"Yeah? Well, MY god has a HAMMER!": Myth-Taken Identity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

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“Yeah? Well, MY god has a HAMMER!”

 Myth-Taken Identity in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

Brian Cogan and Jeff Massey

With box office returns of well over a billion dollars worldwide, The Avengers (2012) clearly struck a chord with audiences beyond Marvel's loyal comic book fan-base. The script is tight, the action intense, the production values high, and the casting stellar, but are these elements enough to warrant the insane popularity of one superhero film amidst a Hollywood landscape already saturated with spandex-clad do-gooders and four-color villainy? As many a film critic has lamented of late, we currently live in an age of superhero cinema. Combined, the "Big Two," Marvel and DC, have overseen more than 30 live-action superhero films featuring their properties in the last decade alone. And while some have been more successful than others (the gamut runs from Green Lantern and Elektra to Iron Man and The Dark Knight), none has generated fandom, buzz or box-office revenue to match The Avengers.¹

What, then, does The Avengers have that other contemporary superhero films do not? Is it simply—as Tony Stark says to Loki—that "we have a Hulk"? Or could it be that the Avengers film franchise finally tapped into a mode of storytelling that has permeated popular culture for millennia and comic books for decades? Hollywood has long been fond of touting summer blockbuster films as "epic" (an overt nod to a classical works of massive scope such as the Iliad and the Odyssey), but is The Avengers the first truly "mythological" superhero film ever made? Or at least the first franchise to fully articulate and codify its own mythology?

The Avengers certainly profits from its own high production values and the current cultural predilection for costumed heroes, but it ultimately succeeds as a narrative because it is the culmination of a coherent, integrative film mythology that paints a world far greater than that shown on screen for 143 minutes. It represents, in the parlance of myth studies, a holistic cultural narrative; in the jargon of comics studies, it shows strong integrative continuity. Hollywood often talks of "tent-pole" films, big-splash events that are designed to support secondary and tertiary retail streams (toys, Happy Meals, t-shirts, video games, sequels, etc.) and The Avengers is certainly that. But the holistic continuity of The Avengers—the erection of the tent-pole itself—would not have been possible with-
out the preceding films that tied into and presaged the meta-referential superhero universe about to unfold. Each of the Avengers "prequels"—Iron Man (2008), Iron Man II (2010), Thor (2011), and Captain America: The First Avenger (2011)—tapped into particular world mythologies (Greek, American, and Germanic), recalled universal heroic archetypes (the Selfish Intellect, the Good Soldier, and the Hubristic Warrior), and through sly Easter eggs and post-credits teasers suggested that these particular and universal themes were an integrated part of a greater narrative whole. Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige branded these films the "Marvel Cinematic Universe": multiple heroes in multiple films operating within a singular continuity. While such continuity in traditional comics had been de rigueur for decades, for film fans accustomed to strings of "stand-alone" superhero films and constant reboots, this was an unexpected revelation. Or, as Nick Fury tells Tony Stark at the conclusion of the first Iron Man film, "You think you're the only superhero in the world? Mr. Stark, you've become part of a bigger universe. You just don't know it yet."

Marvel's cinematic "Avengers Initiative" resonated with modern audiences by offering a new and exceedingly rich form of intercultural and intertextual movie mythology rather than a single, stand-alone myth. Avengers director (and comic book fanboy/writer) Joss Whedon noted in the 2012 "Assemble the Ultimate Protection" featurette (an odd promo piece sponsored by Norton Antivirus) that "Marvel is taking the characters that they are putting into their movies and bringing them all together in a team franchise experience, which really has never been done before." Of course, as Whedon knew full well, this type of "team franchise experience" has been done before often and successfully in comic books and cultural mythologies, from Jason and the Argonauts to the Fantastic Four. Whedon's own Buffyverse (which links a film, multiple television series, and various comic titles) remains a model of successful integration across media: the adroit on-screen crossovers of two television series (Buffy and Angel) alone proved Whedon's capacity for fantasy-based continuity. And so, under his direction, the "Avengers Initiative"—and eventually the larger Marvel Cinematic Universe—became the first synergistic mythology effectively orchestrated by Hollywood. Unlike so many of the more recent superhero films that are, in the view of critics like Derek Thompson, "average on purpose," the results of this cross-cinematic narrative are spectacular (in a way the Spider-Man films could only dream). The Marvel Cinematic Universe is now, in nearly every sense, mythology.

Indeed, while the pre-Avengers films owe much archetypically and structurally to ancient mythology, they also continue Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's reimagining of costumed superheroes stories as modern day mythology. Both Lee and Kirby looked at superhero stories not as black-and-white morality plays about good and evil (as their objectivist peer Steve Ditko often did), but instead tried to create new worlds with modern myths appropriate for the twentieth century. In an Atomic Age that saw bombs with enough power to destroy the world many times over, many twentieth century writers, including Lee and Kirby (both of whom had served during World War II), felt that the modern world needed its own monsters and abominations, its own gods and heroes, rather than simple retellings of ancient myths. Historically speaking, the Marvel Comics Universe was rife with its own self-consistent mythology long before the current Marvel Cinematic Universe was a dream in Hollywood's eyes.

To please several generations of comic fans, the Marvel Cinematic Universe had to take the canonical adventures of almost five decades and distill them into something commercially viable, while simultaneously employing mythological elements familiar to
a general, or non-comics savvy, audience. Hence the older mythological frameworks adapted by Lee and Kirby, as well as their post-World War II re-imaginings of the hero, had to be adapted a third time to create a movie-friendly modern mythos, one that would lead to an epic film that could incorporate all the major Marvel characters (or at least the ones not licensed to other studios). Unlike many earlier superhero films, which too often required viewers to be well-versed in comics continuity for any sense of scope (vague references to other heroic properties and sly "in-jokes" designed to reward the nerd-core), the pre-Avengers MCU films slowly built up a series of mythic films that could reference one another. As a result, Marvel has created a cinematic universe with its own continuity, one that stands apart from the (often convoluted) continuity of comics, a continuity that rewards cinema-goers for being cinema-goers, rather than just rewarding comic fans for going to the movies.

Beginning with *Iron Man* in 2008, elements of a larger Marvel mythology would be integrated into almost every pre-Avengers MCU film. Book-ending *Avengers* both before (*Iron Man* [2008], *Iron Man 2* [2010], *Thor* [2011], and *Captain America: The First Avenger* [2011]) and after (*Iron Man 3* [2013], *Thor: The Dark World* [2013], and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* [2014]) the "solo" Avengers films initiate and maintain a consistent narrative that builds towards and builds upon the actions of the contiguous films. This carefully planned mélange of mythologies within the films not only set up the canon for the *Avengers* franchise, but also successfully referenced ancient and modern mythology to create universally appealing heroes for a modern movie-going audience. In the pre-*Avengers* films, familiar echoes of Greco-Roman demigods, Norse gods, Celtic heroes, and Arthurian legends commingle with Lee and Kirby's post-atomic superheroes: as in the comics, our gods wear spandex on screen. *The Avengers* succeeds where other mythologically-inspired one-shot films (the many Beowulfian warriors, Arthurian kings, and Grecian earners that have paraded across the marqueses of late) comparatively fail, because Marvel managed to integrate ancient (Western) and modern (American) mythologies throughout the pre-*Avengers* solo films. *Iron Man*, *Thor*, and *Captain America* individually paved the way for their own communal success. Superman and Batman, who had held the cinematic advantage for decades prior, had to wonder: where did we go wrong?

**Crisis on Multiple Earths: The MCU vs. the DCU**

Given the early history of narrative structures and superheroic models employed by DC and Marvel, it is perhaps surprising that, in the last decade, DC has been mythologically beaten to the punch by Marvel on the big screen. One long-standing view of comics' history posits that DC founded their superheroic universe in the 1930s on Ancient Mythic Archetypes, while Marvel—some thirty years later—seized the market share by portraying Everyman rather than Superman, in essence trading high-flying mythic heroes for more identifiable, grounded heroes. And so on the DC side of the equation we have Superman, the embodiment of LIGHT, a hero whose godly powers are derived from our yellow sun; he is the four-color avatar of the ancient Sun God. Grant Morrison, one of the most prolific and celebrated comic book writers of the last twenty years, noted in his book on superheroes and modern mythology, *Supergods*, that "Superman was Christ, an unkillable Champion sent down by his heavenly father (Jor-El) to redeem us by example and teach us how to solve our problems without killing one another." Batman, conversely,
is the DARK Knight, a legendary creature of shadow, forged from murder, a man who preys upon the fears of criminals while operating almost exclusively under cover of darkness; he is the monochromatic God of Death. Rounding out the divine DC “Trinity” is Wonder Woman, a being straight out of Greek mythology; she is the GODDESS Incarnate. Other heroic avatars with deep roots in mythology (the Flash [Greco-Roman], Shazam [Hebraic and Greco-Roman], Hawkman [Egyptian], Aquaman [Atlantean], among others) show that DC has long relied on Western mythology for narrative inspiration. With the notable exception of Thor (more on him below), Marvel’s early heroes—a teenage arachnid, a stretchy genius, an invisible woman, a rock-like brute, a fiery hot-rodder, an iron-clad technophile, a Jekyll-and-Hyde rage monster—are harder to identify as part of the ancient Western mythological tradition. Marvel’s key properties, in other words, are less obviously mythic than those of DC.

It is important to emphasize (especially as most film viewers and modern comics readers are not comic book historians) that DC heroes were, in their earliest presentation, superhuman first and human second if at all. Superman’s alter ego is Clark Kent, but that is, as Quentin Tarantino opines through his eponymous antagonist in Kill Bill: Vol. 2 (2004), a construct, a false identity adopted by an alien god walking about on Earth among humans:

BILL: Superman didn’t become Superman. Superman was born Superman. When Superman wakes up in the morning, he’s Superman. His alter ego is Clark Kent. His outfit with the big red “S,” that’s the blanket he was wrapped in as a baby when the Kent’s found him. Those are his clothes. What Kent wears—the glasses, the business suit—that’s the costume. That’s the costume Superman wears to blend in with us. Clark Kent is how Superman views us. And what are the characteristics of Clark Kent. He’s weak ... he’s unsure of himself ... he’s a coward. Clark Kent is Superman’s critique on the whole human race.

In other words, Superman is always Superman, just as Zeus (Jove) is always God, no matter what name he may offer the mundane nymphs and human maidens he seduces while “vacationing” on Earth. Humanity is a pose for these celestial beings, these sky-kings.

Marvel heroes, by contrast, were often reluctant to take up the mantle of superhero at all. When Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Steve Ditko reinvigorated Marvel Comics in the early ‘60s (beginning with the Fantastic Four and Spider-Man), they quickly established the Marvel Universe as distinct from the DC model. The art at Marvel was both crisp and evocative, the colors really popped, and the dialogue sounded closer to realistic speech than ever before “heard” in a comic. By most accounts, Stan Lee’s dialogue actually sounded like it was coming from human beings, rather than proselytizing moral compasses (Thor, once again, being a notable [and quasi-Shakespearean] exception). But the greatest difference between the DC and Marvel Comics was in Marvel’s presentation of the human hero.

Spider-Man is a teen who is bitten by a radioactive spider, sure, but one who—as he swings along the steel corridors of NYC—is as likely to be worrying about his beloved Aunt May, paying his rent, finishing his homework, and meeting girls as he is about the impending brouhaha with Doc Ock. Peter Parker is always Peter Parker, even when he’s self-consciously wearing his “web-pits” or displaying the proportionate strength of a spider. Meanwhile, as citizens of Metropolis routinely “Look! Up in the sky!” for their sky-god to save them, Spider-Man, regardless of the fact he is a superhero, is far more likely to be labeled a “costumed menace” than a god. And although the Fantastic Four can be
read as a quartet of superheroic archetypes—the Brains, the Brawn, the Hothead, the “behind-every-good-man-is-a-protective-1960s-mother”—they are, first and foremost, a human family. They bicker, they argue, they love, they marry, they feel guilty, and so on. The “normal” interpersonal dynamics between Reed, Ben, Johnny, and Sue remain largely unchanged even after their life-altering cosmic-ray-enhanced journey into space. Perhaps most significantly, the Fantastic Four do not have secret identities—they are always, simultaneously, Reed Richards/Mr. Fantastic, Sue Storm/the Invisible Girl (Woman), Johnny Storm/the Human Torch, and Ben Grimm/the Thing. There is no separation of identity, no god-pretending-to-be-human ruse as in the DCU. Marvel traditionally presents human beings dealing with being super, not superbeings dealing with being human.

Thor, of course, is a bit of an exception to this model, but even he breaks the DCU model of “caped god on Earth.” In his earliest Marvel incarnation (solidified by the outstanding 1980s run by Walt Simonson), Thor is truly the ancient Norse God of Thunder, not a superheroic approximation, avatar, or archetypal doppelganger (however much the modern films take a step back on this, replacing “magical science” for “magical belief”). But if the brash superhero was a god, he was nevertheless exiled to Midgard by his father, Odin, as a lesson in humility, his godly identity hidden even from himself. In fact, Journey into Mystery #83 suggests that Thor has no memory of being Thor at all, until mild-mannered (and physically disabled) physician Don Blake—on the run from space invaders—finds the mighty hammer Mjolnir in a cave and is apparently judged worthy of wielding the mantle of Thor. As Blake/Thor exclaims: “Thor!! The legendary God of Thunder!! The mightiest warrior of all mythology!! This is his hammer!! And I—I am Thor!!!” Thor and Blake would, just like the Hulk and Bruce Banner, body swap periodically over the years until Blake finally discovers (in issue #159) that he never really existed at all, that Donald Blake was just a skinny human parody of Thor with amnesia and a limp. As Thor wonders aloud, “But what happens now? Do I walk amidst the civilized world as a mythological god? Or—? It is too bewildering!” Thor (in the early comics, at least) is not a god pretending to be a human, but alternately a god and a human, then a god and a human version of himself, then only god.

So, on the whole, Marvel responded to the DC model of flat, often one-dimensional mythic avatars by showcasing the humanity of their spandex-clad heroes. Spider-Man and the Fantastic Four are “superhuman” and the X-Men literally “homo superior,” but they are all humans first, godlings second. The cinematic Avengers—a playboy in a tech suit, an unfrozen soldier, a quasi-godling, a rage monster, and two spies—hardly seemed to come from a pedigree destined for modern mythology.

I’m a Marvel and I’m a DC: The Rise of the Cosmic Marvel Film

Of course, such reductive views of superheroes have been in print and on screen for—in some cases—nearly a century now. But these broad stroke definitions encapsulate the models and reflections of superheroes that the average consumer knows and which (therefore) Modern Hollywood draws upon most frequently: Superman is a god-like do-gooder, Batman is a frightening dark “knight,” the Fantastic Four is a sci-fi family, and Spider-Man is an angsty teen.

In all fairness, producing a successful super-hero film, getting the nuances (cos-
tunes!) right, placating the comics fan-base, and playing to the core strengths of long term characters with lengthy story arcs is not easy. Tapping into the cultural zeitgeist never is. But overall, the creators of the Marvel Cinematic Universe have taken more time and care to balance the mythological with the mundane than their Distinguished Competitor. Even the films outside of the current MCU continuity (due to ownership disputes between Marvel and Sony) focus on the human within the cosmic. The recent Spider-Man films have invariably concentrated on Peter Parker's human problems over his sometimes comically portrayed “super” problems (“How do I use my webs again?” and “Why is Peter's room all sticky?”). Likewise, the non-MCU Fantastic Four films, although often dismissed by critics and fans, really lean into the humanity of the main characters. As in the early comics, Mr. Fantastic's nemesis, Dr. Doom, is introduced as Reed Richards' foil long before superpowers entered the picture. Ben Grimm still longs to be human rather than “super.” And despite the global threat of Galactus the World-Devourer looming ominously, Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer (2007) is really about Sue and Reed getting married. Their stories remain super personal, not superhuman. So again, on the face of it, the god-like DC heroes should, by all rights, have given rise to the most mythological cinematic narratives. But there's more to mythology than predictable heroic archetypes.

Successful mythologies—from the Homeric to the Whedonesque—need not be entirely predictable, or even logical. In Works and Days and Theogony, the ancient Greek mythographer Hesiod presents two versions of the “Pandora's Box” myth, for example, and the Christian Bible offers two versions of the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis. Yet narrative inconsistency has not detracted from the popularity, power, or persistence of these myths. Paradoxes abound in “mythic reality.” One of the most perplexing “mythic time” moments of Western culture is the Birth of Athena/Birth of Hephaestus paradox. According to Hesiod, Athena is born parthenogenically from Zeus' head. That is, Zeus (ever the philandering husband) woos and beds the goddess Metis, who becomes pregnant with his child. But jealous Zeus, citing a prophecy that stated Metis' child would overshadow the father, consumes Metis entirely. Soon after internalizing the pregnant goddess (whose name translates as "thought"), Zeus experiences excruciating headaches, so Hephaestus (the god of craft and metallurgy) splits open his step-father's head with a giant axe. Out pops Athena, a fully-grown and armor-clad warrior woman: the new Goddess of Wisdom (and clear precursor to Wonder Woman and Xena).

This is a wonderful myth, full of weirdness and supernatural allegory. But there's a mundane problem with Hephaestus in the scene. For, according to Hesiod, Hephaestus is the son of Hera, Zeus' long-suffering wife, who parthenogenically gives birth to her son without the "help" of Zeus or any other male donor. As his myth goes, Hera initiates his unusual birth as a rebellious reaction to Zeus' solo-birth of Athena. Narratively, then, Hera gives birth to Hephaestus after Zeus gives birth to Athena—a birth that Hephaestus midwifes.

Yet like all of Hesiod's Theogony, the individual myths of Athena and Hephaestus are interconnected, forming a grand narrative relevant to Greek society at the time. That's what mythology is, at its core: an interconnected set of stories embraced by a culture. In other Greek myths, we see the Olympian gods interact with various "local" Greek and Trojan heroes; in the often-retold tales of Hercules and his labors, the hero runs into creatures who interact with other heroes in their own subsequent tales; Virgil's Aeneid—mythological propaganda at its finest—recycles the various monsters and heroes of
Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Thus old myths serve new cultures, linking people through shared narratives beyond the constraints of time and space (and sometimes, logic).⁴⁷

Despite the paradoxes characteristic of mythological storytelling, there is an interconnectedness and continuity to the individual "mythic" tales of Ancient Greek heroes that results in a grand "mythology." By this standard, comic books can be—and have long been—considered "modern mythology." The heroes of the DC comics universe, the heroes of the Marvel comics universe, traditionally interact with one another, operate within a consistent world, and even refer to one another. There are highly literate editors—envied by Hesiod, no doubt—who now patrol for "narrative continuity." At various points in comic history, companies have "rebooted" their entire universes in the name of self-consistent narrative. In many ways, the comic book model of mythology is more mythological, thanks to continuity controls, than classical mythology. And its fans, as the ultimate worshipers, embrace (sales!), emulate (cosplay!), critique (spoiler alert!), retell (fanfic!), and thus ultimately help shape the future of their new cultural mythology. The current interconnected films of the Marvel Cinematic Universe warrant the "mythology" label not simply because they recall ancient myths, or tap into cultural archetypes, but because they present a cohesive and epic universe: the MCU presents a deep mythology rather than a simple series of singular myths.

**Behold True Believers! The Mighty Marvel Movie Era Marches On**

Just as the post-Avengers MCU films continue to expand the universe established in *Avengers* through post-credits teasers (meta-theatrically voiced by folks as diverse as Baron Strucker), the pre-Avengers appearances of Nick Fury (in Campbell's mythology who can be seen as the archetypal elder who ushers the heroes along on their quest) served to herald an expanding cinematic future that pleased fans, but also acknowledged its ancient narrative heritage.

There are many differences between the DC films and the Marvel films. Some fans have argued that the recent Marvel films are simply better produced; they are certainly more consistent than the DC films (*Green Lantern* [2011] is often trotted out as evidence in such debates). But one key difference is that the recent Marvel films have tapped into undercurrents of mythology that DC films have seemingly abandoned in an effort at shaking off their own staid—even inflexible—mythic archetypes. That is, the DCU of late, and in stark contrast to its earlier success in the 1970s with *Superman*, has portrayed its cinematic heroes in increasingly dark and dour "realistic" tones. Witness the relentless greyscale of Gotham in the *Dark Knight Trilogy*, or the toned-down palette dominating *Man of Steel*; these are sky-kings made mundane on the big screen. Meanwhile, the MCU has been expanding their increasingly fantastic mythology with more and more super beings as the *Avengers* mythology leads towards a cosmic conflict against Thanos and the Infinity Gauntlet storyline. It's a trend towards more and more fantastic, super, and potentially hopeful myths that seems likely to continue past the current *Avengers* films. If we are to believe what villainous Baron Wolfgang von Strucker says at the end of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, the ever-expanding MCU will soon include the twin "miracles" Scarlet Witch and Quicksilver. This proved to be prophetic with the release of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015). In an interview for his book, *Supergods*, Morrison sug-
gusted that we "can look at Dark Knight Rises as the conclusion of a trend and the Avengers as the beginning of one." The MCU is riding a wave of fantastic storytelling and universe expansion that has successfully drawn new fans to the Mighty Marvel Marching Banner.

With the teaser at the end of the first Iron Man film, the MCU began to herald a grandeur that, while perhaps unfamiliar to film-goers, was refreshingly familiar to card-carrying members of POOM (Friends of Old Marvel). When Nick Fury appears unexpectedly in Tony Stark's apartment to announce that Stark is not "the only superhero in the world," but is now a "part of a bigger universe," Stark's immediate reaction is to ask, "Who the hell are you?" Comic fans in the audience already knew, of course, that Samuel L. Jackson is "Nick Fury, Director of S.H.I.E.L.D.," but at this moment Stark stands for traditional film structure: one wherein the hero's (his!) story is all that matters, as if Iron Man's superheroics exist within a narrative bubble. But from this moment on, Marvel's cinematic myth become cinematic mythology.

The interconnectivity of the films, and of the MCU, is reinforced by character cameos and name-drops, as well as a conspicuous prop, the Tesseract, an otherworldly energy source that acts as a grail item throughout the pre-Avengers MCU films. Fury is a central, and active, linking figure throughout many of the films, but so too is Agent Coulson, who acts as Fury's proxy and eventual impetus for the "Avengers" unification: their common reason for vengeance. Coulson lends his wry humanity to Iron Man, Iron Man II, and Thor, before dying in Avengers (never fear: he subsequently appears on the small screen in Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. [2013]). Black Widow simultaneously kicks ass and unifies the narratives of Iron Man II, Avengers, and Captain America: The Winter Soldier. Minor "recurring villains" also occupy this celluloid universe: in Iron Man II, Tony Stark battles not only physical threats, but political ones, including the governmental control of his armor, spearheaded by Senator Stern (Gary Shandling). In the course of governmental hearings over Stark's possession of the "nuclear deterrent" that is the Iron Man armor, Stark suggests that Stern is an "ass-clown"; by the end of the film, Stern suggests that Stark is a "little prick." This mildly homosodal badinage serves as a side-conflict to Iron Man's physical battles against Whiplash and Tony's corporate battles against Justin Hammer. But the Stern flyting gains further depth when, in Captain America: The Winter Soldier, Stern subtly whispers to Jasper Sitwell's character: "Hail HYDRA." We suddenly realize that Stern is not just Stark's personal enemy, but the enemy of all heroes in this universe. The interconnectivity of the MCU is, in this one short line, highlighted to the viewer: what happens in the Captain America universe matters in the Iron Man universe, because they are—lest we forget—the same place and the same epic cycle."

Conclusion: To Infinity (Gauntlet) and Beyond!

Superheroes in Hollywood have not, historically, succeeded in maintaining a continuity that would enable mythology, only mythic moments. The cinematic world of the Dark Knight, for example, has not, as far as the viewer can tell, also been the world of the Man of Steel. Gotham City and Metropolis have long "known of one another" in their shared comics universe (in that mythology, replete with crossovers and "World's Finest" team-ups), but Superman and Batman films have never successfully synergized; Batman never calls for Superman to back him up, and Superman never does a fly-by over Gotham on screen. Their worlds and their myths are discrete. Likewise, as far as non-MCU films
are concerned, the X-Mansion may exist fifty miles north of the Baxter Building, but since their inhabitants have never crossed paths on screen, we may never know unless we bring our own comics-based mythology to the cinema with us.

Yet like the chapters in Theogony, the Norse Eddas, the Bible, or the Mahabharata, the myths of the MCU are now interconnected, forming a grand mythology: an interconnected set of stories embraced by a culture. By this standard, superhero comic books can be and have been considered “modern mythology” for geek culture. Within the four-color page, the heroes of the Marvel Comics Universe, like their counterparts in the DCU, interact with one another via team-ups and smack-downs, occupy the same consistent geography, and operate within a self-consistent world (what JRR Tolkien would call a true “sub-creation”). Overseeing these universes are editors who patrol for “continuity.” And at various points in history, comics companies have rebooted their entire universes in the name of self-consistent universal narrative: in the name of mythology, superheroes have even died for the sake of such continuity. It is perhaps fitting, then, that Coulson died to unite the Avengers and catalyze their continuity on screen.

Grant Morrison once opined that superheroes “fill in the gap in a secular culture because they open up dimensions of the cosmic and the transcendent, which is the stuff legends usually have to deal with. […] What superheroes have done is give these ancient qualities a new dress so we can recognize ourselves again.” Jack Kirby created the “New Gods” as a continuation of his old comic heroes, which were, in turn, a continuation of ancient mythological heroes; the MCU is a coherent continuation of the Marvel Comics Universe: a new cosmic mythology that offers cinemagoers an enduring new, but familiar meaning system.

The ancients had Gilgamesh, Samson, Achilles, and Hercules. What about us in the modern world? Our god has a hammer. And we have a Hulk.

NOTES


4. Kirby evidenced this particular drive later in his career as well, when he created the aptly named New Gods for DC Comics.

5. For brevity’s sake, and since, for the most part, they were not intentionally used to set up the Avengers, we exclude the first two Hulk movies from this analysis. But note the deleted scenes in Hulk with the Cap cameo.


10. Likewise, the Amazon princess Diana (daughter of Queen Hippolyte) is always Wonder
Woman, even when she is pretending to be the bespectacled Army nurse, Diana Prince (a human whose identity she literally buys in Sensation Comics #1). It's an identity of convenience at the basest level, brought about by a weird coincidence suddenly noticed by the self-exiled Amazonian who spies a weeping nurse: "I just noticed—with these glasses off, you look a lot like me! I have an idea! If I gave you money, would you sell me your credentials?" The weeping nurse agrees (happily going AWOL to join her fiancé in South America), saying, "I'm Diana too! Diana Prince! And you'd better remember that last name—because it'll be yours from now on." In the early comics, Wonder Woman's human identity isn't even a self-creation, but that of another. As for Batman, although he was born Bruce Wayne, a real human boy, hasn't been a boy (or a fully functional human being) since the night his parents were murdered and he took up the mantle of the Dark Knight. Despite Bill's assurance in Kill Bill II, Bruce's "playboy billionaire" routine (sleep all day, collect investment checks, disappear into the night) is only a guise to keep Batman funded and well-rested. The cape and cowl are Batman's "real" face and the suit and cravat are his disguise. When these three Golden Age DC heroes are in their "civilian" guises, they are all still on the clock, heroically speaking. The DC Universe is predicated upon gods wearing human masks essentially being superheroes 24/7.

11. The Hulk, of course, isn't a god-disguised-as-human, but a metamorphic human who loses his humanity/godhood depending on his mood. But in his early representations (before the modern comics introduced "Smart Hulk," "Mr. Fixit," and "Gladiator Hulk"), Bruce Banner provides most of the emotive, human hook that drives the narrative. The Hulk simply exists to, well, smash.


13. Superman, in particular, has suffered a good deal on the big screen because of cultural expectations of his godhood. That is, his films have succeeded most when he has been portrayed as the Sun God—the morally righteous, one-dimensional Boy Scout—and not when he has been allowed an excess of humanity or personal desire. Witness, on the one hand, the much-lauded first Superman film (1978), wherein a happily four-color Superman makes the "hard choice" between saving his beloved Lois Lane (and California) or saving Hackensack, New Jersey; spoiler alert: he saves Hackensack... first. The early Superman films repeatedly delighted in drawing the "you are a god, not a man" dichotomy rather large: when Superman gives up his powers for "human love" in Superman II (1980), the world suffers, including his personal world, and so he gives up his humanity to be "super," or an aloof god once again. On the other hand, note the derision heaped upon the recent Man of Steel (2013), in which a grey-spandexed Superman exacts personal vengeance upon his familial nemesis, Zod. There is not room in Superman's cinematic world for human and god to co-exist. Aeneas would sympathize. Batman has had a greater variety of on-screen incarnations, but as the recent allegory-heavy Dark Knight Trilogy attests, what Batman stands for is far more important to fans than who wears the Batsuit. And Wonder Woman is still looking for her modern Hollywood moment.

14. The Fantastic Four (2005), for example, is often unfavorably compared to Pixar's The Incredibles (2004) which is touted as the best "Fantastic Four" film ever made, much as Galaxy Quest has been ranked the best "Star Trek" film ever made.

15. This can also be true with comics. As Morrison has noted, "one of the most amazing things about those [comic] universes is that they exist, there's a paper continuum that reflects the history, but people don't die, it's like the Simpsons, people don't age, they just change" (Brian Hiatt, "Grant Morrison on the Death of Comices," RollingStone.com, 8/22/11, retrieved 2/20/15).


17. Likewise, S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent Jasper Sitwell appears alongside Coulson in Thor and The Avengers, only to be revealed as a HYDRA Operative in Captain America: The Winter Soldier. There, Sitwell confesses to Captain America and Black Widow that Arnim Zola's targeting algorithm enables the Insight Protocol to target and eliminate anyone on the planet, including "a TV anchor in Cairo, the Undersecretary of Defense, a high school valedictorian in Iowa City. Bruce Banner, Stephen Strange, anyone who's a threat to HYDRA!" Sitwell's name drops not only the Hulk, but also Marvel's Sorcerer Supreme, Dr. Strange, a character whose film will not be released until 2016. Clearly, Marvel has the "long con" in mind here, or, a universe in which everything is connected going forward.

