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O'Rourke, Melissa, "Guardians of the Galaxy: A Holistic Theoretical Analysis" (2018). *Academic Festival*. 23.
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Melissa O'Rourke

Guardians of the Galaxy: A Holistic Theoretical Analysis

Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 1 was released in 2014 and *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* was released in 2017. Both films were directed by James Gunn and produced by Kevin Feige. The production company is Marvel Studios and they are distributed by Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures. *Guardians of the Galaxy* is based off a comic book by the same name written by Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning. *Vol. 1 and Vol 2.* are based off of the comics and other events in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). *Vol 1.* takes place in “phase 2” of the MCU and *Vol 2.* takes place in “phase 3.” The characters of *Guardians of the Galaxy* will next appear in *Avengers: Infinity War* which will premiere in 2018. *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* is set to be released in 2020, but there are no concrete plans on the order that the MCU will take.

In 2009, Marvel Studios was acquired by the Walt Disney Company for 4 billion dollars. This was beneficial move for Marvel because they were able to merge with one of the biggest media giants in the United States. According to Croteau and Hoynes, mergers are beneficial in that they maximize sales, create efficiencies in production, and position themselves to face potential competitors. Marvel Studios was now able to create content that they could not have been able to on their own.

This allowed Marvel to partake in transmedia integration, talked about in Lull's reading. By using different types of media, Marvel is able to weave their characters in and out of comic books, television shows, movies, commercials, merchandise, live shows, video games, and more. Specifically in the MCU, superheroes are able to appear other movies as well as in after credit scenes that give viewers the hint of what is coming next.

Disney owns a lot of companies, allowing them to partake in vertical integration. This gives Disney a large amount of power over the media that we consume every day. From there, they are able to create a number of different products and have different sources of income. As talked about

in Lull, this also allows Disney to participate in transmedia integration by having the different characters of Marvel appear on merchandise, different television shows, in video games, and the music in different movies can be heard in videos and in the theme parks.

Through Marvel Studios, they are able to create many different movies. The Disney Store is a place they can sell tons of different merchandise based off of the movies. *Guardians of the Galaxy* had many different types of merchandise for fans to purchase. As for clothing, New Era produced a line of headwear, Mad Engine and C-Life created T-Shirts and fleece jackets, Freeze created 1980s inspired apparel, and Disguise and Rubies produced costumes. Toys including Funko with vinyl bobble-heads and Lego created three toy sets based off of scenes in the film. When the film had its home media release, more items were released. This included Mattel's Hot Wheels character cars, American Greeting cards, and more. *Guardians of the Galaxy* was able to provide a tremendous amount of merchandise to allow fans to continue to interact with the film.

Disney also owns the Disney Music Group and three albums were released by Hollywood Records, the American record label of the Disney Music Group. The first was the film's score *Guardians of the Galaxy (Original Score)*, next *Guardians of the Galaxy: Awesome Mix Vol. 1 (Original Motion Picture Soundtrack)* which included twelve songs that were on Peter Quill's mix-tape in the film, and then for the first time since 2003, Disney Music Group released a cassette version of *Awesome Mix Vol. 1*. Lastly, they own the Disney theme parks. Here, fans can go to the theme park and meet their favorite characters, and soon they will have their own ride in Epcot.

Outside of America, *Guardians of the Galaxy* was released in 42 international markets. For media giants such as Disney, globalization is an important part in business. "By distributing existing media products to foreign markets, media companies are able to tap a lucrative source of revenue at virtually no additional cost," (Croteau and Hoynes, 34). On the opening weekend, the film grossed \$66.4 million. In China, it became the third highest opening in the country for any Disney release

with \$96.5 million. Marvel has a strong presence in other countries besides America, allowing both Marvel and Disney to profit greatly.

The Guardians of the Galaxy first appeared in a 1969 comic created by Stan Lee, Arnold Drake and Roy Thomas. Then a new team was created in 2008 in a comic book created by Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning. The 2008 team is what the film is based off of. Kevin Feige has played a huge role in not only *Guardians of the Galaxy*, but the entire MCU. Feige has produced 24 films and counting in the MCU, becoming the Universe's "architect." This allows the MCU to operate and appear as a whole.

In the beginning of the MCU, Marvel really needed to figure out the direction they wanted to take. In Creeber, he talks about Henri Focillon's Four Stages of Evolution. It first starts with the Experimental Stage. This is when Marvel tried to find out what their audience wanted. Starting with *Iron Man*, the first movie in the MCU, Marvel tried out what they've become well known for, the post-credit scenes. This helps Marvel to foreshadow a future film, give some comic relief, or resolve a plot line from the film. After the extreme positivity these scenes got after *Iron Man*, these post-credit scenes became a staple in the Marvel films. This also helps to connect all of the movies in the MCU, something that other companies have tried to copy such as Universal.

After the Experimental Stage, comes the Classic Stage. At this point Marvel has established its structure, format, and key conventions. By the end of Phase One, the MCU has a clear theme and direction. Next, the Refinement Stage. Since the MCU is now established, Marvel can start playing around with new themes. They decided to take a risk with *Guardians of the Galaxy*, for a number of reasons. James Gunn, one of the film's writers, became an important key player in *Guardians of the Galaxy* and in this stage of the MCU. But, Gunn is known for his work writing comedy, which would seem like an interesting choice for a superhero movie. Also choosing *Guardians of the Galaxy* was a risk because they were not very well known. Lastly, they chose Chris Pratt, a nonconven-

tional choice to play a superhero. Successfully taking these risks allowed Marvel to redefine the superhero movie and make them funny. This was a turning point for Marvel, after *Guardians of the Galaxy*, all of their films began to take on this comedic twist. Last is the Baroque Stage, this is when Marvel defined themselves.

When searching *Guardians of the Galaxy* on Google, many different genres come up: action, adventure, fantasy, science fiction, superhero, and comedy. This makes the film a hybrid of multiple different genres, allowing it to appeal to a broad audience, which helps the companies to make more money by having more viewers. Although there are a number of genres, the conventions of each genre are reflected throughout the film. For sci-fi, the film is set in space and features a number of characters that can be considered aliens, including a talking tree named Groot. Marvel challenged this genre in that the film is set in modern day and the main character, Peter Quill, was born in the 80s. More sci-fi films are set in the future.

The film is also considered a superhero movie. Peter Quill is called “Star Lord,” his superhero name. There is also the fight over the infinity stone that is found in the beginning of the movie. This acts as a motivator for many of the characters and is a main part of the plot. In other superhero movies there is the use of signature gadgets such as Thor’s Hammer, Spiderman’s webs, Captain America’s Shield. There is also that common fight between good vs. evil. Peter and the rest of the Guardians fight against the villain, Ronan, and his desire to obtain the infinity stone.

Fantasy is reflected throughout the film. Usually fantasy can be seen with unusual creatures such as Rocket the talking raccoon or Groot the talking tree. The infinity stone also has magical powers. Adventure is a huge part of the movie in that Peter makes a trip to an ancient temple to obtain the mysterious infinity stone. After this, Peter goes on a journey through space and picks up more Guardians that join him along the way. Bringing in the action part of it, there are a lot of fighting scenes. This is shown through the use of space ships, guns, and combat fighting.

Lastly, this film is definitely a comedy. Peter Quill is played by Chris Pratt, who is well-known as being a funny guy. There are a number of funny moments that provide a lot of comic relief. One is the Guardians standing in a circle after a serious conversation before a major battle and they stand together ready to face what's coming to them when Rocket says, "Look, I'm standing up! See? We're all standing now! Like a bunch of jackasses." There's also Groot who only says, "I am Groot," throughout the entire film.

Because this film was so successful and Marvel hit the mark, they were able to continue to make the sequel *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, and the characters of the film will appear in the upcoming *Avengers* film as well as their *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 3*. which was recently announced. Although *Guardians of the Galaxy* cannot be streamed on Netflix in the US, when I was abroad in Ireland I was able to watch it on Netflix there. But, they have just recently added *Vol 2*. to Netflix, without adding *Vol 1*. The film is also played frequently on FX, so it is able to be watched on TV. The soundtrack of the film is easily streamed on music platforms such as Apple Music.

In the film *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 1*, there are five main characters, the group of guardians. This consists of Peter Quill or Star Lord, Gamora, Groot, Rocket, and Drax. Out of the five guardians, Peter and Gamora are central characters. Although most of the characters are aliens or some sort of space creatures, they all have different representations in the films.

Each character has their own unique personality and backstory. Peter Quill is the only character that is actually from Earth. When Peter was younger his mother died from cancer, which was extremely hard on him. After his mother passed away he was taken by Yondu, and spent his younger years growing up with him and the Ravagers space gang. Although Peter is a very typical male lead for superhero movies, the fact that Chris Pratt was chosen to play him contradicts typical superhero movie trends. Pratt typically plays comedy roles, so by choosing him for Peter *Guardians of the Galaxy* challenged the typical "cool guy" stereotype.

Next is Gamora, the adopted daughter of the evil villain Thanos. She has green skin, pink/red hair, and is a skilled fighter. There are parts of Gamora's character that are very different than how females are usually portrayed in superhero movies. The fact that Gamora is a very strong main character and can fight right alongside the guys without missing a beat is what superhero movies have been missing. She is given her own rich backstory and character arc. But, in other ways, she is still the stereotypical female character. Gamora is dressed in a skin tight, almost transparent, body suit paired along with high heels. In reality, this would be extremely unrealistic in the environment they are in. Like spoken about in Gill, this is similar to midriff advertising in that the woman's body is the source of their power and this is used to appeal to men. There is no reason that Gamora's body needs to be objectified in the way it is from what she is wearing to the number of shots that linger on her behind. Lastly, although she can handle herself, she is also the damsel in distress in some instances and needs saving from Peter a few times in the films.

Lastly, in *Vol 1*, are Drax, Groot, and Rocket. These characters are not as complex as Peter and Gamora. Drax is a large, blue, no-nonsense guy. His family was murdered by Thanos, and he wants revenge. Drax's race of people can only think logically about things and only communicate on a literal level, meaning they don't really understand humor. Drax is the "macho man" of the film and is physically very powerful. He also goes on to call Gamora a "green whore" for no reason. Groot is a large, tree-like creature, who is partners with Rocket. Rocket is the only person who can understand what Groot is saying and his intentions because all Groot can actually say is, "I am Groot." Yet, Groot really cares about the other guardians and will do anything to protect them. Rocket is the result of experimenting. He appears to be a raccoon but can not only walk, talk, and have incredible knowledge, but also has implants to en-

hance him. Rocket is very emotional and is often talked down to by Drax by being called vermin. Rocket also goes on to objectify Gamora and wants her to seduce the prison guards so that they can carry out their escape plan.

Based off of Hart's reading, there are three of the four stages of representation in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 1. and Vol 2*: nonrecognition, ridiculed and respect. Although this is a sci-fi/superhero movie, there are two actors of color and both of their skin is painted over, but the cast is very diverse and this could be considered respect. Peter is the only character that is from earth, and has a normal appearance. Zoe Saldana who plays Gamora is Dominican and Puerto Rican, and Dave Bautista who plays Drax is half-Filipino. Gamora is a green skinned character while Drax is blue. It is important to remember that they are playing aliens, but they have a very diverse cast and covered them up, which is nonrecognition meaning that these races are not as represented in the film.

Saldana said in an interview with *Telegraph*, "...it's been brought to my attention continuously since I was born that I'm not a conventional person because of the color of my skin or my gender or my cultural background. So I think science fiction has given me the ability as an artist to be colorblind, and gender-blind, and to imagine and reinvent myself and be the chameleon actors are supposed to be." She has great intentions with this quote, but nonrecognition is negative in the media because all races should be represented.

In *Vol 2*. there is ridicule is represented through the character Mantis. She has the appearance of a bug, as she was saved by Ego when she was just larvae and has empathic powers. But, she was raised by Ego to be his servant. Even though she is portrayed as this bug like creature, she is still clearly of the Asian race. Mantis is given the stereotype of the submissive Asian woman, which is ridicule towards a certain race. She was taken away from her home planet by a powerful man who she obediently serves and calls "Master." There is also Drax who ridicules her. Although Drax is a very literal man, he calls her a pet and ugly, reinforcing

the idea that women are only useful when they are attractive. Even while in battle her powers are useful for a short time, until she is literally knocked out and has to be rescued by Drax off the battlefield. I believe Mantis as a character is controversial because is she really needed? Her main purpose in the film is to humanize Drax and show that he is moving on from the death of his wife and actually has some emotion as he saves her towards the end of the film.

There are both negative and positive consequences of the semiotic and ideological messages in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 1. and Vol 2.* Most of these ideologies deal with gender. The films actually do pass the Bechdel Test, which is when two female characters with names talk about something other than men. Gamora and her sister Nebula have their own plot and do have conversations together. There are other positives when it comes to gender. Gamora is just as strong and tough as the guys in the film. She can truly hold her own when it comes to combat. Other than Gamora, there is Nebula. Nebula is actually a villain and wants to kill her sister. Nebula is not likable at all, which is truly different than other female characters, but you respect her for how strong and passionate she is.

In the Pennington reading, there is objectification and hyper sexualization. Sometimes media tries to make a woman look strong and powerful against the men, but they just end up hyper sexualizing them. First, there is the problem with the female character's outfits. Along with Gamora's skin tight ensemble, Nebula is also portrayed in a very tight outfit. As for objectification Drax calls Gamora a whore and Mantis a pet and ugly. Peter has a one night stand and forgets the girl's name. Gamora is also a very strong female character, but does end up falling for Peter. Was this necessary? Why can't she be a strong female character without a love interest? Lastly, there is the fact that both Gamora and Nebula are important female characters, but they are both aliens. This makes them less relatable to the audience because they aren't just regular humans. Peter also objectifies women in the film. The movie starts off with

him going on this high speed chase and action sequence to go back to his spaceship only to realize that his one-night stand is still in his room. Yes, this was supposed to be a funny moment after a high stakes moment in the film, but Peter admits that he has no idea what the girl's name even is.

Guardians of the Galaxy Vol 1. and Vol 2. had both positive and negative representations in the film. Once you look past all of the action, effects, and really dig into the storyline and what the characters are saying, you begin to realize that there are problems with how they treat each other and how they are represented. But, Marvel is definitely taking a step in the right direction and has been diversifying their movies.

For my audience analysis, I decided to reach out to friends to do a face-to-face analysis. Since *Guardians of the Galaxy* is a very popular movie, I knew people that I could interview. I had five participants: four being female from the ages 17-21, and one male age 20. I decided to have the interview at my apartment and invited Ally, Anna, Alli, and Colleen over to sit down around my kitchen table to discuss the questions. I did however Skype in my cousin Chris, the male participant, because he does not go to Sacred Heart. I knew he would be a valuable asset to the discussion and wanted to include him.

Each person was introduced to the film in a similar way. Colleen, Anna, and Chris are big Marvel fans, so anticipated the film release for awhile. Ally and Alli were introduced by family or previews. All of the participants watched trailers of the film on social media platforms such as Facebook. All of the participants saw the film in theaters with friends or family. Chris, Colleen, Anna, and Ally have all seen the film more than once. This includes in theaters, DVD, and streaming services. Alli only saw the film in theaters, although she said that she constantly watches clips of the film on Youtube.

When talking about their favorite things about the film there were various answers. Chris, Colleen, and Alli spoke about the love of the characters in the film. Alli stated that she loves Chris

Pratt as an actor, and that is one of the reasons she wanted to see the film. Chris and Colleen loved the characters because of their unique personalities. They both agreed that the chemistry of the group of guardians was fun to watch, because they were so different but ended up getting along very well. Even though some did not specifically discuss the characters, they all agreed that it was amazing that the human actors interacted with the animated characters to create such a good group. Besides the characters, Chris, Colleen, and Anna discussed the music of the film. They said that the music gave it a very good nostalgic vibe.

Anna even participated in transmedia integration, as spoken about in Lull. A film that was created for theaters, came out with a soundtrack of music that was released on streaming sites such as Apple Music and Spotify. She said that after seeing the movie in theater with her friends, they all downloaded the movie soundtrack and that was their summer playlist. Now, whenever she hears one of the songs on the playlist, she will immediately think back to the movie and how much she enjoyed watching it. Even if not specifically a *Guardians of the Galaxy* fan, by having the soundtrack on this streaming service, they are giving people an opportunity to listen and maybe want to see the movie as well.

Although there were was a lot of positive discussion surrounding the film, there were a few critiques that the participants had. Chris, Colleen, and Anna had complaints about the villains, Nebula and Ronan. Chris said that Ronan was a weak point in the movie, yet the characters strong personalities made up for it. Anna said that Ronan was lack-luster and could have had a stronger role in the film. Colleen wishes that the first film focused more on Nebula, Gamora's sister who was out to kill her. Ally did not like the representation of Gamora, because although she was strong and could hold her own, she still needed saving from Peter. She also noticed that she was wearing really tight clothing and heels, which in reality would be very impractical to fight in. Alli did not like that the movie was somewhat predictable. She said she wished it had a more unpredictable ending.

Besides the focus group, all of the participants have discussed the film in various ways. Chris, Colleen, and Anna, the Marvel fans, have dug deeper into the film. Chris participates in the Marvel fandom. The idea of a fandom is discussed in the Jenkins reading. Jenkins states that a fandom is created when there is a shift from personal reaction to social reaction and instead of being a spectator, you become a participator in the culture of the media. Chris has become very involved in not only *Guardians of the Galaxy*, but the entire Marvel Cinematic Universe. He has a specific group of friends he sees every Marvel movie with. He also has a Tumblr that he uses to repost Marvel themed fan art and discusses the movies online. Besides on social media, he has gone to Comic Con and watches panels from these events.

Colleen discusses these films with friends that live in other countries, specifically England. This shows the globalization of the Marvel franchise. As talked about in Carr, "Thanks to the Internet and cellular networks, humanity is more connected than ever. Of the world's 7 billion people, 6 billion have access to a mobile phone," (Carr, 4). Although she discussed the global village negatively, this is a positive outcome of using the internet to communicate. Marvel knew that they could release their films across the world, and have the same effect on the people in America. The internet and globalization help connect the world through media. Although this person lives on a separate continent, Colleen is able to discuss theories as well as easter eggs with this person online.

Anna is an avid movie lover, and like Chris, has a group of friends she goes with to see every Marvel movie with and discuss the films afterwards. Alli, who is more of a horror/thriller movie fan, said that *Guardians of the Galaxy* was something she never would have ended up liking, so she discussed that aspect with her friends. She said that although she has never watched the entire movie again, she said that she is always making movie references and quoting the movie in conversations. Ally only discussed the movie with the people she went with.

When asked how this film compares to other films, every participant said that the film was funny. Anna said that the film was special because it focused on lesser known Marvel characters

and it had a more comedic script. Colleen said that this film was one of her favorites because of how funny it was. Chris also said that this film is one of his favorites in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Alli said it was funny and was really impressed with it in comparison to films of a similar genre. Ally said it stands apart from other movies because it is high quality and also very comical.

Based on all of the comments on the film from the participants, I think that Marvel achieved exactly what they wanted to. Each of the participants were an active audience because of their participation with the film after seeing it, whether this was watching the film more than once, purchasing merchandise, listening to the soundtrack, or discussing it online and going to events. Marvel specifically casted Chris Pratt and hired a comedy writer to give the film that comedic twist that the MCU needed, each participant thought that the film was funny. The Marvel fans all agreed that this film was one of the best in the franchise, Those who were not Marvel fans thoroughly enjoyed the film, which exactly what they wanted to do through the mix of genres. None of the participants picked up on any of the negative stereotypes besides Ally with her take on Gamora. Overall, I believe that Marvel achieved what they wanted to with *Guardians of the Galaxy* based on the feedback of my participants.

The political economy of *Guardians of the Galaxy* reflects Disney and Marvel Studios in that they wanted to make as much money as possible after releasing it. They did this specifically by using a hybrid of different genres to appeal to a wider audience, by releasing a huge amount of merchandise, and releasing the movie globally. They acted on it being so successful by keeping the characters around and creating a sequel, as well as having them in *Avengers*.

The use of colored actors, but then covering them up suggests non-recognition but also respect, and the use of Mantis as the submissive Asian woman stereotype suggests ridicule. There was also a lot of objectification in the film that could have been avoided, but using strong women was a step in the right direction. These are things I did not first notice when watching the film, but found

this out when researching the film online, which anyone can do if they are interested. Moving forward, Marvel should try to work on these problems by being more inclusive and not objectifying women.

Understanding media theory is important in order to understand what these big media corporations such as Disney are showing and telling viewers. Without understanding the way the media works, it is possible to have a skewed mindset of the world or of people. Doing research on media theories help brings to light the underlying messages that are seen each and every day, and by being able to pinpoint them it helps a person to become a more informed viewer. Even just sitting in class each week I was able to learn more about the media than I ever knew before, and that's what I'm studying. Now I am able to be a more active viewer and pick up on subliminal messages the media is showing me.

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