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# On Superhero Stories: The Marvel Cinematic Universe as Tolkienesque Fantasy

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# On Superhero Stories: The Marvel Cinematic Universe as Tolkienesque Fantasy

## **Abstract**

By considering the movies in the Marvel Cinematic Universe as a case study, I bring Tolkien's explication of mythopoesis in "On Fairy Stories" to bear on the current popularity of superhero films to argue that such works qualify as cinematic examples of Tolkienesque fantasy tales. After summarizing Tolkien's criteria for the genre in Nietzschean aesthetic terms, I both demonstrate how the builders of the MCU have crafted a sub-created fictional world and defend the existence of fairy stories in visual media from Tolkien's own criticism of such a possibility.

## **Additional Keywords**

Marvel Cinematic Universe; Superheroes; Fantasy films; Tolkien, J.R.R. "On Fairy-stories"

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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IN SUPERHERO STORIES:  
THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE AS  
TOLKIENESQUE FANTASY

A.C. HOLDIER

*"I shall join the creators, the harvesters, the celebrants: I shall show them the rainbow and all the steps to the overman."*

- Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Prologue, sec. 9 (1883)

THOUGH MANY MAY NOT REALIZE IT, NIETZSCHE'S OVERMAN is a stranger to no one; for nearly a century, the mythopoetic progeny of the fictional Zarathustra's rainbow-colored prayers have exploded across pages and screens, bringing stories of marvels to life before the eyes of a public hungry for heroes. Since Shuster and Siegel chose to style their supernatural star as a true "Superman" in 1938, the imagined world of the superhero has played on Nietzsche's hope that the greatness of humanity would one day be surpassed by something even greater. This new creature would, to Nietzsche, be not only capable of bending the world to his will in new ways, but would be the very reason why the world exists at all. "Where is the lightning to lick you with its tongue? Where is the frenzy with which you should be inoculated?" Nietzsche asks, "*Behold, I teach you the overman: he is this lightning, he is this frenzy*" (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra* 126; italics added).

Of course, Nietzsche said nothing about the lightning coming alongside a magic hammer.

In one sense, both Nietzsche's imagination and the contemporary popularity of superhero tales are simply following a tradition that is inexhaustibly human. Ages ago, in their fight to make sense of the world around them, the myth-spinners of Ancient Egypt described gods who appeared to be both human and animal, simultaneously. Ancient Greeks told stories of natural forces personified atop Mount Olympus, with each deity owning a different feature of the world below. Today, the Western world sees few offerings made to either Osiris or Zeus, but the human imagination still runs wild, provoked by all of the same uncertainties, infidelities, and mysteries of the real world. Mythopoeisis allows us to imagine boundaries in a world that otherwise grows wild, so the mythopoetic drive is as alive as ever; the world is still a frightening place filled with shadows at every turn, and those shadows need heroes if they are to be defeated. And while tomb walls or marble sculptures are no longer the

media for fairy tales, the evolution to the printed page or the film frame is a change only of form, not function. The greatest contemporary myths (judging based not only on artistic quality, but box office returns) are those of the Batman, the Spider-Man, the Iron Man, and the rest of the superhero pantheons.

To consider the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), then, is to dive deeply into the mythical realm of Faerie wherein humans have adventured and imagined for centuries, now reinterpreted in new ways for a new age. Though there has been no shortage of superhero stories in recent pop culture, the MCU has particularly succeeded in capturing the spotlight, in part because of the crafted authenticity and depth of the cohesive universe portrayed in these stories. It is one thing to dress an actor in a rubber costume; it is quite another to bring a costumed superhero to genuine, if fictional, life, surrounded by a universe that makes believable sense.

No stranger to the difficulty of the mythopoetic task, J.R.R. Tolkien understood the centrality of a good myth's believability, and though he might seem a strange traveling companion alongside Nietzsche, there have been few travelers as well-versed in that realm of Faerie as the creator of Númenor, Middle-earth, and the Undying Lands. Therefore, with the Marvel Cinematic Universe as the target and Tolkien's seminal essay "On Fairy-Stories" as the guide, what follows is an examination of superhero myths as fairy tales that not only offer fleeting entertainment, but, as Nietzsche surmised, existential satisfaction of the sort for which all humans burn.

#### **BELIEVING IN "TALES OF SUSPENSE"**

To properly understand superhero myths as fairy stories, one must first come to terms with what a fairy story is in itself. Tolkien took great pains to distinguish between basic fables (such as those bedtime stories collected by the Brothers Grimm) and a fairy story: a story about the fictional world of Faerie and the various ways that human characters interact both with and in it. To Tolkien, Faerie is not simply a passable setting for gigantic beanstalks, gingerbread houses, or carriages made from enchanted pumpkins in the way that typical "Once Upon a Time" tales treat the worlds they discuss. An enchanted frog prince can be kissed in any number of magical woods or forests, for the location is as relevant to the story as a bedsheet is vital to a homemade puppet show—merely as a backdrop; the roots of Faerie, on the other hand, grow much deeper. As Tolkien notes:

*Faërie* contains many things besides elves and fays, and besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted. (32, italics in original)

The setting of a fairy tale of this sort is not merely a frame for action sketched in as an afterthought, but is a necessary component for building the foundational credibility of the fictional universe as a whole; the vibrancy of the location—Faerie—is a necessary element of the story. Fairy stories offer windows to this otherworld which is every bit as complex as the real one. Men and women live, fight, love, and die in Tolkien’s “Perilous Realm or upon its shadowy marches” (32); that the world and its people are fictional is but a small detail.

This might seem to be a strange description of the MCU which, unlike other superhero settings, takes place in a fictionalized version of the real world. Whereas Superman has his shining Metropolis and Batman broods over the iconic shadows of Gotham City, the Avengers keep their tower in the heart of Manhattan, surrounded by a skyline familiar to many members of the MCU audience. Of course, no myth is completely alien, for it is the nature of myth to possess a certain “arresting strangeness” that is interesting with its familiarity but captivating in its fantasy (Tolkien 60); in Nietzsche’s words, such a creation is “not merely [an] imitation of the reality of nature but rather a metaphysical supplement of the reality of nature, placed beside it for its overcoming” (*Birth of Tragedy* 140). The similarity of the MCU to real life allows viewers to make immediate assumptions about the history of the narrative that buttress the general sense of authenticity they feel when experiencing these otherwise fictional stories.

Because the ability to write such a world into being with a history as rich and complex as the real world is a monumental task, Tolkien points out that the natural inclination of even the best authors is to recombine familiar facets of the real world in new ways: making the faerie-moon to shine blue, turning ram’s wool into golden fleece, or transforming a scientist into an enormous green rage monster. Consequently, Tolkien dubs this re-forging of new forms “sub-creation,” since an author in this mode only creates in a derivative fashion, using things already existent to construct something new. To the sub-creator of Middle-earth, this activity is the essential component of mythopoesis; consider briefly classical mythical creatures like the chimera, sphinx, or griffin, each one built through the mental recombination of actual creatures from the real world into imaginative new forms. Sub-creation could also function by taking an old story element—like a thunder god—and significantly reinterpreting the character while maintaining many of the iconic pieces, sub-creationally changing the character’s substance while keeping its appearance generally constant.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Compare, again, Tolkien’s conception of sub-creation with Nietzsche’s ideas on creativity in general: “[H]ere the intellect has become the master itself [...]. It copies human life, but it takes it to be something good and appears to be fairly content with it. That vast assembly

The crucial factor for Faerie's legitimacy at the end of all this recombination, so Tolkien argues, is the maintenance of the story-world's "inner consistency of reality" (60). An author is free to define the laws of Faerie in whatever way serves the story best, but must always present the fictional world as sincerely and consistently as possible, provoking the audience to move beyond a mere suspension of disbelief to what Tolkien calls "Secondary Belief." A more immersive experience than simple entertainment, Secondary Belief is the product of fantasy done well, for no matter how similar or dissimilar the rules of Faerie might be to those of the real world, the rules they still are. While a viewer understands that the rules of the real world would never allow for a scientist to "invent" a new element or for a blond man to fly by throwing a hammer, the rules of the fictional MCU are understood to be different. The key is that no matter how fantastic Faerie is, it must always remain consistent in its difference to the real world, offering a new stable definition of "believable" within the confines of its story; whatever suspension of disbelief in magic or other wonders that a reader is obliged to make must never be shaken or disturbed. In Nietzschean terms, such art (specifically, myth-making) is "the true *metaphysical* activity of man" (*Attempt at Self-Criticism* 8; italics in original); when done successfully, Tolkien named the product "Enchantment" and described it as "a higher form of Art, indeed the most nearly pure form, and so (when achieved) the most potent" (60).

Secondary Belief can be particularly difficult to achieve in an age grounded in materialistic science that has little room for Magic, a defining element of Faerie. Although the real world has plenty of technological prosthetics, chemical bio-enhancements, and spies trained in martial arts, none approach the magnitude or efficacy of Iron Man's costume, Captain America's transfiguration, or Black Widow's talent—to say nothing of the utter lack of parallels for Banner's alter-ego or Thor's hammer. Every strange element in a superhero story, therefore, is a clue that reveals the tale's setting to be somewhere near, if not squarely inside, the land of Faerie, with all the potential magical freedom that such a fictional realm offers; indeed, Tolkien argued that incorporating Magic in the setting is the "essential face of Faërie," provided that it is never mistreated as a mere plot device (44). Whatever else a fairy story does, the inherent Magic of the setting must always be taken for granted as natural

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of beams and boards to which needy man clings, thereby saving himself on his journey through life, is used by the liberated intellect as a mere climbing frame and plaything on which to perform its most reckless tricks; and *when it smashes this framework, jumbles it up and ironically re-assembles it, pairing the most unlike things and dividing those things which are closest to one another*, it reveals the fact that it does not require those makeshift aids of neediness, and that it is now guided, not by concepts but by intuitions" (Nietzsche, *On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense* 152; italics added).

and as ever-present within the confines of the fictional world as gravity or oxygen is in the real one. That is to say, Tolkien insists that the magic of Faerie cannot be an end in itself, but is always a mere tool in the hero's belt that allows her to strive for the "satisfaction of certain primordial human desires" (34). The payoff for artistically Enchanting such a world into fictional existence is a comprehensive sense of authentic belief from one's audience, no matter how fantastic a superhero story's scenarios might become. While this shall be considered more fully below, it should be noted at this point that the success seen by the MCU may very well be due precisely because its architects have achieved Tolkien's Enchantment.

In sum, Tolkien presents myth as a curiously believable story that enchants the imagination into another world, one filled with danger and strange ways of fighting it. However, the question still remains: what of the superhero? Given what has been said above, it seems a small leap to line Hawkeye and the Hulk up with Horus, Hera, and the Hippogriff underneath Frazer's golden bough—to say nothing of Thor, who has been waiting there already for centuries.

#### NEEDING TO "JOURNEY INTO MYSTERY"

Tolkien recognized that the nature of Faerie (and, therefore, any movies that rely on Faerie) leads to certain unavoidable phenomenological consequences for a fairy tale's audience: chiefly, the opportunity for existential, imaginative Escape into the deep of the fictional world.

That a good story can distract a reader's mind from the normal processing of everyday life is clear; regardless of the portal used (a book, a movie, a video game, etc.); the feeling of falling deeply into a fictional world is in no need of defense. To varying degrees, all fiction is possible of precipitating such an experience, but Tolkien argues that it is the special purview of fairy tales in particular, poised as they are to present "images of things that are not only 'not actually present,' but which are indeed not to be found in our primary world at all" with neither irony nor shame, preserving the verisimilitude of even magical Enchantment within the air of the text (60). The entertainment that comes from entering into such a world is no small part of the power of a fairy story: Tolkien dubs the experience "Escape," for it is an opportunity for someone to trade the trappings of normal life for that "arresting strangeness" of an adventure in the Perilous Realm, even if only for a time (60).

Some might shame such a desire as childish or irresponsible, but Tolkien had harsh words for a would-be critic of the value of an Escape opportunity, arguing that the brokenness of the real world cannot help but trigger a desire for something greater. Escapism is nothing to be ashamed of; in

the face of chains, dreams of freedom are both natural and honorable. As Tolkien put it:

Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it. In using escape in this way the critics have chosen the wrong word, and, what is more, they are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter. (69)

Indeed, the goal of Escape is not to permanently reject the real world, but to relieve oneself from the fight of actual life, however briefly; a fairy tale is a moment in the race of life to catch one's breath, a temporary reprieve to seek comfort in the struggle to survive—perhaps this is behind Tolkien's comment that his passion for fairy stories did not fully blossom until he was fully grown and it was "quickened to full life by war" (56).

Enter the Superhero.

First born during a time of world wars and nuclear uncertainties in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the superhero has been revitalized in an age of terrorist threats, police brutality, governmental hyper-surveillance, and decades-long war. While the news brings one tragic story after another and role models are in short supply, millions of people are entertained by actors embodying the pantheons of our superheroinic legends. As of this writing, ten of the twenty U.S. films with the most lucrative opening weekends in history (six of which are part of the MCU) ("Biggest Opening Weekends"), and two of the ten highest-domestic-grossing films of all time (including Marvel's *The Avengers* at number five), focus on these modern-day myths ("All Time"). Graphic novelist and editor Grant Morrison asks the question best: "Could it be that a culture starved of optimistic images of its own future has turned to the primary source [ancient myth] in search of utopian role models?" (xvii).

Escape captures the age-old feature of fairy stories acting as comforting reminders that the Perilous Realm is tamable and, though here there be monsters indeed, there is no absence of heroes who stand against evil. As Chesterton described the situation, the world is unavoidably filled with all manner of frightening evils—pretending otherwise is simply dishonest—so, "[w]hat fairy tales give the child is his first clear idea of the possible defeat of bogey. The baby has known the dragon intimately ever since he had an imagination. What the fairy tale provides for him is a St. George to kill the dragon" (50).

It would be a grave torment indeed to remove such heroes from an imagination that needs them, whether or not it belongs to a child. And in an



increasingly commodified culture, what defenders are more popular than the ones whose talismans are emblazoned on everything from pajamas to keychains? Escape is the attraction of Faerie that allows the dreamer to imagine the defeat of demons and all the evils from which humans wish to flee—pretending that such a task is unimportant is foolish indeed, for “At the four corners of a child’s bed stand Perseus and Roland, Sigurd and St. George. [Or, today, Captain America and Black Widow, Iron Man and the Hulk.] If you withdraw the guard of heroes you are not making him rational; you are only leaving him to fight the devils alone” (Chesterton 79).

And it is not only children who need such heroes. Depressingly, fictional justice is far easier to come by inside the MCU than outside. In fact, the closeness of the MCU to the real world (set as it is in copies of real cities) magnifies its ability in this regard; to watch the Battle of New York raged on the “same” streets plagued by suicide bombers just over a decade before *The Avengers* was released offers a catharsis of victory more visceral than many other available options. It is no wonder why so many movie-goers, surrounded by injustice and pain, have Escaped by watching Tony Stark or Scott Lang take matters of justice into their own hands; in a very real sense, many people likely wish that they themselves could do the same.

Moreover, mythic Escape is not merely distracting amusement, but thoughtful provocation that refocuses one’s mind on the sorts of eternal truths that rise above the drudgery of mundane existence. Fairy tales do not merely allow audiences to Escape the painfulness of the world, but to break free from the contingent concerns of their present lives to ponder timeless matters that should truly provoke concern: Justice, Fear-Conquering, Sacrifice, Power—the list is long. Not in an explicit fashion—only rarely might Steve Rogers or Nick Fury stand up and offer a thought-provoking observation clearly designed to stick in the minds of the audience—but the embodied demonstrations of duty, honor, and sacrifice are nonetheless apparent. Steven Strange’s willingness to lock himself in a time loop, Ant-Man’s selfless attempt to save his daughter, Peter Quill’s experience of parental betrayal, and Peter Parker’s lessons about responsibility all carry a familiar ring of beautiful truth buried beneath the spandex and the cosmic alien-demon stories.

This is the beauty of myth: its subtle ability to teach us such matters implicitly; as Nietzsche said, “The images of the myth have to be the unnoticed omnipresent demonic guardians, under whose care the young could grow to maturity and whose signs help the man to interpret his life and struggles” (*Birth of Tragedy* 135). Similarly, as Tolkien’s colleague and close friend C.S. Lewis pointed out, myths can generate a concrete experience of otherwise abstract concepts that are not only instructive but are also satisfying; “The moment we *state* [the lesson], we are admittedly back in the world of abstraction. It is only

while receiving the myth as a story that you experience the principle concretely” (66, italics in original).

Myth cloaks truth in the cover of narrative entertainment, avoiding cold, propositional didacticism and making complex ideas palatable by dressing them up as a story, delivering to the reader “not truth but reality” and thereby allowing him or her to digest remarkable concepts often without realizing it (Lewis 66).

#### **SUB-CREATING “AMAZING FANTASY”**

Given all of this, if the function of Faerie is to operate as a playground for the dreamer, then, by necessity, it must exude sub-created reality with every imaginative turn; without Tolkien’s Secondary Belief, Tolkien’s Escape shall never be achieved. Whether competing with mutants, super-friends, or a fantastic family of four for primacy in the hearts (and wallets) of contemporary audiences, the MCU’s mountain of steady and sustained success is built atop its focus on precisely these two facets of mythopoesis and Marvel’s ability to sub-create a rich and believable fictional reality.

To be fair, Tolkien was skeptical of the possibility to depict Faerie visually; pictures, he said, whether moving or not, depreciate the force of Fantasy: “In human art Fantasy is a thing best left to words, to true literature,” he says; “[otherwise] [s]illiness or morbidity are frequent results” (61). He was especially hostile to the notion of bringing Fantasy to a stage, for he considered it impossible for such a production to honestly capture the otherworldliness of the narrative, instead inescapably degrading the imagery; “Fantastic forms are not to be counterfeited. Men dressed up as talking animals may achieve buffoonery or mimicry, but they do not achieve Fantasy” (61).

However, much of Tolkien’s skepticism lay in the technological incapacities of the special-effects mechanisms of his day, when stage directors did not have the wealth of options now available to those attempting to infuse their fantastic tales with visual verisimilitude. As an example, Tolkien related how:

I once saw a so-called “children’s pantomime,” the straight story of *Puss-in-Boots*, with even the metamorphosis of the ogre into a mouse. Had this been mechanically successful it would either have terrified the spectators or else have been just a turn of high-class conjuring. As it was, though done with some ingenuity of lighting, disbelief had not so much to be suspended as hanged, drawn, and quartered (62).

When mechanism was not able to maintain the crucial inner consistency of the reality of the story, it made sense to curmudgeonly criticize its inability to portray Fantasy in a visual fashion.

However, very little argument needs to be made that, though such technology can be frivolously overused, it has certainly advanced far beyond that of Tolkien's milieu. It would indeed be difficult to portray Loki's magic, Stark's technology, or the sweeping landscape of Asgard (to say nothing of Banner's transformations or entire characters like Groot or Rocket Raccoon) within the limitations of a single stage, but the modern industry of cinematic effects and scene flexibility has laid claim to the very ability that Tolkien once reserved for words: making an audience feel as if it is surrounded by a fictional world. Through set design, costume creation, and visual effects augmented by mechanical and digital abilities that are downright magical in their own way, modern movies are now capable of dropping an audience into the middle of a fictional world to a degree that Tolkien's criticism no longer obtains. Like Tolkien's hypothetical mouse-ogre from "On Fairy-Stories," the Hulk's transformation indeed intimidates audiences precisely because it seems so real—something that Tolkien himself admitted: "To make such a thing may not be impossible. I have never seen it done with success" (62).

Additionally, visual storytelling methods, such as comic books and especially films, afford unique opportunities to the storyteller unavailable in other media which can help to compensate for the limitations of embodied storytelling that Tolkien outlined. For example, whereas shocking moments can certainly be revealed in prose, the visceral force of a sudden loud noise or unexpected scene change can provoke an emotional thrill far more immediate than the slow build of reading sequential sentences on a page. Consider Bruce Banner's traumatic shower scene in the motel after he and Betty Ross go on the run in *The Incredible Hulk*: while the showerhead provoking a sudden flashback to the Hulk being attacked by Blonsky's men could very well have been described propositionally in writing, any fair description would have taken far too much time to preserve the split-second sensation of the movie scene's abrupt surprise. It is precisely because of the visually liberated nature of the film medium that several pages worth of prosaic information can be distilled down to a fraction of a second, phenomenologically adding emotional weight (and an increased heart rate) to the didactic content of the plot. Such techniques only serve to further assist the visual storyteller in reaching Tolkienesque levels of creative Enchantment in a manner that might have fully surprised Tolkien himself.

Indeed, in a changing world, culture-dependent fairy stories have likewise mutated. People groups cannot *not* write fantasy stories, for as Nietzsche said, "without myth every culture loses the healthy natural power of its creativity: only a horizon defined by myths completes and unifies a whole cultural movement" (*Birth of Tragedy* 135). In a world of screens, modern

Western myths are now made into movies—and in a world hungry for heroes, cinematic fairy tales provide precisely those imaginary protectors.

### **SLOWLY TELLING “TALES TO ASTONISH”**

The key to the particular success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe lies in the great patience shown by its developers; it has only been because of the slow and thoughtful crafting of the MCU that a properly mythical Universe has indeed blossomed. Like a team of gardeners, the filmmakers did not rush to transplant a fully-formed tree of fairy tales into the unprepared soil of the audience’s imagination, but instead spent great time and effort tilling ground, planting seed, and growing the garden; when production began on the first *Iron Man* film, the eventual blockbuster success of *The Avengers* was still over half a decade away. Regardless, under the watchful eye of studio chief Kevin Feige, the crafters of the MCU carefully built each building block of the comprehensive Realm that is the MCU; as Feige described in a retrospective interview in 2017, “[W]e never said, ‘We’re going to make a cinematic universe.’ We said, ‘We want to make a great Iron Man movie. We want to make a great Thor movie. We want to make a great Cap movie’” (Han). And by prioritizing the individual success of each film along the way, the richness of the overall picture was eventually able to organically emerge.

During the early years of what MCU called its “Phase One,” few people understood the long-term game Marvel was attempting to play; as Feige explains:

I remember thinking, ‘Wow, this is ambitious, this is great,’ and nobody talking about it. I was like, ‘I don’t think people really – like, I think this is pretty cool what we’re doing! That we’re actually putting them all together! [...] I think people didn’t really believe it for a long time, which is understandable. Had *Thor* not worked, things would’ve been different. If *Captain America* didn’t work, things would’ve been different. (Han)

Some of this skepticism may have been justified, given the as-then-perceived meager seeds with which Marvel was limited to plant: having sold off the legal rights to several of its most popular characters (like Spider-Man and the X-Men) to other studios in the 1990s, Marvel was left with only a handful of B-level superheroes whose primary point of interest was their joint participation in a famous superhero team—by betting the rights to *those* characters against the potential success of building a cinematic world wherein they might play, Marvel found financial backing for what would become one of the most profitable

ventures in Hollywood history (Waxman).<sup>2</sup> Yet the initial sub-prime status of their characters led studio executives to intentionally shift their focus towards an as-yet-unheard of concept in Hollywood: a crossover series. Instead of keeping their characters segregated within their own movies, the MCU was born from the desire to weave the distinct stories of four heroes together into a cohesive narrative, turning Iron Man, the Hulk, Thor, and Captain America into Earth's Mightiest Heroes on the silver screen: the Avengers.

This world-building project proceeded with two crucial character-based steps: firstly, each character was introduced into the continuity of the shared universe with their own film (or, in the case of Iron Man, films), thereby allowing each individual to undergo character development and to give the audience time to understand and appreciate each hero in their own way. Secondly, some characters like Director Nick Fury, Agent Phil Coulson, and Erik Selvig (not to mention Natasha Romanoff and Clint Barton who would themselves eventually join the Avengers' roster) were used to begin tying the early connecting threads of the Universe together as they each began popping up—however briefly or secretly in end-credit stingers—in more than one film. Combined with the crossing over of certain tokens like Thor's hammer, Mjolnir, the once-shadowy organization S.H.I.E.L.D., and the Tesseract, the foundation was laid for each of these disparate plot lines to come crashing together inside a team-up movie that, with all the build-up, was legitimately long-awaited.

Repeatedly in his essay "On Fairy-Stories," Tolkien describes the "framing" of a fairy story as capturing a sub-section of Faerie, where most of the fictional world is left unexplored beyond the margins of the particular scene or story (83); this is precisely what the MCU's near-casual reference to a wider continuity shared by each film achieves. After a prototype of Captain America's shield is seen on a table in Tony Stark's lab in the first *Iron Man* (a full two years before *Captain America: The First Avenger* even entered pre-production), every time that a supporting character or object suddenly appeared in another film or that S.H.I.E.L.D. was name-dropped as a normal facet of daily operation, the MCU was subtly demonstrating its multifaceted complexity—that Tønsberg, Norway is strangely attractive to superheroic attention, a news report of the Hulk on a rampage is seen in Tony Stark's lab, or that Spider-Man learns about the Sokovia Accords in History class is only more icing on the Enchanting cake.

And, of course, no moment in any Phase One film was more indicative of the wider reality of the sub-created Universe than the mid-credits scene in *The Avengers* where the mysterious Thanos suddenly shows his face for the first

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<sup>2</sup> Had the endeavor failed to turn a profit, the initial licensing contract stipulated that Marvel would forfeit the film rights to each of the characters in the franchise, including Captain America, Thor, and the rest of the Avengers; see Waxman for more details.

time—though only comic book readers initially understood the full implications of those seven seconds, it was clear that the story of Earth’s Mightiest Heroes was only just beginning. Rumor has it that by the time the Avengers actually confront Thanos in 2018’s upcoming *Avengers: Infinity War*, more than five dozen characters will be on the roster (thirty-two of whom will reportedly share a single scene); yet, thanks to the slowly cooked soup that is the MCU, the audience should not feel overwhelmed, but right at home (Hood).

#### ON SUPERHERO STORIES AND CINEMATIC UNIVERSES

Ever since Robert Downey Jr. walked into a bar as Tony Stark in the post-credits sequence at the end of *The Incredible Hulk*, other movie studios have taken notice of the success of the mythic approach to cinematic storytelling. But as Fox, Warner Brothers, Legendary, and Universal Studios all have started developing their own attempts to mimic the wild success of the MCU, it is unclear whether their approaches will eventually pay off with the rich and rooted Secondary Belief that the MCU has managed to generate. Consider the repeated failure by Fox to reboot Marvel’s Fantastic Four characters into a workable movie franchise (McKnight); it is difficult for a screenwriter to introduce four characters (not including villains), develop each one individually and collectively together as a team, *and* tell a worth-while superhero tale all within the space of a single movie; unlike the MCU which has devoted entire films for character introduction prior to working them all together into a team setting inside their mutually shared fictional world. Similarly, Warner Brothers’ *Batman V Superman: Dawn of Justice*, an early foundation for the planned DC Extended Universe, was criticized for its glut of underdeveloped characters—one reviewer called it “overstuffed, overpopulated, [and] awkwardly plotted” before pointing out that “its detours into franchise-building are often self-defeating” by derailing the film’s momentum simply to rehearse a list of new characters who will eventually get movies of their own (Seitz); by introducing two of the most iconic superhero characters in history (Wonder Woman and Batman) in a single movie, as well as several key villains and supporting characters, such recitation makes it more difficult for the audience to appreciate the larger world being built around this monumental list of names. For this reason, much like what the MCU would later do with the character Star-Lord in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, Fox’s X-Men stories (many of which have a dozen principle characters or more) eventually honed in on the single character of Wolverine to helpfully offer a solid rock on which the audience might stand as dozens of other characters fly around them for several films.

This shift in movie-making techniques appears to be a sort of cinematic arms-race precipitated by the MCU’s refocusing of the nature of movie-telling techniques to Tolkienesque Faerie-sized realms; whereas subtle crossovers

between a studio's properties are nothing new (consider, for example, Scar from Disney's *The Lion King* appearing briefly in the later *Hercules* or how Pinocchio and *The Little Mermaid*'s Sebastian both appeared briefly in Disney's *Aladdin*), such nods are now nearly expected or, when not intentionally present, invented by creative fans. For example, whereas the movies released by Pixar Studios have always contained small repetitive nods (the bouncing ball, the dancing lamp, the Pizza Planet truck, etc.), a recent comprehensive fan theory exploded across the Internet that suggested it was possible to tie every one of Pixar's movies together into a single, unified story (Negroni). In another example, after Disney filmmakers hid the main characters of *Tangled* in a split-second scene in the later movie *Frozen*, fan theorists suggested tying these movies together with the earlier films *Tarzan* and *The Little Mermaid* to explain what happened to the doomed King and Queen of Arendelle—a theory that received so much traction online that the filmmakers of *Frozen* themselves ended up lending credibility to the idea (Butler). What this may indicate more than anything else is the contemporary public's hunger for sensible otherworlds wherein imaginations can run wild—not simply for a single movie, but in and throughout each frame of Faerie and beyond. And with attempts at crafting cinematic otherworlds now coming from Marvel's oldest print-competitor, DC, with the burgeoning DCEU, Universal Studios joining vintage monsters together in its "Dark Universe", and Legendary's revitalization of the classic *Godzilla-vs-King-Kong* franchise (now under the name "MonsterVerse"), moviegoers will have their pick of cross-pollinated movie storylines to choose from for years to come (Leane and Harley).

One caveat remains: early reviews of several nascent shared universes indicate that the success of the MCU may reign supreme for some time. Despite DC owning powerhouse properties like Superman and Wonder Woman, its rush to construct its own shared universe has been met with both critical and financial failures (Hughes). Similarly, the tepid response to 2017's *The Mummy*, Universal's first foray into its so-called "Dark Universe," has led the studio to place the rest of its production schedule on an indefinite hold (Lamble). As Jensen points out, "The Marvel movies work as stand-alone films first and foremost, while other studios seem to think that the 'universe' will do the heavy lifting for them" (Jensen), a sentiment which reflects the care of the slowly-crafted MCU even as it echoes Tolkien's caution that:

To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft. Few attempt such difficult tasks. But when they are attempted and in any

degree accomplished then we have a rare achievement of Art: indeed narrative art, story-making in its primary and most potent mode. (61)

To successfully create what Nietzsche called the “*higher possibility of existence* and the attainment thereby of a yet *higher glorification* (through art)” (*The Dionysiac Worldview* 133, italics in original) is not the sort of thing which can be rushed—movie-going audiences can easily discern which films are successful and which are simply seeking to cash in on a popular trend.

For superheroes, though, and the Marvel Cinematic Universe in particular, the current popularity of fairy stories should be unsurprising. No matter how far human culture may progress, it can never escape its oldest roots—that part of the human soul that still feels unnerved when the lights go out—and the little child inside everyone needs someone to come and save them. Regardless of the advances humanity shall inevitably continue to make, the need for fantastical fairy stories will never die, for the Unknown that spurs the drive for discovery will always be personified in the imagination and, therefore, need some Hero to stand against its dark side. “Fantasy is a natural human activity,” Tolkien insists, “It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and the clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make” (65). By this logic, the multi-million dollar success of our contemporary superhero myths, chief among them the masterfully crafted MCU, is quite understandable.

In the end, Nietzsche’s overman may be just another “puny god,” beyond the reach of reality, but that is not to say that sub-created superpeople will not perpetually play a vital role in human culture. The Marvel Cinematic Universe’s lasting contribution to that project will be its visual instantiation of Tolkien’s concept of Faerie on a grand scale, filled with all the visceral richness that the imagination has always conjured. Indeed, where Nietzsche may instead be correct is in his observation that “it is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that existence and the world are eternally *justified*” (*Birth of Tragedy* 52; italics in original), meaning that humans will always continue to spin stories and make myths—even if they are now clad in spandex and have a taste for shawarma—ultimately, we just cannot help ourselves.



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