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Special Feature: The Marvel Cinematic Universe

Introduction: Leora Hadas, University of Nottingham, UK

In the dynamic landscape of the media industries, where pressures abound to find new ways to produce powerful brands and engage elusive audiences, few experiments have been as successful as the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This unusual cinematic endeavour was, in a sense, a natural development: for five decades, ever since the early 60s, Marvel Comics' separate titles have all taken place within the same fictional world. The Marvel Universe became the de facto model for superhero comics, joined by the DC and Image as well as the shared worlds of other smaller publishers such as CrossGen. Thus it should not, perhaps, have been a surprise when Marvel Studios, newly restructured to bring production in-house in 2004, decided to bring the form to film: a new form of storytelling never before tried in the medium. Marvel Studios' five films between 2008 and 2012—*Iron Man* and its sequel, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Thor,* are set within a singular fictional world, allowing characters, elements and narratives to migrate between texts, and beginning the build-up toward a massive crossover film unlike any seen before: *The Avengers,* released May 2012 to swiftly become the third highest-grossing film of all time.

In this feature, we go back along the past five years in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and revisit the films of the MCU's now completed Phase One. Reviewers were asked to return to each puzzle piece and look at it within the context of the bigger picture, and through them, explore the implications of Marvel's experiment for franchise and cinematic storytelling. How, we asked, are a narrative, characters, a fictional world all constructed across this new manner of landscape? What constraints, what opportunities does the franchise in this new form confer upon the individual text within it? Is there, at all, an individual text to speak of? Whither the comic book movie, as it assumes comics' form of continuity?

The reviewers, each in turn, consider how the individual films tell their tales in light of the greater project, how the MCU's parts fit together, and indeed, how they sometimes clash. In the editorial review opening the piece, I examine how *Iron Man 3*, presented by Marvel as the first of the post-*Avengers* "MCU Phase Two" films, uses unorthodox structure and aesthetics made possible only by Marvel's new moviemaking logic. Next, challenging the very definition of the field, William Proctor takes stock of the wealth of non-cinematic texts that constitute integral parts of Marvel's new universe, arguing for its proper definition as the Marvel Transmedia Universe. Martin Flanagan's review of *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) grapples with continuity across time and examines the carrying over of themes and ideas from a film set apart from its fellows. Finally, Aaron Calbreath-Frasieur returns to the first MCU film, *Iron Man* (2008), to study its unusual approach to the superhero genre and archetype, and

how those inform the films that follow. Together, while not necessarily equipped to save the world from an alien threat, this heroic team is set to explore and map out the uncharted territory of a strange new universe.

Iron Man 3: Launching Phase 2

Iron Man 3

Dir. Shane Black, USA, 2013

Leora Hadas, University of Nottingham, UK

This review contains spoilers for the ending of *Iron Man 3.* Fortunately, they aren't terribly exciting spoilers, as they mainly concern the film's post-credits scene, something that has become a staple and trademark of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The scene is a bait and switch. Rather than teasing the audience with a glimpse of a new character or promises of future plots and films to come, it reveals who protagonist Tony Stark has been narrating his story to: a hopelessly bored anonymous stranger. One can say that a genre or form has become established when its first parody or subversion appears. This particular subversion of viewers' expectations, which I confess has driven this particular viewer to howls of frustration, is the most fitting indication, first that the MCU has an established identity, and second, that something fundamental has changed about that identity as of this first film of Phase Two.

It is far from the only indication in the film, nor the only subversion. *Iron Man 3* is a very strange superhero movie. It paces itself along a narrative more personal than action-oriented, lingers where others drive forward, and a major part of its character development arc hinges on a film that was not part of the *Iron Man* film series at all. Knowledge of *The Avengers* is essential to viewing and understanding *Iron Man 3*, and not the passing knowledge that can be gleaned from a review or a Wikipedia page. One has to have seen that film, in which Stark didn't even properly star, to understand why he experiences post-traumatic anxiety reactions to anything that reminds him of its climactic battle. In fact, with Stark's main source of conflict in *Iron Man 3* being his reliance on his armour to do his superheroics, the film can be viewed as its lead character's process of coping with finding out that he is, to quote the original MCU post-credits scene in *Iron Man* (2008), "part of a bigger universe."

In *The Avengers*, Tony Stark was put down by the superhero ideal, Captain America, for being a "big man in a suit of armor." Here, he refers to himself as "a man in a can", and his moment of revelation is when he realizes that it is his technical and creative genius that is his true power. His final tussle with villain Aldrich Killian eschews repulsor-ray pyrotechnics in favour of brutal, intensely physical hand-to-hand combat, Hulk-style. He stars in an infiltration sequence reminiscent of *Mission: Impossible*, or perhaps of the Black Widow. And he functions as a heroic role model and benefactor to a kid sidekick in a way that would have done proud the very Captain that mocked his detachment and sarcasm not one

film past. Though Stark has undergone significant character growth in the first two films in his own series, giving up the arms trade for clean energy in the first, and coming to terms with his father's memory in the second, it is the encounter with other heroes that truly transforms him. Touched by them, he becomes a hero proper, an Avenger even outside the team. In *Iron Man 3*, for the first time, Iron Man fights enemies that are not personally after him or his company—the rival entrepreneurs Obadiah Stane and Justin Hammer, and Ivan Vanko who was moved by persona vengeance—but ones that present a greater global threat, as Killian's aspiration is to perpetuate and capitalize on the war on terror.

Iron Man 3 is studded with *Avengers* references, some diegetic as with the aforementioned climactic battle, some extra-diegetic chiefly in form of the soundtrack, which riffs on the Avengers' soaring, triumphant theme for its action scenes. It treats the other film not as a parallel line, as the previous MCU films have done in showcasing elements from the wider universe but essentially working as independent viewing, but as an integral part of a series: more integral, in fact, than many sequel movies make their own originals. The plot may mostly be comprehended, but the character motivations, from Stark's angst and anxiety to Killian's desire to create superhumans, make little sense. The movie certainly offers more than its fair share of cinematic thrills, the final showdown between love interest Pepper Potts and Aldrich Killian in particular noteworthy for allowing the damsel in distress to avenge herself instead of relying on her knight in hi-tech armour. But it remains chiefly a character movie, and what truly allows it to work as such is the traction of the MCU behind it. While the film is obligated to provide a spectacle that would satisfy the boys aged six-to-twelve for whom Disney acquired Marvel, *Iron Man 3* is making the shift toward relying not only on run-of-the-mill summer hype, but on audience commitment to a franchise. A committed audience like that, willing to sink its money into repeated cinema showings, demands continuity on a level hitherto unknown in film.

The effects of the new scale are shown in a number of other places. *Iron Man 3* is a solo piece, but it delivers its climax like a team movie. The final action sequence, with the numerous Iron Man suits fighting on autopilot, serves more than to deliver comics-related Easter eggs (such as the "Igor" suit reminiscent of the comics' "Hulkbuster" armor) and chances for merchandising. It functions to raise the film to the standard established by *The Avengers* of a massive multi-character battle scene. That same final scene has Stark's friend James Rhodes seeing some action again as War Machine, and even Pepper Potts is empowered to throw punches and blast energy with the best of them. One hero is simply no longer enough; and this is a truism that underpins not only the number of potential merchandising tie-ins flying about, but the entire approach of the Marvel Cinematic Universe—or indeed, the Marvel Transmedia Universe.

More than enough has already been said of the crisis of Hollywood in the face of new technologies, new screens, new markets, and the gushing overflow of content across all of those. With the MCU films and the variety of media that surround them, Marvel has taken branding and franchising to a new level in a media world wherein these marketing logics have emerged as dominant modes by which to deal with this crisis. In the 1960s, Marvel Comics were the first to place their superheroes in the framework of a shared world, and invite their audiences to engage with a *universe* rather than a character, a series or even a franchise. In the 1980s, television in the United States discovered the power of continuity and seriality, and used series in which viewers could not afford to miss an episode to generate audience loyalty. From the late 1990s, the new buzzword concept of transmedia storytelling has guided media producers to strive for vast fictional worlds, ones that require time, commitment, and money to explore them fully.

Marvel now takes lessons learned across media and time, and attempts to employ them in the creation of a new format. The MCU is based on a pre-existing well of intellectual property all but inexhaustible in its eighty years of published richness. Networked rather than linear, it is free of much of the difficulties that plague standard film seriality, such as the inability to use the same actor in three films every year. It invites audiences to engage with film in the same ways that they have engaged with comics and television, and bring the passion of exploring a world and the commitment of seriality to bear on that most expensive and uncertain of formats. *Iron Man 3* shows that these changes have, in turn, changed the blockbuster film. Future films from *Thor: The Dark World* and *Captain America: Winter Soldier* to *Guardians of the* Galaxy will show us, in the coming months, whether the first film of Marvel's Phase Two was merely a pilot study, and what its theatrical success might herald for films to come.

As I write, the pilot for the Marvel Transmedia Universe's first television series, *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, is airing in the United States. Another notable feature of *Iron Man 3* was its stab at Marvel's rivals, DC and Warner Bros in the form of the Mandarin: a shady villain waxing philosophical in a slurred voice who turns out to be a pathetically comedic puppet on the real villain's strings. His philosophical messages are lampooned as nonsensical; he is basically an example of a manufactured threat that plays on unreasonable American fears. The parodic parallels to Bane of *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) run through the figure of the Mandarin as an undertone that mocks Warner Bros' failure to build up their own film franchises into a Justice League film to compete with *The Avengers*. On television, however, DC has Marvel beat, with *Smallville* spinning off into *Arrow*, which is now set to spin off into a series around the character of the Flash. DC is not as enterprising as Marvel in this field, as television series that cohabit a universe are an old trick, but the comics-based IP arms race is on. By the time of the publication of this feature, with the internet no doubt already passing its judgment on

Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., readers will be primed to draw their own conclusions.

Avengers Assembled: The Marvel Transmedia Universe

The Avengers

Dir. Joss Whedon, USA, 2012

William Proctor, University of Sunderland, Centre for Research in Media & Cultural Studies, UK

Released in the summer of 2012, Joss Whedon's *The Avengers* marked the culmination of phase one of the so-called Marvel Cinematic Universe, which collects a hexalogy of films within a singular story-system. Thus far, the 'metatextual web' incorporates the following films: *Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Iron Man 2*, *Thor* and *Captain America: The First Avenger*. At the time of writing (2013), Phase Two has already begun with *Iron Man 3*, soon to be followed by *Thor: Dark World* and continuing this year with *Captain America: Winter Soldier*, *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Avengers 2* book-ending the second movement in 2015. Already, news is surfacing on the internet and in mainstream presses about the third phase including a film based around the character *Ant-Man*. Rumours circulate regarding a new *Hulk* instalment adapting comic book favourite, *Planet Hulk,* alongside other episodes such as *Doctor Strange*. In 2008, Kevin Feige, Marvel Studios' President of Production, set out his stall: 'to do something that had never been done before...create one seamless world that several different film franchises would exist in'. Of course, the notion of an expansive, serial canvas is nothing new to readers of comic books; and seriality has been a prevailing feature of television for decades. Historically, however, film series tend to unfold over longer periods of time. This means fewer instalments compared to the weekly scheduling of TV series and the decades of continuity attached to long-running comic book narratives such as that of Marvel and DC—although in *Comic Book Nation* (2001), Bradford Wright points out that it was Marvel who set the continuity ball rolling back in the early 1960s.

The seriality of the MCU—one which adheres to an Aristotelian cause-and-effect logic—is more complex and intertwined than that of an episodic series on television. As with comic book seriality, sub-series of the MCU unfold sequentially and linearly—one can watch the *Iron Man* series in a causal 'straight line', for example. However, the MCU also unfolds non-linearly with parallel narratives that all inter-weave within the same story tapestry. This operates akin to the Marvel comic book model, albeit to a lesser degree. The Marvel Comics universe comprises thousands of texts and multiple parallel worlds that are released and welded to the narrative architecture on a weekly basis, something a film series cannot begin to match. The *Star Wars* film series, to take a well-known example, provides a serialised story over the course of six films as well as a gamut of novels,

comic books and *The Clone Wars* animated television series. Although the *Star Wars* transmedia universe may include a vast matrix of texts, the principle of serial continuity does not readily apply *per se* as the Expanded Universe of novels and comic books are thought to operate outside of 'normal' continuity—although this is a point of contention for many fans who argue for the inclusion or exclusion of texts based around a system of logic and ratiocination (see Brooker, 1999). For many fans of comic books, negotiating continuity is a fundamental part of a reader's pleasure. Richard Reynolds argues that the 'serial continuity' of comic book universes 'is the same kind of continuity that is preserved...in TV soaps,' with a back-story, or history, that comprises 'all the episodes previously screened, with their explicit or implied content [which] needs to remain consistent with the current storyline' (1992: 38). Similarly, Christine Geraghty (1987) argues that narrative of *Coronation Street*—and by extension other soap operas—relies heavily on continuity to design a fully-functional structure of rationale and logic that follows the 'cause and effectedness' of 'real' world notions of time, space and, most importantly, linearity. For instance, the production team on *Coronation Street*, 'includes a programme historian who ensures that references to the past are correct' (Ibid: 16). Other serials, whether on television or in comic books, employ the use of a 'series bible', which serves as a continuity gospel for writers to consult in order to adhere to the series' timeline. For many readers and fans of seriality, the story-world *must* make sense.

It is important to point out that the Marvel film universe is diegetically separate from the comic book story-world. Drawing from Mikhail Bakhtin, they belong to different 'chronotopes', literally 'space-time'. Events in the film series do not overlap with the comic book world at the level of narrative and story (although they invariably cross-fertilize intertextually). For decades, Marvel have employed the concept of a 'multiverse' to explain fissures, cracks and counter-factual narratives, which rationalise divergent continuities by situating them within a nexus of parallel worlds. Thus, the mainline comic book continuum exists on Earth-616 while the universe which contains the *Ultimates* counter-factual narrative is known as Earth-1610. The multiverse conceit allows numerous iterations of the same character to coexist within the story-world, which prevents timelines and parallel narratives from corrupting or 'cancelling' each other out. In short, all the stories 'really' occurred, which, by following this rationale, means that *everything* is canonical. The MCU has also been pulled into the parallel world scenario and has been given the multiversal designation of Earth-199999. **[1]**

As creator of a cinematic universe, Marvel is building a textual structure hitherto unparalleled in film history. More than this, however, the MCU unfolds across multiple media platforms that significantly problematize the notion of a *cinematic* universe in significant ways. By pulling a variety of mediums into a serialised continuum that operates akin to the comic

book model of continuity, Marvel's universe is transmedial, I would argue, rather than cinematic per se. In practice, of course, audiences are not beholden to the structure rigidly. Should one prefer to ignore the transmedia 'extras' and enjoy the films, then the system still functions. It is not a pre-requisite of comprehension that one must follow all the nodes in the network. Similarly, the *Iron Man* or *Captain America* films can be watched exclusively. It is not necessary to engage with the entire spectrum of texts on offer—although I would argue that neither can we provide concrete delineations between cinema and other operations, transmedia or otherwise. There is a level of depth and sophistication that comes with an immersive story-world experience, and that is precisely why Marvel is erecting such a vast structure: to invite us in. In *Show Sold Separately*, Jonathan Gray puts forth the proposition that the transmedia elements are not simply peripherals but a part and parcel of the text. In practice, the Marvel Cinematic Universe—or, rather, the Marvel *Transmedia* Universe—depends upon the position of the reader within the network. But this does not mean that this renders the MTU null and void. From this position, the MTU is a sub-branch of the entire Marvel multiverse with the MCU as a sub-branch of the MTU. Brooker's metaphorical description of 'stations on a multidimensional subway map' is an apt description of the intertextual dimensions at play here (2012: 48).

The convergence of media, of course, is nothing new per se (see Jenkins 2006). Many franchises operate within a system of vertical integration and synergy—'the economic possibilities of mutually locking commercial ventures' (McMahan, 2005: 145)—but a film series as connective tissue with other mediums linking in from the outside is a rather new approach. This approach shares more commonalities with comic book continuity than other serial forms that tend to function linearly and episodically—although I must point out that this is not always the case (*Star Trek* being a case in point with multiple connections within TV and film that act in accordance with the 'shared universe' form).

The Avengers, and the Marvel Transmedia Universe as a whole, 'suggests the kind of text which might be better understood through a comparative rather than medium-specific lens, one that rejects cultural hierarchies and embraces intertextuality' (Jenkins, 2012: 7). **[2]** The tie-in comic books, computer games and the TV series, *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*, all contribute to an ongoing flow of transmediality that adhere to Hills' notion of a 'hyperdiegesis'; that is, an interconnected, cohesive story-world that operates 'according to principles of internal logic and extension' (2002: 137). The Marvel Transmedia Universe, therefore, presents causal chains that function within the hyperdiegesis as textual linchpins to create what Umberto Eco describes as a 'doxastic world...that readers are supposed to interpret as referring to a possible state of affairs' (1990: 64). It is important to understand that the comic books and computer/console games are not simply 'add-ons' or peripheral texts, but fully-functioning

narrative nodes that adhere to the causality of the film series continuity in different ways.

For example, the three-part comic book mini-series, *Black Widow Strikes* (Van Lente and Edwards, 2012) takes place after the events of *Iron Man 2* and before *The Avengers* and does not interfere with the 'master-continuity' of monthly comic book series. Does this mean that it is a sequel as the titular character Black Widow ties up some narrative loose ends from *Iron Man 2*? Or, as advertised through its paratextual title, *Avengers Prelude*, is it best described as a prequel? Is it what some commentators are increasingly describing as a 'sidequel', a neologism which describes a parallel storyline to a 'master-narrative', but interconnected in some way or other? Perhaps the episode is apocryphal and should not be considered a part of the Marvel transmedia hyperdiegesis?

Similarly, another three-volume series within *The Avengers Prelude* rubric is *Fury's Big Week* (Yost and Pearson 2012) which depicts events from *Iron Man 2*; *The Incredible Hulk*; *Captain America*; and *Thor* from the perspective of the S.H.I.E.L.D. director and which also features new information and plot points that add to the hyperdiegesis is interesting ways (such as creating a temporal context for the films as all occurring within seven days, hence the 'Big Week' of the title). As a paratext, this can significantly alter the interpretative dimension and lock the texts even tighter together—and break down the boundaries between media spaces further.

Captain America: The First Avenger is the earliest episode of the MCU taking place during the events of World War II. But Fred Van Lente's four-part mini-series, *Captain America: First Vengeance* turns the continuity clock back even further to explore the past of Steve Rogers and his nemesis-to-be, Johann Schmidt, the Red Skull, thereby dislodging the film's inaugural status, at least temporally, and re-situating *Captain America: The First Avenger* as a sequel to the comic book entry. The comic book 'sidequels', prequels, sequels or installments—depending upon your viewpoint—also include *Iron Man 2: Nick Fury, Director of S.H.I.E.L.D.*; *Phil Coulson, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.*; *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*; *Public Identity;* another prequel to the flagship film, *The Avengers Initiative* (Van Lente and Lim. 2012) and the forthcoming two-part prelude to *Iron Man 3* (which also acts as a sequel to the film *The Avengers*).

In 2011, Marvel began to introduce short films into the cinematic continuity with a series of 'one-shots' featured as extras on Blu-ray releases of *Thor*, *Captain America* and *The Avengers* (and also available on YouTube). The first two shorts feature Phil Coulson, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D., in *The Consultant* and *Something Funny Happened on the Way to Thor's Hammer*. The third entry, *Item 47*, acts as a sequel to *The*

Avengers. Following the film's climactic battle, two newcomers to the MTU, Claire and Benny, discover a fragment of alien technology amidst the debris of New York City and use it to rob banks. S.H.I.E.L.D. responds by sending in Agent Stillwell to recover the weapon. (Agent Sitwell will also feature in *Captain America: Winter Soldier*.)

There have also been a number of computer/console games that link into the continuity: *Captain America: Super Soldier* (2011) narratively takes places during the film extending and explaining the globe-trotting battles between 'Cap' and the forces of Red Skull. *Iron Man 2: The Game* is set after the events of the film in a story written by comic book writer and fan favourite, Matt Fraction (who also worked on *The Invincible Iron Man* series). *Thor*, *God of Thunder* (2011) is also written by Fraction and features actors from the film who provide voices and likenesses for the characters, Thor (Chris Hemsworth), Loki (Tom Hiddleston) and Sif (Jamie Alexander). Interestingly, the Avengers game (*Battle for Earth*, 2012), released to tie-in with the film, is not set within the continuity and can be viewed as an adaptation of the *Secret Invasion* storyline culled from the comic book series of the same name rather than a part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. *Battle for Earth* is more comic book adaptation than film spin-off with many characters from the comic hyperdiegesis making an appearance, one of which, Spider-Man, does not have a cinematic counterpart in the Marvel Transmedia Universe. The *Spider-Man* films are produced by Fox and have their own continuity that does not interconnect with the Disney/Marvel films.

The connections are not only textual but at the level of production. As mentioned above, Matt Fraction worked on the *Invincible Iron Man* comic book series and the console game, *Iron Man 2*. At the time of writing, Matt Fraction remains an integral part of Marvel, writing new installments for the recent 'Marvel Now' initiative which re-launched a host of titles in a bid to counter-attack DC's 2011 reboot, 'The New 52'. Joss Whedon, director of The Avengers and overseer of the TV project, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* has also penned comic books in the past, most notably, *The Astonishing X-Men* for Marvel.

The release of these tie-ins, crossovers and spin-offs—what Jonathan Gray describes as paratexts—all coincide with the films with which they are linked and their publicity campaigns. *The Avengers* prequels, for example, were published prior to the film's release. This may serve to encourage new readers who may not necessarily engage with comic book material to jump on board and also act as teasers for the main event. Concurrently, regular comic book readers may simply want to negotiate the intricacies of continuity and immersion. The console games also tie into release schedules providing active extensions of the story-world while the film is still being played in cinemas, with the mini-episodes listed above coinciding with DVD/Blu-ray releases or used to plug gaps between instalments. More recently, a series of comic books acting as entry-way

narratives to *Iron Man 3* have been released prior to the film's release this summer. *Iron Man 3 Prelude* bridges the gap between *The Avengers* and the first episode in *Phase Two*.

Finally, the MCU spills across into television with the post–Phase One series, *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*. The pilot episode is directed by Joss Whedon who also executive produces alongside his brother Jed Whedon and Maurissa Tancharoen. The show features recurring characters from the film series, such as Clark Gregg who reprises his role as Agent Phil Coulson, the format of a TV series over a potential thirteen episodes per year continues the hyperdiegetic expansion significantly.

In addition to the *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* television series, the recent news that Marvel is teaming up with the subscription-based streaming service, Netflix, to produce five 13-episode series based upon comic book properties (available sometime in 2015) indicates a commitment to hyperdiegetic expansion that is leaving rival, DC/Warner Bros, trailing in its wake. Whether or not *Daredevil*, *Luke Cage*, *Jessica Jones*, *Iron Fist* and *The Defenders*—the latter which will see the four characters teaming up in an ensemble series in a televisual variation of *The Avengers*—establish continuity with the MCU remains to be seen (although based upon Marvel's commitment to serialization via continuity over the past sixty or so years in comic books, I would be surprised if they did not seek to connect all these texts within a singular, diegetic rubric of interconnectivity).

Given the wealth of interconnected narrative episodes listed above and the adherence to the principle of continuity *à la* comic books, it begs us to reconsider the Marvel Cinematic Universe as a transmedia entity of convergence and serialisation rather than a film franchise only. As the challenges of post-structuralism teach us, the borders that are erected in the name of structuration are permeable and likely to collapse once pressure is applied. The concept of the immersive story-world is applicable here. As Sam Ford (2007) points out,

> seriality has become a conscious part of creating immersive story worlds [...] these properties have a serial storytelling structure, multiple creative forces which author various parts of the story, a sense of long-term continuity, a deep character backlog, contemporary ties to the media property's complex history, and a sense of permanence.

In *Convergence Culture*, Henry Jenkins discusses *The Matrix* as a transmedia event, and his comments could equally be applied to the Marvel Cinematic Universe as

> entertainment for the age of media convergence, integrating multiple texts to create a narrative so large that

> it cannot be contained within a single medium. [...] Each step along the way buil[ds] on what has come before, while offering new points of entry (2006: 95).

The Marvel 'experiment' transposes the comic book model of continuity across and into the terrain of cinema which creates a serialised, immersive story-world operating separately and outside of Marvel's mainline comic continuity—or, in the words of Douglas Wolk, the 'master-narrative'—that continues to unfold weekly across multiple titles. However, it would be remiss to suggest that this sets up a binary opposition between the two. Texts are always in dialogue with one another and engage in 'mutual invagination', a term Robert Stam borrows from Jacques Derrida: 'Any text that has 'slept' with another text [...] has also slept with all the other texts that that other text has slept with [...] in an amorphous exchange of textual fluids' (quoted in Brooker, 2012: 46). Texts 'cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads' and this is especially apt to take into consideration when examining the Marvel Cinematic Universe (Ibid: 37).

Take, for example, the case of Phil Coulson, Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D. and recurring player in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Initially, Coulson existed only in MCU continuity, but was subsumed into the regular Marvel comic book continuity in the series *Battle Scars* (Fraction et al) and in 2013 will feature in the Marvel Now title *Secret Avengers* (Hickman et al, 2013). Concurrently, Coulson is also a part of the S.H.I.E.L.D. team in the animated series *Ultimate Spider-Man,* and is voiced by actor Clark Gregg. This creates a kind of relay, an aesthetic feedback loop between the MCU, the main-line comic continuity and the animated series and problematizes the disconnection between the narrative universes considerably.

Many factors should be taken into consideration when examining immersive story-worlds such as the MCU: aesthetics, narrative, economics, audiences and so forth. The rich tapestry of the MCU allows us opportunities to drill deeper into fan communities which may yield dividends about the continuing thirst for serialised narratives that cross media boundaries and shake the imaginary borders that structure hierarchies.

The Avengers are assembled. What comes next should be very interesting indeed.

Notes

1. A database detailing the Marvel multiverse can be found at http://marvel.wikia.com/Multiverse/Universe_Listing.

2. The quote from Jenkins is in relation to a comic book analysis of Kim Deitch yet it is extremely fitting in the context which I use it here.

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Joe Johnston and Marvel Studios Unearth a Brooklyn Antique

Captain America: The First Avenger

Dir. Joe Johnson, USA, 2011

Martin Flanagan, independent scholar

Although paving the continuity road towards *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012), *Captain America: The First Avenger* is as interesting for the ways in which it differs from the previous four Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) films as for its similarities and connections with them. Fittingly, at the heart of the film is the notion of mould-breaking, as the emergence of Captain America (Chris Evans) simultaneously heralds a new beginning for U.S. efforts in the Second World War, and the disappearance of a promised future army of Super-Soldiers with the death of scientist Abraham Erskine (Stanley Tucci) at Nazi hands. In Marvel comics, the status of Cap as a one-off is regularly foregrounded in the dynamic of his relations with other heroes: he stands as the exemplar of a brand of heroism that even the most powerful heroes can only admire, the (relative) inferiority of his power set being balanced out by his moral superiority (and a tactical command honed in situations like those presented in this film). His origin as an instrument to fight a specific war is developed by director Joe Johnston and the screenwriters Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely in a way that represents the notion of singularity in terms of existential loneliness (in the concluding sequence where Rogers emerges into a disorientating present day), as well as the matchless virtues of heart and courage.

This is not to say that *CA: TFA* does not help to take some of the narrative strain of the shared MCU. Among the things that are seeded are the Stark empire, S.H.I.E.L.D., and characters for potential franchise expansion. Two of the most important—Armin Zola (Toby Jones) and James 'Bucky' Barnes (Sebastian Stan)—are promised in the next instalment, due in 2014. Yet by comparison to *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011), with a storyline that prepares the *Avengers*' major villain, *CA: TFA* lacks a dedicated narrative line leading to the subsequent film, although it does establish the deadly technologies of Hydra and the existence of the 'Cosmic Cube' (known as the 'Tesseract' in the MCU films), laying out the dimensions of the threat that the team will face. Preceded as it is by all of the other solo movies, the film has limited obligations, a few references to Norse legend aside, to already-presented continuity. This leaves room for playfulness; in a manner that resembles other fresh point-of-view exercises in retelling the genesis of the Marvel Universe (*Marvels*, Busiek and Ross 2004, originally published 1994; *The Marvels Project*, Brubaker

and Epting 2011, originally published 2009-10), *CA: TFA* makes some important future plotlines sideshow glimpses for the eagle-eyed fan. These include the existence of Jim Hammond, synthetic human, original 'Human Torch' and major player in *The Marvels Project*, who is briefly seen at the future technologies exposition attended by Steve Rogers and Barnes. At the same event, Howard Stark (Dominic Cooper), father of Tony, unveils a flying car prototype that will become familiar as a S.H.I.E.L.D. vehicle featured in many Cap adventures. Another barely-glimpsed 'extra' that hints at storyline extensions to come is a blueprint hurriedly gathered up by a fleeing Zola, detailing the robotic body which generations of comic readers will recognise as vessel for the diabolical scientist's disembodied consciousness (in this form, Zola is central to Rick Remender/John Romita Jr.'s 2012-13 run on *Captain America*). While this narrative layering falls short of constituting an extensive, coordinated effort to pull back corners of the universe, and some of these plotlines will undoubtedly fail to transpire in the MCU, it does hint at the riches to be mined from already-published Marvel storylines. Whereas the comic universe proceeded gradually (no new heroes being introduced between the 'Golden Age' appearances of Cap and a select band of wartime comrades like Bucky and the Human Torch in the first Marvel comics of the late 1930s and 1940s, and the Fantastic Four in 1961), the genesis of the MCU has been akin to a 'big bang', with Hulk, Iron Man, S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Avengers all appearing on the scene at roughly the same time and in an interrelated way. Yet, with a brief to situate Captain America's moral development outside of the modern context, Johnston can be both respectful to the comics and find the freedom to construct his own 'Golden Age', without contradicting any ideas already held dear by the general movie audience.

The only period film of 'Marvel Phase One' shares with its titular hero the characteristic of being 'out-of-time' (explored frequently in comics and the key to Whedon's stance towards Steve Rogers in *The Avengers*). A nostalgic adventure with an obvious model of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981)—itself an excavation of beloved genres/conventions)—and, as already mentioned, limited obligation to respect already told events, the film enjoys a freedom to reference film culture more widely than any previous Marvel movie. Despite this, for some critics, franchise-building calculation was too evident. Dubbed an 'exercise in franchise transition' by Longworth (2011), there is a certain Frankenstein quality to a film filled with images of ungodly scientific creations, perversions of nature and CG/body double splicing techniques (needed to transform the six-foot-three-inch Evans into the 120 pound Steve Rogers; see Alter, 2011). We might sum up the task facing proven *pasticheur* Johnston (*The Rocketeer*, 1991) as twofold: to address the application of formula needed to extend the franchise and set up elements of *The Avengers*; and yet retain the opposing notion of unrepeatability. Cap's unifying qualities—etched into legend, the film implies, during his absence in the Arctic ice—qualify Rogers for Agent Coulson (Clark

Gregg)'s hero worship in *The Avengers*, even as the 'team' he is supposed to lead is beset by petty squabbles. All of these strands can be summed up in the notion of 'a little old fashioned' (as Cap is later dubbed by Coulson in *The Avengers*): 'old-fashioned' in this universe comes to represent hope, preparation for the future, and the kind of commitment to moral decency that sets Rogers apart not only from his fellow heroes but from ambiguous spymaster Fury. At the end of Whedon's film, Fury's response to a question about what could possibly motivate such a disparate collection of super-beings to reunite once more ('because we'll need them to') projects his realisation that everything about the Avengers is improbable and nebulous, aside from the moral imperative behind their existence. Steve Rogers drives this moral imperative.

Dr. Erskine is the man who transforms Steve Rogers into Captain America. The film locates the good heart of scientific exploration—and its military application—in this figure, alienated German creator of the 'Super-Soldier' serum and the only man to spot the potential in a scrawny Brooklyn kid. Erskine combines scientific brilliance with a moral wisdom—borne of experience at seeing his country stolen by fascism—unmatched elsewhere in the film. The prospect of a utopian, peaceful future hinges on the encounter between Dr. Erskine, who rejects nationalism, and Rogers, who believes that flags 'are in his future' (setting him against the Red Skull [Hugo Weaving]'s vision of a stateless world). The compassion and comic timing of Tucci, honed in heartfelt indie films like his own co-directed *Big Night* (Campbell Scott/Stanley Tucci, 1996) and *The Daytrippers* (Greg Mottola, 1996), is one of several casting successes in the film. Chris Evans, veteran of a former Marvel (though non-MCU) franchise, *Fantastic Four*, swaps a character (Johnny Storm) who would never let duty present an obstacle to fun for one who is the personification of duty. Tommy Lee Jones goes one better, swapping universes from DC villainy in *Batman Forever* (Joel Schumacher, 1995). After Aaron Eckhart, Jones is unlikely to be remembered as the definitive cinematic Harvey Dent, but makes up for it with a heroic turn here (as Colonel Phillips).

Although sabotaged by Hydra (a mysterious science division of the Reich), it is made clear that Erskine's experiment—the production of a super-strength serum that will be delivered to legions of soldiers—represents a responsible use of technology. That the serum will only work properly with a good man is established in Erskine's quirky choice of Rogers, and his repeated message that it is Rogers' noble heart and bravery that make him the best candidate to inspire the nation. The similarly enhanced Johann Schmidt/Red Skull doubles Rogers as the twisted reminder of the high consequence of failure; this, a classic instance of the comic book villain as essentially the negative version of that which is good in the hero—Superman/Bizarro, Spider-Man/Venom. Along the same lines, in earlier MCU episodes we find Hulk doubled by Emil 'Abomination' Blonsky (Tim

Roth), and Tony Stark confronting opponents who employ twisted takes on his technology (played by Jeff Bridges and Mickey Rourke, respectively, in the first two *Iron Man* films). Rogers' transformation underneath the unassuming 'Brooklyn Antiques' shop—rendered in a kitschy sci-fi lab with genius-industrialist Stark at the controls—fails to result in the expected production line of Supermen, instead marking the beginning of a short career as a propaganda machine.

Comics and graphic novels have explored war in numerous ways, not always through ostensibly shallow adventure (and the importance, in a time of war, even of this can be attested, as in sometime Marvel scriptwriter Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, 2000). Captain America's function, from his propaganda origins as 'the meridian example of pro-war attitudes in World War II era comic books' (Yanes, 2009: 53), has always been symbolic, despite efforts to ground him in specific conflicts and political positions. One could even argue, as does Evans (2010: 120), that a confusion has fallen across the character since 9/11. A modern attitude to the conduct of war is vaguely detectable in the way that *CA: TFA* occasionally toys with a cynical vision of war as control of public perception, although the critique is light. As with so much U.S. action-adventure cinema, bureaucracy and a preference to cut deals rather than fight presents another kind of enemy; when overbearing Senator Brandt (Michael Brandon) pulls one string too many, the movie replaces him as Rogers' mentor with salt-of-the-earth Colonel Philips. However, it takes time for Philips to come around to Erskine's valuation of Steve Rogers. Cut adrift from his planned purpose with the loss of Erskine's formula, the nation's best use for Rogers is to make him a shill for the industrial and economic war effort. In scenes of fund-raisers and USO shows that recall the manipulated Iwo Jima vets of Clint Eastwood's *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006), Rogers is put on display in a gaudy outfit and alienated from 'real' G.I.'s: the once puny Rogers may have gained the dimensions of the ideal fighting man, but here is put once again into the position of freak. This is a classic lesson for Marvel protagonists - famed for their outsider status - to absorb, and again points up notions of singularity and uniqueness, which can confer a burden of alienation as much as an aura of specialness upon the hero. As a film which repeatedly asks whether a team ethos is really just a temporary state of ego suppression, the same issue resonates in *The Avengers*: 'we're a chemical mixture that makes chaos', as Bruce Banner (Mark Ruffalo) evaluates the combustible assemblage of loners, banished gods and assassins around him.

Although comics confirm that Cap and Bucky have experienced concentration camps (Brubaker, Andreyko and Samnee, 2011), a sanitised version of the European theatre of the Second World War is presented in *CA: TFA*. Tight historical and geographical parameters on this war prevent Cap from encountering the Holocaust, even in montage sequences (see Lee, 2011). This may seem a harsh criticism of a nascent

franchise bearing the Marvel (and, ultimately, Disney) branding, although a film from the same summer—the non-MCU *X-Men: First Class* (Matthew Vaughn, 2011)—explicitly presented its villain (Kevin Bacon's Sebastian Shaw) as an authority figure in the death camps. In a way, *CA: TFA* is only a war film in the sense that *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is, with the Tesseract that obsesses the Skull representing the 'Ultimate Weapon'—structurally important but intrinsically meaningless—found in every episode of the Indiana Jones series. The film relishes opportunities to suggest a hidden layer of technological influence on both Allied and Axis/Hydra sides that could only transpire in an MCU where authorities turn to science to provide Vibranium shields before A-bombs (the serum can be seen as a sort of MCU antidote to the A-bomb; Cap's involvement in WWII—curtailed, of course, by his disappearance into the Arctic ice—seems to end well in advance of August 1945). Such substitutions represent Markus and McFeely's attempts to make sense of Captain America's brand of natural heroism and self-sacrifice for a mass audience grown used to the conflicted, reluctant and anguished heroes of films ranging from *Spider-Man 2* (Sam Raimi, 2004) to *The Incredibles* (Brad Bird, 2004) (see Flanagan, 2009: 171-172). The nobility of Rogers thus necessitates a different treatment from the struggles of characters such as Stark and Banner (whether the struggle is one of self-identification as a hero, or a progression from experiencing powers as a curse to recognising them as a tool that can benefit society). Along these lines, Steve's obvious affection for Erskine, 'good German' and honourable figure of science, leads us directly and logically into Cap's first intervention in the Avengers' mission to take down Loki (Tom Hiddleston).

In the Stuttgart sequence of *The Avengers*, Cap's defence of an elderly German man from Loki is clearly intended to check, if not revise, early uncompromising propaganda versions of the hero. In the context of the ambiguous representation of the 'team' that has been noted several times already, this is a neat way of showing that what Captain America defends is freedom; unlike the arrangements between nations (or those between fractious heroes), this is not subject to change. The greater good will always be present, but it is the rare superhero that can be trusted to identify it; this idea ties into a sense that a world experiencing superheroes for the first time would be wary, and seek to first regulate, then exploit, them. This can be seen across the MCU, from General 'Thunderbolt' Ross' attempts to trap, and combat (via a resurrected, flawed Super-Soldier process) the Hulk, to Congressional moves to limit Tony Stark's power in *Iron Man 2*. Cap's demonstration that soldiers are alienated by politics resounds in the interfering, craven 'Council' who restrict Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) and almost succeed in destroying Manhattan Island in *The Avengers*; yet, Fury is a government employee in a way that Thor or Hulk certainly are not. Although teamwork is certainly achieved in confronting Loki and the Chitauri, it is stressed that the only real soldier in the team is Rogers: that the otherworldliness and instability

of the other Avengers might be accompanied by uncertain moral paradigms perhaps helps to explain, in narrative terms, the quasi-governmental oversight of S.H.I.E.L.D. S.H.I.E.L.D. is not particularly valuable to the MCU for spectacle reasons, but is clearly a key part of future plans (Maytum, 2013).

Ultimately, Cap's efforts are not decisive in the war, with the extent of the Skull's threat appearing to be kept classified, and the Tesseract coming into the custody of Stark and S.H.I.E.L.D. In spite of its being questioned earlier, Cap's propaganda legacy is finally celebrated in a shot of children empowering themselves at play as Cap: once more, Rogers' matchless symbolic value – his ability to *stand for* something – is underscored (this continues to be testified in numerous vignettes in *The Avengers*, when Cap faces members of the public or emergency responders during 'The Battle of New York'). Before Cap is lost to the ice, Johnston's film has one more major reference to bring into play, underscoring *CA: TFA*'s essentially romantic vision of WWII. As Cap discovers that the Hydra ship cannot be landed safely without detonating its weapons onto the Eastern Seaboard, he decides to crash land and gets on the radio to Peggy Carter (Hayley Atwell), his military liaison since the early training days, and the woman Steve loves. The most blatant piece of intertextuality in the film, their conversation evokes the first encounter of apparently doomed British airman, and Peggy's namesake, Peter Carter (David Niven), and American radio operator June (Kim Hunter) in Powell and Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946). *A Matter of Life and Death* was officially a propaganda film, commissioned to smooth 'tensions with England's American allies' and promote co-operation between the nations (Lazar, 2003: xv); here, the reference crystallises Rogers' sense of duty-as-sacrifice while showing that before the inspirational public icon stood a human being, capable of connecting to others and making plans towards his own, private, future. This stress on Rogers' humanity illuminates the somewhat unsettling concluding sequence. In S.H.I.E.L.D. hands after the rescue glimpsed at the beginning of the film, Rogers wakes up. On finding that Fury has fabricated a fake 1940s to let Rogers adapt to the length of his absence, he storms into the heart of present day Times Square. It is no accident that Cap emerges into the famous location of so many VJ Day images from popular culture, celebrations that Rogers, poignantly, has missed. Underlining this, and reminding us of how Erskine pinpointed his humanity as the source of his strength, Captain America tells Fury of his regret at missing a date with Peggy (arranged in the previous scene). A triumphal ending is avoided, but would have been difficult to engineer in any case, with MCU continuity making it necessary that Cap spends a spell in the ice. The film finds a simple and affecting way to convey Rogers' loss, while refuting the Skull's assertion that these two very different sons of Erskine have 'left humanity behind'. Thus, the singular Captain is re-integrated into the ranks of humanity via his values and

moral code: both of these will continue to define his character in *The Avengers*.

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Iron Man: Building the Marvel Cinematic Universe

Iron Man

Dir. Jon Favreau, USA, 2008

Aaron Calbreath-Frasieur, University of Nottingham, UK

> You think you are the only superhero in the world? Mr. Stark, you've become part of a bigger universe; you just don't know it yet.
>
> —Nick Fury, *Iron Man*, 2008

The 2008 release of Marvel Studios' *Iron Man* heralded major changes for the cinematic representation of Marvel's popular comic book characters. The film was successful, generally well-received (with a 93% rating at aggregate review site Rotten Tomatoes) and earned over $585 million at the box office worldwide (Box Office Mojo). More interesting than its success as an individual film is the way the film fits into a bigger picture, the bigger universe suggested by Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson) in the post-credit sequence. The film operates not only as part of a bigger narrative universe but also points to industrial changes at Marvel and the rise of franchise media more generally. It is the beginning of an experiment in franchise film making, linking multiple movies together not simply as sequels but as separate yet interconnected films occurring in the same universe. Though franchise continuity across comics is the norm, or at least frequent, this level of cross-film continuity is unusual. Marvel has dubbed this filmic experiment, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU hereafter), both as a way of making the experiment visible for consumers and of delineating the cinematic superhero-filled world from the Marvel comic book universes. Rather than functioning as straight adaptations from comics, the films depict an independent universe based on the comics but not limited by them, allowing Marvel to maintain separate continuities in both films and comics (though with the popularity of the film, some elements have fed back into the comic book universe). Nick Fury's statement initiates the open-ended MCU, a strategy in line with Matt Hills' idea of an 'endlessly deferred narrative' through raising unanswered questions (Hills, 2002: 134-135). Fury tells us it is a bigger universe, leaving the audience to wonder. How much bigger is it? What other superheroes are in this universe? How will Iron Man's narrative fit into this universe? These are questions whose answers can be continually deferred and expanded. Because *Iron Man* begins the MCU, partially setting up the movies that follow, this review focuses primarily on the continuities between *Iron Man* and the other MCU films. The first film functions as a gateway and frame for the rest of the MCU, linking the

franchise together through a variety of elements, including mise-en-scène, characters and the details of the diegesis.

Part of the work of this first MCU film is to challenge expectations about the nature of a superhero movie. Iron Man accomplishes this quickly, within minutes establishing an unexpected style, and clearly subverting the conventions of previous comic book movies. *Iron Man* depicts neither the earnest dedication to a cause of the *Superman* (Warner Bros.), *Spider-Man* (Sony) or *X-Men* (Fox) films, nor the dogged 'justice'-driven action of the *Batman* (Warner Bros.), *Blade* (New Line) and *The Punisher* (Lionsgate) movies, though it contains elements of the latter. It portrays a different kind of 'hero' in a particularly contemporary setting.

The pre-title sequence of *Iron Man* goes a long way in creating a tone and setting unlike those of other superhero films. The first few minutes place Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.) in a military caravan in Afghanistan, thus immediately situating the film within an ongoing contemporary conflict, using imagery familiar from daily news broadcasts and numerous war films and television shows. Where many superhero films use abstracted locations (such as DC Comic's Gotham City and Metropolis) and others are more self-contained (e.g., the politics depicted in the initial X-Men trilogy (Fox) is related only to the mutant issue, though the prequel, *X-Men: First Class*, released post–*Iron Man* in 2011, blends the X-Men story with historical events), Iron Man is dropped into the middle of a real world conflict. We will later learn that Stark is, at this point, personally dedicated to US military superiority—though his company supplies weapons to anyone who can afford them—and he desires to be respected and 'feared' by the rest of the world. The hero of this film is directly engaged in a not-unrealistic picture of the military-industrial complex, as well as of US hegemony. As the film progresses Stark gains some insight into the problematic nature of his own belief system, causing him to relent his role as a 'merchant of death' and calls for his corporation to exit the weapons industry. Challenging the pro-US positioning of the beginning of the film, the initial antagonists, the Ten Rings, turn out to be pawns of the real villain: American corporate greed, personified by Obadiah Stane (Jeff Bridges). The personal changes in Stark and the shift in villain are somewhat superficial, since Stark still devises destructive weaponry (in the form of the Iron Man suit), and much of the violence of the film is perpetrated against enemies coded as Middle-Eastern (for a critique of the geopolitics of *Iron Man*, see Giraldez Catalan, 2008). This theme of corporate greed operating behind the visible menace continues through the *Iron Man* trilogy, with the true villains being, in many ways, variations on Stark himself. Stark's close resemblance to his enemies complicates the nature of the 'superhero' in these films. Martin Flanagan's review suggests that the theme of pitting the hero against a darker version of himself is also used across the MCU, in the *Captain America* and *Hulk* films.

The audience's introduction to Tony Stark further challenges expectations of a superhero. Though he is riding in a military vehicle with three US soldiers wearing desert combat gear, he is in a stylish suit with an alcoholic drink in hand. He jokes with the soldiers (in Downey's rapid-fire style), flirting mildly with the female driver and answering questions about his sexual exploits. Prior to *Iron Man*, most of Favreau's directorial work had been on comedies or mixtures of comedy and drama or adventure. *Iron Man* is very much in this vein, mixing humour with action spectacle. Rather than the one-liners and catchphrases common to action films, including many superhero movies, *Iron Man* offers witty dialogue as its primary source of humour, a practice carried over into Joss Whedon's script for *The Avengers*. Indeed, Downey's Stark seems to be one of the few superheroes with a sense of humour, not seen since Michael Keaton's portrayal of Bruce Wayne in Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989). Unlike Bruce Wayne, Tony Stark's billionaire playboy persona is not an illusion; the playboy is who he really is, or at least who he has constructed himself to be. His newfound hero-persona is an unexpected shift for himself as well as for the characters around him. Indeed, he doesn't fully become a 'hero' in this film; that is deferred until he commits to being a hero in the *Avengers* film. This film features three super-heroic action sequences, but each is positioned as being personal rather than altruistic. His initial escape from the Ten Rings is a matter of self-preservation. As Downey has said, 'It's kind of heroic, but really kind of on his own behalf' (Weintraub, 2009). The battle at Gulmira, while somewhat heroic, is performed primarily as an emotional response related to his own guilt, rather than any planned attempt to do something to help a troubled situation. Finally, his battle with Stane is given no particular heroic context. Stane's crimes up to this point have been corporate greed and the attempted assassination of Stark himself. The villainy for which Stane must be punished is a personal injustice against Stark. There is no sense in this film that Stark sees much beyond himself; this kind of character growth is reserved for later MCU films. This is an important aspect of Marvel's new typology of the superhero film. Rather than traditional heroes, Marvel provides fallible, selfish, and sometimes humorous heroes. Of the future Avengers, Captain America (Chris Evans) is the only one who has clear innate heroic sensibilities. Tony Stark is too self-involved and narcissistic to be traditional hero material. Moreover, he is very much part of the hegemonic system that creates his enemies, and often bears some responsibility for the course of events. As Downey says of *Iron Man 2*, 'Every piece of action…is a direct result of part of a character dysfunction…everything is as a result of character dysfunction or mistakes made' (Ibid.). From the pre-title sequence to Stark's public declaration, 'I am Iron Man' (breaking with the secret identity trope), at the end of the film, Iron Man represents a different kind of cinematic superhero.

The pre-title sequence ends with a visually familiar sequence of terrorists (visually and geographically positioned as Islamic insurgents) making a

hostage video of Tony Stark. Later, the film subverts this initial reading of the sequence in two ways. First, the video itself is not what it seems, as Stark's aide and love interest Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow) eventually discovers that it is not a hostage video. Rather it is an angry message to Stane, berating him for not telling the kidnappers the identity of their target. Second, though the terrorist group is in Afghanistan and visually positioned as insurgents, later dialogue is ambiguous about their actual nature and goals. Labelled as the 'Ten Rings', they seem to be more of an international crime organisation with the vague goal of gaining power in the region. For audiences familiar with *Iron Man* comics, the name Ten Rings will be clear as a reference to Iron Man's nemesis The Mandarin, who features as the villain in the third Iron Man film. The Mandarin, then, is a behind-the-scenes manipulator of events in the first film. Even the briefly seen Ten Rings flag in the background of the hostage video is, according to Favreau, written in Mongolian rather than Arabic, another reference to this hidden villain (Quint, 2008). The flag, a small detail of the pre-title sequence, is in fact part of a narrative that will be deferred until the third *Iron Man* film. The inclusion of small details like these that connect this film with later films is a significant part of creating the MCU.

These challenges to the superhero movie formula, insofar as there is one, help set the stage for later MCU films. The introduction of a particular style of humour, the characterisation of self-centred and fallible heroes, and the intentional inclusion of elements that will link to later films or that suggest a bigger universe (particularly for knowledgeable fans) are common features of the MCU movies. Linking elements include structural similarities, particularly the post-credit sequences used in each of the individual hero's movies to suggest their connections to the MCU, mise-en-scène and details in the world of each film that subtly tie the films together, particularly to connect the individual hero's film to *The Avengers*. In the case of *Iron Man*, for example, a number of visual images are recycled for *The Avengers*. The inside-Iron-Man's-helmet shot, a close-up on Downey's face surrounded by CGI interfaces, which appears not only in the *Avengers* film, but even in most of the trailers for the film, serves as an iconic reminder for the audience of the *Iron Man* film. In the same way, Iron Man's fall from the sky in *The Avengers*, featured in several trailers, is reminiscent of his fall during his first attempt at outdoor flight in this film. In one scene toward the end of *Iron Man*, Potts and S.H.I.E.L.D Agent Coulson (Clark Gregg) confront Stane, now in his own armoured suit; Stane knocks away the S.H.I.E.L.D agents and chases after Potts who runs toward the camera. Stane follows, smashing through the machinery-filled corridor as he runs. The shot is echoed in *The Avengers*, when the Black Widow (Scarlett Johansson) is chased through claustrophobic corridors of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s Helicarrier by the Hulk (Mark Ruffalo), who wreaks havoc on the machinery in his way. Both sequences emphasise the behemoth nature of the pursuers, as they simply plow

through anything in their way. As another example, Stark's 'arc reactor' which enables him to remain alive after his injuries at the beginning of *Iron Man* and to power the Iron Man armor, is not only a continuing element in the Iron Man films, but features in *The Avengers* as the power source for Stark Tower in New York. In one *Iron Man* sequence set in Stark's workshop, a shield can be seen in the background, this one making a reference to Captain America (the shield is displayed more prominently in *Iron Man 2*), though only a small detail in *Iron Man* it serves as a link to the MCU. Subtle references for fans, known as 'Easter eggs,' are not uncommon in comic book movies more generally, but in the case of the MCU some of these references are part of the overall project of linking the films. As Derek Johnson suggests, 'in isolated moments across discrete [MCU films], Marvel established narrative interrelationships and limited serial progression across installments. By contrast, Marvel's earlier film releases made no attempt to draw links between heroes' (Johnson, 2012: 6). Though all these elements connect the films for audiences, the most important linkage between the MCU movies involves the characters themselves and the actors who play them.

Iron Man establishes three important characters for the MCU: Tony Stark, S.H.I.E.L.D. Nick Fury and Agent Phil Coulson. Downey's success as Iron Man ensured that he would be one of the most visible of The Avengers, featuring heavily in advertising for the later film and getting considerable screen time in the film itself. Nick Fury only appears briefly in the post-credits sequence of *Iron Man*, but this sequence is one of the most important and explicit moments of the film for the creation of the MCU. Fury tells Stark and the audience that Iron Man is only a part of a bigger universe and that there are more superheroes in that universe. The film ends with Fury's statement that he has come to talk to Stark 'about the Avenger Initiative'. This exchange acts as a kind of announcement of the MCU and its initial culmination in an *Avengers* film. This sequence also sets up an important structural element of the MCU films, each of which feature a post-credit sequence linking to future films. This sequence has become a highly-anticipated part of each MCU film, providing a strong connection between films, whether it is the introduction of Thor's hammer, the Tesseract, or Nick Fury. Though not as explicit as the Nick Fury scene, equally important to the MCU is the introduction of Agent Coulson. In *Iron Man*, Coulson seems to be a minor character, an officious government man. He provides a running gag, as he introduces himself as an agent of the 'Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division', only to be told repeatedly that the organisation needs a better name; at the end of the movie he finally uses the acronym S.H.I.E.L.D. Despite his seemingly minor role in *Iron Man*, Coulson becomes a kind of lynchpin of this first set of MCU films. He appears again in *Iron Man 2*, *Thor* and *The Avengers*, serving as the catalyst who inspires the Avengers to unite as a team, rather than as a disjointed collection of powerful individuals (much as the films themselves are

brought together as the MCU franchise whole). These characters serve as the clearest link between these films, making the MCU readily apparent to an audience. Marvel was able to keep most of the same actors through each of the MCU films, maintaining a strong and clear continuity for audiences. Further expanding the MCU across media, Gregg stars as Coulson in the upcoming *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* television series, as well as in two shorts made for Blu-Ray releases of MCU films. Though the MCU characters cannot yet cross over with the other films of the greater Marvel Comics universe, with the film rights still held by several studios, 2012 did see the Agent Coulson character appearing regularly in the animated television series, *Ultimate Spider-Man* (Disney XD, 2012-). Gregg returned to voice the character, to some extent linking the TV series to the MCU.

Superhero film franchises are usually understood as focusing on a character or team, each film an entry in one ongoing story (occasionally rebooted), distinct from other superhero properties. *Iron Man* is the first entry in an ongoing cinematic world involving multiple interconnected stories. By self-producing the MCU films, Marvel Studios gained control over both the narrative of the films and the strategic use of common elements to connect them. Numerous instances of deferred narrative and continuing references to the larger universe transform these individual films into a whole. Some, such as the references to the Mandarin, function primarily as they would for any film hinting at traditional sequels; others lead directly to the related MCU films, such as Captain America's shield and the appearances of Nick Fury and Agent Coulson. Nick Fury alerted the audience to the 'bigger universe'. Time will tell just how big the Marvel Cinematic Universe will become.

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Make Love, Not War: Ursuline Counterculture in Ken Russell's *The Devils* and the 1960s Student Revolts

The Devils

Dir. Ken Russell, United Kingdom, 1971

Sarah Pines, Stanford University, USA

As surprising as it may be that Ken Russell's most contested, and X-rated, film *The Devils* (1971) has found so little attention in research, the British Film Institute, prompted by Ken Russell's recent death in late 2011, nevertheless restored the film for its first UK DVD release in 2012. In the same year *The Devils* participated in retrospectives on the director and his films and the Scala inaugurated a cinematic Ken Russell memorial season, "Ken Russell Forever." It is therefore appropriate to complement the new releases and old screenings by a review of Russell's complex masterpiece.

In *The Devils,* a film about a 17th century French convent, demonic possessions, sex, and royal inquisitions, Russell tells an abbreviated history of bourgeois society. He does so by means of a visual aesthetic that allows the connection of three main reference points of the bourgeoisie: its coming into being under early Absolutism, its peak in the 19th century and its decline in the course of the 1960s movements. The film moreover connects to three similar moments of escape and freedom from social constraints. It tells the story of the possession of the Ursuline nuns, which was initiated by their mother superior Jeanne des Anges, who feels scorned by her parish priest Urbain Grandier. She therefore accuses him of sorcery while she herself takes her own "possession" as an occasion to break sexual taboos and, in dreams and fantasies, succumbs to her desire for Grandier. Grandier is then tried together with his accuser Jeanne des Anges, and he is executed while Jeanne des Anges returns to the convent and writes her memoirs. Thus, two questions emerge: first, what is the link between the three points in time - the possession of Loudun of the year 1634, the 19th century "discourse of the hysteric" and the 1960s movement? Second, what are the aesthetic and visual features through which Russell makes this link tangible?

In *The Devils*, the new order that is about to come into being is Absolutism under the reign of Louis XIII. In the film, Absolutism is represented by Cardinal Richelieu, under whom local unrests, such as the "upheaval" at Loudun, are impeded in order to transform France into a "new" centralized state. Urbain Grandier, not only parish priest of Loudun but also its interim governor, is the representative of an old society structure that is characterized by religious tolerance during the time of the Edict de Nantes, a decentralized feudalist state before the Fronde of

1748, and independent towns such as Loudun. Grandier's trial as sorcerer is to be understood as a result of his resistance to the centralization of Absolutist power that is acted out as a counter-ecclesiastical gesture. Richelieu incorporates the simultaneity of these two gestures directed against Grandier: he wants to neutralize him politically, which is also acted out ecclesiastically. During the trial Grandier is forced into confessing his allegiance with the devil, which he refuses. The birth of Absolutism moreover meant the birth of the bourgeoisie. In its modern sense, bourgeois society is about to emerge at the time of Absolutism. Due to the centralization of the administration under Louis XIII and under Louis XIV, the *noblesse de robe* began to replace the *noblesse d'epée*, thereby founding the basis for the educated and possessing classes (the Bourgeoisie) of the 19th and 20th centuries (Koselleck, 1988).

Via the aesthetics of the witch trials Russell then establishes a link between the "birth" of the bourgeoisie under Absolutism and its peak in the 19th century. Here I want to foreground three factors: the space of the trials, torture and confession.

From an aesthetic viewpoint, the main hall of prayer of the Ursuline convent in which the trial takes place bears a strong resemblance to a stage, a laboratory, a clinic and a prison. It is designed according to a common denominator: the same white tiling on the floors the walls and the ceiling, a central operating, examination and/or torture table on which Jeanne des Anges is tried. The windows are barred and the hall is overexposed to light. Present are also two—a chemist and a physician—and the "audience" sits in front. Russell blends the different spaces and their shared characteristics—brightness, sterility, examinations, tools, experts - into one main setting. At the same time the laboratory, the clinic and the prison are all spaces of discursive practices of bourgeois society (Foucault, 1990). Thus, together with the body language and "rigidification" of Jeanne des Anges, **[1]** and the nature of her punishment (she is pierced with various sharp objects), the trial clearly evokes the space of the spectacle of the "grande hystérie" of the 19th century, which Charcot made accessible to a larger audience in the Salpetrière in Paris. Moreover, one could go a step further and say that the white tiles and the black grates and glaring light evoke both the clinker brick and thick curtains of 1960s bourgeois housing.

Another minor character of this scenery links the time of the witch trials to the 19th century: the figure of the scrivener. Present to the trial of both Jeanne des Anges and Grandier are several stenographing scriveners (the absolutist state is based on the centralization of all administration [Kimmel, 1988, p. 47]). He prefigures the 19th (and 20th) century bureaucrat who renders administrative services to the power apparatus. In this context, an important moment in the film is the disempowerment of the hangman as executing part of the old sovereign order. His offer to

hand Grandier the noose in order to reduce his suffering is—next to Grandier's secret marriage to Madeleine de Brou—the only humane moment in the movie. It is not, however, a moment of Christian compassion or mercy, but of solidarity and shared knowledge that killing means suffering beyond the notion of the devil. Thus Ken Russell illustrates how the hangman and hence the sword of "faire mourir" (to "make-die") is replaced by the upcoming figure of the scrivener, i.e. administrator, whose pen henceforth "lets-die." **[2]**

What Russell thus connects are the power mechanisms that these two moments in history have in common: deviations that emerge from *within* a society that itself is in the process of change, are pathologized and then administered by a centralized bureaucracy in order to consolidate a new discourse that is about to take the place of the old. Thus, Russell also tells the viewer *when* these moments occur in history: they are intrinsically linked to the early beginnings of bourgeois society under Absolutism, while the Revolution of 1848 finally consolidates the bourgeois state under Napoleon III (Marx, 2008, p. 23/24). In *The Devils*, this is acted out alongside the "treatment" of Jeanne des Anges and Urbain Grandier, whereby the former represents the coming into being of a new order (in guise of an old, ecclesiastical language) and the latter represents the abolition of a old order (in guise of a new language of libertinage, since Grandier lives a life beyond the confines of celibacy).

Russell shows how the trials rely on the confessions of both Jeanne des Anges and Urbain Grandier, and yet again links two moments in history. During the trial, the intimate confessional situation between a priest and his parishioner is made public, a constellation which in the 19th century is then replaced by the consultation hour and ultimately by psychoanalysis (Foucault, 1990, S. 59ff), which Charcot in the Salpetrière likewise made accessible to a wider audience. However, the confessor to the Ursuline nuns, Father Mignon, equally represents its *inefficiency*, as does the execution of Grandier. During the trial, Father Mignon's gaze on Grandier is frequently shot as close-up. Seen from up close the spectator can perceive the former's desiring and at times almost tender gaze on Grandier. Especially during the execution his eyes are widened and his trembling face is filled with pain while he prays for Grandier's salvation and at the same time urges him, in vain, to confess. During this scene, the close-up of Mignon, while the chaos that surrounds him is faded-out, evokes the intimacy that takes place between speaker and listener during a confessional situation, which Grandier however refuses him. His refusal not only questions the capacity of a "last confession" to provide salvation and hence the truth. With his refusal Grandier also withdraws his body and suffering from the realms of transcendence and turns his endurance of the torture that precedes his death into a Nietzschean moment of *amor fati*. **[3]** Thus, Grandier, in his refusal to confess, disempowers the figure of the priest as the representative of an old order (and likewise the figure of the analyst as the representative of 19th century psychoanalysis) while

his own disempowerment contains an autonomous moment of self-empowerment. The disruption of the intimate confession between confessor and penitent is also reflected at other points in the film: Jeanne des Anges lies to Father Mignon during her confession by accusing Grandier as sorcerer, and the confessional situation between Urbain Grandier and his parishioners at the beginning of the movie secularizes confession by evoking the priest's desire towards the confessing women who in turn lie to him to provoke further desire.

Why make such a film in 1971, however? Or to ask differently: what makes Jeanne des Anges, Urbain Grandier and their torturers so relevant to just passed 1960s? First, one could identify the independence of Jeanne des Anges that allows her to break sexual "taboos". This will, as well as her desire to escape from societal constraints, is symbolized by her hump and the sharp upper part of her spine which seems to almost burst through the flesh and which she tries to grab while cursing it immediately after she had seen Grandier leading the funeral possession of the dead governor of Loudun. She also has, for example, an erotic dream of Urbain Grandier as Jesus Christ and at the end of the film masturbates with a bone that belongs to Urbain Grandier. The same goes for the nuns in the convent who are almost homoerotically affected by their mother superior, whereas Father Mignon represents the repression of homosexuality.

With this narrative Russell certainly alludes to the movement of liberalization and politicization of sexuality that took pace during the 1960s (Herzog, 2005). Not only is the demeanor of Jeanne des Anges, the Ursulines and the trial (apart from being violently misogynistic) sexually "insinuating," they flirt with their torturers and run naked in the convent. While the public space of the 1960s was penetrated by images that were increasingly sexual in nature, the public trial in *The Devils* relies on the nakedness and display of intimate body parts on Jeanne des Anges. While the 1960s propagated extra- and pre-marital sex as well as homosexuality, the nun's breaking of the rule of celibacy, their implied lesbianism, and also the "intimate" gaze of Father Mignon of Urbain Grandier are equally directed towards sexual freedom.

Yet, the story is more complex than just enabling a parallel between two historical moments of (sexual) "promiscuity.". Although a witch-trial is certainly not an erotically charged spectacle, Russell, by means of a specific aesthetics - the clinical or lab space, against the background of which a sexually charged trial is executed and observed by functionaries, the transcriber or bureaucrat, of a specific social system of the time—links three moments in history to bourgeois society. Not only does it connect the time of emerging Absolutism to the pathologies of 19th century bourgeois society, it also enables a link to the 68 movement with regard to its profound transformations.

From a socio-psychoanalytical viewpoint, the 60s movements initiate the disruption of patriarchy and the Oedipal triangle. The conflict between Jeanne des Anges and Urbain Grandier can thus be understood as mirroring this classical Oedipal conflict in which Jeanne des Anges not only symbolically "kills" her authoritarian father Grandier figure, whom she "incestuously" desires and moreover accuses, as the student generation of the 60s movements accused their parents of war-crimes. However, Jeanne des Anges' "forbidden" or impossible desire for Urbain Grandier, together with the fact that she is both a "scorned woman" and, at least in the eyes of Grandier, "unattractively" hunched, who accuses him out of a feeling of jealous humiliation points to yet another, more complex correspondence between the historical time of the film and the 1960s.

It has been shown that Russell, via his visual aesthetics of the clinic and the figure of the transcriber, links the witch to the hysteric, but also that these two figures emerged from *within* a specific society: the bourgeois society that was about to emerge and that reached its peak during the 19th century. During the 1960s, this society undergoes a massive transformation. In *The May Movement* (1971) Alain Touraine describes the student revolts of May '68, the peak of the social unrests in France during the 60s, as the revolts of a cultural *elite*. The students fight on two frontlines: on the one hand against the central figure of capitalist society—the individual patron, proprietor and factory owner—on the other hand they protest against the technocratization and bureaucratization of a new capitalist society that was about to replace the old. This society relies on large corporations that transfer entrepreneurial power from one to many: to financiers and engineers who act in the name of technical rationality rather than private interests and cause a de-politicization of social life (Touraine, 1971, p. 29/30.) Thus, the accumulation of capital becomes achievable via the merits of an efficient bureaucracy and less and less inheritable from patron to successor, which transforms the social elites into a larger net of efficiency relations.

Against this background, the universities stand out as closed and learned societies fighting against both the old patriarchal structure and the commercialization of life initiated by a new order. A closed and learned society the viewer also encounters in *The Devils*: the convent and the parish. The Ursuline nuns and Urbain Grandier, who took the place of the dead governor of Loudun, belong to the *premier état* (the clergy), the learned elite at the top of society, which was challenged by the *noblesse de robe*, the foundational subclass for the bourgeois societies of the centuries to come.

It was from the secluded convents and monasteries that in the course of the 12th century in France, monasteries opened themselves up to urban university life (Duby, 1981, p. 113-115). Both the Ursulines in *The Devils* and the students of the 68 movement revolt at two frontlines in order to

protect their sphere of relative freedom: against the increasing bureaucratization of their world and the cultural conservatism of their own institution, an "archaic machine" seemingly unable to transform itself (Touraine, 1971, p. 119). Moreover, both movements were challenged by "internal" gender conflicts: not only in the case of Jeanne des Anges and Urbain Grandier but also during the 60s movement, women tried to assert their own rights in face of their male, often considered chauvinist, "combatants".

Both events, those at Loudun and the first May movements in 1968, arose spontaneously (Cohn-Bendit, 1968, p. 58) against the background of chaos, violence and collapse. What precedes the possession of the Ursuline nuns is a devastating outbreak of the Plague, whereas the student revolts arose while Agent Orange was poured over Vietnam, which had devastating effects on the Vietnamese people, causing death and suffering.

In *The Devils* the plague, the trials, and the death of Grandier are transient moments, which point to the brevity of both chaos and desire. But episodic excess also means episodic freedom and happiness. Grandier dies, not happy, but free in the sense that he refuses confession, i.e. he resists the discourse of power. In this sense, the most popular slogan at the height of the student revolts in France (Hertoz, 2011, S. 113) "The more I make love, the more I make revolution" applies to the Ursulines, too: Before the beginning of the trial and during the possessions they are shown as giggling running down a corridor of the convent, naked.

Notes

[1] Jeanne des Anges' "rigidification"—"feet or hands, which, being tightly folded together and even the soles of both feet so joined that they seemed glued and bound together with some strong ties, several persons having tried as hard as they could to separate them"—is comparable to the hysterical arch (De Certeau, *The Possession at Loudun*, p. 46).

[2] The opposition between "make die" (and "let live") and "let die" (and "make live") is based on Foucault, *Il faut défendre la Societé*, 17 March 1976, pp. 214, 218-219).

[3] See Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 276: "I want to learn more and more to see as beautiful what is necessary in things; then I shall be one of those who make things beautiful. *Amor fati*: let that be my love henceforth! I do not want to wage war against what is ugly. I do not want to accuse; I do not even want to accuse those who accuse. *Looking away* shall be my only negation."

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The Voyage of the Dawn Treader

Dir. Michael Apted, USA, 2010

Alice Mills, Federation University, Australia

Part of the charm of C. S. Lewis' Narnia series of fantasy novels is the very different settings he devises for each. Michael Apted's film adaptation of *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* (2010) revels in the opportunity to depict oceans at rest and in storm, enchanted islands, a sea-serpent, a dragon, mermaids and finally the beautifully realised upward-coursing waterfall that marks the threshold of the afterlife. While the settings differ greatly among Lewis' novels, the central narrative remains constant: human children visit Narnia, a country in a different world, most of whose inhabitants are talking animals with their spiritual ruler being the great talking lion, Aslan. In each novel Earth-born children and Narnians are tempted and tested within a framework of Christian allegory. *Voyage* assumes a viewer already familiar with three of its main characters: Lucy and Edmund, who visited Narnia in the film *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and again in *Prince Caspian,* and Caspian, the heir to the throne of Narnia in *Prince Caspian*. Any viewer who has neither seen these films (or another adaptation) nor read Lewis' novels is likely to be bewildered by such details as the spectral visitations of the evil White Witch, attempting to repeat her success in seducing Edmund into becoming a traitor in *Lion*, or the glimpse of a stone knife on Aslan's table, used in *Lion* to slaughter the great Aslan. These episodes were invented for the *Voyage* film, and it might have been more satisfactory to have stuck with Lewis' narrative in which the events of Lucy and Edmund's previous visits to Narnia are gradually explained for the benefit of the novice visitor, Eustace, the unlikeable cousin at whose house they are staying.

In *Voyage*, Prince Caspian (Ben Barnes) is now king and his Narnian kingdom is at peace. He decides to travel over uncharted seas in quest for seven lost Narnian lords. Finding the lords is simple, but the journey is soon converted into a quest to retrieve their swords, which must be united on Aslan's table in order to defeat the film's mysterious evil power. Lucy, Edmund and Eustace are drawn into Narnia via a picture of the king's ship, the Dawn Treader, into a world of talking animals and magic, and waters that turn all that touch them into gold. Aslan, divine ruler of Narnia and, as explained at the culmination of the quest, its equivalent to Jesus, occasionally intervenes to warn, praise and reward. In this regard the film is true to Lewis' Christian allegory. It is also true to his advocacy of a just war: being on the right side (that of Aslan) justifies killing in

Narnia and, by implication, in the British fight against the Germans in World War 2 which frames this adaptation. By extension, it validates any war in which "our people" (British, American and their allies) may be fighting against demonised others. Such findings can be seen as implicit in the film's realist frame in our world's wartime Britain, with food rationing, troop enlistments and children battened on other families. The film's opening scenes, in particular, which deal with the strains felt by both guests and hosts who must reluctantly live in the same household, resonate with Lewis' own World War II experiences of having children evacuated to his family home.

Pursuing the theme of justified war, the first two in this current series of Narnia adaptations, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* and *Prince Caspian*, were bloated in an attempt to rival the huge battle scenes of Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings*. *Voyage* resists any temptation to enlarge its ship, the Dawn Treader. Instead of bulked-up battle sequences, this film offers the old-fashioned pleasures of one-to-one swordfighting. Along with the fantasy marvels, the film provides some swash-buckling adventure, when the Dawn Treader's cohort discovers one of the Narnian islands under the control of wicked slavers. War in this film is small in scale as with most mediaeval battles. Indeed, most of the film's pleasures are small scale. The computer-animated talking mouse, Reepicheep (voiced by Simon Pegg) is as charming as in *Prince Caspian* (where he was voiced by Eddie Izzard), and one of the most delightful scenes is his sword fight with Eustace, where the knightly mouse is first punitive, and then becomes absorbed in the pleasures of teaching swordplay to a novice. By this point in the film, the question of a justifiable war becomes lost in the swashbuckling representation of violence as part of the pleasure of a display of athletic skill.

Like the book, the film explores temptation and the overcoming of temptation, but not in Lewis' context of childhood. Narnians and Earthborn humans are challenged not only physically with a plethora of sword fighting (much more than in the book), but also morally, tempted by vanity, greed, envy and despair. Eustace is changed to dragon form, in which he learns the patience, bravery and selflessness that he needs in order to earn his transformation back to human. Apart from Eustace, all the main characters are either adolescent or adult. Delays in *Voyage*'s production meant that Georgie Henley as Lucy and Skandar Keynes as Edmund, continuing their roles from the two previous films, are more grown up than in Lewis's novel. The temptations are changed accordingly. Edmund wants adult power and freedom; in an added scene, he attempts to enlist in the British army though under age and later he lusts briefly after gold, greedy not for wealth but for the power it can buy. The film's Lucy is envious of her elder sister's beauty and confident sexuality. These are odd temptations in that the adult authority that Edmund desires is achieved by the end of the film, while Lucy is physically maturing into a sexuality of her own, each with the film's approval. While these

temptations are somewhat undercut by the film's end, the nature of the children's temptations within the fantasy (envy for Edmund, envy and vanity for Lucy, greed, despair and pride for Eustace) is true to Lewis' Christian framework; succumbing to them, as each child does momentarily, is presented as a serious evil. This treatment is at odds with the blurring of a serious temptation into the processes of growing up and resembles the blurring previously mentioned, of ethical consideration of justifiable war into the pleasures of single combat.

Just as Edmund and Lucy's temptations collapse into a natural, morally approved part of growing up, the film's evil is not represented as adequately potent in the outside world. Evil generally manifests in this film as a green mist, ominous rather than lethal. The White Witch (Tilda Swinton) appears as a spectral temptress, as evanescent and easily thwarted as the green mist. The sea-serpent is splendidly embodied in its attack on the ship but, once defeated, disintegrates into mist. The slavers encountered on the first island to be explored are easily defeated and when their victims return from some vague magical imprisonment, it is as plump, healthy, strong figures seemingly unhurt and untraumatized. It would destroy the film's fragile grasp on plot to enquire too closely into why the green mist actually needed human slavers to provide such prey. Indeed, the whole issue of exactly who or what is the villain remains obscure throughout this film. It is symptomatic of this general vagueness both that the relationship between the green mist and the slavers is unexplained and that King Caspian puts nothing in place on the island to restrain the slavers from continuing their practices once his ship has sailed away. The Dawn Treader folk may have defeated the slavers in hand-to-hand combat, but it is moral sleight of hand to present this as a comprehensive defeat of their evil. Once again swashbuckling (and the accompanying sentimentality of rescuing the lost wife, reuniting parent and child) blurs the moral issue.

Apted adds an unnecessary and far from thrilling twist to Lewis' plot, the seven swords that must be recovered and laid on Aslan's table. The recovery of these swords is almost ludicrously easy. I can only guess that this plot detail was added to spice up the video game. Similarly, King Caspian's temptation amounts to no more than a murmur of disapproval from his father and Edmund's unconvincing lust for gold is instantly overcome by Lucy's reproach. Overall, the film's risks are negligible, its adventures rushed and trifling. Equally unsatisfactory and rushed is the film's lack of wonder. For example Lucy visits a magician's house that is barely realised, generating none of the sense of dread that Lewis' prose description of the visit achieves. Her quest at this point is to restore to visibility the Dufflepuds, dwarves each hopping on one gigantic foot and rendered invisible by the magician's curse. But this episode is all too brief, the Dufflepuds' ridiculous conversations disappointingly curtailed from Lewis' original story. As soon as they can be seen, they are sent out of

sight. The wonder-filled scene in Lewis' novel in which Eustace works out that he had become a dragon is eliminated entirely from the film adaptation. It is hard, after all this skimping, for the last scene at the border of Aslan's country to achieve any gravitas, rising to pathos at best.

The absence of wonder is related to the diminution of serious ethical concern in the course of this film. A sense of wonder takes the wonderer out of the comfortable state of unquestioned familiarity with one's circumstances and surroundings, much as any ethical challenge to the norm aims to do. Being disconcerted is systematically devalued in *Voyage*, most noticeably in the mockery of Eustace's amazement and bewilderment at his first encounters with Narnia's talking animals. The cursory nature of the quest for the seven swords is equally dismissive of wonder.

Similarly unsatisfactory is the film's moral stance, or rather, collapse. Lewis' book deals with temptation, sin and its consequences in a serious Christian context. Sin has real costs. Lucy, in the book, succumbs to curiosity and her childhood friendship is incurably tainted by this. Eustace as dragon learns to repent in pain and is required to tear off layers of skin, demonstrating his willingness to die, in order to be redeemed. The film abandons this powerful scene for pyrotechnics, when the dragon is lifted up and transformed into boy in a glory of light. This appears more of a reward than a punishment, just as being a dragon in the film is mainly an opportunity for feats of strength. Rather than penitence, this Eustace regains boyhood because he is brave (also drawing on the draconine equivalent of a swashbuckler's ingenuity and bodily strength).

Lucy's moral lesson is just as feeble. She learns to value being herself rather than longing to be her sister. The thought experiment in which she learns this lesson has no cost to it beyond momentary discomfort and fright, but this is not the heart of the problem. What is seriously wrong with the lesson is that being oneself is a meaningless moral stance in the context of the film. Eustace was surely being himself as a lying, greedy, obnoxious child, but that self is presented as unacceptable. Surely the Lucy who longed to be sexually attractive to men is as valid a self as the girl who renounces envy of her sister. Simple faith in the principle of being oneself also runs counter to Lewis' Christian beliefs in striving to emulate Christ and the need for redemption (as in Eustace's painful transfiguration, bestowed upon him by Aslan).

Another moral misstep occurs in the opening moments of the film, probably too fast for most filmgoers to notice. Edmund, attempting to enlist in wartime, has taken his aunt's identity card and tries to pass it off as his own. This amounts to theft and lying and leaves unspoken the potential consequences for the family and their ration allowance if the deception were to succeed. While Lucy's wanting to become her sister is rebuked, Edmund's attempt to become his aunt is regarded as plucky;

while Eustace's theft and lying are presented as insufferable, Edmund's are merely treated as comic.

All of this amounts to serious miscalculation, in terms of character, adventure and moral stance. Christian groups have generally praised the film; they should be decrying it as a travesty of Lewis's adventure story and a betrayal of his clear moral stance, his treatment of choices and consequences as meaningful and carrying cost. To make a lightweight film is no sin, but to collapse and then claim high seriousness (as Aslan does towards the end) is inexcusable.

There is one last misstep in the film, tangential to its main narrative. In its closing seconds, when the children are back on Earth, Eustace's mother calls up to him that Jill Pole has come to visit. This sabotages the start of the film, which has represented Eustace as a hate-filled loner. More seriously, it wrecks the premise of the next Narnia book, *The Silver Chair*, that Jill Pole is a friendless, bullied child, a stranger to Eustace. Why should the filmmaker go out of his way to prejudice the next film?

Softly Nihilistic: Comparing Versions of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*

Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy

Dir. John Irvin, United Kingdom, 1979

Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy

Dir. Tomas Alfredson, USA, 2011

Reidar Due, Magdalen College, Oxford, UK

The 2011 adaptation of *Tinker Tailor Sailor Spy*, directed by Tomas Alfredson, is a visual masterpiece. It is also a film that stands out in marked difference from its predecessor, the seven-part BBC series from 1979, directed by John Irvin and starring Alec Guinness in one of his best roles. This difference is not one of *quality*, since the two adaptations have very different aspirations. If one would say that one is better, one would have to add what it is that it is *better at*. The television series is a classic and the new film is destined to become one as well. The difference between the two is also not one of relative fidelity to Le Carré's novels. These are eminently filmable novels and great films have been made from them, but the quality of the adaptations made often results from distance to the original as much as from fidelity. The specific literary quality of Le Carré's novels resides in his sensitivity to the evolution of the English language within the corridors of power. This quality can only to some extent be captured in a screenplay.

What then are the different aspirations of these two versions of *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*? Both are character studies, using the enigmatic and intriguing figure of Smiley as an emblem of general societal anxieties. Both are expressionistic in their creation of a poignant atmosphere generated by colour, light and settings. Both the film and television series have memorable, quotable dialogues and both are very precise in their depiction of English elites.

The BBC adaptation follows the effort of 'Control', the head of MI5 to uncover a Soviet mole within the 'circus', the board of five that govern the intelligence service. This effort involves a mission to communist Czecholslovakia. A certain Jim Prideau is sent to make contact with a Czech general, allegedly willing to defect to the West. The mission fails. Control retires and dies within a few months. A few months later a low-grade British spy hears from a Russian spy that the chief of intelligence in Moscow, Karla, has planted a mole in the circus. Smiley, Control's second in command and loyal protégé, left the circus with Control. He is now

charged by a high-ranking Whitehall official, Lacon, to undertake a special investigation in order to find out whether the 'mole theory' has any substance. The story then unfolds as a series of interviews between Smiley and former colleagues. Their stories are told in flashback. This mosaic of flashbacks combines with a forward moving suspense narrative, driven by Smiley's effort to identify the mole. The original BBC miniseries has quite a complex temporal structure. The new film retains all the bearing elements of the plot, but its structure of narration is much less complex—and the film is of course much shorter. The original BBC series spans several hours, and the new film is 127 minutes. There are certainly flashbacks, and the film does move towards the resolution of an enigma, but in the miniseries, the difference between narrative present tense and flashback was more strongly marked in the style. The new film tends to annul temporal distance just as it tends to portray different locations as being on a continuum. We shall come back to this difference in characterization of locations later.

The difference between the two versions is, further, historical and aesthetic. The new film makes Smiley into an abstract existential figure of loneliness and dread, whereas the earlier Smiley is a symbol of the lost empire and its civil servant ethos. The new film speaks to contemporary Britain and its corporate elites; the miniseries evokes a conflict between competing cultures that was to produce this contemporary England. The rhythm of the series is leisurely, slowly building up suspicion and doubt. Conflict is expressed as menace and indirect intimidation. The rhythm of the new film is an alternation of idyllic, even lyrical, scenes and moments of terrifying violence. The miniseries panders to a middle England racist sensibility; the film is perfectly clean, screened for any remnants of political incorrectness. These multiple differences can be spun out in greater detail; and if one does so, one comes to realize that these two films are not just examples of different historical and aesthetic tastes, but that the two versions by virtue of their immense difference, have something to show us about the changes that have occurred not only in British society but in the Western world between the 1970s and now.

It is not just that the tone of the new film is *tougher*, or that it portrays a darker world in which there is less scope for individual difference, less generosity in human encounters, less time to reflect. It is also not a matter only of two different cultures of power. In Le Carré's 1970s England, civil servants are trained as scholars and their virtues are meticulousness, fairness of judgement, adherence to protocol and hierarchy. The contemporary boardroom in the UK or Hong Kong, or LA, in a bank or a large public institution, operates on a different, faster, more explicitly competitive energy.

These historical differences between the two versions are there, to be sure, but the new film convincingly suggests that what separates us from

the seventies runs deeper than public and private morality. In our half-conscious sense of ourselves and of the world, something appears to have changed. And it has changed in such a way that the seventies remains for us a lost continent.. The new film beautifully demonstrates the impossibility of bringing this continent back to life.

We live in an age that distrusts idealism; we tend to feel comfortable in professional environments where values are defined in terms of work and performance. This work ethic is in a sense nihilistic in that it does not allow for moral, political, religious or aesthetic values to play a significant role in decision making or in the construction of personal identities. The aesthetic and dramatic difference between the two adaptations corresponds exactly to the difference between this new type of social nihilism and a previous social morality which valued individual differences in style and character. Hence, the BBC version builds its atmosphere around sharply drawn character portraits. In the new film, atmosphere is created by situations. Individual characters are drawn more sketchily and with none of the British penchant for satire and caricature that permeated the BBC miniseries.

The seventies were a time of widespread social and political idealism. It was also a time of unprecedented clandestine political violence committed by Western states against non-Western states, with the aim to combat political groups that were their ideological enemies within the Cold War. The coincidence in Western democracies of political grass-roots movements and systemic state participation in clandestine violence created a situation of permanent ideological tension. More people than ever before knew about what was going on behind the scenes, thanks to left-wing newspapers like the French *Libération*. If one were a normally intelligent, politically interested person one would immediately grasp the gap that began to open up in Western democracies between a certain *front stage* and a certain *back stage*. If one took the view that one should somehow try to break the veil of state hypocrisy, through desperate acts of violence, one might become a terrorist. Hence the seventies produced a political culture in which political skepticism and knowingness coexisted with a range of social and political idealisms.

Le Carré's *Tinker Tailor* describes, through the prism of espionage and the British post-imperial civil service, how intelligent people, believing in democracy, live with the knowledge of its failures. In the Guinness version of Smiley, this moral ambivalence is embodied in a complex web of hesitant mannerisms. He always says less than what he means but not always in the same way. To show trust for Smiley is rarely to be direct, except in rare moments of briefing or shared reflection. Trust lies in a silence that does not need the trappings of politeness. There can be banter and swift injections of honesty, displaying familiarity and a sort of intimacy. Yet, silence can also express reserve and distrust.

It is crucial to the aesthetic and semiotic difference between the two adaptations that Smiley's behavior and use of language is presented very differently in each version. In the new film the relationship between silence and coercion unfolds on the solitary stage of Smiley's mind. The older Smiley performs silence. In the BBC miniseries silence is eloquent. It does not simply refer to Smiley's seclusion from others, his coldness, his unwillingness to give anything away. Silence is here a social act of communication, embedded in subtle norms of politeness, hierarchy and deliberation. Hence in the BBC version, Smiley performs a listening silence which is neither that of trust nor that of reproach. This listening attitude has to be prepared, of course. The interlocutor has to be brought into a state where he or she will say what Smiley wants to hear. This involves various types of coaxing. Smiley adapts his manner, tone of voice, degree of familiarity, degree of assertiveness or aggression to the social class, hierarchical position and relation to himself, in intelligence terms. Hence both silence and speech, gesture and demeanor spring from a carefully calibrated judgement. It is important to the world of which Smiley is an emblem that this judgement is simultaneously institutional and social. Smiley lives in a patrician universe in which institutional and social hierarchies both overlap and complement each other. Both are left entirely unquestioned by Smiley. It is also important to the political ethos of the BBC version that Smiley appears never to make any mistakes in judgement. He is a master manipulator and this art paradoxically comes across as a form of empathy, since he is only able to adjust his appearance to his interlocutors once he has assessed their place in the social world. The expressive code of hesitation that runs through the BBC version thus speaks to a complex theme of subjectivity and social submission. Ideologically, Le Carre's Smiley – and the BBC version is fateful to the book in this respect – reflects an ambivalence that is at the heart of the mandarin world it depicts. Smiley exemplifies careful, pondered responses to problems and he does so because he is undoubtingly wedded to a social institution, which he trusts not only in general but in the detail of its formal procedures.

In the new film, Oldman's Smiley also knows how to keep silent. He also modulates the tempo of his voice, speaking now slowly, now very quickly. His voice, however, has a certain quality that is very different from that of the former Smiley. It is *flat*. It is not only acoustically so, but also expressively and intellectually. His voice, like his face and character, give absolutely nothing away. There is no chamber of resonance behind his voice. His words don't suggest an underlying layer of emotion or unsaid thought, of something further that remains to be said that, out of delicacy or cunning one prefers not to say. In silence and in speech Oldman's Smiley gives you all he has to give and there is nothing else to discover.

Oldman substitutes for the earlier Smileys's hesitations and suggestiveness a raw brutality and a naked disillusionment. He uses

changes of tempo and volume to great effect in this respect. There is no continuity between silence and speech in Oldman's Smiley. His silence is like that of a person who is at his best when no-one is around. Speech then happens abruptly and often with an unexpected speed and violence. In this economy of speech, there is no room for hesitation. Smiley either keeps his own counsel or attacks, and he may attack even when speaking slowly and in a low voice.

Oldman's flatness is highly disconcerting. His noble and shy demeanor and his moments of vulnerability raise the expectation that he is a sensitive, thoughtful man, but that does not seem to be the case. His flatness takes on a different dimension when he is reminiscing about meeting the great Russian spy Karla. Ageing, drunk, losing his composure, he starts to relive this past event very vividly and begins to reenact it before his young friend Peter. He delivers lines that in the miniseries sounded like a liberal credo but which now sound like a kind of nihilistic confession: 'We have spent enough time you and I to look for the weaknesses in each other's systems and we both know there is as little of value in the one as in the other.' In this moment, he shows himself naked and honest, but there is no depth. There is nothing to be discovered above the raw truth of his own nihilism.

Oldman's Smiley does have moments of silent thoughtfulness. At these points his face is *even more flat*, even grayer. These moments of silent reflection are always introspective in that they are fueled by memory. Except for his one conversation with Peter, Oldman's Smiley doesn't share his reflections, or his memories. These moments of reflections are thus intensely solitary, even when Peter is present. The solitary quality of Oldman's Smiley is further emphasized by the visual motif of swimming in a lake that occurs a few times. He swims with his glasses on. His introspective ruminations are brought to life by a deft visual metaphor. The dingy hotel they have chosen as their makeshift headquarters is in the new film just behind the Liverpool Street station. When Smiley looks out the window he sees the tracks. The image of the tracks then becomes a metaphor for his thought process.

The atmosphere of the earlier version presents the common social bond as one of complicity. Hence, in the miniseries, silence and slowness were tied to a shared culture of judgment and deliberation. The Guinness Smiley embodies that culture to the point of caricature. He speaks as if it were unthinkable that he hadn't thought of what to say, and why, and how, in respect of the relation he has to the other person—or persons—and how he relates to them in terms of class. Oldman's Smiley on the other hand speaks like a depressive person who has an operative intelligence and who fundamentally dislikes other people. The Guinness Smiley is very different. He is shy and wary of others. He is fastidious and punctilious. He is snobbish and slightly pompous. He can also exhibit a coy charm as when speaking to his nominal superior, Lacon, teasing him

for his uptight manner and pompousness. The Guiness Smiley uses manners and mannerisms as buffers and displays a self-contained dignity that does not need to assert itself. Oldman's Smiley never appears entirely self-contained in this way. Oldman's Smiley reflects the ethos of an institution that values professionalism and performance but not personal judgement or deliberation. The institution that he inhabits cultivates similarities of professional performance rather than differences of personal style.

In his own kind of reclusiveness, the Guinness Smiley attempts to *think about the world*. Being fastidious, he of course seeks to do his job according to every rule and protocol, but through these procedures, he is trying to understand Karla, the Soviet spymaster. We see little of Smiley prior to the feud that leads to his retirement, but what we see gives the impression of a scholarly type of civil servant whose pedantic sense of detail is at the same time carried by the conviction that something very important is at stake. In most of the film, he is a returning wolf, drawn back from retirement. He is no longer surrounded by procedures and pampered by secretaries. He now has to turn his spying techniques against his former institution. This makes him of course more interesting.

In a dialectical twist engineered by the plot, Smiley who is more institutionally trained and loyal than anyone, becomes the emblem of an individual fighting with the only force of his mind against the collective power of an institution. Since the institution is infiltrated by an enemy power, he is in reality fighting this enemy power. With his own individual mind he is taking on, first the British Intelligence community and through that the espionage system of the Soviet Empire. No small task one can say. The hyperbolical stakes of Le Carré's plot are well preserved in the original version and completely lost in the new film. In the new film there is very little sense of conspiracy, since we have little notion that anyone spends much time trying to figure out what the other party is up to. Smiley's moments of reflection could be taken from an Agatha Christie novel. He is trying to find out *who did what*. We do see other parts of the world: Turkey and Hungary. We hear Hungarian and Russian but the film conveys no real fear of the enemy. Nor is the enemy mysterious or in some way hidden.

In a post-Cold War world, it is difficult to imagine the mindset of that time. In the Cold War, what was behind the Iron Curtain was so very literally secret. In the West one was quite fascinated by this secrecy and very conscious of it. Karla is a figure of this great unknown in the Cold War espionage war. He is the evil personification of a system that one otherwise would find it difficult to imagine. In the new film, Karla and Control and Smiley exist on a continuum, visually and in terms of the story. It is true that Karla is viler and more violent than his English counterparts, but they do not seem different in kind. The men in the

boardroom also come across as vicious, only we don't seem them performing acts of physical violence. In the miniseries, the visit to Czechoslovakia is presented from a tourist's point of view. The actor makes no attempt at speaking actual Czech; the atmosphere is that of a Westerner visiting an exotic land. In the new film, we have a shooting scene in the middle of Budapest, in a small square surrounded by tall buildings. This seems no less real or no more mysterious than London of the seventies – in fact it seems less mysterious since the film mystifies London by showing almost only interiors. We have some very static, Antonioni style geometric shots of a street with St Paul's in the background. But otherwise even the car scenes become interior scenes of a sort. Hence the new film undermines the notion of a dichotomy between here and there, us and them – and in this it betrays its profoundly *post-Cold War sensibility*.

Shot in chiaroscuro with a clear emphasis on the darker hues, the miniseries insidiously produces in the viewer a feeling of irreducible unclarity, a sense that truth only very gradually separates itself from illusion. The new film is glossy and crisp. It does not aspire to historical accuracy. The emblem of its anti-realism is Smiley's car: he drives a Citroen DS that in its modernist style fits the overall style of the film, but which of course is completely implausible as a car driven by the cultural nationalist that Smiley is in Le Carré's novel. The visual style of the later film is that of a conceptual art work, reminding one of artists like Thomas Demand. Its flamboyantly retro-futuristic office set reminds one of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985). Its chromatic spectrum centres on green, which gives the film a distinctly cold feel. The settings of the former version are those of a post-imperial establishment. Its cramped rooms and white wooden doors in need of fresh paint are replaced in the new film by luxurious office spaces and modernist architecture. Through this style, the film conveys a slick atmosphere in which transitions between beauty and brutality can be extremely swift. Smiley's nihilism and the film's cynical and cold tone fuse in a series of negations.

This is a world in which violence is naked, not covered by decorum. It is a world in which social relations are governed by uniform laws of competition and survival rather than by complex hierarchical, unspoken codes. Thought and memory are withheld within a space so interior that it is *too secret even to be given expression through silence*. There is little sense of geo-political difference between the West and the Soviet empire, just as there is little sense of a difference between social classes. This is a flat world, matching perfectly the flatness of Oldman's performance.

The flatness, speed and continuity of this world, its uniformity in time and space and the anonymity of its characters form a sociological description of our current reality, at least as it appears in the professional world of large institutions. The BBC miniseries appears as an archeological document, as the chronicle of a very old world captured just before it was

about to disappear. This older world was imperial and undemocratic, racist and slow. It was also a world made up of distinct individuals. In that world, deliberation was cherished as a political instrument. Our current post-Blair neo-liberal form of governance uses different cognitive tools – and these are tools that are projected into language and manners in a way that Tomas Alfredosn's film perfectly captures.