

“We come from the land of the ice and snow”: De-colonising superhero cinema through music

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In this short intervention we examine the relationship between Led Zeppelin’s Immigrant Song and the Marvel Cinematic Universe’s Thor: Ragnarok. We do this to highlight the doubleness of both texts’ meaning, which gives each an aura of postcolonial subversion. This relation is important because in this case Immigrant Song was central to the production of Ragnarok, with director Taika Waititi allowing the song to suffuse the film from its inception. When we speak of music in film, we must also consider the deeper role of music in inspiring the tone of various filmic productions.

“Hammer of the Gods, it’s the perfect song isn’t it?”

– Taika Waititi, *Thor: Ragnarok* commentary

Superheroes and ‘cock rock’: an intersection which should surprise nobody

As is attested to by the many excellent articles in this special issue, the intersection of music and politics has been a fruitful one for academic analyses. From classic studies of catchy music as a way of introducing (geo)political lyrics to impressionable audiences (Marcus 1975; Jarvis 1985), to more recent work that considers the ability of music to entrain bodies (Gilroy 1993), to the proliferation of neoliberal culture that surrounds music (singing competitions, etc. [see, for example: Stahl 2013]), music has revealed itself as something whose politics can be conceptualised in many different ways. In this brief intervention we argue that one aspect that has been neglected in this voluminous literature is the role that music plays in inspiring the politics of other media. Our case study comes from the repeated use of Led Zeppelin’s Immigrant Song in the Marvel Cinematic Universe’s instalment, *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017). While we will briefly attend to the use of the song in the film, the crux of our argument is that the song’s (post)colonial themes infused the production of the entire film, at the insistence of the Maori director Taika Waititi.

As one of the reigning figures of ‘cock rock’ during the 1970s, Led Zeppelin’s music represented “a male-oriented regime of power and pleasure” (Waksman 2001, 239). With “aggressive” and “dominating” performers like Robert Plant and Jimmy Page, cock rock heavily relied upon “male bodies on display, plunging shirts and tight trousers, a visual emphasis on chest hair and genitals” (Frith and McRobbie 1990, 319). It is not a stretch to argue that Led Zeppelin and cock rock parallel the superhero genre, which is similarly dominated by aggressive and dominating male figures with bulging muscles, bare chests, and tight suits, whose powers are inherently linked to their hypermasculinity. Led Zeppelin and the superhero are both driven by the male gaze and display a kind of preening masculinity.

In addition to this male gaze, both Led Zeppelin and the superhero genre function as colonial fantasies. Famously, many of Led Zeppelin’s songs were adaptations of African American blues music. Guitarist Jimmy Page has also often referred to the band’s musical influence from other cultures as the ‘C-I-A Influence’: Celtic, Indian, and Arabic music. As Waksman (2001) importantly notes, these three influences were once under the control of the British Empire. As an English band, Led Zeppelin comes to function as an enforcer of empire, appropriating this music while invoking landscapes of overthrowing and subjugating the villainous Other in many of their songs, including for instance these lyrics from *Immigrant Song*:

“How soft your fields so green
Can whisper tales of gore
Of how we calmed the tides of war
We are your overlords”

The superhero genre has similarly relied upon such fantasies since its inception in comics during the late 1930s and early 1940s (Gavaler 2018; Singer 2002; DiPaolo 2011). For instance, *Captain America Comics* during World War 2 featured a highly racialised Other in the Japanese, who were portrayed with fangs and other inhuman physiognomy. In one story the blonde, white Captain America destroyed a tunnel beneath the Pacific, drowning one million Japanese soldiers (Dittmer 2007).

Immigrant Song and Thor: Ragnarok

Immigrant Song was written by Plant and Page in June 1970 while the band was touring in Iceland. The song originated from a cultural mission in which Led Zeppelin was meant to represent contemporary British culture to the Icelandic people. At the last minute a strike cancelled their concert and a new concert was set up at the university for students to attend; their rhapsodic reception of the band inspired *Immigrant Song*. The band was inspired by fantasies of pillaging Vikings who “come from the land of the ice and snow,” driving their “ships to new lands” to take over as “overlords” and bring the conquered

masses to heel; an aggressive narrative for cultural diplomacy but not necessarily far off the mark. This role inversion – with Led Zeppelin themselves the Vikings who conquer, and the Icelandic students as the recipients of British cultural power – presages the use of *Immigrant Song* in *Ragnarok*.

“From the beginning,” said Kevin Fiege, president of Marvel Studios, *Immigrant Song* “kind of defined what [director] Taika [Waititi] was going to do with this,” playing a fundamental role in *Ragnarok*’s foundations (Erao 2017, n.p.). Before Waititi was even given the job, he created a ‘sizzle reel’ with the song itself playing over clips from films that would inspire the spirit of *Ragnarok*. This reel included shots from *Big Trouble in Little China*, with Kurt Russell embodying the type of hero Waititi wanted Thor to be, a more relatable, humanized protagonist driven by a single goal throughout the film; scenes from *Due Date* and *Withnail & I* that represented the buddy film feel of *Ragnarok*; and even a clip from the most recent *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* because it simply looked cool. And so, “from the start,” as Waititi has explained, “we’d always talked about playing *Immigrant Song*... because it just makes perfect sense for that character” (Leane 2017, n.p.). Led Zeppelin are infamously known for being stingy with their songs; however, after the song was featured in *Ragnarok*’s first explosive trailer, Waititi and the Marvel team showed the trailer to the band, and Led Zeppelin “understood just how perfect the song was for this character” (Guerrasio 2017, n.p.).

Weaving together *Ragnarok*’s tone, narrative, and themes, *Immigrant Song* would (unusually) feature twice in the film. Tonally, *Ragnarok* is quite different from the first two *Thor* films as well as earlier iterations of the superhero in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Lead actor Chris Hemsworth explained that *Ragnarok* aimed to be funnier and unpredictable; departing from the somewhat monotonous Shakespearean tone of the first two films, it would “tonally... just wipe the table” (Robinson 2017). Waititi’s background in indie comedies would bolster this new offbeat comedic tone, with *Ragnarok* matching Plant’s derisive comment about *Immigrant Song*: “It was supposed to be powerful *and* funny” (Dolan et al., 2019). The song directly referenced *Ragnarok*’s 1970s and 1980s retro-vibe, but more importantly this doubleness of *Immigrant Song* serves as a meta-framework for the plot’s main revelation.

Over the course of the first two *Thor* films, Asgard functions as the main superpower of the Nine Realms, and its empire establishes a cultural hegemony with its king, Odin, as a beneficent sovereign. Just as the superhero in a broad sense functions as a defender of the state and the geo-political status quo (Dittmer 2013), so too does Thor staunchly enforce this empire, armed with his “hammer of the gods”, Mjolnir. As Robert Plant sings: “We,” the Asgardian Empire, “are your overlords,” who “drive [their] ships to new lands / to fight the horde, and sing and cry / Valhalla, I am coming!”.

Ragnarok, as a radical superhero text, subverts this hegemony by bringing the audience’s attention to the colonial and imperial past of the Asgardian Empire. Built off the back of enslaved peoples by Odin and his first-born, Hela, through the destruction of any and all who oppose their empire, including the Frost Giants of *Thor* (2011), the Dark Elves of *The Dark World* (2013), Asgard’s very foundations are presented as unsound

and corrupt. Where once they created refugees by invading their neighbouring realms, through an ironic twist of justice the Asgardians themselves become refugees as that very system is turned against them by the primary villain in *Ragnarok*, Hela.

The use of *Immigrant Song* twice in the film, first when Thor still is part of that very same cruel system, and later, when his eyes have been opened to the injustices wrought by the Asgardian empire, highlight the ways in which audiences are interpolated by the song. *Ragnarok*'s first battle sequence begins with a chained-up Thor being confronted by the Fire Demon, Surtur, whose crown was stolen by Odin and was then exiled to Muspelheim. *Immigrant Song* starts playing once Thor has escaped from his chains and begins to attack the swarms of grunting, roving "hordes" of fire demons. Thor takes on *Immigrant Song*'s persona as the invading force; as this realm's new overlord he cuts down its ruler, steals their source of power, and indiscriminately kills all who opposed him. The colonial fantasy so explicit within Led Zeppelin's music further reveals itself during this scene, as Surtur and the fire demons are dehumanized and othered as an oriental horde. The affective power of the song sweeps the audience along with it, as they thrill to the colonial violence.

The second time the audience hears *Immigrant Song* is after Thor has undergone a journey of self-discovery and discovered the true history of the Asgardian Empire. As he and his allies battle Hela and her inhuman forces to protect the people of Asgard, with audiences affectively drawn in to the battle by *Immigrant Song*'s sweeping melody, Thor's character development results in an exchange of roles in the song's lyrics, as Thor – once centred as the conqueror, the Self – becomes the marginalized Other. The song's narrator becomes Hela, with her earlier declaration that "Our destiny is to rule over all others" reinforcing *Immigrant Song*'s imperial tone and revealing the darker meaning of the song. All throughout the battle, Asgard's once privileged citizens are transformed into refugees fleeing the very system from which they had once benefitted. Ultimately, Hela is only defeated through the destruction of Asgard, and the system it once represented, and the Asgardian refugees turn to Earth to find a new home, echoing *Immigrant Song*'s final words: "You'd better stop and rebuild all your ruins / For peace and trust can win the day despite of all your losing".

Onward to Valhalla

In this brief intervention we have hoped to make a specific argument for the consideration of the politics of music and the music of politics. Admittedly we have taken a case study that might seem unimportant. But what is important about it is the way in which it demonstrates how music is not just the affective soundtrack to (geo)political films like *Thor: Ragnarok*, goosing the audience to thrill to the battle scenes (although it can be that, too). Rather in this case, *Immigrant Song* was embedded in the production process from the beginning, both in terms of convincing studio execs of the overall plan for the film (via the sizzle reel) and in the director's personal vision of a postcolonial subversion of the

superhero genre. The doubleness of *Immigrant Song* – both ‘powerful *and* funny’ – mirrors the doubleness of its use in *Ragnarok* (in which it is both Thor’s berserker fight theme *and* a song that identifies with immigrants, refugees, and those oppressed by the hegemon). That is, the music is embedded in the very political ethos of the film project. Only deeper attention to production processes of films or other cultural artefacts can explicate the role of music in moving and shaping wider political projects.

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