts”, then they “suggest that the film or program *is* the entire text, and/or that it completes the text” (Gray 2010: 6-7). However, for him, the film or the program is only one part of the text, being a contingent entity. According to Julia Kristeva (1980), and as mentioned by Gray, the text is not a finished production, but a continuous “productivity”. The text *is* therefore described by Gray as the entire storyworld and our behaviour towards this world will always depend upon paratexts. Here, “film” or “program” should therefore not be confused with “text” as they do not represent the whole text (Gray 2010: 7).

It can therefore be concluded that these previews, bonus materials, merchandise and other things, are crucial for the development of a brand’s strategy, which is why companies invest so heavily in them. For example, Marvel invested \$150 million for the marketing campaign of *Infinity War* and even more – \$200 million – for *Endgame* (Shepherd: 2019). Knowing that these movies became the 5th and 1st highest-grossing movies of all time, it can be seen that this was a smart move as the resulting impact was huge. Marvel clearly illustrated how anticipation and expectation, networks of paratexts and people’s bond with a story, character or genre are

important. This relationship between the audience and the film is made possible thanks to everything that preceded a film as well as the frames that will help viewers to create meaning and to prepare them for what is coming. It is also important to remember that paratexts are continual; that their work is never over as they continually give us more information and ways of looking at a film or show and that they also help us to understand the frames proposed by the text (Gray 2010: 11). In a consumer culture, paratextual advertising is crucial as it incorporates brands into media content across the many media-related platforms “that facilitate participatory, collaborative and fluid consumption, thus increasing brand salience and driving engagement” (Hackley & Hackley 2019: 201). Therefore, paratexts build an audience’s encounters with a text and are the mediators for both fans and a wider audience to the film or television program. Paratexts can be more directed towards a geek audience or can target a more mainstream would-be audience but in every case, what they do perfectly is to be the mediators of a fan property to a wider audience, construing the idea of what the brand represents for fans, but especially also for non-fans (Gray 2010: 17).

2.1. Paratexts as gateways into a text

As has been demonstrated, paratexts establish meanings and frames for decoding before the audience can watch a movie or program: these are in fact gateways into the text and the most iconic examples are movie posters, trailers, and advertising campaigns that are organized to entice people to watch a movie or show and to establish frames in order for the audience to interpret the shows. These promotions and hype help “to determine genre, gender, theme, style, and relevant intertexts, thereby in part creating the show as a meaningful entity for viewers even before they become viewers, or even if they never become viewers” (Gray 2010: 18). However, is it possible to define his notion of paratext?

The first thing to do is to understand how a viewer arrives at a text and why he chooses to watch a particular program or film. For centuries, experts have thought that in order to understand what a text means, people had to dismantle it in the same way as they would dismantle a machine, but time has proven to us that it is not sufficient. There are many things that can be learnt from doing this, but it is impossible to discover the social standing of a text in society and it does not reflect important aspects of the analysed object. It is true that our future consumption could be based on previous experience but on many other occasions, we are involved into new texts and we must engage in speculative consumption in order to choose which movie or program we want to watch and enjoy (Gray 2010: 24). Speculative consumption

means guessing how much enjoyment will be got out of one text, what information it will give and the effect it will have or what emotions it will provoke.

Because of all the adverts in our everyday environment, we could, in fact, speculatively consume text for a large part of our day. It is the same when we buy a ticket at the theatre. We do not buy it because we know that we are going to like a play, but because we are trusting the promise made by the brand and its ads in the hope of persuading us to go and see it. It is the same with television programs as they require a form of engagement for the viewers in terms of time and again, our choices are based on our speculative consumption and on the hope of transubstantiation¹⁵ (Gray 2010: 24). The aim of the business of media is therefore to make a mix of “hopes, expectations, worries, concerns, and desires [...] to offer us images and scripts of what a text might be” (Gray 2010: 25). Transubstantiation is mostly possible thanks to synergy, paratexts and intertexts that allow these speculative consumptions. For example, we decide to watch a movie because of the starring actor, of the previews or reviews, or of word of mouth or other things, because these are constructions made to offer meanings and interpretations.

In his work of 1997, *Paratexts: The Thresholds of Interpretation*, Gerard Genette put forward the first complete definition of what paratexts and their role are. In fact, paratexts prepare us for other texts and “form the “threshold between the inside and the outside of the text, and while paratext can exist without a source [...] a text cannot exist without paratexts” (Gray 2010: 25). At the time of Gray’s writing, these paratexts were essentially covers, title pages, name of the author, prefaces, etc. He had already affirmed that one could not read a book before having consumed a large number of paratexts, influencing it. He also argued that paratexts prepare a reader to enter a new world, often a fictional one, and that thanks to them, people are able to anticipate and know what to expect.

Readers or viewers, therefore, “acclimatize to a certain text, which suggests certain reading strategies” (Gray 2010: 25). Consequently, those paratexts tell and continue telling us what to watch, what to avoid, what to watch in theatres, at home, alone or with friends, providing the important frames through which we will be able to evaluate our possibly future consumption, based on our individual meaning but also on the meaning created by the popular culture and the society in general (Gray 2010: 25-26).

¹⁵ Here, meaning: “the act of transforming something.”

In some cases, today, paratextual products may overcome their related text. It can even be the case that children buy toys, colouring books, video games, without having watched the movie cited by the products. Another example is that fans of a certain movie are sometimes more interested in a fan discussion about a text than about the text itself. The fans construct their image of a text through its paratexts and not through its primary source, which is the film or program. All this takes place without using the word paratext and this is because it is often integrated by the audience in their conception of the text itself.

To conclude, paratexts are useful in our life as we cannot watch every movie or program in order to know what we like or not; we therefore have to depend upon these paratexts and see them as representations of the text. In fact, they exist to “amplify, reduce, erase, or add meaning,” and they show us that “much of the textuality that exists in the world is paratext-driven” (Gray 2010: 45-46).

2.2. *The difference between paratext and intertext*

In order to understand the meaning of paratexts, it is necessary to focus on the notion of intertext, as paratexts are in fact intertexts. Intertextuality “refers to the fundamental and inescapable interdependence of all textual meaning upon the structures of meaning proposed by other texts. [...] *intertextuality* refers to instances wherein a film or program refers to and builds some of its meaning off another film or program, and *intertext* to the referenced film or program” (Gray 2010: 117). In broad terms, this means that a viewer will use previous texts (films or programs) in order to make sense of the one they are now reading/watching. Intertextuality is when texts frame each other just as paratexts frame texts, so with this in mind, paratextuality is “a subset of intertextuality” (Gray 2010: 117) but the difference between the two is that intertextuality “often refers to the instance wherein one or more bona fide shows frame another show, whereas paratextuality refers to the instance wherein a textual fragment or “peripheral” frames a show” (Gray 2010: 117). Intertextuality and paratextuality are also intertwined as for example conversation between people can circulate intertexts and one can interpret a show or form an entryway or *in media res* paratext, such as a trailer or bonus materials. Broadly speaking, intertextuality functions through paratexts and there are cases when paratexts take the function of intertexts or when the two notions combine.

Very obviously the story of a movie starts way before it is released to the cinemas and therefore the public. Months before it enters theatres, the public becomes aware of the upcoming film. It can be popular (or unpopular) through hype: press releases, magazine articles and official websites updates, etc. The internet is the resource that most brings a movie to people’s

attention, as people are discussing a text that does not exist in reality at the time. These people do not necessarily need a trailer or a poster to begin their talk, especially when the movie which is about to be released is a sequel (Gray 2010: 120).

In the case of Marvel, when a movie has been produced but not released, the fans can already imagine what to expect and deduce a number of reading strategies and frames that they already used before. Fans have an *ideal* text, based on available intertexts to imagine the text that is coming and that they can consume even before the actual film is released (Gray 2010: 120-121). However, it is not always certain that they are going to accept it, even before consuming it, as, for example, when a movie is about to be released and is inspired by a book, there will always be the fans that are truly excited about the idea of an adaptation of their favourite book for the big screen and then there will be the fans that do not believe that their masterpiece can be transported to the cinema, as it will never be faithful enough to the original for them and that they cannot accept that their story can be transplanted elsewhere than in their book (Gray 2010: 122-123). Indeed, it is almost impossible to include every detail of a book on the big screen. In fact, many details have to be omitted so that the movie does not last for ten hours. The fans that are posting these ideas and reactions online must therefore live with both the images they want to see on the screen and the images they fear seeing. The adaptations of books onto the big screen are another way of increasing the popularity of the books and their cultural presence in society, which is an aspect that cannot be forgotten by the fans and posters.¹⁶

As we have seen with Marvel, transforming a simple comic into a transmediated franchise has proved to be very beneficial (Gray 2010: 123-124). This form of intertextuality is therefore interesting as it confirms what John Fiske said in “Moments of Television: Neither the Text Nor the Audience”. Intertextuality, he said, is like “ghost textuality,” it is “a phrase that suggests texts living beyond their time, always with unfinished business to perform” (66). One can conclude that every Marvel movie is a sort of intertext preceding another movie that is going to follow it and many other future ones, as these previous movies help future viewers to imagine what they are going to see and to create images, even if it is too early to see information about the upcoming movie’s content. Moreover, if the producer of the movie is going to be the same as the one that has already produced a movie for a franchise or from Marvel Studios, it will even more forge the fans’ mind about what is coming and become another important intertext with a paratextual role (Gray 2010: 125-130).

¹⁶ People posting their reactions and opinions online about a specific subject matter.

This was the case with *Infinity War* (2018) and *Endgame* (2019) as both were directed by the Russo Brothers, who additionally produced *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) and *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). If those two films had already won the support of the fans, then why would the two subsequent ones be a failure? If Marvel Studios and the fans trust them, then everyone will expect another “brilliant” movie. Yet, this strategy is double-edged as people and fans who like Marvel Studios movies will often like the future Marvel movies but on the other hand, people who did not like one particular Marvel Studios movie that they have seen will directly assimilate it to every other Marvel movie, and therefore refuse to go and see another one, which is silly as the stories of the various heroes are clearly different from one another and can maybe change the viewer’s opinion (Gray 2010: 125-130). Therefore, intertextuality and paratextuality are “about framing and the prefiguration of textuality, [...], and are motored by, fans’ (and others’) desires for certain texts to stay alive continuously, reflected off, informing, and inspiring all manner of other texts” (Gray 2010: 131).

3. Focus on entryway paratexts

In the MCU, the para-/inter-textual network works in two ways: (1) our history of Marvel movies serve as an airlock into the world of any other new Marvel movie, but in turn, (2) Marvel is always open for “re-decoding, for any new text or paratext can re-inflect our notion of who and what [Marvel] in general is” (Gray 2010: 35). Therefore, we can divide paratexts into “those that control and determine our entrance to a text – *entryway paratexts* – and those that inflect or redirect the text following initial interaction – *in media res paratexts*” (Gray 2010: 35). We are going now to focus on the first category. Films and television programs begin long before we can actually watch them. We will then first focus on the elements that are the true beginnings of texts and that try to already create a meaning, expectations, and engagement with the audience, but that also deal with the first outposts of these texts (Gray 2010: 47).

3.1. Focus on trailers and TV spots

As Gray points out, the trailer has a “key role in determining how audiences came to the cinema, and what they came expecting” (Gray 2010: 10). Trailers, previews and ads are part of the “narrative image” of a movie or program and they all exist in order to create meaning outside the text. The film trailer remains the most important aspect of movie promotion (Johnston 2016: 2). It is for this very reason that companies spend huge amounts of money on them. Indeed, you can produce the best film in the world, but if you are unable to attract an audience to theatres with your promotion, the film will still be a failure. Trailers, previews and ads introduce us to the text and its “proposed and supposed meanings,” and this promotional material that we

consume is going to help us to begin and frame our first interactions with the text. They serve as “the first outpost of interpretation” as they create textual meaning. Trailers are there to precede the release of a movie and they appear months before the release, enabling the first meanings, interpretations and evaluations and also conversation between fans about what they have seen, what they thought of it and what is to come. These promotional campaigns are also very important as they create textuality, a genre, networking intertexts, and a new story world (Gray 2010: 48). What distinguishes the trailer from other promotional materials is the idea of a “aesthetic and cultural mode of engagement” (Johnston 2016: 4). For fans, it is also the moment where the waiting period officially begins and continues right up until the release of the movie. From this moment, their engagement which existed already before, is reawakened and shared through different communities in order to try and guess what is going to happen.

Therefore, a quality trailer is paramount for the film makers if a film is to be successful. Indeed,

most films make over a third of their box office in their opening week, and since high opening-week box office figures have a compounding effect, giving rise to further hype to bring in audiences for the rest of a film’s run (Gray 2010: 49).

That said, trailers need to be treated carefully. They are clearly there to attract people into theatres, giving them the first taste of a future movie. It is a well-known fact that that many people choose to go to theatres before the start of the actual movie in order to watch the trailers presenting the movies coming out over the next few months. Some of these trailers will already appeal to some of the people in the room, who will think: “we should go and see this movie next month, it looks great” (Gray 2010: 50). It is a way of telling the audience that even if they are at the theatre to watch a particular movie, another movie with another story and other pleasures is already in the pipeline. It is important to point out that this is one of MCU’s strengths as when you are going to the theatres to watch a Marvel movie, you often already see before the film a trailer of a future Marvel movie that will be released a few months later, showing you that Marvel Cinematic Universe never ends (Gray 2010: 50). As soon as their expectations of a movie have been fulfilled because the film has been seen and is no longer a mystery, a fan can move onto the next movie, which is why fans remain loyal to the brand. They are never disappointed as movies follow on from each other at a frenetic pace; fans will never tire of the brand and always need to keep following the news if they want to stay on track with the other. In summary, a Marvel fan is never bored.

According to Johnston, the trailer is first a source of information that can play with the pleasures, emotional attachment, communal sharing and speculation, and engagement of the viewers (Johnston 2016: 4). As Gray also pointed out, Lisa Kernan remarked in her book *Coming Attractions* (2004) that trailers have three concentrating areas; (1) to delineate a film's genre, (2) to celebrate and feature its star(s), and/or (3) to provide an environmental sampling (Gray 2010: 50). Genre is an important component of the interpretive process of a text as it works by giving "an initial context and reading strategy for the text" (Gray 2010: 36). It is shaped before viewing and can be seen as a set of rules that help to understand a text (Gray 2010: 50). If you see that a movie is an action film or a superhero movie, it already implies a definition that is shaped by cultural categories and used by the industry, reviewers, audiences, politicians, or policy makers and this definition already presupposes a certain interest, participation and reaction, not only from the audience but also from studios, theatres or even censors. In the same way, stars can also be said to be intertext and have their individual influence on a movie, "offering interpretive strategies and expectations". Finally, environmental sampling also helps the viewers to imagine what is going to happen in a movie. For the most part, the audience want information but not too much; they want a representation of the movie that is "accurate", but not too much either, because if it reveals too much, the audience will not be happy about it, having been spoiled the best moments of the future film (Johnston 2016: 19). A viewer often decides to watch a specific trailer for four reasons:

- a) to develop/deepen existing knowledge on the film
- b) to make a judgement on quality/aesthetics of film
- c) as a result of external recommendation (personal or social media)
- d) because of a preference for a pre-existing element (star, actor, director, story)

(Johnston 2016: 8-9).

The first point implies that the trailer aims to create a desire to go and watch the movie in theatres and that the viewers use the trailer as a confirmation of what already exists around the movie, or to be sure that this movie is their type of movie (Johnston 2016: 9). The second point insists that the trailer is used as "a confirmation or evidence to support existing knowledge or recommendation" (Johnston 2016: 10). The aim of the third point is the sharing of the trailer. Whether they are personal or external, these recommendations have a key role in the process of

watching a trailer or not (Johnston 2016: 10). Finally, the fourth point deals with the personal investment of individuals before watching a trailer. For example, the presence of some stars or actors that people like to see in a movie, or directors with whom they are familiar, implies for them a certain expectation of the movie. Of course, there are also the fan communities that will watch the trailer of the sequel of their favourite movie as soon as it is released, in some cases before they go to the theatre. This mode of trailer viewing “is based on known pleasures” and “suggests a more emotional, intellectual and intertextual connection” (Johnston 2016: 11-12). In the case of Marvel movies, of course, the fans already know the genre of the movie and the actors appearing in it. What motivates them is to discover the first hints of the next sequel of the Marvel Cinematic universe. What is also very specific for Marvel trailers is that they do not give away much information about the movie which is to be released, but they still create a deep sense of excitement in fans, who know, of course, everything that happened previously and who can speculate about the future plot, simply based on the knowledge shared by the whole community.

From the above points, it can be concluded that these paratexts indicate quite clearly how to read a text and that trailers are there to help us to choose what to watch and to attract viewers on the basis of its promotion. It plays an important role as it is clear that no movie goer is going to watch every movie that is released. People judge what they are going to watch on the basis of hype, but also on what they have already watched in the past. This is why companies must invest a lot in these trailers, ads and previews, and try to appeal as many viewers as possible (Gray 2010: 51-52).

Now I would like to focus on the analysis of the four trailers released for the two movies discussed in this work, *Infinity War* (2018) and *Endgame* (2019). First, it is important to position the trailers chronologically. *Infinity War* was released on 25th April 2018 in Belgium and on 27th April 2018 in the United States of America. The first trailer¹⁷ dropped on 29th November 2017 and the second and final trailer¹⁸ was released on 16th March 2018. On 4th February 2018, Marvel Studios also took advantage of the Super Bowl show, with its guaranteed huge audience, to release another trailer.¹⁹ As far as *Endgame* is concerned, the release date was 24th April 2019 in Belgium and 26th April 2019 in the USA, namely almost precisely one year after *Infinity War*. The first trailer²⁰ of *Endgame* was dropped on

¹⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ZfuNTqbHE8&t=6s>. Accessed 25 March 2020.

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwievZlTx-8>. Accessed 25 March 2020.

¹⁹ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pVxOVIm_1E8. Accessed 25 March 2020.

²⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hA6hldpSTF8&t=41s>. Accessed 25 March 2020.

7th December 2018. A second trailer²¹ was released on 4th February 2019 during the Super Bowl game, as a 30-second TV spot. A third trailer²² was released on 14th March 2019 and the final trailer²³ was released on 16th April 2019.²⁴

It is clear that fans were sure to watch these trailers as they already knew which story world they came from and were familiar with the actors and superheroes associated with it. The fact that Marvel Studios has created such a relationship between fans and actors is a clear strength, as the audience cannot imagine anyone else playing Iron Man or Captain America. It is often due to this bond that the fans keep watching Marvel movies. What is very beneficial for Marvel is that, in *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, all the superheroes are reunited, so that every fan community has a reason to watch because their favourite superhero is present in the movies. Therefore, the presence of these actors is already a motive for fans to watch future trailers.

However, it is important that a trailer does not give away the whole story and must leave the viewer wanting more. Indeed, as developed before, the trailer is “a communal act of sharing, an act that [includes] the display of knowledge, fan-based discussion and the creation of specific readings of the trailer text” (Johnston 2016: 22). This notion of elusiveness, based on the idea that the content of the trailer is incomplete, or ambiguous, is very important for advertising paratexts (Hackley & Hackley 2019: 203). Marvel Studios have always made it a point of honour not to reveal too much in their trailers, so that the fans can speculate freely about what is going to happen. There is a sort of *crescendo* process in their trailers, as they seem to reveal more and more as the date release gets closer, mirroring the *crescendo* of excitement for the fans themselves.

The first trailer of *Infinity War* opened with a brief summary to remind the viewer why the Avengers were created in the beginning and included some scenes from the earlier movie. What truly excited the fans and also made them emotional was the famous speech made by Nick Fury, in the first Iron Man about the Avengers Initiative. This combined with Alan Silvestri's Avengers theme really reminds fans of the beginning of this whole adventure and already gives them the first hint of a handover from the old to the new generation.

Indeed, the many “off” voices are interesting as there is clearly a distinction made between these voices, what they tell us, and the scenes that are shown. This way of linking the trailer to

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-iFq6IcAxBc>. Accessed 25 March 2020.

²² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TcMBFSGVi1c&t=9s>. Accessed 25 March 2020.

²³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jNvJU52LvU>. Accessed 25 March 2020.

²⁴ Release data found on Youtube.

the past excited Marvel fans, as it brought back memories of everything they had watched and loved over the past few years. Then, Thanos, the principal villain in the movie, appeared, or at least his voice was heard, to signal that the Avengers' time was over, that it was time for them "to lose". Viewers already knew that Thanos already had at least two infinity stones in his possession, giving a hint about the development of the plot. Fans also had already seen him appearing in post-credit scenes of previous movies. This enabled them to already imagine who the character was and what he wanted to accomplish.

Of course, the trailer included the expected compilation of scenes with all characters apparently fighting against a character that was implied to be Thanos. However, there were not many scenes where the viewer was able to directly deduce which characters were fighting. It was only the last scene of the trailer that suggested that Captain America, Falcon, Hulk, Black Widow, the Winter Soldier, Black Panther, Okoye, and War Machine were united against the enemy with what appeared to be the Wakandan²⁵ army behind them. The other confusing aspect of this trailer was the fact that it was not apparent which scenes took place in space and which were on earth, and more precisely, which characters were in space or on earth. This first trailer was, in fact, very unclear. This was, obviously, intentional, as it is precisely what viewers want as they get some snippets of information but not too much, giving free rein to their imagination. Moreover, the fans are aware that another trailer will follow with more information, so that it does not bother them to have so little information from this. It was because of this unclearness that the second trailer worked so well, as it was designed to give more answers to the fans.

In the second trailer, the plot and the composition of the different groups in the movie become more precise. Indeed, as in the initial trailer, there is a group positioned in Wakanda, composed of Captain America, Black Panther, and the others aforementioned. However, there appears to be another group, positioned in space, made up of Iron Man, Spiderman, Doctor Strange and the Guardians of the Galaxy. The fans get therefore more information than in the previous trailer. Moreover, the Guardians of the Galaxy and, in particular, Rocket and Groot, seem to have another connection to Thor. Thanks to this trailer, the viewer was finally able to piece together the links and connections between the superheroes gathered together. The infinity stones are discussed more clearly in this trailer too, in order to understand the importance and impact they will have on this movie and its characters. Indeed, after Gamora summarises Thanos's goal with the infinity stones, the superheroes are clearly preparing

²⁵ Wakanda being the country of Black Panther.

themselves to fight Thanos. Loyal fans already know from previous Marvel movies that he is searching for the six infinity stones, that he has some of them already in his possession (however, we do not know how many yet) and that two stones are on earth. What also leaks out in this trailer, is the often-bad state of the superheroes, who seem to have suffered a lot. This suggests to the fans that their favourite superheroes are going to face something very big, unseen before and that they are not going to get through this without any sacrifices or wounds. Fans also already understand that some big changes are going to happen after this movie and that they have to prepare themselves for them, as it is going to be something unimaginable. Of course, they also asked themselves if one or several major characters were going to die, which would be unthinkable for them.

Here the *crescendo* process introduced earlier is clearly continued, as the fans slowly but surely receive more information than in previous trailers, which only makes their engagement and excitement with the movie increase. A few meanings and interpretations based on these first two trailers and the other Marvel movies that preceded *Infinity War* have been released.

In the final trailer, which was a tv spot for the Super Bowl, there is a summary of the two previous trailers. It is also shorter than the first two and only lasts 30 seconds. This trailer, which was broadcast during one of the biggest televised sporting events of the year in the United States, worked as a reminder that *Infinity War* was close to being released and that it was high time for those who had not watched the trailers at this time, not to lose any more time before doing so. The only confirmation from this new trailer is that Superman is going to take a trip into space and that Thor is working alongside Groot and Rocket from the Guardians of the Galaxy.

Another of the main characteristics of these three trailers is the soundtrack that is the same, positioning itself as the “anthem” of the movie. The soundtrack is very important, as it makes it possible for viewers to deduce the general feeling and atmosphere of the movie. Personally, I think it implies danger, suspense and sadness but also fight and resistance for viewers. The soundtrack really strengthens the degree of engagement of viewers as they now identify the movie with this music, and for those who generally like Marvel soundtracks, it increases the intensity of the excitement. Each Marvel movie and each Marvel superhero has its own soundtrack. These soundtracks are really important for fans and are very characteristic of each movie. Many fans like to listen to these soundtracks after having watched the movies, as it reminds them of how they felt, of what they watched and sometimes specific moments of a

movie that they particularly liked, for example a fight or the loss of a dear one. This music really enables fans to keep their feelings alive.

With *Endgame*, and its first trailer, it is important to point out that two characters and superheroes who were missing from the previous movie, *Infinity War*, make an appearance in the shape of Hawkeye and Antman. The latter is presented as he plays a key role in the movie, something which becomes apparent in the final scene of this first trailer. But to go back to the beginning of the trailer, viewers could clearly see that Iron Man is in a really bad state, following the end of *Infinity War*. From the trailer, it is clear that Iron Man believes he is going to die, as he leaves one last message for his wife, Pepper Potts. The beginning of this trailer is clearly presented in a dark and negative atmosphere, which maintains the theme and what happened in *Infinity War*. Fans were therefore not really surprised by this context of chaos but already hoped to see some hint of a better future in the following minutes.

The beginning of this trailer already shows very clearly that it is better to have watched the previous movie to understand what is happening. This was intentional and encouraged people who had not seen *Infinity War* to do so.

This trailer also contains a summary of what happened in *Infinity War*, this time from Black Widow. Her speech is paired up with scenes of the main characters who are deeply saddened by the situation. Once again, the same soundtrack is used for all the *Endgame* trailers and implies an atmosphere of sadness and maybe even despair. They also add an element of suspense, especially at the end of the trailer when Scott Lang (Antman) appears, while every other character seems resigned. This scene gives hope to the superheroes and to the viewers, as they know who he is, what he knows, and his own power and talents. There is hope that Antman will find a solution, but again, if you have not watched the preceding Antman movies, you would be unable to understand how. The superhero Hawkeye is also very important in this trailer as something seems to have happened to him, but we do not know what yet, even if we can already deduce that it has something to do with what Thanos did. This trailer remained therefore very dark and only gave fans a slight hint of hope with the final appearance of Antman at the end. The fans remained, therefore, in a state of anxiety about the future of their superheroes as they received very little precise information about them in this trailer. Again, this only strengthened their anticipation for the next trailer.

The tv spot during the Super Bowl that followed this trailer had a completely new atmosphere. With the soundtrack behind the different scenes, an atmosphere of resistance

appears to emerge among the remaining Avengers. They are clearly desperate and unable to move on, even if Captain America is shown attending a support group meeting. This is clearly what the audience expected after the first trailer, which seemed very dark and pessimistic. The message from this is that the rebellion is coming, again slowly but surely (*crescendo*). Showing this during the Super Bowl was not insignificant in itself, as people were already excited due to the game. Thanks to this, they would have watched the trailer and maybe become much more excited than they would have normally been if they had watched at another moment when they were more relaxed. This strategy was clearly an attempt to attract the audience, which was already inclined to like the spirit of the trailer, given their state of mind and what they were watching at the time.

In the third trailer, what is prominent are the repeated flashbacks. Some are from early Marvel movies, for example the first *Iron Man* movie, the first *Captain America* movie or even the first *Thor* movie, linking, from the very beginning, what is going to happen with everything that happened before. This nostalgic strategy was again used to make the viewer emotional as it becomes clear that some favourite superheroes would be leaving the universe. What was even more horrific for him, is that it was unclear in which state. There are also flashbacks referring to *Infinity War*, and in particular to all the superheroes lost in this battle. The movie plot is becoming more precise, as the remaining Avengers are now preparing themselves to do something to bring everyone back. They seem determined, and this is suggested by the soundtrack, again playing an important role for the atmosphere of the future movie. The viewers are clearly expecting something big to happen, something that is going to change their lives. They clearly enter this story world again, as if they were living the situation and can only hope to see things change. What is also very characteristic of this trailer is the new slogan of this trailer, which becomes the movie slogan: “Whatever it takes”. This implies that the Avengers will do everything in their power to get people back, no matter how many sacrifices are necessary in the future. The likelihood of huge numbers of sacrifices is implied in the trailer, and for the viewer, the atmosphere of the trailer and of what the characters are saying confirms this. The idea of this slogan is brilliant as it gives fans a quote that is unique to a Marvel movie, will last for years, and will always be associated with Marvel. Their sense of belonging is therefore strengthened again, and they know now that if they want their favourite universe to continue, they also will have to make sacrifices and let some of their favourite characters leave, even if it causes a lot of pain.

The last important part of this trailer is the first appearance of a new character called Captain Marvel. The first movie with her was released between *Infinity War* and *Endgame*. Captain Marvel is a willing addition to the Avengers group, who is ready to help them defeat Thanos. However, her role in the future movie was at that time not clear, leaving fans with lots of unanswered questions. The last trailer for *Endgame* clearly signified the climax of all the trailers. Putting them together gives the viewer a complete summary of all the Marvel movies, from the first *Iron Man* in 2008, until *Infinity War* in 2018. There is even something special added with the soundtrack of the trailer. Viewers hear, for the first time, the official soundtrack of the last two movies, *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, but even better, they hear extracts from all the soundtracks of the other Marvel movies, with extracts from *Iron Man*, from *Captain America*, from *Thor*, and the *Guardians of the Galaxy*, etc. These small details bring back all the memories for the most dedicated Marvel fans and confirm how important the soundtrack is for fans, enabling them to once again experience their favourite movies and favourite scenes from them. These references to the past movies are intentionally made to strengthen and awaken their old engagement with other movies that in fact never died in their minds. This trailer was therefore carefully designed to make people and especially fans realise that this was the progression of earlier movies and remind viewers that the Avengers are not going to allow Thanos to win. They will fight until the bitter end, “whatever it takes”.

It should also be noted that some trailers use scenes that will eventually not appear in the movie (Johnston 2016: 21). This is indeed the case with these two movies, with an impact on the viewers. The first example of this strategy appeared in the initial trailer for *Infinity War*, where Bruce Banner, in the last scene, stands as Hulk, the green monster. People who had seen the movie knew that Bruce Banner would never again become Hulk in *Infinity War*, except at the beginning of the movie. The fans expected Hulk to fight with the other superheroes against Thanos, and never imagined that, in the movie, his only way to fight against Thanos would have to borrow Tony Stark’s strongest Iron Man armour. The trailer clearly misled the viewers here and certainly provoked surprise when they finally watched the movie. However, this misleading strategy did not have negative effects on Marvel Studios, as what happened in the movie related to this scene in the trailer and did not disappoint the fans. In fact, it only increased surprise, and for the better. In the second trailer, what could have confused the viewers is that there is an implication that certain characters will interact with others, for example Gamora with Iron Man at the beginning. Yet, again, this proved misleading as Gamora and Iron Man never meet each other. Another example is that Thor still has an eyepatch in some scenes, which disappeared in

the scenes of the movie itself. In the *Endgame*'s trailers, the major misleading aspect is certainly the fact that Thor appears to be in good health and as fit as in previous movies. This was a blatant lie from Marvel Studios, as in the movie, the audience learns that Thor let himself go after *Infinity War* and became fat and unkempt. This is certainly the biggest surprise that the viewers get when they finally watch the movie, as it is impossible to believe that such a thing could happen to Thor. Moreover, this was actually an aspect that annoyed some fans as many of them did not agree with the fate the Russo Brothers gave Thor, who was supposed to be the strongest Avenger. It did not, however, prevent *Endgame* from becoming the highest-grossing movie of all time. This would suggest that Marvel Studios knowingly introduced the “fake” scenes in the trailers to mislead future viewers, but the aim was never to truly deceive the fans. The intention was only to increase the element of surprise in the movies, thereby avoiding fans knowing the full story on the basis of the trailers before having actually watched the movies.

3.2. Focus on movie posters

Movie posters are also crucial in the development of meaning. They can set up the gender, genre, style and attitude towards the movie before its release (Gray 2010: 49). Nevertheless, there is a relatively limited set of posters printed to go with each film. For example, action movies often present the male (or female) hero “looking steely-eyed and ready for action, with weapons on hand and/or muscles bulging”. Another example can be horror movies, where we can either see the murderer or a character representing innocence that has been disturbed (Gray 2010: 53). These styles were developed so that the future audience can directly understand which genre to expect and which stars will be in the movie. Therefore, the main role of a poster can be said to open a movie's story world before the actual release.



Figure 1. Official movie poster of *Infinity War* (2018)



Figure 2. Official movie poster of *Endgame* (2019)

The images demonstrate how the movie posters of *Infinity War* (2018) and *Endgame* (2019) are very similar in their structure. They aim to present as many superheroes as possible and in fact, present them to the audience, so that future viewers already have an idea of how big these movies are going to be as it is the first time that all these superheroes have appeared together.

In the *Infinity War* poster, almost all Marvel characters that have already appeared in a Marvel movie are shown (except Antman and Hawkeye but they do not appear in the movie either) and there is a kind of ratio of power between them in terms of the place they take on the poster. Here, it seems that the bigger the character, the more important and central they are going to be in the movie. Thanos is the biggest figure in the poster suggesting that the villain may be stronger than the superheroes as he is already dominating them on the poster. This confirms a sense of domination by the villain which announces a potential defeat of the fans' superheroes. Behind him, people can see something that looks like a portal, implying that Thanos is probably going to meet the Avengers on earth for the first time. This portal looks as though it is somewhere between the Earth and space, with planets on the upper part of the poster and the ground on the lower part of the poster. What is also interesting is that all characters are mixed, thus suggesting that the characters from space are going to meet the others on earth, without revealing where. On earth or in space? Another interesting aspect are the red/orange colours of the poster, which implies something bright, certainly a fight. This poster follows in fact the same structure as all Marvel movies and is therefore not very surprising for fans. What can still excite them is the gathering of all these superheroes in their armour with a serious stare, ready to fight. As far as I am concerned, I think that Marvel succeeded in representing all these superheroes without letting one or two characters appear less important in a smaller size on the poster.

What is striking on the *Endgame* poster is the change of colours; they are darker and gloomier, confirming something bad and negative that happened in the previous movie. Secondly, the characters that vanished in *Infinity War* after Thanos snaps do not appear on the posters, leaving only the survivors on it. There is much more space on the poster. What is also interesting is that Thanos, the villain, is a shadow behind the superheroes, demonstrating that he will still be present in the characters' lives and minds. Three new characters are also on the movie poster: Hawkeye, Antman and Captain Marvel, showing that they will appear in the new movie even though they were absent from the previous movie. Only people with a sharp eye will notice them, but will also understand that they will make a difference as they already make a difference on the poster and are shown as important heroes. Again, there are bigger characters, taking more place than others but here, this is maybe less obvious than in the previous movie poster, certainly because there are fewer characters on the second one. There are only the three central and strongest Avengers that are more imposing: Tony Stark (Iron Man), Thor, and Steve Rogers (Captain America). This could be a way for the brand to promote those particular superheroes that were the ones that started the first franchises and have existed for so long, as the "grandfathers" of Marvel Studios. This can also suggest to the fans that it is these characters who will have to make the most sacrifices or will be the most hit by the movie.

Another important aspect of both posters, developed by Mendelson (*Forbes* 2018), is that the superheroes are not wearing masks. Indeed, "most of the heroes in the MCU do not have secret identities and are known to society as superheroes. For Mendelson, the fact that in the posters, all the superheroes, even the ones with a secret identity such as Spiderman, Antman or Black Panther show "the popularity of these specific incarnations of these pop-culture icons" (Mendelson 2018). This is because Marvel has always wanted to put the emphasis on the men behind the armour or suits and always presents their superheroes unmasked. This facilitates a better self-identification between the superhero and their fans.

What is also the major force of Marvel Studios is that the fans do not "[cheer] for Captain America or even Steve Rogers. They are cheering for Chris Evans' specific portrayal of Steve Rogers" (Mendelson 2018), and this is thanks to the brand's strategy. Fans can therefore still support the true hero behind the armour and identify with them and their lives, as normal individuals, when they are not fighting Thanos and saving the world.

What Marvel also did for *Infinity War* was to develop individual posters for every character of the movie, enabling the fans to buy the one with their favourite superhero and hang it up on their bedroom wall, but it was also a way to present all the superheroes that were going to be

gathered in the movie (Screenrant 2019). The brand did the same for *Endgame* (Comicbook 2018), with only one slight difference: the characters that had been wiped out by Thanos in *Infinity War*, appeared in a poster in black and white, showing people that they were (supposed to be) dead. Each poster has the words "Avenge The Fallen" written over the characters' faces. It accentuates the dramatic side of the movie and shown to the fans that it was again something that had never happened in the past Marvel movies. It also maybe suggested that even if these characters were supposed to be dead, their presence on an individual poster could imply a new role that they would play in *Endgame*, and their fate was maybe not defined forever.



Figure 3. *Endgame*: some of the Survivors posters

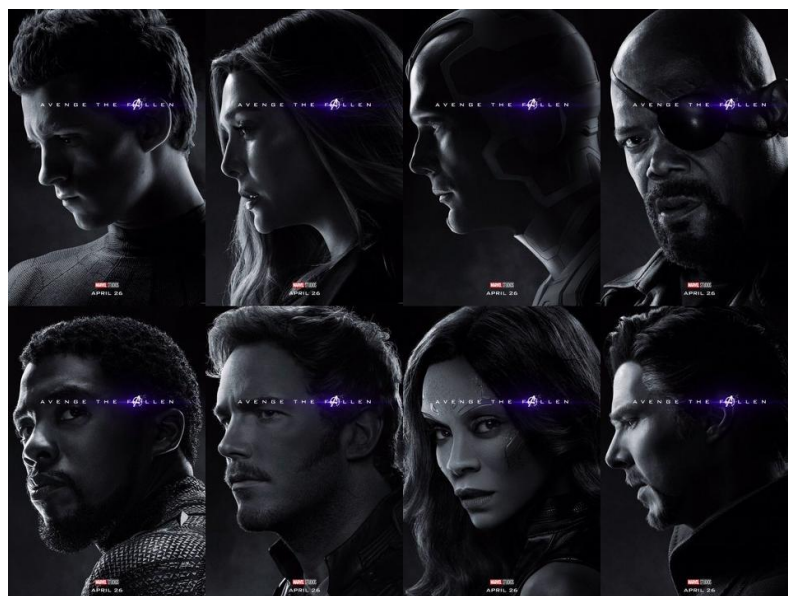


Figure 4. *Endgame*: some of the Fallen posters



Figure 5. First movie poster of *Endgame* (2019)

From this it can be concluded that movie posters convey a message and a potential interpretation to fans and other viewers that do not know the text and the movie. Here is the first poster of *Endgame*, directly referring to the fallen heroes of *Infinity War*, as the symbol of the Avengers (“A”) appears to be disappearing. Posters also allow fans to imagine and deduce certain things from what they see. For example, at the end of *Infinity War*, the viewer was unaware of the fate of certain characters, such as Shuri, Black Panther’s sister. Here with her poster in black and white, the fans found out that she has fallen too, and they were even more upset as they were secretly hoping that she had survived. Of course, this is only based on movie posters, but these posters are one of the many paratexts around the movie or program that help to forge people’s mind, interpretation and meaning before the release. Moreover, fans are not stupid, and they know that Marvel and Disney cannot kill too many characters at once, and particularly not new characters who are barely known by the fans and who could be developed much further in the future.

3.3. Focus on ads and interviews

Ads function in a very similar way to paratexts even if they are more often seen pejoratively. Advertising is in fact built on the same system as paratextuality. The aim of an ad is to sell or brand a product. They are mainly created because producers can never be sure that someone who has already bought their products will continue to use them and also because they cannot force people to buy and use their products. Ads therefore play a key role in consumerism as they make people want to buy something and believe in the transubstantiation thereof. The new strategy used by brands is that they leave out some information about the origins of a product so that it remains a kind of secret and they create new and abstract meanings, “refilling [the void created] with its own symbols” (Jhally 1987: 51). For instance, Nike has created ads with basketball stars, concentrating everything on sport and the fact that it is urban, cool and hip. By using these African American players, the brand tries to present itself as an “all about equality”

brand, forgetting the background and emphasizing the success of the athletes whilst, at the same time, the realisation of the American Dream.

Ads are therefore used to build brand identity and by buying a particular product, a consumer is publicly saying that they identify with this image. This means that ads create meaning, sometimes linked to the product, but not always. These meanings are not only useful to a new audience, or consumers, but also to the already long-time consuming community, so that they continue identifying themselves with the brand (Gray 2010: 27-28). As previously mentioned, the aim of these ads is to create textuality by provoking desire, hope, and expectation of the viewers or consumers and this process for a Nike ad is the same as for a movie ad. An image/identity related to the text of Nike's shoes will be created, just as an image/identity related to a movie through its paratexts will emerge too, becoming inseparable of the text itself. This is why one can say that paratexts help to make texts (Gray 2010: 30)

By collaborating with other brands, Marvel Studios developed a number of ads/commercials for its two movies *Infinity War* (2018) and *Endgame* (2019). Marvel developed many partnerships before the release of *Infinity War*. The partnership with Coca-Cola alone was said to be worth \$40M. Coca-Cola gave fans the chance to collect the ten different designs based on the Marvel superheroes (*Deadline* 2018). There were other partners such as Ziploc, Go-Gurt, Yoplait, Synchrony Bank, American Airlines and Stand Up to Cancer, but also Duracell, Unilever, Quaker, Chevron and Samsung who “will be running promotions for *Infinity War* in smaller markets” (*Deadline* 2018). Ziploc developed hero-themed bag boxes, and Yoplait did the same for its cups. The Synchrony Bank even used a “Save Like a Hero” campaign to increase its number of clients. Then, there were also smartphones from the OnePlus brand coming out in *Infinity War* edition (*Deadline* 2018). Other commercials were released, such as one made by Google Pixel 3 for one of its smartphones, incorporating scenes from *Infinity War* in its ad. LEGO also developed an ad promoting its new toys from the two movies.

Following the release of *Infinity War*, Google even decided to make a nod to Marvel by adding a Thanos figure on top of its general page and anyone who researched something on Google and clicked on the Thanos figure would see half the links wiped out. Of course, the brand continued its partnerships for *Endgame* as it had for *Infinity War*, and other commercials emerged such as one made by Coca-Cola with a young girl missing the bus to go to the theatre to watch the movie. The girl then decides to drink a Coca-Cola and, like a superhero, reaches the bus on time to go and watch the movie with her friends. There was also an Audi ad collaborating with Brie Larson, who played Captain Marvel in *Endgame*. The insurance

company GEICO also released an ad related to the movie. All these ads/commercials, which easily can be found on YouTube, show how many brands invested in Marvel's movies to increase their benefits and customer base. There are too many to name them all but it is clear that anyone and everyone who used *Infinity War* and *Endgame* as promotional devices enabled Marvel Studios and Disney to promote their own movies, establishing a mutually beneficial relationship between the Marvel brand and the other brands.

What characterized the campaign around *Endgame* was that the marketing assumed that you had already seen *Infinity War* (Mendelson 2019). The brand also knew that there would be no spoilers revealed as they knew that the fans were aware that *Endgame* would not be about anything other than Thanos having wiped out half the universe. Also, it quickly becomes apparent that *Endgame*'s trailers are full of recycled footage. The reason for that is that every frame of footage could be considered a spoiler and tell the audience which characters were really dead or not, or who might be resurrected, etc. This is also why, with the exception of *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019), no new MCU movies have been scheduled. Therefore, no one could know who was going to survive and who will not (*Hollywood Reporter* 2019). Mendelson does not hesitate to present the campaign of *Endgame* as follows: "Hey, this movie exists, you know what it's about, here's a small taste of how it will be about it" (Mendelson 2019). Mendelson also interestingly notices that the fact that *Infinity War* and *Endgame* were both presented as "it all ends here" movies and strongly influenced fans in their behaviour. Indeed, at the beginning, everyone thought that there would be *Infinity War* part I and then *Infinity War* part II. However, Disney and Marvel Studios finally decided to give two distinct titles to the last two movies of this generation. They also clearly counted on the nostalgic feeling provoked by the tenth anniversary of *Iron Man* (2008), strengthening this idea of finally ending with *Infinity War*. Nevertheless, as Mendelson mentioned, when *Infinity War* was released, the viewers quickly realised that it was not the end of the end but only the beginning of the end, ending up with one of the biggest cliff-hangers the world has ever known (Mendelson 2019). A year after, and before the release of *Endgame*, the brand decided to focus its marketing campaign only on the first 30 minutes of the movie. In this way, they never revealed too much about the plot of the "real" final movie. Everyone knew about what the film would be about, but the questions were "how", "when" and "why" (Mendelson 2019). What made both movies so successful in the end was that Marvel and Disney kept their promises of giving a true end to them all.

Another way of advertising the two movies before their release came from the numerous interviews given by the actors. Indeed, as these movies were presented as the biggest movies Marvel had ever made, the interviewers wanted to learn details about what was going to happen in them. However, the actors were very well prepared for the interviews and never gave anything away about the movies. They were not allowed to go into any detail and only talked about insignificant events such as what happened with the other actors on set, or how they prepared themselves for the movie. However, this was not the case with all the actors. In fact, two actors, Tom Holland (playing Spiderman) and Mark Ruffalo (playing Hulk, Bruce Banner), let slip details about the movie. For example, Tom Holland spoiled the surprise about one of the official posters of *Infinity War* (Premiere 2017) in a video, which was supposed to remain confidential. He also spoiled the fact that the quantum realm has an impact in the two movies in an interview (Melty 2019) with Benedict Cumberbatch (playing Doctor Strange). However, the biggest give away came from Mark Ruffalo, who said in an interview (Youtube 2017) that everyone died at the end of *Infinity War*, putting his co-star, Don Cheadle, who was also present at the interview, in an embarrassing situation.

These spoilers by the actors appear to have been accidental. However, it is also possible that it was a clever marketing strategy. What is sure is that the truth of the matter will almost certainly never be known. Due to the many unfortunate spoilers released by the actors during the *Infinity War* campaign, the Russo Brothers and Marvel Studios adapted their system for *Endgame*. This meant that they did not give the final script of the movie to any of the actors and all the actors shot many scenes without knowing which one was going to be in the movie (BuzzFeed 2019). Thanks to this new strategy, nothing (or at least nothing really important) was revealed before the release of *Endgame*, and the whole fans community only discovered the story when they saw the movie in theatres. The notion of spoilers will be looked at in more detail in the next chapter but it can be said that the first strategy, even during *Infinity War* campaign, was to remain secretive as much as possible and that the unfortunate spoilers revealed by the actors, were simply accidents, as the actors could not wait for the fans to see the movie.

This advertising campaign had a huge impact on *Infinity War* and *Endgame*'s opening week, as *Infinity War*'s launch brought in \$258 million and *Endgame*'s opening weekend \$357.1 million.

4. Focus on *in media res* paratexts

Many paratexts can also be observed after “entering” a text. For example, at the end of a movie or series, it is still visible on websites, CDs, fan discussions on forums, etc. The text does not really end at the end of the movie, at least not the viewer’s engagement with a movie. These multi-platformed media texts can be seen as “convergence”. Jenkins suggests that there is a confluence of media texts and platforms around a single text (2008).

Gray further developed the idea that while watching a movie or series, we constantly interpret it as we go along and that it is also thanks to the time between episodes or movies (in a series of movies) that we can interpret and make sense of what we have just seen. These moments of interpretation are also often characterized by paratexts that can add to an interpretation. This is especially true in the case of Marvel where dedicated fans often have to wait a very long time to see the sequel of a specific franchise (for example, *Thor: Ragnarok* was released in 2017 and its sequel, *Thor: Love and Thunder*, is only planned to be released in 2021). For this reason, fans tend to vent their frustration by looking for clues in the producers’ paratexts preceding the movie. The viewers are consequently expressing their imagination with others on websites or forums, as this is their only way to control themselves and to imagine what is going to happen before the release of the next movie (Gray 2010: 40-43).

4.1. Focus on opening credit scenes

Opening credit scenes were invented to summarize and present the characters, genre, theme, relationships and general subject matter of a movie to new audiences. The opening credit scene can be the same for a series of movies or programs but with a slight difference in each one so that they are not all completely alike. Their aim is clearly to create genre, tone and characters and also to transport us from a previous universe or story world to a new, unreal one, or different from real life. Opening credit scenes are “providing time for our memories and preferred reading strategies to be uploaded, preparing us for the [movie] at hand” (Gray 2010: 76) and this is also the role of theme songs, which can be equated with an entire program and the experience that we have had of that program (Gray 2010: 76).

Marvel’s opening credit scene is unique, just like any other opening credit scene, as it forges its spirit and meaning towards fans. Marvel prefers to call it a “theme”, which is placed at the beginning of every movie to introduce the audience to a new movie produced by Marvel and based on comics. The theme is presented as a succession of Marvel characters, first in a kind of comic form but not exactly the one derived from the actual comics. This is mainly the case for the oldest characters.

The scene continues with the appearance of other Marvel characters presented through extracts from some movies, particularly the most recent ones. In this way, the brand offers a reminder of all the characters coming from comics who already exist in the MCU. All of these characters appear in what we can firstly only guess and then confirm as the *Marvel* letters, accompanied later with the word *Studios*, referring therefore to the Marvel Studios. This evolution in the theme of Marvel Studios acts as a reminder that all of this was only made possible thanks to the comics, which were developed into movies, and that “Marvel” became “Marvel Studios”.

What is also very characteristic of the opening is the theme song. Normally, Marvel uses the same one for almost every movie but they have changed it for one movie in a few cases, including *Infinity War* (2018) and *Endgame* (2019). In the case of *Infinity War*, there was no theme song as such, and the film began with a silent introduction followed by dark, frightening sounds, with the first scene following with Thanos’ attack on Thor’s ship. This gloomy “song” definitely sets the spirit of the movie, forecasting something that is going to be alarming, shocking and serious. It is as if these sounds already indicate to the audience that something bad is going to happen.

With *Endgame*, things are completely different. Firstly, the opening theme follows an already huge introduction scene that is part of the movie, and the opening theme is characterized by the song, “Dear Mr Fantasy” by Traffic. This song is a nostalgic one, asking Mr Fantasy to get people out of their lonely, sad and morose life, even if himself is apparently a sad character. The part we get in the opening theme is the following:

Dear Mister Fantasy play us a tune

Something to make us all happy

Do anything, take us out of this gloom

Sing a song, play guitar

Make it snappy.

First of all, the last word “snappy” reminds us of Thanos, who snapped the universe in half at the end of *Infinity War*. The story behind this song can also remind us of the role of the Avengers after the chaos of *Infinity War*, trying to be happy and to cheer up even if they did not

go through the events themselves. However, as we are not supposed to have seen this scene at this stage of the movie, the opening theme introduces us to a movie that reflects this idea of sadness only in a world where people are trying to move on and to be happy again. As explained earlier in this chapter, the aim of the opening credit scenes/themes is to give the audience hints about the genre, the characters and the tone of the movie, which is what these two themes are doing. They bring us into a completely new story world that is different to ours and again, try to give a hint of what is going to happen in the movie. However, all these interpretations, even if they are similar, are individual and personal, which is also why it is interesting for the viewer to see these opening themes, as he can create his own vision and opinion.

4.2. Focus on post credit scenes

The most obvious example of an *in media res* paratext is the segments that often precede television serials or movies. What is interesting with Marvel is that they are presented the other way around, as the brand always includes post credit scenes as a tit-bit designed to intrigue and try to give a taste of what is to come in the next movie. These post-credit scenes have already been discussed earlier in this chapter. These post-credit scenes will influence viewers and help them to shape their interpretation of the next Marvel movie in the series. They often tell us which character of the MCU it will concern and in which context, already shaping your future reading of the movie (Gray 2010: 43). As time passes between one movie and the next, a person's interpretation continues to evolve, fuelled as it is by what can be read on fan forums, by what is on television with the advertising campaigns, or merchandising developed by the brand around the particular movie. Paratexts will continue to emerge until the release of the movie and will shape the interpretation even before the movie has been seen, as it might already be more or less clear what is going to happen.

5. Focus on an “extra” paratext: the DVD

The DVD is one of the strongest paratexts. It can include bonus materials, “from making-of documentaries to commentary tracks, delete or alternate scenes, and interactive games” (Gray 2010: 88). DVDs have an intertextual purpose that can alter an audience's perception and interpretation of a movie. It is also a part of the very complete synergy around a movie as it completes the promotion of a product. What is, however, very interesting with DVDs is that they can bring all sorts of previously unseen paratexts, or at least assemble them on a single device, which is easier for the consumer and makes these paratexts part of movie itself. It can provide trailers, documentaries, interviews, or ads for merchandises and videogames. These bonus materials also inform viewers about unseen scenes or characters and develop a sense of

interactivity with the audience, so that people want to buy the DVDs. It is a way for the audience to deepen its knowledge about a movie or program and therefore, DVDs enrich the textual experience of their viewers. Despite the fact that it is becoming easier to watch films online, DVD are still a large part of a movie's strategic campaign. Although a DVD will "grow old", it will continue to develop the interpretation and meaning for viewers.

Images of DVDs of *Infinity War* and *Endgame* make it possible to illustrate how these DVDs are still famous among fans and why they are still bought by fans, who value their bonus materials. Unfortunately, the name of the bonus materials will be in French, as this is how I found them.

In *Infinity War*'s DVD, the movie is introduced by the Russo Brothers. There are also two other short films named "Une étrange alchimie" and "Le Titan fou". Then, there is a short film about the behind-the-scenes of the Titan's and the Wakanda's battles. Finally, there are four scenes that were edited out and the bloopers. This is the same for *Endgame*'s DVD. There is first a short film dedicated to the memory of Stan Lee. Then, there is a film about the casting of Robert Downey Jr. as Iron Man; another film about Captain America, "un homme hors du temps"; another one about Black Widow, "quoi qu'il en coûte"; a film about the Russo Brothers is also included, and one about the women of the MCU. The physical transformation of Thor in the movie is also broached. Finally, there are six cut scenes and the bloopers again.

These bonus materials allow fans to deepen their knowledge about the two movies. It is also a way to increase their interaction and connection with the two movies, learning details about how the battles were shot, discovering new information about their favourite superheroes or actors, etc. It is another way for them to get closer to Chris Evans or Robert Downey Jr., to feel as if they know them personally, they can laugh with them, and they can know small secret details of the movie's shooting. All these materials are unreleased, and the fans feel that if they buy these DVDs, they enter another even more select group of people who know everything there is to know about Marvel movies, strengthening their sense of belonging to the brand. Some of them even decide to collect all the DVDs, so that they have a kind of memento of a movie that touched them and shows the world to which brand they identify themselves the most, enabling them to feel a sense of pride for belonging to this community. It was maybe also the last time that they would see those actors united together and this feeling of nostalgia clearly played an important role in the sales of these two DVDs. It is these extra materials that still make DVDs profitable for brands. If a movie is watched illegally online, there are no bonus materials. DVDs always include new bonus materials that are not available anywhere else. This

makes them unique and desirable for dedicated fans, who consequently still buy them massively and show to the world their pride of being a Marvel fan.

III. THE TRANSMEDIA AMBITIONS OF MARVEL

1. The notion of transmedia

It was following the Second World War that literature reinvented itself and spread itself across various other media, such as cinema, radio or even television. Writing a literary work in the 20th century and even at the beginning of the 21st century implies the experience of generic “architextes” that develop themselves through various media (Letourneux 2017: 101). Later, the idea of “l’œuvre-monde” gained prominence and was used as an architext to be developed through a series of different texts. The cultural object was seen as the sum of all its extensions, creating a transmedia universe. These new modern forms of seriality led to what we know as mass culture (Letourneux 2017: 101-102). This seriality allows symbolic connections between parts of a series within the diegetic universe, but also in more than one media platform. A fictional text can therefore go beyond one medium and engage itself into a larger symbolic, as well as into the cultural and social contexts (Di Crosta 2013: 3). Indeed, transmedia productions are generally based more on a universe than on stories. They propose variations of these universes on different media and these variations can take different forms: temporal ones (e.g. novels), spatial ones (e.g. illustrations), spatiotemporal ones (e.g. movies or cartoons). They can be kinetic or not, mimetic or referential, and interactive or not. All these variations provide a multi-sensorial experience in the “univers-monde” (Letourneux 2017: 435).

Marvel belongs to what we call the age of media convergence, which is where multiple texts come together to create a large narrative that cannot be assembled into one single medium. Indeed, Marvel have not simply released movies over the last few years, it has also developed toys and (video)games, preludes to its movies, websites or forums for fans, etc. all of them making the engagement of the fans stronger as a way of extending its universe. Each section of this process is therefore part of a larger world that leads to a same narrative conclusion (Jenkins 2008: 97). This is what Henry Jenkins (2008) called transmedia storytelling:

A transmedia storytelling unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making 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 (98).

What this definition implies is the ideas of “radical intertextuality” and “multimodality” (Jenkins 2013: 3). Radical intertextuality is, according to Jenkins, the essential link within

transmedia storytelling. On the other hand, multimodality shows us how the encounter between all media can have a huge impact on relational communication (Jenkins 2013: 3). Indeed, in this chronological multimodality, each media has its own spatial and temporal system (Di Crosta 2013: 2). Some experts place the emphasis on the connection between all distinctive texts and others on the connection between all different media, but for Jenkins, both are important in transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2013: 3).

A franchise or transmedia project can be separated into three narrative expansions within one fictional world. These expansions do not have to be an adaptation of an original story, but on the contrary, are complementary to the original narrative (Jenkins 2013: 2). Each media or means of expression is therefore obliged to bring a unique benefit to the serial story or experience in time and space (Di Crosta 2013: 2). Generally speaking, a person does not need to have seen the movie to enjoy the game or a toy in this system. All the products can be seen as entries into the franchise's world and if, for example, a movie is watched or a videogame is played, the aim of these franchises is, through consumption, to increase consumption that is already existing. By continually giving fans new content, the franchise keeps its audience's loyalty and therefore its own business too. The goal of each entertainment franchise is to find the perfect balance between all these products so that they all interact together (Jenkins 2008: 98).

The aim is also to put in a form of interactivity in order to produce the fans' engagement (Jenkins 2013: 2). One way to intensify this loyalty is to reward the activity of the most dedicated fans, so that they feel important in relation to the brand. This form of engagement is therefore crucial for franchises of the 21st century in order to establish a strong link with their fans (Jenkins 2013: 3-4). Let us take another example: the aim of a movie is to give information to the consumers, but not too much so that they can build their own fantasies and interpretations (Jenkins 2008: 100). Indeed, when people go to theatres to watch a movie nowadays, they are often asked to even make some research about what they are going to see, while, before, Hollywood was based on a redundancy system to make sure that people could follow the movie (Jenkins 2008: 106). What is also typical for transmedia storytelling is the building of the fictional world. The world created is often too vast to be completely exploited through one single work. Therefore, it pushes its creators to develop the narrative world through a number of different media platforms, helping fans to make even more speculations and elaborations about it. One world can now contain multiple characters with multiple stories, and this is what makes its strength (Jenkins 2008: 116). Moreover, characters appearing in transmedia stories

do not really need to be introduced but are in fact merely reintroduced as they are often already known from another medium or source (Jenkins 2008: 123). The fans and consumers can therefore “make the connections on their own time and in their own ways” (Jenkins 2008: 121).

Still, the creators always try to keep control over their creation. This is why they often introduce crucial information that makes you look at the story in a totally different light, therefore trying to shape our interpretation. The aim is to motivate the reader or viewer to watch or read what is going to follow (Jenkins 2008: 127). This is what Jenkins called the “origami unicorn,” which is for him one of the most essential principles of transmedia storytelling (2009). This idea of “origami unicorn” comes from the movie *Blade Runner* and it refers to the one thing that you discover and that makes you look at a movie differently. The one thing that can change your mind (Jenkins 2008: 123). For Jenkins, it might also be interesting to make a distinction between transmedia storytelling and transmedia branding, even if, for him, they can also be strongly intertwined. He takes the example of *Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader* (Luceno 2005), which is an extension of the transmedia franchise of *Star Wars* and gives us more insights into and information about a specific character, but on the other hand, when a child eats *Star Wars* cereal, it belongs here more to the franchise’s brand and does not provide us with more information or understanding of the fictional world (Jenkins 2009).

Another distinction which is imperative to draw is between adaptation and extension. Adaptation refers to the reproduction of an original narrative into a new medium with minimum changes, while extension, which is a characteristic of transmedia storytelling, refers to the idea of expanding the consumer’s understanding of an original narrative through other new fictional elements on other media (Jenkins 2009). Transmedia also needs to be distinguished from multimedia. Multimedia can be defined as “the integration of multiple modes of expression within a single application,” while transmedia is “the dispersal of those same elements across multiple media platforms” (Jenkins 2010). The principal difference between these two notions is the relationship they have with their consumers. With multimedia, the consumer only needs to click on a link to find new content, while with transmedia, it is the role of the consumer to look for new information and content, leading him across multiple media platforms. After that, he needs to verify if the content really belongs to the original one and he often compares notes with others in order to control his knowledge too (Jenkins 2010).

In an effort to fully explore the notion of transmedia, Mélanie Bourdaa (2016) interviewed Henry Jenkins, not only to understand his vision, but also to complete it in her own way. In the interview, Jenkins pointed out that there are four different types of transmedia. In the United

States, there are two different schools of thought: The West Coast and the East Coast. Then there is a European type and a Brazilian type (Bourdaa 2016). Concerning the two North American schools, the West Coast works on media concentration/convergence. Their aim is to produce one story on different media platforms. On the other hand, the East Coast school focuses more on independent productions with smaller budgets. The aim is to attract people around a new movie, to create a form of engagement. In contrast to this, it is the audience and the fans that will deploy the story on other media. This is more collaborative (Bourdaa 2016). Jenkins later makes a distinction between distribution and circulation of media. Distribution refers to the “controlled spreading” in the world of a movie for instance (Bourdaa 2016). Circulation, however, also refers to the spreading of a movie but through ordinary people who communicate about a movie through unauthorized means by producing something, but these means appear to be financially interesting for the movie too. This is called “viral” content (Bourdaa 2016). People often use the internet or social media to do their job and the scattered information, which is placed on different media platforms and spread by fans (Bourdaa 2016), is called “transmedia content”. Jenkins later reminds readers of the important role played by fans in this process. These audiences play the part of “cultural attractors” who are passionate about a brand and dedicated to it. These people will constantly look for more information about the franchise, in particular thanks to “cultural activators” (Bourdaa 2016). An active audience is the core for the functioning of a transmedia strategy, which will result in the engagement of fans (Bourdaa 2016).

Hélène Laurichesse quickly noticed the power of this new transmedia strategy used by brands. A brand works as a landmark for consumers and tries to distinguish itself from other brands, which are nowadays numerous (2012: 2) In one article that she wrote in 2013, Laurichesse also talked about this new transmedia phenomenon. She repeated that indeed, the main aim is to create consumer loyalty towards a universe. She also said that it is based on cultural, experimental and relational marketing coming from a “brand content’s strategy” (Laurichesse 2013: 1). A brand content’s strategy is indeed related to the idea of experience, playing with the consumers’ emotions and feelings. The idea is that the audience “belongs” to the experience by coproducing it (Laurichesse 2013: 2). A brand is therefore going to create content that can be informative, cultural, practical, playful, or entertaining. If the content is informative or practical, we are talking about “brand utility”. If it is entertaining, it is “brand entertainment” and if it is playful and immersive, it is called “brand experience” (Laurichesse 2013: 2). The transmedia creations therefore follow these three types of strategies as their

content can be seen as experimental, producing specific feelings and emotions in the audience (Brand Experience). They also produce some entertainment by producing different movies, documentaries or fictions (Brand Entertainment), and finally they inform the audience about the story of this transmedia universe (Brand Utility) (Laurichesse 2013: 3). One of the most successful media that particularly fill these conditions in terms of informing an audience is conventions organised by brands, such as the San Diego Comic-Con organised by Marvel. These conventions can bring “teasers” and trailers to the fans. The fans also have the opportunity to meet actors or other fans. This is often the place where they get more information about the future movie, tv show video game or even derivative products coming out of their favourite franchise (Laurichesse 2013: 3).

Laurichesse goes on to develop the idea of brand communities. This idea of community was first built in the United States by consumers (Letourneux 2017: 445). The idea behind this was to create a link between consumers and a brand, between consumers and products and between the consumers themselves. This leads to the creation of a kind of transmedia brand. The brand is going to organise events and create experiences so that the consumers, who can potentially become fans later, can feel more and more engaged in the community (Laurichesse 2013: 6). The aim is clearly to reach the highest number of fans as they are the ideal consumers, who always remain active on every media platform (Laurichesse 2013: 6).

As far back as 1930, the cultural industry understood the potential interest of building these communities. The readers that were therefore sensitive to a number of distinctive secrets of features from the series would join these fans’ communities (Letourneux 2017: 446). These communities are the ones that ensure the effectivity of imaginary series, and the brand’s strategy to win people’s loyalty. This strategy is nowadays realised long-term by enhancing the relationship with the consumers, inviting them to participate, creating collections, etc. (Letourneux 2017: 448). There is, therefore, a real social bond created between the fans and the producers through this collaborative process and a shared culture (Letourneux 2017: 449). The resulting collaboration gathered a large group of actors such as authors, producers, industrial and commercial actors, communication managers, and also amateurish fans or even audience on a larger scale. They all participate in the definition of a work, in the creation of its architextual features and in its long-term perpetuity (Letourneux 2017: 450).

For Letourneux, the arrival of mass media and the cultural industry were significant in the appearance of transmedia series. In his opinion, the core of transmedia is the circulation

between all the productions of a series (Letourneux 2017: 338-339). He then distinguished a series of common features between all these transmedia productions.

The first common feature is the idea of adaptation: a work can be featured on different media. It can be with a narrative aim or only publicity for example. The balance between the different expression means and the seriality must be based on an adaptation model (Letourneux 2017: 339-340). Each transmedia production implies that there is an original work and then secondary works. The original work can be a text (a book or a movie for example) or an architext (a universe for example). In secondary works, we will then rediscover the essence of the architext, but rearranged (Letourneux 2017: 340). The adaptation is therefore a question of unity for the work but also of hierarchy between all the media productions and what he called “auctorialité” (referring to authors) and, on the other, the discursivity with which the work is associated (Letourneux 2017: 341).

The second important aspect is the negotiation between all the different actors engaged in the creation. There must always be a dialogue between all these production players. The author of a movie can work alone, but most of the time, must work with other people as doing it all alone would be impossible and too much work. This is the case when a franchise, such as Marvel develops different movies, but also different comics deriving from it, toys, videogames, derivative products, etc. These peripheral productions are also very important for the global effect of a franchise (Letourneux 2017: 341). This is where dialogue between all the authors from all the productions is crucial.

The third point elaborated by Letourneux refers to legal and economic problems, which are also huge in transmedia franchises. Every creation depends upon a legal and economic negotiation, with royalty, and more and more, with brand rights, as with legal protection, brands can more effectively protect their fictional universe. Indeed, transmedia creations take more and more advantage of their marketing for this kind of protection (Letourneux 342-343).

The last aspect developed by Letourneux is the idea of what he called the “transmédiagénie”. This referred to the concept that some stories increasingly follow a transmedia process. “Médiagénie” refers, therefore, to the convergence between one narrative and one particular media (Letourneux 2017: 343). There are indeed some “transmédiagéniques” features, as is the case when some objects are already serial in media circulation. In other words, a transmedia series is the expansion of a “monomédiatique” series (with characters and a universe). Economically speaking, it is very interesting to already work on a production that is

serial and famous. This is also fascinating in the sense that a serial universe can produce a unity of relatively stable architexts, which can extend itself cognitively and communicatively. Because of this unity between all the productions, the consumer will be able to make his own cognitive creation, in particular through discussion with other fans or members of communities (Letourneux 2017: 343-344). Therefore, every transfictional universe and character produces a variation of the architextual encyclopaedia on different media with different means of expression. Moreover, this encyclopaedia provides a structure between the characters, their relationships with each other and with the universe, etc. (Letourneux 2017: 344). The aim of this encyclopaedia is to allow free circulation from one media to another, or from one means of expression to the other, but also to invite the consumer to make connections between all the works, constructing himself a form of unity for (Letourneux 2017: 344).

Letourneux proceeded to make a distinction between the notions of cross-media and transmedia. Indeed, cross-media refers to the variation of one original text on different media or means of expression, without adding new information about the universe or the characters. The series thus emphasises expressive and contextual logic. The consumer can take pleasure in rediscovering a story he already knows by heart. Letourneux says that there is still a form of in-depth study of the fictional universe through the different means of expression and therefore perspectives, as well as through the different contextual experiences felt by the consumer. He takes the example of a *Harry Potter* videogame, explaining that even if the videogame takes back the narrative of the movie, it enables the consumer to live a completely new experience (Letourneux 2017: 346-347). On the contrary and as said before by Letourneux and other experts, a transmedia storytelling is scattered on different media, in a coordinated way, always with new elements and information about the story added, in order to produce a unique experience for the consumer. The aim is to produce complementary works from one media to the other, in order to establish a form of unity only as all these productions are assembled. Transmedia logic refers, therefore, to the creation of a diegetic unity on all different media (Letourneux 2017: 348).

Letourneux then refers to Christy Dena (2014) and her three types of transmedia practices. The first one is called “a collection of mono medium stories.” It develops independent stories, sharing the same universe, but without creating connections between the different plots. This is the case for franchises which do not wish to establish a form of continuity between all their productions. For instance, some authors take characters from comics, but not their already known adventures (Letourneux 2017: 348-349).

The second type concerns a collection of media which tells the same story. This story can only be understood through the consumption of all media productions. It often asks the consumer to participate in the creation of a narrative, or simply to engage more and more through the productions and look for more information like a detective after every release, in order to assemble them, discuss them and promote them publicly (Letourneux 2017: 349). Christy Dena distinguishes between these two types, with the “real” transmedia storytelling. For her, this one proposes a proliferation of different plots on different media platforms, all intertwined. Each production must be coherent and understood through the circulation between the media and the other productions (Letourneux 2017: 349).

The first type of transmedia storytelling she developed consisted of the expansion of already existing fictional universes, such as *Star Wars*. The franchise always rationalises and historicises the fictional universe and continues producing new or semi-independent secondary narrative series, in order to avoid incoherence in their transmedia process (Letourneux 2017: 349-350). The second type refers to the productions that had already been created with the idea of being expanded on different media, with a sense of coordination, of course. Here, she takes the example of *Matrix*, which has developed, next to its movie, web series, games, short films, etc. It can be concluded that, thanks to connections between commercial factors and transmedia practices, the creation of a coherent fictional universe is much easier (Letourneux 2017: 350). Letourneux also judiciously confirms what Christy Dena said in 2009: industrial logic and its economic stakes cannot be thought without their aesthetic consequences. When someone creates a transmedia work, it will inevitably redefine its signification and provide new interpretations (Letourneux 2017: 351). Finally, it is not unusual for the adaptation’s logic to deviate from a cross-media structure and a transmedia structure. This is what Marvel did with “Marvel Multiverse”. In order to reconcile the parallel series taking some characters on different media or other collections, it developed a multiverse, enabling the explanation of contradictions between different series of comics, with the aim of reaching a diegetic unity (Letourneux 2017: 353). It is also important to remember that the distinction between cross-media and transmedia is therefore confused, and this is the case with Marvel, as it is impossible to affirm that this is only a transmedia universe or a cross-media universe (Letourneux 2017: 353). In the second chapter, I have prove, with numerous paratextual examples that this is a cross-media universe and in this chapter, I will explain why it can also be called a transmedia universe, through different examples.

In his work, Letourneux endeavoured to explain that there are different features that help to distinguish adaptation, cross-media and transmedia production. The first one is diegetic unity. In an adaptation, the diegetic unity between all media variations tends to be non-existent, as the secondary work is only reproducing the basis of the original work and does not look for a form of complementarity. The same plot is proposed, but the two worlds are not supposed to be complementary (Letourneux 2017: 354). For example, if one looks at the *Power Rangers*, no secondary work is completing the original work. The expansions refer all to the original plot. The adaptation's case cannot be confused with a transmedia process, as the latter explicitly depends upon this idea of complementarity and of unity (Letourneux 2017: 354). In cross-media, the difference is that there is a form of diegetic redundancy. For example, derivative products from a new *Star Wars* movie, such as toys, all refer to the same universe and the same narrative. Unlike adaptation, there is still a focus on diegetic unity in cross-media, and a derivative product cannot be fully appreciated if its origins are unknown. To summarize, cross-media look for a diegetic unity based on an original plot, while transmedia search for complementarity between different media.

Another point that distinguishes the three types aforementioned is what Letourneux called the relationship between the different "médiagénies". In the case of an adaptation, the logics of different media answered the classical questions of "intersémiotique" translation. The authors of any series' adaptations, which other media have declined to accept, are strongly influenced by the original work and also secondary works. Letourneux takes the example of *The Lord of Rings*. When someone wants to produce a movie about this story, it will of course take its cue from Tolkien's books, but also from the creations of fans or even videogames (Letourneux 2017: 356). For transmedia and cross-media productions, the participative dimension between the different media is essential, such as the interactivity created in videogames or the emotions created by a particular movie, the imaginative power produced by the books, etc. The aim is to focus on the quality of each separate media. In addition to this, there is also the question of hierarchies. Our representation of transmedia universes is based on a set of variations, however all these variations are not equal. There is a system of hierarchies, which can come from decisions made by the producers. In the case of a cross-media or a transmedia work, the editors originally defines which work is going to be central and which one is going to be secondary (Letourneux 2017: 356-357). Separate from this, there is another form of hierarchies that can be developed, this time through fans, who themselves make their own distinction between what they call central works and what for them is secondary. For example, in the case of Marvel,

there will always be people who will say that the comics remain superior to their cinematic versions (Letourneux 2017: 357). The canonical works for fans are often chosen according to personal preference for a particular author or authors. Indeed, authors can be seen as worth symbols, but also as explicative factors, and finally fans based themselves upon them as fans can hierarchise the value of each text (Letourneux 2017: 358). The producers know that fans are establishing new hierarchies and take them into account, but must also favour the original hierarchies, as these are the ones linked to media, and more importantly, to the economy. In transmedia works, the works that can use the most powerful media, the ones that can gather the largest audience, are the central works. It is therefore around them that the franchise is built. It is logical that mass media will therefore reach a larger audience (Letourneux 2017: 358-359). These hierarchies have the role of defining the identity of a universe. Therefore, these universes are made up of serial and media unities that do not have the same value and the same existence degree (Letourneux 2017: 360).

Diegetic unity and the notion of complementarity cannot be completed without a relationship between the creators of the different works. In the case of an adaptation, it is extremely unusual for the creator of a work to intervene in the process of adaptation. On the other hand, in cross-media production, there is a need for interaction between all the creators. As the original work is diffused onto other media, there must be a respectful following of the same rules in each production. These rules are often established by the production team, but also the marketing team and a licensing agency. The link between all these actors is therefore crucial for the good functioning of the process (Letourneux 2017: 360-361). In transmedia productions, it really depends upon the situation and there must be a coherence in the universe. This coherence is established between the production team and the rights holders, but also with the consumers. There can sometimes be a central logic or sometimes an independence of the different serial media. Finally, the role of the fans is essential in the transmedia process, as it develops a system of collaboration (with fanfiction, fanart or fanfilms). What is complicated for the producers is to limit the role of the fans to relay and not creators (Letourneux 2017: 361).

The last point developed by Letourneux in this part is the idea of temporality of the media production. There must always be a rhythm established, based on each medium. In point of fact, the duration of production for a movie or a comic is not the same and there must therefore remain a form of synchronisation and coordination between all the media. In transmedia production, the aim is to keep this coordination, in order to maintain the attraction and passion

of consumers and not to develop boredom or weariness (Letourneux 2017: 362-363). For example, *Pokémon* followed the release of a new Nintendo model or the different data referring to mass consumptions, such for example as Christmas (Letourneux 2017: 363).

Adaptations from books can be, and have been, extremely successful in the cinematic universe and Marvel quickly understood that. Indeed, they realised quite early that if they transposed their characters and universe onto the big screen, without imperatively following the comics' plots, it would be commercially interesting. This has enabled them to ensure a promotional collaboration and to use the notoriety of the characters or universe they are endorsing, without even engaging in a promotion. Marvel's comics had already been successful for decades, so that was no major risk for the brand to use what they had already created to complete the universe and its characters with completely new plots (Letourneux 2017: 384-386). Most of the time, it is true that movies make no real adaptation of a book, or comic, or short story, but more often make variation of them, putting forward new plots. They therefore replace some original stories with new ones, still by following the same aesthetics and media rules already established by the franchise (Letourneux 2017: 392).

Another strategy that has made transmedia storytelling famous and, moreover, economically interesting is the fact that it focuses on a predominantly young audience. In fact, young readers or viewers tend to focus more on the diegesis than on the writing, and they tend to look for more information on other media. They can also feel more concerned by derivative products, such as toys, games and videogames, than adults (Letourneux 2017: 408). Creators are also left out in this process as there are no copyright restrictions. The copyright is owned by the producers and editors, making the creation of transmedia series as industrial brands easier. This is also why people, and more particularly, fans identify a work thanks to its central character and not to its author. For this reason, it is more interesting for a brand to build itself around a completely controlled character than around a "free" author. In this case, the unity of a transmedia work is based on the character's and the universe's features rather than on the author's style (Letourneux 2017: 409-410). Letourneux also believes that the characters are an essential part of the transmedia for storytelling. Indeed, characters are seen not only as protagonists anymore but also as overall figures that can be declined on every media platform (Letourneux 2017: 407). For example, with Marvel, Iron Man is seen as an archi-text associated with generic features that can be derived on various platforms. These characters become new brands themselves, which that are absorbed through different forms. Characters need, of course, to be easily identifiable with a small number of features that are specific to a particular

character, for example, Captain America with his suit and shield or Thor with his god-like attitude, his long hair and his hammer. Producers very quickly understood that it was the characters, and not the work, that needed to be protected. When a character became famous in the 20th century, many variations of it emerged quickly thereafter, compromising the influence of the original one on the market (Letourneux 2017: 418-419).

The producers therefore made the decision to privilege the trademark law, instead of the copyright law, steering at a brand strategy, rather than a protection of the work. Indeed, with the trademark, the character, its name, and all its features are seen as a brand and cannot result in counterfeiting, and it is especially with the superheroes in the interbellum that this strategy emerged (Letourneux 2017: 419). All these transmedia productions must therefore be seen as sets of commercial and industrial mechanisms, combined with their narrative and fictional narrative (Letourneux 2017: 426).

The aim here was to develop the notion of transmedia storytelling by beginning with Henry Jenkins, who first took an interest in the premise, and to use the works of other experts, such as H  l  ne Laurichesse, Matthieu Letourneux, M  lanie Bourdaa and others, to complete the notion and to have different points of view about it too. Now that the notion is clear, it is time to use it practically.

2. The Seven Principles of Transmedia

On his website, Henry Jenkins, one of the first people to develop theoretically the notion of transmedia, provides seven principles that are, for him, the core of a transmedia storytelling and branding. Here is a presentation of these seven principles, also adapted to Marvel Studios, and more particularly to its two movies *Infinity War* (2018) and *Endgame* (2019).

The first principle is “spreadability vs. drillability”. Spreadability refers to “the capacity of the public to engage actively in the circulation of media content through social networks and in the process expand its economic value and cultural worth” (Jenkins 2009). On the other hand, “drillability” can be linked to what Neil Young called “additive comprehension” (Jenkins 2009). The aim of the creators is to encourage fans to go deeper and to understand what lies underneath the original narrative (Jenkins 2009). These two terms must be seen as two modes of cultural engagement. Spreadable media can create a strong engagement with consumers that, however, cannot always be a long-term one, while drillable media engage fewer people, although these people develop stronger engagement than others and try to identify and discover the complexities of a text (Jenkins 2009). In the case of Marvel Studios, there are indeed long-

term fans who are involved in the cinematic universe created by Marvel and always try to find more information than what is given in movies. Often, they can find this information in comics as these are more developed than movies. New details or hints can also be spotted in the post credits scenes of each movie, or in the many trailers released by Marvel Studios. This cultural engagement led all Marvel fans to the climax of its series, which were *Infinity War* and *Endgame*. The fans needed to have seen all the movies before, to fully and completely understand these last two movies, which is a kind of reward for the dedication of fans over many years. This would seem to imply that this is a case of drillability, even if the cultural engagement described in this category refers to a small group of fans, while here, the group of fans is massive all around the world. However, it can also be said that Marvel Studios respect the other concept, which is the spreadability. Indeed, fans tend to be fully engaged on social networks and other platforms to communicate about Marvel's movies, its new announcements, its actors' latest tweets, etc. This is therefore a mix of both concepts.

The second principle refers to continuity vs. multiplicity. It is indeed the case that many transmedia franchises are trying right now to develop a strong sense of continuity in their universe, so that the consumer finds some coherence and plausibility during consumption of the brand. The fans therefore see this continuity as a form of reward for their engagement and investment in energy, as they are always trying to collect and assemble information to reach the good conclusion (Jenkins 2009). There is also the notion of multiplicity developed by Jenkins. To explain it, he took the example of *Spider-Man*, seen not only in the Marvel Universe but also in the *Ultimate Spider-Man* franchise, and in multiple other mini-franchises. These are alternative versions of the same character or parallel versions of a universe and a story. Fans therefore take pleasure in discovering new retellings of an original work (Jenkins 2009). Here, one can say that Marvel Studios are more engaged in continuity than in multiplicity. Indeed, Marvel Studios have always made it a point to follow a certain chronology, making their characters and worlds evolve as the movies are released one after the other. Again, the two movies *Infinity War* and *Endgame* are the culmination of this chronology for fans who have followed every movie, every detail, every plot, to finally understand the end of this series of movies.

The third principle distinguishes between the notions of immersion and extractability. The feeling of immersion can be reached by fans by playing video games deriving from the original work or they can simply read a book. On the other hand, extractability allows you to take a piece of the fictional world with you into the real world. Jenkins notably takes the example of

cosplay, when you wear the costumes of your favourite character and show off to the world your passion about such or such franchise (Jenkins 2013: 8). Letourneux also emphasises this notion of immersion. He says that the latter media and technological evolutions have favoured this logic of being part of a unique experience, where the fan jumps into his favourite world. It is often made through videogames, but also through cinema, as nowadays special effects in theatres are more and more impressive and enable us to enter the world of the movie. Finally, this notion of immersion can be found on the internet with the sharing of information and the many discussions between the fans belonging to different communities, blogs, forums, etc. (Letourneux 2017: 435). As far as Marvel is concerned, there are, of course, large numbers of fans that enjoy cosplay and dress up as their favourite superheroes, such as Captain America or Black Widow. It is, in fact, another way for them to identify themselves with a brand and to show their love for their favourite character and universe. It could even be said that Marvel Studios are more concerned about the idea of extractability, as it is easy to use a weapon or a part of one of the superheroes' costume, to feel like an Avenger. It could also be said that Marvel Studios are working on the immersion's notion, as a videogame is actually in development, although success will only be confirmed after its release and the approval of the fans.

The fourth principle refers to the idea of worldbuilding. The universes created by the franchises are often structured so that they can welcome multiple characters, storylines or even other worlds. This is very interesting for brands, economically speaking, as a franchise can always be expanded with new content on different media. The coherent structure of the world also allows the fans to understand the logic and rules of the universe, but also the different relationships between all the characters (Jenkins 2013: 8-9). Marvel Studios are regarded to be one of the most famous examples of the best worldbuilding. Indeed, the Marvel Cinematic Universe gathers multiple characters, who can save different planets, with different superpowers, and with completely different stories and backgrounds. This is the strength of Marvel, as with *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, it gave the fans a chance to see all these characters and all these worlds reunited, reaching the climax. The fact that this universe is so large gives the opportunity for many other characters, with other stories and superheroes to be incorporated later, so that the Marvel Cinematic Universe never dies.

Seriality is the fifth principle discussed by Jenkins. As explained before, a serial story allows a brand to add new episodes to the original story on different media, not only tv or books but also video games, forums, etc. This strategy stimulates a dedicated audience, in particular using suspense. Jenkins said that experts do not know yet what motivates audiences to look for new

information about a story at the end of one episode or movie, but thanks to suspense they engage themselves more and more (Jenkins 2013: 9). Marvel Studios also try to develop that idea of seriality. They have produced movies, but also preludes preceding these movies, many trailers to draw the attention of fans, and post-credits scenes to make fans drool with anticipation over future movies. They also developed a tv series such as *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*, *The Punisher*, *Jessica Jones*, etc. and are currently filming new TV series which will be released on Disney+ and will only present characters that have already appeared in movies, such as *WandaVision*, *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, or *Loki*. This will add a new dimension to Marvel Studios who will now directly develop a story through movies, and also through series. Indeed, with the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* for example, it was not necessary to have followed the TV series to understand the rest of the movies, while here, with these new TV series, it will completely be the case.

Subjectivity is also very important for Jenkins and is the sixth principle. There are for example franchises that developed secondary characters' viewpoints through different media. The exploration of these characters that are not particularly important in the original work or even of new temporality within a universe enable further worldbuilding and stronger engagement with the audience, which might create blogs or similar things from the character's perspective (Jenkins 2013: 10-11). For Marvel Studios, the characters are equal in terms of importance, although it has to be said that some characters appeared in a number of movies, without having their own solo movie. This is the case for Black Widow or Hawkeye. Although Isaac Perlmutter was against female superhero movies, as he finds them non-interesting financially speaking, Marvel Studios have finally decided to produce a Black Widow solo movie, which will be released in 2020, 10 years after the character's first appearance in *Iron Man 2* (2010), and this mainly thanks to the influence of Kevin Feige (*Indie Wire* 2017). It could be due to the pressure of fans, who have developed a true love for Black Widow's character, but the true reason remains a secret. Good news for the fans, however, as Marvel Studios will finally allow one of the more "minor" characters to tell her story and background. I also think that this is the aim of the series that will be released on Disney+, to develop the personalities and stories of more minor characters, such as the Falcon and the Winter Soldier, who have always been in the shadow of Captain America, or Wanda and Vision, and also remained very secretive characters.

Finally, Jenkins's seventh principle is the notion of performance. Jenkins refers again to the cultural attractors and to the cultural activators. The cultural attractors gather a community of

people sharing the same passion, while the activators give this community something to exploit. Fans are able to develop expanded storylines around an existing story. They want to feel involved and contribute something themselves, as in fan fictions or reconstruction of a movie in animation or memes. In this way, the audience becomes a creator, as well as a viewer. This is their chance to enter actively the fictional universe created by the brand (Jenkins 2013: 11-12). Marvel Studios' movies completely approve of this idea of performance, as through this enormous cinematic universe, fans are free to develop their own stories, fanfictions²⁶, or reconstruction on social media or other platforms. The fact that the Marvel Cinematic Universe is so expandable gives fans the opportunity to let their imagination run wild and invent new elements of plots or stories. There is, therefore, a community of fans sharing the same passion for a universe (cultural attractors), and thanks to the movies, TV series, preludes, trailers, post-credits scenes, videogames, toys, etc. they have something to exploit (cultural activators), which leads to performance.

3. Marvel's transmedia policy

3.1. Comics preludes for Infinity War and Endgame

Marvel Studios have used "preludes" since *Iron Man 2* (2010). The Iron Man books are in fact comic mini-series set in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. These products can be considered as transmedia and as part of a transmedia storytelling as they often summarize what has happened in the time before the new movie is set. The idea is to give more information and details about some characters, objects, worlds, plots, than what the movies originally gave. For "real" fans, it is a way of deepening their own knowledge about a franchise and their cultural engagement. They are always set between two movies in the MCU. For example, *Infinity War* (2018) was released between *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) and the movie *Infinity War*, which was finished later. It features scenes from *Captain America: Civil War*, *Doctor Strange*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *The Avengers*, *Thor: The Dark World*, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Guardians of the Galaxy*, and *Thor: Ragnarok*. It was written by Will Corona Pilgrim, who is the Creative Director of Research & Development for Marvel Studios.²⁷ The artists that contributed to the prelude of *Infinity War* were the following: *Tigh Walker*, *Chris O'halloran*, *Jorge Fornés*, *Travis Lanham*, and *Ryan Meinerding*. There were in fact two comics that were

²⁶ Fanfictions are stories written by fans on social networks. They are often based on an original text, but are also often based on fans' imagination.

²⁷ https://marvelcinematicuniverse.fandom.com/wiki/Will_Corona_Pilgrim. Accessed on 15th April 2020.

released and considered as a prelude to *Infinity War* (2018): one which was released on 24th January 2018 and the other on 28th February 2018.²⁸

The prelude is divided into two parts: the first one recalled the events of *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), which caused the Avengers to go their own ways, particularly Captain America and Iron Man. The second part tells us what Doctor Strange has discovered about the infinity stones, and how they have already been seen or used by the many characters of the MCU in their adventures. The prelude of *Infinity War* contains a lot of flashbacks, such as the Battle at the HYDRA Siberian Facility, from *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), the Battle of New York, with the Chitauri Invasion, in *The Avengers* (2012), and even the Battle of Morag, from the *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014). The point here is that fans need to have seen all the other movies to understand what is represented in this prelude, and also that the new information given in this prelude can only be interesting for real fans. Indeed, the flashbacks are often accompanied with other details and elements that are not present in the movies.

This is also the case for the prelude of *Endgame* (2019). It is a three-issue comic mini-series set in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, taking place before the events of *Endgame* (2019), and it is a retelling of the events of *Infinity War* (2018). It was again written by Will Corona Pilgrim and the artists were the following: Paco Diaz, Dono Sánchez-Almara, Travis Lanham. There were three comics released for the prelude: the first one on 5th December 2018, the second one on 9th January 2019, and the last one on 20th February 2019. There are, again, many characters, locations and events that are recalled, many from *Infinity War* (2018), such as the Rescue of Doctor Strange, the Battle of Titan, the Battle of Wakanda, the Attack on Vision, etc. The first part reminds us of the power of the infinity stones and why Thanos is looking for them, even if the Avengers will try to stop him. The second part summarizes another part of the movie where certain Avengers are fighting the Children of Thanos, whilst others are making plans to try to defeat him, and Gamora's past is revealed. In the last part, the Avengers and the Guardians of the Galaxy assemble to defeat Thanos, although it is unsure that they will succeed. Again, this comic book is aimed at fans who need to have seen the movie to understand the many references in the comic. This comic is of course a kind of reward for them as they get additional dialogues between characters and more details about certain scenes, which were absent in the movie.

²⁸ https://marvelcinematicuniverse.fandom.com/wiki/Avengers:_Infinity_War_Prelude. Accessed on 15th April 2020.

These preludes are, therefore, a real part in Marvel Studios' transmedia storytelling, as they not only retell, but also give fans and readers more details about certain events of preceding movies and prepare the fans for the upcoming movie. Fans therefore feel rewarded for their dedication and loyalty, as they get to know their favourite superheroes better, along with their favourite weapons, vehicles, worlds, etc.

3.2. Toys and Games

Children and young people in general like to enter their favourite universe and play within it. The world they are playing in is created in their imagination by themselves, based on narrative productions. A lot of mimicry games borrow these imagined universes and invent a kind of sequel to the original work (Letourneux 2017: 456). Characters, transmedia universes, serial forms, etc. are, in their own way, expansions of the original work and they invite the consumer to imagine new plots, new interpretations, new sequels (Letourneux 2017: 457). Movies often tend to develop what is called "supportive intertextuality". One strategy is to create and sell different kinds of toys, books, watches, bedspreads, and action figures before the release of a movie (Gray 2010: 38). This is what Disney does for example and as we know that Marvel was purchased by Disney in 2009, it will come as no surprise to learn that they use the same system for Marvel movies and that it works. There are indeed many toys, action figures, accessories, developed and based on *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, so that fans can publicly express their love and dedication to the franchise and for the stories, continuing their own narrative plot with many gadgets.



Figure 6. Merchandizing found on the internet and developed on the basis of *Infinity War* (2018) and *Endgame* (2019) #1



Figure 7. Merchandizing found on the internet and developed on the basis of *Infinity War* (2018) and *Endgame* (2019) #2



Figure 8. Merchandizing found on the internet and developed on the basis of *Infinity War* (2018) and *Endgame* (2019) #3

This merchandising process will often be started during the commercial break of a popular program where the viewers can be the potential future consumers of these products and for example, McDonalds' or other fastfoods may develop a themed "Happy Meal" to promote the products and, therefore, the movie even more. In the case of *Endgame*, there were indeed small action figures representing the superheroes of the movie in the Happy Meal, so that children could collect them and play with them.²⁹ A movie is "no longer reducible to the actual experience of seeing it," according to Robert Allen (1999). These merchandises become part of the text and the movie is no longer the primary text, as one can see how all the products developed by Disney contribute so much more of the profit than the tickets bought by viewers in theatres. The boundaries between text and paratext are consequently very confused (Gray 2010: 38-39). Media corporations understand nowadays that it is very interesting to invest in

²⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YI7ykB-OPE>. Accessed on 14 April 2020.

paratexts and to produce previews or/and spinoff merchandise. These paratexts are there to evaluate the potential of a movie, based on the opening weekend box office: if a movie does not reach its audience during that period, movie houses will take it off their programme and the promotion around the movie falls correspondingly.

These products are also known as “peripherals,” except that they are everything but peripheral. They often have a huge impact on the expansion of a movie (Gray 2010: 175). These new gadgets or architexts remind players of their own experience with a movie or a comic, or even a videogame, and therefore, with this form of proximity, and also of common culture, they are more tempted to buy the products, and to replay scenes that they have already seen before (Letourneux 2017: 458/462). Indeed, they offer children a form of escape from the routine of daily life, reaching fantasy through different invented scenarios. There is also the concept of costumes, made for children and enabling them to enter their favourite world by pretending to be their favourite superhero. What matters therefore is the collective imagined work of individual productions, reaching for brands’ commercial and economic successes (Letourneux 2017: 462-463). These products are not narrative, but narrativity carriers (Letourneux 2017: 460).



Figure 9. Costumes for children based on *Infinity War* (2018)

There is a difference between the narrative we receive and the object we manipulate personally to reach another variation of this narrative (Letourneux 2017: 463). The aforementioned architextual encyclopaedias are therefore seen as strongly influenced by the shared culture and result in many individual creative variations thanks to fans (Letourneux 2017: 463). Another important aspect elaborated on by Letourneux, who quoted Kendall Walton to explain it, is the idea of a “prop”. The prop is a fictional medium that allows playing with a fictional work and that emphasises its artificial nature (Walton 1990). Stereotypes in

fictional works can be seen as props, such as a cowboy hat or pirate eye patch. In Marvel Studios, there is for example Thor's hammer or Captain America's shield.



Figure 10. Accessories sold by Marvel Studios, on the basis of its characters' weapons #1



Figure 11. Accessories sold by Marvel Studios, on the basis of its characters' weapons #2

Therefore, architextual encyclopaedias can be seen as sets of props (Letourneux 2017: 465-466). These encyclopaedias function as fiction “catalysts”, describing universes, but more than that, suggesting the many other possibilities and games that can emerge in the future, on the basis of the already collected information (Letourneux 2017: 466). To summarize, these encyclopaedias are full of props and their aim is to go from a narrative to a non-narrative logic, but with a number of intertexts and architexts that the reader or viewer must exploit, to reach that form of fantasy, derived from narrativity (Letourneux 2017: 469). As far as Marvel is

concerned, there is for example the book published by Dorling Kindersley with an introduction written by Stan Lee, called *Marvel Encyclopedia*, which can be considered as the “official” reference. There is also the French Marvel encyclopaedia, on the website www.marvel-world.com created by fans as well as www.marvelcinematicuniverse.fandom.com, which may be the most international example, again a website created by fans.

It is the same process with toys and games. Based on their stereotyped narrative, and through the image of the box and the packaging, a child will decide whether or not they want to join this universe. This can also depend upon personal previous experiences with other works in a particular transmedia series. The accessories combined with the toy will also influence the future stereotyped adventures of the player (Letourneux 2017: 469). The manufacturer uses a certain form of conventional fictional story knowing that it is already shared by a large number of consumers. It is crucial that they find the correct balance between the narrative and mimetic part on one hand, where the fictional experience does not depend upon the player, and the playful part on the other hand, where the fictional dimension is created by the player himself (Letourneux 2017: 470).

Toys and games increasingly exploit the success of franchises since the interbellum. They have based their toys and games on thematised architexts (features of characters, of settings, vehicles, etc.) that they restructure so that they become playful for children and young people (Letourneux 2017: 472). The manufacturers of these toys try to institute a coherence between the products and the universe, so that the players want to collect as many plots as possible (Letourneux 2017: 472-473). In transmedia series, these derivative products are therefore part of an already constituted universe. The players are appropriating the original work and its universe, in order to propose new alternatives to the plot (Letourneux 2017: 475). A series is therefore always open to new fictional expansions and fans or collectors participate in the spreading between producers and receivers, by developing a sense of appropriation (Letourneux 2017: 476).



Figure 12. Avengers Helicarrier as a toy

It is for this reason that these products are often called transmedia. If licensed toys are taken as an example, it quickly becomes obvious that they can play a key role in helping fans to understand and identify themselves with a text before having watched it but also to enter a new story world. This is the case with *Star Wars* for example. Gray quotes Ellen Seiter judiciously as she says that toys “are mass-media goods, [...] [that] facilitate group, co-operative play, by encouraging children to make up stories with shared codes and narratives” (1993).

According to another author, Dan Fleming (1996), Gray elaborates that licensed toys have, in fact, the ability to continue a story and also to expand it or redefine it with children in mind. Fleming also argues that these toys can provide an “ultimate refusal of narrative closure” (96, 102), giving a child the chance to explore every story possibility with his toys, without any resolution (Gray 2010: 178). This is the case with Marvel’s characters and universe, as the expandable quality of the universe enables children to exploit every aspect of it and to play and imagine whatever story and plot they want. The only limit is their imagination. Another interesting aspect of these toys is their versatility. It is true that they are quite rigid figures but what brings versatility is their accessories. With Marvel toys, it could be again Captain America’s shield or Thor’s hammer. Those weapons make children believe that they are playing with warriors and that they can consequently play fight with them. These are action figures. Vehicles can also be represented and have an important role in the development of children’s stories (Gray 2010: 179). There is for example the Avengers helicarrier or the spaceship from the *Guardians of the Galaxy*. Moreover, children often assign specific characteristics to their figures, based on the characters of a movie. They know how important a particular character was in a battle, in which camp the characters stood, who was right and who was wrong, etc. For Gray, the toys do not transform the meanings of the text; “rather, [...] they play a key role in redefining and accentuating certain meanings, multiplying them and carrying them beyond the film into the child’s play world, [...]” (2010: 181).

What is also interesting is that the world of toys does not hesitate to develop characters that seemed less important in the movie. The franchises sometimes even develop characters or vehicles that did not appear in the movies, in an attempt to provide children with as many gadgets, weapons and spaceships as possible. This is not the case for Marvel, but *Star Wars* did develop such new characters as they had the possibility to do it with their highly imaginative universe (Gray 2010: 182). The role of the toys is also sometimes to keep a series of movies alive and in people’s minds in between films. As is the case with Marvel, people often have to wait a very long time to see the sequel of one specific character. For children, their way to keep

the series alive is to play with these toys, in order not to forget the character in question (Gray 2010: 181). It is also important to point out that with long series of movies, the children grow up and sometimes, become adults even before the end of the series. Marvel Studios released its first movie with *Iron Man* in 2008; it is now 2020, and the fans are still discussing the movies that were released in the past two decades. It is very probable that many fans who have become adults are certainly going to influence their children with this Marvel universe and will be happy to buy their children toys that remind them of their own childhood. This is what is also fascinating with Marvel's movies or also *Star Wars*. The series of movies continue, and there is this kind of continuity between children and adults that brings them together and enables them to enjoy the lasting story of the characters, who are always coming back (Gray 2010: 184-185).

It is also interesting to point out that, in the case of Marvel, the colour scheme of toys packaging is often made for boys and men, clearly knowing that these action figures are most of the time used by boys and not girls, and that the foremen are, therefore, the target audience. This strategy is even more accentuated with ads that often present young boys, rather than girls, playing with the toys, and the fact that in stores, these action figures are present in the "boy" toys department. All this suggests that the original text of a movie is more orientated towards boys and men in general and this is certainly the case with Marvel. Broadly speaking, people tend to believe that the majority of dedicated fans of Marvel movies are men. Over the last few years, however, many female superheroes have been developed by Marvel, and the group of women fans has only grown; moreover, there are also women that love watching action movies of that kind (Gray 2010: 185-186). Therefore, one can conclude that toys are not only "peripherals" but offer the audience the possibility of entering a story world and to contribute to it, and that this strategy has proved to be very successful for the business of franchises or series of movies, which never die but only expand.

3.3. Videogames

Inhabiting a new universe is not only a child's game. There are multiple media-related games that exist and address a wide range of audiences. One of these games is the videogame, which allows players to enter another universe, and also to discover spaces not developed in movies or series. The players are also able to expand the original text or even to change it, based on their choices in the game (Gray 2010: 176, 188). It not only attracts men, but also women. It is often seen as a game for teens or geeky young people in their twenties or thirties, but this is not a generality and it has been proven that many older people play video games too. Many

successful producers of movies have decided to develop video games as they have seen how lucrative they can be. There is no guarantee to their success, however, and many have resulted in a failure, but some of them succeeded and opened their doors to gamers that were ready to explore deeper the universe of the movie or show (Gray 2010: 188).

Creators of videogames usually use stereotyped frames, in order to already give a narrative dimension to a game without thinking too much, as everything is based on another work form another medium. The narrative dimension is essential as it structures a game for a player: it is only possible to make progress in the game by following predetermined steps. The downside of this is that it reduces the freedom of the player. The videogame must therefore strike a good balance between its narrative dimension and its playful dimension (Letourneux 2017: 482). What they use to reach this balance is first the original characters and adventures of an original work and universe. A convergence is reached thanks to the fictional universe, the non-interactive sequences and “recycling” of stereotyped mechanisms (Letourneux 2017: 483).

The aim of a videogame is to exploit a universe and its characters, based on what has already been created on other media. The game can be inspired by the logic and the tone of a movie or book, but it cannot necessarily follow a particular plot (Letourneux 2017: 388). The video game creates “a more direct relationship between the individual player and the story world” (Gray 2010: 189). Furthermore, what interests people playing with videogames, based on movies or programs, is to explore new spaces. The narrative suddenly becomes secondary. The player is able to explore the space for themselves and to control it. This discovering is necessary for the progression of the game, even if it implies potential dangers. This concept of control is essential in videogames. Indeed, a player can slow down their progression whenever they want, and can also control characters they loved watching in the movies, etc.

Linda Hutcheon (2006: 22) developed the idea that there are three modes of narratives: Telling, as in novels, which immerses us “through imagination in a fictional world”; showing, as in plays and films, which immerses us “through the perception of the aural and the visual”; and participatory, as in videogames, which immerses us “physically and kinesthetically” (Gray 2010: 192). Therefore, the aim of a videogame is to modify the story, its world, its characters and its audience, navigating through a story world. In the case of videogames, which are an adaptation, the majority of players want to experience a world they already know, on the basis of the movie or program. Although they are already familiar with the world in question, they explore in a new way, which is different from the relationship they have with the movie or show. Gray writes that it is important to remember that:

Allowing audiences to explore a narrative invites play with a world and an expansion of how it can operate, but requiring that they explore that world risks restricting how the film or television program can operate. [...] Allowing fans, and giving room to play, is often of vital importance, but requiring that all viewers be fans is an immodest and potentially destructive move (2010: 196).

The aim is to create something that addresses both the general audience and various types of fans, but not necessarily to conquer every one of them. Producers have had to realise that they cannot please everyone, and if they try, it will often result in failure as they did not succeed in gaining the interest of either the fans or the general audience. Even if they always have to try to attract as many people as possible, it is always safe to have a target audience and to focus on it (Gray 2010: 196).



Figure 13. Extract from the trailer of videogame Marvel's Avengers

It is important to also realise that there are multiple other forms of games based on films or television shows. For example, there is the role-playing game. Playing their favourite character that they know by heart can be very amusing for children, and can also give them more self-confidence, and help develop their imagination. One can see that multiple games can be invented just thanks to the narratives of a movie or show, if one is imaginative enough. These games can only be repetitions of the text or they can try to expand the original text. Either way, the aim is to increase the engagement of the players and they allow him to enter and inhabit a story world they have always been fond of and so to strengthen an existing relationship with a franchise or series of movies.

Marvel Studios have a videogame that is scheduled for release in September 2020 and which was developed by Crystal Dynamics in collaboration with Eidos-Montréal and its publisher, Square Enix. The videogame is simply called *Marvel: Avengers*. According to Marvel.com, “Marvel’s Avengers combines an original story with single-player and co-operative gameplay in the definitive Avengers gaming experience. [...] Featuring regular content updates, Marvel’s Avengers will take players on an epic journey delivered over multiple years. This game is what’s next for the Avengers.” It remains to be seen whether they will release on time as there seems to be a slight problem with this new videogame. As it is not MCU canon, the developers did not have the rights to develop the characters based on the original actors playing them in the movie. Therefore, their faces and voices have been completely redesigned, leaving the fans puzzled by the trailer.

However, this freedom has enabled the developers to come up with completely new stories, which many journalists and some gamers see in a positive light. They have in fact developed a completely new story, so that fans do not see something they are already familiar with and will find themselves on a new mission. However, the game is still in development, so that fans still have time to be convinced by what the publisher and developers will propose to them, even though they know that it will take some time to accept these “new” characters (*The Guardian* 2019).

3.4. Amusements parks with Disney

Another form developed to attract fans is the building of amusement parks. Letourneux said that there is no longer a gap between a work and the consumables. The amusement parks represent fictional universes, as well as shopping centres where the brand is fully deployed for the pleasure of the fans, and especially of the brand’s owners. These built worlds need to be seen as intertexts of the original work, and as partaking participant of their interpretation (Letourneux 2017: 423). For example, Disney World or Disney Land are the real fulfilment of this idea of “œuvre-monde, or “univers-monde”. The fan is able to enter a fictional world, but this time through a physical experience (Letourneux 2017: 436).



Figure 14. Disney's released picture of Marvel-themed parks #1



Figure 15. Disney's released picture of Marvel-themed parks #2

In 2018, Marvel announced that three new Disney parks based on the Marvel universe and characters would be developed so that fans could live a new immersive experience. *Spider-Man* seems to be the hero of choice for California's Disney park, *Iron Man* for the Paris' park and *Ant-man and the Wasp* for the Hong-Kong park. Of course, all the Avengers will be added to these new immersive parks (*The Verge* 2018). Marvel Studios even posted a short video to promote these new parks, saying that the recruitment would soon begin.³⁰ Once again, Marvel and Disney remained very secretive about what would actually be on show in these parks, wanting to surprise fans as much as possible and maybe avoiding spoilers for future films as

³⁰ https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=29&v=WcSpLJzcuII&feature=emb_title. Accessed 05 April 2020.

these parks are not supposed to open before summer 2020 in California. It remains to be seen with the pandemic currently affecting construction, whether they will be able to honour this. Still, Disney posted a number of pictures, letting fans imagine themselves having superpowers and helping their favourite superhero to defeat the villain (*Disney Parks Blog* 2019). The fact that Disney developed three different parks on three different continents also demonstrates how famous this universe has become all around the world. For Disney, everything is a brand and therefore, everything must be exploited, not only to increase profit but also all for the fans around the world, as none of them must be ignored. These parks will also be preparing the ground for future heroes of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

4. The role of fans in this transmedia brand strategy

Producers are not the only ones creating paratexts. Fans do it too, although without the same capital and infrastructure as Hollywood to circulate their productions. However, it has been proven that the role of fans in the creation of these paratexts is crucial for the success of a movie or program. The fans not only talk about such and such movie, but they also criticise it, make reviews, fanfiction, fan film and video³¹, “filk” (fan song), fan art³², spoilers, fan sites, etc (Gray 2010: 143). The role of fans was once restricted to semi-participatory acts such as participating in a convention. Now, their role has also been developed through all media platforms, which also give the transmedia world some consistency (Letourneux 2017: 440). These paratexts play a supplementary role to those created by professionals. As Jenkins interestingly pointed out, fans “cease to be simply an audience for popular texts; instead, they become active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meaning” (Jenkins 1992: 27) and they “actively struggle with and against the meanings imposed upon them by their borrowed materials” (Jenkins 1992: 33).

The appropriation of a text by a fan can be seen as the “final consumption”, which ignites future exchange-value and the use of this value (Hills 2002: 35). This is thanks to fans and people in general that a movie is consumed, and this consumption comes at the end of the whole process organised before the movie by the brand to make it famous. This is why it is called “final” consumption. Moreover, fans can also create and produce through this appropriation (Gray 2010: 145). Jenkins (1992: 156) explains that fans like to stretch the boundaries of a text and try to incorporate their concerns, ideas and feelings in it, and “remoulding its characters to

³¹ Film or video made by fans, who again based themselves on an original work and then, let their imagination do the rest.

³² Mainly drawings or paintings done by fans of a particular movie or soap.

better suit their desires.” Indeed, fans can grab the text from any part they want and point it in another direction that pleases them. For example, in fan fictions, they can change the characters’ personality, or the issues/missions dealt by these characters. They can also use toys developed by a brand to play with them and imagine a new plot for themselves, a plot only based on their own imagination (Gray 2010: 146).

The challenge for producers is to control these peripheral and amateurish productions, so that they do not have a negative effect on the brand’s strategy and image. Indeed, there have been cases where fans destroyed a transmedia series’ coherence and tried to take control of the brand’s image (Letourneux 2017: 441). For instance, there was a conflict between the Harry Potter fans and the producers, as the latter wanted to close every fan website, but eventually changed their mind as they realised they were making new enemies that normally served as opinion transmitting for them (Letourneux 2017: 441). Therefore, in transmedia production, what also enriches the work is the participation and engagement of the audience and fans, through their consumption, but also through their own production (Letourneux 2017: 441). What is described here and created by the fans is what Letourneux called a subculture, with its own codes and rules, but sometimes these subcultures can be retrieved by the dominant cultures, when the brands want to emphasise their interaction with their fans, by integrating the fans’ work to the original production. This strategy is only created by the brands to keep control over the fans’ productions, to channel them and to orientate them, so that the fans remain mainly opinion transmitters (Letourneux 2017: 442).

It would be impossible to take a look at every production made by fans, translating their identity in a movie or program. On the basis of the two movies analysed in this work (*Infinity War* and *Endgame*), a selection of these productions has been made in order to be able to develop them in greater detail and on the basis of what productions were the most important in the case of these two movies. The notion of spoilers, reviews, critics, and fan sites/forums will therefore be developed.

5. Spoilers

I would like to approach the “spoiler” notion again. Spoilers “include any information about what will happen in an ongoing narrative that is provided before the narrative itself gets there” (Gray 2010: 147). They usually come from viewers who have seen a movie or program before others, or from fans themselves “spoiling” other fans or potential viewers when the film or program is already released (Gray 2010: 147). Producers know that these spoilers can have a huge impact on the success of their productions. Consequently, they try to increase the level of

secrecy in order to protect what is coming, and avoid some kind of disappointment, or annoyance from future viewers (Gray 2010: 147). There are two kinds of people: some that do not want to have the content of a movie spoiled and who prefer to wait until the release of a movie or program to discover it for themselves. Others are too excited and impatient to wait for the release, and try by any means to find out what is going to happen. There are even “spoiling communities” that try to find where the show or movie is filmed, sometimes take pictures of the actors or scenes if they succeed in seeing them, and then publish them online to create hysteria in some cases (Gray 2010: 148). Jenkins describes it as “a giant cat and mouse game that is played between the producers and the audience” (2008: 25). Nevertheless, many fans say that knowing what is coming next in a movie or program does not reduce their enjoyment of everything that is going on in the text (dialogues, relationships between characters, etc.). Some of them even argue that knowing what is coming means that you can enjoy the details in the film and avoid becoming attached to some characters that are going to die or disappear from the show. What spoiler fans are fond of is the fact that they know the “what” but not the “how” and discovering the “how” is for them even more exciting because they are going to get the details. In fact, they concentrate on what is the most important for them (Gray 2010: 150-151). Other fans declare that they used spoilers because it was a way for them to “catch up” a show or movie, and to avoid being lost during their viewing (Gray 2010: 151). Spoilers can also intensify the idea of solving a mystery or a puzzle before watching the show or movie. People already receive a number of clues through promotional productions made by the brands and looking for spoilers is just another way of getting as many pieces of the puzzle as possible to solve the mystery. However, it is important to remember that, most of the time, the pieces are not important enough to reveal the whole plot, which is intentional. Spoilers allow fans to make whatever they want of them and fans like it that way (Gray 2010: 152).

Finally, another reason why fans like spoilers is that they enable them to take control of their potential future emotional responses and anticipations vis-à-vis a show or program. Sometimes, the time between two movies or even more between two episodes can be “stressful” for a viewer, especially when the latest episode has finished with hook for the next episode. Spoilers therefore become inseparable from the text and “a mediator of the spoiler reader’s connections with and reactions to the text” (Gray 2010: 153). Paratexts are now considered to be a real part of the main text; depending on who you are and what way you want to take to reach the text, these paratexts can be massively consumed or completely avoided, especially the spoilers discussed here.

The notion of spoilers was examined in the previous chapter and some examples which were already given showed how Marvel Studios handled the situation for *Infinity War*'s and *Endgame*'s releases. Many fans wanted to discover some pieces of information before actually watching the movies, but Marvel remained very close lipped about its two movies, so that the surprise would be complete while watching the end of an adventure for fans. The brand even asks fans not to spoil things for other fans who had not watched the movies at the time, by using an image of Thanos "demanding silence" and the hashtag #ThanosDemandsYourSilence. Most of the fans followed the orders as not many spoils were seen on social media, especially in the first weeks after the release of *Endgame*. However, the fans needed to express their feelings about the movies, and inevitably, after several weeks, "spoils" could be seen everywhere as every fan was discussing it with others, especially after *Infinity War*, as at that point, nobody knew what would happen in *Endgame* and everyone was making the most imaginative and creative suggestions.

The level of secrecy kept by Marvel Studios was also made possible by the fact that the trailers gave very little information, as explained before, and by the fact that even the actors did not know which scenes they had shot would actually be used in the movies. In fact, Marvel Studios made every effort to keep the plot safe and sound. The plot of the two movies therefore remained secret until they were released. Of course, there will always be fans or people who will spoil what is in a film to others will try to find spoilers, and as we have seen, they want to keep control over their emotions and know what to expect. But for the most part, fans respected each other, and nobody spoiled anybody so that everyone could fully experience these last two movies of a generation.

6. Reviews/critics

The last part of this chapter looks at reviews, which are an important factor for people when deciding whether or not to go and see a movie. It may not be a part which will directly answer the question of my thesis, however, as a fan myself, I found it interesting to realise that not only fans recognised the hard work behind these two movies, but also experts. This proves that the movies are not only masterpieces for the fan community but also for the larger cinematic world. Journalists, religious or political figures are often the authors of critical reviews which can be characterized as paratexts. These critical reviews can sometimes serve to summarize a whole movie and later be used by others to deliver a message. They are often used to influence a whole new audience of people who want to watch a movie because of what they read after the release of reviews. For example, when the reviews are negative and strongly criticise a movie, people

will tend to have a stronger desire to watch the movie in order to understand what it is all about or if a movie is seen as racist by critical reviews, people who watch the movie will have difficulty seeing anything else as they are influenced by these commentaries (Gray 2010: 36-37).

Critics could be defined as people with “the capacity to reach a large audience [...] [and] to offer his or her interpretive strategies to others and to gain converts” (Gray 2010: 166). These people can take up position between the media and the audience, viewing shows or movies before the audience themselves, but are not officially affiliated with any media firm, and are therefore supposedly neutral and objective (Gray 2010: 166). As said before, these press reviews can be decisive at pre-analysing and interpreting a text. The critics are very important with their reviews and recommendations and act as a kind of promotional device, independent from the brand. However, when a movie is released, the reviews, just like the rest of the marketing process, are going to “set the parameters for viewing, suggesting how we might view the show (if at all), what to watch for, and how to make sense of it” (Gray 2010: 167). The aim of these critics is not only to criticise but also to give a show or movie an image, suggesting some meanings and attitude towards it from the viewers. It can therefore be said that they are constitutive of the text that will later appear in society.

Press reviews can also be seen to summarise a marketer’s paratexts and hype, as they truly want to describe what is going to happen in the movie. Sometimes, by doing so, they change the orientation that was initially taken by the producers, often to attract a certain audience. Therefore, it can be said that, as taste leaders, these critics are very important in mediating a program or movie’s standing into popular culture. The power of their review will of course depend upon what the individual had already consumed as paratexts and the interpretations he had of them (Gray 2010: 172-173). Reviews can therefore not predict how a text will be received in popular culture, but they “can allow us greater knowledge of the semiotic environment into which new shows arrive, and of the reviews’ role both in creating that environment and in co-creating the text” (Gray 2010: 173).

There are websites, such as www.rottentomatoes.com, which gather a number of official reviews made by “real” critics, or www.imdb.com, which presents reviews on its website from different websites or newspapers. On average, *Infinity War* (2018) and *Endgame* (2019) received positive reviews. Critics from famous newspapers or magazines always wrote reviews, such as *The Guardian*, *The Telegraph*, or famous journalists, such as Scott Mendelson from *Forbes*. On Rotten Tomatoes, *Infinity War* (2018) was given a rating of 85% from critics and

91% from cinema spectators, which is an excellent rating although it is common practice for the audience to be “kinder” than official critics. Strangely, *Endgame* (2019) rated 94% from critics and 90% from cinema audiences, which is unusual but perhaps demonstrates how good the film was. On www.metacritic.com, *Infinity War* rated 68% while *Endgame* rated 78%, which was lower than on other sites but this website is known to be more demanding.

Here are some passages from critics/reviews written about *Infinity War* (2018) and emphasise through *Variety*'s Tara Bitran article (2018). *Variety*'s Owen Gleiberman wrote the following sentences: “So is the movie a jumbled, top-heavy mess of cynical franchise overkill? Sort of like the bloated and chaotic ‘*Avengers: Age of Ultron*’ taken to the second power? Far from it. It’s a sleekly witty action opera that’s at once overstuffed and bedazzling” (2018). *Entertainment Weekly*'s Chris Nashawaty confirmed that “‘*Infinity War*’ is a movie for the fans. Especially those who’ve spent any time wondering what it would be like to witness Chris Hemsworth’s Thor wisecracking with Chris Pratt’s Star-Lord, or tagging along with some of the Avengers as they hightail it to Wakanda (the arrival there got a rousing wave of applause at my screening). It’s the Marvel equivalent of watching the old ‘We Are the World’ video (Hey, it’s Bob Dylan singing between to Cyndi Lauper and Huey Lewis!)” (2018). Still, Richard Lawson from *Vanity Fair* signalled that “the story will conclude next year with a part-two film, which gives ‘*Infinity War*’ a slightly unsatisfying tang. Still, I appreciate the film’s move toward something concrete, inching us closer to a time when at least some of these stories will be complete” (2018). These critics proved that on average, the movie was positively positively received, but that the end was really confusing and that they needed to see the second-part movie to fully appreciate the first one and its construction. This was generally the feeling of fans too, as they were very confused by the end of the movie, and could not wait to see *Endgame*, to see how all the characters’ fates would evolve.

A number of reviews about *Endgame* (2019) appeared in a *Variety* article written by Jordan Moreau (2019): The *Los Angeles Times*' Justin Chang wrote that “the mass slaughter at the end of ‘*Infinity War*’ felt both colossal and weightless, insofar as you knew it was little more than an epic tease. [...] ‘*Avengers: Endgame*’ achieves and earns its climactic surge of feeling, even as it falls just short of real catharsis” (2019). *The Guardian*'s Peter Bradshaw suggested that “‘*Avengers: Endgame*’ is of course entirely preposterous and, yes, the central plot device here does not, in itself, deliver the shock of the new. But the sheer enjoyment and fun that it delivers, the pure exotic spectacle, are irresistible, as is its insouciant way of combining the serious and the comic. [...] As an artificial creation, the Avengers have been triumphant, and as

entertainment, they have been unconquerable” (2019). A.O Scott from *The New York Times* wrote that “Still, ‘Endgame’ is a monument to adequacy, a fitting capstone to an enterprise that figured out how to be good enough for enough people enough of the time” (2019). On *Variety* and in the articles written by Tara Bitran and Jordan Moreau, one can find many other positive reviews about the movie, written by the most prestigious magazines and newspapers. This shows how positively *Endgame* was perceived, not only through fans’ eyes, but also through critics’ eyes, which is maybe why the film became the highest-grossing movies of all time.

In general, the critics were more demanding and sceptic after having watched *Infinity War* (2018), than after *Endgame* (2019). This certainly had something to do with the fact that *Infinity War* was only the first part of the end and did not answer many questions that were finally answered in *Endgame*. This feeling was also true for the fans, who wanted to discover the sequel of *Infinity War* as the suspense at the end of it was unbearable. Still, these two movies are now the fourth and the first highest-grossing movies of all time. This proves that the audience, the fans, and also the official critics played their role in the success of these two movies.

To conclude, fans have always given the most incredible support to movies, especially franchises, and often include people from a real fan community, following every movie from the beginning. These fans do not hesitate to declare war on other fan communities, and to beat them at the box office, to show that they are the “best” one. It is what happened with Marvel as with *Endgame* (2019), when fans came together to beat *Avatar* (Cameron, 2009) as the highest-grossing movie of all time. The aim was to send fans and also non-fans or future fans to the cinema with determination. As we have seen, the role of promotion is very crucial in this process, although the role of fans cannot be overlooked. It took some time, but *Endgame* finally beat the *Avatar*’s community by becoming first in this list and the fans could not be prouder of the work they had accomplished.

CONCLUSION

Marvel Studios became clearly one of the most famous or even the most famous franchises in the world with the release of *Infinity War* and *Endgame*. Indeed, the brand has clearly proven to everyone that it puts a lot of thought into its communication, marketing and, especially, its relationship with the fans. The aim of this dissertation was to point out the various factors and the general strategy Marvel has used to build this incredible universe, and this is the result of this analysis.

In order to understand the strategy of a particular brand, the first thing to do is to determine what a brand is and how it functions. Brands are used as a benchmark for consumers to enable them to identify a brand that is so precious to fans on the basis of its values. It is imperative that a brand works with the market, even if it is independent from it. The notion of franchise will also be looked at as it is important to distinguish a series of movies from normal movies people watch at the cinema. In this case, their marketing strategy is completely different. Indeed, a franchise of this type has to find the right balance between demand and supply and franchises have to license their characters and universe, not only to protect them, but also to prevent others from using them for financial gain.

With Marvel, the audience is facing a transmedia franchise as this particular universe has been developed through different media for many years and still has the possibility to expand even further. The brand made the conscious decision to spread itself across a range of different media, and also through seriality and by following a certain structure and story throughout all its movies. In fact, the movie functions as a visual promotion that encourages people to buy other products or extensions. Seriality is also essential as it creates a link between the audience and the text's various extensions. The strength of this strategy is that if the first element of the series is a success, the following parts will inevitably be successful as well, thanks to the reputation that arises from a successful movie.

It has been demonstrated through this work that Marvel Studios is not simply a series, but also a "cycle", as Letourneux named it. There is a convergence of all the pieces in and around the series of a specific universe that are required to form a unity through time. The basis of seriality is, therefore, the audience. This new method enables fans to participate and to be immersed in their favourite universe, by for instance being part of a lasting relationship with the brand, being familiar with a particular cast or buying derivative products. These derivative products, and the immersion of the fans allow them to build a community where they can all

share their own emotions, interpretations or opinions of the brand. One aspect of this serial strategy was for example built through post credit scenes. In the case of Marvel, it was thanks to them that a form of unity was organised and announced to the fans between all the movies. They are also the parts that keep the audience on the edge of their seats in anticipation of the next movie. Marvel also reached its apotheosis as the post credit scene of *Endgame* symbolised the end of this first generation of heroes and movies, and reminded the fans of Iron Man's first suit of armour being created by the hands of Tony Stark, the original hero of this series.

In this way, Marvel succeeded in building a brand community. For Jenkins, "affective economics" are also crucial in building this brand's identity and it shows that the audience has a crucial role in this process. The aim is to create relational and participative marketing. In a transmedia world like Marvel, affective economics are therefore essential as they focus on the consumer's experience. Marvel quickly understood this and used this information to forge a relationship with its fans. These fans and their behaviour are taken into consideration, to enable Marvel to make correct marketing decisions that will result in the highest possible profits. It has to be said, however, that Marvel depends hugely upon this community. Both are therefore intertwined and depend on the other to live "peacefully."

Marvel was built a long time ago and is now famous all over the world. However, it is important to remember where it came from and what it has been through to become one of the biggest franchises in the world. For this reason, I decided to begin by going back in time and discovering the professionals that created the first facet of Marvel. I already knew some of them, such as Stan Lee, who was a writer and editor of the company in its infancy and was still very present up until his death as he became an emblem for the brand. He was responsible for building a unique bond with the fans creating an authenticity and intimacy between the brand and its community. Unfortunately, following his death, this was no longer possible. Fortunately, Stan Lee was not the only one who established the foundations of the brand. Other people, such as Jack Kirby, also contributed to the creation of the first famous comic books, even if Lee tried to eclipse them.

In the beginning, Marvel wrote mostly comic books, but quickly realised their potential. Their aim was to create superheroes with a very human side to them and they soon decided to license some of their most famous characters. This decision was one of the foundations of the successful franchise. The success of Marvel at the time was also mainly based on its engagement with the fans and the way it encouraged them to participate in the building of their favourite stories about their favourite superheroes strengthened this relationship. The role of

the audience has always been crucial to Marvel and this is certainly one of the elements that have always distinguished them from others. Lee initiated this process and was later repaid for its contribution through cameos in Marvel movies. He therefore became the symbol of the brand, making a link between the Marvel of the past and the Marvel of the present.

To build a strong identity, the brand also had to please a large number of tastes, on the basis of culture, emotions, excitement and captivation, etc. Even though Marvel knew the potential it had, it still lived through difficult times and narrowly escaped bankruptcy in 1996. Luckily for the fans, Marvel bounced back and as a true organisation became a social entity with which many people could identify. After that, what distinguished Marvel from its rivals was its engagement to fans, its relatable superheroes and its shared universe. Even though Marvel had problems with directors or managers during its early years, it managed to keep its identity, although it changed slightly over the years. After the crisis of 1996, the directors of Marvel were not the only ones who saw Marvel's potential and when Disney bought it in 2009, everything evolved for the better, although with the same foundation: allowing fans to have a huge role in the creation of what would become the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Marvel found stability again, notably thanks to their control of movie production and Disney's financial support and it successfully became an even larger universe under the guidance of Kevin Feige.

Kevin Feige was taken on as the President of Production and from that moment, Marvel was able to fully develop its Cinematic Universe. It became the Marvel Studios and developed a transmedia storytelling strategy to build a serial convergence, leading to a form of unity. Its visual logo appearing at the beginning of every movie is a strong symbol thereof. This unity could also still be found between the Studios and the comics section, as they both helped each other, and are based on one another. After Disney's purchase, Marvel also developed itself on television and became a serious player.

This recontextualization and the explanations of the various theoretical notions were useful to lay the foundations of my thesis and to enable people who are not particularly fans of the brand, to have a better understanding of where the brand comes from. My real goal, however, was to understand how Marvel constructed its huge successful marketing and communication campaign around *Infinity War* and *Endgame*.

A movie can be seen as an original text and next to this text, there are other sections that are paratexts. Reading a text means to collaborate in its production and creation, notably through interpretation, which is based on past experience and intertextuality. Intertexts enable

the reader to already guess the genre of a text for example. Still, in order to understand the organisation of the brand policy, this work will first focus on paratexts having a role in the promotion of a blockbuster. Paratexts can be advertisements, which are visible everywhere. They can also be found in online stores, including books, games, videogames, etc. The reason for this wide presence is that they are crucial for a successful promotion campaign, as it is this promotion that will form the basis of a loyal fan community. The film is in fact a package in which the fan analyses every extension of it to understand the text fully. The brand's goal is to make people buy its products or services, and also to create extensions which people can relate to and if they want to produce interesting extensions for the fans, they need to create extensions with meaning. This meaning and the relationship between the brand and the audience will persuade fans to buy products and, in this event, everybody is a winner. Marvel is making profits and the fans are enjoying new products. It is a win-win situation.

Paratexts are, therefore, parts of this promotion. Paratexts are new texts next to the original one and bring new meaning to the latter. Brands invest enormously in them as they are key to a brand's commercial strategy. In the case of Marvel, *Endgame* became the highest-grossing movie of all time and *Infinity War* the fifth one. This demonstrates that their strategy was spot on, but it is interesting to see exactly how and where.

It is first interesting to understand how someone chooses to watch a particular movie. It can be based on previous experience but not only. Adverts, for instance, play an important role in this process. However, once again, Marvel uses various paratexts to create a strong promotion and to invite the audience to enter a new world. People are consuming paratexts and decide, on the basis of their experience, whether they are going to watch a movie or not. They are also paratextual products that followed movies, but they are as important. The role of all of them is to create meaning that will be added to the original text and which will enrich the experience for the consumer.

In order to grasp Marvel's strategy, this work initially focused on entryway paratexts and then on *in media res* paratexts. Entryway paratexts determine our entrance to a text or a world and *in media res* paratexts redirect the text after a first interaction. In the first category, a paratext that plays a very important role in Marvel's strategy is the trailer (and TV spots). They are the most important part of a movie promotion and they introduce a new text and its meaning for the first time. It also initiates a form of engagement from the audience, who will consume these trailers, only if they are interesting. Marvel Studios spend huge amounts of money on trailers. In fact, when a Marvel movie is shown at the cinema, there is often another trailer for

the next Marvel movie during the adverts. Marvel Studios never let its audience fall asleep. Marvel's fans already know what genre the movie is or which actors are going to be present. What they want is to get the first information and clues about the future Marvel movie and Marvel Studios are expert at this. They succeed in giving the fans just enough information to whet their appetite, but not enough to give away the plot. Fans are therefore excited because they have seen the first hints of the movie, but even more thrilled because they do not know exactly what is going to happen. The trailers therefore not only prepare the audience for the movie, but mostly form the basis of the next movie.

Marvel Studios released a number of trailers for *Infinity War* and *Endgame*. Loyal fans were already sure that they were going to go and watch the movie at theatres, but still, the release of these trailers was seen as a relief as they finally gave the fans some information about the movies' narrative. There are a number of aspects that are characteristic of Marvel's movies, and especially these two, that particularly attracted the fans: First, and as already mentioned, the trailer does not give too much information so that the fans are happy with it but still full of anticipation for the upcoming movie. It also enables them to speculate freely before the release of the movie, strengthening again this notion of community with everyone sharing ideas or emotions.

What is also worth noting about these two movies, is that Marvel Studios applied a *crescendo* process in its trailers for both movies, in order to slowly but surely give more information to the fans, and therefore to reward them for their patience. It gave them, for example, more information about the infinity stones, which were the key elements of these two movies. However, it successfully kept a sense of confusion so that fans could not fully understand and guess the plot in advance. For instance, it was not clear, from the trailers, which characters would have scenes together in both movies. What is the strength of these trailers, for both movies, is the notion of nostalgia, with extracts and flashbacks from different other Marvel movies, bringing memories back to the fans who have followed the MCU since the beginning.

The soundtrack is an essential aspect of the trailer. Soundtracks have always been important in Marvel's tradition, and in this trailer, people get a new soundtrack that is largely based on the one which was created for *The Avengers* (2012) movie, making the audience feel sentimental. From this soundtrack, the fan can work out anything. The only limit is their imagination and what they can expect in the future movie, only based on the feelings awoken during listening. Marvel Studios also succeeded in waking up numerous emotions through its trailers, whether sadness, despair, hope or happiness. This could mainly be done because of the

soundtrack. Finally, the links between the two movies were judiciously made through trailers as *Endgame*'s trailers mostly summarized what happened in *Infinity War*. However, another strategy Marvel used to confuse its audience was to present some scenes in its trailers that do not, in fact, appear in the movies. Fans are used to this and do not seem to mind, but this is again very clever of Marvel, in order not to reveal everything too quickly.

Secondly, Marvel's movies have always had imposing and impressive movie posters, displaying their superheroes in the best way imaginable. *Infinity War* and *Endgame* were no exception. Marvel Studios created two main movie posters presenting all the characters and placing some of them in more light than others. The colours in them could suggest some notions of fight in *Infinity War* and some of sadness in *Endgame*. What is also interesting is that they made the villain, Thanos, the most imposing figure in the poster. This directly implies the importance of the character in the movies. The details of the posters can give the fans some new details, even if it remains confusing for the most part. The superheroes are not wearing masks, enabling fans to relate to them and at least to keep in mind that they are part superhero, part human. Another type of poster developed was the individual posters for both movies. However, the ones that had the most impact were the ones for *Endgame*, as the dead heroes were represented in black and white. But still, they were represented and getting their own posters, suggesting to the fans that their fate was maybe not sealed. Movie posters can therefore be seen as other paratexts providing new meanings and information and enabling the audience to come to their own conclusion.

The third paratext discussed could be said to be the most classical one: adverts, and interviews. Ads are used to build a brand identity and community and Marvel has understood that well. Marvel multiplied the commercials with other brands for *Infinity War* and *Endgame*. It worked with Coco-Cola, Google, American Airlines, and many others. As seen earlier, adverts are everywhere in our everyday environment and these partnerships with other brands enabled Marvel to be everywhere too, making it impossible not to be aware of these two movies. The brand tried to protect itself as much as possible from potential spoilers about the movies. It even asked its actors not to reveal anything about the movie. They hid the title of *Endgame* for a very long time, they shot some scenes that were not even in the movies, in order to confuse the actors, and they did not plan anything for after the release of *Endgame*. It is, however, a shame that some actors still succeeded in spoiling some products or even information about the movies, during interviews. It has nevertheless been proven that these accidents were not planned and that the aim of Marvel Studios was to remain as secret as possible. Again, even if

Marvel invested millions of dollars in its advertising campaigns, the result of these two movies and their profits show us that it was calculated and effective.

In the second part of this chapter, I have analysed the *in media res* paratexts. They help prolong the engagement of fans before or after watching a movie. There are first the opening credit scene. The opening credit scene by Marvel is unique and it is called a “theme”. Every Marvel movie begins with this theme, which is an essential characteristic of a Marvel movie. It cannot be left out. This theme makes a summary of all Marvel characters, to remind the audience that they all form a unit. The theme song is another essential part of the opening sequence, meaning, once again, that the soundtrack is very crucial and has often been the same for every Marvel movie, only changing for certain movies, as was the case for *Infinity War* and *Endgame*. Marvel made a modification as these two movies are exceptions and it wanted to mark the occasion.

Post credit scenes are also essential and are a trademark of Marvel Studios. They maintain the audience’s attention after the end of a movie and give them the very first hints of the next Marvel movie. In this way, fans start to draw their first conclusions about the future movie, on the basis of only a 20-second long scene and they are happy about it as they already have an idea of which characters will appear, in which context and often facing which villain.

Finally, and even if DVDs are old and not as popular as in the past, Marvel Studios still invest in them. Their strategy is to further strengthen the engagement with the fans by rewarding them with bonus materials. From the DVDs they get unseen scenes, more interactivity, especially with their favourite actors, as they get to see how they really are on set and with each other. DVDs therefore deepen the knowledge of the fans, and also strengthen their connection with their favourite universe and characters. These DVDs also develop a sense of pride for fans who buy and collect them, and that is the reason why they are so successful. In the case of *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, the attraction for the DVDs was even larger as this was the last time that fans could get unseen scenes with Robert Downey Jr. and Chris Evans reunited and it was also the first time they could get bonus materials with all the actors together, which is unique. DVDs are also a very beneficial aspect of Marvel’s strategy and this is why the franchise keeps them, even if they are going out of fashion.

The last chapter aimed to explain and show how Marvel really succeeded in developing a transmedia universe and storytelling and how this choice led them to the top of the world in terms of successful and famous brands. Transmedia productions are by definition based on a

universe and not on one story. Their goal and strength lie in the fact that they put forward variations of this universe on different media platforms. Marvel has achieved what can be called media convergence as it uses various texts to create a large narrative and sense of unity. It is these texts that were developed in this final part, texts added to the ones that were already mentioned in the paratextual section. For Jenkins, transmedia storytelling needs a link and a balance within it that illustrates how all media converge and become successful together from a communicational aspect. This link is made between expansions that need to bring benefit to the original text.

Another important aspect of transmedia storytelling is the interactivity it can create with fans. If the brand succeeds in rewarding fans, then the community will develop an even stronger form of engagement, which is crucial for the brand's success. Building a world is also another essential part of the transmedia storytelling process and this is exactly what Marvel has done for decades by developing different characters, in different locations, with different weapons, goals in life, and friends, but all of them reaching the same end. What is vital is to keep control of all these aspects, especially the fans, so that even if you try to make the fans feel as participative figures, you keep control on the real core of the universe and its narrative. There seems to be different types of transmedia schools but all of them have one thing in common: the role of an active audience. An interesting example that gathers all these factors is the conventions, often organised by Marvel itself in order to reward fans and give them new content to discover and exploit. Reaching a brand community is again the ultimate goal that can lead to huge profits. It is also important to distinguish between adaptation, cross-media and transmedia production: transmedia needs a complementary and participative universe and this is what mainly sets it apart from the other two. However, brands need to use the fact that all extensions are not equal and do not have the same duration of production. Fans make their own hierarchies, based on which extensions pleased them the most and the brand needs to take that into account in order to keep fans loyal. This is how a brand's identity is defined.

Young audiences are also the favourites of transmedia franchises. They will inevitably spend more time online and elsewhere to find new information, details or hints about their favourite show, universe, movie, etc. They are also much more receptive to derivative products, which is also interesting for brands, as they are greater purchasers. What brands are also trying to do is privilege characters over their authors. By doing so, characters become paratexts themselves and are economically more favourable than the authors.

Later in this dissertation, I wanted to illustrate how Marvel has become an archetype of transmedia storytelling. I therefore decided to take the Seven Principles of Transmedia, created by Henry Jenkins, the precursor of the notion, and to adapt them to the MCU. It first seems that in terms of “drillability”, Marvel had indeed developed a strong engagement with their fans in the long run, notably thanks to this unity between all movies that fans have to watch in order to grasp everything in every new movie. I have also demonstrated how Marvel is engaged in a form of continuity, following a certain chronology and always bringing back the same characters and worlds. *Infinity War* and *Endgame* showed in fact quite clearly the high point of this continuity. Immersion is also very important in Marvel brand’s strategy as they constantly immerse their fans, no matter what the media platform or derivative product. Fans can also feel immersed as they share information online with other fans that make them feel as if they belong to a community. However, Marvel is also based on extractability as it is easy to buy Thor’s hammer or Captain America’s shield and play with them. The principle of worldbuilding is maybe the one on which Marvel is the most based, and what is really its hallmark. The fans can enjoy a whole universe, with numerous characters, on different planets, and that is what they want. Then, seriality is something that Marvel strongly recommends and applies as all its movies are series that result in a loyal audience. It has even produced preludes to expand this idea of seriality on other platforms. It has produced different series and is still producing new ones to extend the universe and exploits media in new and different ways.

Another important aspect of transmedia storytelling is the notion of subjectivity and Marvel Studios are also trying to respect it, as they try to give importance to every character they create and almost all of them have their own solo movie or will have their solo soap in the future, no matter their strength, weapon or gender. The final principle refers to the idea of performance. Marvel Studios can be seen as performing as they have created a fan community that always try to develop its shared universe more and more. They therefore become true creators and are active participants of the brand. Their imagination is free, however, the brand still wants to keep the control of everything and is not often influenced by the audience’s idea in terms of plot.

After having illustrated the basis of Marvel’s brand policy, based on Jenkins’ theory, my work has shown the practical examples of how Marvel developed itself as transmedia. The preludes are good examples. There is again this idea of giving new information that completes the original work, but through another medium. Fans can therefore deepen their knowledge. Both *Infinity War* and *Endgame* had preludes in order to roughly summarize what happened before the start of each movie, and to give some scenes and dialogues that were never seen in

the original movies. The fans are again being rewarded for their loyalty. However, it is necessary to have seen all the previous movies in order to understand what is going on. Preludes are therefore seen as only belonging to the fan community, and not to random people.

Another very well-known and developed aspect of a transmedia policy is based on toys and games. As in every other franchise, Marvel Studios have developed toys, watches, bedspreads, action figures, etc. of their characters. This forms the basis of a franchise promotion and they are always created, no matter the audience. Not only children buy them, as older fans also buy them in order to collect and to strengthen their sense of belonging to the community. These products are of course promoted through adverts, can reach everybody and have a huge impact on the expansion of a movie. It enables the movies, or at least the characters to become common culture that allows a brief moment of escape from reality. Toys and games allow fans to identify themselves with their favourite superheroes and to continue a story as children are free to add anything to the original plot by playing with them. Therefore, they can be seen as transmedia products, more often however targeted at boys, based on their packaging. Another way of being immersed the universe is to go online and visit the architextual encyclopaedias. They are really the source of all information about the universe and if someone wants to know anything about the MCU, it is the place to find an answer.

An important added section is the videogame. The videogame allows players to go even deeper into the universe than with toys. Players are able to explore new aspects of an original work, but also sometimes to change it. This attracts every gender and crosses generations. What interest fans is that they find in it many stereotypes of the universe, but they can still have an impact on them and mould the plot the way they want. Therefore, the proximity between the fans and the brand become greater again. The aim of a videogame is to attract and please dedicated fans, but also to attract new potential users of videogames. This is why Marvel Studios have decided to develop their own videogame. It will be released in September 2020 and will certainly please fans, even if there are some aspects that make fans doubtful, such as the fact that the characters will not have the same voice and look as their original actor. Only time will tell if it will be another success for Marvel.

Another huge announcement was made by Marvel and Disney recently and it concerned the creation of amusement parks based on the MCU. Again, the fans will be able to enter a universe but this time for real, a universe completely built just for them. Marvel and Disney have decided to remain very tight lipped about it, so that the surprise for fans will only be bigger. This is not surprising as it mirrors what they do with the movies. Nevertheless, it is clear that Disney has

played a huge role in this project and fans are hoping that these parks are not only created to make profit, but to expand the MCU further.

The most important point I wanted to work out was to show how the audience really had an impact of the brand's strategy, especially through a transmedia approach. Fans are responsible for the final consumption of a text and they produce text through their appropriation. The producers' challenge is to let fans have the feeling that they are completely free and true participants of the MCU, while keeping whole control of the brand. However, it cannot be denied that the participation and engagement of fans are fundamental for a brand's success. Letourneux named their production "subculture", with their own codes and rules. Despite that, a brand needs to keep control, especially on spoilers.

Secrecy is the fundamental basis of Marvel's policy and they know that spoilers can have a huge impact on their productions. There are numerous reasons why fans and people in general like spoilers. However, it is true that most of the time, people stay away from them. To keep the films shrouded in mystery, Marvel asked its audience not to spoil the two movies *Infinity War* and *Endgame* by using the hashtag #ThanosDemandsYourSilence, and again played on another platform, while keeping control of its audience. What really showed the strength of the loyalty between Marvel and its fans is that nothing was revealed for almost a month and every fan let other fans see the movie before talking about it freely.

The final section concerns reviews and the critics. Critical reviews are most of the time very much appreciated and read by potential movie goers. People often want to like to have an expert opinion before buying expensive tickets at the cinema, without knowing if they will like a particular movie or not. It is almost always the case that a popular movie has positive reviews. With *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, newspapers and experts from all around the world praised the movies and the organisation all around them. This only served to push even more people to go to the cinema, even people that had never seen a Marvel movie before. The enthusiasm was such that *Endgame* became the highest-grossing movie of all time. What an achievement for a brand that was initially only a small producer of comic books!

By analysing all Marvel brand's sections and aspects, it becomes clear that it has built a huge organisation that is very well planned. Not a single aspect of communication or marketing is neglected and, most of all, fans are privileged. The relationship between them and the brand has been created over decades and can only be stronger today than what it was fifty years ago. What will be interesting to follow and to see is if Marvel, with its new projects such as the

videogame, the amusement parks or even its new soaps will have the same success as before, especially as essential characters of the universe disappeared in its latest movies (Iron Man and Captain America). Personally, I need to experience it and to make my own decision after that, but I am sure I will remain loyal to the brand, although maybe in a less enthusiastic way. However, will all fans remain faithful to the brand and keep trusting it, no matter the choices it has made? Will the new characters have the same enthusiasm as the previous ones?

Time will tell.

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