

## From Stories to Worlds: The Continuity of Marvel Superheroes from Comics to Film

David Sweeney, June 2013

Before its 2011 re-launch as the 'New 52' DC Comics' advertising campaigns regularly promoted their inter-linked superhero line as 'The Original Universe'. As DC did indeed publish the first 'superteam', the JSA (in *All-Star Comics* 3, Winter 1940), this is technically correct; however, the concept of a shared fictional world with an on-going fictive history, what comic book fans and professionals alike refer to as 'continuity', was in fact pioneered by DC's main competitor, Marvel Comics, particularly in the 1960s. In this essay I will discuss, drawing on theories and concepts from the narratologists David A. Brewer and Lubomir Dolezel and with particular focus on the comic book writer Roy Thomas, how Marvel Comics developed this narrative strategy and how it has recently been transplanted to cinema through the range of superhero films produced by Marvel Studios.

### Superhero Origins

Like DC, Marvel emerged from an earlier publishing company, Timely Publications, which had produced its own range of superheroes during the so-called 'Golden Age of superhero comics, ushered in by the debut of Superman in *Action Comics* 1 in June, 1938) and lasting until the end of World War II, including Namor the Submariner, Captain America, and The Human Torch. Superhero comics declined sharply in popularity after the War and none of these characters survived the wave of cancellations that hit the genre; however, they were not out of print for long.

Although the 'Silver Age' of superhero comics is often thought to have begun in October 1956 with DC's publication of a new version of the Golden Age 'speedster' superhero, the Flash (in *Showcase* 4) - the success of which led to the revival of more Golden Age characters by the publisher, beginning with the Green Lantern (in *Showcase* 22, November 1959) - Timely had in fact already attempted a revival of their Golden Age superheroes, albeit for a short period, three years earlier, beginning with the publication of issue 24 of the anthology title *Young Men* 24 (December, 1953). This issue featured the 'return' of Namor, Captain America, and the Torch. Timely's superhero revival lasted just under two years, ending with issue 42 of the Submariner's eponymous title (October, 1955), but here we can already see the publisher make the decision to establish continuity between this new range of comics and those that had come before: the numbering of each character's eponymous title carried directly on from the last pre-cancellation issue. The Torch and Namor also made cameo appearances in the Captain America strip in *Young Men* 24, implying that these characters shared a world, even when they did not appear in each other's titles.

## Roy Thomas

Writing about his response as a twelve year who had ‘slowly watched beloved super-heroes disappear one by one’ in the wave of post-war cancellations, Roy Thomas, who would become instrumental in the creation and organization of the nationwide superhero ‘fandom’ network that emerged in the 1950s and, later, a major writer and editor for both Marvel and DC, remembers being ‘impressed by how [Young Men 24] accounted believably for [the characters’] four year absence’: the superheroes, it was explained, had been incapacitated for exactly the same length of time as they had been out of print. Thomas also recalls admiring how the writer of the Captain America story ‘had done his homework’ by making reference to earlier comics, even using dialogue from the character’s debut appearance in a flashback scene, and that the history of Namor was similarly ‘brought up to date’ (4). Furthermore, Thomas remembers being pleased at Namor’s and the Torch’s appearance in the Captain America story but adds that this was a ‘false omen’ as ‘none of the heroes ever appear in each other’s adventures again for the length of the revival’ (6).

As Gerard Jones and Will Jacobs have observed, Thomas was representative of an emerging type of superhero fan whose enthusiasm for the genre had persisted during the ‘wilderness years’<sup>1</sup> after the Golden Age and for whom ‘the stories were of less importance than the *stuff*: the texture, the background details, the “continuity” of old comics to new ones’ (90, original emphasis) even though this had not been the case for publishers or professionals during the Golden Age itself in large part because comics were considered to be disposable items and also because no reliable distribution system for them existed (see Pustz, 130-1). In other words, fans like Thomas were preoccupied with the worlds of the superhero comics they consumed. For such fans the ‘domain of fiction’ is, as it is for Lubomir Dolezel, ‘broader than that of the story’. Dolezel identifies story as the ‘microstructure’ of a narrative while its ‘macrostructure’ is its ‘world’. (ix).

‘Fictionality’, Dolezel states, ‘is primarily a semantic phenomenon located on the axis “representation (sign) – world”’ (2). Fictional acts, he argues, generate fictional worlds and these worlds have histories which are implicit in the stories set within them. These histories include not only the events of the story itself but what has occurred before the beginning and what happens after the end. Furthermore, Dolezel describes fictional worlds as always being incomplete because ‘[f]inite texts [are] the only texts that humans are capable of producing’ (169). There are, therefore, *always* gaps in the representation of a fictional world as we do not, because we cannot, ever see it in its entirety. This is as true of superhero comics as of any other text; however, the *physical* absence of most superhero comics from the actual world in the period between the Golden and Silver Ages, and the subsequent return or revival of cancelled characters, seems to have created a powerful desire in fans

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<sup>1</sup> Jones and Jacobs use this term to refer to both the paucity of superhero comics available at the time following the extensive post-war cancellations and also the mutual isolation of superhero fans before the establishment of the national fandom network.

like Thomas for completeness beyond the process of 'filling in' that Dolezel identifies as a necessary part of the 'reconstruction' of the fictional world that is involved in all reading. The 'variable saturation of fictional worlds is,' Dolezel writes, 'a challenge to the reader [which] increases as the saturation decreases' (170): the short-lived revival of the Timely heroes may have explained their absence in terms of actual world time but the longer delay in the return of the rest of Thomas's 'beloved superheroes', particularly the JSA who would not be revived until 1963 (in *Justice League of America* 21, August), appears to have 'challenged' him to the extent that he was inspired to undertake the task of filling in the gaps not just for himself but for first Marvel and then DC's readership. That Thomas felt able, even compelled, to do so can be understood in Brewer's terms of the detachability of the superheroes, resulting from both their seriality and their incompleteness, and the emotional attachment Thomas had for them as 'beloved' characters.

Thomas's speculations on the fates of the missing superheroes first appeared publicly in the letters pages of DC's Silver Age comics, then later in the pages of the fanzine *Alter Ego* (1961-), which he continues to publish and contribute to today as a 'prozine' (i.e. a journal produced by professionals rather than fans but independently of the industry in which they are employed). Once Thomas 'graduated' to professional status he was in the position to make these speculations fictional fact. Thomas began his career at Marvel Comics in 1964, by which time the company's editor-in-chief, Stan Lee, was the writer and/or editor of most of the company's superhero comics, which he had decided to unite into a single line of titles with a shared, on-going continuity, the macrostructure of which became known as the 'Marvel Universe'<sup>2</sup>. As Jones and Jacobs observe, by this point '[g]uest appearances by heroes in each other's stories were old hat, but no one had done them as often or as *casually* as Marvel started doing' (89, emphasis mine). Marvel's heroes became part of each other's environment and community, appearing in the background, often only fleetingly, or simply cropping up in conversations between other characters. Despite the 'casualness' of Lee's approach, however, all these references and appearances were expected to be 'in continuity': i.e. to correspond to the on-going fictive history for the Marvel Universe that the publisher was developing.

Replacing Lee on the superteam title *X-Men* in 1966, Thomas's work on the comic was immediately distinguished by its *density*; as Jones and Jacobs write:

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<sup>2</sup> The nature of the collaboration between Lee and artist Jack Kirby, and particularly the extent of Lee's involvement in it relative to the credit has received, is a contentious issue in comic book circles. When campaigning to have his original artwork returned to him by Marvel, Kirby claimed to have 'written every word' of the comics he produced for them, despite Lee being credited as writer. Lee has dismissed this claim and continues to refer to his collaboration with Kirby as a partnership. For contrasting views on the situation see Jones and Jacobs, (299-300) and Lee and Mair, (172-5).

The opening splash panel [a panel the full size of the page] of his first issue (X-Men 20, May 1966) sports eleven word balloons and captions – totalling nearly two hundred words – which allow us to understand the depicted bank robbery from the point of view of villains, victims, and bystanders alike. Over the next nineteen pages, the X-Men and their foes not only talk endlessly but give us the “origin” of [the team’s leader] Professor X’s paraplegia. (90)

Thomas ‘fills in gaps’ not only by explaining, for the first time, the cause of Professor X’s medical condition but also in providing points of view for (very) minor characters, indicating his preoccupation with minimizing the incompleteness of the Marvel Universe.

There is, Dolezel writes, ‘an important distinction [between] the extensional property of world incompleteness and the intensional property of world saturation’ (169). Extension is ‘the meaning constituent of a linguistic sign that directs the sign towards the world’ (136): for example, the extension of the expression ‘Robinson Crusoe’s father’ is a specific person within the world of Defoe’s novel. Intension refers to the information contained within an expression: Robinson Crusoe’s father can also be referred to as ‘Mr Kreutznaer’ and, while both terms have the same extension, they each carry different information about this fictional being. The author’s choice of which phrase to use – and, as a result, what information to communicate to the reader – determines the ‘texture’ of the narrative and, therefore, of the fictional world. For Dolezel, extensional semantics describe ‘story’ – what happens, who it happens to, where, when and why – whereas intensional semantics are concerned with how the fictional world is constructed and the reader’s perception of it shaped. The preoccupation with character relationships in Lee’s writing – as Jones and Jacobs put it, Lee tended to ‘forget about plots’ so as to ‘make his characterizations and human interactions as colourful and dramatic and funny as he could’ (53) - can be seen as an emphasis on intensional semantics which had a clear influence on the density of Thomas’ own subsequent approach to writing the Marvel and, later, DC Universes.

Thomas’s explanation of Professor X’s paraplegia is a different form of ‘filling in’ of macrostructural gaps. It is a ‘fictional fact’ that the character has this condition but by the time of Thomas’s first issue of X-Men the cause had not been revealed to the reader, perhaps to make Professor X’s past mysterious or perhaps simply because Lee had yet to get round to explaining it. Professor X’s condition is an effect that implies a historical cause which Thomas - who at this point in his career, even more than Lee himself, seemed more of a historian than a storyteller; Thomas’s lack of interest in story as a fan, as noted by Jones and Jacobs, is also evident in his early professional writing - seems compelled to reveal, which is to say both *invent* and *record*. Thomas subsequently revived a ‘stampede of yesteryear’s most sensational supervillains’ and ‘set about linking up scattered pieces of the Marvel universe with knowledge and careful thought’ (90). Here, Thomas’s world-building involves the development of the groundwork laid not only by Lee but by *all* the creators who had previously worked for Marvel/Timely: the Marvel Universe already existed, albeit

implicitly (as was also the case with the DC Universe) because characters clearly shared a world when they appeared in each other's titles. Thomas's innovation was to make this implied link explicit and, in doing so, create a history for the Marvel Universe.

Given the relatively low popularity of the superhero genre in the early '50s compared to the previous decade it is likely that the first revival of Marvel's Golden Age characters which so excited Thomas was a ploy designed to exploit reader familiarity and nostalgia rather than a deliberate attempt at world-building. Thomas has suggested, in an interview with Lee in 2004, that Lee revived Timely's Golden Age superheroes under instructions from the publisher's owner, Martin Goodman, to gauge whether the popularity of the contemporary Superman TV show had caused a resurgence of interest in superhero comics (and then to cancel the title if this appeared not to be the case).<sup>82</sup> At the time of the interview, Lee admits his already notoriously 'faulty memory' has become even more unreliable so cannot confirm that this was Goodman's motivation for the revival but accepts that he, Lee, was probably responsible for explaining their absence in terms of real time (Thomas, 33). In his autobiography *Excelsior* (co-written with George Mair, 2002) Lee also claims that his creation, with Jack Kirby, of Marvel's first superteam the Fantastic Four (FF hereafter), was again initiated by Goodman as a response to the popularity of DC's *Justice League of America* title, which presented a revived version of the JSA featuring the Silver Age Flash and Green Lantern along with Wonder Woman, Martian Manhunter and Aquaman, all of whom had remained in print after the end of World War II (albeit not in their own eponymous titles). According to Lee, he was instructed by Goodman to use superheroes already owned by the company but which were no longer in publication in order to 'save you from having to dream up any new characters' (112) rather than to satisfy the longings of bereft fans such as Thomas. In the end, Lee only used the Human Torch but reinvented the character along the lines of DC's Silver Age revivals: the 'Golden Age' Torch had been an android while Lee's version was a human teenager who, like the rest of the FF, received his superpower after exposure to 'cosmic radiation'.

Nevertheless in his interview with Lee, Thomas claimed of the Timely superhero comics of the 1950s that '[one] reason I loved that revival at age 12-13, and remain enthusiastic about it to this day, is that it was handled logically, and with acknowledgement and respect for what had come before' (33). Regardless of the motivation, commercial or artistic, behind the revival, the adherence to 'continuity' evident in it, if the reader was interested in such things as Thomas and other fans of his ilk so passionately were, established the tone for the Marvel Universe which would proceed to essentially tell a never-ending story – indeed, a *saga*, to use a term Lee himself often employed – across an entire range of comic books, using editorial captions to direct readers to the relevant issues if important events took place outside of the title they were currently reading, as tended to be the case.

Although created in response to the success of *Justice League of America*, the FF had little in common with that superteam, in large part because of Lee's conception of the team as a

dysfunctional but ultimately loving family (Lee and Mair, 118) rather than a group of crime-fighters; even their clothing was different: where the JLA's colourful costumes were expressions of each members' super-powers, the FF wore matching blue, functional uniforms befitting their origin as a team of government-funded, scientific explorers. Visually, the JLA had much more in common with another Marvel superteam, the Avengers, which united several of the new heroes which had emerged following the success of the FF, such as Thor and Iron Man and the Hulk, along with yet another revival of Captain America. The first issue of *Avengers* was released in September 1963 written by Lee with art by Jack Kirby; Thomas took over writing duties with issue 35 (December, 1966) and marked a development in his approach to the superhero genre; as Jones and Jacobs write:

Here he showed he could invest more of himself than just his passion for research, heightening the conflicts between the characters and deepening their emotional turmoil, pushing them even further than Lee had. (130)

By the time Thomas began writing the title, the Avengers included Hawkeye and the Black Widow; alongside the characters listed above, these heroes would form the line-up of the 2012 cinema blockbuster *The Avengers* directed Joss Whedon which I will return to below.

During his run on *The Avengers* Thomas, in collaboration with artist John Buscema was, according to Jones and Jacobs, 'institutionalizing the Marvel style' (131) and it is for this reason that I have chosen to focus on him, rather than a better known figure such as Lee, for this essay. Furthermore, Thomas's background as a fan-turned-professional also strikes me as significant (particularly when we consider that Whedon has a similar background): the same could not be said for Lee who had harboured ambitions to be a novelist while working in the comic book industry, which he found frustrating to the extent that he claims he was ready to resign his position at Marvel when Goodman asked him to respond to *Justice League of America* and only decided to continue after his wife suggested it could be an opportunity for him to write his own version of a superhero tale (Lee and Mair, 113). I am aware that it may appear that I am giving more emphasis to character than world here, so before I continue I would now like to address the relationship fictional characters have to narrative macrostructure, which I will do by drawing on the work of David A. Brewer.

### **'The Allographic Logic of Print'**

As mechanically reproduced periodicals superhero comics demonstrate what David A. Brewer describes as the 'allographic logic of print, its ability to make characters take on a placeless omnipresence' (78); by this Brewer means that these characters are simultaneously 'everywhere and yet oddly nowhere, for no single material manifestation could be said to adequately contain [them] if every other copy could serve just as well' (80). Superheroes attain, then, a 'placeless omnipresence' in the actual world which serves to reinforce their presence in, and the sense of place of, the fictional worlds they inhabit. Writing about 18th and early 19th century Britain, Brewer contrasts the widespread

distribution of periodicals with the ephemeral and site-specific nature of theatre but the 'allographic logic' of print can, of course, also be applied to other media – such as the novel or even the stage-play, if not the dramatic performance itself - which involve reproduction including cinema which, although it may superficially resemble theatre – in as much as it involves an audience gathered in an auditorium to view a spectacle - differs significantly from it in that films also receive mass distribution as prints, and can be adapted to other formats such as DVD or Blu-Ray which will become significant later in my discussion.

For Brewer, characters in periodicals 'by virtue of the omnipresence of the material artifacts in which [they appear] could seem to have an existence which sprawled beyond any particular copy or set' of the periodical. Because of their 'seriality', such characters are also able to 'exceed any given number or runs as a textual entity' (82). Brewer describes this capacity as the characters' 'detachability' and discusses it in terms of a character's ability to 'migrate', not from one fictional world to another, but from authorized to unauthorized texts in which readers speculate about the characters' 'off-page' lives, as was the case with Thomas in *Alter-Ego* and in the letters pages of superhero comics then later in the comics themselves. The representation of serial characters is, then, in Brewer's terms, always radically incomplete – just as, for Dolezel, all texts are finite - yet readers nevertheless have a sense of characters' wholeness, which comes from an understanding of them as 'Historic' rather than 'Dramatic' beings, the latter being understood to 'live' only for the duration of a theatrical performance in which they serve a symbolic or metaphoric purpose. Producing, in Dolezel's terms, 'pre or post-histories' (207) for characters contributes to not only their history but to the history of the worlds they inhabit or, in comic book terms, to *continuity*.

Brewer writes that the detachability of serial characters 'enables [them] to serve as the *friend* joining together otherwise disparate readers into a virtual community' (82, my emphasis). Brewer's use of the word 'friend' here echoes Thomas's reference to 'beloved' superheroes and the fandom network in which he was involved was a case of a 'virtual community'; for such movements fictional characters are 'figures who could serve as the rallying point for a virtual sociability modelled upon more traditional modes of embodied social interaction' (79). This perfectly describes the emerging fandom movement of the 1950s and '60s in which figures like Thomas and his collaborator on *Alter-Ego*, Jerry Bails, had 'elite' status due to their encyclopaedic knowledge of the superhero genre and their proactivity in writing letters and producing fanzines. The importance of letter writing to the development of both comic book fandom and the superhero genre cannot be overstated: for publishers, readers' letters were an inexpensive form of market research while for fans they provided not only a forum for discussion but, once editors began to print readers' full postal addresses – a move Jones and Jacobs credit to Silver Age DC editor Julius Schwartz (64) – a means by which to contact each other and form a 'virtual community' (which could be 'actualised' by the conventions that followed).

At Marvel, Lee developed a persona which was 'easy, hip, familiar' with which he 'strove to impress his readers with his honesty and self-effacement' (66) including owning up to continuity errors for which vigilant readers would be awarded a 'No-Prize' (literally, an empty envelope). Lee also insisted his correspondents address him and other Marvel staff by their first names, or by the nicknames he attributed to them in the on-page credits (which were also a result of the desire of fans to identify favourite creators; previously comics tended to be credited only to an editor if to anyone at all). The result of this inclusiveness and accessibility – as Matthew J. Pustz has observed, Marvel 'was selling a participatory world for readers, a way of life for its true believers' (56) - was to instil a strong sense of brand loyalty in Marvel readers who began to refer to themselves as 'Zombies', such was their slavish devotion to the company (48). Part of the attraction of the Marvel Universe was its relationship with the actual world in terms of both space - Lee used New York, where Marvel itself was based, as the main location for his stories rather than fictional cities like Metropolis or Gotham – and time: the 'on-going' nature of Marvel's superhero stories meant it lacked the 'timelessness' which Pustz (drawing on Umberto Eco's essay 'The Myth of Superman') has identified in DC's pre-continuity comics and suggested a mortality for Marvel's heroes which was in stark contrast to DC's 'immortal and unchanging' characters (130). (Before anyone feels the need to write to him, or me, I should point out the Pustz acknowledges that 'some basic, "irreversible" premises made Marvel Comics relatively timeless' including the maintenance of alliances and secret identities and the fact that no major character ever died (131)). Marvel Zombies were, then, a 'virtual community' involved in a 'participatory world' which somewhat resembled their own and which had an on-going narrative that pointed both forwards and backwards in time.

### **Ultimate Marvel**

As it developed Marvel continuity became increasingly convoluted and difficult for both professionals and readers to follow. Launched in 2000, Marvel's Ultimate line was conceived to be discrete from the Marvel Universe with, in an attempt to attract new readers who would not have to tackle decades of accumulated fictional history, its own separate continuity. The first Ultimate comic, *Ultimate Spider-Man #1* (October 2000) presented a new iteration of the existing Marvel Universe character with a contemporary setting and a slightly altered origin story (the cause of the new version's superpowers is a bite from a genetically engineered spider rather than a radioactive one as had been the case with the original version). These minor differences aside the Ultimate Spider-Man had much in common with his Marvel Universe counterpart, including the same 'secret identity' as Peter Parker: the character, therefore, was consistent, but not in continuity, with the existing version.

Marvel followed the success of *Ultimate Spider-Man* with a second title based on existing characters, *Ultimate X-Men*, the following year and *The Ultimates* (featuring a superteam modelled on the Avengers) a year after that. Again, these titles presented characters that



were new iterations of, but largely consistent with, the existing versions. One widely noted difference was in the ethnicity of the character Nick Fury, director of the espionage agency S.H.I.E.L.D.: Caucasian in the Marvel Universe, the Ultimate version was an African-American who bore a distinct resemblance to the actor Samuel L. Jackson.

## Marvel Studios

Of course, Jackson himself would later play Fury in the Marvel Studios' films *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008), *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011), *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh 2011) and *The Avengers* all of which are in continuity with each other, presenting, therefore, another shared fictional world, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, which, like the Ultimate line, is a variation of the Marvel Universe.

S.H.I.E.L.D.'s representative in *Iron Man* is Agent Phil Coulson (Clark Gregg) with Fury appearing only very briefly in a post-credit scene where he informs Tony Stark (aka Iron Man, played by Robert Downey Jr.) that he is 'not the only superhero in the world' and makes reference to a government project called the 'Avengers Initiative'. Stark himself makes a similar post-credits cameo in *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) where he mentions the formation of a 'team'. Fury returns in *Iron Man 2*, playing a more substantial role; the film also includes Agent Coulson, in a post-credits scene, at the site of an impact crater in the Nevada delivering the line, to Fury by phone, 'We've found it'. The cause of the impact is revealed to be a large hammer which resembles a weapon more than a tool. This directly links *Iron Man 2* to *Thor*, in which the hammer is the favourite armament of the titular character. Coulson is a minor character in *Thor* while Fury again makes only a post-credit cameo appearance, as he also does in *Captain America*. Fury's name is also briefly glimpsed on a government document in the opening credits of *The Incredible Hulk*: this, like the post-credit appearances, recalls, and is no doubt influenced by, the 'casual' guest appearances and references Jones and Jacobs identify as a hallmark of the Marvel Silver Age. Coulson also appears in the two of the 'Marvel One-Shot' short films, *The Consultant* (Leythum, 2011) – which included footage from *The Incredible Hulk* - and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Thor's Hammer* (Leythum, 2011) included as extra material on the DVD and Blu-Ray releases of *Thor* and *Captain America* respectively. These shorts 'fill in the gaps' between the movies and in doing so increase the density of the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

All of the titular characters of the Marvel Studios films listed above appear, alongside Fury and Agent Coulson, in what we are regularly told is the third most profitable film of all time, *The Avengers* (although Bruce Banner, the 'secret identity' of the Incredible Hulk, is played by a different actor, Mark Ruffalo, than in the eponymous film, which starred Edward Norton) which also features the S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent Natasha Romanov (Scarlett Johansson), who played a major role in *Iron Man 2*, and its villain, Loki (Tom Hiddleston), is also the antagonist of *Thor*. This kind of crossover cohesion between movies which are not direct

sequels or prequels is unprecedented in American cinema, although it is perhaps implicit in the appearance of the character Ray Nicolette as played by Michael Keaton in Quentin Tarantino's *Jackie Brown* (1997) and Steven Soderbergh's *Out of Sight* (1998) both of which are based upon novels by Elmore Leonard: *Rum Punch* (1992) and *Out of Sight* (1997) respectively. The key word here, however, is 'implicit': set in the same place (Los Angeles) in the same era (the 1990s) and based on inter-linked novels by a single author, it is plausible that the two Leonard adaptations could share the same fictional world even though the films were produced by different studios. Regardless, the continuity between the two is not made explicit - even though Keaton wears almost exactly the same wardrobe and renders Nicolette with identical mannerisms in each film - and it can perhaps be attributed more to Soderbergh's cinephile mentality as previously demonstrated in his use of footage from Ken Loach's *Poor Cow* (1967) in his own *The Limey* (1999) to link the films through their shared casting of Terrence Stamp as a Cockney criminal, rather than any 'synergistic' strategy on behalf of the film studios. With its run of movies leading up to *The Avengers*, however, Marvel Studios made a point of letting the audience know that the characters inhabited a shared world with a consistent fictional history, just as Lee, Kirby, Thomas and the other 'architects' of the Marvel Universe had over half a decade previously with their use of 'casual' guest appearances, intensional semantics and editorial captions referencing other comics.

A third 'Marvel One-Shot' was also produced, Louis D'Esposito's *Item 47* (2012) included on the DVD and Blu-Ray of *The Avengers*: longer than the previous two at 12 minutes (the others ran for less than 4 minutes) and set after Whedon's film, *Item 47* focuses on two other minor characters, S.H.I.E.L.D. agents Sitwell (Maximiliano Hernández) and Blake (Titus Welliver) who discuss Coulson's recent death and deal with the aftermath of an alien invasion (both which were depicted in *The Avengers*). Again, this is very much in keeping with the approach towards word-building - in which density is increased through intensional semantics - found in Marvel comics.

Despite his apparent demise, Coulson is the central character in Marvel Television's forthcoming series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013) devised by Whedon to be in continuity with the Marvel Studios films. Having continuity across media platforms is an act of, in Henry Jenkins' terms 'transmedia storytelling' which he describes as 'the art of world making' (21). This 'new aesthetic' he writes 'has emerged in response to media convergence' and 'places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities':

To fully experience any fictional world, consumers must assume the role of hunters and gatherers, chasing down bits of the story across media channels, comparing notes with each other via on-line discussion groups, and collaborating to ensure that everyone who invests time and effort will come away with a richer entertainment experience. (21)

This was the case with the 'cult' TV series as *Lost* (2004-10) created by JJ Abrams, Jeffrey Lieber and Damon Lindelof and Whedon's own *Firefly* (2002) both of which were expanded in a variety of media, including 'webisodes' (*The Lost Video Diaries* and *The R.Tamm Sessions*), and while not every viewer for a series will be interested in having the kind of 'full experience' Jenkins describes or in contributing to online discussion groups nevertheless 'additional content' does increase the density of a fictional world and is relatively easy to obtain, particularly if we compare the 'hunters and gatherers' of today's 'convergence culture' to fans like Thomas who were buying comics in a period before the establishment of a reliable distribution network – as Pustz has noted narrative continuity and the comic book direct market are closely linked (131) - or a backlist reissue programme. Indeed, as we have seen, because this situation fans like Thomas felt compelled to increase world density themselves, both as fans and as professionals.

As Jenkins has noted (1992) fans are characterised by their tendency to *reread*, a practice which allows them to *linger* in a fictional world, paying attention to background details and nuances of dialogue and character interaction which may be overlooked on the initial, plot-driven reading. Similarly, DVD and Blu-Ray technology, much more than video, allow viewers control of narratives which is encouraged, and rewarded, by the presence of hidden features or 'Easter eggs' (although there were actually none of these in *The Avengers* beyond clips from the earlier Marvel Studios films appearing in a scene where Tony Stark activates an array of computer screens; the other Marvel Studios films, however, had plenty such as the appearance of the 'Cosmic Cube' which would become instrumental to Whedon's film, in both *Thor* and *Captain America*). However re-watching, as with rereading, also allows the interested viewer to appreciate the *texture* of a fictional world through the suspension of time and emphasis on space or, in other words, the privileging of world (macrostructure) over story (microstructure). Marvel Studios have recognised, and rewarded, both the 'lingering' potential of this kind of technology and the existence of 'hunter/gatherer' viewers prepared to follow a narrative across media platforms in pursuit of as full an immersion in their fictional world as possible. In Whedon, a comic book fan (see John, 2013) turned professional and an established transmedia storyteller - his TV series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003)<sup>3</sup> is currently being continued in comic book form (2007-), as has been the case with his less successful series *Firefly* (2002)<sup>4</sup> – whose work, like Thomas's own, has a strong sense of continuity (*Buffy* spawned, and often crossed-over with, a 'spin-off' series, *Angel* (1999-2004)) and, in its depiction of characters' personalities and relationships, can be seen as a form of *melodrama* (see Jones and Jacobs, 130 and

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<sup>3</sup> Which included a very conspicuous reference to the Marvel Universe when the previously heroic character Willow went 'dark' (in the series' sixth season) in a similar manner to the Marvel superheroine Jean Grey (in 'The Dark Phoenix Saga', *The X-Men* 129-138, January-October, 1980).

<sup>4</sup> Despite being cancelled after only one season, spawned a feature film, *Serenity* (Joss Whedon, 2005), and the comic book mini-series *Serenity: Those Left Behind* (2005) and *Serenity: Better Days* (2008), the online comic *Serenity: The Other Half* (2008) and the graphic novel *Serenity: The Shepherd's Tale* (2010), all of which are in continuity with the TV series.

Shaviro, 2005) they may have found their own Roy Thomas for our age of 'convergence culture'.

And perhaps, given *The Avenger's* phenomenal success, created a whole new generation of Marvel Zombies (myself included).

## List of References

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