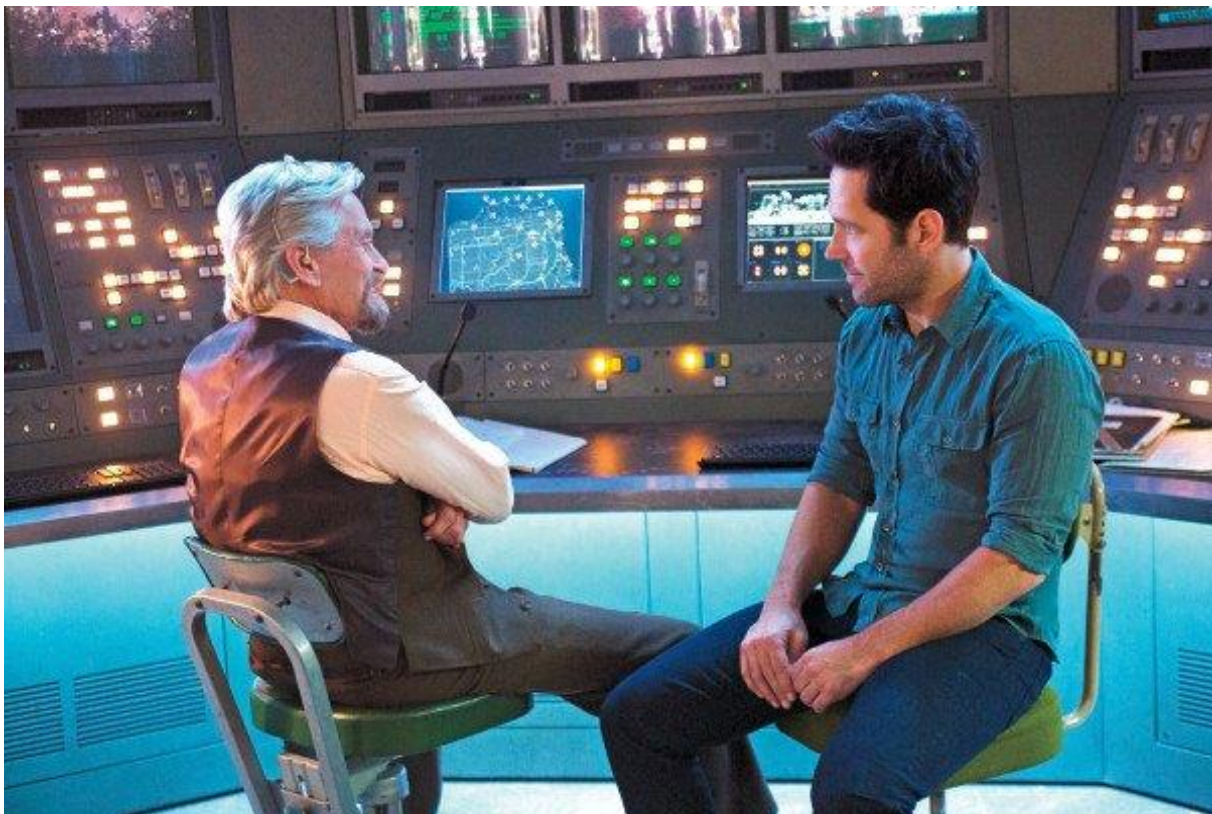


## Introducing Marvel's Age of Miracles

*Pim Razenberg on Marvel's Age of Miracles...*

Last week's **Ant-Man** teaser introduced worldwide audiences to the character of Scott Lang, a con-man who's on his way to become part of something greater than himself. The character's story arc greatly resembles that of

Lang's Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) colleague Tony Stark: both men are presented as unlikely anti-heroes overcoming their own imperfections to become something more.



**Ant-Man** is Marvel Studios' carefully planned next step towards the supernatural side of the MCU. The "serious" way in which **Ant-Man** was introduced in the movie's teaser just goes to show how well thought through Marvel Studios' long-term plan really is.

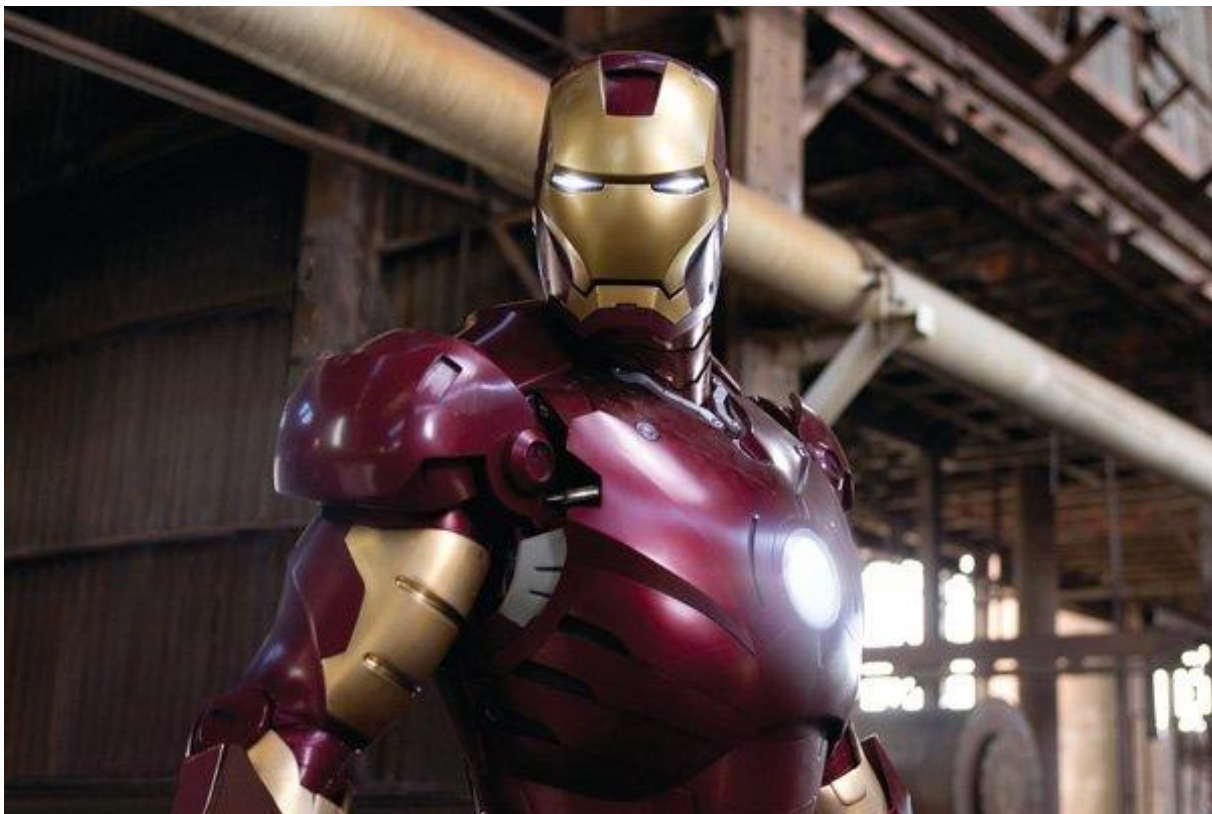
The greatest political game-changer in the world of comic book movies in recent years was the attack on the World Trade Center, September 11, 2001. The emotional aftermath of the events that took place that day were

strongly felt in the movie industry and arguably affected comic book movies the most. Director Christopher Nolan's **Batman Begins** and its sequel **The Dark Knight** were the first superhero movies that tackled the problems the United States faced head-on. Nolan presented audiences with a darker, more realistic take on the classic superhero, whose previous incarnation had been reduced to a campy colour fest. In Nolan's **Batman** series supervillains were replaced by terrorists – **Batman's** enemies became the product of a

corrupt society rather than the outcome of a failed experiment, mutation or genetic manipulation. Nolan’s movies contained numerous references to September 11, the Patriot Act, Al-Qaeda, and its former leader Osama bin Laden.

After Nolan introduced the concept of the “grounded” superhero movie Marvel Studios’ MCU was created with a similar approach. In the studio’s first movie **Iron Man**, the

extraordinary abilities of Tony Stark’s alter ego were the product of advanced technology; Stark didn’t undergo mutation, he wasn’t genetically manipulated and he required no gruelling combat training to turn him into a hero. Through Stark’s down-to-earth personality and the many references to terrorism and international politics within the first **Iron Man** film, Stark’s story became a plausible extension of our own world.



Subsequently skipping the clichéd “mutation through gamma radiation” storyline by introducing Bruce Banner as a scientist on the run from the U.S. Government in **The Incredible Hulk**, Marvel was able to extend the MCU’s sense of “realism” until the introduction of **Thor**. Before **Thor**’s release, fans complained that the movie wouldn’t fit within the “grounded” universe of **Iron Man**. The movie, however, adequately positioned the “magic” of the Asgardians as an extension of Earth’s

science. **Thor** and **Captain America: The First Avenger** slowly eased audiences into the cosmic side of Marvel. Simple hints and quotes served as stepping stones to a possible meeting between Tony Stark and outer space hero Rocket Raccoon; as the Red Skull stated in **The First Avenger**: “what others see as superstition, you and I know to be of science.”

Announcing a meeting between Iron Man and Rocket Raccoon in **The Avengers**, however,

would have stretched the concept too far, too soon. Audiences clearly had their fill of campy CGI filled superhero fare such as **Batman & Robin** or **Green Lantern** and were looking for something more relatable. Hence, **The**

**Avengers** focused on the team’s inner struggles. It was only after the dust had settled that Marvel’s heroes faced the Chitauri invasion, led by Thor’s brother Loki – an outer space villain the audience was already familiar with.



**The Avengers** pushed the envelope on the MCU’s cosmic side, but didn’t take it too far to disrupt the franchise’s “grounded reality”. In fact, like Marvel Studios’ audience, Tony Stark needed some time himself to adjust to the existence of the Marvel cosmic universe; the events of **The Avengers** left him suffering from Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in **Iron Man 3**, while Thor casually went on to defend the Nine Realms. The disruption of Stark’s reality was conveyed through Stark’s own words, as early as in **Iron Man 3**’s first trailer: “You experience things and then they’re over, and you still can’t

explain them? Gods, aliens, other dimensions? I’m just a man in a can.”

Of course, Stark was then faced with the franchise’s first “supernatural” enemies whose powers did not just stem from advanced technology, but sprung from a mutation caused by the Extremis virus. **Iron Man 3** thus served as a reflection on the growing presence of the supernatural in Marvel Studios’ movies and in addition it opened the MCU up to the introduction of more obscure comic book properties.



Sequels *Thor: The Dark World* and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* further hinted the co-existence of *Iron Man*’s “grounded” reality and the cosmic side of the MCU. Both movies came with a stinger that offered audiences steppingstones towards Marvel’s riskiest property to date: the *Guardians of the Galaxy*. Headlined by a man just as stubborn an anti-hero as Stark and Lang, protagonist Peter Quill – and to great extent his new-found partner Rocket Raccoon – was ready and able to comment on the insanity going on around him, mimicking the voice of the audience whilst at the same time confirming that no matter how

strange things get, even in outer space we’re still walking the world of former weapons manufacturer Tony Stark.

Though serving as a step-up for *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Baron Wolfgang von Strucker’s words in *The Winter Soldier*’s mid-credit scene hold a far greater meaning for the franchise as a whole. “It’s not a world of spies anymore,” von Strucker stated after audiences had just witnessed the downfall of S.H.I.E.L.D. at the hands of Captain America in Marvel’s political action thriller, “not even a world of heroes. This is the Age of Miracles.”



Looking at the detailed process through which Marvel Studios built and established the characters and story lines within the MCU reveals just how carefully the franchise has been mapped out from the very beginning. In 2008 it seemed unimaginable that Tony Stark would ever share the big screen with a talking raccoon or a surgeon-turned-magician going by the name of *Doctor Strange*, but through careful planning, story building and universe

expansion, it seems that Marvel is more than capable of making us believe in such miracles.

For a franchise which started down and dirty in the war-torn dust bowl of Afghanistan, the MCU has come a long way. Now, nearing the conclusion of its Phase Two movie slate, the MCU is ready to present us with a new generation of anti-heroes stemming from the (super) natural; from the Scarlett Witch and Quicksilver in **Age of Ultron** to **Ant-Man**, **Doctor Strange** and the **Inhumans**, Marvel Studios is taking its time to prepare audiences

for 2018-2019’s ultimate Marvel movie event, **Avengers: Infinity War**.

Personally, I am very much looking forward to discovering the path Marvel Studios will pave towards the Avengers’ inevitable clash with the Mad Titan Thanos and I’m very curious how the studio’s new slate of characters will fit within the reality they have created, because as Jane Foster stated in **Thor**: “magic’s just science we don’t understand yet.”

Are you excited to join Marvel’s Age of Miracles?

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Pim Razenberg is both a film maker and a film buff. Having kept a record of every movie he watched since childhood, Pim followed up his love for film by writing his master thesis on the socio-political contextualization of superhero films and became a freelance entertainment writer.

