

**“I’m just trying to make my city a better place” Social issues, superpowers, and New York City in Netflix’s 2015-2017 marvel series franchise**

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### **Abstract**

A luminous distress sign raging across the sky begs for a superhero capable of defeating the evil that infests Crime Alley. Undoubtedly the scariest part of Gotham City, it is also the cradle of its hero: it was there that, as a child, Bruce Wayne witnessed the murder of his parents - an event that deeply marked him and laid the foundation for the birth of Batman. More often than not, superheroes exist in fictional universes of their own and navigate places and spaces that unravel fluidly - but not necessarily harmoniously - and generally in alignment with a particular *raison-d'être*. Like Gotham City, these fictional cities sometimes gain so much complexity that they evolve from backdrops into characters, thus deeply influencing various facets of other characters' trajectories. But what changes when these influences - such as the inclinations that fuel them and the challenges they face - are intrinsically connected to real places? What happens when superheroes and us coexist in the same city? This paper analyses Netflix's recent renditions of Marvel's Daredevil, Luke Cage, Iron Fist, Jessica Jones, and The Defenders to understand how each series' dramatic arc is informed by, intermingle with, and build upon specific elements of New York City's geographic, historic, and sociologic textures. We propose a twofold argument: firstly, that these superheroes become entangled in the fabric of the New York City as mythical embodiments of some of its most pressing social issues, whose narratives constitute avenues for diverse audiences to critically engage with the city, its struggles, and its multiple modes of living. Secondly, that these narratives exploit clearly defined roles of "hero" and "villain" and employ superpowers as abstractions designed to appeal to a broad, ill-defined notion of "justice" while exposing real dilemmas of morality and struggles of policy design and enforcement underpinning particular urban environments. Ultimately, we argue that superhero stories are important cultural artifacts in that they are vested with the potential of rallying audiences around, and setting the tone of social and ideological disputes related to specific urban spaces, and urge that their interplay with the symbolic landscapes of cities be more systematically studied in cross-disciplinary perspectives. This issues recycles the urban experience as an immersion through imaginaries and realistic landscape and territories.

**Keywords:** urban phenomena, social issues, city places, neighborhood,

### **Introduction**

In a constant development since 2008, the cross media franchise centered in the audiovisual re-creation of Marvel Comics stories from comic books and graphic novels has been gaining audiovisual markets spreading itself over video-games, on-demand streaming

platforms, blockbuster cinema and television series. This brief paper will focus on the Marvel Studios and Netflix's 2015-2017 series franchise, which leads to New York City based characters and its routine environment.

The birth of cinema, under the transformations of the industrial revolution, is contemporary with modern geography and its academic development. The languages and aesthetics of the audiovisual are developed in the first years of cinema with a documentary perspective, the portrait of the landscape as well as the human marks left in the space - the territory and the place - are projected in the works of the brothers Lumière and of the other filmmakers that appear the From 1895 onwards, like any other form of previous narrative, cinema portrays, from the perspective and discourse of author, camera, direction, production and editing, human issues in their relations with themselves and with nature and with space.

Academic connections between geography and cinema began to form with the development of humanistic geography in the late 1970s. While the first incursions into the media, art, and communication centered on literature and painting, it was in the 1980s those aspects of popular culture (Lukinbeal, 2009), music or film, and the universe that surrounds it to compose new possibilities of geographic object. The force of cinema leads the geographer to study senses and identities, culture and economy.

This cinematographic force can draw attention to narrative aesthetics, language resources, the acquired form of spatial representation and its agents of spatial transformation since "geographic space is cyclically (des) constructed in artistic realization" (Schuenck Amorelli, 2013) because cinema deals with the lived space - the space conceived in the perspective of the individual, the citizen and the collective - but also deals with the reconstructed and recycled space in the imaginary.

## **Geography of Cinema**

This space is made up of territories, landscapes, places and metaphors. Images and filmic sounds have the function of constructing their own spatiality through the artistic-industrial proposition.

The landscape modeled by the camera and the direction of a film is capable of generating an illusion in the viewer, and inserting into the social perception an Image - that can circumvent the limits of reality. The metaphor of cinematography is, among others, in its relation with space and human perception, in a self-reflective and metalinguistic process.

The landscape becomes an image in the visual perspective of understanding space and symbolizes spatial relationships.

The territory is revealed in the film according to the actions of each character, in which each traces through the physical and symbolic ways presented on the screen a network of actions circumscribed in its territory.

It's the emotional concept of place and all the spaciality inside ones meanings that makes cinema a great mix of understandings, relations, beliefs and ideologies. It gives passion and humanity to the narratives, the landscapes and territories. The place gains meaning by characters journeys as their actions leads to spatial transformation.

### **Development: Superheroes go Audiovisual**

Both the cinema and the comic make up the cultural industries, a system that transforms art into commerce in an apparatus of spectacularization of the facts *"with the complete penetration of the media around the world, virtuality ended up surpassing reality, and today it is the real which reproduces the virtual, according to a certain Baudrillard."* (Guerreiro, 2002). For Harvey (1992) this virtuality occurs:

"Through the experience of everything - food, culinary habits, music, television, shows and cinema - today it is possible to experience the geography of the world vicariously as a simulacrum." The intertwining of simulacra of daily life gathers in the same space and in the same time of different worlds (of commodities), but it does so in such a way that it conceals in a near perfect way any vestiges of origin, of the processes of works that produced them or of the social relations implied in their production."

While in the film industry Hollywood studios such as 20th Century Fox, Warner Brothers or Universal Pictures consecrate a secular hegemony, in the universe of comics the highlights go to publishers Marvel Comics and DC Comics, the two most successful publishers in this scenario and the main driving forces of this transmissive connection with cinema. Both publishers have among their creations, scripts and characters the various aspects of the Hero's Journey and the Power of Myth, treated by Joseph Campbell throughout his work on the origin of the classic hero and his motivations.

### **Development: Who are those supergods?**

While the main DC Comics heroes live their supergods identity most of the time, in the countless narratives of Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman, the Marvel Comics

competition has brought a humanized strand to its characters, bringing its pages to crises of these characters as civilians and also as heroes, in addition to setting them in real cities such as New York, Los Angeles and other global cities. This is the case of Peter Parker, a teenager and orphan created by his uncles who, in an experiment with radioactive spiders in a collegiate science class, gains spider abilities such as superforce, sharp instinct, and the ability to scale walls. At this point Peter Parker takes on the nickname of Spider-Man and begins to divide his time between high school, the yearnings of the adult life to come and the responsibility to protect New York, of robbers, terrorists and supervillains.

Spider-Man is one of the main symbols of Marvel Comics and along with him the publisher has icons like Iron Man, an alcoholic scientist and industrialist billionaire who develops a computerized armor to protect himself, Captain America, the American super-soldier created to be a final weapon against World War II Nazism, and Thor, the thunder god of Germanic mythology, a millennial Viking who moves with the human causes and feelings of the twentieth century and leaves his paradise with Odin, the God-Father, to live on planet Earth and protect the human species. These three names lead the Avengers, a group of heroes, who associate with government entities, are willing to fight for freedom, democracy and salvation of planet Earth.

Faced with this iconography, Marvel Comics created in 2005, Marvel Studios, its film producer that would no longer depend on other Hollywood companies to take their characters to the movie screens. Marvel Studios proposes to create a scenario of fantastic realism shared by its heroes, since all live and act in real cities, have financial or family problems, romance cases and experienced real space facts such as the Great Wars of the twentieth century, the Cold War, terrorism, economic crises.

The film production of Marvel Studios suggests a world interpretation based on dynamic global relationships, with actors such as Iron Man or Captain America interceding in causes that go beyond the US territory for the preservation of the human species, but nourishes the bias of imperialism political and economic bias the actions of the USA in relation to the other countries.

According to the survey of Box Office company Mojo the productions "The Avengers" (2012), "Avengers: The Age of Ultron" (2015) and "Iron Man 3" (2013), all based on Marvel Comics creations that arrived to theaters through Marvel Studios, grossed more than \$ 3.1 billion while they were in theaters around the world.

**Table 1: Marvel Studios Movie Dollar Billing Table**

Ranking	Movie	Company	Worldwide
1	<a href="#">Marvel's The Avengers</a>	Buena Vista	<b>\$1,518.8</b>
2	<a href="#">Avengers: Age of Ultron</a>	Buena Vista	<b>\$1,405.4</b>
3	<a href="#">Iron Man 3</a>	Buena Vista	<b>\$1,214.8</b>
4	<a href="#">Captain America: Civil War</a>	Buena Vista	<b>\$1,153.3</b>
5	<a href="#">Spider-Man: Homecoming</a>	Sony	<b>\$880.1</b>
6	<a href="#">Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2</a>	Buena Vista	<b>\$863.6</b>
7	<a href="#">Guardians of the Galaxy</a>	Buena Vista	<b>\$773.3</b>
8	<a href="#">Thor: Ragnarok</a>	Buena Vista	<b>\$741.7</b>
9	<a href="#">Captain America: The Winter Soldier</a>	Buena Vista	<b>\$714.3</b>
10	<a href="#">Doctor Strange</a>	Buena Vista	<b>\$677.7</b>
11	<a href="#">Thor: The Dark World</a>	Buena Vista	<b>\$644.6</b>
12	<a href="#">Iron Man 2</a>	Paramount	<b>\$623.9</b>
13	<a href="#">Iron Man</a>	Paramount	<b>\$585.2</b>
14	<a href="#">Ant-Man</a>	Buena Vista	<b>\$519.3</b>
15	<a href="#">Thor</a>	Paramount	<b>\$449.3</b>
16	<a href="#">Captain America: The First Avenger</a>	Paramount	<b>\$370.6</b>
17	<a href="#">The Incredible Hulk</a>	Universal	<b>\$263.4</b>

Font: adapted from IMDB (2015)

### **Development: United States of the Avengers**

These same hero icons also symbolize dreams and desires that feed human life through the hero's journey. For geographic space it follows the transformative potential that cinema has in the products and meanings of its conception, production and representation. This type of product needs to be studied in all its phenomenological contribution, it is an industrial product that moves masses around the world and leaves marks of thought that feed the imagination on the space itself, because in this universe of fantastic realism we have the presence of a hero who he wears his own US flag and, beyond his intentions, his actions symbolize much more than a global Manichean salvation discourse, it goes beyond the duality between good and evil, for this hero was created for and still represents a cause that refers to imperialism. It cannot be just by coincidence that Thor, the God of the Asgardian Thunder, supreme power entity of the ancient Viking religions chooses the US as home. And as the flagship of this block we have the Iron Man, who besides being a multi-billionaire

scientist, flies through the world equipped with powerful armor against extreme levels of warfare and in his civil persona, playboy Tony Stark, is also the biggest producer and marketer of weapons on the planet, an allusion to US military policies.

The unfolding of the narratives tends to demonstrate centralities between the flows of actions of the characters. As much as they face global threats, most of the characters are native or naturalized in the U.S., the seat of the characters' actions is New York City.

The territory of the United States of America hosts most of the events of the films. And by the narrative of the works it is possible to see the importance of the city of New York represented continuously in the films, series and other products.

Cosmopolitan life is represented in the daily lives of the characters; the journey of the hero described and analyzed by Joseph Campbell is part of this experience, and therefore part of this analysis. It is up to this research to understand the city according to the journey of these heroes, their connections between neighborhoods, customs, events, the metaphor in clichés, prejudices and food to the imaginary that these works proposes.

### **Development: Netflix's New York City**

At the close of the movie "The Avengers," Tony Stark, proposes after the battle wear, that the heroes gather to eat an Arab dish, in a diner he knew near the scene of the battle, making great scenarios for battles and also common acts. Mean while the narratives developed in these series of Netflix Marvel superheroes escape the canon of superheroes that commonly materialize a dispute, fundamentally abstract, between good and evil. They, on the contrary, lend mythical clothing to contemporary disputes about how societies ought to be governed. Those stories roll on gender issues – Marvel's AKA Jessica Jones, racism – Marvel's Luke Cage, classism and gentrification – Marvel's Iron Fist, and the development and contradictions of justice in the perspectives of Western Christian Jewish society – Marvel's Daredevil. All these issues are dealt with materially through the active employment of the city, its geographies and imaginary, in the construction of the narrative. This is evidenced in the sense of commitment expressed by superheroes at various times, but especially in the crossover series Marvel's Defenders, whereupon the characters are joint together in the pursuit of a common cause, also a commitment to the city especially with Matt Murdock/Daredevil, the neighborhood and young people with Luke Cage, the genre, misogyny and abusive relationships with Jessica Jones. In fact, the narrative arcs themselves

of these series materialize these questions, which, again, do not correspond to an abstract Well-Evil dispute, but contemporary issues pertaining to functioning and harmony living in society.

New York City remains as the center of all the narratives. The City itself became an object of disputes among other characters, it stages and depicts their passion, desires, and psychopathies in the ambition of maintain the order according to one beliefs. Despite the truth of any hero or villain, it is the city that suffers and survives the development of gangs, mafias, vigilantes, corruption and the various demands of financial capital. The series reconstruct on the screen the landscape and territoriality of Hell's Kitchen and Harlem, for most of the development of Daredevil, Luke Cage and Jessica Jones, and Iron Fist's Wall Street.

### **Characters Analysis: Daredevil**

The character Matt Murdock, protagonist of "Marvel's Daredevil", more than native of New York, is native of the district of Kitchen of the Inferno, or Clinton, in the western portion of the island of Manhattan, its actions are basically delimited to this neighborhood both in its identity civilian community lawyer as well as the masked vigilante Daredevil, the Demon of the Kitchen of Hell. Its habits and its vision of the city are constructed through the local identity, a composition of immigrants originating mainly of Ireland and Italy, with great cares by the Catholicism and the gastronomy of masses.

### **Characters Analysis: Luke Cage**

The same construction is seen in the character of Luke Cage, the black hero who lives and works in the Harlem region, where his cycle of actions is illustrated by soul and rap music, clashes against racism and classism still in force. The Harlem hero embodies classic race issues in the U.S., for example mass incarceration, friction with the police system, vulnerability of a youth devoid of perspectives, etc. This all against the background of a process of marginalization - in the series, through the gentrification carried out by the economic symmetry between a mostly black working class and real estate speculation conducted by an "absent" class, that is, without ties with the neighborhood.

The villain Luke faces is a materialization of the consequences of these processes of marginalization - economic, social and prospects of integration into society. Still in relation to justice issues related to Daredevil's dramatic arc, Luke gravitates to another question: How do I become my obsolete hero? In a context of physical and symbolic violence, count those who are dear to me? The city then becomes the minefield of structural violence against which Luke strikes on his journey to obsolescence as a hero. Harlem, more specifically, materializes the space to which a (racial) class has been relegated until it becomes the target of the utilitarian gaze to give classes in power. It is important to note how superpowers derive from more or less intuitive understandings of these questions.

### **Characters Analysis: Jessica Jones**

Super-heroine embodies issues of gender inequality in their most frightening materiality: psychological violence against women – grooming, gaslighting, etc. The dramatic strategies adopted, such as villain Kilgrave, capable of giving tangible expression to "immaterial" problems and the relationship between Jones (an alcoholic and considered a person of lesser social capital) and Trish (successful, working on a radio show) serve to substantiate a narrative based on policies of visibility of the question of women in contemporary society. The central question of the character is: how to make credible the existence of the villain Kilgrave?

This question relates directly to the issues of justice with which the Daredevil strikes. Jessica, however, faces a specific villain - violence against women in a context that subtracts from them, is against which society does not have adequate legal apparatus. The city, then, constitutes the space of interlocation in which the heroine, between superpowers and interpersonal relations, seeks to legitimize – and remedy – the evils inflicted on her and on the other women of the series. Which leads Jessica, as symbol of a social and extremely necessary transformation on gender issues, among women are still victims of several crimes and abusive relations and part of cosmopolitan living.

### **Characters Analysis: Iron Fist**

Danny Rand, the Immortal Iron Fist, Protector of K'un-Lun, Sworn Enemy of the Hand is an outsider in his own heritage, besides his living in NYC across his youth.



The main notion of urban reality by the character is based on cultural and social learnings he gained by several years being educated by monks in a hidden city on Himalayas. Danny Rand does not understand the importance of financial capital as configured on the Wall Street reality. He turns into a misplaced man while tries to brake the interests of his own company on gentrification.

## **Conclusions**

Daredevil is blind, like justice, counting on other, sharper senses to move around the world. He is a lawyer, which places him at the center of conflicts of legal sensitivity. Jessica Jones is super strong - stronger than any man – which, however, was not enough to stop male exploration about her body and mind.

Luke Cage is, in addition to superstrength, super-resistant – even being bulletproof, which gives him a privileged status of resistance to the violence usually inflicted on other American blacks – e.g. police violence, but which serves him little against the prospect of social ostracism of incarceration. What is expected to be emphasized here is how these narratives differ from others of the same genre with respect not only to the issues raised, but only the hero's own status in contemporary society.

If Spider-Man, for example, also inhabits New York, his *raison d'être* is fundamentally linked to the individual (issues of personal responsibility, handling of his two lives, etc.). So it is also his narrative arc - the hero is constituted by an "accident of course" and continues to exist due to threats (villains) that also exist due to "accidents of course" (Connors, Green Goblin, etc). Thus, the myth of the spider man - although it encompasses values on ethical imperatives proportional to the capacities of the individual (with great power comes great responsibility) - is a surrender of the abstract clash between good and evil.

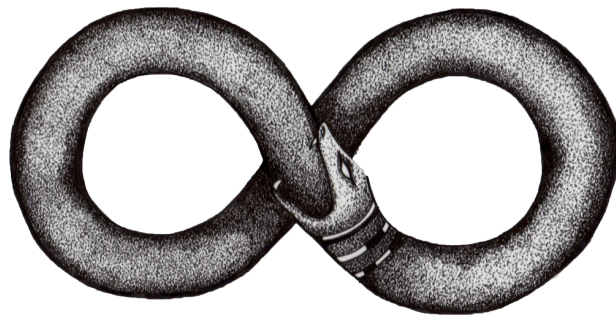
Daredevil, Jessica Jones, Iron Fist and Luke Cage render concrete social clashes, which, in their constitutions as heroes, are framed in core issues (which, in the end, also provide the conditions disappearance of these mythical figures). The city in this context comes to provide the context, the historical and material specificities, and the physical / emotional anchorage of what is at stake with these disputes. New York is thus the space in which we coexist with these heroes and their disputes whenever we update them - every

episode of racially motivated police violence, every case of violence against women, every failure of the legal system to administer justice with competence.

The hero's empirical spatial experience, its origins, acts, and personality need to be analyzed. The essence of geographic space incarnates as the totality of the film itself before an audience, conditioning to the form of simulacrum, new experiences to the spectators. The film is projection and spatial representation and has in its artistic and symbolic nature the place, the landscape, and the territory. And the extension of the film takes place beyond the artistic-cultural quotient, its industry has led us to see a process of ideological, social, political, cultural dissemination that for Milton Santos (2000), in an article published in the Folha de São Paulo newspaper, says that *"the contaminations of one culture by the other have become industrially possible, giving rise to a stronger influence of those hegemonic turns over the others, which are thus modified"*. The characters become cultural icons, representations of ideals and mechanisms of consumption. The ability of these pop culture supergods to mobilize hundreds of millions of dollars in movie box office and hundreds of millions of dollars in licensed products created from films is a fact that impresses on the development of the Cultural Industry and drives its mass of consumption to empirical and dream experiences on human relations.

This research is delimited by the city, by the customs and identity represented. The phenomenon to be understood is how these works absorb the city for its narratives and return to the public new forms of consumption of urban space, in a cycle of construction and deconstruction of the imaginary based on symbols of human yearnings and needs - such as courage, hope and justice - aligned with the constant consumption of space as a human product composed of actions, metaphors and meanings.

Through the journey of the hero proposed by Joseph Campbell is that the relationship of the characters with the city will be analyzed, among their customs and actions, their propositions of space. Under the hypothesis that the audiovisual feeds and is fed by the imaginary, and therefore the heroic journey attributes emotions on the space to the imaginary, the relation between the cinema and the city must be dissected from the perspective of the heroes, the public, and the authors to understand the feedback loop that this phenomenon creates.



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