

# MONTHLY MOVIES

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## Marvel slump: is the honeymoon over?

*By T. Rob Brown*

**M**any true believers waited with anticipation for the newest addition to the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Many were less than thrilled with the MCU's launch to Phase V: *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania*.

After four full phases, perhaps people face MCU burnout? Is the newlywed period over? Or ... do we face what became an eventual decrease in MCU quality? One can only maintain high quality for so long. The critics certainly aren't having any of it.

As much as I admire Kevin Feige and his influential role in the shared film-TV universe, many fans wonder if this is nearly the last straw. Even the greatest baseball sluggers of all time have slumps.

Lately, especially following the newest Ant-Man film, I've pondered the future of the MCU. Can it sustain itself going forward or has its bright shining star begun the process of going supernova as its core collapses into a black hole that sucks all life out of the MCU? Does enough time and quality remain for it to instead become an ultra-dense neutron star?

Sure, I get it. This begins to sound quite negative about something you all know I care about deeply. My Marvel fandom goes without question, as does my Star Wars fandom. That doesn't mean I've

never criticized Star Wars before, though. I think we should never simply love a fandom blindly; yes, we can love it even for its flaws—in spite of them, or sometimes even because of them—but it's important that we can sometimes step back and try to be a little bit objective even about the things we love.

Where is the MCU headed? Its course seems set following the end results of *Quantumania*, which I refuse to spoil here for you, my readers.

MCU, you're going to need to work harder to make this marriage work. With the exception of the last Spider-Man film and *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022) (a T'Challa-less Black Panther film, I might add), the critical reviews and ratings of the past couple years of Marvel films really slumped. Can *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3* pull the studio out of the slump? And if so, what's left for Marvel with James Gunn's full exit for DC (jokingly called the "Distinguished Competition" by fans of both online)? What will it take to put the MCU back on top? Deadpool? The X-Men (Mutants)? Or do they need to try something completely different and off-the-wall, like a Squirrel Girl movie? Better yet, maybe try a serious movie once in a while—which is probably what the introduction of a Thanos-level villain, like Kang the Conqueror, should be.

Yes, this created a dilemma for Marvel. They decided to introduce a major MCU deadly central opposition character in a franchise led by comedic actor Paul Rudd—a film series well known for its humor—well, re-introduce a character we first saw in the finale for *Loki* Season 1 (2021) on Disney+. According to Rotten Tomatoes, fans enjoyed the newest Ant-Man film almost as well as the 2015 original, which received an 85% audience score. The sequel, *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (2018) received an 80% audience score, even lower than the newest film.

One question we really need to ask ourselves, in this regard, is whether this is something fans are simply unable to accept right now or if only the critics noticed the current trend in MCU films. When we look at the Rotten Tomatoes scores, this film's rating is quite split. Critics rated it 47%—the lowest rated MCU film ever (tied with *Eternals* (2021)). Fans, on the other hand, gave it an 83% score, while *Eternals* only received 77% from the fans. The International Movie Database gave *Quantumania* 6.5/10 compared to 6.3/10 for the superhuman ensemble picture.

Another question we should ask is if the movie met our own expectations or are we just so spoiled by spectacular Avengers films like *Captain America: Winter Soldier* (2014), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), that it would be difficult for any new Marvel film to meet our expectations. Remember, some of those earlier films like *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Thor* (2011), and *Thor: The Dark World* (2013) weren't all that great either—but we fell in love with them anyway because we previously were so starved for good superhero films. We had a void that needed to be filled. I believe if these same four movies released in today's climate, their scores would be significantly lower.

Now, we have three or four MCU film releases per year along with about four or five MCU series on Disney+ per year. We even get the occasional Sony-led Marvel film. We get our Marvel fix far more frequently than ever before. Even DC's production levels and frequency of output increased after the MCU took off. As the dosage goes up, sometimes we become numb or resistant to its effects.

For some, this requires taking a break from Marvel films for a while until the desire to get caught up arises. For others, it means cleansing the palate by watching other genres of films before coming back for more superhero content.

Does that mean this was a bad film? Absolutely not.

This family picture highlighted much of the whole Pym and Lang family, putting them right into the frying pan of the Quantum Realm. The film is odd—it has lots of odd stuff in terms of alien characters and alien settings. It features a small role from comedic legend Bill Murray. There are plenty of fun Easter eggs for Marvel fans throughout the film. Overall, it's a typical MCU film.

Most importantly, though, it introduces the BBEG (Big, Bad, Evil Guy)—expertly played by Jonathan Majors, who grew up playing sports in Texas. He brings strength to the character, and not just in terms of his muscular build, but in terms of acting ability, focus, determination, and overall screen presence. This villain is formidable and far more powerful than his combined adversaries. As a time-traveler, he's armed with highly advanced futuristic technologies. This sets up several years of MCU storyline leading up to the *Avengers: Kang Dynasty* film slated for 2025.

The new villainous lead almost didn't get his shot, according to a Feb. 15 *Vanity Fair* article. Majors sat in the waiting area at Marvel Studios' offices for his initial interview.

"...I walked out of my Marvel general [meeting]," he told *Vanity Fair*.

Later he explained, "I grew up in a very particular way and I don't like to waste nobody's time. So I got in there and they're just busy. And I was like, 'I'm supposed to be here, right?' It got long and I went, 'I'm just going to go. It's cool. I'll just go.' And I got to the door, but then they said [casting director] Sarah Finn was going to come."

He spoke with Finn, but it would be three years later before the two shared "the Kang chat," thus making Marvel history.

So, who is Majors? After his breakout role in *Hostiles* (2017) opposite Christian Bale, he went on to star in HBO's *Lovecraft Country* (2020), Netflix's *The Harder They Fall* (2021), military aviator film *Devotion* (2022), and most recently in *Creed III* (2023).

I think the Thanos-level antagonistic reins are in talented hands and we can expect a lot of greatness in the future from Majors—both as Kang and in other career roles.

Directed by Peyton Reed, *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* (2023), Rated PG-13, stars Rudd, Evangeline Lilly, Michael Douglas, Michelle Pfeiffer, Majors, Kathryn Newton, and Murray. It runs 2 hours and 4 minutes. I give it one thumb up because of Majors and Rudd's acting, as well as the interesting visuals.

In other recent films, I watched Netflix's *We Have a Ghost* and *Operation Fortune: Ruse de Guerre* at the cinema.

I was sold by the mention of MCU alumni David Harbour and Anthony Mackie, so I watched *We Have a Ghost*. This comedy-adventure film starts off making you think it might be somewhat of a horror film, but not at all. It's a story of a family, their struggles, and how they encounter a ghost named Ernest

(Harbour), who changes their lives. This film offers laughs and one perspective on the supernatural. I won't spoil it, but there's a pretty good plot twist in here.

*We Have a Ghost* (2023), Rated PG-13, directed by Christopher Landon, stars Jahi Di'Allo Winston, Harbour, and Mackie. At 2 hours and 6 minutes, it received a 44% on the Tomatometer and a 65% audience score at Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 6.1/10 at IMDb. I give it one thumb up for the humor and that interesting twist.

I enjoy the majority of director Guy Ritchie's films. Not infrequently, they feature action star Jason Statham; this one is no exception. It marks at least the fifth time the director and actor collaborated on a film, going back to the caper comedy *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998).

Statham leads a starred cast in this spy action film, laced with some humor. Thanks to the casting of Aubrey Plaza and Hugh Grant, this film provides a little more humor than some of Ritchie's other snarky capers. Grant and Cary Elwes bring a level of class to the whole event. These elements help to play off Statham's leadership and charisma for these types of, somewhat stoic, action hero roles. Grant and Josh Hartnett play off each other quite well throughout the film—I wouldn't mind seeing a film led by the two of them as a sequel.

From my perspective, this was a fun film with some nice turns. I enjoyed the ride.

Speaking of Ritchie, his next film also releases quite soon this year. Afghanistan War picture *The Covenant* stars Jake Gyllenhaal, rather than Statham, with an expected theatrical release on April 21.

*Operation Fortune: Ruse de Guerre* (2023), Rated R, directed by Ritchie, stars Statham, Plaza, Elwes, Hartnett, Bugzy Malone, and Grant. At 1 hour and 54 minutes, it received a 50% on the Tomatometer and an 83% audience score at Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 6.7/10 at IMDb. I give it one thumb up for lots of great spy action and the brilliance of putting Elwes into the spy business—how has this guy never been up for the James Bond role?

"The show must go on."