



CTCS 469: Marvel

Units: 4

Fall 2020; W—6pm–8:30pm Pacific

Zoom ID: [available through blackboard]

Professor: J.D. Connor

Office: None

Office Hours: M 12–2 and others by appointment at jdconnor.youcanbook.me; held in my personal zoom: 851 900 6551

Contact Info: jconnor@cinema.usc.edu. I reply to emails during business hours, usually the same day.

TA's

Lead: Alessandra Sternberg, alsternb@usc.edu

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Course Description

Marvel: The Course focuses on the art and industry of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, from the corporate battles over the bankrupt company to the present. We will balance analysis of corporate strategy with close attention to the form and style behind the largest sustained narrative effort in cinematic history. At the core lies a unique design-centered production model that has allowed Marvel to radically diversify its motion pictures—a diversity of talent, genre, and style—even as they maintain production and narrative continuity. We will emphasize the roles of key creative workers—not just producing and directing, but screenwriting, production and costume design, sound, score, and music, performance, cinematography, marketing, and so on. Although the MCU is the heart of the course, we will also be examining alternative comic adaptation practices. We'll look at pre-MCU Marvel films (*Spider-Man*, *Blade*), Marvel properties *outside* the MCU (*X-Men*, *Deadpool*), and DC (*The Dark Knight*). We will concentrate on movies but spend significant time on television (*Agents of Shield*, *Luke Cage*, *Jessica Jones*), comics, and fans. The MCU lies at the center of contemporary Hollywood, of global cinematic entertainment, shaping and shaped by the culture it is part of.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the course, students will be better able to integrate their understanding of art and industry, business and aesthetics, principally in writing. Students will have a better understanding of the relative contributions of key players in an integrated media brand: top executives, producers, directors, and a range of “below the line” crafts. Students will expand their research skills to include business operations and history as well as media studies and history. In addition, the course emphasizes media literacies for practitioners, especially the critical reception of industrial discourse.

Prerequisite(s): None.

Co-Requisite(s): None.

Concurrent Enrollment: None.

Recommended Preparation: An introductory course in film analysis is helpful.

Delivery

This course is offered **entirely online**. Students are generally expected to attend the main sessions synchronously and to watch video materials asynchronously. Lecture slides will usually be available in advance on Blackboard, but may be subject to change and supplementation.

Technological Proficiency and Hardware/Software Required

The course will rely on a number of relatively intuitive software tools (zoom, Blackboard, discord). Students will need basic word processing software. No multimedia production software is required, but certain assignments may make optional use of it. A **robust internet connection** is extremely useful.

Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

Required readings will be available on Blackboard. Each session will have its own folder and its own readings. This will allow us to respond to student interests and to current events. Screenings will be done out of class.

As you will see from the sessions below, lots of readings for later weeks have yet to be slotted in. The revised syllabus will be posted and revised as those take shape. Again, the reading burden will be consistent.

There is one required book, Flanagan, McKenny, and Livingstone, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon: Inside a Transmedia Universe*, Bloomsbury 2016. It is available through the bookstore and elsewhere.

Regular Viewing

Each week there will be required viewing to be done in advance of the Wednesday session. There will usually be recommended viewing as well. (And, yes, you should rewatch the movie or tv show even if you've seen it before. Perhaps the *whole point* is learning how to watch these movies more closely in light of the lectures, visits, and readings.) Those movies will be posted to the new SCA Movie Library. You access that library by visiting SCA Community (scacommunity.usc.edu). Full directions are attached, and you should pay particular attention to them if it is your first time logging in to SCA Community.

For the first couple weeks I will also post low-res versions of the movies to a shared google drive folder (https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1uJOwuh5PYTRkV-Evf3RqAp_yfM1bvFOX?usp=sharing). You will need to log in to your USC gmail account to access them.

The main movies and tv shows are available streaming elsewhere. I'll make sure you have those links since bandwidth may be an issue and sometimes commercial providers will be easier. (*Spider-Man*, for example, is currently free on Starz and rentable lots of other places; *X-Men* is free on Disney+, HBO Max (etc.), and rentable.)

Watchalongs

After a terrific summer rewatch of the entire MCU with some of you, I'm more convinced than ever that watching along with other people is one antidote to the strange non-theatricality of all this. You are free to set up whatever sort of watchalong you'd like. I will usually be watching late on a Monday night. Your TA may be watching at another time.

I will probably be watching the movie on blu-ray at my house for bandwidth reasons, not streaming from SCA or another service, but I will be chatting on **discord**. Discord is a free, very easy to use platform that lets you chat, drop images and links and so on. I will send out a timed discord link before the screening. You'll have to use your **real name** not a gamertag (sorry, official policy) and adhere to the course rules (which are pretty simple: PG-13 rating; no harassment, no spamming, etc.).

Guests

As complex as the semester is in many ways, being virtual has made booking guests dramatically easier. In addition, Marvel has been extremely helpful. We will have visitors most weeks, whether synchronous or prerecorded, and great visitors.

Producer/screenwriter James Schamus next week, Marvel President Kevin Feige in the final week, lots of folks in between. And when we do not have a visitor, I will usually point you to a recorded Q&A that will be important for our understanding of Marvel's own industrial discourse.

But this class is *NOT* a symposium class. We will be treating every visit not simply as evidence of some external truth but as part of an evolving corporate discourse that requires interpretation.

Shawarma Sessions

We don't have official sections for this course, but I know many of you are eager to talk about all sorts of Marvel things, and all sorts of USC things. To that end, I'll be holding shawarma sessions—informal, non-required zoom chats—at all hours of the day and throughout the week to sync up with your schedules as best I can. Again, those will be in my zoom room, <https://usc.zoom.us/j/8519006551> (These won't be recorded.)

Assignments

Attendance

We're not going to try to make everyone attend synchronously, or to keep the zoom screen on all the time. I spent the summer "teaching" in my kitchen; I know how odd some situations are. Some of you are in wildly different time zones. We'll accommodate that as best we can, and if there are ways to improve things, we will.

If you can't attend synchronously (we'll keep track as best we can), then when you do watch the recorded materials, you'll have to answer some basic questions on a google form showing you caught up.

Attendance and makeup are worth **8 points**.

Reading/Viewing Questions

Each session, by dawn, half the class should forward a significant question about the reading or viewing to J.D. and their TA in advance and be prepared to ask it during class. If you have an even number of letters in your first name, you ask questions during even weeks; if you have an odd number of letters in your first name, you ask questions during odd weeks. We will discuss the sorts of questions that are appropriate in the opening session. 6 questions; 12%. Who is your TA? Until the first assignment is due, your TA is the following: USC ID ends in the digit 0, 1, or 2: Alessandra; in 3, 4, or 5: Brian; 6, 7, 8: Daniel; 9: J.D.

Written work

There will be **four written assignments, each worth 20 points**, each about 1250 words, due at Midnight on the date.

1. **9/16 Close analysis of a scene.** Just what it sounds like, but done partially collaboratively. (I will model this just about every week.) It might seem like this could be done as an a/v assignment; you must do it in writing.
2. **10/7 Adaptation, Extension, Transmediation.** A close look at an instance where a bit of Marvel IP has been reused: a moment from a comic, a toy, a game, a novelization, fanfic, etc., in light of ideas about transmedial storytelling. A/V option.
3. **10/28 Discourse Analysis.** A close look at Marvel’s corporate discourse—from one of our guests or from another source—in light of various theories about corporate reflexivity. A/V option
4. **11/18 Alternatives, Expansions.** The MCU as opposed to what? We’ll try to attend to various alternatives—non-MCU Marvel, DC, indie superheroes—and you can take the measure of those differences by precisely attending to them. ORRRRRR: You can come up with your own alternative or expanded concluding assignment that reflects the research you want to do. Get approval for the latter. A/V option.

Where there is an A/V option, it will be possible to submit an equivalently intense audio-visual version of the assignment. However, you may only do that once during the semester without prior approval. What does “equivalently intense” mean? Something that takes at least the same amount of labor, involves the same amount of research, and can be subject to similar evaluation. I’ll post an example.

There are no exams. You take this course because you want to; you do the best you can; we meet you where you are and do our best improve your ability to think, write, analyze and understand.

Grading Breakdown

Assessment Tool (assignments)	% of Grade
Reading/Viewing questions	12
Attendance/Makeup	8
Close Reading	20
Adaptation, Transmediation	20
Discourse Analysis	20
Alternatives, Expansions	20
TOTAL	100

Grading Scale

Course final grades will be determined using the following scale

A	95-100	A-/B+	90
A/-	93.75	B+	87.5
A-	92.5	B/+	86.25

B	85	C-	72.5
B/-	83.75	C-/D+	70
B-	82.5	D+	67.5
B-/C+	80	D/+	66.25
C+	77.5	D	65
C/+	76.25	D/-	63.75
C	75	D-	62.5
C/-	73.75	F	60 and below

Assignment Submission Policy

Written assignments should be submitted via Turnitin on the course Blackboard site. Other sorts of assignments, such as session questions and presentations, should be emailed directly to me, jconnor@cinema.usc.edu AND your TA. Any video submissions can be shared via Google Drive or a similar platform.

Late assignments

The usual penalty is 1/3 of a letter grade per day with the weekend counting as one day. But these are extraordinary times and we must be accommodating. But there are still consequences. The assignments are spread out to make it possible to grade them and return them so that you can learn from them. If an assignment is late, it undercuts that process. It also wrecks your TA's ability to stick to a schedule and get their own work done. To prevent that, then I end up grading essays that are significantly late.

Additional Policies

Discussions are more lively if you have your video on. Internet vagaries, chaotic home situations, and time zone differences may make that impossible. Please let me, Alessandra, Brian, or Daniel know in advance if you will be video-off so that we can accommodate you. Don't hesitate to use the chat.

Zoom makes the recording and dissemination of classroom events much simpler than in in-person instruction. You are asked NOT to record, screencap, or otherwise retain classroom video. We will maintain recordings of course sessions and make those available for review on Blackboard.

Course Sessions

Reading and screenings are due on the day they are listed. As guest schedules become firmer, sessions may be shifted.

	Topics/Daily Activities	Readings/Preparation	Guest	Deliverables
Aug 19	Introduction; Bankruptcy and Reinvention; <i>Spider-Man</i> , <i>X-Men</i> and Stan the Man.	Required Viewing: <i>Spider-Man</i> (Raimi, Columbia 2002); Interview with Abraham Riesman, author of the forthcoming Stan Lee biography, <i>True Believer</i> (pre-recorded and posted to Blackboard) Sequence analysis: <i>Spider-Man</i> (pre-recorded and posted to Blackboard) Recommended Viewing: <i>X-Men</i> (Singer, Fox 2000)	Abraham Riesman (video)	NONE

		Required Reading: Stan Lee, "There's Money in Comics!" Siegel, "Brian Singer's Traumatic 'X-Men' Set" Raviv, <i>Comic Wars</i> , excerpt Caldwell, Appendices to <i>Production Cultures</i> Recommended Reading: The HBS Case Study of the Marvel Bankruptcy; Caldwell Chs. 6 & 7		
Aug 26	Hulks, Incredible and Otherwise. Comics as source vs. Comics as form. Auteurs Comicbook Movies	Required Viewing: <i>Hulk</i> , Sequence Analysis: <i>Hulk</i> ; Required Reading: Schamus, "Sing to us, Muse, of the Rage of the Hulk," <i>MSP</i> Intro, Ch2 Recommended Viewing: <i>Blade II</i>	James Schamus (sync)	Even Q's
Sept 2	<i>Iron Man</i> and the War for Independence; Design at the Center	Required Viewing: <i>Iron Man</i> ; Recommended Viewing: <i>Captain America: The First Avenger</i> , USC Marvel 10 th Q&A (selection)		Odd Q's
Sept 9	Crossover Events; Supersonics	Required Viewing: <i>Avengers</i> ; Recommended: USC Marvel 10 th Q&A (selection) Required Reading: <i>MSP</i> Ch5, 8		Even Q's
Sept 16	<i>The Dark Knight</i> and the DC Alternative	Required Viewing: <i>The Dark Knight</i>		Odd Q's W1 Close Reading
Sept 23	From Genre to Mode: <i>The Winter Soldier</i>	Required Viewing: <i>The Winter Soldier</i> ; Recommended: <i>X-Men: Days of Future Past</i> Required Reading: <i>MSP</i> 4	Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely (sync)	Even Q's
Sept 30	The Infinite Library; <i>Guardians of the Galaxy</i> ; Design at the edges; Soundtracking	Required Viewing: <i>Guardians of the Galaxy</i> ; Recommended: <i>Captain Marvel</i> , USC Marvel 10 th Q&A Required Reading: <i>MSP</i> Ch6	Ryan Meinerding (sync)	Odd Q's
Oct 7	Television, Diversification, Reintegration I; <i>Luke Cage</i> vs. <i>Agents of Shield</i> ; Race and Embodiment	Required Viewing: <i>Luke Cage</i> S1E01 & 02 (but really at least through 07); Recommended: <i>Agents of Shield</i> from the beginning	Asad Ayaz (sync); Cheo Hodari Coker (sync)	Even Q's W2 Extension
Oct 14	Television, Diversification, Reintegration II; <i>Jessica Jones</i> vs. <i>Agents of Shield</i> ; Gender and Trauma	Required Viewing: <i>Jessica Jones</i> S1E01–03; Recommended: More <i>Agents of Shield</i>		Odd Q's
Oct 21	Universing: Integrating IP; Transmedial Entertainment	Required Viewing: <i>Black Panther</i> ; Recommended Viewing: <i>Dr. Strange</i> , USC Marvel 10 th Q&A Required Reading: <i>MSP</i> Conclusion	Luwig Göransson (sync)	Even Q's
Oct 28	Meanwhile, at Fox: Adult-ernative Modes	Required Viewing: <i>Deadpool</i> ; Recommended Viewing: <i>Logan</i>		Odd Q's W3 Discourse
Nov 4	Indie Ascension; New Auteurs	Required Viewing: <i>Lore</i> or <i>Berlin Syndrome</i> (tbd); Recommended viewing: <i>Ragnarock</i>	Cate Shortland (sync)	Even Q's
Nov 11	Infinity & Beyond; The Biggest Movie of All Time; Phase IV	Required Viewing: <i>Avengers: Infinity War</i> ; <i>Endgame</i>	Kevin Feige (sync)	Odd Q's
Nov 18				W4 Alternatives

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in SCampus in Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards" policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in SCampus and university policies on scientific misconduct, policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

Support Systems

Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

Student Health Leave Coordinator – 213-821-4710

Located in the USC Support and Advocacy office, the Health Leave Coordinator processes requests for health leaves of absence and advocates for students taking such leaves when needed.

<https://policy.usc.edu/student-health-leave-absence/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call

suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention and Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-9355(WELL), press "0" after hours – 24/7 on call

studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)- (213) 740-5086 | Title IX – (213) 821-8298

equity.usc.edu, titleix.usc.edu

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following *protected characteristics*: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations. The university also prohibits sexual assault, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual misconduct, intimate partner violence, stalking, malicious dissuasion, retaliation, and violation of interim measures.

Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298

usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office of Equity and Diversity | Title IX for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

The Office of Disability Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776

dsp.usc.edu

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

Campus Support & Intervention - (213) 821-4710

campussupport.usc.edu

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101

diversity.usc.edu

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call

dps.usc.edu, emergency.usc.edu

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-1200 – 24/7 on call

dps.usc.edu

Non-emergency assistance or information.

Office of the Ombuds - (213) 821-9556 (UPC) / (323-442-0382 (HSC)

ombuds.usc.edu

A safe and confidential place to share your USC-related issues with a University Ombuds who will work with you to explore options or paths to manage your concern.