WITH GREAT POWER COMES NO RESPONSIBILITY:

REFLEXIVE IDEOLOGY THROUGH SPECTACLE-VIOLENCE

IN THE SUPERHERO FILMS OF MARVEL STUDIOS

by

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Abstract

This work critically interrogates the superhero films of Marvel Studios and their textual treatment of, and the ideological function of, violent action spectacle. In Chapter One, I trace a chronology of superhero films and their corresponding treatment of violence, up to the onset of Marvel Studios, and the release of Jon Favreau's *Iron Man* in 2008. I argue that Marvel superhero films respond to the genre's previously tenuous treatment of spectacle-violence in the face of 9/11 and other instances of sociopolitical violence. Instead, Marvel Studios reappropriates action-violence interludes as 'safe' sites for audience enjoyment, undiminished by sociopolitical reflection. In doing so, Marvel crafts a brand identity of 'reflexive wit,' further integrating comedy into action sequences, and foregrounding provocative, yet superficial, sociopolitical commentary. In doing so, the Marvel films discourage audience preoccupation with the politics or ethical ramifications of spectacle violence. The films court the sense that, through such reflexivity, no further reflection is necessary, allowing audiences to unrepentantly enjoy the action violence.

In Chapter Two, I explore the narrative techniques employed in Marvel films to foster viewer connection with their superheroes. I argue that the Marvel films draw upon a blend of comic book textual references, mythic intertexts, and pathos and humour, to court a dichotomy of 'mythic accessibility,' coding their heroes as sympathetic, valorized, sanctioned, 'acceptable' agents of violence. As such, Marvel utilizes violent action spectacle to mediate dominant cultural ideologies. In Chapter Three, I discuss the resonance of this support for the heroic protagonist, arguing the Marvel films thematically perpetuate textual ideologies of deference and unquestioned subservience. Such ideological resonance extends not only to exceptional superheroes, but to the political superstructures they are affiliated with, which are, by proxy, equally valorized (namely, the United States military and NSA, by means of surrogate entity, 'S.H.I.E.L.D.').

Ultimately, I argue that the Marvel films purportedly privilege an active audience, but subliminally endorse a passive, unreflective one. This allows for textual amplification not only in regards to the scope and intensity of spectacle violence and action combat, but the political intertexts ideologically mediated through said action sequences, rebranded as unreflective 'fun.'

Preface

This thesis is original, unpublished, independent intellectual work by the author, Kevin Hatch.

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Acknowledgments

Considering the topic of this work, I could hardly have felt less 'super' through the bulk of the research and writing process. I am thereby immeasurably indebted and unspeakably grateful to a wealth of people. Without the following stellar individuals, this work would not be words on a page, and would instead be relegated to grumpy remarks delivered in movie theatres over end credits, anticipating the inevitable tease for the next *Avengers* spinoff ("That's Thanos. He'll be important later. Hmmpff").

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Introduction: "Good Guys Hitting Bad Guys"

"Try to have fun. Otherwise, what's the point?"
-Colonel Stars and Stripes (Jim Carrey), Kick-Ass 2 *(Jeff Wadlow, 2013)*

In the 1970s, Marvel Comics generated advertising revenue by creating one-page stories

involving their most famous superhero characters heroically solving crimes through distracting or

luring their antagonists to surrender by bribing them with Hostess Fruit Pies or Cupcakes ("I

knew they'd go for the *light tender crust* and *real fruit filling*!").[1] These shorts, undoubtedly

antiquated and cumbersome to readers even at the time of their release, are nonetheless comical

not only because of their reflexive product placement, but due to their central premise: that

Marvel superheroes would employ nonviolent means of conflict resolution in confrontations with

adversaries. Indeed, if there is anything that a lifetime of reading superhero comics and watching

superhero films has taught me personally, it is that superheroes are *always* violent. But, as I

learned from a young age, their being violent was okay, because they were the 'good guys,' and,

since they only hit the 'bad guys,' they were thereby *doing the right thing*, and it was ultimately

all in good fun.

Accordingly, most discussions regarding violence in the superhero genre[2] rely on the

same pattern of ethical shorthand and rationalization, complete with the assumption that the genre

and its fighting are ultimately harmless, due to being fantasy narratives fundamentally intended

for children. Academic or cultural criticisms of superhero violence specifically, whether in

comics or in popular cinematic adaptations thereof, have been comparatively scarce, since

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[1] A comprehensive list of these 1970s Hostess advertisements can be found online at
http://www.tomheroes.com/Comic%20Ads/hostess%20ads/hostess_ads.htm

[2] For further scholarship situating and classifying the superhero genre as such – a *genre* – see Coogan (2006; 2013),
Rosenberg (2013), and others.

psychologist Fredric Wertham famously condemned superhero comics as ideologically harmful for youth readers in his 1954 literary diatribe *Seduction of the Innocent*. Since then, the superhero genre, or comic book influences in general, have only sporadically become involved in overarching cultural discussions about the potentially harmful role of media violence.

One such instance of superheroes being embroiled in media violence discourse was the July 20, 2012 Aurora, Colorado shooting at the premiere of the Batman film *The Dark Knight Rises* (Christopher Nolan, 2012). While being arrested, shooter James Eagan Holmes referred to himself as "the Joker," purportedly in reference to the Batman antagonist previously played by Heath Ledger in the film's predecessor, *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008). Despite only tenuous links suggesting Holmes' actions taking any influence from any Batman films, coverage of the event continued to sensationalize the potential of the shooting being an act of 'copycat violence' (Bogdanovich; Kellogg).

This discussion is further complicated by reactions ranging from bemused to outright hostility towards the "Real-Life Superhero" movement. This trend – loosely taking place across the world, but largely located in the United States, likely due to the proliferation of superhero comics in popular culture and cinema alike there – finds various individuals donning colourful, comic book-style costumes, and billing themselves as "Real-Life Superheroes." These self-billed 'heroes' perform 'heroic' deeds ranging from handing out food and juice boxes to homeless citizens to engaging, almost invariably, in vigilante violence, which has similarly attracted considerable controversy.[3]

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[3] Although my work here does not further engage with the "Real-Life Superhero" movement, many news articles, including those by Daniel Fallon (2004) and Elizabeth Flock (2011) have covered the movement, including public and police responses to it, in further depth. In particular, the website http://www.reallifesuperheroes.com/ and Michael Barnett's HBO documentary *Superheroes* (2011) deliver the most in-depth and comprehensive coverage of the movement, including interviews with many of the self-billed "Superheroes."

Both the Aurora shooting's inextricable relation to the film at which it took place and the clear textual influence demonstrated by the "Real-Life Superheroes" briefly involved the superhero genre in cultural discussions and criticisms of the ethical impact of depictions of violent acts in popular culture (commonly referred to as the 'Effects tradition' of scholarship – those believing violent acts depicted in popular media serve to cognitively influence viewers and provoke increased violence in real life [Grønstad 27]). Throughout this debate, as with many comparable situations prior to it, there emerged no conclusive evidence that film violence (in superhero films or otherwise) is *harmful*, or can be singularly traced as a guiding influence in acts of real life violence. Annette Hill asserts there is no conclusive universal reaction to watching violent films, as any influence from watching violent films on those perpetuating real life violent crimes necessitates consideration within a web of intersecting influences and social frameworks (27).

However, as Tania Modleski warns, "The problem with the [media violence] debate as it has shaped up in recent years is that the positions have become polarized, and our thinking correspondingly reductive," warning that many critics avoid acknowledging any relationship between violence in popular culture and real life "lest they find themselves abetting pro-censorship groups" (B15). This dichotomy lends to violence in the superhero film either being demonized for *being* a representation of violence, or dismissed as trivial and of no importance. Ultimately, the superhero genre itself was never specifically criticized, nor were its seemingly innate violent combat and avocation of vigilantism theoretically interrogated.[4] Instead, the superhero genre continues to flourish in popularity, to the point of near-monopolizing the output

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[4] Interestingly, the fictional takes on the "real-life superhero" movement – *Defendor* (Peter Stebbings, 2009), *Super* (James Gunn, 2010), *Kick-Ass* (Matthew Vaughn, 2010), and *Kick-Ass 2* (Jeff Wadlow, 2013) – all *do* engage in critiquing and exploring the ethics of vigilante justice. However, all such texts maneuver such initial critique into validating the protagonist's controversial violent vigilantism by the end. Unsurprisingly, in doing so, all such 'revisionist' films borrow tropes (as will be explored throughout) from the superhero films they are purportedly parodying, to venerate and validate the actions and judgment of the non-powered individuals as 'right.'

of Hollywood blockbuster releases each year – particularly since 2008, with the onset of Marvel Studios.

Such superficiality in response is perhaps unsurprising, given, as Asbjorn Grønstad explains, the widespread assumption that "mainstream blockbuster violence is harmless because it has no artistic merits" (40). Because of these "polarized" responses and tangential connections between real-life violence, and the thematic fundamentals of the superhero genre being left unexplored in the context of film violence as the genre reaches increasingly mass audiences, the aim of this thesis is to provide deeper theoretical consideration to violence in the superhero film, without succumbing to hasty criticisms assuming the inherent presence of violent combat in-text to be harmful. As a structuring principle, I take influence from Martin Barker and Cynthia Marshall (among others), who argue the impossibility of considering 'violence' apart "from the hugely different contexts of meaning and use in which it occurs," or "without also taking into account its object" ("Violence" 10 and 4 respectively). Herein, I explore the 'function,' intensity, ethics, tone and textual treatment of violent action-spectacle sequences within superhero films. In doing so, my research has evolved into focusing specifically on the superhero films of Marvel Studios (2008-present) as a case study. I chart and critically interrogate Marvel's treatment of superhero action violence spectacle: how it distinguishes from previous action violence in the superhero genre, or in Hollywood action cinema in general, its interplay with tone and humour, and the narrative devices used to cue audience endorsement of the superhero protagonist figure, along with their interplay with dominant sociopolitical ideologies.

As a previously independent company (now subsidized and owned by Disney), Marvel Studios is granted unprecedented textual command of its own source material in adapting their

comic book characters cinematically.[5] This self-contained nature to Marvel mediating its own

products results in the company constructing a brand identity that manifests on numerous levels.

The Marvel 'brand identity' (which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter One of this work)

includes a consistent tone of what I call *reflexive wit* – conceding audience awareness of

conventions in an affable, humourous fashion – and textual fidelity to their comics source

material, both geared to generate a satisfied and receptive audience of comic fans and those

unfamiliar with the Marvel characters alike. Equally, Marvel demonstrates a penchant for

transmedia storytelling and world building, both in terms of intertextual references to their

existing comic book texts and the cross-pollination of characters between films, resulting in Joss

Whedon's unprecedented collaborative piece *The Avengers* (2012), and since resulting in

numerous upcoming character crossovers.[6]

The central argument of my work here, thus, is that in the wake of post-9/11 superhero

films ruminating on the ethics of action-violence as escapism (largely in Christopher Nolan's

Dark Knight trilogy [2005-2012]), the superhero films of Marvel Studios rebrand spectacle-

violence as 'fun,' divesting it from such ethical interrogation. My argument thus greatly draws

from the theories of Yvonne Tasker (1993; 2004), Mark Gallagher (1999), Lisa Purse (2011;

2012) and others, who contest that interludes of action-violence in Hollywood blockbusters

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[5] This applies, of course, only to characters that Marvel Studios, as opposed to Marvel Comics, possess the rights to. Many iconic Marvel Comics superheroes are owned by different production companies: Spider-Man by Sony Pictures and Columbia Pictures, and the X-Men, the Fantastic Four, and Daredevil by 20th Century Fox. As such, for the sake of clarification and brevity, I will henceforth only use the term "Marvel Superhero Films" to describe the superhero films of Marvel Studios, adapting their own comic book material, as opposed to the aforementioned other Marvel Comics characters adapted cinematically by other studios.

[6] Derek Johnson (2007; 2009; 2012), Matthew J. Pustz (1999), and Jason Bainbridge (2009) theoretically engage with Marvel Comics/Studios and transmedia storytelling in more depth. My work here does not extensively deal with the transmedia nature of Marvel Studios' properties, apart from these textual intersections contributing to the unification and fidelity of Marvel's brand identity as a company. However, as I argued at the 2014 SCMS conference, Marvel's transmedia web of textual interconnections between comic book, cartoon, and film texts often lends an additional layer of sophistication and in-depth affective engagement with the Marvel characters and storylines. Further techniques employed by Marvel Studios of engendering unquestioning audience support for their superheroic protagonists are discussed in Chapter Two in this work.

provide an enthralling, exhilarating, and even euphoric sense of enjoyment and pleasure for numerous mass audiences. This enjoyment is often considered to be a self-contained experience of 'fun,' implying harmless sensorial escapism. However, Tasker, Gallagher, and Purse all argue that such enjoyment, or 'fun,' extends beyond the affective resonance of the bodily mastery demonstrated by larger-than-life heroic protagonists, and encompasses more sophisticated subtextual and thematic ideological concerns, including those of identity, ethics, and politics. Geoff King similarly posits that a Marxist reading could be applied to the euphoric elevation provided by action sequences, arguing such sequences could function to ideologically regulate viewers "by offering superficial satisfaction to needs or desires that might otherwise lead to demands for real change in social or economic relations […] short-term stimulation and 'escape' at the movies" (*Spectacular Narratives* 103). Although King warns that such readings could undervalue the emotional impact action films have on viewers, I argue that his speculations of the ideological and capitalistic undertones in action sequences are entirely applicable to Marvel Studios superhero films. As such, I argue that the action sequences in Marvel superhero films serve to mitigate sociopolitical anxieties through affable humour and witty acknowledgment of genre conventions, and reify narratives of ideological subservience: deference to an omnipotent hero figure, and the by-proxy validation of political and military superstructures (as discussed in Chapters Two and Three). Similarly, foregrounding the 'fun' of said sequences equally increases the box office appeal of the Marvel superhero films, contributing to their increasing financial successes.

Prior to Marvel Studios, violence in the superhero genre was known for its frivolous, often campy artificiality (perfectly indicative of what David Morrison characterizes as "playful violence" [4]), or, more recently, the more tonally 'serious' and reflective genre entries of the

Dark Knight trilogy and those influenced by it.[7] Instead, the Marvel films allude to instances of extratextual sociopolitical violence, but do so for the purpose of 'excusing' the viewer from having to dwell on the ethics of film violence in reference to such events, allowing audiences to freely engage in the depicted spectacle-violence as 'guilt-free entertainment' (all of which is discussed in more detail in Chapter One). Additionally, the Marvel films – more than comparable examples from other production companies – undertake the ongoing ideological project of engendering viewer support for the central superhero figure, coding the heroes as simultaneously affectively relatable and mythically infallible, and thus coding their actions and judgment as absolute. By proxy, the Marvel films narratively code the hero's violent conflict resolution as necessary and valid (as is further discussed in Chapters Two and Three), and the ensuing 'fun factor' serves as a capitalistic means of further solidifying a commercial monopoly on the genre in terms of Hollywood box offices.

The superhero films of Marvel Studios have experienced a near unprecedented degree of popularity and success, financially and critically. This lends the franchise a particular degree of global visibility, cultural recognition and exposure, which I contest necessitates further theoretical study. Indeed, the proliferation of new Marvel releases has shaped this thesis throughout the course of writing. The recent releases of *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013), *Thor: The Dark World* (Alan Taylor, 2013), and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Joe and Anthony Russo, 2014), and the cultural dialogues surrounding them, have impacted my work. Each release has transformed (or, more often than not, reified) my existing arguments, as well as further solidified Marvel's near-monopoly of the genre. This topicality allows me to engage with the most popular and influential realm of the genre at this time of writing. It equally lends this

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[7] Chapter One charts a chronology of superhero films through the years and their ensuing intersections between tone and violent spectacle, proceeding to differentiate the violent spectacle displayed in Marvel superhero films.

research and writing a particular sense of urgency, further necessitating examination of the potential theoretical impacts of the genre's mediation of the ethics of violent combat.

Academic interrogation of the term "violence" requires some theoretical unpacking. This is particularly the case in light of Martin Barker's noted contestation that "violence" is a term that emerged within the 1950s as a means of "grouping, and thus silently theorizing" a variety of (generally countercultural) behaviours that were seen as potentially damaging to the upholding of dominant societal ideologies ("Violence Redux" 58) – a somewhat different interpretation than the common contemporary usage of the term. Conversely, Slavoj Žižek firmly considers violence to be a tool *of* dominant ideology, identifying the term "systemic violence" – "the more subtle forms of coercion that sustain relations of dominance and exploitation, including the threat of violence," which he largely attributes to socio-economic infrastructures such as capitalism (*Violence* 9-13). As these two positions show, critics or audiences do not necessarily agree or precisely articulate what they understand to be "violence" other than, as Barker argues, "a central repository for a set of fears about social change, which at the same time proffers an understanding of those changes in an ideologically-skewed way" ("Violence Redux" 73).

Given the linkage of the term to forces antagonistic to the status quo or a means of upholding harmful dominant ideology, it might be incongruous to align 'violence' with the concept of enjoying popular entertainment. This paradox proves pivotal to the crux of my thesis, as I argue throughout that the term's polysemous usage has become appropriated within superhero action as a means of focalizing and structuring audience enjoyment. My own research concludes that "violence" in the superhero genre signifies intentional bodily harm inflicted on one human being by another, either through use of a weapon or physical means. The term's use in the superhero genre does not generally encompass any degrees of sexual, psychological, or emotional violence. Instead, as I explore in Chapter One and Three, the Marvel films often use

physical combat as a cipher for reaffirming the fundamental stability of dominant sociopolitical

ideologies – thereby reconciling the aforementioned paradox. This violence appeals to a

(perceived) mass audience appetite for highly constructed spectacle, and a means of showcasing

the choreography and physical proficiency of the characters (courtesy of a blend of star

performers with famously aesthetically sculpted muscular physiques[8] and stunt doubles), or

digitally augmented special effects augmenting the combat. Moreover, following Geoff King's

observation that spectacle-for-spectacle's-sake can fundamentally disrupt narrative (*Spectacular

Narratives* 3), violent superhero combat is always ensconced in moralism within the genre –

hence, "good guys" hitting "bad guys," with both ends of the binary being tacitly and universally

understood.

Many scholars who engage with issues of film violence arrive at vehemently contrasting

conclusions in regards to its impact or ethics. The central dichotomy lies in the ongoing scholarly

tension between those aligned with the 'Effects tradition,' and those believing acts of violence

depicted in popular culture to be harmless, or even serve as a means of cathartic release, diffusing

the presence of violence in real life. This debate is extensive within the fields of mass

communication and media studies, including film studies. Although I lack the space to fully

elaborate on the positions of each camp, it warrants mentioning as a paradigmatic compass. My

work here does not presume to solve this debate, but to roughly position the Marvel films'

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[8] Although my work here does not extensively engage with the study of the exaggerated physiques of the actors portraying comic book superheroes, such discussions are central to critical and scholarly engagement with the genre alike. Many news articles profiling the production of new superhero films largely discuss the workout regimes of stars such as Hugh Jackman, Scarlett Johansson, and Chris Evans in attaining their 'superheroic' physiques. This physicality is central to said stars credibly embodying comic book superheroes and the correspondent iconicity and mythic resonance (which will be discussed further in Chapter Two). As Lee Easton asserts, discussing the construction of hetero-masculinity in the superhero film, "Low angle shots emphasizing the actors' transformed, sculpted male torsos affirm their white masculine bodies as ones capable of containing and controlling their newfound power" (40).

treatment of violence within it, in theorizing the role of the superhero genre as a whole as a pivotal piece of mass entertainment anchored upon violent spectacle.

There is an equal need to address my consistent use of the evasive concept "audiences" throughout this work. As Barker and Kate Brooks aptly explain,

The very term 'audience' is misleading because it homogenizes what is in fact very diverse, and because it assumes an almost reverential concentrated attention to their chosen media (when in fact most media use is casual, discontinuous and often interrupted. Audiences relate to the media in complex ways […] A good deal of the relations between media and audiences has to be thought in relation to issues of social power: the media belong to powerful interests in society […] They control flows of information, they speak in ways that border on propaganda; more informally, they circulate images, stories and senses of who we are that correspond with the interests of the powerful. (*Knowing Audiences* 11-12)

As this work does not adopt a reception studies approach (instead striving to set the theoretical groundwork necessary for such a future study), I do not presume any specific or universal response to the Marvel films by any viewers. Likewise, I do not presume any concrete, singular, or malevolent intent on the behalf of Marvel Studios, or any filmmakers therein. Instead, my aim is to theorize broad, potential, often constructed, responses in regards to the textual techniques and machinations I outline.

My methodology concentrates on analyzing the depiction of characters, the fidelity to comic book source texts, and the aesthetics of violent combat in the Marvel films. In narrowing my focus as such, I rely on many presuppositions, and leave many fields of study largely unexplored. I take as a given that all the films I discuss are produced by Hollywood, are fundamentally 'American,' and are generally geared to be consumed by Hollywood-centric

(largely Western, or at least well-versed in Western popular culture) audiences. Although I do momentarily touch on the construction of a traditionally 'mythic' heroic persona, which encompasses the physicality and temperament of a traditionally 'masculine ideal' subject,[9] I do not engage with, or assume, any particular demographics in terms of audiences of superhero films – age, race, sexual orientation, or gender.[10] I do treat the Marvel superhero films as vibrant cultural texts, but focus little on their means of production (cultural, economic, etc.), and only briefly touch upon their reception by means of context.

Instead, I privilege textual analysis within a myriad of critical and scholarly frameworks, for the sake of positioning the Marvel superhero films within the film violence debate without particularly aligning myself with any particular (and potentially restrictive) school of thought therein. I draw upon numerous theoretical schools of thought and frameworks – many discordant or conflicting with one another. I find the juxtaposition and occasional contrast in approach useful in better isolating the presuppositions and parameters of the larger academic discussion on film violence, and thereby positioning the methods employed by and ramifications of the Marvel superhero film therein.

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[9] In accordance with common ideological trends in Hollywood, the Marvel superhero films equally demonstrate a lack of diversity, with a cast of characters encompassing largely young-to-middle aged, heterosexual, cisgendered, Caucasian male heroes. My work here does not engage in the problematic ramifications of this, but I find it to be worth mentioning in that it further engenders a viewership prone to expect the familiarity (and likely *reassurance*) of Hollywood conventions, particularly in terms of the viewer's engagement with the superhero protagonists, as I discuss in Chapter Two.

[10] As previously mentioned, my work here does not involve reception studies into the audiences of Marvel superhero films apart from theoretical speculations based on broad critical trends. That said, this point is worth briefly commenting on in light of the controversial public broadcast in August 2013, when three of the most influential names in Marvel Comics, Gerry Conway, Todd McFarlane, and Mark Millar, each expressed views that superhero comics were not intended for a female readership. Said comments resulted in a public backlash lambasting the three for entrenching their medium in antiquated and unnecessary sexism (Logarta). My own research and experience has demonstrated that Marvel superhero films are enormously popular among male and female audiences alike. As such, I do not see this point to affect my discussion of the appeal and means of engendering support for the Marvel hero in regards to any preconceived gender or sexual orientation on behalf of the films' audiences.

Greg M. Smith notes that most theoretical studies into the medium of comics are themselves interdisciplinary by nature, diluting focus into the specific historical and sociocultural situation of comics as a medium unto itself (111). Given the disparate array of interdisciplinary sources engaging with my defining focus of violent action spectacle in the superhero genre, and, by proxy, the lack of core philosophical foundation for critical engagement with the genre, my research has encompassed a variety of interdisciplinary approaches to comics, superheroes, filmic violence and action spectacle. My intent is that, in juxtaposing and contrasting dominant academic voices in each of the aforementioned topics, this project will glean a particular insight into how to conceive of and culturally place the appeal of the superhero, and, subsequently, the uniqueness and significance of analyzing superhero filmic violence. As such, my work here will be situated not only within scholarly engagement with the comic book superhero and its filmic adaptations, but also equally in discussions of Hollywood action cinema, as the genre that has diversified into the superhero genre filmically, and of predominant theories regarding film violence, myth, and ideology in general. In addition, I find the bulk of scholarship concentrating on the transmedia adaptations and medium specificity of superheroes in comic or filmic form to be of comparable importance, given the potential therein for clarifying the affective and historical appeal of the superhero, and how, I contest, viewers familiar with comic book texts or the iconography of the superheroes in question could connect with the hero on a much deeper affective level than with other action heroes in Hollywood.

In constructing such a web of salient theoretical approaches and arguments, I do, at times, in spite of not employing a reception studies approach, consult critical responses to the films themselves. I include such points for the sake of occasionally providing signposts for broad reception, or isolating key trends in appeal. It is my belief that, by doing so, I can introduce and further elevate discussion of the superhero film as a genre, and help outline this genre's place as a

site of significance within larger debates of media effects, media violence, and indeed 'violence' in general.

My work here thus functions in part as genre classification, differentiating Marvel superhero films, their tone, and approach to spectacle-violence, from past entries into the genre (I engage with this central issue in Chapter One of this work). In addition, my intent is that this work intensifies theoretical explorations of how Hollywood's mediation of violent spectacle functions these days, including engagement with more controversial issues of extratextual sociopolitical violence, and the interplay of fictional texts with such omnipresent issues (I explore the resonance of the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the superhero genre in Chapter One, and the ongoing mediation of controversial military incursions and terrorist combat in Chapter Three). Finally, this work functions as an in-depth analysis of how narrative, theme, textual familiarity and cultural mythology conflate, using protagonists as ethical barometers for the 'acceptability' of enjoying violent spectacle.

Review of the Literature

Due to the expansive nature of pertinent sources and fields of study when researching superhero blockbusters and Hollywood film violence, this Review of the Literature is segmented into two sections: sources pertaining to comic book theory, superheroes, and their filmic adaptations, and violence theory.

Superheroes – Comics and(/to) Film

Initially, academic scholarship involving comic book superheroes (or comic books at all) proved virtually nonexistent, as comic books were considered a cheap, disposable medium designed for fleeting entertainment – "a kid's medium" (Ndalianis "Why Comics Studies?" 113). However, this dismissive attitude became dramatically transformed after the extensive critical investigation of the medium by Frederic Wertham, senior psychiatrist for the Department of Hospitals for New York City, in 1954, released in book form as *Seduction of the Innocent*. Wertham, drawing upon interviews with imprisoned youth, attributed comic books with youth crime and juvenile delinquency, specifically criticized the depicted violence and portrayals of lawbreaking in crime comics as both too graphic and alluring for impressionable young minds. Moreover, Wertham condemned comic book superheroes specifically, claiming the fantasy stories of Superman and Batman promoted not only harmful attitudes towards violence and fantasy (with Wertham even coining the "Superman complex" to describe children gleefully enjoying the sense of power derived from hurting others), but as promoting sexual perversity (homosexual subtext in the relationship between Batman and Robin; Wonder Woman as a bondage allegory) and drug use. Recently, in a 2012 investigative article by Carol L. Tilley,

Wertham's study has been exposed to have been exaggerated and fictionalized, falsely expanding

sample groups and data extracted to more firmly assert his case against the harmful effects of

comic books. Nonetheless, *Seduction of the Innocent* firmly established a cultural climate of

demonizing the perceived harmful influence of comic books on young readers (one that Lee

Easton contends, to some extent, continues to this day ["Uncanny" 14]). As Marshall McLuhan

recounts, to 1950s audiences,

> comic books were as exotic as eighth-century illuminations. So, having noticed nothing
>
> about the form, [readers] could discern nothing of the contents, either. The mayhem and
>
> violence were all they noted. Therefore, with naïve literary logic, they waited for violence
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> to flood the world. Or, alternatively, they attributed existing crime to the comics. (154)

This inflammatory yet dismissive attitude towards superhero comics proliferated in scholarship

until the 1970s.

In 1972, Umberto Eco published the first seminal scholarly article on comic book

superheroes, "The Myth of Superman," in which he explores the cultural significance and

function of Superman within a semiological perspective. Eco concludes that the mass appeal of

the superhero figure (Superman in his example) lies in a double-bind between functioning within

the tradition of classical mythology, in which the mythic hero had "immutable characteristics and

an irreversible destiny," and an "aesthetic universality," in which the hero proved accessible to

the reader through their 'secret identity,' lending their exploits the engaging possibility of

uncertainty (15). Eco claims this tension between myth and accessibility locks the superhero in a

stasis between being 'inconsumable,' like a myth, and consumed, like everyday life, lending the

temporality and sense of conflict in the superhero narrative a sense of stagnation. However, Eco

equally criticizes the superhero narrative, extrapolating this stagnation as problematic by

anticipating readers, by proxy, losing perspective on the temporal responsibilities of their own lives (16-19).

Neither Wertham nor Eco discuss superhero films specifically, as, with the exception of certain 1940s-50s serialized B-films and television programs, no mainstream examples existed at their time of writing. However, several of the central concerns they raise continue to proliferate in, and, largely, define burgeoning scholarship in regards to superheroes as a comics medium and genre. In particular, the mythic/mortal dichotomy articulated by Eco proved the defining thematic tension in the genre for many scholars. Working from Joseph Campbell's seminal definition of the "classical monomyth" in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949), and Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence's adaptation thereof, in *The American Monomyth* (1977) and *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002) – their theoretical explorations in American cultural narratives of desiring to 'save' the world, including that of the superhero specifically – numerous scholars have affiliated the appeal of the superhero figure with overarching mythic structures. Many further the nationalist-based identity of the heroic monomyth, particularly Jeffrey S. Lang and Patrick Trimble (1988), who accentuate the Judaeo-Christian self-sacrifice of the superhero as crucial to its function within Jewett and Lawrence's American Monomyth. Diverse writers, including Terrence Wandtke (2007), Angela Ndalianis (2009; 2011), Richard Harrison (2010), and Tom Pollard (2011), affiliate the superhero figure with the Greek or Roman divine figures of Antiquity, whereas others, such as Eric Lichtenfeld (2007), Barna William Donovan (2013), and Anthony Mills (2014), highlight the spiritual dimension, and the progression of the messianic selflessness as key. More still align the superhero with artistic intertextual mythological structures, such as Peter Coogan (2006; 2013), who critically reconfigured the linear influence of the comic book superhero as a blend of classic mythology with early pulp and science-fiction tropes, Henry Jenkins (2009), who stresses classic science-fiction as a key influence, and Jason

Bainbridge (2009), who aligns superhero production company brand identity – 'Marvel vs. DC comics' – with either horror literature or classic mythology respectively.

Conversely, a bevy of scholars highlight the 'human' and 'accessible' dimension of Eco's mythic/human dichotomy as key to the appeal of the superhero. Richard Reynolds, in his seminal work *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (1992), mediates modernist discourses of mythology, and argues that the superhero figure consolidates the populist enthusiasm of human innovation and potential in a post-industrial age. Will Brooker (2001; 2013), famously popularizing the academic study of superheroes, approaches the topic from a reception and cultural studies perspective. Brooker contests that, "Superheroes are about wish fulfillment. They're about imagining a better world and creating an alternate version of yourself" (11). Henry Jenkins (2007) similarly extrapolates from and ultimately repudiates Eco's contestation that the superhero serves as a fetishistic denial of death, offering a personal account of how reading superhero comics served as a personal means of coping with the trauma of his mother's death as example of the interplay between myth and human accessibility in superhero narratives. Psychologist Robin Rosenberg (2013) stresses the superhero as a nostalgic appeal to the affective play of childhood, "where we really *believed* we could fly or knock down the bad guy or save the city from disaster" ("Our Fascination" 4). Lee Easton (2010; 2013) considers the superhero narrative within the scope of cultural studies, reading the superhero figure and its influence on gendered reader identities as undertaking an ideological project of regulating conservative masculinity. In "Saying No to Masculinity," Easton considers the supervillain as a queer site for resistance to dominant gender and sexuality paradigms, exemplified by the (generally male) hero.

However, not all theorists read this accessibility and affective influence of the superhero figure on audiences as a positive. Todd McGowan and Shaun Treat (both 2009) argue that contemporary superhero films breed mass complicity in audiences willfully subsuming agency

and power to an effective fascist power beyond the law, essentially advocating for the cultural climate of a police state. McGowan, in particular, argues that the illegal actions of the superhero become excused due to the assumption that the superhero is acting altruistically on behalf of the collective – a problematic suspension of regulatory legislation and an abuse of power (2).

In regards to scholarship on superhero films specifically, the majority of theorists engage in issues of the transmedia adaptations from comic book to film, particularly ancillary capitalist-driven markets. Pivotal comics theorist Scott McCloud (1993; 2000) discusses medium specificity in the cinematic adaptations of comic books, arguing that "superheroes are first and foremost about role-playing – becoming the character" (*Reinventing Comics* 118), thereby echoing Brooker and Rosenberg's participatory ethos. As such, McCloud sees motion pictures as ideally suited for superhero comic book adaptations specifically, as the efficient, action-driven narrative structure of the standard superhero comics echoes that of Hollywood blockbusters (37). Similarly, in regards to violence and comic books, McCloud's seminal theorizing of "the gutter" – the gap between panels in a comic book – complicates the discussion of the "Effects tradition." McCloud, in studying the reader's intuitive perception in cognitively facilitating movement in space and time in comic books, claims that whenever acts of violence are committed in comic books, the reader is thus the one *responsible* for actualizing the violent acts, which are seldom explicitly depicted within a single panel (*Understanding Comics* 66-69). This notion of "the gutter" remains a prominent and compelling theory in critically interrogating violence and comic books.

Greg M. Smith (2011) further notes the commercial transmedia relationship between comics and film lends comics a subordinate status to film, suggesting "comics are increasingly used as a research-and-development source for mainstream films and television programs" (110). Derek Johnson (2007; 2012), taking a media industries approach, studies the transmedia

adaptations of Marvel comics to film specifically, and charts the creation of the 'Marvel Cinematic Universe,' and the internal grammar and 'canon' therein. Johnson argues that Marvel Studios, in controlling the rights to the cinematic adaptation of their own key characters, maintain a more consistent narrative and aesthetic to the interconnectivity of the comics, yet are still driven by necessary profit margins and necessary conventions of Hollywood cinema.

This criticism of 'Hollywood vs. comics storytelling' is one consistently maintained by Scott Bukatman. In "X-Bodies: The Torment of the Mutant Superhero," Bukatman discusses how the comics medium allows for a more fluid and reconstitutive conception of an individual character and the limits of the physical body, and that such fluidity lends itself to providing theoretical commentary on contemporary social anxieties. His work in "Secret Identity Politics" similarly grounds the superhero figure's fantastic capabilities within an aesthetic of comparative, relatable realism, connecting the escapism of the hero's fantastic powers with that of performance interludes in the musical genre, and a more tangible sense of embodied escapism. Continuing this discussion into a critique, in "Why I Hate Superhero Movies," Bukatman affiliates this escapism with an excess of 'unreality,' claiming there is nothing 'at stake' in the repetitive, formulaic conflicts of the genre. As such, Bukatman sees the cinematic adaptations of comic book superheroes as not only lacking the transformative, mutable possibilities of their comic book precedents, but as instead serving for vehicles of conservative storytelling and ideology, including nonreflexive violent spectacle – a premise echoed throughout this thesis.

Film Violence and Hollywood Action Cinema

Arguably the most recognizable academic voice in regards to American action cinema is Yvonne Tasker, whose diverse works from *Spectacular Bodies* (1993) to *Action and Adventure Cinema* (2004) serve to articulate key themes and tropes in the 1980s-1990s Hollywood action

cinema. Tasker outlines the tonal transformations in the genre, including the inevitable, perpetual return to comedy as a means of genre hybridity and further coding violent action spectacle as enjoyable, and the politics of gendered body image invested in the actors portraying agents of violence. Mark Gallagher (1999) furthers Tasker's delineation by articulating the sociocultural resonance of (predominantly) 1990s American action cinema, and its role in perpetuating dominant ideologies about gender, power dynamics, and conflict resolution. Gallagher echoes Brooker, Rosenberg, and Jenkins' claims about the affective and 'empowering' resonance of an artistic text by establishing the thematic core of the action narrative as, "[t]he films subject their heroes to ritual or conventional obstacles that, once overcome, demonstrate the fantasy omnipotence of the action hero" (208). Ultimately, Gallagher's most incisive argument is that the mastery of physical combat and conflict resolution in the action genre lends viewers a euphoric sense of translating the text's mastery-through-violence into personal mastery, and thereby proxy 'empowering' them through the fantasy escapism of the action hero (203).

In her groundbreaking 2001 article "Violence American Style: The Narrative Orchestration of Violent Attractions," Marsha Kinder argues that sequences of violent action spectacle function as akin to "performative" song-and-dance numbers in the musical genre, "interrupting the linear drive of the plot with their sensational audio and visual spectacle, yet simultaneously serving as dramatic climaxes that advance the story toward closure" (68). Kinder claims that the hyperbolic excesses in such orchestration lends them an inherently "comic" tone (in an instance of accidentally fitting wording), and that "the representation of violent iterations suggests a proliferating series that moves both forward and backward in time, as if denying the finality of death [recalling Eco]" (69). This framing of the narrative structure serves to contextualize the function and appeal of violent interludes, and foregrounds the notion of (conscious or unconscious) comedic undertones to them.

Geoff King (2000; 2004; 2005) consistently works on conceptions of the spectacle in Hollywood filmmaking, engaging with issues of violence, digital ontology, iconicity, and humour, and thereby placing him into a conversation with Kinder, Prince, Purse, Pollard, and many others. In "Killingly Funny," King discusses the role of comedy in complicating the implied 'consequences' of filmic violence in the postmodern action film, arguing, "[m]oments of violence in these films are often coded as 'witty' and stylized and, therefore, more detached from potentially 'real' implications than might otherwise be the case" (131), thereby fusing Kinder's discussion of comedy with Prince and Purse's conceptions of 'consequence.' In "'Just Like a Movie,' King furthers this discussion of spectacle to cultural dialogues concerning the comparison between images of September 11th while the event was still unfolding, articulating the sense of "guilty thrill" audiences received from revisiting the images of destruction (49) – an attitude just as applicable to any spectacle-violence with intertexts of socio-political resonance. Finally, in *Spectacular Narratives*, King posits that the exhilarating pleasures of action cinema could, feasibly, be read from a Marxist perspective, "in which the films are seen as serving an ideological purpose by offering superficial satisfaction to needs or desires that might otherwise lead to demands for real change in social or economic relations […] short-term stimulation and 'escape' at the movies" (103).

Stephen Prince equally engages King's notion of 'reality' and 'implications' in violence, aesthetics, and spectacle. Prince is one of the seminal scholars on both classical and contemporary film violence. His work in *Classical Film Violence* (2003) theorizes cinematic violence and discourses of censorship in the era of the Hayes code, elaborating on how foundational attitudes and discourses in regards to the 'harmful' effects of film violence were established. Equally, this work differentiates how different means of enacting violence (gun violence, other weapons, physical combat, etc.) evoke different affective responses in audiences.

Prince approaches the aesthetics and design of film violence from the films of the Hollywood renaissance, and how directors such as Peckinpah were able to manipulate the treatment of unprecedentedly graphic violence as a means of both aesthetic spectacle and cautionary social commentary. Similarly, in his 2004 article "The Emergence of Cinematic Artifacts," Prince considers the ontological role of digital effects and computer-generated imagery in regards to comprehending cinematic figures as *human*, and the role violence plays in this cognitive process (consolidating in his discussion of the "consequences" of violence towards CGI-rendered figures). In general, Prince considers cinematic violence to be a fundamentally mediated spectacle, and one understood by audiences as such, and that the artistry to particular violent sequences marks a transition point in audiences and cinematic censorship from the classical era, when graphic violence was scrutinized and contained, to contemporary film violence, where the spectacular enactment thereof can serve as a functionally cathartic spectacle of choreography and aesthetics.

Lisa Purse (2007; 2011) is one of the foremost theorists on contemporary Hollywood action cinema, and largely follows Tasker's work in regards to genre and bodily politics in contemporary action cinema. In her 2007 article "Digital Heroes in Contemporary Hollywood," Purse notes audience disconnect with CGI-rendered characters, arguing that the digitally reconstructed superhero bodies in fight sequences served to alienate audiences, rather than perpetuating the visual spectacle (9). Her 2011 book *Contemporary Action Cinema* provides a comprehensive taxonomy of conventions of Hollywood action cinema of the 2000s, including how spectacle-violence is narratively motivated, and often spurred as a response to contemporary American sociopolitical anxieties specifically – generally overseas military conflicts. Tom Pollard (2011) echoes this by charting trends in Hollywood action cinema directly reactionary to

the attacks of September 11th, and the subsequent ideological codifying of a revenge narrative in American culture.

Christopher Sharrett (1999) roots the American cultural fascination with violence in the study of mythology, claiming that, historically, violent conquest has become entwined with myths of domination, conquest, sacrifice, and power in cultural narratives such as the frontier myth. Similarly, Philip L. Simpson (1999) categorizes violence in American genre films as a means of asserting ideological barriers and codifying domains of ethics, claiming oversimplified 'good vs. bad' violent narratives "serve mostly to uphold a patriarchal, law-and-order status quo derived in large measure from a repressively puritanical heritage" (119). Sharrett and Simpson's notions of overarching cultural projects of violence and each individual's role (conscious or not) in maintaining and perpetuating them serves to recall McCloud's "gutter" and violence discussion in regards to comic books.

Asbjorn Grønstad, in his 2008 work *Transfigurations: Violence, Death, and Masculinity in American Cinema*, alludes to Kinder's notion of "narrative orchestrations" by noting that film violence not only "pierces the viewer," but that "it also seems to pierce the process of narration itself, marking it off as a special instance of signification," or calling attention to the pointed artificiality of the narrative (13). Therein, Grønstad calls for a more sociological approach to film violence and its appeal, rooting the majority of the influx in the impulse towards consuming filmic violence in mythic narratives, like Sharrett. However, Grønstad equally urges scholarship to rekindle focus on the fascination with violence with a philosophical curiosity with "transfigurations" of the corporeality of the human body, and in understanding its role in ontologically being enacted by, and transforming, the physical form (20), recalling the body-focused analysis on violence in the action genre of Tasker, Purse, and Prince.

One of the most influential and prolific contemporary cultural theorists and philosophers, Slavoj Žižek's extensive research explores notions of ideology, politics, and violence, frequently through the lens of popular culture. By way of a brief survey of Žižek's considerable volume of work, in *Violence* (2008), Žižek warns against the temptation to focus only on "subjective" instances of physical violence, which distract from confronting overarching ideological conditions of inequality and "systemic violence" within systems of North American capitalism (11-13). Equally, Žižek explores the cultural fascination with myths of human bodies withstanding displays of violence as a test of physical strength (1999: 369), recalling Gallagher and Purse's notions of viewers consuming the physical ordeals or suffering of the action hero for the sake of proxy personal empowerment. This sense of films 'doing the work' for viewers equally recalls Žižek's notion of the "Tibetan Prayer Wheel" – a concept suggesting an artistic work, such as a film, engaging with issues of politics or ideology 'for' viewers so they can simply relax and enjoy (2006: 31-33). Finally, in "The Politics of Batman" (2013), Žižek furthers this mindset in engaging with the superhero genre specifically, suggesting, again, that the genre's commentary on extratextual issues of sociopolitical systemic violence serves as more of a distraction than inspiration to actually engage with said issues firsthand.

In terms of conceiving of the "effects tradition" of film violence within the scope of culture and ideology, Martin Barker is equally instrumental in extending the discussion of cinematic violence beyond the casuality it is frequently reduced to in the media, to instead extrapolating to redefine understandings of the term 'violence.' In both *Ill Effects: The Media-Violence Debate* (1997) and "Violence Redux" (2004), Barker re-defines 'violence' as a cultural construct, starting in the 1950s, used to encapsulate countercultural sentiments or concepts that do not directly reinforce the dominant ideological discourses. Barker's research equally conflates the study of comics and violence. In *Knowing Audiences:* Judge Dredd*, Its Friends, Fans and*

Foes (1998), Barker (along with co-author Kate Brooks) takes a reception studies approach to violence in comics and censorship, and the various ways audiences consume filmic violence, as well as the corresponding expectations for textual fidelity. Barker concludes that the inevitable conflation of cinematic violence with American national identity and cynicism can be polarizing if not produced by American authors, whereas the violent output of a cinematic comic book protagonist – whether more or less violent than their comic book precedent – can risk enraging fan audiences for failing to stay true to the source text. As such, Barker considers violence to be a more fluid and amorphous construct, and one that can never be considered in a cultural vacuum. Instead, Barker's discussion of violence, adaptation theory and ideology largely considers film violence as a 'scapegoat' used to encapsulate a variety of anxieties, frustrations and concerns too multifaceted to specifically define. Nonetheless, this analysis complicates traditional, reductive discussions of film violence as 'bad,' instead urging for a more extensive examination and critique of the formative conditions surrounding the filmic violence.

Barna William Donovan equally applies a reception studies approach to engaging with action cinema and its appeal for audiences. In *Blood, Guts, and Testosterone: Action Films, Audiences, and a Thirst for Violence* (2010), Donovan reconsiders the role that the genre's typically 'masculine' identity and perceived audience has in its execution, and means of audiences justifying (or excusing) their interest in violent content. Donovan coins the essential term "acceptable visions of violence" (211), implying the ethical rationalization taken place in-text to validate violent actions undertaken by the hero as morally 'just' – a pivotal issue, and key intersection with Prince and Gallagher's notions of validating violence textually. In "A Superman for Our Times" (2013), Donovan utilizes the character of Superman, and his most recent textual adaptation, *Man of Steel* (Zack Snyder, 2013) as a case study for the contemporary appeal, and militaristic and religious subtext infusing the character with relevance. In arguing as such,

Donovan's theories engage with Brooker's, who equally charts the historical and cultural changes in perception and audience towards superhero figures over time, and with Purse, Pollard, and Žižek in analyzing how sociopolitical anxieties inherently manifest in Hollywood action or superhero genre texts.

Chapter One: The Merry Marching (Violent) Marvel Society

"I Finally got Everything I Wanted… and I'm Wearing Tights"
-Steve Rogers (Chris Evans), Captain America: The First Avenger *(2011)*

Given the fact that the first Marvel Comics superhero,[11] Captain America, was introduced in a boldly iconic comic cover punching out Adolf Hitler, the linkage of cinematic adaptations of the comic book superheroes of Marvel Studios with physical violence and the resonance of extratextual socio-political violence would be unsurprising. However, such associations do not ultimately reflect the common cultural associations of comic book superheroes, let alone their filmic representations. Since the vitriol of Wertham in the 1950s, such cultural complaints about the harmful impact of comic books (or comic book superheroes) have largely subsided. Instead, they have been replaced by a cultural climate frequently denouncing the presence, quantity, or intensity of violence in popular cinema (or video games, more recently), with complaints of overexposure to filmic violence prompting a potentially harmful desensitization (Grønstad 11).

Nonetheless, despite this conflation of cultural anxieties regarding violence and the dissemination thereof to audiences through popular media, the contemporary superhero film is still generally approached as diversionary, escapist, fantasy entertainment, rather than as a prevalent site for ideological perpetuation of violence. This conception runs contrary to trends in recent superhero narratives – comic book or filmic alike – which "contend with themes that are inherently historical and political" (Carney 101). As such, this chapter will chart Marvel Studios' attempt to reconcile the tension between socio-political engagement and fantasy escapism in its superhero films. In doing so, taking example from Terrence Wandtke's claim that "as long as the superhero's been in existence, the superhero has been 'in the making,' working through a series

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[11] Captain America's first comic book appearance was technically produced by Timely Comics, from which Marvel Comics originated as an offshoot, retaining the rights to the character.

of revisions" (5), I will herein examine the tonal transition of the superhero genre, and the corresponding treatment of violence throughout. I will chart four primary classifications within the superhero film in regards to aesthetics and tone: the 'cartoony' aesthetic and approach to violence in early genre offerings (1970s-1990s), the post-millennial genre hybridity (roughly 2000-2011), the 'seriousness' of DC comics (2005-2013), and, finally, the Marvel reflexive wit (2008-present). My argument is thus that each of these categorical phases function as responses to one another, creating a dialogic interplay between tone and influence, with the portrayal of filmic violence fluctuating in tandem with this semiological exchange. I will then build this historical classification into a more in-depth interrogation of the Marvel studios tone and aesthetic, particularly in regards to the treatment and 'use value' of violent interludes therein. I will analyze the means and distinguishing techniques employed by Marvel in their violent spectacle setpieces for the sake of reappropriating filmic violence as enjoyable spectacle, and conclude by noting how such techniques ultimately serve the ideological project of helping structure an audience primed to defer to the affable and 'trustworthy' hero figure as an ideologically sanctioned agent of violence.

<p style="text-align:center">"Real, not Realistic" – Superhero Films Prior to the Year 2000</p>

Though live action cinematic incarnations of superheroes date back to the 1940s, it was primarily with the televised release of the 1960s *Batman* television show (1966-1968) and the corresponding *Batman: The Movie* (Leslie H. Martinson, 1966) that the live action superhero garnered significant presence and relevance in popular culture. While the show was frequently criticized for its hyperbolic, colourful camp and histrionic faux-melodrama, Will Brooker asserts that this aesthetic and tone for the show was deliberately constructed, not only addressing a 1960s zeitgeist favouring camp performance art, but establishing a "tongue-in-cheek […] ironic, dual

address" designed to appeal straightforwardly to children while serving as comedic for adult viewers (*Batman Unmasked* 180-184). As such, this cultivated aesthetic proves perfectly indicative of David Morrison's characterization of "playful violence," defined as such:

> *Playful violence* is clearly acted violence, and is seen as unreal. The violence looks staged, and has little significance beyond its entertainment value. It is invariably seen as violence with a little v. A lot of violent action may be involved, but it is not graphic and does not assault the sensibilities. (4-5)

This aesthetic of self-consciousness and silliness established a benchmark for the genre, and grounds for comparison that all subsequent superhero narratives would either be aligned with or defined against. Throughout this chapter, I will argue that the tropes established by the *Batman* show remain intact in various iterations throughout the genre (including the viewership climate of "Playful violence"), albeit to varying degrees of intensity. While the camp excesses of the show are toned down in an ongoing bid for credibility and 'realism' in the genre, its commodified, self-reflexive humour ultimately manifests in the films of Marvel Studios, albeit translated more into witty "frivolity" (Tyree 28) than 'silliness.'

Prior to the year 2000, the superhero genre was still largely affiliated with the campy, 'cartoony' aesthetic of the 1966 *Batman* show. In contrast to this, genre staples *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978) and *Batman* (Tim Burton, 1989) strove to be recognized as more 'serious,' without sacrificing the fun factor. Donner famously summarized his directorial maxim for *Superman* as "verisimilutude," arguing "[i]t's a word that refers to being real…not realistic – yes, there IS a difference" (qtd. in Maslon and Kantor 195). Burton, conversely, endeavoured to differentiate his *Batman* from the 1966 show, using the words "Gothic, timeless […] mysterious, brooding, dark, somber" as aesthetic descriptors (qtd. in Brooker *Batman Unmasked* 285). Nonetheless, though both seminal films initially differentiated from the irreverence of the 1966

Batman show, the third and fourth offerings in each franchise returned to its broad humour and hyperbolic stylistic excesses. This return to 'silliness' was mirrored by the early 1990s adaptations of Marvel Comics superheroes, including *Captain America* (Albert Pyun, 1990), *The Fantastic Four* (Oley Sassone, 1994), and *Nick Fury: Agent of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (Rod Hardy, 1998), all of which were pulpy B-movies with minimal budgets and exposure (Lichtenfeld 287). These, along with the infamous camp of Joel Schumacher's *Batman & Robin* (1997), served to invite critical comparisons to the 1966 *Batman* series in a negative light, rebranding the superhero genre as 'cartoony' in the most condescending sense of the word (Brooker *Batman Unmasked* 173), rather than sustaining the temporarily credibility generated by *Superman* and Burton's *Batman* films.

Geoff King uses "comic book violence" to signify depictions that are 'unrealistic and exaggerated' (132), and this description proves unmistakably applicable to the camp approach to violence in the 1966 *Batman* show (and, to a lesser extent, the genre as a whole). The *Batman* show's penchant for comic book 'sound effect bubble' nondiegetic inserts during fight sequences ("Pow!" "Biff!" "Zzzzzwap!" "Flrbbbbb!") not only furthered its 'cartoony' aesthetic, but literally obscured any representations of physical violence therein, cutting away from depicting any physical contact in favour of the nondiegetic "sound effect" inserts. This foregrounds an attitude of obscuring the 'consequences' of physical violence that is continually perpetuated throughout the genre, including in the superhero films of Marvel Studios. While future genre offerings were not as overtly 'comic-book-like' in their aesthetic renditions of physical combat, a sense of levity pervades their action sequences. In all of the pre-2000 superhero films, most action sequences, particularly those of the *Superman* franchise, are more designed to showcase the physical ability of the superhero protagonist, with most action sequences instead

foregrounding Superman (Christopher Reeve)'s super-speed or super-strength, lifting helicopters or other large objects, rather than engaging others in combat.

When instances of physical violence do occur, they are customarily brief and sparse (the hero usually fighting no more than one adversary at a time), with no extended spectacles of choreography. The physical combat itself remains cartoonishly 'unreal,' with frequently disjointed editing lending fight sequences a choppy quality, a sense furthered by the exaggerated, mismatched sound editing. The physicality thus becomes hyperbolic; even films like *Batman* or *Captain America*, where the hero has only marginally superior physical strength, have sequences where the superhero punches an adversary, resulting in them flying several feet backwards. Such exaggerated physical performance lends action sequences such a disproportionately exaggerated feel that any vestiges of realism or the 'consequence' of physical violence are dissolved into an aesthetic of cartoonish fantasy spectacle.[12] Tim Burton's *Batman* and *Batman Returns* (1992) briefly escalated the violence content in the genre, with antagonists the Joker (Jack Nicholson), Catwoman (Michelle Pfeiffer), and the Penguin (Danny DeVito) clawing, biting, shooting, or disintegrating various henchmen and associates. Still, the violence of such moments often

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[12] In regards to the ethics of superhero violence, there remains a consistent cognitive disconnect between the violent *capabilities* of the hero (their physical strength and ability) and the violence they enact on their adversaries. In the case of characters like Superman, who are depicted as being strong enough to move planets, internal grammar would denote that if Superman were to punch an adversary unchecked, said adversary would be immediately killed, if not 'splattered.' In many cases, superhero narratives circumvent engaging in the logistics of this disconnect by matching superheroes with antagonists whose stamina and strength equal if not exceed theirs (as is discussed in Chapter Three), but this is not always the case. As such, superhero comics have coined a term explaining this: "pulling punches." This implies that the hero is able to exert force with individual discretion, and, in the case of weaker adversaries, intentionally hold back, and not strike their opponent with their full physical strength, to ensure they simply knock out their antagonist instead of murder them. Ultimately, this disconnect provides an intriguing inversion of McCloud's notion of the "gutter," by suggesting the reader, with minimal narrative cues, undertakes cognitive processes of internal rationalization which *save* characters from violence rather than, as McCloud quips, "participat[ing] in the murder" (*Understanding Comics* 68). Space does not permit me to fully engage in the theoretical ramifications of this cognitive process in live action superhero films here. Nonetheless, I find it pertinent to suggest that this same cognitive process is mimicked by at least some film viewers to whom this disconnect occurs, both comics fans and not, as means of rationalizing internal grammar within the superhero film, and justifying violence enacted upon minor characters. If not, this would imply certain audiences conceding that each blow administered by the heroes in question carries enough force to inevitably kill those they hit, suggesting a surprising complicity in the hyperviolence and high death toll in the genre, more akin with McCloud's "gutter" rationalization. Further study would be required to ultimately corroborate this issue.

became distorted or offset through the over-the-top, affected performances and comic-inspired costumes of the actors. Such moments are thereby ensconced within a surreal, grotesque theatricality, which proves equally distancing.

This notion of consequences of violence is temporarily engaged in *Superman*, by having Lois Lane (Margot Kidder), Superman's love interest, be killed by the aftershocks of a missile fired by antagonist Lex Luthor (Gene Hackman). Nonetheless, this consequence is short lived, as Superman, executing a previously unseen hyperbolic display of power, flies around the planet so quickly that he reverses time, allowing him to return to the scene of the accident, save Lois, and stop Luthor. Superman's essentially divine abilities not only lend the character and the genre a sense of omnipotent reassurance, but functionally strip its depictions of violence from any bearing in reality or notion of context. Henceforth, though no other filmic superhero could match the exaggerated superpowers of Superman, the genre perpetuated a tonal aesthetic of any violent transgression or consequence being able to be undone, highlighting the omnipotent physical capabilities of the superhero. Correspondingly, any reference to socio-political violence is cursory at most, with only vague, elusory allegorical commentaries on the dangers of rampant capitalism or anarchy, none of which function explicitly or clearly (Steyn 69). As such, filmic violence in such an environment is reduced to an overtly fantastic spectacle, tacitly depicted as unreal and having no ultimately harmful repercussions.

Spins An (Invisible) Web Between Twin Towers – The post-2000 Superhero Film

After the fallout of critical scorn in regards to the superhero genre after the release of *Batman & Robin*, superhero films maintained a reputation for juvenile, dismissive fantasy entertainment until the release of Bryan Singer's *X-Men* (2000), which infused the genre with newfound critical renown. Of particular note was *X-Men*'s propensity for 'serious' subtext, with

the persecution and discrimination of superpowered 'mutants' amidst society serving as an overt

metaphor for societal discrimination towards various disenfranchised minority groups. The

subtext took on more explicitly homosexual overtones in Singer's sequel, *X2* (2003), wherein the

parents of young mutant Iceman/Bobby Drake (Shawn Ashmore) tentatively inquire, "Bobby…

have you ever tried… *not* being a mutant?"[13] Ultimately, the success of Singer's *X-Men* films is

largely linked to their propensity for engagement with socio-political issues of greater

sophistication, echoing such subtext in the source comics (Bukatman "X-Bodies" 49).

Singer's films equally engage with the socio-political dimensions of filmic violence

beyond the simplistic sequences of physical combat customary to the genre.[14] Correspondingly,

the violence in action sequences demonstrates a marked acceleration. In *X-Men*, Storm (Halle

Berry) unmistakably murders mutant adversary Toad (Ray Park) by electrocuting him, and

leaving him to fall to his death off the Statue of Liberty. Similarly, the mutant claws and healing

powers of Wolverine (Hugh Jackman) and adversary Sabretooth (Tyler Mane) allow for

unprecedently visceral combat, with choreography primarily entailing graphic (though, granted,

still PG-13 and bloodless) stabbing and slashing – choreography historically understood by

audiences and censors, as Stephen Prince explains, as "a more brutal and gruesome type of

violence" (*Classical Film Violence* 139).[15]

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[13] Indeed, Easton and Purse extrapolate this subtext to the genre as a whole, asserting that the superhero film's inherent secret identity trope functions as akin to a kind of 'coming out' ("Rogers and Stark" 309; *Action* 144).

[14] In *X-Men*, mutant antagonist Magneto (Ian McKellen) – established in an allegorical 'Malcolm X/Martin Luther King' binary with X-Men leader Professor Charles Xavier (Patrick Stewart) – attempts to forcibly transform all humans into mutants (which, the narrative reveals, would result in genetic instability, and, ultimately, their deaths). In *X2*, Magneto, spurred to more drastic action in response to militant anti-mutant military General William Stryker (Brian Cox)'s attempted mutant genocide, responds by trying to kill all humans on the planet. Equally, the opening sequence of *X2* is a failed political assassination attempt on the president by the (brainwashed) teleporting mutant Nightcrawler (Alan Cumming).

[15] It is worth noting that, in spite of this marked acceleration in the intensity of violence in superhero films, all superhero films, to date, have received ratings of PG-13 in the United States (PG or 14A in Canada). Prince notes the disjuncture in depictions of violent acts versus the *intensity* of said acts resulting in a surprisingly antiseptic treatment

However, in tandem with the more graphic and tactile violence came intertwined political and ideological subtext, lending Singer's films, and the genre, by proxy, unprecedented cultural relevance. I find this transition to mass exposure to be of particular importance. The fact that this tonal shift occurred within the superhero film's transition to major Hollywood studios amidst the cultural climate of the attacks of September 11th is no accident. Indeed, the cursory socio-political engagement of the superhero genre of this time (both direct and indirect) clearly indicates interplay with the cultural environment of a post-9/11 America. Just as Žižek asserts that "[a] nation exists only as long as its specific *enjoyment* continues to be materialized in a set of social practices and transmitted through national myths or fantasies that secure these practices" (*Tarrying* 202), the superhero genre, in shifting to a more global exposure, serves as a vessel for indirect, metaphoric, sociopolitical interplay. By both reaching a larger audience, and redefining the genre's aesthetic and thematic parameters beyond 'cartoony escapism' to a commentary on extratextual sociopolitical anxieties (Maslon and Kantor 281), the superhero genre as an entity henceforth begins a project of asserting itself as a 'worthy' vehicle for engaging with a cultural dialogue in regards to the ethics of its depicted subject matter, of which violent spectacle is crucial. *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002)'s mantra of "with great power comes great *responsibility*" had never proved so reflexively applicable.

The genre's appropriation of the "action-blockbuster formula" (Foster 14; Lichtenfeld 286), complete with an unprecedented use of more mobile choreography and intensified continuity, allowed for unprecedented visual action spectacle (Purse *Action* 38). In increasingly

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of violence in contemporary Hollywood. In particular, Prince finds the conflation of violence with *suffering* to more restrictive ratings – he indicates various textual signifiers, including more explicit sound editing involved in violent acts, or the inclusion of blood, or gore, as indicative. As such, the discrepancy between depicted violent acts in fight choreography – characters stabbed, beaten, or even dismembered at times – and comparatively lower ratings in Hollywood action, including that in the superhero film, can be attributed to "screen violence [being] the largely pain-free phenomenon that it remains even today" (*Classical Film Violence* 67-75). Ultimately, space does not permit for a more exhaustive theoretical exploration of the disconnect between the absence of such signifiers of suffering and whether the depicted acts are ultimately any less disturbing or affecting for mass audiences.

modeling itself after the Hollywood action genre, the superhero genre also followed what Yvonne

Tasker marks as an ensuing trend of postmodern generic hybridity, or "bricolage" (*Spectacular*

54). Genre entries of this period began bifurcating in tone and thematic preoccupation between

action comedy – *Fantastic Four* (Tim Story, 2005) – action-melodrama – *Daredevil* (Mark

Steven Johnson, 2003); *Hulk* (Ang Lee, 2003); *The Punisher* (Jonathan Hensleigh, 2004) – or a

melding of both, as with Sam Raimi's seminal *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002-2007).[16]

This tonal binary between light and dark, already customary to the genre (Bukatman

"Superhero Movies" 119), allowed the millennial superhero films varied lines of access in terms

of subtextually addressing the socio-cultural trauma and extradiegetic violence of 9/11.[17] Rather

than addressing this trauma to the explicit extent of Singer's *X-Men* films with minority

discrimination, the millennial superhero films instead utilized this aforementioned tonal binary

between melodrama and comedy as allegorically exploratory, channeling cultural anxieties and

trauma post-9/11 into the genre's more codified action narratives. Johannes Schlegel and Frank

Habermann contest that, post-9/11, cinematic "superheroes became comforting and safe, like

creamy vanilla ice cream, reflecting pure American values and innocence" (30).[18] This was never

more reflected than through the release of Bryan Singer's *Superman Returns* (2006), an

unabashedly nostalgic and sentimental film that consistently celebrates the near omnipotent

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[16] Indeed, the only superhero films during this period that were financially successful (and, by proxy, popular) enough to warrant sequels being produced were the ones that privileged levity rather than melodramatic brooding: the *Spider-Man* and *Fantastic Four* series. I find this fact to attest to overarching cultural trends veering more towards comparative levity and escapism in response to the trauma of 9/11, and the sociopolitical violence and fallout surrounding it globally.

[17] *Spider-Man* is customarily the most associated with the cultural trauma of 9/11, as an early promotional trailer, in which Spider-Man captured a helicopter of thieves in a giant web spun across the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, was removed from circulation after their destruction, delaying the release of the film. Correspondingly, the film serves as the most nationalistically populist superhero film to date, to the extent of including a scene where a crowd of bystanders defend Spider-Man (Tobey Maguire) by attacking antagonist the Green Goblin (Willem Dafoe), exclaiming "You mess with one New Yorker, you mess with all of us!" (Foster 18).

[18] Cultural psychologist Robin S. Rosenberg equally isolates nostalgia ("a callback to youth") and the "familiar and comforting" narratives of superhero films as key to their mass appeal ("Our Fascination" 3-4).

abilities of its titular protagonist (Brandon Routh), and overtly recalls the more 'innocent' Christopher Reeve Superman films. Thus, completion of the (violence-driven) superhero narratives becomes codified as culturally reassuring. This yields an ideology of superhero violence serving as metaphorically comforting, or, as Will Brooker argues, "all about [fantasy] wish fulfillment" ("Heroes" 11).

Such (inexplicitly) politically-driven filmic violence could serve a cathartic, retributive function, in the face of post-9/11 American audiences feeling impotent and incapable of violent retribution of their own. Barna William Donovan articulates such post-9/11 cultural sentiments in audiences as "the impulse to justifiable action, tempered by the fear of unforeseen, self-destructive consequences" ("Superman" 26). Appropriately, Peter Coogan specifies that the superhero's selfless mission to "fight evil and protect the innocent […] must fit in with the existing, professed mores of society" (4). This phrase – intentionally rife with ambiguity – frequently serves as a mantra for critics lambasting the superhero genre for its questionable socio-political morality. Many, like Todd McGowan, Sean Treat and Anthony Mills, contest that the idealized fantasy narrative of the superhero advocates for a near-fascist state valorizing a celebrated individual whose superseding of the law is commended due to an innate sense of unquestionable moral purity and the interest to act on behalf of the collective (1,106, and 183 respectively). Correspondingly, Sean Carney sees the traditional superhero narratives as mediating such potentially repressive subtext, instead constructing an audience who "imaginatively abdicate responsibility for human actions to these heroes" (102). This constructs an ideological climate of comfort and the displacement of conflicting and contradictory ethics in favour of inspirational narratives of hyperbolic fantasy comfort.

Given this established notion of 'wish-fulfillment,' the treatment of violence in this period of superhero film proves curiously detached, in contrast to the markedly physical combat of the

genre prior. Even *Daredevil*, whose violence is grounded in the physicality of the hero, employed stylized martial arts and wire work combat, lending many sequences of violence a constructed, 'unreal' quality. Furthermore, the introduction of the now pivotal reliance on computer-generated imagery (CGI) to the superhero genre proved contentious in regards to filmic violence. Despite CGI being essential for realizing cinematic images previously only possible in a comic book medium (Prince "Emergence" 26), many scholars, including Lisa Purse, argue that the digitally reconstructed superhero bodies in fight sequences serve to alienate audiences, rather than perpetuating the visual spectacle ("Digital Heroes" 9). Indeed, Scott Bukatman affiliates the tonal melodramatic trauma of the genre with this CGI-disconnect, quipping superhero films "make a fetish of trauma, the better to compensate for the painlessness and weightlessness of digital being" ("Superhero Movies" 122).

Stephen Prince, however, extends this argument further in regards to violence, stating that, as digitally constructed characters are ontologically understood as 'unreal,' "they can be exterminated *without any consequences* to any reality in front of the camera" ("Emergence" 27, my Italics). While such absence of 'consequences' was already a superhero trope, as with Superman spinning the planet to reverse time, the possibilities of CGI in violent combat allow for the simulation of more explicitly violent imagery. This, in turn, divests the occasional instance of more explicit combat violence in this era of the genre of the amount of graphic resonance it would customarily have. In *Spider-Man 3* (2007), for example, Spider-Man, in the midst of being morally corrupted by his invasive alien costume, furiously confronts antagonist Sandman (Thomas Haden Church), kicking his legs off and shredding half of his face off on the side of a moving train. However, as Sandman's superpowers allow him to morph and regenerate his body, which is made of malleable sand, the extreme violence exhibited against him, through being

mediated by fantastic powers and special effects, is only allegorically graphic, but has no residual impact.

Prince's notion of "consequences" is crucial here, as it suggests a violent visual spectacle designed purely as such – cognitively understood as purely staged and constructed, with no ontological bearing on reality for viewers. As such, sequences such as the kinetic mid-film battle between Spider-Man and adversary Dr. Octopus (Alfred Molina) in *Spider-Man 2* (Sam Raimi, 2004), which Purse criticizes due to the aforementioned disconnect, or the fight scenes in films like *Fantastic Four* or *X-Men*, which involve superhero characters like Mr. Fantastic (Ioan Gruffudd) and the Invisible Woman (Jessica Alba) or Cyclops (James Marsden) and Storm from *X-Men,* whose combat is driven entirely by CGI-special effects, could instead serve as pure, cathartic spectacle for viewers, without the customary cultural repercussions affiliated with standard filmic violence. The digitally animated choreography could be consumed as a type of simulated movement or dance piece – fitting, given Bukatman's alignment of the exceptionality of superpowered movement with the euphoric, spectatorial joy of dance numbers in the musical genre ("Secret Identity Politics" 115).

This sense of post-9/11 disconnect-violence is furthered by Purse's discussion of the increasing genre trend of non-physical violent altercations. Examples include the climactic confrontation in *Hulk* between the titular hero and his energy-absorbing Father (Nick Nolte), in which the 'fight' consists of the two men screaming, barely visible, amidst a din of amorphous energy special effects, the 'psychic battle' between Professor Xavier and Jean Grey (Famke Janssen) in *X-Men: The Last Stand*, or the climactic battle between Ghost Rider (Nicolas Cage) and satanic antagonist Blackheart (Wes Bently) in *Ghost Rider* (Mark Steven Johnson, 2007), in which Ghost Rider defeats his enemy simply by looking at him with his 'Penance Stare,' which

renders enemies catatonic, forcing them to confront the morality of their violent crimes. Such interactions seemingly serve as the ultimate in post-9/11 (non)violent combat.

Paradoxically, despite this tendency towards disconnected violence in the wake of post-9/11 trauma, the superhero films of this era extend far more attention to the battle-ravaged physicality of the superhero than any other time period in the genre. In all three films in Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* trilogy, Spider-Man's costume is shredded, showing bloody skin underneath,[19] whereas in *Daredevil*, the titular protagonist (Ben Affleck)'s scarred back is filmed almost sensually, in both a shower scene and in the genre's only visually depicted sex scene to date. Even in *Superman Returns*, the saccharine tone and populist, nostalgic tone are undercut by an anachronistically violent sequence where the normally invulnerable Superman is viciously stabbed by a sharp spike of kryptonite and thrown into the ocean by adversary Lex Luthor (Kevin Spacey), later only barely surviving, his costume torn and body bloodied. Far from contradictory, such visual signifiers of bodily violence serve as reiterative of the fetishized images of conservative, 'hard' masculinity Yvonne Tasker identifies as foundational in action cinema (*Spectacular Bodies* 78). The tandem functioning of 'immaterial' CGI violence with the reassurance of a hero who can nonetheless survive being subjected to it thus lends the violence and ideology of such films, despite being purportedly 'new' or 'transgressive,' an ultimately conservative bent. This 'forward-yet-backward' aesthetic best exemplifies the genre's means of articulating post-9/11 trauma.

"Why So Serious?" – The *Dark Knight* Trilogy, and Comparative 'Realism'

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[19] The same is true for the recent reboot, *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Marc Webb, 2012), to the extent of having an image of Spider-Man (Andrew Garfield)'s chest slashed by the claws of adversary the Lizard (Rhys Ifans) serve as a poster and DVD cover for the film.

Despite engaging allegorically with the socio-political violence and trauma of 9/11, few superhero films within this time period serve to interrogate the ethics of the violent actions exhibited by the heroic protagonist. Some, such as *Daredevil* and *The Punisher* did, yet ultimately transitioned to hyperviolent action spectacle sequences in spite of their ruminating, and thereby offsetting such surface critique. Nonetheless, issues of violent combat and external socio-political violence became interrogated far more extensively upon the release of Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* in 2005 – the most dramatically 'dark' departure from the irreverent camp of the 1960s show to date.[20] Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy (2005-2012) served to, once again, singlehandedly re-brand the superhero genre in regards to tone, scope, and 'significance.'[21]

Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy, in many ways, exemplifies what Slavoj Žižek refers to as "the fetishistic denial of cynical reason" – the double-bind between audiences feigning cynicism and jadedness as a means of protecting themselves from sociopolitical anxieties they are ultimately unprepared to deal with (*Sublime Object* 28). Sean Treat furthers this line of thought, finding the fusion of ambiguous, self-reflexive critique in regards to violence and morality and "the imaginary solution of fantasy" that Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy offers an ideal means of focalizing the existential despair and nihilism prevalent in American culture post-9/11, by incorporating sentiments of cultural malaise into entertainment culture (106). Tom Pollard and Lisa Purse echo this sentiment, arguing that a more somber, fallible and relatable timbre to

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[20] The *Dark Knight* trilogy is not exempt of moments of levity or humour – many are deadpan one-liners delivered by Wayne (Christian Bale)'s butler Alfred (Michael Caine). However, these are fleeting, and generally quite tonally grim in delivery, as if even the rhythmic tension-breaks remain comparatively more 'serious.'

[21] Other DC superhero releases, including *Catwoman* (Pitof, 2004), *Superman Returns,* and *Green Lantern* (Martin Campbell, 2011), fail to maintain this established aesthetic of seriousness in a more universal 'brand identity' for DC (Foster 15). Instead, the three films are more tonally aligned with the generic hybridity and tension of the *Spider-Man* era. This is particularly true in *Green Lantern*, in which the fight choreography is entirely composed of the titular hero (Ryan Reynolds) using energy constructs – including one shaped like a 'Hot Wheels' toy car track – from his power ring to attack others, landing it within the tradition of the special-effects driven, 'nonphysical combat' identified by Purse.

Hollywood superhero characters and narratives alike, alongside the justification and ethical

complication of violent spectacle, renders the genre and medium more accessible rather than

anachronistically alienating (76 and *Action* 152 respectively).[22]

Nolan's Batman trilogy exemplifies this cultural mediation to an unprecedented degree,

even incorporating this 'darkness' aesthetically, adjusting the standard bold, pastel colour scheme

of the genre to dulled browns, greys and deep blues, lending it a more faded, 'realistic' timbre.

Additionally, the trilogy deals far more candidly with socio-political undercurrents and the ethical

interrogation of filmic violence in general. Nolan himself, in what could be considered a

manifesto, remarked, "We just write from the perspective of the world we live in, what interests

us and frightens us" (qtd. in Treat 103). Critical discourse on the *Dark Knight* trilogy highlights

this socio-political resonance: Darren Franich considers all the violent confrontations in the

trilogy as terrorism-allegories ("Geekly"), Todd McGowan criticizes *The Dark Knight* (2008) as

dialogic with the politics of exceptionality of the Bush administration (2), and Žižek considers

The Dark Knight Rises as a commentary on the Occupy Wall Street movement, in light of the

economic recession ("Politics of Batman").[23]

Thus, in keeping with the established aesthetic of seriousness and scope that permeates

Nolan's trilogy, the fight choreography – also rooted in martial arts, but dramatically different

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[22] This tonal shift is not specific to the superhero blockbuster: films from the James Bond 'reboot' *Casino Royale* (Martin Campbell, 2006) to examples as recent as this year's *Godzilla* (Gareth Edwards, 2014) are affiliated with what Ian Freer calls the "let's-take-everything-super-seriously approach de rigueur in post-*Dark Knight* blockbusterdom." This remark demonstrates that, at least in the eyes of film critics, the tonal and aesthetic ramifications of Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy continue to proliferate in blockbusters attempting to distinguish themselves as 'worthwhile.'

[23] Interestingly, Brooker implies this interplay with sociopolitical, war-related violence manifests aesthetically even in terms of mise-en-scène in the text. In describing the tonal shifts of *Batman Begins*, he writes that the film "reimagine[s] the gadgets and costumes in plausibly militaristic terms" ("Heroes" 13). Brooker's conflation of the words "plausibl[e]" and "militaristic" suggests not only that historical signifiers of Batman are validated through more 'serious,' pragmatic functions, but equally that the sociopolitical awareness of military violence permeates the texts on numerous levels.

from the intricate theatricality of *Daredevil* – offers few spectacles. Instead, Batman, trained as a ninja,[24] customarily attacks quickly and decidedly from the shadows. Physical interactions are consistently brief but focused, with each blow dealt by Batman heralding an immediate narrative objective (ie: to move past enemies to reach a destination). Likewise, the sound effects and choreography employed lend physical altercations an additional level of 'realism' and intensity, in contrast with the dramatic, unbelievable fight sound foley customary to the genre.[25]

Similarly, Nolan's Batman narrative is markedly more ambiguous in its rationalization of its own violence. Throughout the trilogy, Batman reiterates a familiar, clearly codified mantra of superhero conduct: the refusal to take a life, which leads to his expulsion from the ninja headquarters in which he trained. This establishes an immediate moral binary between 'good' vigilantism and 'bad' vigilantism. This protracted moralism is reiterated throughout the trilogy: in *The Dark Knight*, the Joker (Heath Ledger) refers to it as Batman's "one rule," which, in *The Dark Knight Rises*, Batman extends to a "No guns!" maxim, much to the chagrin of Catwoman (Anne Hathaway) who he is fighting alongside.

This invocation of reality could rely on what Tania Modleski calls "the alibi of the real." Modleski argues that in regards to depictions of filmic violence, "Realism becomes a perfect alibi for indulging in morally dubious pleasures, assuring us that we're not just having a little sadistic fun" (B15), thereby allowing a simultaneous double-standard of critique yet endorsement of the "sadistic fun" of filmic violence. Nonetheless, throughout all three films, the inherent instability of Batman's "one rule" is consistently foregrounded (Maslon and Kantor 283). At the end of

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[24] Brooker asserts that Bale's casting makes for an even more 'realistic' and plausible Batman, as Bale himself went through Batman-level physical training in order to embody the physicality of the role. This lends the character of Batman – and the superhero myth in general – a degree of affective attainability ("Heroes" 12-13).

[25] Prince notes that, throughout film history, sound editing has played a crucial role in underscoring the intensity and 'realism' of violence, whether visually depicted or offscreen (*Classical Film Violence* 67). Though space does not permit me a fully comprehensive comparative soundtrack analysis in the superhero genre, I do refer back to this concept through this work in tandem with discussing the evolving intensity of violent combat in the genre.

Batman Begins, having cornered adversary Ducard/Ra's Al Ghul (Liam Neeson) on the skytrain, which he has rigged to crash, Batman extols the following statement: "I won't kill you. But I don't have to save you." This paradox, in essence, could be extended to the ethics behind violence in the superhero genre as a whole. Similarly, Batman's insistence on "no guns!" in *The Dark Knight Rises* is equally repudiated, when he is saved from being murdered by adversary Bane (Tom Hardy) only by Catwoman arriving on Batman's 'Bat-pod' and shooting Bane through a wall. After doing so, she quips, "You know, about the whole 'no guns' thing – I'm not sure I feel as strongly about it as you." In doing so, Nolan's films differentiate Batman's (inherently fluid) moral conduct from the text's moralism. By demonstrating the instability in a "one rule," the *Dark Knight* trilogy mediates such sentiments into a commentary on vigilante-sanctioned violent intervention.[26]

The *Dark Knight Rises* even temporarily breaches its own inherent sense of 'realism' and physical plausibility. The most noteworthy repudiation of this otherwise withheld standard of consequences of violence is Batman, whose back is (purportedly) broken by Bane, miraculously 'fixing' his back, somewhat implausible cracking it back into place. After this, Batman returns to Gotham to physically confront, and defeat, Bane in the film's climactic battle. By the end of the film, Wayne manages – inexplicably – to survive a certain death by nuclear explosion. Such breaches of the otherwise maintained internal grammar stray into the territory of superhero fantasy, thematically transitioning beyond 'realism' into addressing the symbolic, mythic role of the superhero, by having Batman, like Superman, be able to omnipotently transcend death.

Žižek, again, acknowledges this disconnect, arguing, "cynical reason, with all its ironic

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[26] This challenging of the otherwise comparative sterility of violence in the superhero narrative is furthered still in the Superman reboot *Man of Steel*. The film also comments on the unsustainability of a 'no killing' rule in vigilante combat. Superman (Henry Cavill), having caught fellow Kryptonian antagonist General Zod (Michael Shannon) in a headlock, yet unable to stop his 'heat vision' from murdering human bystanders, is resigned to breaking Zod's neck, murdering the only other survivor from his home planet in an unmistakably graphic fashion. This proved intensely controversial for Superman fans worldwide (Donovan "Superman" 27).

detachment, leaves untouched the fundamental level of ideological fantasy, the level on which ideology structures the social reality itself" (*Sublime Object* 30). In this sense, the climax of the final installment of Nolan's markedly cynical and dark trilogy still caves to brazen ideological reassurance, breaching the otherwise maintained contours of textual realism to thematically further the impact of Batman as a symbol of hope. Because of this, I contest that, over a decade after 9/11, this aforementioned climate of post-9/11 existential cynicism could be waning, with the gritty interrogation into the ethics of violent spectacle not holding the same appeal as it did four years after 9/11 with *Batman Begins*. Instead, it indicates cultural shifts towards a paradigm shift in regards to treating filmic violent spectacle in the superhero genre as a safe site for 'enjoyment' once again – a paradigm shift, I argue, that is largely instigated by the films of Marvel Studios.

<p style="text-align:center"><u>Make Mine Marvel: Reflexivity, Humour, and Political Evasiveness</u></p>

Stephen Prince asserts that, in the wake of 9/11, Hollywood films momentarily reflected on the grander consequences of filmic violence, only to be followed by a clear, mass transition to "business as usual," in an attempt to recoup the 'consequence-free' film violence demonstrated in action Hollywood blockbusters of the 1980s-1990s (*Classical Film Violence* 1). Prince's use of the word "business" is deliberate, implying that Hollywood's reliance on violent action spectacle extends beyond the financial gains of action blockbusters, to suggest a vested interest in the ideological machinations possible in the action genre (and, correspondingly, the superhero genre). This assertion is pivotal to my overarching argument here, as this calculated shift to "business as usual" is exactly the ideological project I argue is being undertaken by Marvel Studios – not just to reclaim film violence, but to make violent action spectacle a 'safe' site for audience enjoyment. This would, in turn, result not only in profit, but allow Marvel the means of

reiterating ideological constructs endorsing deference to exceptional individuals (superheroes) and corresponding superstructures (the military, etc.) alike. In doing so, the Marvel Studios films adapt a tonal aesthetic of reflexive wit, opting for moments of self-deprecating humour instead of the melodrama and 'seriousness' of the genre to date.

This self-codified tone was established within the first minutes (or, arguably, seconds) of *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008), the first release from Marvel Studios, which, in itself, exemplifies all foundational tonal elements of the Marvel aesthetic. Rather than opening with the dramatic, aggrandizing brass notes of a Hans Zimmer score, or the quixotic voiceover of Tobey Maguire musing, "Who am I? You sure you wanna know?" *Iron Man* begins with AC/DC's "Back in Black" blaring out, accompanying an extreme long shot of a military convoy through the Afghanistan desert. Inside one jeep in the convoy, a group of soldiers glance skittishly at an as-of-yet unseen man in the back seat, dramatically teased by the idle swilling of a glass of scotch. Cut to Robert Downey Jr.'s Tony Stark, wearing Bono sunglasses, and immediately breaking into rapid-fire, referential wisecracking: "I feel like you're driving me to a court martial. What'd I do? I feel like you're going to pull over and snuff me. What, you're not allowed to talk? Hey – Forrest!" Shortly after, the jeep in front of them explodes. The scene – three minutes into the film – devolves into a frenzied action sequence, fraught with shooting, and, crucially, with a further brief moment of humour inserted in. Stark, attempting to avoid being shot, begins texting (presumably to enlist help, but still an unconventional action to execute in the middle of a Hollywood action sequence), only to notice a missile that has landed in the sand beside him, about to explode, has "Stark Industries" written on the side of it. As such, the final seconds before the missile detonates, hitting Stark, are relegated not to tension building, or underscoring the pending violence about to affect Stark. Instead, the moment is ensconced with humour, focusing on Stark's indignant double-take before he is hit by the explosion.

The tone of this sequence is perfectly indicative of Marvel's tonal aesthetic, which I call "reflexive wit."[27] – slyly comedic, fast-paced, and referential, privileging viewer textual familiarity through Stark's reference to *Forrest Gump* (Robert Zemeckis, 1994), and subverting action conventions through Stark's texting. This sets a precedent of relaxed, knowing, acerbic humour, which, even when interrupted by the outburst of violence, still diffuses tension. Geoff King discusses the role of comedy in complicating the implied 'consequences' of filmic violence in the postmodern action film, arguing, "[m]oments of violence in these films are often coded as 'witty' and stylized and, therefore, more *detached from potentially 'real' implications* than might otherwise be the case" (131, my Italics). As such, Marvel's tonal aesthetic serves to equally distance viewers from excessive contemplation of the films' depicted violence in a similar means to 'unreality' explained by Purse and Prince, yet serves to, instead, mediate such distancing as a rebranding into spectatorial entertainment.

Similarly, in contrast to the *Dark Knight* trilogy's foregrounding its mediation of socio-political concerns, the Marvel films, as exemplified here, consistently acknowledge such anxieties, but ultimately skirt around direct ethical interrogation of them. *Iron Man* seemingly provokes socio-political conversation through the topical involvement of the American military's stationing in Afghanistan, and Stark's bombastic weapons presentation (played as satirical):

'They' say the best weapon is one you never have to fire. I respectfully disagree. I *prefer* the weapon you only have to fire *once!* That's how Dad did it, that's how America does it… and it's worked out pretty well so far! Let one of these babies off the chain, and I *personally* guarantee you that the bad guys won't want to come out of their caves. […] To peace!

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[27] Lee Easton uses the term "metafictional" in discussing Marvel's use of reflexive humour in establishing their transmedia cross-promotions ("Uncanny" 14).

However, apart from this broad satirical introduction, the film eschews such political commentary in favour of the excitement of Stark inventing and refining his Iron Man armour, and using it for personally sanctioned violent conflict resolution. Indeed, as Anthony Mills argues, *Iron Man* and its sequels continue to introduce geopolitical issues such as military interventionalism, yet never ethically interrogate them further (178). This culminates in Stark's brazen boast in *Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010), "I have successfully privatized world peace!" (178)[28]

This moment is most memorably echoed in a mid-film sequence in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnson, 2011),[29] introducing protagonist Steve Rogers (Chris Evans) in his heroic capacity as Captain America. Rogers appears in a farcical facsimile of his original comic book costume, awkwardly performing in a war bonds propaganda sequence ("Who wants to help me sock ol' Adolf on the jaw?" Rogers feebly quips to audiences largely composed of cheering children). This sequence, set to musical pastiche "The Star-Spangled Man" similarly knowingly 'winks' at audiences lambasting the hyperbolic patriotism of Captain America by introducing the character in tandem with a satirical critique of 1940s enlistment propaganda (like much Marvel subtext, conflating capitalism and the military). However, like *Iron Man*, this segment marks the film's only noteworthy instance of overtly courting any socio-political commentary, before transitioning to several action sequences and montage foregrounding Captain America in the midst of nonreflexive military combat.

These examples demonstrate the double-bind of Marvel's reflexivity: though they draw attention to instances of sociopolitical anxieties and extratextual violence more explicitly than the

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[28] Further discussion of this pivotal moment, and how it exemplifies Marvel Studios' satirizing yet venerating the American military will occur in Chapter Three.

[29] The film will henceforth be referred to as *The First Avenger* for brevity's sake. To avoid confusion, its 2014 sequel, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* will henceforth be referred to as *The Winter Soldier*.

allegorical engagement of earlier genre examples, they restrict themselves to fleeting, undeveloped moments of doing so. Such moments appear tailored to be repeated out of context, in a bid to establish credibility for the reflexivity and wit of the films in question, yet are ultimately too fleeting to invite an audience to reflect on, or interrogate, the intricacies of the sociopolitical issues raised. Instead, the Marvel films effectively establish a mentality of 'doing all the moral and ethical thinking for the viewer.'

This recalls Žižek's allegory of the "Tibetan Prayer Wheel" (an object that performs the act of ritualistic praying on behalf of the user), theorizing the concept of a cultural product 'doing the work' for its audience. Žižek finds such devices to perfectly represent contemporary attitudes towards politics: audiences refuse to ignore sociopolitical conflicts and debates for fear of being repressed or 'duped,' yet are equally reluctant to 'do the work' in more actively resisting, or becoming more informed about, such issues. As such, Žižek claims cultural texts that figuratively 'do' politics for the viewer serve as hugely reassuring, while also furthering a cultural climate of disinterest, subordination and passivity (*How to Read Lacan* 31-33). This theory is pivotal to my analysis of the action sequences in the Marvel superhero films, and how they serve to mediate dominant ideologies. This mentality, in turn, leaves viewers free to spectatorially engage with the Marvel spectacles of violence free of ethical dilemmas, instead consuming them as pure, 'untarnished' entertainment. Spider-Man's aforementioned catchphrase could thus be reworded in the case of Marvel: "With great power comes no responsibility."

<u>"Give me a phat beat to beat my buddy's ass to!" – Rhythm, Affective Physicality,</u>
<u>and Humour in Marvel Violence</u>

Melding comedy with action spectacle is by no means unprecedented in Hollywood (Tasker 57), but what ultimately distinguishes the treatment thereof in the superhero films of

Marvel Studios is an amplified sense of maintained pace and immersion within the action sequence in question. While earlier superhero films would include brief comedic interludes in their action sequences, they functioned exactly as such: interruptions in the pacing of the sequence, allowing the audience momentary 'relief' from the intensity of the action. The timing, as such, is that of 'action-pause-comedy-resume-action.' Conversely, in Marvel action sequences, the inevitable moments of comedy are more fluidly immersed in the violent spectacle, allowing for further suture between enjoyment of comedy and violence, rather than interrupting the intensity of the fight or chase. There is a sense of 'keeping the pace,' by quickening moments of comedy to often a fraction of a second, rather than lingering on them, as if conceding viewer familiarity with Hollywood action convention. This often results in the conflation of action and comedy into singular 'beats.'

These 'beats' structure the editing of Marvel fight sequences. Geoff King observes that standard action films cut their physical action to instances of movement, to amplify excitement in accordance with Hollywood intensified continuity (*Spectacular Narratives* 94). Marvel films, instead, attain a particular rhythm to their fights, often choreographing physical blows to match the accompanying musical score (or sometimes interrupting it, as in *Iron Man*, when the heroic fight music abruptly cuts off when Iron Man is shot out of the sky by a tank, infusing the moment with comedy). This 'musicality' in pacing is appropriate, given Bukatman's aforementioned alignment of the superhero genre with the filmic musical ("Secret Identity Politics" 115).[30] *The Avengers* offers several examples of these consistently paced 'beats' of violence and humour. The most celebrated are the Hulk (Mark Ruffalo)'s unexpected sucker punching of Thor (Chris

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[30] *Iron Man 2* reflexively acknowledges this musicality of action combat: anticipating a fight with his friend James 'Rhodey' Rhodes (Don Cheadle) breaking out at his birthday party, an inebriated Stark calls out to his DJ, "Give me a phat beat to beat my buddy's ass to!" Queen's "Another One Bites the Dust" begins to play, and the ensuing brawl is choreographed to the beats of the song.

Hemsworth) immediately after battling alongside him, or his interrupting antagonist Loki (Tom Hiddleston)'s boastful postulating by ingloriously slamming him into the floor to the point of submission. Furthermore, numerous Marvel fight sequences pepper such 'beats' with instances of unorthodox fight choreography, generally involving heroes propelling large, unexpected objects into enemies: in *The Avengers,* Thor flips a car into attacking Chitauri alien forces with his hammer, whereas in *Iron Man 3*, Stark propels a piano into an attacking helicopter with his repulsor rays. These additions not only fuse action and comedy beats, but equally serve to celebrate the physical exceptionality of the heroes, furthering their valorization (as will be further discussed in Chapters Two and Three).

As such, though such moments are clearly intended to play as comedic, the audience is not given the customary time to reflect and laugh. What is crucial to note is that not only do these sequences blend comedy and violence, but that the comedic beats are not paced or exhibited in any fashion different to the rest of the scene. The fights thereby maintain a sense of flippant naturalism, rather than overtly 'constructed' comedy, furthering Marvel's trope of purportedly privileging active audiences (as if a knowing wink to the viewer's ability to comprehend the comedy in such a conventional visual gag without overplaying it). This, in turn, furthers Marvel's overall paradigm of re-coding violent spectacle as unapologetically enjoyable.

In addition to Marvel's penchant for melding comedy with violence, the combat choreography of Marvel tends to privilege extensive hand-to-hand combat sequences more than many genre equivalents. Even climactic battles against enemies with primarily firepower-based capabilities, incorporate extensive sequences of physical choreography, rather than succumbing to action spectacle rooted in CGI energy blasts, as with genre precedents. The central action

setpiece in *Iron Man 2*, in which Stark and Rhodes (now established as his similarly armoured

pseudo-sidekick, War Machine)[31] battle a room full of robotic drones, relies on the two,

somewhat impractically, punching and kicking the drones almost as much as shooting them.[32]

Such focus on physical combat helps localize the violent spectacle, in lieu of the FX alienation

outlined by Purse and Prince, lending the violence a more affective, almost participatory

dimension of tactility. In addition, the comparative intimacy of hand-to-hand combat allows

further fusion of character building within action sequences. Darren Franich sees character

building and more simplistic combat as pivotal to the Marvel brand identity compared to genre

precedents ("17 Signs"), and the smaller scale focus of hand-to-hand combat allows for more

emphasis on dialogue and characterization – including humour, as discussed – to permeate and

colour action combat.

Furthermore, the sole prominent female Marvel superhero to date, the Black Widow

(Scarlett Johansson), is almost entirely defined by her athleticism and propensity for physical

combat. As such, in keeping with Lisa Purse's commentary on the near inevitability of a degree

of voyeuristic eroticism in physical female combat in Hollywood action films (*Action* 74), the

Black Widow's violent engagement results in blatantly sexualized physical spectacles, with

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[31] Common in the Marvel superhero films is the unmistakable presence of 'tiers' in their cast of superhero characters: the central, 'headlining' heroes, and others, relegated more to subordinate roles (herein I refer to them as 'Secondary heroes'). These include Rhodes, Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow, Hawkeye (Jeremy Renner) in *The Avengers*, and Sam Wilson/Falcon (Anthony Mackie) in *The Winter Soldier*. As such characters, while still unmistakably superheroes, ultimately function as more akin to 'sidekick' figures, who, while given heroic character beats, often function to further valorize the central heroes by comparison. Said valorization is particularly explicit (and, in keeping with Marvel tone, comedic) in *The Winter Soldier*, when the Falcon declares his allegiance to Captain America, saying, "I do what he does, just slower." This distinction becomes ideologically problematic, considering the only non-male and non-Caucasian heroes in the Marvel franchise occupy this subordinate tier. As such, I find the issue worth specifying, though I am not privy to the space to fully unpack the ideological ramifications of it here.

[32] *Iron Man 2* includes an ongoing choreographic motif of boxing: a sequence midway through the film has Stark sparring with his bodyguard, Happy Hogan (Jon Favreau), while Travis Wagner finds the aforementioned Rhodes vs. Stark birthday party sparring as indistinguishable from a clumsy "boxing match" (9). This allusion aligns the film's violent combat with the playfulness and spectatorship of competitive sports, further rebranding it as strictly enjoyable.

choreography largely entailing her thighs wrapped around antagonists' heads, or otherwise suggestive wrestling maneuvers. Moreover, the Black Widow's fights consistently employ almost hyperbolically 'feminine signifiers,' coding her combat as explicitly (traditionally, and somewhat conservatively) 'feminized.' In *Iron Man 2*, after fighting her way through a building full of armed guards, she sprays the final guard in the face with mace without looking at him, suggesting her deterring an aggressive suitor; in *The Avengers* she whips a guard in the face with her hair, and, after the fight, calmly stops to retrieve her high heels. Such choreography befits Purse's observation that Hollywood action films frequently code female action stars with explicitly (and stereotypically) 'feminine' characteristics as "containment strategies," further reifying traditional gender roles (*Action* 81). As if in conversation with such claims, the Black Widow's fights, and the moments of purported humour therein, are shot with the same uninterrupted pace as those discussed above, as if infusing her combat with Marvel's established brand of reflexive humour – a commentary on the genre's customarily conservative sexual politics in regards to female characters. However, the unironically eroticized nature to the Black Widow's combat, in tandem with her general lack of characterization and narrative focus compared to the primary (male) heroes, instead further serves to stress her difference from the central heroes, further valorizing them by comparison (as is further discussed in Chapters Two and Three).

Pursuing the affective tactility of more physical combat, a further innovation in Marvel fight choreography is the franchise's propensity for deriving spectacle action sequences from superheroes fighting other superheroes. Rather than the traditional 'hero vs. villain' combat binary, certain Marvel films display prolonged instances of superheroes battling their contemporaries: the aforementioned sparring between Stark and Rhodes in *Iron Man 2,* and several such conflicts in *The Avengers* (including one 'three-way' battle between Iron Man, Thor, and Captain America in a forest). These sequences are noteworthy because they lack the usual

moral-infusion in superhero combat ('good guys' vs. 'bad guys'), as all participants are equally

exceptional, valorized protagonists. As such, rather than serving as rough ciphers for cursory

moralism, as the customary superhero fight sequence would, these 'hero vs. hero' sequences

instead adapt a playful competition akin to a sporting event, allowing viewers to 'root' for their

favourite (yet equally intrinsically 'good') hero, or to simply sit back and enjoy the fight in

question as an instance of morally-divested, 'pure' violent spectacle. In either case, this trope

marks yet another instance of Marvel reinscribing violent interludes with fun.

Theresa Webb and Nick Browne stress the essential nature of, in New Hollywood action-

adventure films, an internal grammar of plausibility that is established, to avoid cognitively

distancing viewers in light of the genre's inherently sparse interplay with reality (82). Thus, while

the average superhero film is almost inevitably, by definition, not 'realistic,' there is an insular

logic of physical possibility that is established and maintained by the nature of the superhero's

powers. Richard Reynolds calls this logic "hierarchal continuity" – a hero with superhuman

strength will be able to perform superhuman feats of strength, yet there is variation therein, and

'stronger' characters will be capable of more hyperbolically unrealistic feats (40-41). As Paul

Atkinson explains,

> A character's ability to fly, leap, or metamorphose is always regarded as remarkable when
>
> judged within a framework in which the laws of physics still apply. The superhero's
>
> actions always require explanation to separate them from the actions of nonsuperheroes.
>
> Once these anomalies are posited, the superhero is then only required to remain consistent
>
> with respect to fixed traits. (60)[33]

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[33] This notion of internal grammar of plausibility also extends to violent potential, as discussed earlier in regards to
the "pulled punches" cognitive assumption on the viewer's behalf.

In many earlier superhero films, the inherently fantastic nature of the genre lent itself to some fairly implausible breaches of internal grammar. For example, in *Daredevil*, or the *Batman* franchise, while both protagonists are understood to be capable of Olympic level athleticism, they perform physical feats that exceed the plausibility of their powers – leaping from ten story buildings or scaffolds, or completing 75 foot jumps or drops in Daredevil's case, yet landing unharmed. These exhibitions are thereby 'unrealistic' even within the grammar of the superhero narrative. Nonetheless, these breaches of internal plausibility were frequent enough as, due to the fantastic nature of the narratives, audiences were less likely to scrutinize 'realism.'

However, Marvel Studios furthered an ongoing project of combining their tonal wit with a penchant for textual fidelity, this sense of internal power grammar and plausibility is more carefully maintained. Laurence Maslon and Michael Kantor's argue that post-*Iron Man* Marvel films demonstrate the verisimilitude of the superhero *in* an accessible reality more extensively than genre precedents (282). In an interview, Captain America star Chris Evans attested to the more grounded, moderate depictions of physical combat in *The First Avenger*:

> if I'm going to punch someone they're not going to put them on a cable and fly them back 50 feet, but he's going to go down, probably not getting back up, which I think humanizes it. It makes it something that, again, I think everyone can relate to a little bit more. (qtd. in Mortimer)

As such, Marvel's emphasis on internal fidelity, can, if Evans' assertion is correct, lend its combat a degree of accessible intimacy, yet one designed for enjoyment rather than distancing critique.

Equally, Robert Genter outlines the tradition established in Marvel Comics of superheroes advocating nonviolence on the surface, but inwardly harbouring repressed urges to unleash it (961). While this conceit is most evidently true in regards to the "Freudian" Hulk (Mills 169), it

manifests throughout, as with Stark's vehemence to close down the weapons manufacturing division of his (primarily weapons design) company translating into a vigilante quest for global technological disarmament (Mills 176). The 'well-intentioned interventionalism' of *Iron Man* is considered a spectacle of geo-political wish-fulfillment by Lisa Purse (*Contemporary Action Cinema* 154). As such, Marvel's mediation of the appropriateness of violence recalls Barna William Donovan's concept of "acceptable visions of violence" (*Blood, Guns and Testosterone* 211) as motivation for steadily more explicit depictions and mentions of violence.

<u>"That was *Really* Violent!" – Escalating Boldness in Marvel Action Violence</u>

Initially, the majority of the Marvel films acquiesced to the standard Hollywood trope of using evasive editing to avoid the consequences of depicted action violence from occurring. However, more contemporary Marvel films have since transitioned to acknowledging, even reveling in, the graphic consequences of depicted violence. Throughout the years, violent combat in Marvel films has continued to intensify, including more pronounced sound editing emphasizing the impact and resonance of physical blows in *The First Avenger* and *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011). In *The Winter Soldier*, not only does Captain America throw a knife at an enemy (an uncharacteristically violent gesture rendered all the more shocking by its inclusion in the film's opening action sequence), but the pace and intensity of the hand-to-hand fights is rapidly increased, with considerable use of rapidly-paced intensified continuity editing and frantic, handheld cameras capturing the film's already chaotic Mixed Martial Arts (MMA) fight choreography.

Iron Man 3, in particular, marks a newfound standard in genre reflexivity towards filmic violence. Stark, numerous times throughout the film, explicitly threatens antagonists: he issues an

on-air challenge to terrorist figurehead the Mandarin (Ben Kingsley) by saying "You just died, pal. I'm gonna come get the body" When kidnapped and held hostage by henchmen of adversary Aldrich Killian (Guy Pearce), Stark, intones, "I'm gonna kill you first." Upon the arrival of his remote controlled Iron Man armour, Stark strikes the henchman in the face with enough force to – in keeping with Atkinson's notion of insular diegetic grammar – easily make good on his threat. In the film's next action sequence, Stark once again (this time, unmistakably) kills, firing a repulsor blast through the chest of villainous henchman Savin (James Badge Dale), before leaving him to conclusively die in the explosion in the airplane he was riding. Stark's love interest Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow) even provides satirical commentary on this explicitness at the end of the climactic battle with Killian, exclaiming, "That was *really* violent!" – poignantly, as a throwaway line played for laughs, rather than ethically interrogated. Ultimately, this moment calcifies the current aesthetic of Marvel's superhero films: confident enough in their ability to mitigate the ethics of violence that they can reflexively call attention to their own violence without any indication of contemplating consequences, and all in a fashion designed to entertain above all else.

However, what is perhaps the most noteworthy shift in terms of violent spectacle in the Marvel superhero films is the increasing reliance on collateral, environmental damage and destruction within action sequences.[34] This collateral damage does not only mark setpieces of destruction, but superhero violence spilling into urban centers – a pointed contrast to many violent showdowns in earlier superhero films that pointedly isolated themselves from being in populated areas, to avoid the threat of passersby being injured by superhero conflicts, in the period of more evasive interplay with consequences of superhero violence after 9/11. In the

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[34] Although non-Marvel Studios superhero films have since adopted this genre trope, with noteworthy recent examples including *Man of Steel*, *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (Marc Webb, 2014), the pioneering such example was Marvel's *The Avengers* in 2012.

Marvel films, conversely, pedestrians are depicted as not only at risk, but obviously being injured

or killed: early showdowns in *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008) take

place on crowded city streets, with the villains unmistakably murdering several passersby amidst

their violent conflict (antagonist Obadiah Stane/Iron Monger [Jeff Bridges] even snatches a

passing motorcycle to hit Iron Man with, sending the rider unquestionably to his death). This

destruction only continues to escalate to unprecedented levels from *The Avengers* onwards, with

mass city destruction rivaling imagery from 1990s 'disaster cinema,' such as *Independence Day*

(Roland Emmerich, 1996) and *Armageddon* (Michael Bay, 1998), and trends in the 1990s action

film centering action setpieces around the destruction of locations (Lichtenfeld 159; King "Just

Like a Movie?" 47).

However, in keeping with the genre's perpetual unspoken suspension of disbelief that

civilians *could* theoretically escape unharmed amidst destructive setpieces, earlier Marvel

examples, including *Iron Man, Thor*, and *The Avengers*, all have sequences clearly demarcating

civilians fleeing or being evacuated from the scene prior to, or during, destructive showdowns. In

keeping with the general sense of escalation[35] in Marvel violence, this is not the case in later

Marvel superhero films. Examples such as *Thor: The Dark World* and *The Winter Soldier* have

civilians unmistakably demonstrated as present amidst sequences of enormous destruction and

collateral damage, implying astronomical levels of passerby casualties. Yet, no civilians are

explicitly shown being killed, despite the threat thereof; instead, both *The Incredible Hulk* and

Thor: The Dark World demonstrate bystanders filming the expansive destruction and superhero

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[35] My use of the term 'Escalation' here is consistent within the superhero genre, as per its use in *Batman Begins*, where Lieutenant James Gordon (Gary Oldman) queries, in response to Batman's existence, "What about escalation? […] We start carrying semi-automatics, they buy automatics. We start wearing Kevlar, they buy armour-pissing rounds. […] And you're wearing a mask, jumping off rooftops." Gordon's comments thus serve to echo common critiques of the existence of superheroes spurring the existence of more dramatic lawbreaking adversaries (McGowan, Treat, Verano).

action on their cell phones, further coding the violence as enjoyable spectacle, even for those

purportedly in harm's way.

Such urban destruction cannot help but visually allude to the attacks of 9/11,[36] suggesting

more explicit and somber reflection on the ethics of spectacle violence, in a fashion more akin to

Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy. *The Avengers* occasionally suggests this, with numerous sequences

of heroes looking around at the vast environmental destruction surrounding them with awed

contemplation, as if reflecting on the destructive impact of their violent conflicts. However, given

the aforementioned recollection of the 1990s disaster cinema and its notably populist, 'fun' tone,

the spectacle-violence in the Marvel films instead recalls Geoff King's analysis of the appeal of

disaster cinema being "enjoyable fantasies of destruction precisely because they can be safely

indulged in the realm of fantasy" ("Just Like a Movie?" 49). By rekindling imagery from the

1990s disaster cinema with the already established levity and fun factor in Marvel violence, the

genre serves to equally reappropriate post-9/11 collateral damage as escapist fun, rather than

triggering imagery for American audiences or otherwise.

The Marvel Studios films maintaining such consistent tone and treatment of violent action

spectacle lends their filmic output a particular uniformity. This, in turn, constructs a brand

identity of being a 'safe' capitalist product, reliably pseudo-individualized in its expenditure of

action-spectacle, and without pretentions as to its 'fun factor.' However, to further reify viewer

endorsement of the standardized 'guilt-free action spectacle,' the Marvel films employ numerous

diegetic tropes solidifying the valorization of the heroic protagonist, as will be discussed in the

ensuing Chapter.

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[36] *The Winter Soldier* is the most explicit in visually recalling 9/11 in its collateral damage, as will be discussed in more depth in Chapter Three's case study.

Chapter Two: "If He Be Worthy" –Validating the Violence of the Marvel Superhero as Enjoyable Spectacle

"I'm just not the hero type… clearly. I mean, with this laundry list of character defects, all the mistakes I've made, largely public... The truth is… I am Iron Man."
-Tony Stark (Robert Downey Jr.), Iron Man *(2008)*

This bold assertion, the triumphant closing line of Jon Favreau's 2008 film of the same name, serves as not only indicative of the distinctive Marvel Studios tone and aesthetic, but equally microcosmic of their treatment of their heroic protagonists. Indeed, the transition in Stark's fumbling public statement, an attempt to protect his 'secret identity' turned whimsical public confession, could not be more aptly representative of Marvel's take on the customary superhero 'divine/human' dichotomy. Stark not only affirms both his human fallibility and godlike, heroic alter-ego (who he himself, earlier, dubs a "superhero"), but does so without any trace of the melodrama or existential brooding customary in earlier incarnations of the genre. As J.M. Tyree states, "*Iron Man* accepts its own juvenility and revels in a semi-spoofed version of the genre" (31) – a particularly apt analysis of Marvel Studios' tonal brand identity.

This chapter will intensify this work's overall discussion of the Marvel brand identity is by examining what is arguably the genre's most effective means of reflexively rebranding and validating its violent spectacle as fun: narratively coding the superhero protagonist as 'worthy agents of violence.' To validate such violent spectacle, and the hero as a worthy agent in instigating it, the Marvel superhero films establish and reconcile a binary of human and 'divine' identities – what Umberto Eco calls "aesthetic universality" (15) – evoking both pathos and mythic resonance, all the while tempering the extremes of both with self-reflexive humour, thereby reconciling the binary and rendering it more universally approachable. As such, the

Marvel hero fulfils dual functions of being fundamentally human (and thereby empathically relatable) and far more than human (and thereby devoid of human error), without the somber posturing that could make such a figure alienating. This chapter will further interrogate the narrative establishment of this identity binary, and, as a case study, illustrate this process taking effect through a comparative analysis of the fight scenes in *Thor*.

<div align="center">

"The Hero Type"

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Umberto Eco sees the fundamental difference between the superhero figure and heroes of classical mythology being the classical mythic hero's "immutable characteristics and […] irreversible destiny." Conversely, Eco claims that for contemporary comic book superheroes, given their serialized narratives, the "reader's main interest is transferred to the unpredictable nature of *what will happen*," which "sacrifices for the most part the mythic potential of the character." As such, Eco sees the hero's secret identity as key to audience accessibility, calling this linkage between human fallibility and links to mythic superstructures "aesthetic universality," claiming this lends the hero the potential to encompass widespread feelings and behaviours as a means of personal reference, rather than the unchanging nature of myth (14-15).[37]

Befitting the emphasis Eco places on the necessity of secret identities in audiences connecting with superheroes, the genre remained preoccupied with the concept (Easton "Uncanny" 11; Lichtenfeld 301; Bainbridge 71) prior to the formation of Marvel Studios. Moreover, this preoccupation was generally infused with pathos and existential, almost schizophrenic melancholy; *Spider-Man* even begins with protagonist Peter Parker's meditative

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[37] Richard Harrison equally conflates divinity and ideology in his analysis of the superhero figure: "The old gods are with us still. […] Stripped of their religious meaning, they remain touchstones of folklore and myth. But in the comics, they are *figures* again, taking up at least part of their old task of giving human form to the forces of psychology, politics, invention and nature" ("Origin" 17).

voiceover narration inquiring "Who am I?" Parker refers to his Spider-Man identity as "my gift. My curse," establishing a theme of reluctant heroism central to the genre (Schumaker 139), until the resulting tonal shift from the onset of Marvel Studios. This theme of reluctant heroism affirms the genre's established tension between 'civilian' and 'hero' identities, initially seen as largely mutually exclusive. This calcifies in the recurring trope of the protagonist's affirmation of their heroic identity necessitating self-sacrifice, usually in terms of romantic union. Parker will not allow himself to act on his affections for love interest Mary-Jane Watson (Kirsten Dunst) for fear of putting her life in danger, thereby coding his acceptance of his Spider-Man identity with melodramatic self-sacrifice.

Such hyperbolic moral gestures and the associated self-sacrifice and pathos being inherent in the assumption of a superheroic identity were a staple in the superhero text – both comic book and filmic. Ultimately, this dichotomy of inhabiting an identity that is simultaneously personal and functioning on behalf of a collective (human/divine) recalls Rick Altman's discussion of the "dual-focus narrative" hero, who "is defined by his function […] the group personified" (68). The superhero proves an ideal candidate for Altman's "dual-focus hero," particularly in the wake of post-9/11 sensitivity to spectacle-violence, by serving as a comforting, inspirational ideal for morality and integrity in the wake of widespread trauma (Schlegel and Habermann 30). In the pre-Marvel superhero films that proceeded 9/11, the assumption of a superheroic identity largely circumvented an individual identity, and instead a sense of 'duty' in functioning as a symbol on behalf of the cultural collective.

Conversely, *Iron Man*'s evoking of the melodrama of secret identity proceeded by glibly discarding such concerns concretizes Marvel Studios' revolutionary aesthetic and sensibilities in their treatment of the superhero genre and its protagonists. Stark's flamboyant refusal to keep up the guise of a secret identity is not only a reflexive wink to genre conventions, in keeping with

Marvel's reflexive wit, but also indicative of a larger ideological project. None of Marvel's filmic

output after *Iron Man* engages with the issue of secret identity. The identities of Bruce

Banner/Hulk and Steve Rogers/Captain America are public knowledge within the governmental

and military complexes they are affiliated with. Similarly, *Thor* purposefully eschews the

character's convoluted human secret identity as medical doctor Donald Blake from the comics,[38]

instead occupying the genre's most succinct coalescence of human/divine identities by solely

identifying as the "God of Thunder" (which will be discussed in greater detail in the latter half of

this chapter).

In this way, what was arguably the guiding thematic concern and generic marker of the

superhero narrative (Coogan 6) became effectively eradicated by Marvel. This is significant not

only in regards to the eradication of the trauma of secret identities being more in keeping with

Marvel's aesthetic of unabashed entertainment, but equally in regards to Marvel's mediation of

the heroic identity. Rather than treating the aforementioned human/divine tension as a binary,

Marvel Studios serves to reconcile the two within a single figure more fluidly, further facilitating

their ongoing ideological project of engendering unquestioned support for and affiliation with the

superhero figure. Such unwavering fidelity to the hero figure, in turn, serves to divest their

violent, vigilante actions – even in their frequent illegality (McGowan 2; Gaine 111) – from

cynical, ethical interrogation, instead re-coding the hero's violent means to conflict resolution as

enjoyable spectacle.

<center>Suffering With A Smile</center>

Marvel's first means of fostering audience affiliation with the superhero protagonist,

towards the end of rendering their spectacle-violence as acceptable and enjoyable, is in their

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[38] The film, in characteristic Marvel wit, does include in-jokes to Thor's comic dual identity as Blake. Jane Foster (Natalie Portman), when lending Thor a man's shirt, self-consciously rips off a nametag that reads "Donald Blake," mumbling, "My ex. Good with patients, bad with relationships."

focus on the human end of the 'human/divine' binary. While many other superhero protagonists were chastised for being too obtusely godlike, most notably Superman (Donovan "Superman" 21), Marvel's filmic output maintains an emphasis on accessible, 'human' protagonists, even in the case of the purportedly divine Thor. This character-driven approach is not only a continuation of an established trend in the action genre of justifying action spectacle within caring about characters (Purse 27), but is also in keeping with Marvel's comic book brand identity (Lee 116), further synergizing the company's cinematic and comic output. Appropriately, Marvel's cinematic superheroes are depicted as accessibly flawed and human – Jason Bainbridge even aligns Marvel storytelling with the establishment of character and conflict of the melodrama tradition (68). Such humanism encourages audiences to relate to them as human before transitioning to comprehending them as superpowered beings. This approach contrasts many earlier superhero texts, such as *Batman* or *Daredevil*, where the protagonist is introduced first in their superheroic capacity, before expounding on their civilian identity.

In terms of Marvel humanizing their heroes, *Iron Man*'s declaration of a "laundry list of character defects" proves apt. Many Marvel films introduce their protagonists in tandem with their suffering: Stark, critically wounded and abducted in Afghanistan; the physically diminutive, naïve and idealistic Rogers in *The First Avenger*; Bruce Banner (Edward Norton) in *The Incredible Hulk* sequestering himself in Brazil, practicing meditation to keep his destructive rampages as the Hulk under control. This trend may be evident, given Martin Fradley's assertion that "spectacles of heroically suffering white men have become the key trope in recent Hollywood action cinema" (239). Nonetheless, it codes the Marvel heroes with sympathy and pathos from the onset, which serves in poignant counterpoint with their ensuing celebrated exceptionality.

However, the crucial difference is that such situations are not exploited for the hyperbolic melodrama of earlier superhero texts like *Spider-Man* or *Daredevil*. Instead, in keeping with the Marvel reflexive wit, they are intertwined with self-aware humour. In *The First Avenger*, Rogers wryly gives love interest Peggy Carter (Hayley Atwell) a self-deprecating tour of all the locations he has been beaten up in Brooklyn, whereas Banner's faulty grasp of the Spanish language results in him satirically misquoting his famous maxim: "You're making me hungry…!" Thus, the Marvel films simultaneously court the pathos and larger-than-life struggles customary with the superhero genre, but, in doing so, consistently offer audiences 'grace notes' of relief. This practice prevents the tone or emotional resonance from becoming too serious, thereby fostering a sense of unapologetic entertainment throughout.

This pathos is intensified by the necessary act of violent, painful transformation archetypal for the superhero figure. While Bukatman claims "[t]he central fascination in the superhero film is the transforming body" ("Superhero Movies" 121), Žižek articulates, "[i]n our popular narratives and myths, from Robocop to Stephen Hawking, a person becomes a supernaturally powerful hero only after being the victim of some traumatic accident or illness which literally shatters his body" (*Ticklish Subject* 369). This violent, 'shattering' transformation is particularly foregrounded in "Marvel characters, who often have something deeply wrong with their bodies" (Tyree 28). Correspondingly, the transformations of Rogers and Banner into their super-bodies (and Thor, in his inverse transformation into a 'mortal') leave them howling in pain. Similarly, Stark's body is literally reconfigured after his shrapnel wound, an indignity emphasized by his initially having to carry around a car battery to power the electromagnet in his chest – a condition that prompts Travis Wagner to read Stark as an allegory for disability (4), and as poignant an image for Fradley's suffering male body as any. In this way, Fradley and Žižek's conflation of suffering and heroic power furthers the blending of the human/divine binary of the

Marvel superhero: the painful suffering of each protagonist's transformation into their heroic identities simultaneously reinforces their sympathetic pathos, yet larger-than-life ability to endure punishment, coding them as masculine ideals with resonance beyond that of individual humans.

This, in turn, recalls Lisa Purse's notion of "fantasies of empowerment." Purse outlines the narrative process of the action hero's body temporarily losing, then regaining control (as is the case of the suffering of said Marvel heroes, followed by their reclamatory heroic actions), which can equally grant film audiences a comparable sense of 'mastery' of the body (45). In this way, the suffering of the Marvel superhero fulfills such fantasies, by also engaging the audience on an affective level, translating such bodily or emotional responses into a euphoric thrill. As such, this maintains the overall Marvel project of translating violence into enjoyment, by coding even the suffering of the Marvel hero as pleasurable – not in a fetishistic, masochistic fashion (which could prove uncomfortable or distasteful for mass Hollywood audiences), but as a form of (literal) empowerment.

In addition to the affective resonance of the hero's physical torment, further pathos and scope to the conflict of the superhero figure are generated in response to the prevalence of death in Marvel superhero narratives (Harrison "No!" 209; Lewis 37). As Henry Jenkins insists, "Superheroes don't move closer to death; they move further away from it. Yet, death still defines the cycles of their lives" ("Death Defying" 73). This is the case for every Marvel hero. Many are motivated into heroism through wishing to atone for deaths construed as their fault (Stark, Banner, Clint Barton/Hawkeye, the Black Widow), while others are spurred by the desire to 'avenge' the deaths of those dear to them: Thor's resignation to nonviolent heroism, as discussed in the ensuing case study, is cued by the perceived death of his father, believed to be his fault, while Rogers is devastated by the seeming death of his childhood friend, Bucky Barnes (Sebastian Stan), established an ongoing sense of trauma and survivor's guilt foundational to the

character (Weiner 94).[39] This serves to reinforce René Girard's assertion that "an act of originary violence constitutes the core of all mythical formations" (qtd. in Grønstad 49), further conflating the human fallibility and mythic resonance of the Marvel superhero.

<div align="center">Violence and Ethical Escapism</div>

Crucially, however, this preoccupation with death is seldom extended to enemies the heroes have unleashed violent retribution upon. While Jason Dittmer's assertion that "generally the physical strength to defeat enemies in combat is seen as a proxy for moral strength" (44) largely serves as a mantra for the genre, early comic book adaptations interrogated the superhero's culpability and ethical ambiguity in enacting violence, as discussed earlier. Marvel superheroes, conversely, almost never demonstrate such reflexivity towards the ethics of their violence. In *Iron Man* – the only Marvel film that openly alludes to the ethics of the hero being involved in violent combat against antagonists – the only challenge to Stark's vigilante global interventions as Iron Man is Pepper Potts vocally refusing to condone Stark's violence for fear of *his* life being in danger. Such displacement of the repercussions of violence towards Stark rather than his victims reinforces the genre's overall ideological project of diverting focus back to the hero. In doing so, the genre necessarily erases considerations of the perspective and harm the hero's violence has on others, instead narratively translating it as purely enjoyable spectacle.

Nonetheless, Marvel superheroes do engage with the notion of consequences, yet not in regards to immediate combat. Banner, Barton, and Romanoff are all vividly haunted by memories of their past violence, yet equally given chances to 'redeem' themselves in ensuing 'morally

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[39] Well known to viewers familiar with the comics is the fact that Bucky does not ultimately die in the course of his falling off a moving train into a mountainside abyss. Instead, his body is found and reconstructed as a cyborg by Russian intelligence forces (Hydra in the film), who brainwash him and rebrand him "The Winter Soldier," using him as a political assassin throughout the decades. In *The Winter Soldier*, Rogers' realization that Barnes is not only still alive but has been reconstructed as an amnesiac antagonist he is forced to repeatedly battle adds a further level of existential grief to his characterization.

sanctioned' heroic violence. When facing down the invading Chitauri alien forces in *The Avengers*, Captain America even implores Hulk to "Smash," as if granting permission for his ensuing rampage. This further reinforces Barna William Donovan's notion of "acceptable visions of violence" (*Blood, Guns, and Testosterone* 211), distinguishing between the ('unacceptable') past violence haunting the heroes, and further vindicating them and establishing their familiarity with, and, by extension, clear judgment in executing ('acceptable') violence upon antagonists.

Moreover, the ramifications and intensity of the violence enacted by the Marvel heroes is undercut by a trend of the weapons they carry being primarily motivated as sources of self-defense. While *Iron Man 2* explicitly codes Stark's Iron Man armour as "a weapon," which clearly embodies violent potential, being able to fire any number of armaments, Stark sardonically responds to this accusation by referring to it as "a high-tech prosthesis." As such, Stark's armour is justified as being primarily a means of protecting him, in light of his heart injury and the armour's integral role in protecting him from it. Even Stark's referring to his Iron Man outfit as "armour" connotes an inherently defensive function, and its use is underscored as largely a means of protection. Examples include the armour's inception as a means of Stark escaping his captivity in Afghanistan, to a necessity when he is attacked in his civilian identity by Whiplash (Mickey Rourke) at a Monaco racetrack in *Iron Man 2*, to his throwing himself into it in *Iron Man 3* when suffering an anxiety attack, believing his life to be in danger. This defensive motivation to potentially violent objects, of course, is epitomized by Captain America's carrying a shield, which, despite its defensive presuppositions, he uses as an offensive weapon, both for striking opponents with or using as a projectile. In this way, by semiotically affiliating the heroes with defensively motivated objects, the focus, once again, is diverted from the violence *of* the hero to the violence *towards* the hero, thereby lending a defensive, retributive function to their violence using said props.

Many of the other Marvel heroes do carry weapons that are more explicitly offensive in use – most notably Hawkeye from *The Avengers*, who carries a bow that fires a multitude of multipurpose arrows, and Thor, who fights with a mythic hammer (discussed in more detail in this chapter's case study). However, most of the key heroes are juxtaposed with supporting protagonists who are consistently affiliated with more aggressive weaponry, namely guns. In *Iron Man 2* and *3*, Rhodes' Stark-derivative armour is explicitly coded as a military-sanctioned weapon, complete with shoulder-mounted miniguns, and two pointedly aggressive monikers to match: 'War Machine' and 'Iron Patriot.' As firearms and their explicitly lethal semiotic linkage have customarily proven controversial inclusions into the fantasy-violence narratives of superheroes (Cunningham 176), juxtaposing the weaponry of key Marvel heroes alongside contemporaries using more (explicitly) lethal force serves to downplay the consequences of the violence exhibited by the superheroes in question. In this way, the Marvel heroes, by proxy, appear 'less violent' than their contemporaries, making the violent spectacles they enact more 'ethically sanctioned.'

Interestingly, in spite of this, most Marvel heroes do use firearms at specific points, including Hawkeye, the Black Widow, Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson), the Falcon, Iron Man (in *Iron Man 3*), and Captain America himself. However, all of these aforementioned heroes primarily use non-firearm related weaponry (Hawkeye's bow; Black Widow's "widow's stings" – wrist-mounted electric tasers; the Falcon's mechanical wings; Captain America's shield). Thus, their occasional use of guns is coded as reluctant and only as a last resort, in the absence of their primary, 'less violent' weaponry. This marks yet another example of the Marvel superhero films avoiding using such instances as venues for sociopolitical critique for the ethics or means of enacting violence (as is the case with Batman's recurrent "No guns!" mantra in *The Dark Knight Rises*). Instead, the Marvel films subtly manipulate narrative conventions to warrant the inclusion

of firearms-related violent spectacle without any incited ethical scrutiny, while still reinforcing the 'clear judgment' of their heroes, thereby validating their use of violence as justified and acceptable.

<center>Mythically Accessible</center>

This sense of 'clear judgment' is furthered by the Marvel superhero's interplay with mythic resonance and iconicity,[40] furthering the divinity inherent in the superhero figure, yet grounding it within the aforementioned humanism and accessibility. The comic book superhero has been consistently understood to embody mythic resonance and iconicity, and the affiliation is calcified in Jeffrey S. Lang and Patrick Trimble's attribution of the term "American Monomyth", and its associations of self-sacrificing Judaeo-Christian subtext, to the superhero figure (158). This inherent messianic or divine subtext is read far more literally in many analyses of the filmic superhero (Lichtenfeld 299; Pollard 73), and is relevant not only in affirming Christopher Sharrett's discussion of "the invocation of divine will as a rationale for violence" ("Afterword" 414), but also to this chapter's ensuing case study of *Thor* – an appropriation of Norse mythology depicting a 'literal' God. Yet, the Marvel superheroes equally evoke non-secular mythic superstructures. Jason Bainbridge finds Marvel heroes, in differentiating themselves from DC superheroes, as not "map[ping] as easily onto [mythic heroic] archetypes," and instead drawing from influences such as "horror literature," particularly the Hulk, a derivative of classic literary 'monsters' such as those from *Frankenstein* or *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (67-68). Henry Jenkins comparably notes the aesthetic influence of iconography from classic science fiction films on

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[40] Here, my use of the term 'mythic' will mirror Christopher Sharrett's definition, in referring to myth as "an operation of ideology, a series of narratives that conflate nature with culture, tending to have us assume that certain narratives are given and immutable" ("Introduction" 10). I do not use the term to imply any explicitly spiritual or Jungian connotations, but instead engage with it more as a semiotic practice of (nearly) universally understood subtexts and superstructures within a predominantly North American culture, as all of the Marvel films are American films.

Marvel heroes – the Hulk and Iron Man in particular as in the tradition of rampaging B-movie giant monsters ('Just Men in Tights' 29). Cinematically, this is equally true for Captain America and Iron Man, both of whose heroic geneses are linked with scientific or technological experiments in keeping with the gothic tradition (in *The Avengers*, Stark even – somewhat morbidly – stresses this, mocking Captain America by quipping "Everything special in you came out of a bottle"). Such influences, appropriately, not only align the Marvel characters depicted with greater intertextual and cultural 'weight,' but also with the aforementioned discussion of pathos, and the 'tragic hero/monster' archetype.

This interplay with influences from both Judaeo-Christian mythicism and literary intertexts adds nuance to Roland Barthes' assertion that "myth is a peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed before it: it *is a second-order semiological system*" (295). By conflating and appropriating established mythic semiotic linkages, Marvel's use of mythic resonance suggests a "third-order" semiological system, adding an almost abstract layer of hyperbolic importance to their heroic products. Thus, Marvel, again furthering their brand identity from the comics, utilizes cultural 'mythic' intertexts, with predominantly popular culture sensibilities, making their mythic intertexts more accessible for a mass audience.

This concept of mythic embodiment is most evidently the case with Captain America, who, as a WWII propaganda icon (both diegetically and extratextually), consciously functions as a microcosmic iconic signifier of national identity. As Robert Weiner expresses, Captain America is intended to function as "America herself […] "Rogers is no longer Steve Rogers; Captain America is now the reality, and Rogers is the alter ego" (91). Thus, Captain America's resonance extends beyond his identity as a war hero, and into the realm of functioning as a cipher for the United States, both historically (as he is rooted in the 1940s) and contemporarily (his transplantation to contemporary time). Indeed, Captain America is frequently considered by

cultural critics and audiences alike to embody the *ideal* of America more than a specific American geopolitical script: Anthony Mills contests the character is "more American than the country he represents, and more heroic than the monomythic tradition from which he stems" (184). Again, such a lofty ideal as a character signifying the ideological ideal of an entire country could serve to alienate audiences, as with Barna William Donovan's discussion of the inaccessibly 'divine' Superman ("Superman" 21).[41] Correspondingly, the customary Marvel wit is maintained more than ever in depicting Captain America. Rogers' semiotic elevation is consistently undercut through fish-out-of-water humour and humanism, even in the midst of this 'embodied mythicism.'[42] In *The First Avenger,* after Rogers assumes the iconic role of Captain America, he regards his symbolic function with world-weary humour, referring to "Captain America" in the third person, and himself as "just a kid from Brooklyn." Again, through self-reflexivity and levity, the Marvel superhero serves to conflate the human and mythic dimensions of the hero archetype, mutually reinforcing both sites for audience approval.

This resonance equally manifests through drawing upon the extensive history of comic intertexts, which yields what Eric Lichtenfeld refers to as "monolithic [textual] inconicity" (297) and sites of recognition and emotional resonance for comic fan viewers (Kaveny 227). Richard Harrison, however, contrasts Lichtenfeld's use of the word "monolithic" in regards to superhero iconicity. Echoing Eco, Harrison asserts that superhero iconicity is both "static and dynamic," both maintaining the "collectively held meaning" of an icon, while allowing the fluidity of

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[41] Even the titular suffix "The First Avenger" indicates such anxiety on behalf of Marvel marketing executives, firmly linking the character as a franchise component of *The Avengers*, while avoiding losing audiences by strictly depicting the character as a standalone, unironic, propaganda icon. In Russia, the Ukraine, and South Korea, the film was released as simply *The First Avenger*, for fear of anti-American sentiments affecting box office sales (Barnes).

[42] In *The Avengers*, Captain America is constantly oblivious to cultural references, except one to *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939), reaffirming his antiquated status. In *The Winter Soldier*, this 'man out of time' joke is furthered in the film's opening scene, where Rogers is revealed to have a list of cultural reference points to catch up on, including "Moon Landing, Berlin Wall (Up + Down), Steve Jobs (Apple), Disco, Thai Food."

adapting to a contemporary cultural climate in a fashion correspondent with character growth ("Origin" 23). Indeed, Barthes' articulation of cultural mythology acknowledges this, claiming that "all the materials of myth […] presuppose a signifying consciousness […] they impose meaning at one stroke without analyzing or diluting it" (294). This notion of "impose[d] meaning" suggests the live action adaptation of comic book iconography (the "signifying consciousness") serving as a particularly salient site for imparting ideology to viewers, given the affective resonance of storied investment in the now 'embodied' heroes. Barthes' assertion that myth "transforms history into nature" (300) mirrors this blending of comic book iconography into cultural ideology, suggesting images and aesthetics from comic book history being 'naturalized' cinematically, amplifying their mythic and ideological resonance in the process. In this way, the superhero genre's treatment of comic book iconography, particularly in terms of costuming, with reverence (Lichtenfeld 299; Bukatman "Secret Identity Politics" 114) could help foster deeper emotional connections with audiences familiar with the comics.

Fittingly, every Marvel film includes a nostalgic homage to the classic costumes of their superhero protagonists. These, again, generally operate in tandem with humour – *The Incredible Hulk* alone has two separate jokes based on Banner sporting purple "stretchy-pants." Visually evoking the comics encourages viewers to invest the cinematic protagonists with the decades of familiarity and emotional connection Harrison and Kaveny refer to, thereby serving as further shorthand to audiences tacitly excusing the hero's violent actions rather than deliberating their ethics.[43] The jubilant, affective, nostalgic glee in seeing the aesthetic of the comics embodied in a

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[43] This impact of costumed iconicity is taken to a further thematic level in *The Winter Soldier*. When faced with the infiltration of S.H.I.E.L.D. by terrorist sect Hydra, Rogers, who has spent the film questioning and interrogating the ethics of contemporary patriotism and military, consciously decides to return to wearing his classic 1940s costume for the final showdown. This manifests thematically on several levels. Rogers' use of his costume has the tactical function of helping the Winter Soldier remember his former identity as Rogers' best friend during WWII. However, it equally demonstrates Rogers reconciling his friction with American politics and military, and reappropriating his

live action figure equally translates tonally into the Marvel superhero film, furthering the

ideological project of film violence being remediated as enjoyable, ethics-free spectacle.

<p style="text-align:center">Case Study: Thor</p>

Though the Marvel formula for reflexive comedy and spectacle-violence had already been

firmly established by 2011, the release of *Thor* suggested the franchise's biggest risk to date. The

film heralded the potential difficulty in palatably portraying a demigod appropriated from Norse

mythology and prone to speaking in pseudo-Shakespearian Old English (a preconception

furthered by the appointment of director Kenneth Branagh, primarily known for his work in

cinematic Shakespeare adaptations) without unraveling the veneer of Marvel wit. Despite such

reservations, *Thor* avoids somber posturing by frequently undercutting its potential for

melodramatic camp with – like Captain America – self-deprecating, 'fish-out-of-water' humour.

Thor's unfamiliarity with Earth lends itself to comedic relief (he enters a pet store bellowing, "I

need a horse!" and, when served coffee at a diner, exclaims, "This drink – I like it! Another!",

energetically throwing his mug to the floor in an antiquated gesture signifying a post-war feast),

rendering him a more relatable incarnation of a 'Norse God.'

Even Thor's costume, an almost exact invocation of its comic book incarnation, involves

a moment of nostalgia in the character's first appearance, akin to such nods in *Iron Man* and

Captain America. Thor's first appearance as an adult (after a prologue showing he and Loki as

children), which recalls Eric Lichtenfeld's discussion of the genre trope of teasing the arrival of

the superhero, playing on audience textual awareness (321), first introduces the character with his

back to the camera. Thor is thus only recognizable through his iconic comics costume: a flowing

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own heroic identity as Captain America, while also using the semiotic weight of his outfit to help inspire
S.H.I.E.L.D. members to stand against Hydra and overthrow them.

red cape, and the iconic winged helmet.[44] Such details initially seem to have no narrative motivation other than in-jokes for fans. However, these moments of tactfully applied iconicity instead prove crucial in the suture process of making Thor an eligible protagonist for audience investment.

Furthermore, despite *Thor* engaging with the surrogate divinity of the superhero more overtly, Branagh's film is careful to stress the inherent accessibility and humanity of Thor. As co-writer Ashley Miller argues, "Thor's powers are godly, yes. And his zip code is a little different. But at the end of the day, he's a man. In the comics, Odin sends him to Earth because he's not perfect. He's brash, arrogant. Even over-confident. We all know that guy – some of us have even been that guy." In this way, Thor is explicitly coloured as fluidly reconciling the genre's identity binary – a God, but equally "that guy."

However, the film emerges as a case worthy of more intensive critical attention largely through its inversion of the customary superhero violence narrative. Mark Gallagher's analysis of the genre establishes the thematic core of the action narrative: "[t]he films subject their heroes to *ritual* or conventional obstacles that, once overcome, demonstrate the *fantasy omnipotence* of the action hero" (208, my Italics). Accordingly, the standard superhero narrative would follow the protagonist being bestowed with their exceptional abilities, followed by their learning to control their powers and violent potential in the service of defeating the equally superpowered antagonist, all in the service of protecting the community or world. Following the hero learning to master their powers in a linear fashion could function to prompt trust in the superhero as physically and morally capable, thereby validating them as an agent of violence.

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[44] This helmet, which could have run the risk of ruining Thor's credibility, is only shown in this sequence, recalling the character's comic iconicity without distracting throughout the narrative. Furthermore, the helmet is invested with narrative motivation, as the sequence – Thor's coronation ceremony – would involve more formal attire.

Thor, however, begins with its titular protagonist at his peak in terms of both superpowered mastery and the desire for violence, only to follow his disempowerment and banishment from Asgard to Earth by his father, Odin (Anthony Hopkins), as a lesson in humility and morality. Thor, stripped of his powers, is thus forced to learn humility and moral discretion (and, ultimately, nonviolent means of conflict resolution) before again being "worthy" to retake his divine hammer, Mjolnir and reassume his heroic identity. As such, *Thor* further conflates mythic resonance with moralism, by utilizing a mythic object as a litmus test for the strength of Thor's character.[45] The film thereby establishes its own internal grammar, giving the viewer a tangible signifier as to Thor's worthiness, and, by proxy, when to accept him as a capable hero.

As such, the film as a whole serves to reinforce Thor's proficiency in and attitude towards violence serves to define his heroism. Following Lindsay Steenberg's overview of the postmodern action film being structured around fights intended to showcase moral and narrative progression (22-23) I will here undertake a comparative analysis of *Thor*'s progression of action sequences. This analysis equally takes influence from Marsha Kinder's claim that violent interludes can be used "to structure not merely an individual sequence but the stylistic and narrative design of the entire film – that is, to use representations of violence as a series of rhythmic eruptions that orchestrate the spectactor's emotional response" (65). I will, in turn, explore how each of *Thor*'s action sequences serve to foreground this narrative of advocated nonviolence, which, paradoxically, serves to reaffirm Thor's 'worthiness' as an agent of violence, validating his further violent actions. I will discuss the film's four main fights involving Thor: his battle against the Frost Giants of Jotunheim, his confrontation with the agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. in

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[45]Such a diegetic 'litmus test' is also evident in *The First Avenger*, in which Dr. Abraham Erskine (Stanley Tucci) chooses Rogers as a candidate for the Super Soldier Program, despite his (initially) diminutive physicality, insisting his being a "good man" is what makes him an appropriate candidate for the serum to work. Erskine, claims, "the serum only magnifies what is already there," explaining the Red Skull (Hugo Weaving)'s monstrously deformed appearance is consequence of him taking the serum despite having innately "bad" qualities. The narrative thus provides quantifiable means for assessing Rogers' character and infallible morality.

attempting to reclaim his hammer, his battle against the Asgardian robot the Destroyer, sent to kill him by Loki (at which point, Thor, affirming the Judaeo-Christian ramifications of the American Monomyth discussed by Lang and Trimble, sacrifices himself to save others, and, in doing so, is reinstated with his Asgardian powers), and Thor's final showdown against Loki. These four fights will be analyzed and compared on a basis of three criteria: Thor's motivation in each fight, his means of enacting violence, and the adversaries he confronts and their moral resonance within the diegesis. Throughout the film, as Thor's lust for violent confrontation steadily subsides, the film increasingly validates him as a character, and his subsequent violence as acceptable.

The battles in *Thor*, again, uncharacteristically for the genre, become steadily more intimate in scope as the film progresses. The film opens with a prologue detailing an ancient war between the Asgardians, led by Odin, and the villainous Frost Giants of Jotunheim, which, in a feat of intertextual iconicity, clearly evokes the prologue of *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (Peter Jackson, 2001). The scope becomes more intimate in the first battle involving Thor, Loki, and their warrior companions, as they engage in an unsanctioned invasion of Jotunheim, seeking retribution for a small-scale attack on Asgard by Frost Giants.[46] When Thor confronts the King of Jotunheim, Laufey (Colm Feore), Laufey advocates for diplomacy, and advises him to do the same. However, when a Frost Giant sneers, "Run away, little princess," Thor responds violently, smashing the Frost Giant in the face with his hammer, which propels him into the air.

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[46] In accordance with earlier arguments regarding Marvel's brazen yet indirect references to actual sociopolitical events, Darren Franich finds 9/11 subtext in *Thor* equivalent to that in *Iron Man*'s Afghanistan setting: "The Thunder god invades a land he knows nothing about, a classic war hawk maneuver; chastened by his elders, he has to learn how his actions have consequences" ("17 Signs").

What is crucial about this altercation is not only the fact that Thor initiates the combat, responding violently to a childish taunt, but his evident relief and joy in doing so. Thus, Thor's motivation in the fight is not ultimately about political vindication, but that the Frost Giants invading Asgard simply provided him an excuse for combat. Thor's actions in the rest of Frost Giant battle further this sense of immaturity and lust for violence: after defeating several Frost Giants, he scoffs, "At least make it a challenge for me." While the rest of the Asgardians appear anxious, battered, and reluctant throughout the battle, Thor continues to laugh as he fights off growing masses of adversaries.

Thor's means of enacting violence, as opposed to that of many other Marvel heroes, is noteworthy in its seemingly omnipotent potential. Unlike his companions, who only engage in standard combat, Thor is the only Asgardian with supernatural powers, having the ability to fly and summon and expel lightening bolts from his hammer.[47] In one exaggeratedly slow-motion shot, he charges his hammer with lightening before striking the ground with it, shattering the landscape and sending countless Frost Giants flying. This shot, the dramatic highlight of promotional trailers for the film, reaffirms Thor's oppressive, 'divine' capabilities, suggesting the world itself literally crumbling at his feet.[48]

Moreover, Thor's lust for violence is echoed in his fight choreography. Unlike the majority of other Marvel heroes, who traditionally strike at the chest of their opponents, as if implying a blow more designated to stun rather than wound, Thor routinely swings his hammer (explicitly coded to be used as "a weapon to destroy, or as a tool to build" by Odin, yet only ever

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[47] In spite of Thor's surplus of powers compared to his fellow Asgardians, Darren Franich notes that, in compared to the comics, the Marvel films downplay the full extent of the magical abilities of Thor's hammer to further 'ground' his combat. As Franich jests, "It's basically Boomerang Excalibur" ("17 Signs").

[48] This begins a trend of Branagh using slow-motion only at key moments that emphasize Thor's heroism. Interestingly, analysis of the film's slow-motion alone still yields a narrative advocating non-violence, as the film's use of slow-motion increasingly shifts from designating violent spectacle to foregrounding nonviolent sacrificed, as will be discussed later.

used violently) in an upward arc, striking at the faces of his opponents, in a fashion explicitly designating harmful intent. This becomes hyperbolically clear in one moment, in which – again, accentuated by slow-motion and ramped up speed for dramatic effect – Thor throws his hammer, which strikes a line of several Frost Giants in each of their faces, lending his combat the momentary rhythm of a game of dominoes. Moreover, Thor is also the first Marvel hero to unmistakably kill a living (nonhuman, but nonetheless) antagonist, by flying, hammer first, through the head of a giant Jotunheim Frost Beast. In this way, Thor's hyperviolence and attitude towards it establish him as dramatically different from the standard superhero. He, starting at his peak of powers, rather than introduced in the traditional, linear, 'power-earning' progression, has not been 'validated' by his narrative as an 'acceptable' or sanctioned agent of violence.

Thor's second battle, combating the forces of S.H.I.E.L.D. in attempting to reclaim his hammer from their compound, is a more intimate confrontation than his battle in Jotunheim, pitting him, solo, against a fixed number of human antagonists rather than a world full of superpowered, nonhuman, and explicitly antagonistic assailants. Already, Thor is driven by a more tangible motivation (reclaiming his hammer) than simply a lust for combat, which further validates his violence. This is reaffirmed through a re-establishing shot of the hammer beginning the action sequence (re-cueing it as his motivation), followed by the onset of a thunderstorm, at which point Thor looks at the sky and smiles. This pathetic fallacy suggests a validation of his re-assuming his identity as 'God of Thunder,' and an excuse for his violence in retrieving it.

Moreover, as Thor possesses neither his hammer nor his ensuing superpowers, he is forced to engage in combat as merely a stronger-than-average human being, shifting the dynamic and potential for hyperviolence considerably. Before his confrontation with any S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, Thor, unlike his entrance in Jotunheim, is forced to enter the compound by stealth, conceding his comparative weakness rather than oppressive power. Similarly, Thor's violence in

this scene is less aggressive, and more designed to detain his opponents: Thor's choreography entails primarily throwing S.H.I.E.L.D. agents into each other, or even tangling one in his coat. This reaffirms Thor's combat as not for its own sake, but simply a means to achieve his objective. It is only when agents with guns – a greater threat in Thor's vulnerable, human state – confront Thor that his choreography becomes more explicitly violent, kicking them in the chest and the face.

Furthermore, even in this (comparatively brief) action sequence, Thor is given a surrogate 'archenemy' to battle, in the form of a looming, more physically durable S.H.I.E.L.D. agent. This renders Thor's combat all the more intimate, by grounding his struggle in the vanquishing of a single, worthwhile antagonist as opposed to simply eluding a multitude of them. Reducing the scope of Thor's combat to a 'one-on-one' scenario renders the sequence a more morally charged, 'good guy vs. bad guy' scenario. As Thor wishes to avoid this violent altercation in favour of claiming his hammer, the large S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, deprived of any dialogue explaining his motivation to be anything other than violent, is coded as the aggressor, and obstacle in the way of Thor completing his objective, thereby prompting further affective moral affiliation with Thor. In this way, Thor finally engaging the S.H.I.E.L.D. agent in a prolonged, fetishized violent spectacle (rolling around in the mud, and defeating him with a slow-motion 'kangaroo kick') is narratively justified.

Immediately after, Thor is inscribed with pathos, when, attempting to lift his hammer, he finds he cannot – he has not fulfilled Odin's mythic qualification of being "worthy". The subjectivity and ambiguity inherent in this qualifier, combined with the scene's pathetic fallacy (slow motion rain, here emphasizing heroic suffering) and sad musical score, all function to firmly align the viewer with Thor's anguish. Even Coulson, who, as head of the S.H.I.E.L.D. compound, should serve as Thor's primary antagonist in this scene, is shot in a way – framed in

profile in the rain, his face a 'hangdog' expression – that suggests he also sympathizes with Thor. This codes Thor with the pathos normally inscribed on Marvel protagonists at the beginning of their respective narratives, furthering the film's process of steadily vindicating him as a respectable and suitable agent of violence.

This pathos is what cues Thor's transition to 'worthiness.' As such, his third fight scene, against the giant Asgardian robot the Destroyer (sent to kill him by Loki) proves the film's most evocative of the Judaeo-Christian Monomyth. As the Destroyer creates a swath of destruction through the New Mexico town Thor has taken refuge in, searching for him, Thor, without his powers, has no means of reciprocating violently. As his Asgardian warrior companions, who came to Earth searching for him, hold off the Destroyer, Thor's motivation is entirely altruistic: protecting innocent civilians. When the other Asgardians fail in holding off the Destroyer, resulting in cataclysmic collateral damage to the town and an insurmountable threat to all the civilians, including Thor's love interest Jane Foster, Thor directly intervenes. Initially, he picks up an Asgardian shield, feigning combat to convince the other Asgardians to save themselves. However, he then discards the shield –the film's first use of slow-motion to signify non-violence rather than fetishized violence – and instead appeals to Loki, imploring him to spare the civilians and take his life instead. This appeal to Loki establishes an inverse parallel to Thor's first confrontation with Laufey on Jotunheim, with Thor now advocating diplomatic nonviolence. Correspondingly, the Destroyer, like Thor at Jotunheim, first turns around and begins to depart, but then turns and backhands Thor in the face (again, paralleling Thor's previous tendency to strike opponents in the face), sending him flying through the air (again, in slow motion), resulting in him battered, bloodied, and evidently dying. Recalling Fradley's discussion of Hollywood fetishizing of suffering, the film accompanies Thor's 'death' with a tragic, soft, orchestral theme, and cross-cutting to shots of Foster, Thor's allies, and even Odin, crying in disbelief, fully

validating Thor's selfless heroism.[49] It is at this point the film officially codes Thor as "worthy,"

as his hammer flies from its lodging at the S.H.I.E.L.D. compound into his hand, his outfit

transformed to once again attain the visual iconicity of Thor, accompanied now by the triumphant

reprise of the 'Thor musical theme'.[50]

With this transformation comes an inevitable change in fighting tactic; though the

Destroyer is primed to let loose an energy blast, it is Thor who strikes first, throwing his hammer

at the Destroyer's head (once again). However, rather than fighting the Destroyer out of

vengeance, Thor's combat furthers his former motivation of protecting innocent civilians. After

stunning the Destroyer with his hammer blow to the head, Thor flies up into the air, and,

swinging his hammer, creates a vortex of wind, which sweeps the Destroyer up into the air. This

reinforces Thor's unmatched 'divine' powers, but is also a curiously nonviolent gesture,

compared to his usual tangible, physical combat. Instead, Thor's clear intent is to extract the

Destroyer from the city space, thereby preventing their violent altercation from causing any more

collateral damage. When Thor does engage the Destroyer midair, it is his briefest fight in the film

– the entire fight lasts only 50 seconds – which further reinforces his power. Similarly, Thor's

choreography, again, is crucially nonviolent – he swings his hammer only to deflect the

Destroyer's energy blasts, and finally, in an effectively defensive gesture, "kills the Destroyer"

by forcibly redirecting its energy blast back through its own head.

After the Destroyer plummets to the ground, Thor strides out of the dust cloud left by its

impact, purposeful, heroic, and ignoring the cars and other debris falling behind him. Foster,

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[49] This shot of Odin is all the more powerful, as Odin is in the midst of a restorative coma – "the Odinsleep" – suggesting Thor's sacrifice has the ability to magically reach him nonetheless.

[50] Interestingly (though tangentially), this track on the film's soundtrack is called "Thor Kills The Destroyer" – an uncommonly explicit treatment of the consequences of the superhero's violence. Though in keeping with Thor killing the Frost Beast in his first fight, this frankness is largely unprecedented in the Marvel films at this point. Language in regards to violence and death does become more explicit in later Marvel films though, particularly in *Iron Man 3*, as discussed in Chapter One.

Selvig, and Thor's Asgardian companions regard him in hushed awe, before Foster tentatively

asks, "So… is this how you normally look?" Thor retorts, "More or less," to which Foster

responds, "It's a *good* look." Foster regarding Thor as having an overpowering heroic presence

and sex appeal recalls Lisa Purse's discussion of the conflation of violent spectacle and sexual

intercourse, with the hero's victory at the former affectively implying his mastery of the latter

(110). Furthermore, the overwhelming spectacle of Thor's immersion from the cloud of dust – a

figurative 'rebirth' in itself – confirms Eric Lichtenfeld's discussion of superhero films using the

hero's love interest to "venerate [him], to make him something beheld" (315). Thor, in this

sequence, is 'beheld' as a paragon of heroism – divine, iconic, and epitomizing not only physical

and sexual mastery, but what he previously lacked: discretion and judgment. This establishes him

as a divine figure now tempered with human humility and restraint, and thereby, in reconciling

the binary, a suitable agent of violence.

This status, however, could risk being compromised by the film's final fight: the

inevitable confrontation between Thor and Loki. While customarily the hero/villain battle would

most affirm the hero's "worthiness," Loki's status as an unprecedentedly sympathetic villain

complicates this cognitive process. Loki is granted the most screentime, personal resonance and

emotional character arc out of any Marvel antagonists (the film codes Loki – who discovers his

true father to be Laufey, making him a Frost Giant by birth – with arguably more pathos than

Thor). Furthermore, Loki is renowned for being uncharacteristically physically attractive for a

villain,[51] and holding the most fan appeal of any character in the Marvel films short of Tony

Stark (Rich). Because of this appeal, it would be harder to engender the unquestionable moral

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[51] Hiddleston has been voted "Sexiest Man Alive" by numerous periodicals, including *MTV News* and *Empire Magazine*. His nearly unprecedented fan attention on social media platforms such as tumblr has had him coined "an Actual Disney Prince" (Hall & Dickens).

support for Thor in a violent confrontation between Thor and Loki, despite the film's systematic process of constructing it up until this point. As such, to reassert a traditional moral 'good vs. evil' binary between the brothers, Branagh's film furthers Thor advocating nonviolence, while more explicitly stressing Loki as an unsympathetic villain.

In spite of Loki's comparatively sympathetic character arc, Lee Easton argues his villainy is still coded as somewhat innate, due to his Frost Giant lineage ("Saying No" 43).[52] This recalls Philip Simpson's affirmation that more ambiguous cinematic antagonists, without obvious 'villainous' visual signifiers (such as serial killers), "while capable of corrupting the social fabric, arise primarily from outside the culture" (119). In this way, Loki's transgressive behaviour, in tandem with his lineage defining him against the established cultural framework of Asgard, is coded as both negative and exterior, affirming the moral dichotomy between the 'good' of Asgard, and Loki, by not belonging therein and attempting to "corrup[t] the social fabric," as inextricably negative. Fittingly, Loki desires to validate his existence within Asgard. However, his violent methodology in doing so narratively taints his desire as unachievable, and his actions as no longer sympathetic. Before the film's final confrontation, Loki is introduced as 'playing hero.' Despite having let Laufey and a company of Frost Giants into Asgard under the guise of allowing them to murder a nonresponsive Odin, Loki kills Laufey with an energy blast by Odin's bedside, accompanied by a surge of heroic music, and a stereotypically heroic catchphrase: "And your death came by the son of Odin." This action, however, paradoxically intensifies Loki's coding as antagonist, by making him a killer, rather than simply, as he is dismissively referred to

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[52] The morality of Loki, though too convoluted to explore in adequate depth here, functions as shorthand to a 'nature/nurture' debate.

earlier by Thor's companion Fandrall (Josh Dallas), "one for mischief."[53] In contrast, Thor, having returned to Asgard, does not confront Loki with violence, but rather verbal accusations. Loki, in turn, responds by against instigating violent conflict, blasting Thor through the Asgardian palace wall with an energy blast, before, seemingly impulsively, declaring "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to destroy Jotunheim." The scope of Loki's antagonism, with this line, rises from a singular murder to attempted genocide.

Loki turns the Bifröst (the energy channel by which Asgardians travel between worlds) on Jotunheim at full power, knowing that leaving it open over an extended period of time will cause the energy channel to intensify, destroying the world. When Thor attempts to destroy the Bifröst with his hammer, Loki blasts him again, making him the aggressor twice in a row. Branagh then cuts to Jotunheim, showing several Frost Giants running away from the Bifröst's energy beam, screaming in terror. By translating the film's former antagonists into sympathetic victims of attempted genocide, Loki is firmly established as clearly and inextricably morally compromised.

This inversion of perspectives towards violence and moral coding is firmly established by the ensuing dialogue exchange between Thor and Loki:

Thor: "You can't kill an entire race!"

Loki: "Why not? [he giggles] And what is this newfound love for the Frost Giants? You could have killed them all with your bare hands!"

Thor: "I've changed."

Loki: "So have I. Now fight me."

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[53] This invoking Loki's murderous actions for the sake of reminding viewers to regard him as antagonist (likely in light of his fan appeal) is reiterated in *The Avengers* (albeit, in a more traditionally Marvel fashion, for the sake of comedic relief):
Thor: "Have care how you speak. Loki is beyond reason, but he is of Asgard. And he is my brother."
Black Widow: "He killed 80 people in two days."
Thor: "…he's adopted."

As such, Thor's motivation in the ensuing fight is to prevent the loss of life, while Loki's, like

Thor in Jotunheim initially, is explicitly violence and personal vindication. Thor, nonetheless,

firmly advocates nonviolence throughout the fight, and consistently refers to Loki affectionately,

refusing to dehumanize him: "I will *not* fight you, brother!" This continual affirmation of Thor's

relationship to Loki is in keeping with Mark Gallagher's analysis of the centrality of family in

Hollywood action cinema. Gallagher suggests that this interplay lends action sequences an

extratextual affective dimension of empowerment for audiences, suggesting mastery of physical

combat, in tandem with the allusion the family unit, lends viewers a euphoric sense of translating

the text's mastery-through-violence into personal mastery (203). Thus, Thor continually

affirming his family relationship with Loki lends sympathy to his resistance to combat. Indeed,

Thor only concedes to any physical combat when Loki threatens Jane, furthering Thor's identity

as a figure protecting others from violence. Despite this, Loki is still the aggressor, being the first

to leap at Thor confrontationally, firmly reinforcing the binary between their motivations.

The choreography and film style in this final confrontation reflect this moral tension:

Loki's actions are always more explicitly violent, making stabbing motions or firing energy

blasts from his staff, whereas Thor's, as in his battle with the Destroyer, remain more defensive,

largely parrying Loki's attacks. Even the sound editing in this scene introduces a sensual degree

of moralism to the fight: the sound effects of Loki's attacks are more 'crackly,' evoking

grotesque, abject sensations of stabbing or piercing. Conversely, the deeper, more metallic

'thrum' of Thor's hammer (a sound already affiliated with his heroic violence)[54] holds affective

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[54] This trope of distinctive sound effects coded to the hero is consistent within the genre beyond the Marvel films, as is evidenced in the distinctive "thwipp" webbing sound effect of Spider-Man (accordingly, with the franchise reboot in *The Amazing Spider-Man* in 2012 came an updated "thwipp" webbing sound), the "snickt" of Wolverine's claws, or the "bamff" of Nightcrawler teleporting. Indeed, this technique in sound editing functions as a cinematic means of adapting the distinctive sound effects correspondent with characters in the medium of comic books (as per all the aforementioned examples), as depicted visually through 'sound effect' captions. This, in itself, allows for an additional level of affective iconicity for fans or consistent readers of the comic books.

resonance as a more empowered, 'divine' sound, subjectively sounding more 'noble,' and thereby morally sanctioned. This, again, reaffirms Lisa Purse's analysis of the privileging of sound effects geared to the heroic protagonist in action sequences, thereby affectively constructing further support for the heroic protagonist even on the sensory level of the sequence (71). Not only is Thor depicted as more heroic than Loki, but his violence even sounds more 'noble,' and thereby more morally and narratively sanctioned.

The fight choreography furthers this sense of nobility when Thor, having knocked Loki down, places his immovable hammer on top of Loki in a gesture reminiscent of a parent giving a 'time out.' This act proves pedagogically punitive, as Loki's inability to lift the hammer further underscores his being "unworthy," while depicting Thor, by proxy, as all the more worthy. Thor then exhibits his only visceral violence in the fight, and does so against an inorganic object, shattering the Rainbow Bridge that houses the Bifröst, and thereby destroying the Bifröst and saving Jotunheim from obliteration. This not only yields a spectacle of pleasurable violent destruction, but one that is coded in pathos and personal sacrifice – as Loki jeers, "If you destroy the Bridge, you'll never see her [Jane] again!" As Thor takes a final swing at the Bridge, he and Loki both lunge simultaneously, and this singular, parallel movement establishes an unmistakable binary of "acceptable" and "unacceptable" violence: Thor's violence is unselfish, directed at an inorganic object, and – like Altman's dual-focus narrative hero – for the good of many, whereas Loki's violence is selfish, and directed at a single person. As such, film courts an affective sense of yearning for Thor to engage in physical violence with Loki, as, by the film's designation, he has 'earned it.' Nonetheless, as Thor takes the moral 'high ground' by refusing to fight Loki, his purported project of nonviolence is reaffirmed, as well as acknowledging the potential for audiences having emotional investment in Loki by resisting confronting him with unsympathetic, brutal violence.

In the film's conclusion, after Loki voluntarily drops from the Rainbow Bridge rather than face the disapproval of Odin, Thor is conclusively reinforced as having completed every vestige of heroism and "worthiness" designated by the film's internal grammar. Odin declares Thor "will be a wise king," yet Thor, despite having 'earned' the title of power he formerly lusted over, refuses it, exhibiting humility - a characteristic correspondent with his "worthiness." Thus, Thor's judgment and actions are cemented as infallible, affirming him as a "worthy" agent of sanctioned violence without disrupting audience investment in him. In this way, Thor is vindicated of the morality of his violence in all future appearances in other Marvel films. This is appropriate, as, in his next two filmic appearances, *The Avengers* and *Thor: The Dark World*, Thor is immediately introduced as a violent aggressor, instigating fight scenes instantly upon appearing onscreen in both films, and even combating other heroes – Captain America and Iron Man – in *The Avengers*.[55] In *Thor: The Dark World*, Thor's violence is more graphic than ever: in his first scene, he strikes an antagonistic rock troll in the face with his hammer, shattering the troll. Nonetheless, this is coloured by the film as both comedic and triumphant – the other Asgardians present literally laugh and cheer – despite being an act of murder. Later in the film, Thor breaks a character's neck – another murder. Yet, this action is treated as a throwaway piece of combat choreography, in crucial contrast to the considerable controversy yielded by, in the same year, the equally 'divine' Superman breaking the neck of General Zod in *Man of Steel* (Donovan "Superman" 27). Indeed, the complaints over Superman's neck breaking in contrast with the unremarkable treatment of Thor's could serve as testament to Marvel's ideological

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[55]To clarify, in *The Avengers*, Thor is not constantly depicted as lusting for violence, and his 'nonviolent' identity is, overall, maintained: he defends the rest of the team from an enraged Hulk, restraining him, and urging, "We are not your enemies, Banner. Try and think!" Similarly, in his first and last confrontations with Loki in *The Avengers*, Thor vehemently implores Loki to abandon his dreams of conquest in favour of a peaceful reuinion in Asgard. I mention this point more for the sake of articulating that, in both of his next filmic appearances, Thor is *immediately* depicted as in the thick of violent action, which is a significant and jarring contrasy from the honourable, nonviolent conclusion of *Thor.*

project of rendering spectacle-violence as enjoyable. Having been conclusively affirmed as a suitable agent of acceptable violence by Branagh's film, Thor is henceforth excused from skepticism regarding the morality of his violence. In this way, Marvel's Norse demigod truly lives up to his iconic comic book moniker (quoted ironically by Loki, yet ultimately affirmed by the film) of "The Mighty Thor."

Chapter Three: "Freedom is Life's Great Lie" –Exterior Proxy Validation of the Marvel

Superhero

"You are deluded, Captain. You pretend to be a simple soldier, but in reality you are just afraid to admit that we have left humanity behind! And, unlike you, I embrace it proudly."
-The Red Skull (Hugo Weaving)
"Then how come you're running?"
-Steve Rogers (Chris Evans), Captain America: The First Avenger *(2011)*

In addition to employing various thematic and narrative devices to code the Marvel hero and their violent means of conflict resolution as infallible, thereby allowing audiences to enjoy the ensuing violent spectacle in an unchallenged, guilt-free fashion, the Marvel superhero films use exterior means beyond qualities inherent in the hero to validate their individual exceptionality. This chapter will discuss the two primary means of focalizing such exterior motivations for valorizing the hero and their violent spectacle: the military and other political infrastructures, and the presence of supervillains as antagonists to the heroes. Throughout this discussion, I will argue how the role of supervillains function as 'scapegoats' for widespread cultural anxieties inherent in the sociocultural political system, and how defeat of the villain serves as narrative shorthand for the larger anxiety in question being resolved. This mirrors Gallagher's analysis of action cinema allowing audiences a sense of extratextual 'real life' mastery through affective resonance with the hero's physical mastery (203), which, in turn, recalls Matthew Wolf-Meyer's analysis of the utopian narrative omnipresent in superhero stories through the hero's inevitable victory (501). However, this minimalism in terms of political engagement ultimately serves as only a form of 'soft critique,' allowing audiences to challenge issues in the sociopolitical system without disrupting the comfort of the system's continual functioning. This discussion proves in keeping with Žižek's notion of audiences' purposeful obtuseness in regards to the disjuncture between their belief that global conditions are unjust, yet

their unwillingness to hear any in-depth discussion as to why (*Desert of the Real* 61). Such a 'soft critique,' in turn, extends to analysis of the Marvel superhero film's interplay with the military, which serves to equally valorize the hero through their inability to be contained by military superstructures yet the existence of such superstructures for allowing the hero to exist and proliferate.

<u>"I have successfully privatized world peace!" – The Marvel Superhero and the Military</u>

Almost since its inception, the comic book superhero has been linked with violent military engagement, from Captain America's role as a pro-military icon during WWII to, in 2007, the reappropriation of Marvel heroes Spider-Man and Captain America by the U.S. military for the "America Supports You" campaign, posing for photos with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld (Shelton Lawrence 2-3). Indeed, several scholars have aligned the exploits of the post-9/11 filmic superhero with narratives of military related wish fulfillment (Purse *Action* 154; Pollard 75). As Jason Dittmer states, "[t]he central theme found in these stories is the normative good associated with an interventionist worldview" (40). With this in mind, the more overt interplay with military content and subtext in the Marvel superhero films seems appropriate, given the company's aforementioned penchant for self-reflexivity and candidness in approach.

Prior to the Marvel superhero canon, the superhero genre maintained an ongoing tenuous relationship with military content, in keeping with the genre's aforementioned uneasiness in courting extratextual sociopolitical violence too explicitly. As such, involvement with the military, pre-*Iron Man*, was a function largely reserved for antagonists (military weapons contractor Norman Osborn in *Spider-Man*, General William Stryker in *X2*, and General Ross [Sam Elliot] and Major Talbot [Josh Lucas] in *Hulk*), or, at best, well-intentioned figures who, in

adhering to their institutional legislation, end up impeding heroes, such as General Hager (Andre Braugher) in *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (Tim Story, 2007).

Conversely, *Iron Man* heralded the ongoing, far more explicit involvement of the Marvel superhero and the military, by introducing a heroic protagonist with the profession of military weapons contractor. Though Stark, after noticing his own weapons in the hands of the terrorist sect "The Ten Rings" during his captivity in Afghanistan, publically swears off weapons contracts for the military, the omnipresence of the military-as-superstructure persists throughout the film. Indeed, the film's most striking action-spectacle sequence is Iron Man taking action against "Ten Rings" terrorists in the active warzone of Gulmira when the U.S. military hesitated in intervening. After, Iron Man is engaged in a subsequent aerial chase sequence by the military, who, in being misinformed in confronting him and unable to harm him, are coded as both misguided and 'safe.' Since *Iron Man*, each Marvel superhero film has remained extensively involved with military content in varying capacities.

Throughout the Marvel superhero films there is a persisting undercurrent of satire towards the American military. In *Iron Man*, Stark advises Rhodes to explain away his transgressive actions as Iron Man as a "training exercise" – an excuse Rhodes uses, comedic cutaway style, twice. Equally, *The First Avenger* mediates its potentially contentious use of a patriotic protagonist yearning to join the army by consistently satirizing Rogers' passion for enlistment. When Rogers rescues Bucky from captivity in the Red Skull's military base, Bucky, stunned by Rogers' physical transformation, asks, "What happened to you?" Rogers airly retorts, "I joined the army," as if mocking military enlistment videos suggesting recruits will become instantly heroic upon joining the army (particularly in the wake of the aforementioned satirical war bonds sequence). Finally, in *Iron Man 3*, Rhodes' rebranded armoured identity, the 'Iron Patriot,' operating as a surrogate for the United States military, is consistently subjected to ridicule, both

by Stark, and by the film itself. In a military incursion into the Middle East, searching for the Mandarin, Rhodes, on the phone with Stark, is forced to admit his login password to the military's secure server to be "WARMACHINEROX… all caps… with an 'x'", at which point he is giggled at by a group of people nearby.

However, in addition to such satirical interplay with the military, the military is generally depicted as an occasionally adversarial force. In *The Incredible Hulk,* the U.S. military, tasked with controlling the Hulk, are depicted as well-intentioned, yet antagonistic – or, as Tyree puts it, "a military-industrial complex that is depicted as monstrous, steroidal, malevolent, and out of control" (34). Said military-industrial complex, however, is crucially depicted as incapable of subsuming or controlling the superhero. Anthony Peter Spankanos, writing about *The Incredible Hulk*, argues that this distinction from the American military functions as a form of 'reverse Othering.' Spankanos argues the Hulk's Othering by the military does not function in the customary, vilifying fashion, but instead codes him as both victim of, and exceptional by proxy with, the oppressive military industrial complex that birthed him (15).

Every subsequent Marvel hero reinforces this concept of by proxy-exceptionalism, but it is epitomized in *Iron Man 2*. Stark is subpoenaed into a Senate Arms Hearing by the United States government, headed by Senator Stern (Garry Shandling),[56] investigating Stark's Iron Man armour's status as a weapon, and Stark's unsanctioned (read: illegal) violent involvement in geopolitics. Stark's objects: "I am Iron Man. The suit and I are one. To turn over the Iron Man suit would be to turn over myself, which is tantamount to indentured servitude or prostitution, depending on what state you're in. Can't have it." Moreover, Stark excuses his defiance of the law by arrogantly declaring himself as a qualified 'nuclear deterrent' (a term he later abhors in

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[56] This legal challenge to Stark's exceptionality is coded as unjust through Stern's characterization as belligerent, inept, and reminiscent of the fundamentalism of Senator Joseph McCarthy. This is retrospectively furthered in *The Winter Soldier*, where Stern is exposed as a member of Hydra, and thereby corrupt and firmly antagonistic.

The Avengers) – both powerful enough to stave off any geopolitical retaliation, and discerning enough (by his own standards) to exercise global violence judiciously. Stark thus glibly rebrands his illegal, unsanctioned global violence as both desirable and out of personal interest:

> It's working. We're safe. America is safe. You want my property, you can't have it, but I did you a *big favour*: I have successfully privatized world peace! […] I will serve this great nation for my own pleasure… because of there's anything you can count on me for, it's to pleasure myself."

After Stark's outburst, the hearing audience triumphantly applauds him, before he leaves with impunity.

As with the customary treatment of politics by Marvel Studios, this segment is the film's only in-depth interrogation of the unsanctioned legality of Stark's 'heroism.' Stark's actions are only digetically challenged in two ways: the possible emergence of a viable adversarial Iron Man alternative (as with Whiplash attacking Stark at Monaco, in a public display of this), or that Stark, who is dying from palladium poisoning from his chest arc reactor, might (temporarily) be unable to exercise sound judgment to warrant this exceptionality. Ultimately, the film resolves both threats to Stark's fallibility – as he defeats Whiplash and cures his poisoning – yet ultimately skirts the legal and political ramifications of his unsanctioned global vigilantism. Conversely, Stark is awarded a medal by the United States government in the closing shot of the film, firmly sanctioning his 'right' to governmentally unsupervised, violent global action.

In *Iron Man 3*, Stark further differentiates his actions from legislation. Upon posing a challenge to the Mandarin for the injury of Happy Hogan in a terrorist bombing, Stark declares, "There's no politics here, just good old fashioned revenge. There's no Pentagon – just you and me." Similarly, even the overt symbolic patriotism of Captain America himself is mediated by Rogers' consistent challenging of contemporary politics and dominant infrastructures, as will be

discussed in more depth in this chapter's case study. As such, rather than depicting the military as an overtly antagonistic force, the Marvel superhero films mediate a relationship with the military to depict the hero as even more valorized and exceptional through the infrastructure's inability to control them.

Nonetheless, Anthony Mills sees the feigned military critique in Marvel films such as *Iron Man 2* as having exactly the opposite effect, claiming that in *The Avengers*, a "bloated military presence" is "assumed and glorified" (179). Žižek explains this disconnect by articulating a trend in contemporary cinema of texts and audiences alike mocking deep seated beliefs, yet continuing to sustain them, which serves to reify and strengthen dominant ideology (*Desert of the Real* 71). Correspondingly, the Marvel films emphasizing such exceptional individuals being linked to the military, even in such a 'compare/contrast' fashion, can be seen to equally reinforce the military itself, among other such superstructures, as a necessary base from which exceptionality can rise.[57] In what could serve as a mantra for this by-proxy reinforcement, in *Iron Man*, Stark, in an attempt to justify his initial profession as weapons manufacturer for the military, attests to his non-weapons manufacturing as such: "All these breakthroughs – military funding, honey." Similarly, Thor, and the Hulk would not exist in heroic capacities without their relationships with their respective militaries (Thor being raised as not only a prince, but as a key figure in Asgard's army, and the Hulk being created through Banner's experiments with the U.S. military going awry). Despite the aforementioned satirizing of Rogers' patriotism, Grant Morrison notes that Captain America exists as a symbol of violence "endorsed by the constitution itself" (39). Additionally, all of the Marvel 'secondary heroes' are more actively affiliated with

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[57] Darren Franich also notes the unprecedented nature of superheroes being "agent[s] of a higher authority" within Marvel films. Franich also gives this a capitalistic bent, sardonically referring to Marvel's 2010 purchase by Disney, "a global conglomerate that basically controls the world" as motivation ("17 Signs").

the military: Rogers and the Falcon bond through their shared experiences as combat veterans,[58]

the Black Widow and Hawkeye are defined by their employment with military surrogate

S.H.I.E.L.D., and both of Rhodes' heroic identities – War Machine and Iron Patriot – are defined

solely through his role as a Colonel in the military. This, again, reaffirms the Marvel trend of

surface critique-turned-reaffirmation of the dominant institution through the focalization of

specific exceptional individuals.

"Earth is ready for a higher form of war" – Escalation and Politics

in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

This dual-reinforcement of individuals and infrastructure is essential, as it sets the

foundation for the Marvel superhero films' interplay with extratextual violence. The Marvel films

consistently use fictional surrogate entities for instances or infrastructures pertaining to real-life

violence and military campaigns. In addition to S.H.I.E.L.D. functioning as a functional

equivalent to the United States NSA, CIA, and FBI, both Nazis and contemporary terrorism and

espionage agencies are conflated into the terrorist sect 'Hydra,'[59] while Stark is kidnapped in

Afghanistan by the equally fictional terrorist sect "The Ten Rings" in *Iron Man*. In *Thor: The

Dark World*, the dark energy force called 'the Aether," and Odin's use of its existence and the

adversarial Malekith (Christopher Eccleston)'s plan to use control it to plunge the universe into

darkness as an excuse for a military incursion into Malekith's home world of Svartalfheim

implicitly recalls the Bush administration's resistance to the constant threat of 'Weapons of Mass

Destruction' in the Middle East. In *Iron Man 3*, terrorist bombings are referenced yet rebranded

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[58] The Falcon's involvement in the conflict in *The Winter Soldier* even (likely unconsciously) echoes *The First Avenger*'s satire of enlistment propaganda, albeit in a far less satirical fashion: "Dude, Captain America needs my help. There's no better reason to get back in."

[59] The moniker itself is a reference to a terrorist organization from Marvel comics history, but is contextualized in *Captain America: The First Avenger* as "the Nazi deep science division."

as accidental explosions of soldiers treated by the biochemical regenerative treatment of the human body called 'Extremis.' Finally, as Darren Franich notes, the Chitauri alien attack on New York in *The Avengers* ultimately functions as "the 9/11 of the Marvel Cinematic Universe: An event that changed everything," complete with Stark evidencing post-traumatic stress disorder and chronic anxiety whenever the phrase "New York" is uttered in *Iron Man 3* ("17 Signs").

Iron Man 3 offers, in many ways, the genre's most incisive sociopolitical critique regarding the politics and social construction on the 'War on Terror' through its (purportedly central) antagonist, the Mandarin. The Mandarin is visually depicted as an almost overwhelming barrage of semiotic signifiers of global warfare, though most pointedly recalls Osama bin Laden, suggesting a rote allusion on 9/11. Instead, the Mandarin provides a somewhat more nuanced commentary: the character is revealed to be a hoax, a false identity played by a drunken, drug-addicted actor, created as a surrogate figurehead for American fears of anti-American terrorism. Rather than ideological terrorism, the Mandarin's motivations are strictly those of global capitalism: he rebrands accidental explosions in the tests of Killian's Extremis biotechnical procedures as deliberate anti-American terrorist incursions, not only absconding Killian from responsibility, but helping to generate a cultural need for the sale of Extremis to the United States military. This provides an almost deceptively candid critique on the illusionary and fear-mongering nature of 'terror' in American culture, and on the primarily financial motivations in military incursions. However, as always, the "*Iron Man* [series] plays politics for laughs" (Tyree 34), with the sociopolitical resonance of the Mandarin reveal buffered by the inherent comedy in the notably austere Ben Kingsley playing an outrageously stereotypical pantomime of a drunken buffoon actor. As such, even the most revealing instance of sociopolitical critique in the Marvel franchise is still played more for its 'fun factor' than anything else – a vivid example of the Marvel mechanism of including sporadic political commentary more for the sake of (seemingly)

discouraging viewers from actively courting any themselves. Instead, as Tyree notes, the film, like the rest of the Marvel films, "pre-interprets itself as frivolous entertainment and it does not try to be anything more" (34).

Such references become increasingly frequent and transparent throughout the progression of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This sense of 'escalation' vividly recalls Stephen Prince's aforementioned "business as usual" mentality in post-9/11 Hollywood (*Classical Film Violence* 1), suggesting the Marvel superhero films consistently 'testing the waters' to gage the acceptability of recalling real-life instances of military violence. Žižek furthers this discussion by suggesting a primary draw of violent narratives for audiences is a means of processing and 'making safe' – indeed, forming a "protective shield" against full comprehension of real life violent trauma (*Ridiculous Sublime* 37). This, and their reappropriation into violent spectacle, serves an ongoing project of the Marvel superhero films making familiar violence safe for viewers to enjoy, without the critique or culpability of the earlier genre entries. As such, any such conflicts with sociopolitical scope function, through the use of such fictional surrogate political entities, as reductionist political shorthand. In *Iron Man 3*, Stark and Rhodes' 'saving the day' literally entails rescuing the American President (William Sadler) from public assassination.[60]

Such shorthand extends in the genre methodology employed by the Marvel superhero films. Unlike other superhero texts,[61] the Marvel films never present a nonviolent alternative of

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[60] This instance also demonstrates a covert moment of *Iron Man 3* skirting deeper political resonance. Killian's ploy was to televise his burning the President alive on a pyre of oil, citing the President's noteworthy ties with the oil industry and a recent, environmentally devastating spill (echoing frequent complaints regarding vested interests in privatized corporations by real-life politicians). However, as this means of murdering the President is so horrific and villainous, the film circumvents further ethical interrogation of this throwaway remark in favour of morally coding the arrival of Stark and Rhodes as necessary and celebratory.

[61] While many cinematic releases such as *Watchmen* (Zack Snyder, 2009) and *Super* critique the hyperviolent means of conflict resolution inherent in the superhero genre, the most poignant such example is in the television cartoon *The Avengers: Earth's Mightiest Heroes* (2010-2013). Therein, the character of Hank Pym/Ant-Man (Wally Wingert) is portrayed as a staunch pacifist, and dedicates his energies to constructing supervillain prisons and other means of rehabilitating supervillains rather than simply incarcerating or physically subduing them. In one episode, Pym

conflict resolution. Even when Marvel superheroes initially object to the use of military-sanctioned violence or excessive force, as in *The Avengers* (in which the Avengers are disgusted by S.H.I.E.L.D.'s plans to use the Tesseract – an Asgardian energy source – to make advanced military weapons)*, The Incredible Hulk* (in which Banner's primary fear is the Hulk becoming 'weaponized' by the military), or *Thor: The Dark World*, they are inevitably appropriated into military-style combat, albeit under the guise of altruistic free will. Ultimately, this reaffirms Christopher Sharrett's assertion that cinematic narratives of violence are customarily used to validate (generally American) political doctrines and action thematically ("Afterword" 416), by suggesting the inevitability and justification of violent conflict resolution within both constitutional constraints and the infallible judgment of the exceptional individualistic superhero. In this way, audiences, through the Marvel superhero, can both question political superstructures and their propensity for violence, and yet still align themselves with the superhero who – with discretion – chooses to execute acts of violence. In accordance with Sharrett's alignment of violence and manifest destiny narratives with national myth, the superhero, whether working overtly or subliminally with the doctrine of the American military, motivates their violence by being in the name of – as the iconic Superman catchphrase boasts, "Truth, justice, and the American way."

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resigns from the Avengers, after bitterly criticizing their refusal to consider any nonviolent means of subduing supervillains. It is worth noting, however, that in Season Two of the show, Pym suffers a mental breakdown, and his attitude towards violence changes. Pym assumes a new identity, the vigilante Yellowjacket, and consistently carries a gun, eventually even battling the other Avengers. As such, despite the show introducing the viable presence of nonviolent conflict resolution in the superhero narrative, Pym's transformation seems to attest to the inevitability of violence permeating the superhero narrative, despite attempts at critique and deconstruction.

Integral to the superhero narrative are supervillains: antagonists who not only match the

hero in terms of powers and capabilities, but who serve to establish a strict binary with the hero

in terms of moral and ethical conduct. Richard Reynolds furthers this notion of villain-as-cipher

in the superhero myth, isolating the villain as the figure who initiates conflict and rising action in

the plot by threatening to destabilize the world, forcing the hero to intervene, resolve the conflict,

and return the world to its current, 'proper' state (52). Indeed, it is customarily the villain's

flamboyance in their penchant for socio-political reform and paradigm shifts that serves to

establish a binary of 'right' and 'wrong' – the villain, by being so indisputably 'wrong,'

vindicates the actions of the hero as 'right,' including all actions required to stop the villain on

the hero's part. As Theresa Webb and Nick Browne assert, "the villain's violation of *the laws of

humanity* justifies his eventual extermination by the hero" (81, my Italics).

Thus, by clearly delineating a behavioural course of action so clearly coded as

*un*acceptable, the superhero narrative, by proxy, serves to reinforce a larger ideological construct

of a state of articulating an acceptable state of being. This results in the customary conservativism

in the superhero narrative criticized by numerous scholars (Pollard 83; McGowan 2). As Matthew

Wolf-Meyer asserts, most villains, in seeking pseudo-utopian paradigm shifts, are branded as

misguided fundamentalists, failing to respect the sanctity in preserving the *rightness* of the status

quo – or, generally, American hegemony (501). As Alexander Pierce (Robert Redford), central

antagonist of *The Winter Soldier*, ruminates, "Sometimes building a new world means tearing the

old one down. And that makes enemies" – enemies, in this case, including the superhero and

superstructure alike.

Central in establishing this aforementioned 'right/wrong' binary is the omnipresent threat

of violence in the villain's actions. Furthering Victoria Harbord's observation that violence is

deemed 'acceptable'[62] by audiences of mainstream cinema provided it contributes to a protagonist/antagonist binary (qtd. in Grønstad 39), as Webb and Browne note, in the standard hero/villain conflict, "Violence [is] committed by most of the villains in order to remove perceived obstacles in obtaining their goals. […] Almost none of them reflec[t] on their use of violence" (88). This threat of violence lends a sense of urgency to the hero responding in kind to the villain's actions, vindicating the hero's use of violent conflict resolution in response to the villain's threat of larger-scale violence.

Crucially, this binary is mutually reinforced, as Frank Verano and Todd McGowan articulate how the existence of a supervillain justifies the existence of a hero and their actions, unsanctioned by the law, in a fashion that would not otherwise be tolerated (85; 3), recalling Mark Gallagher's assertion that action films conceal potentially problematic aspects of the hero by demonstrating the villain to be hyperbolically worse on every such front (204). Thus, supervillains function narratively not only to valorize the hero and make their violence ethically sound, but to sanctify the mere presence of the hero in the first place.[63]

Paul Levitz notes that the introduction of supervillains in superhero comics equally cued the inevitability and assumption of violence, as opposed to simply superpowered problem solving, into the superhero narrative (81). The distinction between violent conflict and 'problem solving' here is crucial, especially in light of how intrinsically the two have become interwoven in the superhero narrative. This assumption is particularly important in ruminations on violence in Marvel superhero films, as they, more than any other genre equivalents, fail to present or

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[62] Harbord's wording, of course, recalls Donovan's aforementioned notion of "acceptable visions of violence" (*Blood, Guts and Testosterone* 211).

[63] This tenuous and conditional acceptance of the hero is even textually acknowledged in past superhero films – by the Green Goblin in *Spider-Man* ("In spite of everything you've done for them, eventually they will hate you") and the Joker in *The Dark Knight* ("They need you right now. When they don't, they'll cast you out – like a leper").

consider any nonviolent means of conflict resolution. It is because of this that Frank Verano reads

supervillains as figurative distractions, "the product of a military-industrial complex that wants to

keep superheroes occupied with day-to-day conflicts to prevent them from enacting real social

change" (86). Vincent M. Gaine furthers this criticism, noting that the hero's staunch allegiance

to the law results in them becoming increasingly oppressive and violent (119), whereas Randolph

Lewis extends this critique even farther, claiming the superhero is the real villain, "because his

joyless victory brings nothing but another day of the unsatisfying status quo" (qtd. in Schlegel

and Habermann 44). Therefore, the mere presence of the supervillain figure can be considered a

consistent validation of the presence of violent spectacle within the superhero narrative, and,

moreover, an ideological distraction obscuring the possibility of deviation and more productive

nonviolence within the hero narrative.

"Doubling" and Proxy-validation

Echoing Katey Rich's aforementioned criticism that "Loki is the only good[64] villain in

Marvel movies – and that's a big problem," Marvel supervillains are primarily noteworthy for

lacking the narrative attention, or 'face time,' of the genre's precedents to ascribe much

motivation or explanation to their actions whatsoever, let alone pathos. Instead, more

dramatically than their forerunners, the narrative motivation and function of the Marvel

supervillain is generally reducible to concise, one-note causality: desire for power (Obadiah Stane

in *Iron Man*; Emil Blonsky/Abomination [Tim Roth] in *The Incredible Hulk*; the Red Skull),

revenge (Whiplash and Justin Hammer [Sam Rockwell] in *Iron Man 2*), or both (Loki and

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[64] Here, Rich's use of the word 'good' is intended as a value-judgment rather than an assessment of moral character. Nonetheless, Loki remains an ethically complex character, not only in light of his aforementioned fan appeal, but due to his (purportedly) shifting moral allegiance, which is discussed later in this Chapter.

Aldrich Killian). Jason Bainbridge aligns this conciseness in motivation to antagonist from the Marvel comics, who he aligns with the tradition of melodrama. Correspondingly, Bainbridge finds Marvel villains to have rote audience appeals towards negative emotions, such as jealousy or vindictiveness (69). In her typology of filmic supervillains, Robin S. Rosenberg stresses the "Vengeful Villain" archetype to have particular resonance in ascribing further personal scope into the superhero narrative (108), and it is worth noting that the vast majority of Marvel villain's motivations can be linked to jealousy of the heroic protagonist – itself a means of, by proxy, valorizing the superhero as desirable.[65] Regardless, this simplicity and lack of access to the Marvel supervillains renders even the cursory potential for empathy or nuance in audience engagement with their precedents difficult, and further reducing the character archetype to narrative function, and means of motivating violent spectacle.

For the most part, this efficiency (or minimalism) in characterization extends to two of the most established signifiers and tropes of supervillains: the savage, "ecstatic" enjoyment of inflicting violence against others (Webb and Browne 88), and the stereotypical penchant for "monologuing," or explaining their villainous 'master plan' to the hero.[66] Scott Bukatman finds this "monologuing," beyond a device designed to impart narrative exposition, to be a form of verbal performativity and prowess akin to its physical equivalents ("Secret Identity Politics" 121). Similarly, Andrew Smith charts the trend of hero/villain conflicts extending beyond physical altercations into ideological pontification. Smith identifies a slew of villains, such as

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[65] In regards to *The Incredible Hulk*, Anthony Mills interestingly reads the Abomination's ferocious competition with the Hulk as an "inability to accept his aging" (173). This proves yet another example of a potential site for pathos in a supervillain being instead rebranded as negative and unsympathetic through lack of personal access.

[66] Arguably the most noteworthy post-2000s example of both is in *Superman Returns*, when Lex Luthor boastfully extols his plans to use Kryptonian technology to reshape the existing geographic continents and monopolize the real estate market. Lois Lane (Kate Bosworth) exclaims, "But millions of people will die!" to which Luthor cheerfully replies, "Billions! Once again, the press underestimates me."

Magneto, who "would rather win the argument than the fight," relying on morally besting their heroic adversary for the sake of self-actualization (104).

Though there are fleeting moments of these tropes in Marvel villains, most of them demonstrate comparable ambivalence towards such standard villainous signifiers. Instead, they fulfill Webb and Browne's observation of villains committing violence primarily "in order to remove perceived obstacles in obtaining their goals" (88), rather than goading the hero physically or ideologically to the extent of past villains like Magneto or any of the villains in the *Dark Knight* trilogy. Webb and Browne note that, normally, the appeal between villain and hero oscillates throughout, due to the seductive appeal of evil (96). Nonetheless, the limited access and comparative lack of villainous 'scene-stealing,' in turn, deprives Marvel villains of the potential for the camp or performative enjoyment factor of their precedents. J.M. Tyree even comments that many Marvel villains evidence "counterintuitive casting," played by "soft looking" actors "who do not exactly exude threatening vibes," such as Jeff Bridges and William Hurt (29). This technique would seem to perpetuate the 'humanization' of said supervillains were it not for the lack of personal access; as it stands, it simultaneously decreases their camp appeal as well. Thus, viewer interest and sympathy is grounded even more with the heroic protagonist.

Marvel villains also differentiate from their precedents in regards to the aforementioned tropes of pathos and preexisting personal relationships with the hero. Instead, in accordance with Rosenberg's "Vengeful" taxonomy, Marvel villains primarily engender grievances with heroes through conceptual doubling in their heroic/villainous identities – Blonsky and the Red Skull do not *know* Banner and Rogers, but fixate on conceptual similarities with them, further reducing the antagonists to their narrative functions, as opposed to characterizations. This functions in accordance with Chris Deis' contestation that superhero narratives are consistently told from a hero-centric vantage point, excluding focus or intimate access to the villain (98). As such, the

customary Marvel villain, though exhibiting potential sites for pathos, is denied the narrative access to fully register as sympathetic with audiences.[67]

There are exceptions to this trend in villain characterization. Though Stane also has a preexisting relationship with Stark prior to his turn to villainy, it is primarily Loki and the Winter Soldier who have existing relationships with the hero, and demonstrate considerable potential for engendering audience sympathy and pathos (in large part because of Loki's aforementioned fan appeal). Loki laments his lifelong marginalization by his 'family' in Asgard, whereas the Winter Soldier is revealed to be Rogers' best friend, Bucky Barnes, believed to be killed in action during a battle with Hydra during WWII, but who is instead brainwashed and genetically modified by Hydra forces to become a political assassin instead. After his first encounter with Captain America, who recognizes him as Barnes, the Winter Soldier is shown agonizingly attempting to retrieve his memories, and subjected to physical torture by Alexander Pierce and Hydra scientists attempting to again erase his memories. The fact that Loki and the Winter Soldier are the only two Marvel antagonists to demonstrate any moments of heroic redemption akin to Octavius in *Spider-Man 2* (in *Thor: The Dark World*, Loki helps Thor combat Malekith, and – seemingly – dies a hero,[68] whereas the Winter Soldier, in spite of repeatedly shooting and viciously beating Rogers in a climactic showdown, ultimately rescues Rogers from drowning afterwards) is,

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[67] Travis Wagner, re-reading the *Iron Man* trilogy as an allegory for disability disavowal, points to the problematic repercussions of this in the case of *Iron Man 3*. Discussing the (initially) disabled Killian and his army of war veteran amputee Extremis soldiers, Wagner argues that, by depriving Killian and his soldiers of any personal focus, "little is shown to suggest their anger rooted in anything but villainy. These disabled figures, unlike Stark, affirm the stigma attached to such an identity, therefore creating the very contrast Stark requires to justify their destruction. Indeed, their otherness is not pitied by Stark, but made a fiery monstrosity to be destroyed" (10). As such, in anchoring viewer focus with the protagonist, Stark, so singularly, Wagner contests that *Iron Man 3* adopts a thematic subtext of disability stigmatism, by reifying Stark's exceptional singularity as the only character not rendered 'monstrous' by his debilitating injury.

[68] By the end of *Thor: The Dark World*, it is revealed that Loki did not in fact die, but instead feigned his death, to instead impersonate Odin on the throne of Asgard. It is ambiguous what, consequently, happened to Odin, with the implicit potential that Loki murdered him to instead finally capitalize on his lust for political rule of Asgard. As such, at this point, Loki's ultimate morality remains tenuous and ambiguous, at best.

doubtlessly, uncoincidental with the fact that the two are the only adversaries depicted as young and physically attractive. Moreover, it can equally be asserted that, as with the case of the aforementioned superstructures, Loki and the Winter Soldier can be considered within the framework of 'by-proxy exceptionalism' through their relationships with the central heroes. In this sense, once again, even the redemptive actions of the two villains can, again, be attributed to textual valorization of the superhero first and foremost.

<div align="center">

"You know, with all that power, I thought you'd hit harder"

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Unique to the Marvel superhero films is the extent to which Marvel villains' doubling of their respective heroes reflects in the means by which they engage in physical combat. In virtually every case, the villain's superpowers are a variant of the hero's. Consequently, the hero vanquishing the villain is, effectively, a case of 'beating them at their own game' – Stark's Iron Man armour must outperform the variant armours of Stane and Vanko, the Hulk must 'smash' harder than the Abomination, and Captain America must overpower the Red Skull, the Winter Soldier, mercenary Batroc (Georges St-Pierre),[69] and even an elevator full of Hydra members, in terms of athleticism and combat prowess. Such equality in violent showdowns recalls Gallagher's discussion of heroes overcoming "ritual" obstacles to display their "fantasy omnipotence" (208). Thus, much in the same way that the doubling between hero and villain serves to establish the binary of morality between them to a greater extent, the doubling in physical combat in Marvel films serves to further showcase the physical exceptionality in the superhero as a capable agent of violence.

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[69] In *The Winter Soldier*, Batroc taunts Rogers for using his shield in combat, the only discrepancy between the fighting capabilities of the two, jeering, "I thought you were more than just a shield." Rogers, succumbing to the taunt, sheathes his shield, with the retort "We'll see." The rest of the action sequence serves to further demonstrate Rogers' physical prowess, being equally able to best Batroc in unarmed combat.

Moreover, this doubling in physical combat also further foregrounds the visual monstrousness of the villain by comparison. Easton aligns the filmic supervillain with Barbara Creed's notion of the monstrous,[70] observing that, in contrast with the pristine, fetishized physicality of the superhero, villainous bodies are "grotesque and abjected" (40). Accordingly, in the aforementioned showdowns, Stane's armour is depicted as grotesquely excessive in contrast with Stark's sleek Iron Man armour (even to the point of emitting an enormous cloud of black smoke when flying, unlike Iron Man), whereas the physicality of Abomination and Red Skull are mutated and deformed in comparison with their heroic counterparts. Scott Bukatman observes that supervillains, more than heroes, are often named after their physicality, thereby relegating their character and function to it even moreso ("Secret Identity Politics" 122). This is unquestionably the case for 'The Red Skull' and 'Whiplash,' whereas 'Abomination' serves as an example of nomenclature-as-value-judgment.[71]

Ultimately, this concept of monstrousness ultimately divests the violence enacted by the superhero against the villain of any ramifications of audience reflection and critique. In several instances, Marvel superheroes, in violently combating their supervillain adversaries, leave them seriously wounded or disfigured: the Hulk hospitalizes Blonsky, leaving him in a full body cast after shattering most of his bones, Stark maims Ten Rings terrorist leader Raza (Faran Tahir) when escaping from captivity in Afghanistan by shooting him in the face with a missile, and Thor

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[70] Easton uses the term in analyzing the supervillain's role more in 'doubling' the normative, masculine gendered identity of the superhero, citing Creed's 'monstrous' as, "A feminine figure that is produced at the border which separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not [the internal citation is 10-11]. Here the monstrous is a feminized male who threatens the clear lines of the hero's white hetero-masculinity" (40).

[71] Bukatman's concept of 'naming-as-morality-shorthand' is put to particularly poignant use in *Thor: The Dark World*. Therein, Malekith had previously operated as the political head of a race and kingdom that were effectively obliterated in an ancient conflict with Asgard. Malekith's objective is thus to use the Aether to rebuild the universe in a means hospitable for rebuilding his race – a somewhat more sympathetic 'master plan.' However, since members of Malekith's race are called the 'Dark Elves,' his plan is worded throughout the narrative as "Malekith plans to plunge the universe into darkness." Thus, this, in tandem with the aforementioned lack of personal access, codes Malekith and his objective as villainous, with no vestiges of pathos or vibrant social critique.

burns Malekith's face with a bolt of lightening. Yet, this evidence of the hero's violence, rather than serving as a guilt, ethically troubling reminder of Stephen Prince's notion of "consequences" of violence ("Emergence" 27), instead furthers the visual monstrousness of each antagonist. After recovering from his time in the hospital, Blonsky overdoses on chemical 'Super Soldier' supplements and compounds made from the Hulk's blood until he mutates into the Abomination, whereas Raza and Malekith's scarred visages grant them identifiable 'villain signifiers.' Even when the Marvel hero exerts potentially 'overkill' violence against the supervillain, the only 'consequence' is of the villain emerging as even less favourable than before.

Moreover, what is particularly noteworthy about Marvel villains is, as Chris Deis notes, their consistent affiliation with the aforementioned superstructures or socio-political 'institutions,' particularly the military (95). General Ross (William Hurt) and Blonsky in *The Incredible Hulk* each occupy high-ranking positions in the American military, Stane, Justin Hammer, and Aldrich Killian function as military contractors, the Red Skull and Alexander Pierce are both part of the Nazi-derivative terrorist sect Hydra, whereas even Loki, Laufey and Malekith have military combat-related aspirations (Loki even refers to his attempted conquest of Earth in *The Avengers* as "The War"). This affiliation could, again, serve to function as a means of sociopolitical critique, commenting, by extension, on the corruption of larger political infrastructures through their insemination by supervillains.

However, instead, channeling Žižek's aforementioned contestation that audiences critique sociopolitical systems to ensure the comfort of their stability, my assertion is that such affiliation of villains with the infrastructure is what allows for such a sense of 'safe critique.' The existence of the politically affiliated supervillain allows audiences a clearly narratively sanctioned means of sociopolitical critique through an obvious figurehead (or 'scapegoat'). The inevitable defeat of the supervillain upon the conclusion of the film thus functions as shorthand for 'problem solved,'

suggesting that the removal of the villain from the infrastructure has 'cured' any inherent conflict within the system without jeopardizing the security of the system itself.

With this in mind, it is equally crucial that the 'master plans' of the Marvel supervillains are generally vague and simplistic, reducing the likelihood of audience alignment with them. Lee Easton, drawing upon queer theory, deems the supervillain a figure of "non-productivity," who functions more to resist societal paradigms than expressively rebrand them. In regards to the Red Skull, Easton observes, "[a]lthough his ultimate goal is never made entirely clear, the Skull does plan to destroy both the Allies and the Axis for no other reason than they presumably stand between him and world domination" (41-42). Similarly, Aldrich Killian crows, "I'll own the war on terror," thereby (over)simplifying his convoluted scheme (simulating terrorist attacks through his 'Mandarin' broadcasts, and creating supply and demand for his 'Extremis' program being implemented in the military). When Killian abducts the U.S. President, who demands, "What do you want from me?" Killian's flippant response speaks to this sense of vague opposition: "Uh… absolutely nothing, sir. I just needed a reason to kill you that would look good on TV." Indeed, comprehension of the nuances of the plans of Killian or the Red Skull is not ultimately necessary. Both figures can instead be understood as figures of "non-productivity" by being against the 'status quo' of normative American culture, and the heroes who increasingly stand as ciphers for it. The cursory nature of such conflicts, as such, reinforce Chris Deis' argument that the customarily crude political ideology of the villain sanctifies the hero's politics, and, by proxy, that of the dominant socio-political system they are aligned with (97).

One such villainous plan that *is* made clear – and, indeed, is echoed by more than one antagonist – is the notion of freeing the mass populace from freedom. Loki first utters this paradoxical statement upon his arrival on Earth in *The Avengers*:

Loki: "I come with glad tidings, of a world made free."

Fury: "Free from what?"

Loki: "Freedom. Freedom is life's great lie. Once you accept that – in your heart – you

will know peace."[72]

This wording suggests a more explicitly totalitarian regime (discussed in greater detail in this Chapter's case study). This pivotal phrase ultimately proves microcosmic of my argument as a whole, and perfectly emblematic of Marvel escalation. audacity. The concept of 'freeing people from freedom' might signify the threat of an impending dictatorship, especially when espoused by Loki, having just murdered three people and brainwashed two more into becoming his subservient slaves. However, the term could equally apply the Marvel film's ongoing ideological project of promoting unquestioning deference to the exceptional individuality of the superhero. Equally, the phrase calcifies the aforementioned appeal of Marvel mitigating political engagement (as in Žižek's notion of the "Tibetan Prayer Wheel") by making broad, explicit references to real-life politics, but only surface engagement, all for the sake of "freeing" viewers from the need to pursue political engagement on their own right, in favour of enjoying the film. Having the film's central antagonist vocalize such a potentially incriminating phrase not only attests to Marvel's fundamental reflexivity in tone, but also their means of narratively motivating political alignment: by having Loki, the murdering antagonist vocalize sentiments of a hyperbolically conservative nature, the rest of the Marvel films, and heroes, appear far less conservative in their politics by comparison.

Fittingly, in his next appearance, attacking an opera in Germany, Loki is confronted and defeated by the two most nationalistically affiliated Marvel heroes: Iron Man and Captain America. Captain America even lends this fight explicitly political overtones: dropping down

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[72] Loki's statement is reprised by Hydra in *The Winter Soldier*, and is discussed further in this Chapter's subsequent case study.

from a helicopter to protect an elderly German man from being incinerated by Loki's energy blast

with his shield, he exclaims, "You know, the last time I was in Germany, and saw a man standing

above everybody else… we ended up disagreeing." This comment directly aligns the Marvel

heroes with the dominant American interventionalist cultural narrative, suggesting that they, in

doing so, are the true bastions of 'freedom' (appropriate, given how both characters exercise their

own respective freedoms: Stark, in becoming the head of a mega-corporation, who, as self-

declared, attempts to "privatize world peace," and Rogers, whose defining character moment was

in exercising his right to enlist in the United States army). Indeed, if there were any further doubt

about the sanctity of the Marvel hero's actions, Captain America personally safeguarding

innocent citizens from an antagonist compared to Hitler *in Germany* would likely be enough for

any viewer to cheer for the "good guy" hitting the "bad guy."

<div align="center">Case Study: Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014)</div>

Just as *The First Avenger* differentiated itself from the standard Marvel superhero

narrative by appropriating the tone and tropes of a jaunty, 1940s-era serialized adventure,[73] *The*

Winter Soldier equally aligns itself with the tone and rough narrative structure of a 1970s

political thriller. This comparison is complete with references to comparable genre pieces, such

as *All the President's Men* (Alan J. Pakula, 1976) and *Three Days of the Condor* (Sydney

Pollack, 1975), and lent metatextual weight by the casting of Robert Redford as Alexander

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[73] This tonal pastiche serves to make Captain America – potentially alienating due to his explicit patriotism – palatable for a contemporary audience. The tonal evocation of fun-based period films serves to historically root the character – he can function as antiquated because he is literally *from the past*. *The First Avenger* furthers this by surrounding the introduction of Captain America with a knowing, intertextual barrage of references and influences. Specifically, the film includes no fewer than three references to Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), one in the first five minutes, which provide a familiar tonal benchmark that aligns the character with the fun of Spielberg's iconic adventure film.

Pierce.[74] In keeping with the paranoia and political skepticism and nihilism inherent in such

genre entries, the film proves Marvel's most ambitious undertaking in terms of furthering

allusions to familiar sociopolitical anxieties and instances of 'real-life' violence and conflict. The

film's central conflict involves the exposure of the corruption of military-cipher S.H.I.E.L.D. by

Nazi-derivative terrorist sect Hydra from its inception.

In furthering this conflict, *The Winter Soldier* not only amplifies the amount of street-

level collateral damage amidst violent spectacle (and thereby engaging with American anxieties

regarding 'violence on the homefront'). It equally alludes to contemporary anxieties regarding

Wikileaks and the NSA's spying on civilians (central to Hydra's plan is a conceit called "Zola's

Algorithm" – a computer program that monitors American citizens, and, by tracking credit card

transactions and cell phone usage, determines the applicability of the individual to "Hydra's

worldview") and drone warfare (Hydra's ultimate plan, codenamed "Project Insight," is the

launch of three Helicarriers – airborne military bases – complete with countless long-range

cannons designed to target and eradicate all other citizens who do not comply with "Zola's

Algorithm"). *The Winter Soldier* even includes a brazen visual reference to 9/11, by having one

of the Helicarriers, destroyed by Captain America, crash into the Triskellion (the S.H.I.E.L.D.

military base, which conflates the visual iconography of the World Trade Centre with the

function of the Pentagon).[75] Such an explicit visual homage to 9/11, here rebranded as

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[74] Though it is never made explicit, it is implied that Pierce is the Secretary of Defense. In video counsel with other political world leaders he is referred to as "Mr. Secretary," and Nick Fury makes reference to the fact that Pierce was awarded, but declined, a Nobel Peace Prize, an award befitting such stature. As Pierce is revealed to be a high-ranking Hydra official, and the film's chief antagonist, this lends the film further sociopolitical weight. Yet, unlike *Iron Man 3*, in which the Vice President (Miguel Ferrer) is explicitly involved in Killian's master plan, this maneuver of alluding to yet not outright depicting an official political figure is more in keeping with Marvel's courting sociopolitical resonance yet ultimately eluding active engagement with the ramifications thereof, in favour of guilt-free violent spectacle.

[75] The visual of the Helicarrier hitting the Triskellion incorporates many of the signifiers Geoff King identifies as pivotal in cuing viewer recognition of 9/11, including the Helicarrier mirroring the angle of the second plane hitting

entertainment-based violent visual spectacle, could not be a farther cry from the tenuous

avoidance of any specific references to 9/11 in favour of an ethereal spirit of patriotism and

community in immediate post-9/11 superhero films such as *Spider-Man*, as discussed in Chapter

One. Instead, the bold reappropriation of 9/11 – what has largely been argued to be the seminal

event in reshaping the genre in terms of reflection and attentiveness towards the consequences of

violence – as enjoyable visual spectacle here marks the most explicit case of Marvel's ongoing

ideological project of unlearning the guilt attributed to violent spectacle by the post-9/11

superhero film, and returning to the guilt-free abandon of violence in the 1990s action film,

vividly recalling Prince's "business as usual" quip (*Classical Film Violence* 1).

Fittingly, this escalation in reliance on sociopolitical anxieties and extratextual, familiar

violence, becomes distilled into almost redundant, bare-faced simplicity. Despite the lengthy

expositional monologue by Hydra scientist Arnim Zola (Toby Jones) explaining Hydra's master

plan being to shift the balance of global power through ideological insemination,[76] "Project

Insight" instead eschews hegemonic subtlety entirely through a return to almost feudal conflict

resolution – shooting any perceived to disagree with Hydra's "worldview." The antagonists even

have an identifying catchphrase ("Hail Hydra!"),[77] which is frequently whispered between them.

The Winter Soldier prays on anxieties of the unknowability of corruption and violence, only to

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the twin tower, shot from a dramatic low-angle correspondent with most video coverage of the attack, and followed by an enormous, engulfing dust cloud ("Just Like a Movie?" 51).

[76] Zola reprises Loki's "freeing [people] from freedom" statement as Hydra's dogma:
> Hydra was founded on the belief that humanity could not be trusted with its own freedom. […] If you try to take that freedom, they resist. The war taught us much. Humanity needed to surrender its freedom willingly. […] Hydra created a world so chaotic that humanity is finally ready to sacrifice its freedom, to gain security.

[77] Although this catchphrase may have little narrative motivation beyond the titillating chills evoked from its utterance, it recalls Lee Easton's discussion of unconventional community building in supervillains, "organizing social life beyond that of the family and the nation formation it supports" ("Saying No" 42), as well as Scott Bukatman's aforementioned notion of "monologuing" and self-actualizing verbal performativity akin to physical domination ("Secret Identity Politics" 121).

make it unmistakably exposed and knowable. Consequently, by the beginning of the final action showdown, Sam Wilson/The Falcon queries, "Hey Cap – how do we know the good guys from the bad?" to which Rogers responds "If they're shooting at you, they're bad." As reviewer A.A. Dowd quips, "the exchange underline[s] how black-and-white the film's politics end up looking."

Anthony Peter Spankanos recounts how palatable superheroism for audiences requires "finding an authentic and just patriotism while rejecting official accounts" (27). Fittingly, in a continuation of his skepticism of the validity of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s politics and military maneuvers in *The Avengers*, Rogers, throughout the film, is shown unflappably questioning the secrecy and dubious politics of S.H.I.E.L.D. and Nick Fury even before Hydra's roots in the organization are exposed. Rogers' first assignment – an incursion to military vessel The Lemurian Star on international waters, purportedly to rescue hostages held for ransom by Batroc, but ultimately a front to retrieve stolen S.H.I.E.L.D. intelligence files – is jeopardized through his unawareness of the Black Widow's alternative mission to retrieve said files. Afterwards, he lambasts Fury, saying "Soldiers trust each other – that's what makes it an army, instead of a bunch of guys shooting each other."[78] Later, Fury does confide in Rogers the intent of "Project Insight" – a terrorist deterrent, and means of targeting and eliminating concealed terror threats. Rogers grimly intones, "I thought the punishment usually came after the crime […] holding a gun to everyone's head and calling it protection? […] This isn't freedom – this is fear." Rogers thus remains firmly aligned with the Marvel tradition of the hero's exceptionality being valorized through the inability of larger superstructures to contain them, and of his heroism being rooted not out of a sense of obligation or guilt, but out of personal interest. As Rogers explains to Peggy Carter, his love interest from the 1940s, now elderly, and bedridden at a hospital, his ultimate motivation in

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[78] Fury's justification for S.H.I.E.L.D.'s secrecy is itself an incisive commentary on contemporary bureaucracy: "It's called compartmentalization. Nobody spills the secrets because nobody knows them all." Rogers: "Except you."

joining S.H.I.E.L.D. was the knowledge that Carter helped found the organization. Rogers'

politics thus remain firmly rooted in his own judgment, rather than exterior motivations or

influence.

Nonetheless, in spite of Rogers' persistent critique of S.H.I.E.L.D. throughout his filmic

appearances, the presence of Nick Fury as authority figure has remained a consistent 'human

face' and anchor for the morality of the organization. Fury is consistently narratively coded as

'the one good spy,' and, though influenced by political interplay, stubbornly insistent on pursuing

his personal vision in a fashion reminiscent of the exceptionality of the primary superhero figure.

In *The Avengers*, it is Fury's appeal to his own emotions, rather than bureaucratic policy, that

convinces his assembled force of heroes to fight as a team, and, when a nuclear strike is called on

New York City to immobilize the Chitauri attack, Fury protests, claiming the strike would result

in millions of casualties, including the Avengers. When Fury's resistance is overruled and a

nuclear strike is called, Fury – again, continuing the Marvel project of conflating political

intrigue with spectacle violence – fires a bazooka at the fighter jet preparing to depart, and thus

delays the impending strike on the city.

In *The Winter Soldier*, this coding of Fury as 'trustworthy' is upheld. When Rogers

criticizes Fury for his secrecy,[79] Fury immediately reveals the intent of "Project Insight" to him,

snapping, "I share. I'm nice like that." Later, Fury, troubled by Rogers' resistance to "Project

Insight," implores Pierce to delay the release of the initiative until further investigations can be

taken to ensure its sanctity. In this way, Fury continues the tradition of 'secondary heroes,' who,

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[79] In a further commentary on the NSA and the concealment of information, when Rogers invades the Triskellion to stop the Helicarriers from launching, his first act is to advocate 'freedom of information' ("I think it's time you know the truth") by publically broadcasting the existence and plans of Hydra, and Pierce's incriminating role therein, to all S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. This precludes the climactic action showdown by valorizing Rogers through his heroic, inspirational speech. Furthermore, in customary Marvel fashion, the political resonance is undercut by humour, as Rogers' speech is framed by a cameo from comedy star Danny Pudi, and the Falcon joking, "Did you write that down first, or was it off the top of your head?"

through allegiance with the primary Marvel hero, are equally coded as trustworthy, making S.H.I.E.L.D. by proxy, given Fury's executive role as director, a sanctioned organization.

In this way, echoing Umberto Eco's analysis of the stagnant temporality in the superhero narrative through the 'impossibility' of death of primary characters (16), Fury's (purported) assassination by the Winter Soldier thus carries considerable symbolic weight in regards to the morality of the infrastructure of S.H.I.E.L.D. Indeed, Fury's (supposedly) dying message to Rogers is "S.H.I.E.L.D. compromised. Don't… trust…anyone" – a contention dramatic enough that it could functionally serve as means of *The Winter Soldier* generating genuine sociopolitical commentary by depriving the audience of the standard moral barometer for the morality of an institution. This could open channels to the kind of sociopolitical questioning and critique Marvel superhero films would normally subtly abstain from.

As such, even upon the eventual revelation that Fury's death was faked, Rogers' response to the indiscernible extent of Hydra's influence within S.H.I.E.L.D., in tandem with his preexisting uneasiness with S.H.I.E.L.D.'s tenuous politics, is a complete paradigm shift: the complete dismantling and destruction of S.H.I.E.L.D. as an entity. Rogers' decision is vocally endorsed by each of the film's secondary protagonists – the Black Widow, Falcon, and even S.H.I.E.L.D. assistant director Maria Hill (Cobie Smulthers), further sanctifying Rogers' exceptionality and heroic judgment. This eradication of S.H.I.E.L.D. recalls Geoff King's articulation of the perceived cathartic yearning for "the notion of a cleansing destruction of centres of government and urban decadence, against which certain powerful notions of American-ness have often been defined," conflating the thrill of systemic or ideological destruction with the aesthetic thrill of visual mass destruction. Considering King connects this affective thrill in such destruction with residual audience guilt at recognizing the visual similarities of spectacle-violence to 9/11 ("Just Like a Movie?" 49), *The Winter Soldier*'s

valorizing of the eradication of military involvement in civilian life, complete with the accompanying 9/11 visual reference of the crashing Helicarrier, could suggest the kind of reflective deconstruction or critique of the enjoyment of inevitable violence in the superhero genre, more akin to the aforementioned reflective violence in films such as Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy.

Curiously, Rogers' firmness in the complete eradication of S.H.I.E.L.D. again functions as a means of 'doubling' with the villain, considering Pierce and Hydra's plans for the complete obliteration of any perceived opposition with "Project Insight." Rogers' insistence in this sequence ("You [Fury] told me not to trust anyone, and this is how it ends: […] S.H.I.E.L.D., Hydra, it all goes!") even (seemingly unconsciously) echoes the wording of Pierce's earlier comment that "Sometimes building a new world means tearing the old one down." This, consequently, could serve as a more viable site of critique yet, by utilizing doubling with the antagonist to, instead of reifying the morality of the hero by contrast, instead engage in the uncertain morality of his actions and judgment by comparison.

However, Žižek has repeatedly argued that aspirations for sociopolitical paradigm shifts like those discussed by King are ultimately consciously geared by the culture industry as a form of 'political bloodletting,' simulating the illusion of desire for political upheaval, yet ultimately betraying an undercurrent of fundamental, uncompromising desire for stability (*How to Read Lacan* 23). It is my argument here that a clear correlation is evidenced between the challenging of the sociopolitical system in the Marvel superhero films and how much said systems are ultimately reaffirmed as beneficial and desirable. The comfort of this inverse stability is never more firmly portrayed than in *The Winter Soldier*. The genuine systemic discomfort generated by Fury's death could never ultimately be sustained, and his inevitable return perfectly illustrates

this notion of safe sociopolitical 'soft critique' – Fury's death might suggest the dismantling of

the infrastructure, but his inevitable return maintains the comfort of consistency and stability.

By the climax of the film, it is implied that Rogers and his affiliates, Black Widow,

Falcon, Fury, and Maria Hill, do 'take down' S.H.I.E.L.D., seemingly valorizing the

dismantlement of the military industrial complex. However, as in *The Avengers*, when the victory

of the heroes is reinforced in a visually-based deus-ex-machina (Stark propels a nuclear missile

into the mothership of the invading alien Chitauri, and all of the remaining Chitauri troops on

Earth fall to the ground, dead), in *The Winter Soldier*, Rogers' victory over S.H.I.E.L.D. is

implied through acts of physical destruction and violence. The Helicarriers of "Project Insight"

and the Triskellion, headquarters of S.H.I.E.L.D., are destroyed, and Pierce is shot by the Black

Widow, his dying words being a breathy "Hail…Hydra," as if implying the organization

effectively dies with him.[80] However, both aforementioned climaxes evidence customary Marvel

oversimplification in terms of politics, with minimal engagement with the nuances and

repercussions of the simultaneous destruction of a major military institution and terrorist sect. As

such, once the thrill of the physical destruction has died down, the film's implicit message is

effectively that 'things are okay now.'

Ultimately, in the case of *The Winter Soldier*, there is a discrepancy between symbolic

institution and functional institution, which is never critically engaged with by the film. Though

all of the visual signifiers of S.H.I.E.L.D. are gone – even including an aestheticized sequence of

Fury burning all his S.H.I.E.L.D. documents and definitive eyepatch, silhouetted by the flames –

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[80] This security in the eradication of Hydra is, of course, undermined for viewers who stayed to watch the traditional Marvel 'mid-credits teaser' for an upcoming Marvel project – in this case, for *The Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, 2015). The teaser introduces the character of Baron von Strucker (Thomas Kretschmann), an iconic figurehead of Hydra from *Avengers* comics, who boasts that none can anticipate the upcoming plans and machinations of Hydra.

the film's conclusion clearly implies that the functional effect of the institution still carries on.[81]
An epilogue sequence details Rogers, Fury, Falcon, Black Widow and Maria Hill all carrying out follow-up missions related to S.H.I.E.L.D. politics. In this way, it is implied that S.H.I.E.L.D. as an entity survives through not only the behest of the superhero – Rogers – but the 'second-hand exceptional' individuals he surrounds himself with. This remains significant, as these individuals can be seen as ciphers for American military and political organizations: Falcon, who self-declares as "I'm more of a soldier than a spy," as the military, the morally ambiguous 'spy' Black Widow as the NSA, and the more militarily administrative Fury and Maria Hill as the CIA. Thus, the implicit message is that said institutions need not be dismantled, but instead staffed by such 'second-hand exceptional' people sanctioned by the trustworthy hero.

The film's denouement even echoes *Iron Man 2*'s subpoena scene, when the Black Widow is called in to testify for the destruction of S.H.I.E.L.D. When threatened with legal action, the Widow idly retorts,

> You're not going to put me in a prison. You're not going to put any of us in a prison. You know why? […] Because you need us. Yes, the world is a vulnerable place. And yes, we helped make it that way. But we're also the ones best qualified to defend it. So, if you want to arrest me, arrest me. You'll know where to find me.

Despite admitting complicity in illegal actions, the Widow's speech ultimately affirms the necessity of the superhero as both a trustworthy, more omnipotent, and ultimately unstoppable counterpoint to sociopolitical infrastructures.

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[81] The Marvel companion piece television show *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* mirrors this theme that S.H.I.E.L.D. as an entity transcends its status as an institution and is instead anchored in the 'trustworthy' individuals who still maintain its dogma. In the episode "Providence," Agent Phil Coulson, believing S.H.I.E.L.D. to be disbanded after being infiltrated by Hydra, goes on an impassioned diatribe, exclaiming "We are not 'Agents of Nothing' – we are 'Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.,' and that still carries weight! It *has* to carry weight!" Appropriately, the episode reinforces this message by demonstrating Coulson's passion – initially depicted as misguided fundamentalism – to be warranted, upon his discovery of a secret hidden S.H.I.E.L.D. base.

The Winter Soldier received widespread praise for melding the entertaining escapism of the Marvel superhero narrative with contemporary topical concerns; indeed, a common phrase in critical reviews is the film being "actually about something" (Slotek). However, the cultural sentiments the film channels are ultimately more about reifying the existence of sociopolitical infrastructures than challenging them, provided the presence of the exceptionality of Captain America, who, in continuing to serve as a bastion for patriotism while equally a mouthpiece for critique with dominant infrastructure, perfectly calcifies the disjuncture between American institutions and 'America' as ethereal entity. As such, by remaining in the midst of a vibrant and fluid ideological discourse, Captain America as a character consistently serves as an allegorical variant for Žižek's "Tibetan Prayer Wheel" – not only 'doing' the socio-political work for the audience in regards to political engagement or interrogation of its institutional violence, but making it fun.

Conclusion

"Next time, baby."
-Colonel James 'Rhodey' Rhodes (Terrence Howard), Iron Man *(2008)*

In a cautionary note, extrapolating the potential harmfulness in the structural stasis in temporality that arises from serialized, formulaic comic book narratives, Umberto Eco warns that

In growing accustomed to the idea of events happening in an ever-continuing present, the reader loses track of the fact that they should develop according to the dictates of time. Losing consciousness of it, he forgets the problems which are at its base; that is, the existence of freedom, the possibility of planning, the necessity of carrying plans out, the sorrow that such planning entails, the responsibility that it implies, and finally, the existence of an entire human community whose progressiveness is based on making plans. […] Is it possible to establish connections […] affirming that Superman is no other than one of the pedagogic instruments of this society and that the destruction of time that it pursues is part of a plan to make obsolete the idea of planning and of personal responsibility? (19)

This diatribe, despite reading as somewhat alarmist pontification out of context, still speaks to a far grander degree of influence and ideological potential in the superhero narrative than most critical sources afford it. It should thereby come as little surprise that superheroes have reached the mass exposure they have in contemporary Hollywood. Indeed, Sean Treat connects Eco's analysis of the stasis inherent in the temporality of the superhero narrative as an ideal site for "produc[ing] in readers an impotence and passivity amenable to Late Capitalism (104).

However, as my work here has demonstrated, the ideological influence of the filmic superhero extends far beyond a simple cause-and-effect equation for commercial success. Instead, Marvel superhero films specifically serve to diffuse widespread cultural anxieties

regarding real life sociopolitical and globalized violence through utilizing their superheroic protagonists as anchors for comforting nostalgic values, rendered contemporarily relevant through reflexive, textually aware wit. As such, through using violent action spectacle as microcosmic for such ideological remediation, Marvel superhero films serve to dispel the prior dour reflection as to the ethics of violent combat, conclusively rendering violent spectacle enjoyable once again in a post-9/11 environment.

Yet, the key to Marvel's successful sustaining of this fusion of classical populism and contemporary savvy wit has been through perpetual change, amidst establishing a core aesthetic and tone. Jenkins' notion of the "core myth" of a superhero – a consistent fidelity in characterization unaltered by cosmetic surface changes ("Just Men in Tights" 18) – could just as easily be applied to Marvel's brand identity as a company. The escalation in violent spectacle and allusions to specific instances of real life violence that earlier superhero films would simply avoid has lent the Marvel films a sense of 'healthy growth' – an essential feature to any pseudo-individualized product remaining relevant in a capitalist market. The upcoming release of Marvel's *Guardians of the Galaxy* (James Gunn, 2014) suggests Marvel acknowledging this potential for their product becoming excessively repetitious. The film, based on a substantially less popular comics series, marks a substantial departure in terms of subject matter, by removing the field of action to outer space, and unprecedently blending the genres of superhero film and science-fiction space adventure. Nonetheless, the film's early press has focused primarily on its self-deprecating, surreal humour, including one-liners by recognized comedic star Chris Pratt, and the trailer's incongruous soundtrack use of pop song "Hooked on a Feeling" by Blue Suede. As such, *Guardians of the Galaxy* functions as a microcosm of the capitalistic appeal of Marvel: slight variation amidst familiar tonal notes.

Regardless, it is more dubious as to whether Marvel's ongoing project of rebranding violent spectacle as enjoyable can continue to remain a core attribute of the superhero populist appeal. At the risk of speculation, having already (somewhat audaciously) visually recalled the spectacle of 9/11 through the Helicarrier crash in *The Winter Soldier*, how such slow-but-steady escalation could continued to be evidenced in Marvel films without them becoming too transgressive to maintain a core demographic remains to be seen. As J.M. Tyree argued as early as 2008, while Marvel films "are molded after a structure proven to last," "a thinking man is made grumpy by the fact that [all such] films have the same story" (28).[82] Fatalist cultural critics would be left to wonder if, in rebranding violent spectacle as fun in the wake of 9/11 with such symmetry, Marvel superhero films have effectively 'completed' their populist ideological function in the film industry, and effectively written themselves out of relevance – "freed themselves from freedom," as it were.

The answer, it would seem, would be to challenge Eco's assertions about stasis head-on, by fundamentally disrupting the familiar narrative without disrupting Jenkins' notion of "core myth". The main way of doing so – particularly given Harrison, Jenkins, and Lewis' aforementioned claims of the centrality of death in the superhero – would be the death of a central heroic character.[83] As cultural critic Adam Holmes voices,

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[82] Since late May 2014, Marvel Studios have been the subject of considerable fan scrutiny and criticism after the departure of esteemed director Edgar Wright from upcoming 2015 release *Ant-Man*. For many fans, the presence of director Wright, known for cult action-comedy hits *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and *Hot Fuzz* (2007) was the film's greatest claim to relevance and quality. Rumours that Wright left due to Marvel making substantial, unapproved changes in his screenplay, involving standard Marvel franchise-building over creative innovations, have reflected poorly on the production company in fan discourse. Many fans have threatened boycotts of the film, protesting Marvel's purported refusal to compromise in the face of attempted artistry (Brown; Puchko).

[83] Many fans have speculated that Captain America is an obvious candidate to die, as Rogers was killed in recent editions of Marvel comics, with Bucky Barnes/the Winter Soldier taking over in the role of Captain America. This would allow for customary Marvel textual fidelity, and, thereby, would still serve as a functionally 'safe' gesture, despite disrupting the formula somewhat.

As much as the MCU embraces its comic book roots, there needs to be a sense of realism

in that the heroes could die at any moment. With few exceptions, there's never been a

superhero movie where the main hero is killed off. The MCU needs to get it across to the

audience that though these characters are iconic, they're not invincible. [A central hero's]

death would send an emotional ripple effect throughout the franchise and be the catalyst

for a new era of the MCU.

Such an event would not only affirm vitality in the narrative structure of Marvel films by

establishing largely unforeseen dramatic tension, but could serve as a largely unseen critical

commentary on Marvel's violent spectacle – an insertion of Prince's notion of "consequences"

into the omnipotence of the superhero as ideological figurehead through their mastery of

combat.[84]

Equally, it is worth speculating as to whether the specific appeal of Marvel films – or

superhero films as a whole – necessarily exclusively lies in its action *violence* spectacle. In the

case of recent 2014 superhero release *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, the most frequent talking

point of the film among fans and critics alike has involved the character Quicksilver (Evan

Peters), whose super-speed abilities result in an action setpiece that involves no violent combat.

Instead, the sequence circumvents any combat at all, by having Quicksilver use his super-speed

to subdue enemies, preempting any altercation – a piece of pure special effects-driven spectacle,

accompanied by humour (Burlingame; O'Connor). This recalls sequences in superhero origin

stories in which the superhero practicing his powers for the first time provides a nonviolent

spectacle setpiece: Spider-Man practicing using his web-shooters, Iron Man or Superman

practicing flight. Given the enthusiastic response towards the spectacle of the Quicksilver

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[84] Other recent, non-Marvel superhero films have included the death of central characters as means of reasserting dramatic tension, including *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (Marc Webb, 2014), and *X-Men: Days of Future Past*.

sequence, despite its absence of customary violent combat (a 'spectacle scene,' rather than 'fight scene'), there is the potential that superhero films could follow said example by further divorcing superhero spectacle from violence.

It is my contestation, however, that although such nonviolent spectacle sequences do still demonstrate the 'mastery' of the superhero lead, the absence of any adversary deprives them of any overt conflict which would allow for the same kind of ideological mediation demonstrated in Marvel's action combat sequences. Moreover, given the aforementioned press regarding Edgar Wright departing *Ant-Man* indicating Marvel's propensity for allegiance to formula at the cost of occasionally stifling of authorial creativity, it appears unlikely that any future Marvel projects will deviate from established tropes too substantially. Just as superheroes have always been violent, they are liable to always remain violent, acting as ideological bastions for "Truth, justice, and the American way" in the process. And as long as critical success and financial returns continue to be attributed to their product, it appears that audiences, whether in America or worldwide, will continue to "Make mine Marvel."

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