

Wakanda rising: *Black Panther* and commodity production in the Disney universe

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the superhero film *Black Panther* as a cultural commodity produced and distributed within an industrial capitalist system. The film has not only generated millions of dollars for the Disney Company, but has also stoked collective imaginations and energised the agency of audiences with its portrayal of the Afrofuturistic utopia, the kingdom of Wakanda, untouched by the ravages of colonialism and ruled by benevolent leaders endowed with superpowers. The film, is currently ranked first in terms of its lifetime gross revenues in the categories of comic book adaptation and superhero film and is the most successful of the Marvel Cinematic Universe characters' films so far. *Black Panther's* many firsts in the superhero genre reflect its non-financial feats: first to feature an almost entirely Black cast; first top-grossing film with an almost entirely Black cast; and biggest debut for an African American director (Disney 2018a). I demonstrate that while *Black Panther* showcases the work of African American filmmakers, storytellers and artists, and recognises Afrofuturism narratives, the film is also a commodity that sustains the system that produced it. Recognising and establishing the connections between commodity, cultural production and economics also offers a chance to identify opportunities for counter-hegemonies and challenges to the systemic erasure of Afro-histories.

Keywords: Afrofuturism; *Black Panther*; commodity; Walt Disney Company; Marvel Comic Universe; political economy.

Introduction

On 16 February 2018, four months after its record-setting opening weekend in the United States, global box office receipts for *Black Panther* reached \$1.4 billion. Almost half of these earnings came from international markets – revenues derived from theatre showings outside the United States and Canada. The Walt Disney Company has consistently highlighted the film's many financial successes: highest grossing superhero movie of all time; second highest four-day holiday weekend box office receipts (\$242 million); third biggest release of all time; more than \$100 million earned in four weeks in Latin American theatres and theatres in China; number one release of all time in South Africa, with revenues just over \$220 million (Disney 2018a). Audience demographics for *Black Panther* are different from Disney's other superhero films. In US theatres, about 37% of ticket buyers were African American, compared to the average African-American movie theatre audience of 15% (Huddleston 2018). Disney Chief Executive, Bob Iger, attributed the company's 2018 first quarter revenues, and increase of 9% from the previous year, to the commercial success of *Black Panther* (Faughnder 2018).

With a production budget of \$200 million, and an estimated \$150 million spent on publicity, *Black Panther* has not only made an impact on Disney's revenues but also established precedents. *Black Panther's* notable firsts include: biggest debut by an African American director (and co-writer) Ryan Coogler, and first Disney film with a significant representation of African-American writers, musicians, and artists in its production crew. Another first was the costumes and outfits created by African-American costume designer Ruth E Carter. Worn by the largely African and African-American cast, the costumes were based on inspiration from the designs, fabric and jewelry of South Africa, Ghana, Nigeria, the Congo and Niger, reflecting Zulu, Sotho, isiXhosa, Akan, Maasai, Himba, and Tuareg aesthetics (Ford 2018). The costumes were designed as an interpretation of an imagined future – an Afrofuture, unscathed by the ravages of European colonialism – firmly grounded in the history of Africa and its many peoples and cultures.

In this essay then, I discuss how the power of creating *Black Panther* (Coogler 2018) as a commodity, and the wealth acquired from its distribution, along with all its derived commodities, resides almost entirely with the Walt Disney Company, a multinational media and entertainment conglomerate. In discussing Disney's power and control over the narrative of Afrofuturism, I also identify ways to understand the motion picture *Black Panther* as an opportunity for identifying counternarratives and resisting this power and control. The essay begins with an outline of the theoretical lens – critical political economy. Next, I provide a timeline of the creation of the Black Panther

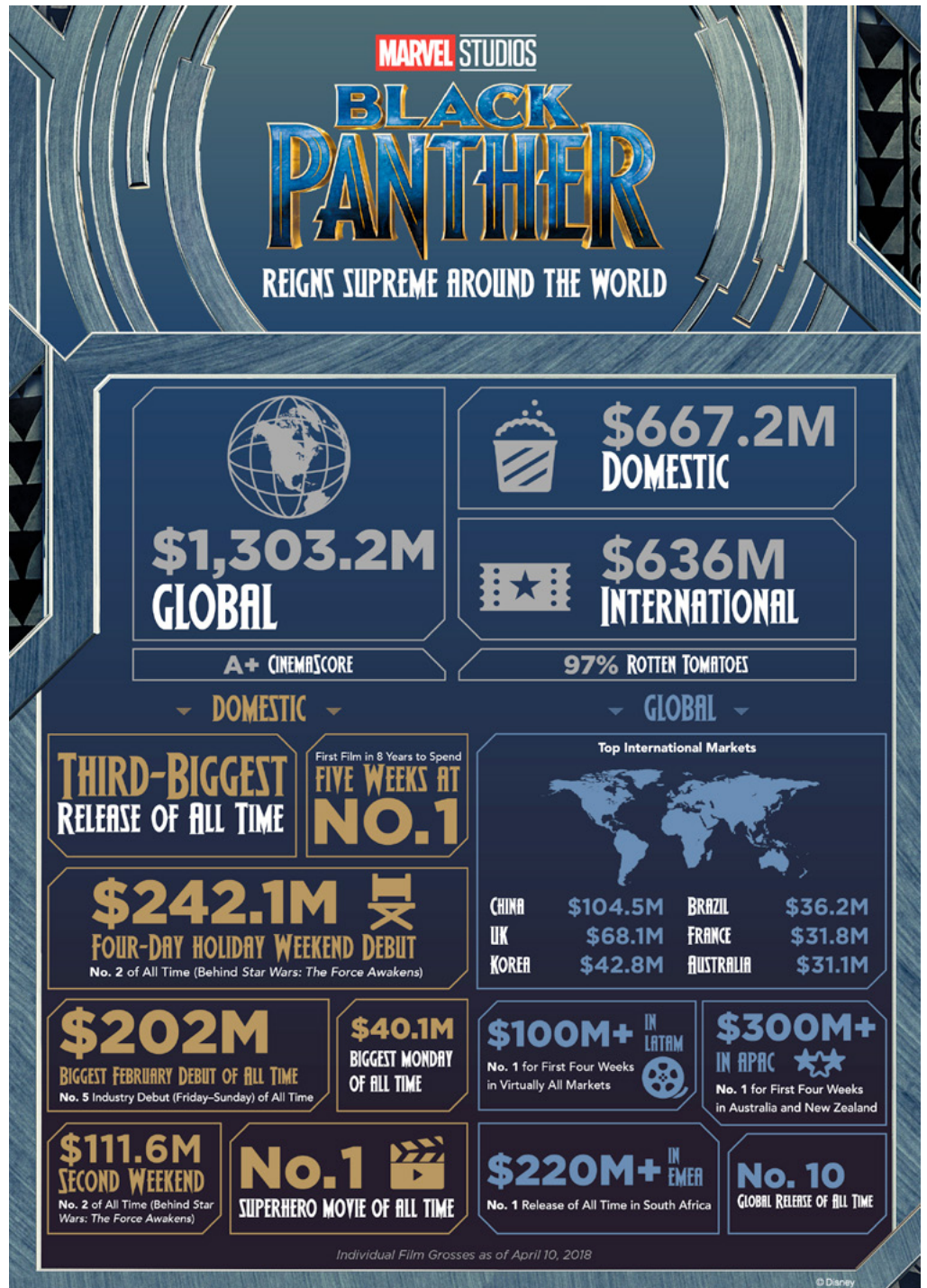


FIGURE N° 1

Black Panther infographic by Disney Studios (The Walt Disney Company 2018) ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

character, and I use this history as a vehicle to trace and establish the antecedents of Afrofuturism. To establish the economic hegemony of the producer, I describe how The Walt Disney Company, ultimate owner of Marvel Comics and Marvel Studios, and current owner of the copyright to the Black Panther character, markets the film as one of its many products. Then, using the key tenets of critical political economy, I examine the many ways in which the film *Black Panther* exemplifies the characteristics of a commodity, or a property, for the purpose of generating revenues for its owner. I conclude by offering reflections on how the economic success and popularity of *Black Panther* offers an opportunity to strengthen the resistance narratives and ideology of Afrofuturism.

Afrofuturism

The alternative science fiction view of Africa presented in *Black Panther* represents what author and culture critic Mark Dery described as Afrofuturism in his 1994 essay *Black to the Future*, a chapter in *Flame wars: the discourse of cyberculture*, an edited collection of essays that interrogate the discourse of cyberculture and address numerous aspects of the deliberate erasure and relegation of African Americans to the subaltern position in science fiction literature. Dery (1994) distilled and defined Afrofuturism as the merging of African American/Black cosmologies, technologies and histories in literature and artistic expression in order to re-imagine possibilities for Black emancipation.

While the narratives of science fiction, and the narratives and history of African Americans, are largely determined by white males, Dery (1994:182) argues that Afrofuturism exists in many places in American culture – in the paintings of Jean-Michel Basquiat, in the John Sayles's film *The Brother from Another Planet*, in Jimi Hendrix's *Electric Ladyland*, in George Clinton's, *Computer Games*, and in many other 'unlikely places, constellated from far-flung points'. Indeed, as Anderson (2016:232) observes, the historical precedent for Afrofuturism is WEB DuBois's 1913 seminal work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, which influenced creative intellectuals from Claudia Jones and Malcolm X to Sun Ra and Octavia E Butler, from Audre Lorde and Cornel West to Samuel R Delaney and Marilyn Thomas – all of whom extended, deepened and sowed 'the seeds for a Black speculative movement challenging white racist normativity and Black parochialism'. The dominance of this normativity is evident in the glaring absence of African American representation in the narratives of science fiction literature but is not a result of a dearth of African-American writers, creators, or artists.



FIGURE N° 2



Black Panther costumes Marvel Entertainment (moviestillsdb 2018; cf. Coogler 2018) ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

To help create what he called ‘a map of one small corner of the largely unexplored psychogeography of Afrofuturism’, Dery (1994:187) interviewed three African-American writers and scholars: Samuel R Delany, a semiotician; Greg Tate, a cultural critic and reporter; and Tricia Rose, a professor of Africana Studies and History. Each scholar addresses, among other issues, matters of economics, race, power, and representation, all foundational ideas to the now substantive body of literature on Afrofuturism. Tate asserts that African Americans have been creators and consumers of science fiction literature in film, music, graffiti, art, and text-based narratives for decades. Rose contends that Hollywood science fiction films, while upholding a patriarchal status quo, open small spaces for counter narratives for women, for example, Sarah Connor’s character in *The Terminator*, or Sigourney Weaver’s character in the *Alien* trilogy. Delaney alerts us to the celebration of consumer society which glosses over the fundamental problem that ‘the redistribution of commodities is somehow congruent with the redistribution of wealth - which it is not’ (in Dery 1994:187). Delaney argues that ‘access to the formation’ of those commodities and the commodity system’ does not equate to how commodities are formed and organised (in Dery 1994:193; emphasis in the original). Users, or viewers in the case of film, have access to these digital

commodities as consumers but lack the power to produce commodity, nor can they derive any wealth gained from the distribution of the commodity.

These narratives of science fiction, and of Afrofuturism, are thus not just property, but as in the case of the film *Black Panther*, a commodity. This is precisely what Dery (1994:180) called the 'unreal estate of the future [which is] already owned by the technocrats, futurologists, streamliners, and set designers – white to a man – who have engineered our collective fantasies'. The narratives of Afrofuturism represented in the Disney film *Black Panther* are based on a comic book superhero that was introduced in 1966 emerging from the imagination, writing and comic book art of white males – Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. A half century later the Black Panther character and the narratives and representations of Afrofuturism were entrusted to African American script writers and an African American director to interpret for the motion picture *Black Panther*. The film featured an almost entirely African American and African cast. But as Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky reminds us: 'Cinema is an unhappy art as it depends on money ... it is also marketed like cigarettes' (Santas 2008:210). Thus, the film *Black Panther* is cinematic art made possible through the financial resources of the entity that owns the means of producing, exhibiting, and distributing the art – the Walt Disney Company – which determines success based on returns on economic investments. Viewed from the perspective of film-as-art, *Black Panther* is both a lucrative cultural commodity and a potent emancipatory cultural artefact. The popularity of *Black Panther* has given Afrofuturism's counter hegemonic ideas and critique of colonialism a global stage. Seen from a critical political economy lens, *Black Panther*, and its derivative commodities, are owned and controlled by The Walt Disney Company. But, an Afrofuturism writ large by artists, writers, intellectuals, workers, and producers can challenge hegemonic forces that have disadvantaged and erased Black history and stories. To understand how this challenge is possible, it is necessary to provide a framework of critical political economy.

Theoretical approach

The overarching theory of political economy, in the classical tradition of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, is at its core the study of household management in the sense that it is the theory and practice of economic affairs. Political economy is essentially the study of the 'social relations and power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution and consumption of resources' (Mosco 1996:25). When used to study social and power relations in the communications, culture and media industries, Disney becomes a mode of cultural production and consumption (Garnham 1979).

In her pivotal study of the Hollywood film industry, Wasko (2003) uses a political economy approach to provide a critical overview of the complex and convoluted production, distribution and exhibition of sectors of the US film industry by analysing how the industry expands, promotes, and protects its businesses. Wasko concludes, in part, that Hollywood has become more commercial through product placement, the creation of new commodities and merchandise, and major Hollywood film companies like Disney, which has come to dominate domestic and local markets with its films and related products. Wasko argues that analysing film as both a cultural artefact and a commodity allows us to identify contradictions in the communication industries as sites of power, thereby highlighting spaces to create 'strategies for intervention, resistance and change' (Wasko 2003:9).

In the context of this essay, therefore, the film *Black Panther* is a cultural artefact, and a cultural commodity, produced and distributed within an industrial capitalist system (Meehan 1986). The act of commodification is the transformation of a product whose value is determined by its ability to meet individual and societal needs, its use value, into a product whose value is determined by what it can sell for in a marketplace, its exchange value (Kunz 2007). Thus, *Black Panther* is sold as a commodity at the box office – its exchange value. But *Black Panther* also satisfies entertainment or educational needs – its use value. The Walt Disney Company, ultimate owner of Marvel Studios and the Marvel Comic Universe, thus monetises *Black Panther* the film using its power as a transnational, diversified, entertainment conglomerate. Disney is transnational in that its commodities are distributed across the world. Disney is a diversified conglomerate with a corporate structure consisting of a group of diverse companies under common ownership and with holdings across industries. For example, Disney acquired Marvel Comics, along with the intellectual property rights to all Marvel characters, including *Black Panther*. Disney's Marvel Studios division then produces a film about the Black Panther and distributes the film globally through its Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures (previously known as Buena Vista Picture Distribution). It also sells merchandising through its Disney stores, online and around the world. With this global reach and Disney's in-house distribution division, along with its foreign distributors, Disney is able to exhibit digital projections of *Black Panther* in theatres in fifty-two countries spread across Europe, Africa, Australia, Asia, and South America. These complex structures, interrelationships and modes of ownership and control also allowed The Walt Disney Company to acquire ownership of the Black Panther character in its original comic book format that appeared just over a fifty years ago.



FIGURE N° 3



Fantastic Four and *Black Panther* Marvel Entertainment ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

The *Black Panther*: from comics to film

Both Marvel Comics and DC Comics, albeit under different trade names, featured early in what has come to be called the Golden Age of comic books¹ in the United States, gaining popularity just after the end of WWI. Both companies would continue to dominate the comic book world for decades. The Black Panther made his debut in 1966 in issue 52 of the *Fantastic Four* comic, written by Stan Lee and illustrated by Jack Kirby. During this period, in what artist and self-publisher Turtel Onli referred to as the Black Age of Comics, a thriving universe of African American comic characters were created in comic strips² and comic books in the United States (Duffy & Jennings 2010). The Black Panther and other black superheroes created in mainstream comics in the 1960s and 1970s were largely influenced by the blaxploitation films of the time (Brown 2013). For the most part, these superheroes were background characters and minor superheroes whose names served as a reminder that they were Black in the overwhelmingly white comic universe (Duffy & Jennings 2010). Among the Marvel characters introduced were Black Goliath in 1966, Luke Cage/Power Man in 1972, Blade in 1973, and Ororo Munroe, aka Storm, in 1975. DC Comics introduced Vykin, the Black and Black Racer, in 1971, Green Lantern in 1972, Guardian in 1970, Bumblebee in 1976, Black Lightening in 1977, and Vixen in 1981 (Kelly 2017).

While Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's creation of Black Panther was a response to the growing voice of the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s (Regaldo 2005), the writers and artists of the Black Comic age were very deliberate in their characters' roles in the narratives and images of comic strips and then comic books. For example, Torchy Brown, the character created by Jackie Ormes, was an attractive, intelligent self-motivated young black woman who 'challenged racial stereotypes and provided social commentary on a variety of issues' (Howard 2013:16). Many of the Black comics were social commentaries on the racial, political, and class inequities of the time. Comics were for many of its readers their first encounters with 'social justice pedagogy in action' (Howard & Jackson 2013:2).

While Black comic writers and artists confronted contemporary social issues in their stories and drawings, this was not the same for mainstream comics. There was a persistent whiteness in comic book superheroes, evidenced by depictions of Superman, an alien from another planet who is not human but who still embodies traditional white ideals of male beauty and masculinity. This avoidance of contemporary social justice issues in the early representations of the Black Panther is demonstrated by Marvel's brief name change in 1972, from Black Panther to Black Leopard – to avoid association with the Black Panther Party (Kelly 2017). The Black Panther Party for Self-Defense

(BPP), founded by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in 1966, was the grassroots Black liberation organisation that advocated for revolutionary socialism in its quest for social justice and economic equality (Joseph 2016). If viewed through the lens of the emancipatory aspirations of Afrofuturism, the Black Panther Party is the force that challenged the rampant racism and exploitative economic system – much like the comic book (and motion picture) *Black Panther from Wakanda*. The superheroes in comic books created by Black writers and artists reflected these creators' efforts to reclaim Afro-histories and to challenge prevailing social injustices – counter hegemonic narratives that would not make it all the way onto a blockbuster Hollywood motion picture screen.

In the pages of the mainstream comics during this time, the gaze of the primarily white creators of Black superheroes provides an insight into how Black characters were placed in a largely white universe, framed in accordance with its trope of 'the other'. In the first issue of *Black Panther*, Mr Fantastic, Ben Grimm (The Thing), Susan Storm (the Invisible Woman) and Johnny Storm (The Torch) use a futuristic craft powered by magnetic waves, a gift from the Black Panther, to travel to Wakanda at the invitation of the Black Panther. In the opening panels, Ben Grimm's reply to Mr Fantastic and Susan Storm, after hearing about the Black Panther, is: 'Never hear of 'im! But how does a refugee from a Tarzan movie lay his hands on this kinda gizmo?' (Lee & Kirby 1960:2). In this way, Lee and Kirby connect the Black Panther to Edgar Rice Burrough's well-known novel and subsequent films about Tarzan, the European boy raised by apes in the jungles of Africa. The narrators' voice on the next page, as the panels take the reader to Wakanda, reads: 'By now as the Fantastic Four prepared for their momentous journey, let us do what few Western men had ever done ... let us gaze upon the enthroned figure of him who rules the Wakandas ...' (Lee & Kirby 1960:4). This is the gaze the readers are guided through by Lee and Kirby as they behold the other – reminiscent of the problematic portrayal of African humanity in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. This narrative is in stark contrast to that of the Black Panther in the hands of writers Ryan Coogler and Joe Robert Cole. Their Hollywood Black Panther has gravitas and agency, much like the later iterations of the comic book *Black Panther* in the hands of African American writers Christopher Priest, Ta-Nehesi Coates and Roxane Gay. In 1988, Marvel Comics hired writer Christopher Priest to reboot the Black Panther comic. In the hands of a seasoned African-American writer, the Black Panther series ran for sixty issues. Priest was the first full-time African-American editor to work for DC Comics in the mid-1980s (Riesman 2018).

When they first appeared in the 1970s, superhero films mirrored the comic book depictions, reflecting a 'privileged whiteness' that 'presented racial difference largely in terms of an exotic, sometimes villainous, and less sophisticated Other' (Bernadi & Green 2017:190). The lack of racial diversity in mainstream American cultural productions

that is no longer as prevalent in comic books remains in superhero movies. In the 1970s, African American actors were featured in lead roles in independent films such as *Super Fly*, *The Human Tornado*, *Abar*, *First Black Superman*, *Pootie Tang*, and *Black Dynamite*, but these did not gain much attraction. By the late 1990s, several major studio-produced films received mixed reviews and popularity. These films included *Spawn* in 1997, *Steel* in 1997, *Blade* in 1998, *Cat Woman* in 2004, *Hancock* in 2008 and *Chronicle* in 2012 (Kelly 2017).

The hiring of Ryan Coogler as *Black Panther's* director and scriptwriter, along with co-scriptwriter Joe Robert Cole, marks the first significant shift of the filmic gaze of Afrofuturism, from white to African American. This shift represents the potential for the re-appropriating science fiction and Afrofuturistic stories, and simultaneously a beginning of reclaiming control of historical narratives from which African Americans have been erased. Ultimately, however, potential is impeded by the structural dominance of the economic entities that own and control the means of producing these alternative narratives, like the transnational conglomerate The Walt Disney Company.

Ownership and commodity: The Walt Disney Company and Marvel Studios

The global market for Black superheroes turned out to be very profitable decision for Disney, with *Black Panther* and the anticipated spinoffs. According to Anderson (2018), 'The film unexpectedly tapped into a global Black reservoir of desire and agency that is long standing and built and autonomously maintained in the cultural software of Africa and its diaspora'. This suggests that Disney expected a successful film but may not have anticipated the extent of its success, much less the awakening of a simmering and nascent Black consciousness prompted by the Afrofuturist narratives and imagery of *Black Panther*.

The Walt Disney Company was created in 1923 by siblings Walter and Roy Disney as the Disney Brothers Cartoon Studio. In the early years of the silent-film era, the company produced cartoon animations and short films. It would eventually change its name to The Walt Disney Company and come to be known as the creator of Steamboat Willie and the now iconic Mickey Mouse. Over the next fifty years the company expanded its holding across the entertainment sector acquiring interests in television, motion pictures, and parks and resorts. The Walt Disney Company is now the most synergistic of the Hollywood majors having the ability to 'exploit each intellectual property as fully as possible, for as long as possible, through as many operations as possible' (Meehan



FIGURE N° 4



Black Panther futuristic collage Marvel Entertainment (moviestillsdb 2018; cf. Coogler 2018) ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

2005:110). An example of this synergy can be seen in Disney's acquisition of Marvel Entertainment/Marvel Comics in 2009 for \$4.2 billion. This allowed the company to jumpstart its comic book property as a graphic novel. Disney hired African-American writer, Ta-Nehesi Coates, to author the series *Black Panther: A Nation Under Our Feet*. Roxane Gay took over as writer in 2017 with *Black Panther: World of Wakanda*. Coates returned in 2017, along with co-writer Yona Harvey, for *Black Panther and the Crew*. As part of the Disney stable, *Black Panther* was further leveraged, appearing across multiple platforms and the television franchises, such as: *Ultimate Avengers 2* and *Next Avengers: Heroes of Tomorrow*. The Black Panther has also featured as a playable character in more than a dozen games, including *Lego Marvel Superheroes*.

Perhaps the most ambitious of Disney's leveraging of its Marvel Entertainment properties, aside from the Black Panther character, is its creation and then expansion of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), launched soon after Disney acquired Marvel Entertainment. Disney has created three periods or phases so far, starting in 2008 and currently ending in 2019. Disney released a series of MCU superhero motion



FIGURE N° 5



Black Panther cityscape (moviestillsdb 2018; cf. Coogler 2018) ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

pictures, including three *Iron Man* films, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Thor*, three *Captain America* films, *The Avengers*, and *Ant Man*. There are hints that the phases may well last into 2024 (Fischer 2018). This all underscores Disney's singular objective to maximise its integrated properties, made clear in a 2018 second quarter financial updated by Disney CEO, Robert A Iger (cited in Disney 2018b):

Our ability to create extraordinary content like *Black Panther* and *Avengers: Infinity War* and leverage it across all business units, the unique value proposition we're creating for consumers with our DTC platforms, and our recent reorganization strengthen our confidence that we are very well positioned for future growth.

Statements by Marvel Studio president Kevin Feige are also an indication of how Disney is likely to use the popularity of *Black Panther* for derivative works. Shortly after the *Black Panther* opening weekend, Feige (cited in del Barco 2018) was ecstatic about box office revenues:

In the case of *Black Panther*, literally the Monday after 'Panther' opened, people start asking, where's the Shuri movie? Are you going to do a Shuri movie? That's the greatest thing in the world. So, believe me, we think about all those things. And we have plans for the characters. And the notion of more female leads, more people of color leads, that is 100 percent the future, I think the future of all films, certainly the future of Marvel Studios.

Feige is well aware of the financial success of having female leads and people of colour leads. These leads are extremely marketable commodities for Disney.

Distribution and exhibition

In Hollywood, once a film is produced it has to be distributed, usually by a centralised group of dominant distribution companies, which draw much of their power from film distribution. Disney is a vertically integrated Hollywood major – one of a handful of companies that dominate in the motion picture industry. This means the company not only can produce *Black Panther* but also distribute and exhibit the film. Disney's Buena Vista Distribution division was, since 1953, one of the top five Hollywood film distribution companies. Buena Vista was rebranded to Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures in 2007. According to the credits at the end of the film, Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures is the official theatrical distributor in the US as well as in Singapore, Argentina and several countries in western Europe. DVDs and Blu-ray are also distributed by Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures, while streaming services are handled by Disney's Direct-to-Consumer and international division. Disney, thus, not only produced *Black Panther* but also distributes this commodity in theatres across the world. The company has been able to create distribution arrangements in countries from China to Saudi Arabia to Singapore to India.

While box office receipts are one source of revenue for Disney, revenue streams also include DVD/Blu-Ray disc sets, apparel, toys, comic books, mugs, jewelry, video games, music, and royalties from licensed products such as band-aids, sneakers, school lunch boxes, etcetera. An example of this licensing is Disney's licensing pact with entertainment and toy company Hasbro whose products include games, television shows, movies, digital gaming, and toys. Hasbro has guaranteed an additional \$80 million in royalty payments to the Walt Disney Company to extend its licensing pact into 2020 (Spangler 2013). Licensing its intellectual property to Hasbro allows Disney to further commodify the characters from its Marvel Cinematic Universe franchise. Fans can buy *Black Panther* masks, action figures and collectables, in addition to the option of being able to buy a range of Marvel-related clothes, accessories, toys, home décor, videos and comics from shop.Marvel.com, or official Marvel approved retail outlets.

Marvel characters in costume are also used to advertise car insurance (Geico), home loans (Rocket Mortgage), and motor vehicles (Ford and Lexus). In the 2018 Super Bowl, the Black Panther and his sister Shuri were featured in their Marvel characters in a commercial for the Lexus car brand. The Black Panther is a lucrative property for Disney. The character has been repurposed across multiple Disney properties



FIGURE N° 6



Black Panther Aerial of city sunset Marvel Entertainment (moviestillsdb 2018; cf. Coogler 2018) ©MARVEL (fair use copyright permission).

generating revenues for the company far beyond the 2018 blockbuster motion picture. Disney is marketing the character and the film *Black Panther* as a commodity but is also paradoxically marketing the accompanying narratives of Afrofuturism. The narratives of Afrofuturism are embedded in the film, in the themes of resistance and struggle against forces of dominance and exploitation.

Conclusion

Black Panther is fundamentally a property of The Walt Disney Company and exemplifies the characteristics of a commodity, generating multiple revenue streams, in multiple iterations, and across numerous platforms for the company. The film as a commodity, created fifty years ago as a character in a comic book, has been transformed by Disney into a product with a high exchange value in the entertainment marketplace for consumers. In this process, a use value of the commodity *Black Panther* has emerged, a value determined by fans, writers, academics, and creative artists. The original 1966 Stan Lee and Jack Kirby iteration of the *Black Panther* comic book super hero, with its problematic narratives of race and colonialism, changed in the hands of African-American writers when Christopher Priest introduced elements in the story line of Black Panther that highlighted racism and the nature of global capitalism (McLaughlin 2005). Fifteen years later, Ta-Nehisi Coates and Roxane Gay continued to develop the character, deepening the Afrofuturist thematic and making the Black Panther more complex and overt in its critique of colonialism and the ongoing

destructiveness of the post-colonial world. Marvel cancelled the Coates and Gay *World of Wakanda* after just six issues, citing declining comic book sales (Abad-Santos 2017). Several months after the cancellation, Disney released a teaser trailer for the Ryan Coogler and Joe Robert Cole Marvel Studios film project. The film, as we have learned, has generated millions of dollars in revenues, giving it a significantly higher exchange value than the comic book. Paradoxically, the film has also generated a high level of use value, an extension of the critiques introduced by Priest, Coates and Gay when they were employed to write the *Black Panther* comic book stories. The seeds of counterhegemonic resistance were planted decades ago by Priest, Coates, and Gay in the comic book *Black Panther* stories.

The dominant science fiction narratives in popular culture may have for years denied and thus erased the existence of Black life but it also laid the ground work for forces that challenged its dominance. Afrofuturism and its reclamation of an imagined past and future is firmly in the imaginations of fans new and old. The importance and impact of the Afrofuturist narratives in *Black Panther* are not lost on the many millions of fans around the world. These fans are exposed to the same benevolent superheroes from Onli Studios' *Black age of comics* (2019) where comic book writers used history as a vehicle for political and social commentary and created characters on a quest for social justice. The Disney motion picture *Black Panther* is a vehicle that delivers an entertaining story, and also problematises themes of resistance and Black revolution. Dery revisits his original definition of Afrofuturism in a 2016 online essay, *Afrofuturism reloaded: 15 theses in 15 minutes*. In this online essay, Dery (2016) clarifies the significance of Afrofuturism in contemporary America:

Afrofuturism ... offers a mythology of the future present, an explanatory narrative that recovers the lost data of historical memory, confronts the dystopian reality of black life in America, demands a place for people of color among the monorails and the Hugh Ferriss monoliths of our tomorrows, insists that our Visions of Things to Come live up to our pieties about racial equality and social justice.

The condition of contemporary Black life in America, and in diasporic African communities, can be described as under siege. Economic and educational inequality, mass incarceration, social neglect and systemic racism still disadvantage Black, and brown communities. Afrofuturism, albeit in an imperfect incarnation in *Black Panther*, offers opportunities, on a global scale, for an emerging awareness of a reimagined egalitarian Afro-future, even if the narrative of the benevolent saviour king Black Panther is a commodity owned by a global corporation.

While the themes and representations of Afrofuturism in *Black Panther* fall short of an egalitarian political and economic utopia in which advanced technologies serve basic human needs, the many critiques, discussions, and arguments that have ensued in response to the film's representations offer tangible emancipatory possibilities. And so, in the paradoxical exchange of purchasing a movie ticket or a DVD to watch *Black Panther* lies the embryonic possibilities of the beginnings of a counternarrative in which the viewer considers the Afrofuturist alternatives that can challenge the oppressive status quo. Delaney (1984:35) captured the desire for an alternative future succinctly: 'We need images of tomorrow; and our people need them more than most. Without an image of tomorrow, one is trapped by blind history, economics and politics beyond our control'. The images of tomorrow we need should be images of life in a future that resemble the utopia of the Afrofuturism we see in *Black Panther* – a place of racial equality and equal justice for all, a place where Black lives do matter.

Notes

1. The first cartoon in an American newspaper appeared in Ben Franklin's *Pennsylvania Gazette* in 1754. And the first comic strip, *The Yellow Kid*, appeared in American newspapers in 1895.
2. Back comic strips – created by Black artists and featuring Black characters - appeared in the four largest Black newspapers in the 1920s (Howard 2013).

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