

Comic Book Takeover: The Ubiquitous Influence of the Medium on Hollywood

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Though film studios have been adapting comic book characters and stories into films for decades now, it is only in the past ten years or so that these films have come to dominate Hollywood, garnering not just massive box office receipts but also critical approbation. Though critics, audiences, and public relations campaigns often call these sorts of films “comic book movies” (such as this year’s *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, and most recently/surprisingly, *The Guardians of the Galaxy*), more accurately the most successful franchises, based on the mainstream comic books published by DC and Marvel Comics, should be termed “superhero movies.” Movies adapted from comic books can range from the aforementioned science fiction/action films to lower-budget, character-based dramas like *Ghost World*. To call a film a “comic book movie” is thus not a generic description, but rather akin to calling *Gone with the Wind* a “novel movie.” In this response, I will be specifically discussing the blockbuster franchise science fiction/superhero movies based on superhero comic books, particularly those produced by Marvel Studios.

I contend that these movies have found such success with mainstream audiences in large part due to the narrative structures developed by the superhero comic book creators to which they are beholden. Marvel Studios has made its mark by utilizing the dense, interweaving, Easter Egg-laden continuity that has been a hallmark of superhero comic books for decades. Much as Stan Lee and his artistic collaborators built up the breakthrough “Marvel Universe” in comics in the 1960s, Kevin Feige and his studio have carefully and deliberately invented the “Marvel Cinematic Universe.” Initially, the foundations of this universe showed up as fun nods to comic book fans in 2008’s *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk*, with, respectively, Samuel L. Jackson’s Nick Fury and Robert Downey Jr.’s Tony Stark popping up for cameos. By the time 2010’s *Iron Man 2* was released, though, the studio was deliberately engaging in a process of world-building. Indeed, *Iron Man 2* was not as critically acclaimed as its predecessor in part because much of the film was dedicated to setting up characters and situations for the 2012 film *The Avengers*. Nevertheless, that set up served to cement the success of the next two Marvel films, *Thor* and *Captain America*. Although these films were not, ostensibly, sequels, they performed as well as any sequel might because audiences viewed them each as another strand in the narrative tapestry that was leading up to the much-anticipated Joss Whedon-helmed *Avengers*, which would become the third-highest grossing film of all time. The shared Marvel Cinematic Universe can also in part be credited for leading to the recent success of *Guardians of the Galaxy*, Marvel Studios’ riskiest film to date, with an unproven leading man, no well-known characters, and a prominently-featured talking raccoon. However, Marvel made it well known that *Guardians* would also feature Thanos, the villain teased at the end of

The Avengers, thus making this a “must-see” film for those anticipating next year’s *Avengers 2*.

The narrative techniques of superhero storytelling – continuity, seriality, and reliance on a kind of “comics literacy” – have in this way proven to be massively successful transplants to film franchises, and are a crucial component of the way that these movies have taken over the box office. For example, although there have only been three films in the *Iron Man* franchise, each new release relies upon the plot of not just the previous films, but also of those Marvel films that have come in between. Tony Stark’s narrative arc in *Iron Man 3* wholly revolves around post-traumatic stress disorder developed from the events in *The Avengers*. Similarly, should Marvel produce an *Iron Man 4*, it would be part of an evolving continuity that would need to take into account plot developments in such films as *Captain America 2* and the upcoming *Avengers 2*, and even television shows like *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* Essentially, Marvel has developed a two-tier road to success: each of their individual franchises (*Iron Man*, *Captain America*, *Thor*, and now *Guardians of the Galaxy*) is built on a particular set of characters and actors, but then further rests upon the larger framework of the ongoing story of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This is the kind of large-scale narrative development that has been a staple of DC and Marvel Comics’ output for decades, where each individual character’s comic book contributes to the larger “universe.” Marvel Studios has proven that this technique can be just as successful for movie audiences as it has been for comic book readers, and Warner Brothers seems like it will soon follow suit with its upcoming DC Comics-based films. Comic books have thus taken over the silver screen not just through their characters and content, but also through their narrative structures and tropes.