

MONTHLY MOVIES

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Slew of summer blockbusters set for cinemas

By T. Rob Brown

Rather you cling to the popular opinions that modern summer blockbusters began with *Jaws* (June 20, 1975) or *Star Wars* (May 25, 1977), this summer's blockbusters are here.

Last month we talked about *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3*, which is still in cinemas as I write this. It's still doing fairly well at the box office. After opening in 4,450 cinemas, *Vol. 3* earned \$118.4 million during its opening weekend of May 5. It went on to gross \$784.6 million worldwide, as of June 6, according to Box Office Mojo, and it's still in 3,580 cinemas. On June 6 alone, it still pulled in more than \$1.5 million in ticket sales.

That was probably the first of our big summer blockbusters, but it certainly doesn't stand alone. Even though the new contender isn't another Marvel Cinematic Universe film, it's still Marvel. The animated film hit cinemas this past weekend domestically on June 2: *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*. Sony, Columbia Pictures, brings us back to events in the wake of *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (Dec. 14, 2018). After nearly five years—and a pandemic—we get to catch up on Miles Morales and his team of unlikely Spider-People.

As much as Tallahassee had his own Elvis story to tell in *Zombieland: Double Tap* (2019), many fans of the web-slinger are no different when it comes to Spider-Man. We have a story to tell.

For me, it began in in the mid-1970s when comics cost between 30 and 35 cents. I was in the hospital. It ended up as nothing serious, but at the time, my doctors were confused and I spent about a week in the hospital for tests and surgery. I was aware of Spider-Man, but little did I know my life was about to change and that a comic book character would shape my future.

In my hospital room, I was bored. My parents visited as much as visiting hours would allow. To help cope with the alone time, my parents brought me my first-ever Marvel Comics. The first issues they got me were from *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Marvel Tales Starring Spider-Man* titles. The latter was sort of a reprint comic—a way to catch up on older Spider-Man stories that were otherwise out of print and difficult to acquire. Through these, I learned about the Green Goblin and Doc Ock—nefarious members of the wall crawler’s ever-growing rogue’s gallery. Thus, my love of comics and Spider-Man began.

Later that Christmas, I asked for the Mego figure of Spidey—my new favorite superhero. In the comics, Peter Parker wanted to be a chemist and in junior high, I considered that career path. By the time I got to high school, though, I discovered journalism and photography. Like Peter, I switched to photojournalism. Later in life, we also turned to become teachers. Aside from his spider powers, it seems like we have a fair amount in common. I would say that my love of the character helped influence some of my career choices.

During my journalism career, I even got an opportunity to freelance as a writer and game designer for two official Marvel Comics books. I even got to write about Marvel Universe journalists, including Peter Parker, as well as Norman Osborn—the Green Goblin. Those books are *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying Game’s Civil War Campaign* and *Civil War: Young Avengers and Runaways* supplement (both 2012).

Across the Spider-Verse references many phases and variants, as well as paying homage to the diverse nature and history, of your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man. From the original 1967 animated TV series Spidey to the more recent Spider-Punk and Spider-Man India, we get a chance to encounter numerous Spider-People who wear the mask.

Why shouldn’t we celebrate one of the most successful superhero properties of all time? While Superman’s global retail sales of toys and merchandise, according to a 2013 report by *The Licensing Letter*, which tracks containers with content marked by name, was at nearly \$300 million. Batman reached about \$500 million on that list. Even combined, Batman and Superman merchandise couldn’t touch Spider-Man’s reported \$1.3 billion in global retail toys and merchandise that year. Spidey is the most profitable superhero of all time. It’s no wonder Sony doesn’t want to give up their exclusive film and video game license to the property.

Spider-Man is a pop culture phenomenon. The property is far more than just multiple series of comic book lines and graphic novels. The Spider-Verse has a long and rich history with almost any type of merchandise you can imagine—okay, fine, they didn’t release Spidey the flamethrower. That one would have been a big hit with the kiddos, right? But seriously, we’ve seen numerous animated series, two 1970s live-action TV movies, Spider-Man Japan, the Evil Spider-Man who fought Lucha Libre and Captain America in Turkish cinema, all the way up to the modern era with Tobey Maguire and beyond. This visual media entralls children and adults alike.

Why is that?

In co-creator Stan Lee's own words, as quoted on the Quality Comix website, "I like Spider-Man because he's become the most famous. He's the one who's most like me—nothing ever turns out 100 percent OK; he's got a lot of problems, and he does things wrong, and I can relate to that."

Spider-Man is relatable. Lee said it himself. Despite all of his powers, the character rings true as if he were a real person with real-world problems. Because of this, we can connect with Peter and the others who wear the mask.

To think, it almost never happened.

Spider-Man came into existence because Marvel Comics had a dying comic title called *Amazing Fantasy*. In August 1962, Marvel would release Issue 15 and end that title's run. Lee and Steve Ditko had to create what essentially might be just a filler story—one hardly anyone thought would go anywhere. But go somewhere it did when Lee and Ditko co-created Spider-Man. Later, once the sales numbers came back, they knew they had a hit on their hands and in March 1963, Spidey got his own comic book line called *The Amazing Spider-Man*.

His popularity grew, demand increased, and nearly every decade a new Spider-Man comic line would get added to the roster, such as *Peter Parker: Spectacular Spider-Man*, *Web of Spider-Man*, and the Tod McFarlane-led *Spider-Man*. Then Spider-Man titles branched out with *Spider-Man 2099* in the 1990s—one of the first non-Peter Spider-Men, Miguel O'Hara.

Definitely powered by Miles, whose first comic appearance was August 2011, this Spider-Verse film sees Miguel play a major role. I was happy to see this after feeling like he got snubbed in the first animated film. In comics, Miguel opened the door to the idea that Spider-Man didn't always have to be Peter or some clone. Anyone can wear the mask and stand for Spidey's ideal of responsibility with great power.

I loved the first film, two thumbs up, and I love this one at least as much. There are many reasons. It's not just the aforementioned homages and references—so many cool cameos. It's not just the level of diversity and variety of Spider-People. This film is art.

Yes, Martin Scorsese, Quentin Tarantino, and TV talk show host Bill Maher, you heard me right. A comic book film can be, and is art. Despite what superhero film opponents like them might say, these Spider-Verse films are true art.

The stylized animation is unique to these films, yet draws from the comics that inspired them. Not only are the visual elements cool, pleasing, and innovative, but they add to the storytelling—which should always be the goal. Unfortunately, many animated films out there fall short here. The effects aren't just eye candy, they help us understand the nature of what's occurring, as well as to emphasize the impact and engross us in this compelling world and story. Through the visuals, the audience can connect to such a fictional concept as the Spider-Verse.

Not only that, but from a storytelling perspective, these films have heart. There's a moral compass, as well as great meaning for teens and parents alike who deal with these same types of issues in a non-super kind of way. The writer and the director included the crucial nonverbal communication clues

we need to see from the characters to understand their internal struggles. We feel for these characters during their darkest moments, their failures, and their successes. When this happens, cinema works.

After two viewings of the film, I have a difficult time coming up with anything to criticize. I loved it all the way down to appreciating that J.K. Simmons might be the only J. Jonah Jameson we ever need.

The only thing I don't understand is if Sony can produce two wonderful animated films without Marvel Studios' direct involvement, why was *Morbius* (2022) so bad? Why were the two *Venom* films less than they should have been? This is one of life's great mysteries.

Directed by Joaquim Dos Santos, Kemp Powers, and Justin K. Thompson, *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023), Rated PG, stars the voice talents of Shameik Moore (Miles), Hailee Steinfeld (Gwen Stacey), Oscar Isaac (Miguel), Jake Johnson (Peter B. Parker), Issa Rae (Jessica Drew), Daniel Kaluuya (Spider-Punk), and Jason Schwartzman (The Spot). It runs for 2 hours and 20 minutes. It received a certified fresh 96% on the Rotten Tomatoes Tomatometer and a 96% audience score, plus an 9.1/10 on the International Movie Database. I give it two thumbs up. It led off with a \$120.6 million domestic opening weekend. As of June 7, it already grossed \$236.6 million worldwide, according to Box Office Mojo.

Other upcoming summer blockbusters, after June 7, include: *Transformers: Rise of the Beasts* (June 9), *The Flash* (June 16), and *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* (June 30). Of these, I'm looking forward to all of them—yet, *The Flash* seems to be the most appealing from the trailers I've seen. Including both Ben Affleck and Michael Keaton as Bruce Wayne, having two Barry Allens, and including Supergirl, this film looks like it has a lot to offer as the DCEU Snyderverse swan song. Hopefully it paves the way for the new DC Universe films led by co-CEOs James Gunn and Peter Safran, which I'm calling the Gunnverse.

In July, I'm looking forward to Christopher Nolan's *Oppenheimer* and *Mission: Impossible—Dead Reckoning Part One*.

“The show must go on.”