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Divine Ontology and Multicultural Representation in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

Abstract The Marvel Cinematic Universe ('MCU') is one of the most lucrative entertainment franchises ever, and shapes the pop-cultural imagination to no small degree. This paper examines the MCU's receptions of divine and supernatural characters from two interrelated research foci: (1) divine ontology, and (2) multicultural representations of premodern religions and civilizations. The first topic examines how the MCU remediates godhood: what does it mean to be a god in the MCU? Where lies the distinction between gods, heroes, and superheroes? What are the socio-cultural implications of these conceptualizations? We argue that the MCU currently exhibits a variety of divine definitions and modalities. The second topic investigates how the MCU represents various premodern cultures and mythologies. It demonstrates how the MCU's storytelling and representation of (inter)mythological communities are centred around (but not subsumed) by white and Western cultural concerns. In sum, this paper investigates contemporary meanings attached to premodern religion and mythology by one of the largest entertainment franchises, illuminating not only how these meanings stand in dialogue with evidence but also what they reveal about contemporary society and how present-day creators look towards world mythologies.

Keywords Marvel Cinematic Universe, mythology, multiculturalism, reception, superheroes, divinity

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INTRODUCTION

> "In ancient times, people believed the heavens were filled with gods and monsters and magical worlds. Then, as time passed, those beliefs faded into myth and folklore. But now we know the stories are true. Other worlds, with names like Asgard, do exist. And beings once revered as gods, like Thor, have returned, leaving us with more questions … an enormous mess to clean up." – Jemma Simmons (*Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* S1E8 "The Well").

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (henceforth 'MCU') is a massive transmedial entertainment franchise, focused on the exploits of superheroes ('Avengers') and their entanglements in both terrestrial and intergalactic threats. Under the guidance of Marvel Studios' president Kevin Feige, the franchise started in 2008 with the release of *Iron Man* (2008, Jon Favreau), and was acquired by Disney a year later. At the time of writing, the MCU spans 33 feature films, 9 television series on Disney+, and various other projects in different media.[1] Importantly, all of these projects are linked together in the same narrative universe – albeit to varying degrees of importance, see below – with characters crossing over between different texts and narrative events reverberating across media.[2] This so-called 'cinematic universe' technique is considered as one of the most influential recent developments of the Hollywood film industry.[3] The franchise has proven incredibly successful, both financially and culturally: not only are the movies estimated to have collected around US$30 billion,[4] the MCU is also one of the most

1 Other MCU projects include short films (Marvel 'OneShots'; see Graves (2017)), broadcast television series (e.g., *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.;* 2013–2020, Joss Whedon), streaming series on Netflix (*The Defenders Saga;* 2015–2019, Douglas Petrie and Marco Ramirez), Hulu (*Runaways;* 2017–2019, Josh Schwartz and Stephanie Savage), and Freeform (*Cloak and Dagger;* 2018–2019, Joe Pokaski), web series (*WHIH Newsfront;* 2015–2016, Jon Danforth-Appell), tie-in comic books, Disney+ specials (e.g., *Werewolf By Night;* 2022, Michael Giacchino).

2 See, for example, Calbreath-Frasieur (2014).

3 Taylor (2014) 183; Beaty (2016) 319; Flanagan/Livingstone/McKenny (2016) 1. The technique itself is much older, and goes back to Universal's monster films from the 1930s, such as *Dracula* (1931, Tod Browning) or *Frankenstein* (1931, James Whale). Today, other examples include the DC Extended Universe (2013–2023) and the ongoing MonsterVerse (2014–present). Marvel Studios' cinematic universe does, however, remain the "most ambitious" to date (Taylor (2014) 184).

4 Anon. (2023).

dominant forces in contemporary popular culture. For those reasons alone, it is an important franchise for academic analysis.

Appropriately, the Marvel Comics and the MCU in particular have recently become the subject of sustained scholarly examination.[5] One strand of the previous research on the MCU franchise focused on issues such as adapting and accommodating the comic book material and the resultant transmediality.[6] Another analytic angle considered issues of geopolitics,[7] gender, race, disability and identity,[8] as authors examined the shifting roles of superheroines and non-White characters in the MCU. Concurrently, a number of comic book scholars have compellingly contended that superheroes serve not only to support existing societal values and behaviours but also operate as divine symbols within the cultures that give rise to them.[9]

Within this sizable entertainment franchise, we can discern a continuing presence of premodern worlds and mythologies: some of its characters are gods, heroes or monsters either well-known from mythical narratives (e.g., Thor, Zeus) or inspired by them (e.g., Eternals), and some of its locations are attested in premodern mythological traditions (e.g., Asgard, Duat, K'un-Lun). From the very inception of the franchise up until its current storytelling innovations, mytho-

5 To name but a few very current monographs and edited volumes on the MCU, consider Baldwin/Hodge (2022), Carnes/Goren (2022), Kent (2021), McSweeney (2018), Chambliss/Svitavsky/Fandino (2018), Yockey (2017) and Flanagan/Livingstone/McKenny (2016).

6 On the MCU's transmediality, see, *inter alia,* edited volumes by McEniry/Peaslee/Weiner (2016) and Flanagan/Livingstone/McKenny (2016), chapters by Brinker, Graves and Proctor in Yockey's edited volume (2017), Dantzler, Burke, Perdigao and Svitavsky in Chambliss/Svitavsky/Fandino (2018), or articles by Radošinká (2017), Scott (2017), and Proctor (2014).

7 For geopolitical analyses of the MCU storyworld, consider, *inter alia,* chapters by Eccleston, Rea, Beckett and Nadkarni in Chambliss/Svitavsky/Fandino (2018). For studies into ideology and comparisons between the MCU and their historical context, see Muñoz-González (2017), White (2014), or Hagley/Harrison (2014).

8 The research on race and its entanglements in the MCU predominantly concentrates on the *Black Panther* duology: see, *inter alia,* White/Ritzenhoff (2021), chapters by Rank/Pool and Sanders in Carnes/Goren (2022), or Saunders' 2019 article. Mincheva's chapter in Baldwin/Hodge (2022) discusses Islam in *Captain Marvel,* whereas gender in the MCU is explored by Abney (2022), Kent (2021), Gray/Kaklamanidou (2011), and in chapters by Beail, Philips, Fattore, Cassino, Rodda and Kanthak in the volume by Carnes/Goren (2022). For studies on MCU and the representation of disability, see Grue (2021) or Wagner (2013).

9 McSweeney (2018) 72. Cf. Morrison (2011), Saunders (2011) and LoCicero (2007).

logical allusions and inclusions continue to drive the narrative, with the potential of growing even more important in future years (see below). Recently, various volumes appeared that elaborated on the MCU's use of religion and myth,[10] which included contributions discussing hierarchies of divinity in the MCU and broader Marvel canon,[11] as well as mythic reinventions in Marvel films.[12] Our analysis builds on these and other ideas, and offers not only a necessary, but also a timely intervention to subject the MCU's current mythological and premodern inspirations to critical scrutiny.

Specifically, we are interested in two interrelated research questions on the franchise's reception of premodern cultures. The first relates to *divine ontology* in the MCU: we have indicated the presence of gods (or god-like figures) in the franchise, but what exactly does it 'mean' to be a god in the MCU? Where lies the distinction between gods, heroes and superheroes, and what are the socio-cultural implications of these conceptualizations? Following Andrew Tobolowsky, we consider which "available myths" the MCU creators draw upon to depict their deities, blending tradition and personal vision.[13] Second, we are interested in the MCU's *multicultural representations:* how does the MCU represent the different mythologies and cultures it has chosen to include? Reading the MCU through these two research foci, we investigate contemporary meanings attached to divinity and mythology, illuminating not only how these meanings stand in dialogue with mythological sources but also what they reveal about contemporary society and how present-day creators look towards cultural narratives.[14]

The main framework informing our analyses is that of classical reception studies, although the multicultural focus of both the MCU and our current investigation requires us to go well beyond those civilizations usually called 'classical'. For this reason, we adopt and yet transcend the term 'premodern world

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10 Stevenson (2020), Nichols (2021), Baldwin/Hodge (2022).

11 Freeman (2020).

12 Tobolowsky (2020).

13 Tobolowsky (2020) 173–184.

14 In the last two decades (2000–2024), classical reception scholars began to increasingly explore the intricate interplay and enrichment between the ancient material and modern works that receive it, in lieu of solely assessing the modern works for their adherence (or lack thereof) to the "original" (cf. Hardwick (2003) 112). This two-way relationship may use the modern reception to illuminate aspects of the original material that had since become obscure or forgotten (cf. Rogers (2015) 225).

reception studies,' being broadly interested in all premodern mythologies received in the MCU. In this paper, we investigate the MCU from its beginning in 2008 up until the releases of *Loki* (2021–2023, Michael Waldron, Justin Benson & Aaron Moorhead) S2E6 "Glorious Purpose" and *The Marvels* (2023, Nia DaCosta) in early November 2023, which were contemporary at the time of writing.[15] Our sample is, therefore, quite large, and spans fifteen years of storytelling. Such a scope inevitably requires a degree of selection. As we explain further below, our focus lies first and foremost with the films and the streaming series released on Disney+ since 2021, and within *this* set-up, the MCU's so-called Phase Four receives the most attention. However, we nonetheless survey the entirety of the franchise and even discuss media beyond these two foci when they prove useful to our research goals. Our perspective is primarily textual, meaning that we focus our attention predominantly on the films and series themselves (as textual products or artefacts), instead of their production contexts or audience evaluation.[16] In doing so, our paper stands alongside the other textual MCU studies listed above, although our specific lens of premodern world reception studies is original.

For this analysis, we assembled a multidisciplinary team of scholars versed in history, archaeology, literature, mythology, art history, media studies, and reception studies, with experience related not only to the Graeco-Roman ancient world, but also ancient Egypt, Africa, Mesoamerica, and more. We believe that the collected expertise is well-suited to shed some light on the current situation of mythology and reception in the MCU or, put differently, to tackle this "enormous mess", to borrow from *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s Jemma Simmons, quoted above.

15 This means that both *What If …?* S2 (2023, A. C. Bradley) and *Deadpool & Wolverine* (2024, Shawn Levy), which were released after submitting our initial article but before our final proofreading, was not included in our analysis.

16 For more non-textual MCU studies, see – among others – Koh (2014) and Raphael/Lam (2016) on the topic of stardom, or Coker (2013) and Beaty (2016) on fandom and audience.

MYTHOLOGY AND THE MCU: A BRIEF SURVEY

Since the MCU comprises such a gargantuan collection of texts, it benefits the overall purpose and clarity of this paper to survey the exact ways in which mythological inspirations and/or content are present in the franchise. In the following paper, we use 'Marvel' to denote the entirety of the company's cultural output, including materials created by Marvel Comics and its predecessors (1939–present)[17] before the establishment of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (2008–present). More narrowly, we use 'MCU' to describe the main focus of our analysis, a franchise/shared transmedial universe which both overlaps with and diverges from 'Marvel' as a whole. While our primary attention lies with the MCU, we also draw on broader Marvel media on specific occasions for further contextualization and deeper discussion.

Storytelling in the MCU proceeds in so-called 'Phases', or stadia in which the overarching story is gradually told (see Attachment 1). Together, three Phases comprise a Saga, or a larger narrative that is teleologically structured and culminates in a climactic finale. Premodern world-related content has been present throughout all Phases, and was first introduced in the inaugural *Thor* film, released in 2011 and directed by Kenneth Branagh. The film – the fourth entry in Phase One (2008–2012) – opens in the Norwegian town Tonsberg, in 965 CE. Here, the army of Odin wards off Midgard from the Frost Giants, or Jötnar in Norse myth. The film shows different mythological regions (e.g., Asgard, Jotunheim), as well as several famous characters (e.g., Thor, Odin, Frigga, Loki, Heimdall) and objects or other related phenomena (e.g., Mjölnir, Bifröst, Einherjar). Throughout the film, allusions are made to the distinction between magic and science, with the former described as those incidents that science is not equipped to explain yet. Thor, commenting on Jane's research on outer space, largely erases this distinction: "Your ancestors called it magic, and you call it science; well, I come from a place where they're one and the same thing." Later, in *The Avengers* (2012, Joss Whedon), Thor joins forces with the Earthly superheroes introduced in other Phase One films – Iron Man, Hulk, Captain America, Black Widow and Hawkeye – as the world is threatened by Thor's adoptive brother, Loki. The MCU's first great crossover is therefore immediately an at

17 Founded in 1939 as Timely Comics by Martin Goodman, the company eventually became known as Atlas Comics by 1951, and was officially rebranded as Marvel Comics in June 1961. On December 31, 2009, The Walt Disney Company acquired Marvel Entertainment, which included both Marvel Comics and Marvel Studios, the studio responsible for the MCU.

Year	Date (U.S.)	Title	Medium	Director (film)[1]/ Head writer (D+)	Relevant inclusions
THE INFINITY SAGA (2008–2019)					
Phase One (2008–2012)					
2008	May 2	*Iron Man*	Film	Jon Favreau	
	Jun 13	*The Incredible Hulk*	Film	Louis Leterrier	
2010	May 7	*Iron Man 2*	Film	Jon Favreau	Thor (hinted)
2011	May 6	*Thor*	Film	Kenneth Branagh	Thor, Loki, Odin, Frigga, Heimdall, Sif, Laufey, Frost Giants, Asgard, Jotunheim
	Jul 22	*Captain America: The First Avenger*	Film	Joe Johnston	
2012	May 4	*The Avengers*	Film	Joss Whedon	Thor, Loki, Asgard
Phase Two (2013–2015)					
2013	May 3	*Iron Man 3*	Film	Shane Black	
	Nov 8	*Thor: The Dark World*	Film	Alan Taylor	Thor, Loki, Odin, Frigga, Heimdall, Sif, Dark Elves, Asgard, Jotunheim, Vanaheim, Svartalfheim, Knowhere (Celestial)
2014	Apr 4	*Captain America: The Winter Soldier*	Film	Anthony & Joe Russo	
	Aug 1	*Guardians of the Galaxy*	Film	James Gunn	Dark Elves, Knowhere (Celestial), Eson the Searcher (Celestial)

Year	Date (U.S.)	Title	Medium	Director (film)[1]/ Head writer (D+)	Relevant inclusions
2015	May 1	*Avengers: Age of Ultron*	Film	Joss Whedon	Thor, Heimdall, Ragnarok (hinted)
	Jul 17	*Ant-Man*	Film	Peyton Reed	
Phase Three (2016–2019)					
2016	May 6	*Captain America: Civil War*	Film	Anthony & Joe Russo	Bast (mentioned), Sekhmet (mentioned)
	Nov 4	*Doctor Strange*	Film	Scott Derrickson	Thor
	May 5	*Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*	Film	James Gunn	Ego (Celestial), Watchers
2017	Jul 7	*Spider-Man: Homecoming*	Film	Jon Watts	
	Nov 3	*Thor: Ragnarok*	Film	Taika Waititi	Thor, Loki, Odin, Heimdall, Hela, Fenris, Surtur, Valkyrie, Asgard, Ragnarök
2018	Feb 16	*Black Panther*	Film	Ryan Coogler	Bast, Hanuman (mentioned)
	Apr 27	*Avengers: Infinity War*	Film	Anthony & Joe Russo	Thor, Loki, Heimdall, Eitri, Nidavellir, Knowhere (Celestial)
	Jul 6	*Ant-Man and the Wasp*	Film	Peyton Reed	
2019	Mar 8	*Captain Marvel*	Film	Anna Boden & Ryan Fleck	

Year	Date (U.S.)	Title	Medium	Director (film)[1]/ Head writer (D+)	Relevant inclusions
2019 (cont.)	Apr 26	*Avengers: Endgame*	Film	Anthony & Joe Russo	Thor, Valkyrie, Loki, Frigga, Asgard, 'New Asgard'
	Jul 2	*Spider-Man: Far From Home*	Film	Jon Watts	Elementals (e.g., Pazuzu)
THE MULTIVERSE SAGA (2021–2027)[2]					
Phase Four (2021–2022)					
2021	Jan 15	*WandaVision*	Disney+	Jac Schaeffer	
	Mar 19	*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*	Disney+	Malcolm Spellman	
	Jun 9	*Loki* (S1)	Disney+	Michael Waldron	Loki, Sif, Asgard
	Jul 9	*Black Widow*	Film	Cate Shortland	
	Aug 11	*What If …?* (S1)	Disney+	A. C. Bradley	Uatu/The Watcher, Thor, Loki, Sif, Frigga, Surtur
	Sep 3	*Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*	Film	Destin Daniel Cretton	Chinese mythological creatures
	Nov 5	*Eternals*	Film	Chloé Zhao	Eternals (Sersi, Ikaris, Thena, Ajak, Kingo, Sprite, Phastos, Makkari, Druig, Gilgamesh, Eros), Celestials (including Tiamut), Mesopotamia, Babylon, Gupta Empire, Tenochtitlan, Greece (mentioned), Olympia
	Nov 24	*Hawkeye*	Disney+	Jonathan Igla	

Year	Date (U.S.)	Title	Medium	Director (film)[1]/ Head writer (D+)	Relevant inclusions
2021 (cont.)	Dec 17	*Spider-Man: No Way Home*	Film	Jon Watts	
2022	Mar 30	*Moon Knight*	Disney+	Jeremy Slater	Ennead (mentioned), Khonshu, Ammit, Taweret, Horus (avatar), Isis (avatar), Tefnut (avatar), Osiris (avatar), Hathor (avatar), Alexander the Great (mummy), Duat, Giza Pyramids
	May 6	*Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness*	Film	Sam Raimi	Chthon ('first demon')
	Jun 8	*Ms. Marvel*	Disney+	Bisha K. Ali	Djinn (Clandestines)
	Jul 8	*Thor: Love and Thunder*	Film	Taika Waititi	Thor, Heimdall, Valkyrie, Sif, Tanngrisnir, Tanngnjóstr, Celestials, Zeus, Hercules, Dionysus, Artemis, Minerva, Bast, Aztec God, Elche Goddess, Maori Goddess, Mayan God, Goddess of the Dead, Jademurai God, 'New Asgard', Omnipotence City, Ra (mentioned), Tūmatauenga (mentioned), Quetzalcóatl (mentioned), Valhalla
	Aug 10	*I Am Groot* (S1)	Disney+	Kirsten Lepore	
	Aug 18	*She-Hulk: Attorney at Law*	Disney+	Jessica Gao	
	Oct 7	*Werewolf by Night*	Disney+	Michael Giacchino	
	Nov 11	*Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*	Film	Ryan Coogler	K'uk'ulkan, Talokan, Chaac (mentioned), Bast (mentioned), Hanuman (mentioned)

Year	Date (U.S.)	Title	Medium	Director (film)[1]/ Head writer (D+)	Relevant inclusions
2022 (cont.)	Nov 25	*The Guardians of the Galaxy Holiday Special*	Disney+	James Gunn	Knowhere (Celestial)
Phase Five (2023–2025)					
2023	Feb 17	*Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania*	Film	Peyton Reed	Rama-Tut
	May 5	*Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*	Film	James Gunn	Knowhere (Celestial)
	Jun 21	*Secret Invasion*	Disney+	Kyle Bradstreet	Frost Giants (powers)
	Sep 6	*I Am Groot* (S2)	Disney+	Kirsten Lepore	
	Oct 5	*Loki* (S2)	Disney+	Justin Benson & Aaron Moorhead	Loki, Yggdrasil, Egyptian pyramid (Void)
	Nov 11	*The Marvels*	Film	Nia DaCosta	Valkyrie

1 In the case of the two Disney+ specials (*Werewolf by Night* (2022); *The Guardians of the Galaxy Holiday Special* (2022)), the director is listed.
2 At least in current plans, the Multiverse Saga is slated to end with *Avengers: Secret Wars* in 2027.

Table 1 Table of MCU media and relevant divine, mythological, or ancient references.

This table is meant to be comprehensive and representative, instead of completely exhaustive (e.g. we did not list every time Thor is mentioned). In accordance with the main scope of the article, we include only cinematic releases and series released on Disney+. 'Relevant inclusions' broadly refers to appropriate characters and locations. The Disney+ series follow the date of the first episode.

least partially mythological one. As we will see, the association between gods and superheroes – which, within the limits of the MCU, originates from pairing Thor with the other Avengers – will remain a major theme in the franchise's subsequent mythology reception.

Phase Two (2013–2015) builds and expands on prior plot events and character dynamics, while at the same time opening up the MCU to more cosmic and extraterrestrial adventures (beginning with *Guardians of the Galaxy;* 2014, James Gunn). The realm of Norse mythology is extended in *Thor: The Dark World* (2013, Alan Taylor), introducing worlds such as Vanaheim and Svartalfheim. The small screen provides further elaboration, with *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* expanding the details of the MCU's mythological lore, and exploring different regions of the world.[18] In *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015, Joss Whedon), a vision of Thor hints towards a future mythological calamity, explored further in the next Phase.

The expansion strategy of Phase Two gains new momentum in Phase Three (2016–2019), with a plethora of new phenomena and characters being introduced. Crucially, we argue that this Phase's *Doctor Strange* (2016, Scott Derrickson) opened the MCU to the fantastic: while not explicitly mythological, the film introduced and solidified the representation of supernatural (e.g., magical or divine) forces as tangible and active within the limits of the MCU's storyworld, rather than as ungraspable phenomena to be rationalised as yet-unknown science or technology.[19] Phase Three also extended the MCU's perspective to

18 We recognize that *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s canonicity within the MCU is contested. The series was initially closely connected to the events from MCU cinema (see Hadas (2014)), building on events from (among others) *The Avengers, Thor: The Dark World, Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014, Anthony & Joe Russo), and anticipating those of *Avengers: Age of Ultron.* As the series went on, however, it became increasingly interested in pursuing its own goals (Flanagan/Livingstone/McKenny (2014) 179–180), and the link between the series and the rest of the MCU grew progressively obfuscated: despite the film series remaining influential onto the series' narrative (e.g., the team's divided reactions to *Captain America: Civil War*'s (2016, Anthony & Joe Russo) Sokovia Accords), being mentioned in passing (e.g., references to *Ant-Man* (2015, Peyton Reed) in S3E1 "Laws of Nature", or *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018, Anthony & Joe Russo) in S5E20 "The One Who Will Save Us All"), or exploring similar themes concurrently to the film series (e.g., season four's more 'mystical' focus, more or less simultaneously to magic taking centre stage in *Doctor Strange* (2016, Scott Derrickson)), subsequent seasons were not as closely connected to the rest of the franchise as was initially the case. For the purpose of this paper, we consider *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.,* as well as all other projects enumerated in Footnote 1 as canonical to the MCU.

19 Keen (2017). We gratefully acknowledge this input by Antony Keen.

include African cultures and characters: one of them, T'Challa, is king of the fictional African country Wakanda and serves as the superhero/protector known as the Black Panther (*Black Panther;* 2018, Ryan Coogler). In the opening scene, the Black Panther is said to originate from the panther goddess Bast, and powered by a heart-shaped herb originating from outer space. Elsewhere, Thor's story picks up where *Avengers: Age of Ultron* left off, as Asgard is destroyed by Surtur (*sic*) in the predestined event of Ragnarök (*Thor: Ragnarok;* 2017, Taika Waititi). The destruction of Asgard disperses the remaining Asgardians across the universe, only for them to ultimately settle down in the aforementioned Tonsberg, now dubbed 'New Asgard'. Phase Three culminates in the duology films *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018, Anthony & Joe Russo) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019, Anthony & Joe Russo), where the superheroes fight the threat posed by Thanos, revealingly named after the Greek god Thanatos and described as a 'Mad Titan': once again, the climactic battle at the end of the Phase has a distinct mythological flavour. Phase Three also includes more passing references to premodern mythology, such as the depiction of K'un-Lun, a mystical city named after a mountain range in Chinese mythology, in *Iron Fist* (2017–2018, Scott Buck), or *Spider-Man: Far From Home*'s (2019, Jon Watts) antagonist natural forces named 'Elementals', described to have appeared in various ancient mythologies. Finally, Phase Three offered some initial insights (developed further in ensuing Phases) into the MCU's divine creators. The character Ego in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (2017, James Gunn) formally introduced the Celestials, primordial beings predating even the Big Bang, and described by Ego as gods "with a small 'g'."[20] As we shall see below, the notion of Celestials complicates the MCU's divine ontology, bleeding into a paradigm of ancient astronauts that the franchise adopts.

After the conclusion of the so-called Infinity Saga (2008–2019), Phase Four (2021–2022) slows down the narrative progression of the franchise, instead concentrating more on the aftermath of previous battles, and the introduction of new heroes and forms of storytelling (such as streaming series and specials on Disney+). While we have seen mythological inspirations from the beginning of the franchise (with *Doctor Strange* previously noted as a significant breakthrough in the MCU's treatment of such themes), it is primarily in Phase Four that we see a striking surge of mythologically inspired stories, as well as increased depictions

20 Within the Marvel imaginarium, the Celestials belong to the high order of demiurgic beings, "manipulating evolution on a universal scale in order to perfect creation [and] to create both mutants and superheroes" (Freeman (2020) 161).

of characters and/or worlds explicitly described as mythological.[21] In *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021, Destin Daniel Cretton), the final battle takes place in the mystical realm of Ta Lo, itself not directly attested in Chinese mythology, but including Chinese mythological creatures. *Eternals* (2021, Chloé Zhao) introduced a range of heroes associated with mythological figures, including Thena (similar to Athena), Phastos (Hephaestus), Makkari (Mercury), Ikaris (Icarus) and more, who are said to be the inspiration behind certain mythological narratives across various cultures (having travelled around the globe, going to Greece, Babylon, India, and Tenochtitlan, among others). Supposedly born on the planet Olympia, the Eternals were sent to Earth around 5000 BCE by the Celestials to organise the creation of a new Celestial, Tiamut (similar to Tiamat in Mesopotamian mythology).

Another important text from this Phase is the streaming series *Moon Knight* (2022, Jeremy Slater) revolving around the character Steven Grant, who serves as the 'avatar' of Khonshu (a god modelled after the Egyptian lunar deity Khonsu) and must thwart the plans of Ammit, the goddess modelled after the demon from the Book of the Dead who devours the hearts of the wicked deceased. On his journey, Steven travels to the Egyptian afterworld of the Duat, where he meets the goddess Taweret.

Building on various Phase Four media that individually revolved around the overarching concept of the multiverse (i.e., the collection of the MCU and all other possible parallel universes), the animated series *What If …?* (2021–present, A. C. Bradley) featured the character Uatu/The Watcher, one of various all-powerful entities who exist outside of the multiverse with the unique ability

21 The MCU's post-2021 mythological surge follows from and parallels developments in other franchises and Western popular culture *sensu lato*. Antony Keen (2022) 290–294, 302–303 traced the rising wave of mythologically-oriented films and television shows in the early 21st century. The first tide came in the late 1990s (*Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* (1995–1999, Christian Williams and Robert Tapert), *Xena: Warrior Princess* (1995–2001; John Schulian and Robert Tapert) and Disney's *Hercules* (1997, John Musker and Ron Clements)). The myth-laden works returned to the cinemas in the early 2010s (*Clash of the Titans* (2010, Louis Leterrier); *Wrath of the Titans* (2013, Jonathan Liebesman); *Percy Jackson* (2010, Chris Columbus; 2013, Thor Freudenthal), *The Legend of Hercules* (2014, Renny Harlin); *Hercules* (2014, Brett Ratner)) and remain somewhat popular until this day, with non-MCU examples found in DC Extended Universe's *Wonder Woman* (2017, Patty Jenkins), *Aquaman* (2018, James Wan), *Shazam!* (2019, David F. Sandberg) and *Shazam! Fury of the Gods* (2023, David F. Sandberg), all of which receive Greek myths in some shape or form. See also Raucci (2015).

to observe it.[22] Given his description by the series' creator as standing "above everything else",[23] it is hard not to see Uatu as a divine (or divine-like) character, complicating further cosmogonical or theological hierarchies imposed by characters like the Celestials.

Phase Four also revisited the *Thor* series with *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022, Taika Waititi), with Gorr the God Butcher as its antagonist. Gorr possesses the Necrosword, a weapon granting him the ability to kill gods. To counter this threat, Thor travels to Omnipotence City, a divine hub city ruled by Zeus. We catch glimpses of many other gods from many different cultures (and entirely fictional ones, such as 'Bao, the God of Dumplings'), and receive the most extensive look into the MCU's ideas of godhood so far. Finally, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022, Ryan Coogler) – the sequel to the aforementioned *Black Panther* – includes a character called Namor, who rules over the underwater world of Talokan, and is identified with the Mesoamerican god K'uk'ulkan. Talokan takes after Tlalocan, a watery paradise dedicated to Tlaloc, the Aztec rain deity.

Overt mythological or ancient allusions have become more scarce in the current Phase Five (2023–2025) – at the time of writing, at least – instead being relegated to more passing comments on godhood: *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania*'s (2023, Peyton Reed) antagonist Kang – introduced as the MCU's new major villain – is described as a "monster … who thinks he's a god", and similarly, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*'s (2023, James Gunn) High Evolutionary describes the remains of a dead Celestial as the "skull of a dead god." However, given the MCU's teleological structure described above, and especially since the increased ancient world reception since Phase Four, it is plausible to assume that at some point these different traditions and characters will all converge (and, perhaps, become even more confusing), meaning that these inspirations – as well as our analysis results – might become ever more important as time goes on.

Given the importance of Phase Four to any conceptualization of godhood or multiculturalism in the MCU, this Phase will be the main focal point of our analysis. Similarly, we will focus predominantly on the MCU films and Disney+ series, which offer the most extensive information related to our two research

22 Multiple Watchers were already depicted briefly in the aforementioned *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2.*

23 Salazar (2019).

questions. This focus is legitimised by the high narrative importance of these texts to the overall franchise: above all, it is the franchise's cinematic enterprises – and, increasingly, the Disney+ projects – that are integral to its narrative progression, whereas projects in other venues (e.g., the Netflix series) are more self-contained, or subsequently reworked to fit the cinematic canon.[24]

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A GOD IN THE MCU

Marvel's divine ontologies: gods as superhumans, gods as supernaturals, invisible monotheistic gods

Divine ontology within the MCU is neither a singular nor simple affair, not least because of the various religious and historical perspectives that have been adopted and assimilated across the franchise. In this article, we focus on MCU characters that are explicitly called 'gods' in-universe (by either themselves or others) or beings that are generally understood to be divine beings by audiences (i.e., outside of the MCU's storyworld). We distinguish two broad diegetic classes of godhood in the MCU: the expansive **superhuman** class, into which any sufficiently powerful entity may be included, and the more exclusive **supernatural** class of 'true gods,' who stand out among superhumans thanks to their purported possession of some ontological divine marker. Defined in sharp relief against these two classes is the (non-)representation of **monotheistic Abrahamic deities** in the MCU, who never appear on screen, being glimpsed only as part of human characters' sociocultural heritage.

The first conception of godhood, which we call a **superhuman ontology**, classifies gods as very powerful beings that demonstrate abilities far above those of 'ordinary' humans. Such beings may live much longer than humans (or in-

24 Flanagan/Livingstone/McKenny (2014) 35 coined the phrase "films lead policy" to describe how the MCU's non-cinematic projects are generally subservient to the events of the films. Given the close connection between films and Disney+ series in recent years (e.g., *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022, Sam Raimi) building directly on *WandaVision* (2021, Jac Schaeffer)), we may consider the Disney+ projects as being of near equal importance as the films. Indeed, Disney+ series appear to set up and complement movies to a much greater degree than the Netflix series or *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*

definitely)[25] or exist outside of the normal bounds of time and space – but, most saliently, they wield preternatural powers, sometimes enhanced by advanced technology.[26] The MCU's human characters tend to equate godhood and power while vaunting their newly acquired abilities. Johann Schmidt/Red Skull, a WWII Nazi leader in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011, Joe Johnston), states he has "harnessed the power of the gods" by seizing the Tesseract, whereas Sinister Strange describes himself as "a sorcerer with the power of the gods" in *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness.* Within this recursive paradigm, 'gods' are defined by their power: any great power is seen as divine, and wielding such power makes one a 'god'. Consequently, the distinction between gods and superheroes grows blurry. Since the MCU frequently depicts superheroic abilities (obtained through technological or supernatural means) as analysable, transferable, and quantifiable, viewers may be (and, arguably, are) encouraged to apply the same positivistic lens to divine powers and 'magic', which often resist easy classification.[27] Adding to the confusion, some MCU beings do not define themselves as gods but are defined as such by other (human) characters (for example, Thanos and the Eternals).[28] Further complicating this classification is

25 Freeman (2020) 159–160 notes that, by adopting this broad definition of 'godhood', all Marvel characters whose lifespans significantly outlast humans (such as the Eternals and the Watchers) can be classified as 'deities'.

26 The MCU's enduring conceptual bond between powerful extraterrestrial entities and once-worshipped deities perhaps echoes the ancient astrological practice of associating deities with the celestial bodies (especially the planets, such as Mars or Venus; Freeman (2020) 160).

27 The unfolding of the MCU franchise concurred with repeated redrawing (and blurring) of lines between sorcery (as practised by Doctor Strange), witchcraft (as wielded by Wanda Maximoff and Agatha Harkness), and divine power (as exercised by Zeus and other 'true gods'). The untangling of the MCU's views on the nature of magic, witchcraft and supernatural power *sensu lato* lies well beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say at this point that, with *Doctor Strange,* the MCU began its forays into the mystical and fantastic, which eventually resulted in its deities being more explicitly depicted as supernatural beings (and not solely technologically advanced extraterrestrials). Cf. Kaveney (2008) 37–44 for some illuminating thoughts on the nature of magic and power in comic book franchises and Stenmark (2022) on the relationship between technology and religion in the MCU.

28 McSweeney (2018) 73 draws our attention to the subjectivity of Asgardian godhood, noting that even though humans worshipped the Asgardians, they themselves were aware of their mortality: for example, Odin in *Thor: The Dark World* exclaims "We are not gods! We're born, we live, we die, just as humans do." Why the Asgardians conflate godhood and immortality remains unknown.

a notion akin to apotheosis: some MCU characters aspire to become gods, while others appear to attain godhood (like Jane Foster in *Thor: Love and Thunder* who, through the power of Mjölnir, gains Thor's powers and is ultimately allowed to enter Valhalla). Within the superhuman ontology paradigm, anyone can be seen as a god if they wield enough power – yet, crucially, one's claim of godhood may be vetted – or rejected – by others of the same rank.

Appropriately, the second (and more nuanced) conception of 'the divine' in the MCU, the **supernatural ontology**, relates to a more exclusive group of beings within the former category who call themselves 'true gods' and distance themselves from others not worthy of that title. Having occasionally appeared in the earlier Phases, this ontological conception has recently received increased emphasis in Phase Four works such as *Moon Knight* and *Thor: Love and Thunder.* At its heart lies the belief (expressed by certain MCU deities) that some as-yet-undefined feature sets apart 'true gods' from other powerful beings in the MCU. The gatekeeping 'true gods' of the MCU keenly draw lines between themselves and any presumptuous pretenders. In *Avengers: Infinity War,* dying Loki taunts his killer Thanos by stating that, no matter how much power he amasses, he "will never be a god." In turn, *Thor: Love and Thunder* has the divine community come under attack by the godslaying Gorr, a once devout worshipper of the god Rapu who lost his faith after Rapu had belittled Gorr's suffering after the death of his daughter. Gorr stumbles upon a necrosword, a sentient weapon imbued with the power and desire to slay gods: subsequently, the man and the sword go on a deicidal rampage across the universe, murdering Rapu, Falligar the Behemoth and other deities. When Thor informs the divine assembly in Omnipotence City about Gorr's crusade, its ruler Zeus publicly dismisses Gorr's victims as "a couple of low-level gods;" subsequently, however, Zeus acknowledges in private that "Gorr [...] could kill us [the gods]" but remains unwilling to broadcast this fear and cause mass panic. The scene brings out the complex nature of godhood in the MCU, simultaneously (and incongruously) designated as a group-defined (and screened) affiliation to a certain supernatural class and an indelible ontological marker. Among themselves, the MCU gods may establish culturally determined hierarchies according to perceived power or significance (on which more anon), but they concurrently recognise that they all share something that sets them apart from other powerful beings in the universe – something that makes them vulnerable to the necrosword. As we shall see later, this paradoxical entanglement of divine vulnerability and power also resurfaces in many world mythologies that inspired the MCU narratives.

Standing yet further apart from these two paradigms is a third, distinctive subcategory of the MCU deities, reimagined according to what we term a **monotheistic** or **Abrahamic ontology**. Technically a subgroup of the supernatural ontology, this very small subset includes only deities worshipped by the Abrahamic religions, conceptualised as 'real' within the limits of faith yet almost never represented on screen in a physical form, referred to only as part of the MCU characters' religious and cultural heritage. Scattered references to Abrahamic faiths/deities in the MCU include Yahweh (evident in *Moon Knight* via Marc Spector's adherence to Jewish cultural/religious practices),[29] Allah (worshipped by Ms. Marvel in *Ms. Marvel;* 2022, Bisha K. Ali), and the Christian God (mentioned by Elena "Yo-Yo" Rodriguez and Alphonso "Mack" Mackenzie in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.,*[30] Captain America/Steve Rogers,[31] and Daredevil[32]). Unlike other MCU gods who may (or may not) be associated with historical/mythical beings (and are directly stated by Jemma Simmons to have once been the stuff of myth and legend), these (monotheistic) divinities come from specific, identifiable and *contemporary* religious practice. Their lack of appearance in the MCU almost certainly relates to a well-noted trend within popular culture of not representing currently worshipped deities in order to avoid offending the sensibilities of

29 Marc is seen wearing a Star of David around his neck throughout the series (having donned it at the end of S1E2 "Summon the Suit"), while flashbacks in S1E5 "Asylum" show Marc attending a *shiva* (a seven-day post-funeral gathering) while wearing a *kippa.*

30 E.g., *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.,* S4E9 "Broken Promises"; Mack: "You said your powers were a gift from God?", Elena: "Yes.", Mack: "Here's the thing …. Like you I rely on my faith."; S5E20 "The One Who Will Save Us All", Mack: "It's how you live a good life … it's following the Good Word and doing the right thing every time."; S5E22 "The End", Mack: "Everyone dies. And on that day we'll have to answer up there for what we've done down here," Elena: "It's not God I'm afraid of"; S1E9 "Repairs", Skye/Daisy, reflecting on her catholic tutor Sister McKenna, posits, "God is love. It's simple, and a little bit sappy, but, that's the version I like. God is love."

31 In *The Avengers,* Captain America converses with Black Widow when his Quinjet is attacked by Thor, noting that "[t]here's only one God, ma'am, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't dress like that."

32 Matt Murdock/Daredevil's Catholic faith comes to the forefront in many of his storylines across the MCU (Griffin (2019) and Clark (2020)): see, for example, *Daredevil* (2015–2018, Drew Goddard) episode S3E1 "Resurrection", in which Matt questions his belief, likens himself to Job, and claims he has seen God's "true face."

certain groups within monotheistic modern audiences.[33] Alternatively, the exclusion of the monotheistic (and, by extension, omnipotent) deities in the MCU may reflect a collective authorial choice: an omnipotent divine character could resolve the dramatic tension with a single act and implode the narrative.[34] This remote type of godhood, intangible and unassailable, looms in the shadows of the MCU, very much unlike physical and larger-than-life MCU gods inspired by polytheistic pantheons. It remains to be seen if any relationship exists between the MCU deities drawn from Abrahamic and polytheistic faiths: any future cinematic venture into this territory in the MCU would require an incredibly deft directorial hand.[35]

MCU gods and their mortality vis-à-vis world mythologies

Central to the first two ontological categories of MCU godhood is a clear distinction between the concepts of immortality and invulnerability. Within the MCU, characters from the supernatural ontology are immortal in the sense that they have everlasting vitality. Generally speaking, they do not die of illness and age very slowly, if at all. However, the MCU gods are not invulnerable and can be killed. As a useful *comparans,* we propose to briefly survey the idea of divine (im)mortality in cultures that inspired more or less directly the most salient pantheons of the MCU (Greek, Norse, Egyptian, Aztec, and Mayan), teasing out parallels and points of departure. In doing so, we remain aware that, in terms of Marshall's audience-oriented reception typology, the MCU *envisions* ancient divinities with considerable latitude, drawing equally upon divine representa-

33 Ahl (1991); Maurice (2019) 89; Wainwright (2019) 142; Freeman (2020) 166–167. However, Paprocki 2020 (200) mentions the backlash from an adherent of modern Greek polytheism against deicides in the video game *Apotheon* (2015, Alientrap). Similarly, India censored *Black Panther*'s references to Hanuman due to fearing "hurt religious sentiments."

34 Freeman (2020) 157 postulates that, "[t]his reticence to close off the upper echelons of power likely stems from a desire to continue telling fresh stories at larger and larger scales, but can also effectively prevent writers from infringing upon the rights of the true Almighty by "reducing" God to a comic book cameo." See also Freeman (2020) 167, 171.

35 In contrast to the MCU's Abrahamic non-involvement approach, the DC Universe does feature an outlier: Lucifer, a figure from the Christian tradition, included alongside world and fictitious mythologies (such as the Kryptonian religion of Superman).

tions in myths, upon their versions shown in Marvel Comics and upon plethora of their revisions in popular culture, including the MCU's own additions.[36] Simultaneously, we recognise that no explicit genealogical relationship may exist between ancient and modern ideas about divine vulnerability.[37] However, we argue that their juxtaposition elucidates how premodern and modern creators alike impose ontological limitations on their mightiest characters.

The Greek mythic imaginarium revolves around human mortality as its core theme. While Greek myth underscores a yawning divide between humans (mortal and ageing) and deities (immortal and unageing), it also records instances of individuals who remain forever young but eventually die (like nymphs),[38] those who cannot die but continue to age (Tithonus),[39] and numerous beings that hover uneasily somewhere between immortality and mortality.[40] At times, violent death seems to have encroached even upon the ever-young gods of Olympus, who could be hurt, permanently disabled (like Hephaestus) and, in very exceptional circumstances, perhaps even slain. For example, Ares experienced being bound and confined within a bronze jar for thirteen months by the giants

36 In Marshall's typology of reception, built around audiences and their expectations, *envisioning* encompasses works that explicitly use the ancient world as part of its setting, but with little concern for 'factual accuracy' (Marshall (2016) 20–23). The MCU's multistage storytelling franchise freely appropriates any version of myth it deems "available" (Tobolowsky (2020) 177–184), embodying *par excellence* a product of extended, diffuse reception.

37 For example, classical reception scholars such as Tomasso (2015), Gordon (2017) and Maurice (2019) 193–195 interpret modern depictions of deicides of ancient Greek gods as a recent cultural development that has no direct link to ancient *exempla.* In turn, Garcia Jr. (2013) 159–229 and Paprocki (2020) 200–202 survey a selection of examples of divine vulnerability in ancient Greek literature, with Paprocki claiming that this paradoxical and deeply unpopular idea nevertheless lingered in the ancient Greek poetic discourse (202).

38 Among extremely long-lived and eternally young beings, we include mountain nymphs in the *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite,* explicitly said "to belong neither with mortals nor with gods" (transl. MP) (259–272: αἵ ῥ' οὔτε θνητοῖς οὔτ' ἀθανάτοισιν ἔπονται).

39 *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* 218–238.

40 For example, extant fragments of Stesichorus' *Geryoneis* seemingly present eponymous three-bodied Geryon (grandson of Medusa and Poseidon) as uncertain whether he belongs with mortals or immortals – at least until his vitality is put to test by Heracles' fatal violence (Page (1973) 149–50; Vermeule (1979) 138, 143; Paprocki (2020) 201–202, *contra* Rozokoki (2008)).

Otos and Ephialtes, his very survival reportedly depending on the intervention of Hermes, "for his grievous bonds were overpowering him" (Hom. *Il.* 5.388–391). The Greek poets entertained – but remained uneasy about – the idea of deicide, with this 'absurd' notion, whether hypothetical or contingent, looming on the periphery of their worldview, a primal fear of cosmic upheaval.[41] A more accepted – and popular approach – to neutralise a deity permanently was to bind and throw them into the subterranean chasm of Tartarus: the bound gods retained their vitality but lost their mobility and individual agency, almost as good as dead.[42] Despite its emphasis on divine immortality, the Greek mythic imaginarium hints at its contingency, implying that its gods have not reached a state of absolute ontological security.[43]

Contingent divine (im)mortality also seems to have appeared in some shape or form in Norse, Egyptian, Mayan and Aztec myths, perhaps contributing to the perplexing reception of this idea in the MCU. The Norse deities, on whom the MCU's Asgardians are most saliently modelled, provisionally retain eternal youth and strength thanks to apples of youth, produced by goddess Idun: without them, they grow old and grey.[44] Apart from death by ageing, the Norse divinities could also perish by violence: Loki tricked Hodr into killing the seemingly invulnerable Baldr by piercing him with a magical mistletoe spear, while Vali

41 Paprocki (2020) 200–201. The scholars remain divided over whether death was an actual possibility for Greek gods: Vermeule (1979) 118–144, Burton (2001) 45–46, Garcia Jr. (2013) 159–229 and Paprocki (2020) 195–196, 200–202 claim that the notion of divine vulnerability offers some interpretive purchase. In contrast, Levy (1979), Andersen (1981), Clay (1981), Loraux (1986), Meulder (2004), Neal (2006) 151–167, Purves (2006), Tomasso (2015), Gordon (2017) and Maurice (2019) 193–195 offer a significantly divergent interpretation of the same material, arguing for the absolute immortality of ancient Greek deities and contending that ancient Greek myth-laden texts entertained the notion of deicide merely as a speculative mental exercise rather than an actual narrative possibility.

42 The act of binding carries subversive and dangerous connotations of control and coercion among Greek gods. See Detienne/Vernant (1974) 113–114, Burton (2001) 45, 54–55, Vermeule (1979) 125, Slatkin (1991) 60–62, Paprocki (2023) 45–48, 61–68.

43 Vermeule (1979) 122–125. Garcia Jr. (2013) 159–229 examines a plethora of scenarios in which Homeric gods seem to teeter on the brink of death.

44 Thjódólf of Hvin's (late 9th–early 10th c. CE) shield poem Haustlöng and a section of Snorri Sturluson's *Edda* (early 13th c. CE) known as *Skáldskaparmál* narrate how Loki surrendered Idun and her apples to the giant Thjazi and how Idun was rescued by the gods (Lindow (2002) 16, 198–199).

avenged Baldr's death by killing Hodr and torturing Loki.[45] Most of the major Norse deities die in Ragnarök (Twilight of the Gods), the battle at the end of the world: according to the *Gylfaginning,* the serpent Jörmungandr kills Thor by poisoning him, the wolf Fenrir kills Odin, while Heimdall and Loki kill each other.[46] Those who cannot be killed can be bound, at least for a time: Loki and Fenrir break free of their bonds during Ragnarök, while Hel remains bound in the underworld with which she shares her name.[47]

The preoccupation with divine vulnerability and death is evident in ancient Egyptian religion and myth: the divine world closely mirrors the human one, and the gods and humans alike would arguably one day perish with the world and return to the primordial non-being.[48] The gods themselves feared death: they would either flee from it eternally or suffer from dangerous injuries.[49] Their greatest foe was the evil snake Apep (Apophis), as long as infinity, its only goal to destroy the weakened sun god during his nightly journey through the afterlife.[50] The sun god (typically Amun-Re or Atum-Re) relied on countless deities both major and minor to thwart Apep: they would savagely mutilate and torture the serpent to render it non-existent.[51] The most prominent story featuring deicide and injury, however, is that of Osiris, Seth, and Horus. Osiris originally had been the king of the gods, but his jealous brother Seth cunningly slew and

45 The fullest account of Baldr's story survives in Snorri Sturluson's *Gylfaginning* (13th century CE) (Lindow (2002) 65–69).

46 See Footnote 45. Another account of Ragnarök survives in the *Völuspá,* a prophetic poem (Lindow (2002) 254–257, 317–319).

47 Lindow (2002) 83, 172.

48 Hornung (1982) 162–165, 183.

49 Namely, it is the sun god who is in peril in the afterworld: the representation of this scenario most often are paintings or wall carvings in royal tombs, from the New Kingdom onward. See Hornung (1999); Darnell/Darnell (2018).

50 Apep does not appear in all the afterworld books, but does appear in the *Book of Gates, Book of the Hidden Chamber* (also Amduat), *Book of Caverns, Book of the Creation of the Solar Disc,* and *Book of Two Ways.* See Darnell/Darnell (2018); Sherbiny (2017) *passim.*

51 The Bremner-Rhind Papyrus, dating to the Ptolemaic Period, contains a detailed list of spells detailing *ad nauseam* all the ways in which the gods will destroy Apep, including burning, flaying, chopping, binding, trampling, stabbing, and urinating and spitting on him before turning his body pieces into mash. By rendering Apep non-existent, the sun god is freed of the danger of his own non-existence. See Faulkner (1937) and Faulkner (1938).

dismembered him, to strew his pieces across Egypt. Reassembled by Isis and Nephthys and revived, Osiris magically impregnated Isis with their son Horus and became the ruler of the afterworld.[52] In turn, "The Contendings of Horus and Seth" details the battles, both violent and cunning, between Horus and Seth in their bid for the divine throne.[53] At one point, Horus speared Seth in his hippopotamus form, a parallel to the spearing of Apep.[54] In the Papyrus Jumilhac, dating to the Ptolemaic Period, Seth suffers significant violence not unlike Apep, being speared, engulfed in flames, mutilated, and bound.[55] One of the perhaps strangest texts is the so-called Cannibal Hymn, featured in the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts,[56] which has the deceased king, described as a raging bull, consume the gods in order to absorb their godly powers.[57] An Egyptian deity could suffer and perish just like a human could: as we shall see, this vulnerability will come to the forefront in the MCU's *Moon Knight.* Human mortality and divine vulnerability are less central to Mesoamerican cosmologies, likely due to their prevalent belief in the cyclical nature of time. The Aztec creation story of the five suns, for example, envisions a repetitive (and still continuing) pattern of

52 The earliest written sources of the death and resurrection of Osiris are found as early as the Old Kingdom in the Pyramid Texts, a collection of hymns and spells inscribed on the walls of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasty kings (Smith (2017) 137–138). The texts then appeared in the coffins of non-royal people in the Middle Kingdom (Hornung (1999) 11), to be followed by actual narrative stories in the New Kingdom. The latest and most complete (if syncretised) version comes from Plutarch (Plut. *Is.*).

53 Simpson (2003) 91–103. The story of Horus and Seth's rivalry, already known from the Pyramid Texts (but potentially earlier in origin) also appears in narrative texts from the Middle Kingdom (in fragments) and the New Kingdom works, including the Late Egyptian *Contendings of Horus and Seth.*

54 This moment is illustrated on the northwest exterior wall of the Temple of Horus at Edfu. Incidentally, Seth is one of the gods charged with spearing Apep in the afterworld. The Twenty-first Dynasty Book of the Dead papyrus of Heruben (Egyptian Museum, Cairo SR 19325) has a vignette that illustrates Seth spearing Apep.

55 Vandier (1961) 114.

56 Lichtheim (2006) 69–72; Eyre (2002) 131–136 and *passim.*

57 Lichtheim (2006) 70–71. The prolonged violence of his feeding is akin to the violence described in the battles against Apep, but the act is not meant to render gods non-existent. Contrarily, the theophagy is meant to give the king the power needed to become an exalted spirit in the stars for eternity. Cf. Eyre (2002) 142–146.

world creations and destructions.[58] A notable example of divine death in Aztec religion comes from the story of the birth of the god Huitzilopochtli.[59] While still in his mother's womb, Huitzilopochtli learned of a matricidal plot led by his sister Coyolxauhqui.[60] To defend his own life as well as his mother's, infant Huitzilopochtli, born in full warrior's regalia, defeated his sister and dismembered her body while tossing her down from the top of Coateptl, or Serpent Hill.[61] In turn, the most prominent story of divine death and rebirth known today for Maya culture comes from the 16th century Quiche Maya manuscript known as the *Popol Vuh*.[62] While the *Popol Vuh* relays cosmogonic and aetiological stories, much of the manuscript focuses on the lives of Hunahpu and Xbalanque, the Hero Twins. The adventurous twins braved the underworld of Xibalba, where Hunahpu lost his head; the divine lords of Xibalba used it as a ball until Xbalanque regained it by trickery. Forced to provide more entertainment for the lords, the twins performed a mock human sacrifice: Xbalanque pretended to kill Hunahpu only to revive him miraculously. Astonished, the lords asked to be sacrificed and brought back to life as well. The Twins obligingly sacrificed the lords but fled Xibalba instead of resurrecting them. Not unlike the Greek, Norse and Egyptian beliefs, the tales of the Aztecs and the Maya linked deicide to acts of deceit and guile, committed in almost impossible combinations of liminal circumstances (such circumstances called *interstitial phenomena* by Bruce Lincoln).[63]

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58 See Stewart (2021) for a discussion of the Aztec Sun Stone and its representation of the creation story and its ties to rulership in the empire.

59 Huitzilopochtli was a patron deity of the empire and the Templo Mayor, found at the centre of the capital Tenochtitlan, was dedicated in tandem to Huitzilopochtli and the rain deity Tlaloc; see Carrasco (1999) 49–87.

60 Taube (1993) 47.

61 This scene and its importance to Aztec cosmology was commemorated with the Coyolxauhqui stone, a statue placed at the base of the Templo Mayor depicting the dismembered body of the deity. During human sacrifice rituals, Aztec priests would effectively reenact the divine role of Huitzilopochtli; see Carrasco (1999) 49–87.

62 Tedlock (1996).

63 Lincoln (1982) 84. Relevantly to this paper, seemingly unkillable characters are killed at birth (Coyolxauhqui), in the underworld/afterlife (lords of Xibalba, Apep), or with unusual not-weapons (Hodr's mistletoe spear, Ares' bronze jar). Furthermore, Burton (2001) 54 notes that Kronos castrates and disempowers Ouranos at twilight (neither day nor night), as

Moving on to discuss depictions and circumstances of divine vulnerability and death in the MCU, we must first note that the MCU's reception of characters and pantheons listed above acknowledges but does not prioritise the ancient material: the MCU's stories on deities are just as (if not more) likely to draw from contemporary comic books and other mass media. Accordingly, we primarily treat the MCU as a franchise whose depictions of divine weakness and death mirror those present in modern popular culture, building upon the paradigm established by Vincent Tomasso. Having analysed what he calls the 'divine twilight' motif, Tomasso argues that depictions of dying Greek deities in modern media usually depict them as either withering away due to the lack of worship, or being violently slain by mortals or other deities. Moreover, Tomasso and Joel Gordon postulate that the former mode (divine death by fading) predominated before the 1990s, whereas the latter (divine death by violence) became much more prevalent from the 1990s onward.[64] True to Tomasso and Gordon's caesura, the MCU's narratives about dying deities inspired by world cultures mainly feature violent deaths.[65]

Relevantly, the MCU's violent deicides frequently come about due to specific objects or ritual acts that are meant to overcome the divine immortality and power (such objects or acts perhaps being functionally convergent with Lincoln's interstitial phenomena). One such object – mentioned throughout this

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Ouranos penetrates Gaia (as the heaven and the earth unite), with an adamantine sickle (an agricultural implement, made of an element that did not exist before).

64 Tomasso (2015) 147–160; Gordon (2017). See Footnote 73. The caesura appears to hold true for non-Greek deities as well. In modern reception, divine death by vanishing surfaces most prominently in the late 1960s within an episode of *Star Trek* (*Who Mourns for Adonais?*) and is still present within popular culture: for example, the backstory to the video game *Smite* (2014–present, Titan Forge Games) recounts how the world's pantheons have grown too large, without enough mortals to worship them all. As a result, their powers are diminished, and the fear grows that "only those who can maintain worshipers will survive". Cf. Gordon (2017) 214 n. 21, 217–19, 221. For *Smite*'s background lore, see the comic book *Smite: The Pantheon War* (Banish/Miller/Francesco (2016)).

65 In the MCU, violent death happens to characters inspired by Norse deities, such as Frigga and Loki. In general, death by fading does not apply to Marvel deities, who have not been worshipped on a wide scale for centuries but do not complain about loss of power or seek out new worshipers. One possible exception is *Moon Knight,* which has the Egyptian gods isolate themselves, "observe, not meddle in the affairs of men," and carry on their purposes via human avatars. Fading as a paradigm carries the concomitant implication that humans possess power over gods, which diminishes the superheroic appeal of 'gods' as characters.

paper – is the godslaying necrosword of *Thor: Love and Thunder*.[66] In the MCU, the power to vanquish divine beings also reverberates in certain rituals: for example, the Eternals have Tiamut 'killed' when they turn this nascent Celestial into stone. Another (and more elaborate) ritual that may result in divine death is seen in *Moon Knight:* loosely inspired by historically attested ancient Egyptian religion and magic, the ritual is essentially a binding spell.[67] The members of the Ennead Council – now down to five – have chosen to abandon humanity and act through possessing human avatars.[68] At the end of S1E3 ("The Friendly Type"), the council decides to punish Khonshu by extracting his spirit from his human avatar and trapping it in a statuette (improperly called 'ushabti'[69]) shaped like the god himself, which is then placed among those of other presumably disgraced deities. This procedure, however, can also be altered and used to imprison a divinity inside a human body. In the season finale (S1E6, "Gods and Monsters"), Moon Knight and Scarlet Scarab forcibly trap Ammit in the body of Arthur Harrow. Khonshu then orders Marc to kill the man to get rid of both him *and* the goddess at once. In a post-credit scene, Harrow is shot and killed by Jake Lockley, another avatar of the moon god. This sequence of events suggests that the Egyptian gods in the MCU cannot exist on their own on this plane of existence:[70] they need to be anchored to a physical object. If bound to an ushabti, they are trapped and unable to act; if, however, they are bound to a living human body as an avatar, the demise of the human host would likely also spell the death of the deity. *Moon Knight*'s use of the dramatic god-binding ritual demonstrates the creators' keen interest in deicide and its technicalities.

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66 One possible ancient analogue is an Ophiotaurus (Ov. *Fast.* 3.799–808), a creature whose entrails were said to grant the power to defeat the gods to whoever burned them: the Titans attempted to use the Ophiotaurus against the Olympians.

67 Willeke Wendrich (2006) observes that, in ancient Egyptian magic and religion, "action of binding itself can be positive or negative, protective or restrictive," with nets and fetters symbolising containment and deprivation of liberty (258).

68 The process is not fully explained, but at least Khonshu, Ammit, and Taweret seem to require explicit consent from the human beings chosen to become their avatars.

69 Ushabtis are Ancient Egyptian funerary figurines in the shape of a person bearing various tools. These statuettes were supposed to come alive and act on behalf of the deceased whenever the latter would have to perform manual tasks in the afterlife: see Quirke (2001).

70 The show's Taweret, however, is not tied to an avatar in the Egyptian afterlife of Duat, which (as she observes) lies on another astral plane.

Marvel's gods and superheroes

One of the primary consequences of MCU's overlapping divine ontologies (by far not unique to the MCU, but perhaps most prominent within it) is the notion of gods as superheroes. Once gods can be killed (one way or another), they can no longer be exclusively defined by their 'invulnerable immortality' (already somewhat contingent in mythological world narratives). Thus, the MCU gods become defined, as noted earlier, by their fantastical powers that set them apart from the 'ordinary masses'. In result, gods become extremely similar to superheroes: figures who are also defined, at the simplest level, by their extraordinary abilities. This association with 'superheroes' is, of course, a deeply rooted one, since many superheroes were initially conceived as re-mythologized Greco-Roman deities and heroes. DC Comics' Barry Allen/The Flash, for example, was initially described as a reincarnation of Mercury in *Flash Comics #1*.[71] As Coogan points out, "[t]he Golden Age Flash explicitly draws on the iconography of the Greek god Hermes with his winged helmets and boots."[72] Furthermore, a tangible conceptual link appears to exist between the concepts of superheroic and divine vulnerability in popular culture: it is not until superheroes begin to 'die' in popular culture in the early 1980s that we then see 'gods' beginning to die similarly in the early 1990s.[73]

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71 Fox/Lampert (1940) 1: "Faster than the streak of lightning in the sky … Swifter than the speed of light itself … Fleeter than the rapidity of thought … is The Flash, reincarnation of the winged Mercury […]."

72 Coogan (2006) 117.

73 Tomasso (2015) first noted that the popular culture began to depict divine deaths in the 1990s (151–152), whereas Gordon (2017) explores this issue in greater detail and discusses the entangled trend of depicting dying superheroes (229) and deities (214–221) in mass media. Divine death first appears in DC's *The War of the Gods* (1991) – a very complex cross-over series – to reappear as mass deicide of Greek, Egyptian, Hindu, Judeo-Christian and other pantheons in the later 'God War' arc (1999) (note the inclusion of monotheistic deities!). Deicide comes on screen in the late 1990s in *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* and *Xena: Warrior Princess* (detailed elaborately by Tomasso (2015) 151–153), with further examples found in the 2000s in the *God of War* video game franchise (2005–present, Santa Monica Studio) and *Wonder Woman* comics. It was not until the 2010s that the controversial notion of divine death spread to Hollywood blockbusters such as *Immortals* (2011, Tarsem Singh Dhandwar) and *Wrath of the Titans*. Notably, *Wrath of the Titans* combines the paradigms of divine death by fading and by violence: the gods lose their immortality and control over the imprisoned Titans due to humanity's diminishing worship. Also see Footnote 64.

Further compounding the association between gods and superheroes in popular culture is the fact that, over the past 50 years (or so), the presentation of superheroes underwent a paradigm shift. While classic depictions of superheroes within the medium of film were perfect, infallible paragons of all that is good about humanity (e.g., *Superman,* 1978, Richard Donner), contemporary films more often depict flawed heroes who rise above their circumstances.[74] Indeed, the MCU was a direct contributor to this paradigm shift, portraying Tony Stark (*Iron Man*) as an arrogant, facetious playboy. Thus, the modern superhero is a person just like us (according to the marketing, "anyone can be a hero!")[75] – yet one endowed with exceptional powers. This humanising trend is apparent in the most recent portrayals of Hercules on the silver screen – *The Legend of Hercules, Hercules* and *Hercules Reborn* (2014, Nick Lyon). Depictions of 'flawed' (super) heroes naturally lead to depictions of the 'flawed' gods of antiquity (with their womanising ways and oppressive, infamous abuses of power prevalent in many myths), with a prominent example in the MCU's depiction of lecherous and cowardly Zeus in *Thor: Love and Thunder.*

MULTICULTURAL RELIGIOUS REPRESENTATIONS AND THE MCU

Thor: Love and Thunder and the supposed primacy of the Greek, Norse, and/or European pantheons

In the MCU, an intriguing yet asymmetrical relationship exists between in-universe representations of different world pantheons, most saliently depicted in *Thor: Love and Thunder,* which has Thor and his companions embark on a journey

74 Morally perfect depictions of superheroes in the comic books abounded in the Comic Book Golden Age in the 1930s and 1940s. By the 1970s (and the end of the co-called Silver Age, 1956–1970), the comic books had at least partly moved past the perfect paragons as heroes and embraced flawed, humanised superheroes (Duncan/Smith (2009) 44–48, 58–61).

75 Marvel comics adopted a similar strategy back in the 1960s, which is widely acknowledged as a pivotal factor in their rise to prominence as a leading publisher in the industry (Duncan/Smith (2009) 46–47). Notably, Marvel's Spider-Man serves as a prime example of this approach, a relatable everyday teenager who grapples with the challenges of school and family while secretly moonlighting as a superhero.

to Omnipotence City, a celestial divine metropolis under the dominion of Zeus. Within the city we catch fleeting glimpses of numerous deities hailing from diverse cultures, and even encounter entirely fictional ones: the film credits name deities such as Zeus, Hercules, Dionysus, Artemis, Minerva and Bast but also include actors depicting unnamed deities of, among others, the Aztecs, the Maori and the Maya. The MCU's exploration of world mythologies highlights the unequal narrative importance given so far to European and non-European pantheons. Norse and Greek deities, the movers and shakers in the MCU, get names, backstories and storylines. In turn, reclusive Egyptian deities of *Moon Knight* cannot act on the physical plane and need human avatars to work their will, while deities of other pantheons fade into the background entirely. In the following paragraphs, we dissect the multicultural representations of the divine in the MCU, beginning from *Thor: Love and Thunder* and its elevation of the Greek and Norse pantheons (to the partial exclusion of other ones).

Thor: Love and Thunder depicts Zeus (Russell Crowe) as the ineffectual head of the divine assembly in the Omnipotence City and the Asgardians as disruptive interlopers who temporarily upend its established order; however, the film does not explain how or why Zeus came to hold this position.[76] The film's ironic rendition of Zeus somewhat subverts his traditional august cinematic depictions.[77] An unkempt and lascivious deity, Crowe's Zeus speaks with an exaggerated Greek accent and dons a flowing white skirt paired with a bulky muscle cuirass, perhaps ironically alluding to Crowe's formerly svelte cuirassed physique in *Gladiator* (2000, Ridley Scott). The film's tongue-in-cheek and metafictional approach to its representation of Zeus, evident in interviews with the cast and crew,[78] raises the possibility that the creators wished to deride the purported superiority of Graeco-Roman mythology and culture, associated with

76 Zeus might have won the leadership by violently usurping his predecessor. However, it is possible that the Omnipotence City leadership is won by a popular ballot, since Zeus in *Thor: Love and Thunder* is keen to please other gods by throwing orgies and suppressing any disturbing news.

77 Cf. Maurice (2019) 40–50. Crowe' Zeus resembles some of the more comedic portrayals of the king of the gods (such as in *Blasphemy, the Movie* (2001, John Mendoza) or *For the Love of Zeus* (2015, Sharlene Humm)), whose purported importance is "often undermined comically by his impotence on screen" (Maurice (2019) 43).

78 McDonough (2022). Taika Waititi deliberated whether to have Crowe speak with a formal British accent, not unlike Laurence Olivier in *Clash of the Titans* (1981, Desmond Davis) or

white supremacy.[79] This is particularly notable because previous movies have given precedence (and sympathetic treatment) to the heroically portrayed Norse pantheon. Nevertheless, it is worth considering whether the film still inadvertently reinforces hierarchical structures within mythology, especially through Zeus' disparaging references to other pantheons.

If *Thor: Love and Thunder*'s Olympians (represented by Zeus) head the divine council in the City[80] and the Asgardians possess enough agency to question Zeus' decrees, then other pantheons blend into the ornate background of the divine metropolis. Tellingly, the MCU gods have established culturally determined hierarchies according to perceived power or significance. Zeus publicly dismisses Gorr's victims as "a couple of low-level gods," deceptively implying that Gorr would be no threat to more powerful deities. This public yet unfounded disparagement of 'lesser' divinities coupled with the film's focus on the Greek and Norse deities (to the detriment of others) arguably implies that, despite its ironic approach to Zeus' purported importance and brief nods towards other pantheons,[81] the film still narratively prioritises the European pantheons.[82] The MCU works featuring a single pantheon (like *Moon Knight* or *Black Panther*) indicate that these deities bear relevance and agency in their own cultural pockets, but their relationship to the Zeus-led Omnipotence City remains unclear (and potentially subordinate).

Particularly significant appears the connection between the MCU's Norse and Greek deities: although the Norse gods of Asgard appear much more prominently across the first four Phases of the MCU, they nominally seem to defer to the Greek deities, as made evident in *Thor: Love and Thunder,* where starstruck

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with a Greek accent, recognising in the spirit of postcolonialism that "the British [have] taken enough from the Greeks". In the end, the Greek version elicited a better response from the test audiences.

79 For classical antiquity's entanglement with colonialism and Western supremacist views, see Futo Kennedy (2023).

80 The Marvel Comics sometimes show the chief deities of every meeting in a "Council of Godheads" (Freeman (2020) 171 n. 4).

81 Thor, looking to "pull together the greatest team ever" against Gorr, hopes to "recruit Ra, Hercules, Tūmatauenga, […] Quetzalcoatl […] [a]nd Zeus, **the oldest and wisest of them all**" (our emphasis).

82 Niklasson (2023) 4–5 surveys how modern identity politics exploits essentialist ideas of European heritage to foster polarisation.

Thor acknowledges his admiration of (and debt to) Zeus.[83] Thor's initially subservient attitude perhaps reflects the imagined Norse cultural debt to ancient Greece. The earliest surviving accounts of Norse poetry demonstrate the skalds' deep knowledge of Greek mythology.[84] Subsequently, the Romantic period in Scandinavia produced a surge of interest in Norse myths and their applications in cultural identity politics. The late-eighteenth and nineteenth-century Scandinavian reception of Graeco-Roman mythology follows the Romantic turn and questions the classical myths' cultural significance, inflated at the expense of local myths (seen as more relevant and vital to Scandinavia's heritage), with creators adopting divergent perspectives on their relative importance.[85] Not unlike nineteenth-century Scandinavians, the Asgardians in *Thor: Love and Thunder* grow ambivalent about the Greek deities, shown as passive and decadent: more aligned with the Western standards of cinematic superheroism, the Asgardians shine all the brighter against the fading glamour of Zeus.

The MCU and Egypt

The representation of the ancient Egyptian pantheon and Egypt itself in the MCU appears more comprehensive and respectful in comparison to previous renditions (with a few interesting choices along the way), factoring in progressive and reactionary elements. The MCU envisions or mentions many Egyptian deities. In addition to appearing in the Wakandan pantheon, Bast (modelled after Bastet) was also seen in her quasi-anthropomorphic form in *Thor: Love and Thunder*'s god-studded Omnipotence City, while Sakhmet is mentioned in *Captain America: Civil War.* This congregation of divinities in the Omnipotence City

83 Thor: "I base a lot of what I do on this guy. He's the god of lightning, I'm the god of thunder. Huge source of inspiration."

84 The euhemeristic framing story of Snorri Sturluson's mythological tale *Gylfaginning* identifies Thor with Tror, son of Mennón (Memnon), a Trojan prince; Snorri relates that one of Tror's descendants, Voden/Odin, travelled from Asia Minor to Sweden and founded a kingdom there (Lindow (2002) 19–23). Furthermore, Norse accounts of building the walls of Asgard appear to draw on Greek accounts of building the walls of Troy (Fontenrose (1983)).

85 Králová (2022); Ljøgodt (2012). The Scandinavian interest echoes and grows from the concurrent "second renaissance" of Greek mythology in Germany, where it was also employed to reinvent the national identity (Greineder (2007)).

also includes a clearly Egyptian (yet unnamed and uncredited) goddess with a golden headdress and wings.[86] A more extensive representation of the Egyptian pantheon is found in *Moon Knight.* In S1E1 "The Goldfish Problem", viewers are immediately introduced to the two main deities of the series, Khonshu and Ammit, while S1E3 "The Friendly Type" shows an actual council of the gods (comprising Osiris, Isis, Tefnut, Horus and Hathor) taking place inside the Great Pyramid (*sic*!). Later in the episode, we see nine more statuettes containing the spirits of disgraced and imprisoned (and unnamed) members of the pantheon.[87] The last goddess to be introduced at the end of S1E4 "The Tomb" is Taweret. The MCU's refreshingly large selection of depicted divinities outnumbers the few household names in pop culture, such as Anubis, Horus, and Seth.[88] The ancient Egyptian religious beliefs are also reflected through the MCU's depiction of Osiris as the head of the pantheon[89] as are the animal attributes of some of the gods' quasi-anthropomorphic forms.

However, the portrayal of Egyptian gods in *Moon Knight* is not exempt from criticism. First, in direct contrast to the Norse and Greek gods, active and afoot on Earth, the Egyptian deities of *Moon Knight* cannot act physically on the mor-

86 This iconography could refer to several goddesses including Isis, Ma'at, and Nephthys. Despite MCU's Wiki page's claim that the goddess in question is Isis (https://marvelcinematicuniverse.fandom.com/wiki/Isis), the details of her portrayal in the movie are not distinct enough to allow an unambiguous identification. Even if the creators meant to depict Isis, the representation they used does not align with ancient Egyptian models.

87 The ones who can be clearly identified are Bes, Neith (for the symbol over her head), and Khepri (the head of a winged scarab). The others have the heads of animals (such as snakes, frogs, and rams) not unique to single deities.

88 It is especially encouraging to see that for once the villain of the pantheon is not the jackal-headed god, whose reputation and representation in popular media range from threatening to straight-up monstrous. A recent example of this is found in the film *The Pyramid* (2014, Grégory Levasseur) in which a terrifying, Anubis-presenting monster hunts and captures the researchers who are exploring the pyramid, and, after forcibly removing the heart of its captives while they are still alive, performs both the traditional role of Anubis (weighing the heart) and the role of Ammit (devouring the heart). Another (and perhaps one of the most influential) representation of the evil jackal comes from *The Mummy Returns* (2001, Stephen Sommers), in stark contrast to the late Egyptian tradition, which actually has Anubis fighting Seth on behalf of Horus.

89 Although Osiris was technically never the head of any Egyptian pantheon, from the Middle Kingdom onwards he became one of the most significant deities, being worshipped throughout the whole country.

tal plane and must work through human hosts (called *avatars*): this limitation, also present in *Moon Knight* comics, hints at the very different treatment of the Egyptian pantheon in the MCU. Second, the choice of avatars appears to link moral value to ethnicity, promoting some Orientalist tropes. Among the gods portrayed in a positive light, very few of their avatars (save Layla, Taweret's avatar) are modern Egyptians, with most seemingly chosen from all over the world. The villainous Disciples of Ammit operating in the same place, however, are *mostly* local Egyptians. Third, the divine representation in *Moon Knight* is still somewhat lacklustre. Apart from the three main divine characters (Khonshu, Ammit, and Taweret), the writers did not truly manage to establish their distinct characteristics for each deity like it happened, for example, for Norse mythology. The remaining gods appear mostly for expository reasons, with the council discussing latest happenings and rule infractions.

Moon Knight's depiction of three main divine characters, Khonshu (after the Egyptian Khonsu), Taweret, and villainous Ammit, somewhat parallels yet departs from the source material, demonstrating the MCU's relaxed approach to its source material, both to envisioning religious beliefs and to Marvel's comic books. While Taweret had nothing to do with the judgement of the dead,[90] the other two are portrayed somewhat accurately: Khonsu was indeed a lunar god, and Ammit, a demon, did consume the hearts of those who did not pass the judgement. While the former has a long history of fighting with other gods in the comics, the choice of the latter as the main villain of the series raises some questions. Ammit simply worked in service of the gods as a way of disposing of the hearts of people who had been wicked in life.[91] This role is reprised in Marvel Comics, where she devours wrongdoers in addition to being a servant of Ma'at and a guardian of Ma'at's hall and magic artefacts; notably, she displays little to no agency if not for one exception.[92] Ammit's appearance in *Moon Knight* was also mellowed down. In S1E1 "The Goldfish Problem", an an-

90 Wilkinson (2003) 185. However, much like in the MCU, from the 18th Dynasty (ca. 1550–1292 BCE) onwards the weighing was indeed the culmination of one's journey through the netherworld that could result in either becoming 'true of voice' and being granted access to the afterlife, or for one's heart being devoured by Ammit.

91 Quirke (2013) 269–76; Wilkinson (2003) 218.

92 *Savage Sword of Conan* Vol 1 #196; *Savage Sword of Conan* Vol 1 #206; *Hellstrom: Son of Satan* Vol 1 #3; *Hellstrom: Son of Satan* Vol 1 #5; *Mystic Arcana Magik* Vol 1 #1; *All-New X-Factor* Vol 1 #18; *All-New X-Factor* Vol 1 #19; *Moon Knight* Vol 8 #3; *Moon Knight* Vol 8 #14; *Thor* Vol 6 #31; *Moon Knight: City of the Dead* Vol 1 #1.

cient Egyptian image of the Devourer appears as a fresco: the concept art shows that, in the first phases of character design, Ammit's lion mane and more animalistic features were still present. However, the final depiction, a crocodile-headed woman dressed in Egyptian fineries, is thinner and more reptilian than the Egyptian Ammit ever was.[93] If *Moon Knight* deserves praise for finally bringing on screen a colourful, vibrant modern-day Egypt, it is also fair to say that its ancient, equally dazzling pantheon should have deserved a similar treatment.

The MCU and Pan-African Identity

Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* irreversibly changed American cinema and global Black culture, being widely praised for elevating Afrofuturism as a framework for worldwide African popular culture and highlighting contemporary debates on nationalism, colonialism, gender, and racial justice.[94] *Black Panther*'s narrative follows Prince T'Challa's (eponymous Black Panther) rise to the throne of Wakanda, a technologically advanced African nation untouched by European colonisation. Once hit by a vibranium meteorite,[95] Wakanda now abounds in its deposits, used to fuel its technological progress. Furthermore, vibranium mutated Wakandan flora, with the ingestion of a so-called heart-shaped herb granting the original Black Panther strength and peacekeeping abilities.[96]

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93 The crocodile head on a thin human body does appear in the comics when Ammit possesses Dr. Emmet (*Moon Knight* Vol. 8 #2), but in every other instance the portrayal of the goddess follows her ancient Egyptian iconography. The MCU's Khonshu, who retains the semi-mummified look with which he appears in the comics, is on the opposite end of the spectrum, as his representation in Marvel products is only vaguely inspired by Egyptian art.

94 Davis (2021) IX, Rank/Pool (2022). The *Black Panther* franchise is born out of and continuously comments on the sociopolitical struggles of Black people in the United States (Thomas (2018)): for example, Kohoutek (2022) draws our attention to the fact that the film's director Ryan Coogler chose to have N'Jobu, an expat prince of Wakanda, live in a housing project in Oakland, California, the origin place of the historic Black Panther Party.

95 A fictional metal appearing in Marvel comics, noted for its extraordinary abilities to absorb, store, and release large amounts of kinetic energy.

96 Strong/Chaplin (2019).

Black Panther leans heavily into the Afrofuturism genre, depicting a Black superhero who rules a highly technologically and socially advanced African nation that has also successfully thwarted all would-be conquerors, particularly European colonists.[97] Wakanda's success appears to exemplify the strength of Africa as a continent. A pan-African cultural amalgamate, the country is shown to lie in the vicinity of Lake Victoria: its people speak the South African Xhosa language and don garb primarily inspired by West and South African attires, while its religion and architecture owes much to the Sahel and Egypt.[98] This "redemptive counter-mythology" of Africa[99] capitalises on Black liberation movements in the United States of America. Although the film spins an uplifting anti-colonial fantasy, it also traffics in certain subtler forms of neoliberal cultural appropriation,[100] with Wakanda's worship of Egyptian and Indian deities as the most relevant example.

The syncretic religious tradition of the MCU's Wakanda chiefly worships the goddesses Bast and Sakhmet (respectively modelled after Egyptian Bastet and Sekhmet) but no other African deities, parallelling the modern Afrocentric preoccupation with Egypt as the ancient pinnacle and font of African development.[101] Both Bast and Sakhmet were previously mentioned in *Captain*

97 Markedly, Wakanda surpasses other nations through its inherent gender equality: for example, its elite warrior force, the Dora Milaje, comprises solely of women.

98 Saunders (2019) 142, 144–145 and Wynter (2018) 93 trace how depictions of Wakandan culture incorporate pan-African elements. Chadwick Boseman successfully fought to have his character not speak with a British accent or the guttural 'generic' African accent: instead, the language of Wakanda is modelled on Xhosa, one of South Africa's official languages, with some actors modelling their accents on their own linguistic heritage (Faloyin (2022) 210–212). Saunders (2019) criticised Coogler's pan-African approach as culturally homogenising, arguing that it panders to neoliberal agendas. In turn, Rank/Pool (2022) 29–30 argue that, while imperfect, *Black Panther* offers a thought-provoking vision of decolonised Africa.

99 Cobb (2018).

100 Saunders (2019) 140–145; Albarrán-Torres/Burke (2023) 10–11. Lund (2016) argues that, at the Black Panther's very inception in the comics, the character projected an idealised image of a co-opted and Americanised Black hero, filtered through Marvel's then-prevalent Cold War focus.

101 Afrocentrism is an umbrella term for an extensive range of scholarly and intellectual approaches (Hanretta (2023) 205 n. 6; Bay (2000)) that place a strong emphasis on the history and self-determination of individuals of African descent (the said approaches sometimes also being perceived as prioritising African over non-African civilizations). One Afrocentric con-

America: Civil War as psychopomps escorting the souls of the deceased to the afterlife.[102] In the Marvel Comics, the Wakandan pantheon includes three Egyptian-inspired deities (Bast, Ptah, and Thoth), while Sakhmet is worshipped by a rival cult.[103] *Black Panther* simplified the matter by having the majority of the Wakandans venerate only two out of these deities, both traditionally depicted in feline form – Bast as a cat, and Sakhmet as a lioness – in alignment with the Black Panther's feline attire.[104] In turn, the antagonistic Jabari tribe honours the gorilla god Hanuman, a discernible nod to the Hindu god of the same name, customarily depicted as a humanoid monkey or ape.[105] Due to *Black Panther*'s peculiarly piecemeal approach to religion, Wakanda's geography, language, culture and dress includes elements drawn from lands all across modern Africa, but its religion excludes all these regions to appropriate goddesses of ancient Egypt, with an incongruous addition of an Indian god. Egypt's undeniable mystique notwithstanding, the film's creators chose to persist with Marvel's Wakanda as religiously dependent on Egypt, in lieu of exploring another African religion or mythology as a source text.

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cept, Kemetism, stresses (to a varying degree) the indelible African origin and 'Blackness' of the ancient Egyptian civilisation: among scholars linked in some manner to Kemetism one may count Cheikh Anta Diop, Martin Bernal, Théophile Obenga, William A. Brown, Molefi Kete Asante and many others (Hanretta (2023) 205–206; Fritze (2016) 323–334). A cultural counterweight to European-dominated narratives, Kemetism fuels controversy among Egyptologists and other academics, with some perceiving it as "therapeutic mythology" that grants individuals of African heritage a spurious cultural connection to the universally admired ancient Egyptian civilization (Fritze (2016) 333–334).

102 The MCU's vision strays from the ancient Egyptian belief, which had the canine gods, Anubis and Wepwawet, serve as psychopomps.

103 *Avengers* series 1 #112; *Wakanda* series 1 #1; *Black Panther* series 5 #2; *Astonishing Tales: Dominic Fortune* series 1 #5. *Black Panther* series 6 #13 and #15 expand the Wakandan pantheon with references to other African faiths, adding Kokou (a warrior Undergod for the Yoruba faith of Benin) and Mujaji (a goddess of rain and abundance among the Lovedu people of South Africa) to Bast, Ptah, and Thoth.

104 Wilkinson (2003) 177–178, 181–182.

105 See Footnote 21.

The MCU and Mesoamerica

Following *Black Panther,* the MCU continued its exploration of non-European cultures and postcolonial themes. After a brief glimpse of the Aztec capital city of Tenochtitlan in *Eternals,*[106] the MCU returned to Mesoamerica in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever,* ushering in Namor, ruler of Talokan, an undersea sanctuary founded by Maya refugees fleeing the Spanish conquest in the 16th century. A distinctly postcolonial (anti-)hero in the vein of Black Panther,[107] Namor represents an unusual departure for the MCU in that the character significantly differs from his classically tinged comic book predecessor. When Timely Comics introduced Namor in 1939, he was the ruler of an unnamed underwater kingdom, his name the ananym of 'Roman',[108] the wings on his ankles clearly hinting at the winged sandals of Hermes. When Namor was reintroduced in the 1960s, during Marvel Comics's Silver Age, he became the ruler of Atlantis,[109] thus further entangling the character in the receptions of the Graeco-Roman world.

For the MCU's *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever,* the narrative shifts to the local cultural context: Namor, rebranded as K'uk'ulkan, was made the leader of the Maya refugees who established the underwater city of Talokan (off the coast of the Yucatán Peninsula). Talokan, Wakanda's marine counterpart, stands for another vibranium-abundant clandestine refuge under the looming peril of colonisation.[110] Other parallels to Wakanda's exceptional history also become evident. Namor's people thrive in the sea after ingesting a vibranium-infused plant that turned their skin blue and allowed them to breathe underwater. Namor himself, however, stands out both among his people and other humans: introduced to the vibranium-laced herb in his mother's womb, Namor retains his human skin tone but becomes an othered, liminal mutant: immortal (or at least ageless), of great strength, near invulnerable while in contact with water.[111] Although

106 In *Eternals,* its eponymous alien demigods, led by Ajak (Salma Hayek, a Mexican actress), refuse to interfere in the Spanish genocide of Tenochtitlan (Albarrán-Torres/Burke (2023) 5).

107 Albarrán-Torres/Burke (2023) 1–7.

108 Everett (1939) 17.

109 Lee/Kirby (1962) 8.

110 Albarrán-Torres/Burke (2023) 12–13.

111 Namor was born shortly after the Spanish conquest in the 16th century, making him approximately 500 years old in the film.

he keeps the winged ankles of his classically inspired Marvel Comics namesake, Namor instead consciously presents himself to his people as K'uk'ulkan, the Feathered Serpent of Maya cosmology,[112] stoking the fires of atavistic nationalism to galvanise his subjects against the colonial scavengers, encroaching in search of vibranium deposits.[113] Not unlike its predecessor, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* leverages current political and cultural concerns of previously marginalised groups in its storytelling: Talokan, a pan-Mesoamerican cultural patchwork paradise, reflects cultural influences of both the Maya and the Aztecs, projecting an idealised "mythologized pre-colonial past [that] is used to appeal to and connect Latinx communities," such as cultural nationalist *chicanos.*[114] An offshoot of an expansive American superhero franchise, *Black Panther* films concurrently exploit, adhere to and undermine cultural stereotypes,[115] not unlike Namor himself, "an exotic, disruptive, alien Other (…) [that] question[s] the norms of the Marvel Universe and the wider world."[116]

112 The MCU's Namor appears to incorporate stories of Feathered Serpent deities and legendary rulers of Mesoamerica. Feathered serpent imagery first appears in the Late Preclassic period (300 BCE–300 CE) among the Maya and becomes prominent in Central Mexico during the Early Classic period (300–600 CE) (Miller (2012) 70, 88). K'uk'ulcan, the Feathered Serpent deity, came to prominence in the Northern Maya lowlands during the Post Classic period (900–1519 CE), particularly at the site of Chichen Itza (Sharer/Traxler (2006) 582). At the time of European contact, K'uk'ulcan was seen as a legendary ruler who once came from the West (De Landa (1978) 10). Similarly, the Aztec empire of Central Mexico worshipped Quetzalcoatl, a feathered serpent entity associated with water and fertility, as well as Ehecatl, an aspect of Quetzalcoatl associated with winds and the breath of life (Taube (1993) 31). His namesake, Topiltzin Quetzalcoatl, is said to have been a legendary ruler of Tollan who travelled to the East to build a new city (Taube (1993) 10).

113 Albarrán-Torres/Burke (2023) 12–13 argue that *Black Panther* and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever,* set in an increasingly fragmented and turbulent global landscape, consciously engage with notions of anticolonial retaliation, essentialist racial identity and violent resistance, components to what Cameroonian historian and philosopher Achille Mbembe calls 'atavistic nationalism' (Mbembe (2019) 6).

114 Albarrán-Torres/Burke (2023) 12–13.

115 Albarrán-Torres/Burke (2023) 20–21.

116 Albarrán-Torres/Burke (2023) 16.

THE MCU GODS AS ANCIENT EXTRATERRESTRIALS

As we have laid out above, the representation of divinity in the MCU is strongly entangled with real world religions. However, throughout the franchise, there are also repetitive references to pseudo-religious and pseudo-archaeological ancient alien ontologies. As cited at the beginning of this paper, in Phase One, the character Jemma Simmons tells us that the gods and magical worlds of the ancient past were actually extraterrestrials and exoplanets. In addition, in *Captain America: The First Avenger,* the villain Red Skull uses a cosmic artefact, the Tesseract, to power his deadly weapons while claiming to have "harnessed the power of the gods." The idea that humans in the distant past mistook extraterrestrials for gods and their technology for magic is the central premise of the "Ancient Astronaut hypothesis," as published by Erich von Däniken (1968). Von Däniken argued that evidence of alien contact could be found in ancient monuments and religious texts from around the world, and that humanity's development was inspired by extraterrestrial tutors. Today, these ideas are best known through the lens of the History Channel's show *Ancient Aliens* (2009–present), which was created as an homage to von Däniken's work. Scholars have repeatedly debunked ancient alien claims since as early as the 1970s,[117] pointing out that these claims at best misrepresent the evidence and at worse revitalise colonial legends disparaging the great works of indigenous people: notably, enthusiasts of the "Ancient Astronaut hypothesis" routinely claim that extraterrestrials must have helped non-European peoples to raise their astounding monuments, but the premodern Europeans, it seems, erected their own structures without significant alien help.

Ancient Alien claims are most explicitly depicted in *Eternals,* which is based on Jack Kirby's comic book series first published by Marvel Comics in 1976.[118] The film depicts the arrival of the Eternals, a group of superpowered beings, on Earth in ca. 5000 BCE. The group believes they were sent to Earth by a Celestial for the purpose of defending humanity from vicious monsters known as Deviants. However, the Celestials themselves are depicted as ethically ambiguous forces in the MCU. The Celestials first appeared in Kirby's comic book *The*

117 Wilson (1972); Story (1976); Colavito (2005); Feder (2019).

118 Jack Kirby made use of von Däniken's ideas when writing *Eternals* (Keen (2008) 9). Recursively, Feige and Zhao more or less explicitly named *Ancient Aliens* as an inspiration for the film version (Watercutter (2021)).

Eternals (#1 1976), where they were depicted as the god-like creators of the Eternals, the Deviants, and even humans. Since then, the Celestials have grown to become demiurges of the MCU, responsible for both creating and destroying worlds as they see fit.[119] In the MCU, the Eternals are pledged to not interfere in humanity's development but they are depicted as inspiring humanity through their god-like powers: the character of Phastos cannot help but teach humanity a few technological tricks along the way. Overall, the movie downplays the racial and colonial prejudices found in von Däniken's original work but nevertheless embraces a model wherein humanity needed help from extraterrestrials to develop advanced technology. The MCU's films such as *Eternals* exist in an uneasy equilibrium with more postcolonial contributions such as the *Black Panther* series: within the MCU's creative playground, creators appear just as likely to entertain progressive and reactionary ideas.[120]

119 The capricious nature of the Celestials in the MCU was first displayed in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* where the Celestial Ego reveals he placed a tumour in the brain of protagonist Peter Quill's mother. During *Eternals,* the characters learn that they were created by the Celestial Arishem to restrain the Deviants and allow for the human population of Earth to grow large enough to support the birth of a new Celestial, Tiamut (an echo of a primordial Babylonian goddess of sea and chaos, Tiamat), whose seed had been lying dormant in the planet's core. Unwilling to sacrifice humanity, the Eternals commit deicide by halting the birth of Tiamut.

120 Similarly, as Antony Keen pointed out to us, the world picture glimpsed in *Thor: Love and Thunder* fits poorly with Eternals, who were not originally meant to be included into the Marvel storyworld: all subsequent attempts to integrate them, whether by Roy Thomas, Neil Gaiman, or Kieron Gillen, have led to continuity problems. If *Thor: Love and Thunder* and other Phase Four works portray mythological beings as supernatural agents in the MCU storyworld, then *Eternals* implies that mythological narratives in fact were inspired by ancient exploits of the Eternals (with Thena inspiring stories of Athena, Phastos those of Hephaestus, Makkari those of Mercury, and more).

CONCLUSIONS

Gods as superhumans (Phases One–Three) vs. gods as supernaturals (Phase Four–present)

Let us summarise our thoughts on the gods in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. While the franchise may appear to inconsistently explore various notions of godhood, the initial Phases One to Three mainly portrayed 'gods' as superhuman extra-terrestrials or formidable beings with ambiguous origins. In contrast, Phase Four films, most notably *Thor: Love and Thunder,* underscored the notion that gods possess distinct qualities that distinguish them from other mighty entities. It remains to be seen whether Phase Four (with *Thor: Love and Thunder* at its heart) is an exception in an otherwise stable trend of portraying gods as superhumans/aliens, or whether it will transform the MCU conception of godhood from that point onwards.

Multi-authorship of the MCU

We have shown that 'godhood' in the MCU remains a notoriously slippery concept that shifts from film to film.[121] One should consider whether the multi-authorship creativity of the MCU simply translates into shifting authorial definitions of godhood – or, on par with postmodernist conceptualisations of meaning, whether there is, in result, no unified understanding of the divine in the MCU. Tobolowsky draws attention to the importance of "individual creativity" in a multi-author franchise such as the MCU:[122] despite the MCU being conceptualised by Kevin Feige as a "shared sandbox" in which filmmakers are invited to play around within the confines of the playground,[123] the accumulating employment of various individual directors with particular styles and inter-

121 Cf. Freeman (2020) 159: "Furthermore, there are simply too many authors, too many issues, too many retcons and continuity changes to create a perfectly consistent (or perfectly accurate) "ranking" [of MCU deities]."

122 Tobolowsky (2020) 181.

123 Robinson (2017). Hadas (2020) 43 describes that the MCU's high degree of "studio authorship" – "hypervisible through paratexts such as the studio's omnipresent logo and its ex-

ests inevitably leads to specific emphases and directions that potentially diverge from previous projects.[124] Taika Waititi, the director for *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Thor: Love and Thunder* – and, as such, an important influence upon ontologies of godhood in the MCU – is, for example, on record saying:

> There's a certain line where you gotta leave the other stuff behind. (…) Otherwise, you get bogged down in this idea of honoring the truth or the authenticity of something. Any comic book character is reinterpreted a different way by different writers and different artists each time there's a new run. That also proves that nothing is actually sacred.[125]

Waititi's own aesthetic idiosyncrasies and narrative characteristics as film auteur thereby drive his creations as much (if not more) as any potential desire for consistency with previous MCU projects, comic book precursors or world traditions. As a result, a question arises in regard to the extent to which we can (or even should) try to find common ground between them.

Polyphonic storyworlds and available myths

One might find interpretive purchase by recasting the MCU's shared universe as a storyworld, "a unified and coherent mental universe in which numerous narratives, directly connected or not, coexist and unfold."[126] In a storyworld,

travagant idents" (*ibid.*) – is a striking departure from earlier Hollywood blockbuster cinema in which the studio's identity is generally not a main element that draws audiences in.

124 See Hadas (2020) 44 on auteurist influences in the MCU (e.g., Favreau, Branagh, Johnston, Whedon), Taylor (2014) 188 on this phenomenon in superhero cinema broadly, and Flanagan/Livingstone/McKenny (2016) 18 on Shane Black's "signature *noir* inflections" in *Iron Man 3* (2013, Shane Black) more specifically.

125 Radulovic (2022).

126 Paprocki (2020) 195. The narratological concept of 'storyworld', increasingly discussed in various permutations from 1980s onwards, is generally believed to have been popularised by David Herman ("the worlds evoked by narratives"; (2009) 105), but no universal definition of the concept exists (cf. Thon (2015) 24–25). The somewhat loosely defined storyworld notion was subsequently increasingly applied to discuss transmedial media franchises (cf. Ryan/Thon (2014) 1–2). Our use of the storyworld concept (and its methodological framework) fol-

narratives and characters, although possibly created by a number of authors, are bound by a shared imaginary setting, resulting in self-imposed adherence to emergent (and often unwritten) ontological rules, reinforced through self-referentiality between narratives. As multiple authors contribute, storyworlds evolve and diversify, occasionally challenging established continuity. This polyphony, when managed well, enhances complexity and realism without compromising core values. Crucially, storyworlds exhibit both centrifugal and centripetal forces as narratives diverge and converge, resulting in a flexible, ever-adapting storytelling environment,[127] one that remarkably resembles the efflorescent and multifocal franchise of the MCU.

The existence of centrifugal and centripetal tendencies within any storyworld accentuates some issues related to the MCU's ambiguous statements about the nature of divinity. On the one hand, Tobolowsky's illuminating study on the MCU's polyphonic assimilation of "available" myths underscores that Marvel creators, although operating within larger continuity frameworks, enjoy great artistic freedom in reworking cultural themes and narratives: as such, they largely do not preoccupy themselves with traditional constraints placed on myths and their theological underpinnings (*a centrifugal impulse*).[128] On the other hand, the inevitable emergence of ontological rules within the MCU storyworld will and must translate to some clearer messaging (and establishment of certain rules) about the divine nature in the franchise (*a centripetal impulse*).

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lows and expands upon its application by Sarah Iles Johnston to the Greek mythological imaginarium (2015; 2018), subsequently reemployed by Paprocki (2020). Significantly, this analysis' interest in 'ontological rules' of the divine *modus operandi* in the MCU reflects Klastrup/Tosca's (2004) interest in defining core operative principles of every storyworld (its 'mythos', 'topos', and 'ethos') while acknowledging this approach's resultant (and somewhat limiting) normative preoccupation with 'singular' storyworlds (in contrast to multiverses or similar constructs) (cf. Thon (2015) 23–24). In parallel, Roz Kaveney (2008) read superhero comic book franchises as "thick texts", "collective, contingent compromises" (24) that at once invite and cherish experimental forms of storytelling and multiple narrative continuities (21–37) and simultaneously appreciate their creators abiding by "the internal logic of the artistic form or corpus," with such internal storytelling constraints gradually appearing in the form of "emergent phenomena" (46).

127 Paprocki (2020) 195; Johnston (2018) 131–146.

128 Tobolowsky (2020) 177–180. See also Footnote 120 on *Eternals* and their place in the MCU.

Perhaps, as it must happen in consumer-oriented cinema, the MCU will highlight one conception of divinity when audiences start asking for it: since many reviewers of *Thor: Love and Thunder* made it clear that they could not easily reconcile the film's revelations about the gods with messages in the earlier entries in the franchise,[129] Marvel Studios most likely either already intends (or may soon attempt) to set some ground rules in that regard. This becomes especially relevant when we realise that the MCU is building up towards the next crossover(s), which will probably have either the Eternals, Thor, Zeus, Hercules, Moon Knight and Black Panther fight alongside each other. As is often a trope in crossover storytelling, there might be scenes in which they compare their powers or natures. This will either provide definitions and categorization through which the above concepts of godhood and superheroism can be understood, or blur the existing ontological dimensions even further.

Shifting concepts of godhood and superheroism

Setting such ground rules on the godly nature in the MCU would, in theory, concern the exact extent of divine powers and limitations, such as divine vulnerability and mortality, with these unsettling elements made prominent in *Thor: Love and Thunder.* Making gods vulnerable and limited brings them closer to both superheroes and 'ordinary' humans and blurs the boundaries between these categories. On one hand, the MCU, like some other film franchises, appears to turn more and more to the flawed hero who rises above their circumstances and masters their fate through sheer grit, falling into paradigms of self-help and personal improvement prevalent in Western(ised) cultures.[130] On the other hand, we need to consider Zeus' post-credits scene in *Thor: Love and Thunder,* in which he implores his son Hercules to make Thor and other so-called superheroes no-

129 Following the release of Phase Four films, some reviewers expressed their bewilderment at the MCU's inconsistent messaging about divine powers and limitations that strained their suspension of disbelief (Ayala (2022); Radulovic (2022); Schedeen (2022)). The initial directorial version of the film apparently stressed the deicidal carnage even more (Singh (2022)). See also Footnote 125 on Taika Waititi's view on artistic freedom.

130 This, in turn, builds upon work by Raucci ((2015) 168) who suggests that all classical heroes were 'rebooted' from 2010 onwards, making them more like 'traditional' masculine heroes (for example, *Die Hard*'s John McClane; 1988, John McTiernan).

tice the 'real' gods again. Zeus' plea hints at lines being drawn between the true gods and superheroes.[131] The gods, here understood as a separate class of beings, used to receive mortal worship in the old times, whereas superheroes, looming large and god-like in the diegetic storyworld, both seemingly blend with and stand apart from the deities of old. In sum, representations of premodernity are transformed by the norms of contemporary fantasy fiction, with the representation of the gods and their divine ontology fitted into the existing frame of superheroes, even if this frame itself was initially inspired to an extent by mythological gods. Gods, heroes and superheroes – categories that inscribe themselves on one another – are all muddled together in contemporary fiction and thus shape a new blended modality of divinity for twenty-first century audiences.

Multicultural representations

We have also questioned multicultural representations in the MCU and the manner in which it represents different premodern world cultures, including Norse, Greek, Egyptian, African and Mesoamerican peoples. The MCU began to include non-European cultures in a growing number of films and to increasingly question the legacy of postcolonialism – yet always with the company's revenues in mind. Productions like *Black Panther* and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* respectively portray Black and Mesoamerican superheroes who wrestle with appropriate responses to postcolonial trauma, nationalism and globalism. Drawing in previously marginalised audiences, the MCU profiteers by co-opting their struggles into the superheroic genre, treading a thin line between inspiration and exploitation. At the same time, the franchise chooses not to put too much focus on Abrahamic faiths to avoid viewer and political backlash – and with a good reason, since pitting supposedly monotheistic Abrahamic deities on screen against other gods like Zeus and Thor would most definitely alienate many viewers. To complicate the matter even further, the MCU seems to promote, if very cautiously, the pseudoscientific and racially charged notion of

131 Vandewalle (2022) draws our attention to the interdependence of these ontological categories. Zeus' reminiscence about the gods once being worshipped finds a curious counterpoint in the Fan Convention culture built into *Ms. Marvel:* now, it appears, superheroes may receive adulation on par with the deities of old.

'gods' as ancient astronauts: extraterrestrials who came to Earth, fostered humanity's development and eventually became perceived as deities by humans. Since depictions of gods as superhuman extraterrestrials were more strongly pronounced in the earlier MCU phases, it remains to be seen whether they resurface in new entries in Phases five and six.

Final words

Paraphrasing Jemma Simmons' quote that opened this presentation, "beings once revered as gods, like Thor, have returned [to the MCU], leaving us with more questions … an enormous mess to clean up." Just past its efflorescence period, the MCU cannot quite decide on what makes a god or how to depict diverse world cultures: as a result, it often appears as if being pulled in different directions by changing creative visions, at times progressive, at times, reactionary. One such creative duality concerns the MCU's recursive oscillation between the fantastic and rationalising approach to the assimilated mythologies: although the franchise depicts myths and legends as misrepresentations of historical events, said events grow ever more fantastic, spinning tale after tale: gods become aliens become cosmic principles, *ad infinitum*.[132] In parallel, the MCU creators waver between propping up and dismantling legacies of colonialism and inequality, with "superhero stories, as faultline texts, [seen] an effective means of mapping societal tensions."[133] We have shown the MCU as a complex cultural palimpsest that draws freely from premodern narratives as envisioned through, but also separate from Marvel's comics: a cultural powerhouse and a profit-oriented franchise, the MCU concurrently panders to their audiences' preconceptions and expectations, gives space to activists and social justice workers and co-opts their work for the franchise's end revenue. Most relevantly, however, we have considered how juxtaposing the MCU's narratives with premod-

132 Willis (2017) 111. Cf. McSweeney (2018) quoting thoughts of Tom Hiddleston (Loki): "Superhero films offer a shared, faithless, modern mythology, through which these truths [about the human condition] can be explored. In our increasingly secular society, with so many disparate gods and different faiths, superhero films present a unique canvas upon which our shared hopes, dreams and apocalyptic nightmares can be projected and played out" (79–80).

133 Albarrán-Torres/Burke (2023) 2.

ern inspirations underscores convergences and tensions already present in the source material: through the mirror of Marvel, we glimpse the universal myth-making impulse.

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