Why People Will Still Love Marvel When We're All Dead

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This is your last free member-only story this month.

By the end, this will actually inspire you

How people look when I talk to them. ([WandaVision](#) © Marvel Studios)

Marvel Studios is the current box office king. And like most kings, it's loved by some and hated by others. But, [in my personal experience](#), I've found that even people who love Marvel movies tend to dismiss them as "not art."

I think that's a mistake. I think it's a mistake as a basic matter of classification. We have terms to distinguish between good, bad, lowbrow, and highbrow art precisely

because all of them are art.

But I also think it's a mistake because Marvel movies are pretty dang good. Specifically, the kind of good that might survive for a long time to come.

And I'm here to prove it with reason and statistics.

Rage for the Machine

And the first point to keep in mind is that this isn't new. Corporations dictating art isn't just late capitalism or the death of cinema or people being idiots these days. I mean, I fully support breaking up Disney, I'm not saying there isn't a scale of better or worse. But the basic principle is constant to some extent or another.

And good news: A lot of great art has been made with sponsors of one kind or another. [Michelangelo didn't want to paint](). He preferred sculpture. The Sistine Chapel was for the money.

Think about the Medici and the Catholic Church, great sponsors of Renaissance art. Marvel is hardly doomed.

Even better news: Marvel's more hands off than bloggers usually imply. Discourse surrounding the studio likes to talk about "the Marvel machine" being "made by committee."

Well, a machine is just a process. And if you've read, uh,

certain sites for fifteen minutes, you know that a process can actually be helpful for your creativity.

More importantly, the fabled committee doesn't exist. That's a fact. It just doesn't. This is public information. Each project's director reports to Marvel's president, Kevin Feige, [who reports to](#) Walt Disney Studios' chairman and Disney's CEO.

There used to be a committee, but they [abolished it in 2015](#) following problems on *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, *Ant-Man*, and other films. Not coincidentally, the franchise's guts and personality jumped afterward. The stereotype stuck — but they no longer deserve it.

Genre Is a Tool, Not a Flaw

Marvel only makes superhero stories. So what? Homer only created epic poems.

And like Homer, Marvel's stories fit into an expanded universe. All their movies are arguably one story, perhaps better classified as a TV show. Having some tonal consistencies keeps that story coherent. It's hard to switch from romance to horror halfway through a novel, not just financially, but artistically too.

Marvel heroes should always quip in the middle of a fight, just like Homeric heroes always recap their lineage during action scenes. Marvel heroes should have superhero

names, just like Homeric heroes have epithets. And Marvel heroes should ultimately save the world, just as Greek heroes ultimately suffer bitter, ironic fates.

The repetition of these tropes is artistically justified in both cases. They gain power through use. They form the genre.

Marvel is flexible within that genre. Some Marvel movies have serious themes, others don't. Some are comedies, and some aren't. They steal from other genres.

And Marvel's genre isn't really superhero movies, but the broader concept of blockbusters. If *Guardians* and *Thor* are superhero franchises, then so is *Star Wars*. If Doctor Strange is a superhero, then so is Harry Potter. If Black Widow and Hawkeye are superheroes, then so is every 90s action hero and Katniss Everdeen. The concept's largely irrelevant in *Black Panther* and *WandaVision*. Captain America's powers are so minor that, after his first movie's first act, his abilities are indistinguishable from a Dwayne Johnson character.

It's a diverse range of films within an artistically valid broader concept.

And genre is irrelevant to quality. What matters is how well the story is told.

Thankfully, Marvel knows how to tell a story.

The Surprising Statistics Behind Marvel's Success

I'm calculating this next part using IMDb.

Marvel's last eleven films, its "Phase Three" (*Captain America: Civil War* to *Spider-Man: Far From Home*), have an average Metacritic metascore of 72.54.

Now, the metascore isn't Rotten Tomatoes; it's calculated [based on the overall scores](#) of reviews, not on a simple up or down. So an okay movie isn't ranked the same as a great one. And the metascore only counts professional reviewers, so fans aren't messing this up.

Steven Spielberg's legendary run from *Jaws* to *Schindler's List* is also 11 films - after I dismissed the critical failure *1941* as an outlier. I'm also not counting *The Twilight Zone: The Movie*, another misfire he co-directed. That string of mostly classics — including *E.T.*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and *Jurassic Park*— averages 73.25.

Averaging all of Quentin Tarantino's directorial efforts, his metascore is 76.66. And that's skipping *Death Proof*, usually considered his weakest film, because it doesn't have a score.

Remember, Marvel's average for its last eleven films is 72.54.

Fox Searchlight, now Searchlight Pictures, is a beloved studio catering to cinephiles that's produced four Best Picture Oscar winners. It's own last eleven films averaged 61.81.

If you want to be petty, Martin Scorsese's last eleven films get 78.5, while Edgar Wright makes it to 78.6. But Wright only has five films on Metacritic; I'm discounting him, because I refuse to accept a world where he rivals Martin Scorsese. But even Scorsese's victory over Marvel is a matter of degrees — not classifications.

Now, if you do want to blow Marvel out of the water, you can look up Pixar's first eleven films: 87.3. (Conveniently, *Cars 2* was their 12th movie.) And the past eleven Best Picture Oscar winners average 89.54.

That said, seven out of those last eleven Marvel films beat 2018 winner *Green Book*'s Metacritic score of 69. (And *Spider-Man: Far From Home* tied.) When Disney ran a "For Your Consideration" campaign for *Avengers: Endgame*, the film was better reviewed than the previous year's winner.

Admittedly, *Green Book* was a weird case. But usually, the Best Picture winners will win a critics' popularity contest almost by definition. And Pixar making Best Picture-level movies for eleven films in a row says more about Pixar's golden era than anything about anyone else.

Marvel's literally got a better track record than

prestigious studios like Searchlight — and holds its own against the industry's best auteurs.

And, yes, Steven Spielberg's highs are higher than Marvel's. But out of those eleven films I checked for him, only three were better received than Marvel's most acclaimed entry (*Black Panther*, 88).

The only higher-ranked Quentin Tarantino movie is *Pulp Fiction* (94). The only higher-ranked film among those Searchlight ones is *The Favourite* (91). *Black Panther*'s ranked higher than four of the past ten Oscar winners, and higher, or equal to, half the first ten Pixar movies.

Marvel almost always makes good films and sometimes makes great ones. If we count Marvel's showrunner, Kevin Feige, as an auteur, he'd be a statistically respectable choice for a well-informed person's favorite filmmaker. (My personal preference is Tarantino.)

Where the Fans Are Silent

This is all according to data from professional reviewers, not fans—the same critical reviewers who often bemoan "the Marvel machine" while talking in the abstract.

Film reviewers are usually film lovers. Very few of them fall asleep watching *2001: A Space Odyssey*. They care about themes and characters. They're probably sympathetic to [Martin Scorsese's concerns](#) about

blockbuster cinema crowding out the market space.

Halfway through writing this, I stopped to watch *WandaVision*'s third episode and read some reviews of it. Below is the opening paragraph of [Vulture's review](#):

> *"Taken as a whole, WandaVision is a boldly innovative piece of entertainment. But I would contend that we shouldn't take it as a whole. No one has previously attempted or pulled off a piece of filmed serial fiction about Marvel superheroes trapped in an altered reality made to look like a succession of old sitcoms, a reality that is sometimes idyllic and other times eerie in its suggestion of a sinister truth. And yet every individual element of that sentence I just wrote has been attempted ad nauseam in film, television, prose, and/or comics. Like everything else in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, it's a bunch of old wines poured into a new bottle with the hope that it'll taste nice and get you buzzed."*

After acknowledging the show's innovative "as a whole," we then learn we should use a different metric, by which it fails. By which any story fails.

It's true that other people have already accomplished Marvel superheroes; sitcom-style alternate realities; shifting tones; mysteries; and, of course, that tired cliché: "filmed serial fiction." Those are building blocks from which *WandaVision* created something new.

Storytelling is, simply, the mixing of elements. Are all existentialist movies ripping off the *Epic of Gilgamesh*? Is every romance just Hades and Persephone again? Isn't television itself, combining weekly fiction and radio plays with cinema, "a bunch of old wines poured into a new bottle?"

Every movie you've ever watched owes an incalculable debt to cave paintings.

And I doubt that concept's new to you. I can't imagine it's new to Vulture. Because we overwhelmingly judge the creativity of stories as a whole. We only break them down to individual parts to find how they went right or wrong.

And that means the first line of that review shouldn't be a caveat. It's the honest bottom line: *WandaVision* is "boldly innovative."

Wanda[Putin]

A Mad Libs WandaVision parody

medium.com

Now, I've read too many reviews of Marvel movies. I'm confident saying I didn't cherry pick here. Film reviewers are overwhelmingly suspicious of this company's films.

But, somehow, "the Marvel machine" is always abstract. The particular story they're reviewing is "the one that

slipped by." Then the next Marvel movie comes out, and it's once again the studio's lone stab at wit and ambition. The last film's quality sinks into cultural amnesia.

And I know someone just read that, nodded slyly, thinking it's because the films have no substance. That implies people remember important things, like anniversaries or shocking political events from more than four weeks ago. We remember what we desire to recall.

And for many film lovers, it's easier for Marvel to be bad. Because their films do take up disproportionate resources. Disney's semi-monopoly really is alarming. And Marvel's example has led imitators to focus even more on IP, blockbusters, and "interconnected universes." Normal people spend their three trips to the movies a year on the same franchise.

As a cinephile and writer, I despise those developments. I've got my own screenplays to sell.

And none of that is connected to the quality of Marvel's filmmaking.

And despite critics' reluctance, Marvel consistently gets strong reviews. And I bet they'd get even better ones if they were judged "taken as a whole." Because, stubbornly, even infuriatingly, they're good-to-great movies.

The Future of Marvel — The Far, Far Future

Now figure, all of Marvel's films are also exciting, all-ages popcorn entertainment. Which, again, are matters of genre, not quality.

And imagine you're trying to find a movie the whole family can enjoy. Marvel is easily the most reliable bet available.

That's a good thing, by the way. Reliable doesn't mean mediocre. It means consistently good or better.

Whether one of their film's ultimately becomes a true classic... we won't know for hundreds of years.

Literally. I'm not making a prediction. There are any number of filmmakers and stories that might survive from our time, including ones we'd consider insignificant today. But it's strange to discount Marvel as "content" instead of art. It's in the same conversation as everyone else.

But —

But...

They're not only popular, they're reliable. They're usually simple. They nail the fundamentals. They're proven to cross cultures and languages. Even their weaker stories

are part of a larger, mystical world.

All those traits people disparage Marvel films for are precisely the reasons they will survive. Because they're not flaws. They're the genre. Specifically, the genre with the best track record for endurance: Myth.

Elemental, adaptable, heroic myth.

Because even if its films don't survive, the stories behind them stand an even stronger chance. Comic book superheroes are just populist mythologies imprisoned by copyright. One day that copyright will expire or collapse. Then Marvel could spread like folklore.

We're still reading about Robin Hood, aren't we? Somebody from 14th century England probably wouldn't have guessed that.

700 years from now, they might be making yet another *Spider-Man* reboot, the Marvel heroes passed to public domain, into folklore, highbrow arts, and back.

After all, we're still rebooting the *Odyssey* three thousand years later. Maybe "Wakanda Forever!" will be more literal than we expect.

And maybe, if you're a storyteller, and you want your own stories to last forever, Marvel isn't just an irritant taking up space.

It's a role model.

[This Is Now the Most Important Time in the Film Industry: Fridays at 3 AM](#)

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