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# Disney's Endgame: How the Franchise Came to Rule Cinema

GERRY CANAVAN

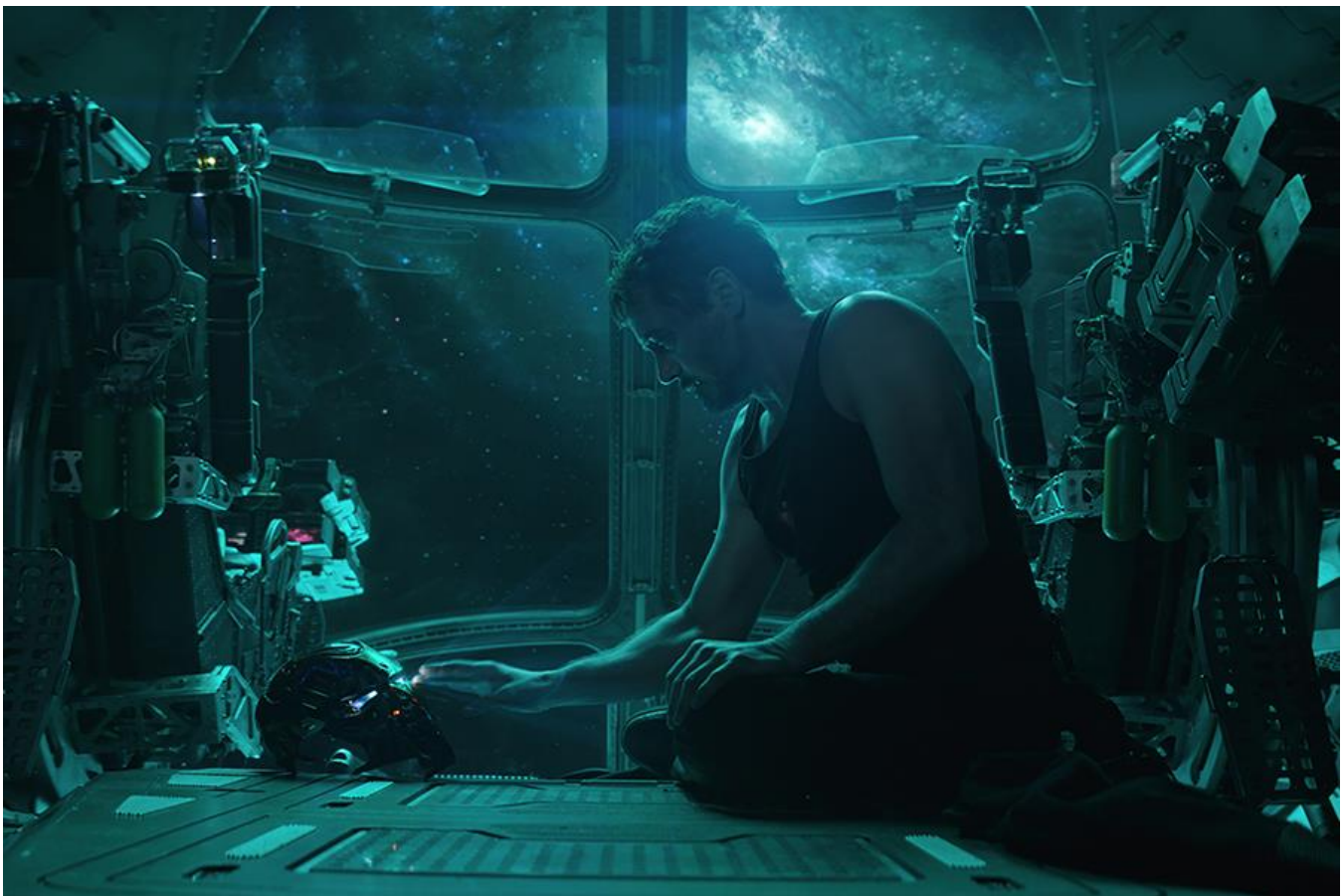
In the 2010s, nearly every blockbuster film has been a visual-effects-driven fantasy spectacle owned and distributed by a single corporation



Almost none of the top-grossing films of the 1990s were part of a franchise. In fact, it wasn't until 1999 that two sequels – *Toy Story 2* and *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* – cracked the top ten, with a few more – *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), *Batman Forever* (1995) and *The Lost World: Jurassic Park* (1997) –

appearing here and there in the top 25. Of these, however, only *Star Wars* and *Batman* really qualify as franchises in the contemporary sense of being a single narrative system distributed across multiple texts and media formats. By contrast, nearly every top-20 film of the 2000s was either the start of a franchise or a sequel within a franchise, with *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) the lone exception.

In the 2010s, not only is every top-20 film a sequel, but nearly all of them are visual-effects-driven fantasy spectacles owned and distributed by a single corporation: The Walt Disney Company. Its highly profitable Lucasfilm, Marvel Studios and Pixar divisions utterly dominate the list, with competitors such as Universal (*Jurassic World*, 2015) and Warner Brothers (*The Dark Knight Rises*, 2012; *Wonder Woman*, 2017) barely registering. Even if we single-out 2019 as a snapshot of the era, only Jordan Peele's *Us* and Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood* – directors whose names effectively function as brands in themselves – have bucked the trend towards franchise supremacy. By contrast, the films of 1999 were far more varied in terms of genre, director, style, mode of distribution and just about every other conceivable measure of cinema.



Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, *Avengers: Endgame*, 2019, film still. Courtesy: Marvel

Of course, box-office receipts do not equate to critical esteem, but there's no question that something essential has changed about the way we engage with and consume culture. Martin Scorsese recently launched a thousand online flamewars with his declaration that the Marvel movies – the dominant franchise of our era, whose wild success no studio has yet been able to replicate – are closer to theme parks than to film. In his recent *New York Times* op-ed, he declared that the shift from millions to billions in terms of film-industry receipts over the course of the 2000s and, especially, the 2010s has endangered the system of independent

studio production and theatre ownership that had previously allowed art cinema to flourish – whether symbiotically or parasitically – on the back of popular blockbuster fodder.

Today, it seems impossible for a film to break out without some connection to corporate-owned-and-managed intellectual property of which everyone is already aware. (Even one of 2019's most ostensibly *auteur* triumphs, *Joker*, is a comic book-inspired pastiche to which defender-of-the-faith Scorsese himself was attached as producer and potential director for years.) When a single film, *Avengers: Endgame*, debuts on every screen in a multiplex, with packed showings round-the-clock – and when non-science-fiction, non-comic-book projects increasingly eschew distribution on the big screen for same-day or direct-to-streaming deals instead – how much longer can cinema exist as anything like an artform, rather than as an ATM for Disney shareholders?



Todd Phillips, *Joker*, 2019, film still. Courtesy: Warner Bros.

This same trend can be observed across media, with huge-budget sci-fi and fantasy brands swamping not simply streaming services but also what used to be called 'prestige television' (see the pre-eminence of HBO's *Game of Thrones*, 2011–19, and *Watchmen*, 2019, in the space of critical acclaim that, a decade ago, would have been the domain of *Mad Men*, 2007–15, and *Breaking Bad*, 2008–13), as well as what used to be high literature (perhaps most infamously the recent (joint-)awarding of the Booker Prize to Margaret Atwood for *The Testaments*, a sequel to *The Handmaid's Tale* that effectively amounts to a story treatment for an upcoming Hulu television series). Social media only intensifies this tendency by narrowcasting our collective conversation to a small handful of tentpole 'event' texts, which dominate the cultural conversation for a week or two, then disappear entirely.

'They are sequels in name but they are remakes in spirit,' Scorsese says of franchise films, 'and everything in them is officially sanctioned because it can't really be any other way [...] market-researched, audience-tested, vetted, modified, revetted and remodified until they're ready for consumption.' Now, I've seen every Marvel Cinematic Universe movie, every *Star Wars* release, every Pixar film and, not only have I enjoyed them, I've taught them in college classrooms and frequently, as now, participated in the thinkpiece industry around them. There seems little doubt, however, that Scorsese's dire diagnosis of a culture industry that is functioning almost entirely as the profit-engine for a single, trillion-dollar corporation seems basically accurate and utterly disheartening.



David Benioff and D.B. Weiss, *Game of Thrones*, 2011-2019, film still. Courtesy: HBO

Of course, there have been innumerable historical pronouncements on the Death of Art, with the tastes of any rising generation invariably deemed grossly unsophisticated. Yet, ours seems to be a cultural moment in which there is a very real risk of alternative perspectives to the extremely narrow horizon of fantasy spectacle being crowded out entirely. Anyone working as a film critic today has an obligation to resist, as best as they can, the totalizing flattening of all culture to the homogenized paste that the late British author Terry Pratchett once called 'Extruded Fantasy Product.'

And there is, despite everything, some reason to hope: the *Star Wars* spin off *Solo* (2018) crashed and burned; someday, maybe soon, a Marvel movie will, too. The New Hollywood of the 1970s, where Scorsese cut his teeth as a young filmmaker, emerged in response to a similarly monolithic apparatus of cinema production: the studio system, whose once-unthinkable collapse during the late 1950s and early '60s opened up new possibilities for creative innovation in ways that still shape our sense of what film, at its very best, can do. The most exciting question about global culture in the 2020s, I think, is whether a similar collapse in the overawing power of franchise hegemony would even be thinkable today – and, if it is, what kinds of creatively supercharged new forms and fandoms might yet emerge out of the ruins. Stay tuned.