The Marvel Cinematic Universe & seriality : how a genre marketing strategy transcended narrative and screen formats

The acronym MCU has now entered the common vocabulary of any cinematographic or television commentator whether in the press or on TV, stating, if anything, that the very concept it stands for has overgrown the films it first referred to. Indeed, starting in 2008 with the release of *Iron Man*, the Marvel Cinematic Universe has expanded beyond the wildest projections of the original comic book fans when the project was revealed back in 2005. This "shared universe" – concept that was borrowed directly from the rhetoric of the comic book genre – was perceived as very volatile by the studios who invested with Marvel and they thus preferred to invest in franchises based on Marvel characters: Fox with the X-Men, Sony and Spider-Man for the two most profitable ones. When Marvel Studios was able to acquire back the exploitation rights of the original roster of the Avengers, they embarked on the building of MCU which kick-started after the international success of the first *Iron Man*. Iron Man 2, The Incredible Hulk, Thor and Captain America: The First Avenger, followed and were instant box office successes because on the one hand, people wanted to see how these popular characters were adapted to the silver screen, but also because the audience who were either comic book fans firsthand or who became comic book readers after coming into contact with the Marvel universe through their films knew what all these films were leading to…

What Marvel Studios called their "phase one" was the building of a cinematic universe that was already relying on seriality in terms of narrative forms not so much within the storylines developed in the main plots, but in terms of forms as everyone soon learned to watch the entire credit scenes to have a glimpse of what was coming next… Even more so, Marvel relied also on their "one shot" short films that were included on the DVD of their films, tying together the overall shared universe with secondary characters crossing paths. "Phase two" went a lot further as to how the MCU dealt with seriality as it launched the TV series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and *Agent Carter* as well as the Netflix series starting with *Daredevil*. These titles and how they fit within the MCU broke new grounds as how the two formats were able to work together, even on a narrative level. "Phase three" which started after the release of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* promises to be a lot trickier… Indeed, as it grew on different formats and also expanded a lot more than originally intended, the MCU is starting to get as complex as its comic books counterpart with narrative intents sometimes colliding with marketing ones…

This presentation aims at deciphering how seriality as the original intent of Marvel Studios was put into practice, but also how this approach was also dictated by the coupled forces of the original narratives and the contemporary cinematographic industry. We should also question if the imbued seriality associated to the cinema screen through the MCU also works in reverse with the TV series of the MCU being imbued with some cinematic qualities…or not and why. The very state of the industry can also be questioned as Marvel Studios placed its pawns on so many different plates… How to deal with two different sets of contracts, one for TV series and another for feature films ? How to manage an ever-growing set of characters while not confusing the audience or creating what many critics have now labeled a super-hero fatigue with a release schedule planned four years in advance? Could it mean that the "phase three" final lesson would be that even the Disney-Marvel juggernaut cannot revolutionize the Hollywood-based industry as they try to make the silver and TV screens collide?

Bio: Charles Joseph completed a Ph.D. in American Studies; his dissertation, entitled *Being and Writing (from) Los Angeles: Wanda Coleman*, examines the complex and evolving relationship between the work of the African-American author and the city that harbored her birth, life and death. He has developed an interest in the implications and practices of the entertainment industry based in Los Angeles; his latest papers deal with TV series and the super-hero genre in comic books. He has published articles in *Les Chantiers de la Création*, *ORDA*, *Conserveries Mémorielles*, *ANGLES* and *Urbanities*) and he is currently writing a book on TV series centered on superheroes (Editions Vendémiaire).