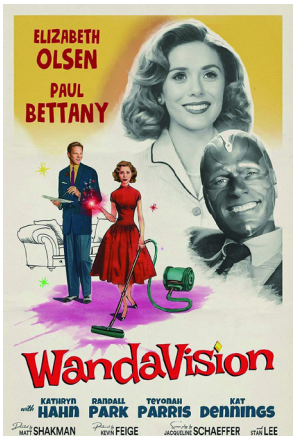
WandaVision

Jeremy Brett

Schaeffer, Jac, creator. *WandaVision*, Marvel Studios, 2021.



In early 2021, the Marvel Cinematic Universe introduced its first Disney-directed television production—the limited series *WandaVision*. The show is a bold choice for the MCU's Disney+ television debut because it is not a traditional superhero story (despite the battle-heavy final episode, which features its fair share of superpowered individuals hurling energy blasts at one another). Instead, the show is a number of other things, including an exploration of the tempting power of nostalgia, a meta-commentary on television and the cliches and pretensions of the sitcom format, a study of female autonomy and the social construction of a life, and an examination of the fragility and survival mechanisms of the human psyche in the face of trauma. Each of these aspects of *WandaVision* is valid and would merit significant academic analysis. The show is certainly a feast for scholars of media studies, as well. More than one sizable study could be produced detailing the ways—through imagery, dialogue, and more subtle Easter Egg-type references—in which *WandaVision* contributes to the ongoing evolution of the MCU. The production and creative decisions behind the construction of a cohesive narrative universe are a topic of significant interest, especially as Hollywood seems to be running full tilt into the "cinematic universe" mold of filmmaking. In essence, the show is rewarding enough in its complexity to hold multiple layers of analytical weight.

But to me, *WandaVision*, at its foundation, revolves around the twinning of grief and illusion. The show's chief protagonist, Wanda Maximoff (played by Elizabeth Olsen), is driven by grief so profound that it quite literally warps herself and the people around her, as gravity warps and distorts the flow of time. Grief can be life-destroying; it is an intensely powerful emotion for regular human beings, let alone an Avenger imbued with Chaos Magic that is amplified by the power of an Infinity Stone. What *WandaVision* makes clear, however, is that the effects of Wanda's all-consuming grief are wide-ranging and catastrophic because of her power, but her desire to change fate and wrap herself in comforting illusion is a common human trait.

WandaVision opens soon after the events of the films *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame*, during which the Avengers and their allies first failed at preventing the Mad Titan Thanos' plan to erase half of the intelligent life in the universe and then—thanks to time travel—finally eliminated Thanos. The victory was achieved at great cost, however—several heroes died in the attempt to save the universe, including Wanda's love, the synthezoid Vision (Paul Bettany). In

Infinity War, Wanda must endure watching Vision die not once but twice, first by her own hands in order to stop Thanos, and again, by a time-reversing Thanos who rips the Mind Stone from Vision's head. This doubling of Wanda's trauma is added to an existing foundation of unearned guilt over destruction that Wanda caused in previous MCU films, causing an ultimately untenable burden on Wanda's psyche that triggers the events of *WandaVision*.

The show's first seven (of nine) episodes are clever in tone, writing, and production. Each one is modeled after a different era of American situation comedy, with appropriate opening themes, credit sequences, and commercials. In each episode—beginning with a 1950s show modeled on *The Dick Van Dyke Show* and continuing through to the 2010s *Modern Family*—Wanda and Vision are a happy married couple living in the idyllic town of Westview, New Jersey. It is a safe, comfortable, low-stakes life, in a town where the lawns are always mowed, Agnes the wacky neighbor is always dropping by, and all conflicts are minor and solved within 30 minutes. But the show's tone shifts from the outset, signifying that things are not what they seem. Neither Vision nor Wanda can remember their lives before coming to Westview; the radio breaks in with someone's voice calling out to Wanda; neighbors occasionally act peculiar—as if they are lost or scared. Most strangely of all, within a mere two episodes, Wanda becomes pregnant and gives birth to two rapidly growing twin boys. The increasing sense of otherworldliness and unease, even menace, is atypical of other Marvel productions and instead reminiscent of shows like *The Twilight Zone*, *Twin Peaks*, or *Carnivale*.

The secret is eventually revealed, partly through the help of government agency S.W.O.R.D., which has become aware of the situation and is observing from the outside. Wanda's dark despair has fueled her semi-unconscious creation of a dome of magical energy around Westview—within that space, she has transformed Westview into the ideal kind of town she recalls from her memories of watching American television as a child in war-torn Sokovia. Wanda's Westview captures the utopian myth of the American small town, but at the terrible price of transforming the residents into live puppets in her idyllic theater. Inside the "Hex", she can happily play at being a wife and mother with her husband, her emotional anguish buried under layers upon layers of denial. But gradually, the illusion keeps giving way to reality as Vision increasingly questions the events around him and Wanda's resets of reality keep being punctured.

The final breakdown comes because of revelations from two very different characters: S.W.O.R.D. agent Monica Rambeau (Teyonah Parris) and Wanda's neighbor Agnes (Kathryn Hahn). Monica is dealing with feelings of guilt and grief because, in her mind, she failed to be present when her mother Maria passed away. This, however, was a result of being "blipped" by Thanos in *Infinity War* and therefore not her fault. Unlike Wanda, Monica comes to accept the truth of her existence and seeks to live it, not avoid it. As she tells Wanda during one exchange, "I can't change, and I don't think I want to, because it's my truth." Monica rejects the same cycle of grief and doubt-erasing illusion that Wanda builds to escape both her past and her present.

The other character that returns Wanda to herself is neighbor Agnes, who reveals herself as Agatha Harkness, an ancient witch seeking the source of Wanda's power. Their confrontation in the penultimate episode exposes the secret about herself that Wanda never knew—she is the inheritor of a destiny marking her as the "Scarlet Witch", a magic user of unparalleled ability. Agatha ironically causes her own downfall by helping Wanda—through flashbacks—to see the truth about her past, by wiping away the illusions, and by excavating the traumas Wanda had hidden away. A flashback to Wanda's past soon after the death of her twin brother Pietro (Aaron Taylor-Johnson in *Age of Ultron*; Evan Peters in *WandaVision*) shows Vision trying to comfort her. He notes quietly to the despondent Wanda that he is too young to have known grief, or love, but he wonders, "What is grief, if not love persevering?" This conveys to the audience Wanda's ultimate motives for creating "Westview". Her final rejection of this illusion in favor of a harsher yet truer reality, her acceptance of responsibility for the mental enslavement of the townsfolk, and even her assent to her Scarlet Witch destiny, all reveals her growing recognition of illusion and denial's ultimate paucity.

Therein lies the narrative power of *WandaVision*, distinguishing it from its fellow MCU film productions. Wanda is arguably the most emotionally complex figure in the MCU to date, and the most human in how repeated traumas and violence have affected her life. Though her fellow Avengers have their own imperfect lives, their own traumas and scars, none so far (with the exceptions perhaps of Natasha Romanoff or the protagonists of the Marvel Netflix shows) have been so defined by their pasts or have entwined their abilities with such fraught and piercing emotional resonance. *WandaVision* presents the viewer and the scholar alike with a more multidimensional kind of Marvel hero. In Wanda and Vision (who, as a construction from Wanda's memories, experiences his own crisis of identity when confronting his newly reactivated S.W.O.R.D. incarnation), power is linked to trauma in an intimately, fallible human way. The show attempts to interrogate the image of the trauma-laden traditional superhero and asks its audience to consider what sorts of people result from the fusion of trauma and power. With this alone, *WandaVision* proves itself truly something new in superhero media, beyond its clever re-creation of old television in all its cliches and tropes, its multiplicity of tone, and its powerful acting from Olsen and Bettany.

The show is a meditation on the power of grief and the lengths humans go to avoid or deny it. Wanda's history in the comic books has always been marked by heightened emotional states resulting in world-changing effects—notably in the "Avengers Disassembled" and "House of M" story arcs—and the show reflects this heritage. More problematically, however, it reinforces continuing complaints about Wanda's character—that she is primarily defined by her reactions to loss and that she personifies the antiquated stereotype of women being prone to mental and emotional instability. Note how, in contrast, fellow magic-user Stephen Strange is eerily calm and composed in most situations. Conversely, science whiz Tony Stark is easily as emotionally unstable

as Wanda yet is seldom called on it as a gender-trait. It's an image that bears closer scholarly study. *WandaVision* doesn't necessarily do much to overturn this conception of Wanda, but it does effectively chronicle her pathway from broken and reactive victim of trauma to a woman cognizant of her destiny yet still wholly imperfect. Notably, Wanda flees the angered townspeople whom she enslaved rather than actively engage with a reckoning for her crimes; besides Agatha's acidly noting that "heroes don't torture people," the show ducks the ethical question of her criminal responsibility.

Heroes don't torture people. Nor, traditionally, do heroes grieve like people do, nor feel guilt for the destruction they create and inspire in the name of saving the world. Traditionally, heroes are supposed to be better, and are often rendered justified in any actions because of this assumption. Yet recent superhero film and television has started reevaluating the superhero's image in light of a more confusing, complex, and divided world. *WandaVision*, in its depiction of a woman of great power who blinds herself to emotional reality past the point of safety, joins this new group of media devoted to the fallibility and humanity of heroes.

Jeremy Brett is an Associate Professor at Cushing Memorial Library & Archives, Texas A&M University, where he is both Processing Archivist and the Curator of the Science Fiction & Fantasy Research Collection. He received his MLS and his MA in History from the University of Maryland – College Park in 1999. His professional interests include science fiction, fan studies, and the intersection of libraries and social justice.