GAZING AT OTHERNESS: EXPLORING REPRESENTATIONS OF
RACE, ETHNICITY, AND GENDER IN THE MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE

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ABSTRACT

Otherness is embedded within Hollywood's most successful superhero franchise, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). Using innovative readings of the gaze, this study executes close textual analysis of the MCU film cycle's first arc of films, the Infinity Saga, examining the saga's representational politics and arguing that the MCU's generic foundations inform its portrayal of race, ethnicity, and gender as other. The MCU film cycle is analyzed via three recurring components: Manicheanism, the superhero as hegemony, and Marvel Studios' industrial practices. These underlying processes build upon one another in order to construct the self/other discursive system, instilling various gazes within the saga's films and heavily impacting its portrayal of race, ethnicity, and gender. In terms of race, the White gaze is prominent within the film cycle, casting the white superhero as the self while othering and marginalizing non-white characters; this look is most evident when analyzing the racialization and othering of the alien body and the Oriental body. The portrayal of gender is similarly impacted, and it is largely shaped by the male gaze which centers the heteronormative, cisgendered male body of the superhero while decentering and objectifying the female body and vilifying or simply erasing the queer body. Though later entries into the franchise provide a glimpse into an evolution of the MCU film cycle and its core components with texts that challenge and restructure the system, the Infinity Saga still heavily relies upon a self/other dialectic. As there is a gap in MCU literature, this study of representational politics examines the franchise, proposing new and insightful readings of the gaze, while helping the reader gain a more nuanced understanding of the underlying systems at work within one of the most widely disseminated cultural phenomena of the past two decades.

IMPACT STATEMENT

In this dissertation, I examine the portrayal of race, ethnicity, and gender as other within the Hollywood superhero franchise, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), specifically analyzing the MCU film cycle's first arc of films, the Infinity Saga. In order to tackle this study, I execute close-readings of each of the Infinity Saga's films with analyses of character, narrative, themes, mise-en-scène, cinematography, as well as industrial practices. My analysis is informed by an interdisciplinary approach, as I primarily draw upon postcolonial and critical race studies, gender and gaze theory, as well as film theory. On an academic level, I delve into the inner workings of the MCU, a franchise that has received little academic attention. I have also contributed to the broader literature by proposing unique takes on gaze theory, with 'the Occidental gaze' and 'the weapon gaze.' Outside of academia, this project's findings further benefit the general audience of MCU movies, and Hollywood films at large, as this dissertation helps the everyday viewer gain a more nuanced understanding of the underlying systems at work within the franchise, learning why these texts are dominated by straight, white, male superheroes who represent propagandistic and hegemonic sites, while also bringing to attention the distinct lack of racial and gendered representation on-screen. Disseminating this information is vital as the MCU is one of Hollywood's most financially successful and culturally significant franchises of the past two decades. Ultimately, this dissertation examines the MCU, proposing new readings of the gaze, bringing attention to the lack of diverse representation in the MCU and its reliance upon propagandistic themes, and finally, calling for the MCU and superhero films, more broadly speaking, to diversify both on screen and behind the scenes.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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INTRODUCTION

In May of 2008, a young, giddy Kuwaiti teenager bought her ticket to see the highly-anticipated film, *Iron Man*. I was 14 years old at the time, obsessed with Spider-Man, the X-Men, and Fantastic Four. Visits to the local bookstore always found me in the ridiculously small comic book section, and I had posters of superheroes taped onto my bedroom closet. Needless to say, when *Iron Man* was announced, I was ecstatic, and even though I rarely found any *Iron Man* comics to read, I couldn't wait for this new superhero film to be released. The day of the movie came, I had bought my salty popcorn, Minstrels, and a flat soda. I took my seat in the back row of the packed theatre with my family, and the cameras rolled. Two hours later, I came out of the theatre with two warring emotions: I had loved the film, but I was also vaguely disappointed by it.

Iron Man was supposed to be a new superhero film for me to obsess over, a new hero to fall in love with and buy comics and merchandise of, but I was (yet again) bombarded with images of the Middle East as a frightening, dangerous land filled with horrifying, savage terrorists. I vividly remember how the audience reacted to all of the Ten Rings scenes. When Abu Baker, a character who exclusively speaks in Arabic, graced the screen, the theatre broke out in laughter, not at the character himself (because, truth be told, Sayed Badreya's delivery

is sublime), but rather at the absurdity of it all. When an audience is constantly bombarded with dehumanizing images in visual media which unerringly depict them as barbaric, savage and evil, sometimes there isn't much else to do but laugh, try to ignore the racism, and just enjoy the movie. I was not surprised by the imagery presented on the screen, and I reckon no one in that theatre was surprised either, but by that age, I had reached a point where I had simply accepted that this is how Hollywood and the West at large perceives us. And despite the film's blatant racism, I really did enjoy *Iron Man*. I was enamored of the film's superhero, its fantastical storyworld and high-tech science. I was charmed by the fast-paced banter and Robert Downey Jr. and Gwyneth Paltrow's chemistry. And of course, I was thrilled by the promise of an extended universe of superhero films. And in that respect, I would not be disappointed at all.

Iron Man would pave the way for the Marvel Cinematic Universe, more commonly referred to as the MCU, a franchise that has adapted Marvel's most popular superheroes and their individual tales and storyworlds into a transmedial grand narrative which all takes place in the same universe. The following decade of MCU films, twenty-three movies in total, would be dubbed the Infinity Saga, as they all contributed to the same overarching storyline of the Avengers protecting the Infinity Stones from the supervillain Thanos. Ultimately, the MCU simultaneously operates on numerous levels: it is a flourishing film cycle; a multi-media, billion-dollar franchise; a shared universe depicting a grand narrative; and ultimately, one of the most influential and successful phenomena to come out of Hollywood in recent years.

Despite revolutionizing the modern serial narrative, however, it has been clear since the release of *Iron Man* that the MCU film cycle has a huge problem in how it portrays race

and ethnicity, as well as gender and sexuality, on screen. Otherness has always played a key role in the superhero narrative, for at its core is the distinct notion of us versus them, of good versus evil. This was true in *Iron Man*, and it is true of the Infinity Saga on a grander scale; because the MCU film cycle is generically composed as a Manichean landscape, binary oppositions such as hero and villain, good and evil, self and other, male and female, white and non-white, East and West, all come to heavily influence the portrayal of the saga's characters, settings, themes, and overall ideology. The Infinity Saga's ensuing hegemonic narratives, therefore, construct and rely upon stereotypical and dehumanizing depictions of race, ethnicity, and gender as other, and this is what I hope to expose and examine in this dissertation.

I. THESIS AND METHODOLOGY

Using innovative readings of the gaze, this dissertation explores the politics of representation of the MCU film cycle, examining how otherness is embedded within the MCU and its first arc of films: the Infinity Saga. I argue that there are three recurring tendencies which shape the MCU film cycle: Manicheanism, the superhero as hegemony, and Marvel Studios' industrial practices; these underlying processes build upon one another in order to construct the self/other discursive system of the MCU, heavily impacting representations of race, ethnicity, and gender primarily by instilling a variety of gazes within the saga's films. In terms of race, the White gaze is prominent within the Infinity Saga, casting the white superhero as the self while othering and marginalizing non-white characters; the impact of this gaze is most evident when analyzing how the alien body and the Oriental body are racialized and othered in the saga. The portrayal of gender is similarly impacted, and it is largely shaped by the male gaze

which, once again, centers the heteronormative, cisgendered male body of the superhero while decentering and fetishizing the female body and erasing or vilifying the queer body. Though later entries into the franchise provide a glimpse into an evolution of the MCU film cycle and its core components with films that challenge and restructure the system, the Infinity Saga still heavily relies upon a self/other dialectic.

This dissertation is divided into three chapters. While the first chapter examines the recurring trends of the MCU film cycle, the last two chapters are concerned with how this system impacts first race and ethnicity and then, gender and sexuality, respectively. As I argue that otherness is one of the core foundational processes of the MCU film cycle, in **Chapter 1**, I examine how otherness primarily functions via three intersecting components which structure the MCU. The first component is Manicheanism which creates the apocalyptic mood of the saga while enforcing a dualistic binary system. Building upon this mood is the second component which is the superhero's role as a tool of cultural hegemony and propagandistic nationalism where Whiteness and Empire are central. And the third and final factor is Marvel Studios' industrial practices and collaborations with various military and governmental bodies, partnerships which further reinforce and are reinforced by the cycle's Manicheanism and hegemony. Though the film cycle does slowly evolve over the span of ten years, I argue that the Infinity Saga is primarily influenced by these three core tenets. And it is this underlying system of otherness which influences and shapes the Saga's portrayal of race, ethnicity, and gender. This chapter closes with an examination of how the Infinity Saga has slowly evolved over the past three phases, concluding with an in-depth study of the saga's most radical film: *Thor: Ragnarok.*

Chapter 2 is concerned with the portrayal of race and ethnicity and considers how the White gaze permeates the Infinity Saga. This chapter first briefly overviews the Saga's centering of white superheroes and its lack of racial and ethnic diversity, examining the depiction of settings, characters of color, and the casting choices of the Saga. And then, to better understand how otherness plays a role in the portrayal of race and ethnicity in this cycle of films, Chapter 2 partakes in two close-readings. The first close-reading examines how both humanoid and monstrous aliens are racialized within the MCU. The final and more extensive portion of this chapter is dedicated to an in-depth analysis of how Orientalism functions within the Infinity Saga via what I label 'the Occidental gaze.' This analysis is accomplished by analyzing one film from each of the Saga's three phases, *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 3*, and *Doctor Strange*; the study tracks the self/other dialectic via the Occidental gaze and compares how these texts have adapted and translated the racialized imagery of the original comics.

The dissertation's final chapter is concerned with the cycle's portrayal of gender and sexuality. **Chapter 3** assesses how the male gaze influences representations of male, female, and queer bodies. While the white, cisgendered, heteronormative male body is cast as the self, embodying a hegemonic and toxic hypermasculinity, the female body is fetishized, marginalized, and subject to a recurring pattern of archetypal tropes, including the Mother, the Side-Lined Superheroine, and Fridging. These arguments are supported by close readings of both Thor's and Black Widow's character arcs. Chapter 3 concludes by briefly analyzing the limited portrayal of queer characters in the Infinity Saga, paying close attention to how villains are often queer-coded, while superheroes are portrayed in a homoerotic manner, queer-baiting the franchise's audience. We are at a significant moment in American cinematic

culture, and as the MCU film cycle is the most defining and successful example of this 'superhero moment,' it is imperative to analyze how these texts disseminate particular narratives on power. Ultimately, by analyzing how race, ethnicity, and gender are portrayed within these narratives, we may learn more about the current dominating cultural hegemony.

In order to tackle this study, I have executed close-readings of every film within the MCU film cycle's first arc of films: the Infinity Saga (2008-2019). Starting with *Iron Man* (2008) and ending with *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), the study's primary texts only include films from Phase One, Phase Two, and Phase Three, marking twenty-two films in total. The dissertation's close readings include analyses of characters, narratives, themes and motifs, as well as the mise-en-scène, cinematography, and behind-the-scenes industrial practices. I analyze these texts by implementing an interdisciplinary approach in my research, drawing upon post-colonial and critical race studies, gender and feminist theory, film theory, as well as the current available literature on Marvel Comics and the MCU. And at the heart of this dissertation will be the theory of otherness as is informed by intellectuals including Levinas (1989; 1990), Sartre (1943), de Beauvoir (1949), Fanon (1952; 1963), and Said (1978). In order to examine how otherness is depicted on screen, I apply both racialized and gendered gaze theory, primarily shaped by the works of, once again, Fanon (1952), Rieder (2008), and Said (1978), as well as Mulvey (1975), Neale (1983), and Soloway (2016) respectively.

In an effort to narrow the scope of my dissertation, I have restricted the texts I will be examining as well as which fields I will be utilizing in my framework. Though I will be investigating the Infinity Saga, it is important to note that I will not include Phase Three's final film *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019) in this study and will only mention it in passing, as

the movie was released and takes places after the events of *Avengers: Endgame*. Additionally, though there were many noteworthy MCU television series produced during the MCU's first arc, these shows generally do not directly interact with the overarching grand narrative and world of the Infinity Saga, and quite frankly, including so many texts would overburden this dissertation. In terms of disciplines, it is important to note that psychoanalysis is an undercurrent framework in many of the concepts I examine, such as otherness and the gaze. However, I will be avoiding any overt reliance on the field as I am already drawing upon an extensive interdisciplinary framework, and that would widen the scope of my thesis to a problematic degree. Moreover, though psychoanalysis as a field has been reconceptualized several times since its illustrious beginnings with Sigmund Freud, the discipline focuses excessively and almost exclusively on gender and sexuality, disregarding intersections with race, ethnicity, and even class, while inexplicably still functioning as heteronormative and misogynistic in nature. I would like to emphasize that this dissertation is, at its heart, a study of the MCU film cycle's representational politics. This dissertation will not be an extensive exploration of the political economy of Marvel Studios and Disney, nor will it be partaking in an in-depth study of the relationship between this film cycle and American Empire and its geopolitical affects. This dissertation is moreover not concerned with the circulation and reception of this cycle's films nor the history of franchise culture. Though I may briefly touch on these issues when it is relevant, ultimately this dissertation's aim is in presenting insightful readings of the MCU film cycle, specifically its first arc, the Infinity Saga, with a primary focus on the portrayals of race and ethnicity as well as gender and sexuality.

Based on this thesis and the chosen parameters of my study, the key research questions that this project then pose include:

1) How does otherness function within the Infinity Saga, and how does it shape the MCU film cycle?

2) How has the MCU film cycle evolved over the course of the Infinity Saga?

3) How do the foundations of the MCU film cycle impact the representations of race, ethnicity, and gender?

4) What racial, ethnic, and gendered stereotypes and tropes are employed by the MCU, and how do they mediate otherness?

5) How is the gaze deployed within the MCU film cycle?

6) And finally, can the MCU film cycle evolve past the self/other schema?

Before investigating these queries, it is first important to provide a historical and theoretical literature review to ground this dissertation. The first section of the following literature review chronicles the history of the MCU, tracking its transformation from its humble beginnings in Marvel Comics to becoming one of the highest grossing American franchises. I then overview the theoretical frameworks that reinforce this study, otherness and gaze theory, paying close attention to how these theories intersect with the subjects of race and ethnicity as well as gender and sexuality. Each section of the literature review first considers multiple perspectives on the respective theory before delving into an appraisal of the work written in the fields of comics and film studies.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. <u>Historical Context</u>

Marvel's humble origins can be traced back to 1939 when the company was first known as Timely Publications, a pulp-magazine founded and run by Martin Goodman.[1] The Golden Age of Comic Books (1938-1956), was kickstarted by Detective Comics' (DC Comics) first issue *Action Comics* #1 (1938) with the introduction of Superman.[2] This propagandistic era was filled with narratives of crimefighting superheroes who were more often than not pitted against Axis powers and villains and promoting nationalism to their readers. *Marvel Comics* #1 (1939) would be printed with Timely's first publication, an issue which included the first appearance of superheroes who are still popular today, including Namor the Sub-Mariner, and within a couple of years, the company's staff would include stalwart names such as Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, who would create Captain America, as well as the celebrated Stanley Lieber, more commonly known as Stan Lee. The market for superheroes in comic books suffered greatly post-World War II with the emergence of the television and repercussions of the Comics Code Authority (CCA).[3] Superheroes were suddenly less popular, and with the severe restrictions of the CCA, superhero comics legally could only target young children. Timely Comics would become Atlas Comics during the 1950s, as superhero storylines were unsuccessfully rebooted, and Atlas expanded to more popular trends in other genres such as Westerns, romance, and horror.

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[1] See Bradford W. Wright's *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (2001) for an excellent historical review of American comics and its relationship to youth culture, politics, and popular culture.

[2] By the 1960s, DC and Marvel, or the Big Two, would become the two largest comic book publishers in the industry as well as each other's highest competitors. It should also be noted that though the division and naming of the comic book eras have been, relatively speaking, accepted by the comic book industry, fans, and academics, they are nevertheless rather subjective in nature.

[3] The CCA, also known as the Comics Code, was a form of self-regulation in the comics industry which censored imagery such as violence, crime, sex etc. For more on the CCA and Fredric Wertham, see Wright (2001, pp. 83-102; 162-178).

Once DC succeeded in bringing superheroes back into fashion in the late 1950s/early 1960s, the Silver Age of Comics (1956-1970) began, and Marvel, finally taking its present name in 1961, would follow in their footsteps. "If the Justice League is selling," Stan Lee said, "why don't we put out a comic book that features a team of superheroes?" (Lee, 1974, p. 16). This resulted in the creation of the Fantastic Four and Marvel's rise to the head of the superhero market as they began to target an older audience. In direct contrast to DC's altruistic, infallible characters who "exalted the virtues" of the day and age, of "peace through technology," rejecting "individualism and non-conformity," Marvel's superheroes followed deeply flawed antiheroes, alienated and morally ambiguous, who suffered from "the anxieties of the atomic age" (Wright, 2001, p. 202). The superhero formula was revolutionized by the Fantastic Four as well as by later superheroes, including Spider-Man, the Hulk, Iron Man, the X-Men, and countless others. Marvel would further breathe new life into the genre when Lee took the mantle of editor at the company and created the Marvel Universe. This universe would consist of a compact series of storylines all within the same narrative, filled with crossovers from different superheroes and cross-promotional battles. Lee would later say that this clever editorial strategy was not only "a gigantic advertising campaign," but also a way in which "readers would identify with us and care about us" (qtd. in Salicrup, Kraft and Hagen, 1983, p.57). Bradford W. Wright (2001, p. 218) would define this "crazy Marvel Universe" moment as the birth of a new modern mythology.

This modern mythology would further evolve during the Bronze Age of Comics (1970-1985), wherein the comics market, now unencumbered by the CCA, began to mature and turn darker. Enhanced by realism and the inclusion of adult themes (e.g. religion, politics, racism,

the environment, alcoholism, drug use, overt sexuality), this era redefined the notion of the superhero. Suddenly, minorities and non-white characters were taking the helm of superhero, as older, established characters were rebooted and reconfigured. Over time, the emphasis on adult themes grew darker, edgier, more violent and sexual, and this flowed into the Modern Age, or the Dark Age (1985-present). Deconstruction was and still is a defining element of this era as what it means to be a superhero is re-evaluated and reconceptualized; at the forefront of this deconstructionist wave would be seminal texts like *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. In addition to deconstructing the superhero, this new turn has relied heavily on rebooting Marvel's characters and even whole universes, and this is further accompanied by the more recent trend of race-bending and gender-swapping particular superheroes i.e. the Ultimate Universe, Riri Williams, Gwenpool etc. Since the turn of the millennium, Marvel has grown into a multimedia corporation that relies not only on comics as a financial front, but has also expanded to merchandising, theme parks, and adapting their characters in novels, videogames, and more pertinently, on screen.

a) Adapting Marvel On Screen

Marvel's foray onto both the small and big screen had a bumpy start. While, of course, films and television shows revolving around superheroes have been present in Hollywood from as early as the 1930s, the adaptation of comic book superheroes first found its real audience and market in the 1980/90s with DC's cinematic adaptations of Superman and Batman.[4] This era could arguably be called the first wave of superheroes on screen. During this period, Marvel lagged behind in the reception of their superheroes, as they released the box-office

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[4] It should be noted that there has also been a sizable amount of superhero animated films (which are most often direct-to-video) as well as animated television shows, however I have decided to focus on live-action media in my studies.

bomb, cult movie *Howard the Duck* (1986), direct-to-video adaptations of *The Punisher* (1989) and *Captain America* (1990), as well as an unreleased adaptation of *The Fantastic Four* (1994). Their affairs would only worsen in 1996, when Marvel faced bankruptcy due to monopolizing the comics market and overextending itself.[5] Toy Biz, an American toy company, bought Marvel Entertainment Studios in 1997, and to further ward off bankruptcy, Marvel licensed the rights to some of its most valuable characters to several film studios: for example, Spider-Man found his home in Sony Pictures while the X-Men and Fantastic Four were acquired by 20th Century Fox. By the time the sleeper hit *Blade* was released in 1998, Marvel seemed to have finally found its footing, and this would set the stage for the second wave of superhero films in the early 2000s.

At the turn of the millennium, and with the astonishing advancements in CGI and special effects technology, Hollywood was suddenly producing superhero film after superhero film. This second wave was kickstarted by the box-office and critical success of *X-Men* (2000) and Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* (2002), the first film to earn more than $100 million in its first weekend. As noted before, both of these films were produced by companies who had acquired the licensing rights during Marvel's struggles in the 1990s. *X-Men* and *Spider-Man*'s box-office and critical success paved the way for their own franchises and trilogies and helped reconceptualize Marvel's superheroes for the audience of that period. With the promise of returns in cinema as well as profits from DVD and merchandising sales, countless films poured out of the studios.

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[5] See McAllister (2001) for more on how ownership concentration resulted in the collapse of the comics industry in the 1990s.

b) The Birth of the Marvel Cinematic Universe

This finally brings us to the start of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and what could be deemed as the third wave of the superhero films. Up until this point, Marvel had been co-producing any adapted Marvel superhero films with numerous film production companies, including Sony Pictures, 20th Century Fox, New Line Cinema, Columbia Pictures etc. However, with the establishment of Marvel Studios, a subsidiary motion picture studio of Marvel Entertainment, Marvel sought to take back the creative control and financial profits in adapting their characters on screen, a task which was initially led by Jerry Calabrese and Avi Arad, who at the time both headed Marvel Studios.[6] Much like Stan Lee had pushed to create a shared universe for Marvel's characters in the 1960s, the goal was to establish a shared universe on screen via the MCU. This was set in motion by David Maisel in 2004, whose strategy was to first release separate films for the MCU's main characters and then slowly lead up to the convergence of all the characters in a crossover film. By the time the first MCU film, *Iron Man*, started production, Kevin Feige was named President of Production and David Maisel as Chairman. And only a year after the well-received and, of course, profitable release of *Iron Man*, the Walt Disney Company would purchase Marvel Entertainment in 2009, securing licensing and distribution rights for all future Marvel films and multimedia franchises as well as merchandising.

As of May 2022, there are twenty-eight films in the MCU film cycle. The narratival and structural progression of the MCU's films have been divided into four phases by Marvel Studios.[7] The first three phases compose the MCU's first arc of films with the Infinity Saga,

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[6] See Johnson (2012) for an in-depth overview of Marvel's production practices during these transition years.
[7] The chronological progression of the comic book eras, from Gold and Silver to Bronze and Modern, arguably parallels much of the narrative and thematic structure of the MCU.

while Phase Four launches a new arc, the Multiverse Saga. Mostly comprised of origin stories, Phase One jumpstarts the MCU with *Iron Man* (2008), *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Thor* (2011), *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), movies which culminate with the first crossover film, *The Avengers* (2012). The MCU's second phase further expands the MCU with sequels and new characters and includes: *Iron Man 3* (2013), *Thor: The Dark World* (2013), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), and *Ant-Man (*2015). The final phase of the Infinity Saga, Phase Three continues to expand the MCU, while also offering deconstructive texts and wrapping up the saga's grand narrative with: *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *Doctor Strange* (2016), *Guardians of the Galaxy: Vol. 2* (2017), *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), *Black Panther* (2018), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), *Ant-Man and the Wasp* (2018), *Captain Marvel* (2019), *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), and finally *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019). Phase Four is the MCU's current phase, and it has introduced more characters and storyworlds into the MCU film cycle while also diversifying the universe; this phase's films includes *Black Widow* (2021), *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), *Eternals* (2021), *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022), with many more titles currently in production.[8] Phase Four is unique in that it not only includes films, but also television series which are officially part of the MCU's grand narrative.

Late in Phase One, Marvel Studios began working on developing television shows for the MCU. Partnered with ABC Studios, *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-2020), *Marvel's Agent Carter* (2015-2016), as well as *Marvel's Inhumans* (2017) were all brought to the little

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[8] In 2019, Disney acquired 21st Century Fox and has accordingly re-secured the licencing of principal characters Marvel had previously sold in the 1990s, i.e. the X-Men and the Fantastic Four.

screen on broadcast television. Other series include *Marvel's Runaways* (2018) on Hulu and *Marvel's Cloak & Dagger* (2018-2019) on cable from Freeform. The most critically acclaimed series was a group of shows produced by Netflix; the so-called Marvel Knights series includes: *Marvel's Daredevil* (2015-2018), *Marvel's Jessica Jones* (2015-2019), *Marvel's Luke Cage* (2016-2018), *Marvel's Iron Fist* (2017-2018), a crossover season called *Marvel's The Defenders* (2017), and finally *Marvel's The Punisher* (2017-2019). Unlike the family friendly, all-inclusive films of the MCU, these shows targeted an adult audience, tackling mature themes and containing explicit scenes including sex, drugs, and alcohol etc. By 2019, Marvel Knights would be cancelled as Disney had begun to jumpstart its own streaming platform, Disney+, and as of now, Disney+ exclusively streams Marvel's films, while also releasing new Phase Four live-action and animated series: *WandaVision* (2021), *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (2021), *Loki* (2021), *What If…?* (2021-2022), *Hawkeye* (2021), and *Moon Knight* (2022), with more to come.[9] In regard to the MCU's expansion to Disney+, Feige has said that he hopes to bridge the theatrical experience of the filmic MCU with a longer form narrative that the online streaming platform provides, because "that's what comics are, [they are] about as longform a narrative as exists" (qtd. in Ford, 2018). It will be interesting to see how Disney+ will continue to develop and expand the MCU universe on the small screen.

The genesis of the American comic book superhero in 1938 and the staggering creativity, imagination, and innovation of the past several decades have all narrowed down to this moment in time, where superheroes have become one of the defining trends of our era.[10] In comics, cinema, television, and cartoons, in toy, clothing, and book stores, in popular

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[9] Disney's streaming rights of course exclude the co-owned Sony Spider-man franchise.
[10] The MCU and DC Extended Universe alone have made around $33 billion in box office revenue, with Marvel holding four of the top ten highest grossing films of all time.

and academic discourse, superheroes have slowly insinuated their way into so many outlets of our daily lives. To study *how* these superheroes are represented is therefore vital, be these representations insidious in nature, conservative and sustaining the hegemonic order, or radical and revolutionary, challenging and evolving both the MCU film cycle and the current hegemonic systems it represents. Having chronicled the rich history of Marvel and the MCU, I will now delve into the primary theoretical frameworks that will define this dissertation: otherness and the gaze.

2. Otherness

a) *Otherness Defined*

"If the encounters of '1492' displaced the European view of the world as being centered on Europe," Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999) contends, then "the expulsions of the same year forged the cult of the homogenous Same in the face of the Other" (p. 45). According to Mirzoeff, the fundamental moment of Christopher Columbus landing in the Americas sparked a chain of events which helped inform our modern understanding of the self and other dialectic. Otherness can be defined as a process wherein a dominant group, the self/us, creates an oppressed group, the other/them, through difference, an act which can lead to further subjugation as well as a general denial of identity and being. Over the course of this section, I examine how the concept of otherness has developed over time, tracking several theorists and their interpretation of the subject, and I then conclude by reviewing how otherness has been employed in the analysis of superhero comics and film.

There has of course been a plethora of critical discourse written on the nature of the other. Edmund Husserl analyzed otherness through the lens of phenomenology, Jacques

Lacan through psychoanalysis, Jacques Derrida through deconstruction. However, even earlier than Columbus's arrival in the Americas, the dichotomy of self and other can be traced back to Plato's treatise in *Sophist*. In this dialogue, Plato reflected on the relationship between Being and Non-Being, between One and the Other, and the issue of difference:

> But I suppose you agree that whereas some things are *themselves by themselves* (*auta kath' hauta*), others are always said in relation to other things (*pros alla*).—Of course.—But isn't difference always in relation to something different (*pros heteron*)?—Yes.—And this would not be the case, if being and difference were not distinct. For if difference partook of both forms [i.e., *auto kath' hauto* and *pros alla*], as being does, then something even among the different things could be different without being different in relation to something different. (Plato, 1921, 255c–d)

Plato's ontological debate presents this issue of difference that is at the core of otherness, that in order to divide the self from the other, there must be a sense of something different, a diversity in the face of a homogeneity.

Influenced by Plato's discourse, Emmanuel Levinas discussed the Other in relation to ethics and metaphysical scripture. What predominantly defined his argument was what Levinas (1990) called the face-to-face encounter, wherein the Self comes face to face with the transcendent Other. The face-to-face encounter is a primal and important moment, a moment which inhibits the destructive nature of sameness and establishes a responsibility towards the Other. Ultimately, "to speak, at the same time as knowing the Other, is making oneself known to him… I not only think of what he is for me, but also and simultaneously, and even before, I *am* for him" (Levinas, 1990, p. 7). So important is this face-to-face, the act of seeing the visage of the Other, that the only way for the Self to continue to subjugate or even go as far as to murder the Other, is "when one has not looked the Other in the face" (p. 10).

Levinas further approaches the issue of otherness in a rather problematic male-oriented dialogue, defining otherness as feminine: "Alterity is accomplished in the feminine. The term is on the same level as, but in meaning opposed to, consciousness" (Levinas, 1989, p. 50). In the 1950s, Simone de Beauvoir would counter this argument in her seminal book *The Second Sex* (1949) pointing out the inherent "masculine privilege" of his argument: Levinas "writes that woman is mystery, he assumes that she is mystery for man" (p. xxviii). de Beauvoir's critique of Levinas presents a broader challenge in the discourse of otherness, for in seeking to define what is different, an othering in and of itself may occur.

Jean-Paul Sartre further analyzed an alienated form of otherness in *Being and Nothingness* (1943). Sartre was heavily influenced by Hegel's understanding of being. Hegel (1807) believed that there are three types of being: *being for itself*, a *being in itself*, and finally a *being for others*, and he further argued that "self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it is only by being acknowledged or recognized" (1967, p. 229). Operating on this framework, Sartre considers how *l'être*, or being, is connected to the notion of otherness through a phenomenological study of shame. "By the mere appearance of the Other, I am put in the position of passing judgment on myself as on an object, for it is as an object that I appear to the Other" (Sartre, 1943, p. 222). Shame, according to Sartre, is equivalent to recognition: "I recognize that I am as the Other sees me" (p. 222). The Other therefore constructs new understandings of the self through the process of alienation. This discourse would be an underlying theme in his work on the black consciousness in *Black Orpheus* (1964) as well on antisemitism in *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1965).

Similarly influenced by Hegel, de Beauvoir considered the other in relation to self-consciousness through a protofeminist lens as a means to examine the binary and power relations between man and woman. According to de Beauvoir (1949), to be a woman in this age, is to be an object, an other, for a woman is a fundamentally sexed being in the eyes of humanity, and the need to create alterity and difference is just as fundamental, as "no group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself" (pp. xxviii-xxix). For de Beauvoir, just as Levinas fell into a patriarchally-charged line of thinking, so too does the rest of mankind consider itself in male terms, and "man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him... He is the Absolute and she is the Other" (p. xxviii). de Beauvoir insists that otherness functions as a fundamental behavior in human thought. It is intrinsic in the nature of man to other those around him, to define citizens from another country as "foreigners," for Jews to be "different," African-Americans "inferior," aborigines "natives," and the proletariat "lower class" (p. xxix). Citing Hegel, de Beauvoir ultimately argues that the Self, the subject, can only come to being when it is opposed to the Other, the object. De Beauvoir further claims that women submit to their oppression more willingly than other oppressed groups as there is no solidarity and no shared history or religion amongst this specific gender, and what little privilege is guaranteed by one's social standing is desperately clung to while deliberately ignoring the plight of women who are oppressed. For example, she cites bourgeoisie and white women whose allegiance lie with the men of their class and race as opposed to women in the proletariat or women of color; by refusing to be a part of this hegemonic dichotomy, women would sacrifice all the privileges afforded by their supposed alliance. Like Sartre, de Beauvoir attempts to reflect upon the oppression of other minorities; however, the theorist equates 'the eternal feminine' to the struggles of African-

Americans with Jim Crow laws and Jews with antisemitism without quite delving into the intersections between gender, race, and ethnicity.

While de Beauvoir focused on gender in her evaluation of otherness, Frantz Fanon would consider it primarily in relation to race through a psychoanalytic analysis of blackness and a critique of colonialism. Otherness for Fanon is triggered by the encounter of the colonizer with the colonized. "Good-Evil, Beauty-Ugliness, White-Black:" Fanon (1952, p. 141) argued that the colonial landscape created a subjective division between the two races, creating the imaginary other. This space is inherently a "Manichean delirium" where master and slave, the colonizer and the colonized, white and black, the self and the other take part in a violent struggle (p. 141). "It is the racist who creates the inferior," through the White gaze, argues Fanon, and under the weight of this look, evolves an inferiority complex, a social alienation, which poisons the black man (p. 69). The black man then, Fanon contends, accepts his role as other, and "the goal of his behavior will be The Other (in the guise of the white man)" as it is only his otherness now that will prove his worth and being (p. 119). Blackness then comes to signify "ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality" in the collective unconscious, and the black man who is not ugly, sinful, dark, and immoral is simply not a black man (p. 148). Fanon believed that the principal way to reverse this othering and inferiority complex is through the process of recognition, which remarkably calls back to both Levinas' face-to-face encounter and Sartre's evaluation on shame and recognition.

In the context of the Algerian Revolution, both Sartre and Fanon further analyzed the othering of the colonized, and what is of particular interest is the issue of decolonization. Sartre posits that when decolonization occurs, the dehumanization of not the colonized, but

rather the colonizer takes effect, and a certain involution transpires. Describing this process, Sartre (1965) reasons that the colonizer's violence and initial degradation of the other "turns back on itself and rends" the colonizer (p. 18). It would seem that decolonization, or indeed, any involution of the process of othering leads to the othering of the Self. However, Fanon's initial argument challenges Sartre's application of otherness to the black consciousness, arguing that despite the fact that the white man may prove to be the Other, he is also "the master, whether real or imaginary" (1952, p. 138). Putting theory aside, Fanon's insistence on political and social context is key. In a specifically colonial setting, Fanon argues that Hegel's notion of being-for-others becomes moot: "Ontology… does not permit us to understand the being of the black man… he must be black in relation to the white man" (1952, pp. 82-83). This further challenges de Beauvoir's grasp of the master-slave dialectic, for she believed that "the master does not posit the need he has for the other, [while] the slave…, out of dependence, hope, or fear, internalizes his need for the master," and so, de Beauvoir erroneously maintains that it is the slave, the other, who is always dependent on the master, the self (1949, p. xxxii). Context is then essential in understanding how otherness functions, and the concept of the self therefore relies upon and is only completed through the notion and the creation of otherness. And herein lies the hypocrisy and paradoxical nature within the self/other dialectic, for the self ultimately relies upon the other to create a sense of being, a sense of self. "Even when one speaks to a slave," Levinas says in *Difficult Freedom*, "one speaks to an equal… I not only think of what he is for me, but also and simultaneously, and even before, I *am* for him" (1990, pp. 7-8).

Building on these theories, Edward Said (1978) examined otherness through a postcolonial lens, proposing his theory of Orientalism. Said was greatly influenced by Michel

Foucault's discourse on knowledge and power as well as Antonio Gramsci's discussion of hegemony. He argued that Orientalism was a system of cultural representations which create a distinction between "the Orient" and the "the Occident," between East and West, consequently operating as a Western tool to both control and restructure the Orient (Said, 1978, pp. 2-3). According to Said, the Orient is one of the "deepest and most recurring images of the Other;" it has "helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience," or more succinctly as the hegemonic self (pp. 1-2). The Orient, the East, comes to represent an inferior, irrational, and regressive realm, while the Occident, the West, symbolizes superiority, rationality, and progressiveness. The reciprocity that is at the root of otherness is similarly at the root of Orientalism, for both the Orient and the Occident support each other and give each other meaning (p. 5). Said further reasons that Orientalism in fact says more about the West, its culture, politics, and geopolitical intricacies, than about the Orient itself, constructing a superior European identity that paves that way for colonial and imperial campaigns in the East (p. 12). Again, the process of othering illuminates more on the nature of the self than of the other.

In *Positions* (1981), Derrida states that the Western philosophical tradition has always relied on a binary dialectic, and this framework bolsters the privileged classes and sanctioned the othering of the oppressed. "We are not dealing with the peaceful coexistence of a *vis-à-vis*, but rather with a violent hierarchy. One of the two terms governs the other […,] or has the upper hand" (Derrida, 1981, p. 41). It is this binary dialectic that paves the way for the structuring of hierarchal powers and the cultural hegemony. Gramsci described cultural hegemony as a "moving equilibrium," and Stuart Hall expanded upon that notion: "Hegemony… is not universal and 'given' to the continuing rule of a particular class. It has to

be won, reproduced, sustained" through cultural, political, social, and economic forces (Hall *et al.*, 1975, p. 40). While Louis Althusser rejected Gramsci's reliance on historicism, it is yet again important to consider how historical, geographical, and cultural contexts impact our understanding of otherness. This hegemony relies upon a Foucauldian sense of power and casts a gaze which imprisons and others the docile bodies of the underprivileged via media for example, as the MCU has demonstrated. The hegemonic narratives that are produced in visual media, and the MCU in particular, ultimately produce stereotypical depictions of race, ethnicity, and gender as other.[11] Power and the imbalance and asymmetry of power is then a defining element in the intersection between superheroes and otherness.

b) Otherness within Superhero Comics

Having established a theoretical framework of otherness, this following section examines relationship between otherness and superhero comics via the superhero comic's Jewish origins, its Manicheanism, relationship to the cultural hegemony, and finally its reflection of significant historical events. It is important to remember that Marvel's comics were created and largely shaped by othered Jewish voices during the mid-1900s.[12] Having escaped the horrors present in Europe and striving to succeed in a new country, the original creators of superhero comics were allotted with the jobs that no one wanted. They were immigrants who often felt ostracized and othered in their various attempts to assimilate in American society (Wright, 2001, p. 10). Gerald Jones (2004) recounts how "their dads had grown up viewing American culture through the eyes of outsiders, but the kids," men like DC's Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster or Marvel's Stan Lee, Joe Simon, Chris Claremont, and Jack Kirby, "knew it was

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[11] As grim as this conclusion may appear, perhaps it is through the flourishing of diverse voices, narratives, and representations that we can hope to inspire change in a hegemonic order. See this dissertation's conclusion.
[12] For more on the Jewish origins of superhero comics, see Wright (2001); Jones (2004); and Coogan (2006).

their culture, theirs to take and theirs to remake" (p. 128). These 'kids' and their own ostracization in the 1950/60s helped shape the superhero narrative into what it is today; in fact, a key characteristic of the Silver Age of Comics was Marvel's representation of the superhero as an outsider and outcast: as other. Chris Claremont said that "the idea, for [him], was prejudice," that his characters were:

> hated, feared for no other reason than they are born how they are born. And it's a stigma that will stay with them their whole lives, regardless of what they do… And bear in mind that this was the '60s, and that I'm an immigrant, and that I'm white Anglo-Saxon Protestant, but half of my family is Jewish. So there is an awareness of what it is like to be on the other side of the fence. (qtd. in Bucciferro, 2016, p. 220)

That being said, countless superhero narratives of that time still relied on conservative, pro-establishment stories that supported American cultural hegemony, and this applies to the MCU as well.

Superhero narratives, and the MCU film cycle as will be discussed in Chapter 1, enforce this cultural hegemony by staging Manichean worlds wherein one group is pitted against another, or in this case the other. The superhero's universe is generally presented as a Manichean landscape that relies heavily upon the binary oppositions of otherness: self and other, subject and object, male and female, white and non-white, hero and villain, good and evil. Manicheanism plays a vital role in the concept of otherness. Originally developed by the Persian prophet Mani, Manicheanism is a dualistic cosmology that hinges upon the struggle between good and evil. Having found a secure home in Western thought, Manicheanism is now interwoven in race and postcolonial theory. Fanon (1963, p. 41) argued that "the colonial world is a Manichean world." The colonial settler "paints the native as a sort of quintessence

of evil… he speaks of the yellow man's reptilian motions, of the stink of the native quarter, of breeding swarms, of foulness, of spawn, of gesticulations" (pp. 41-42). Ultimately the settler, the self, "makes history… he is the absolute beginning," while the native, the other, is likened to a savage bestiary (pp. 51; 42). These frightening, stark dualities have unfortunately informed race relations today and are a pivotal tenet in the superhero narrative and the MCU film cycle specifically.[13]

The Manichean characters of superhero and villain also undergo the process of othering.[14] In considering the superhero, it is difference, a transformation from sameness, that sets the hero apart from everyone else. For example, the predecessors of early comic book heroes, such as The Phantom or John Carter, discovered their powers and were transformed in exotic locales, and then presented as superior to the othered natives. When contemplating the villain, the veil of otherness is more tangible. Stylistically, the issue of otherness has been examined by Scott McCloud in his seminal, albeit outdated, book, *Understanding Comics* (1993). McCloud (1993, p. 44) points out that while "most characters were designed simply, to assist in reader-identification—other characters were drawn more realistically in order to objectify them, emphasizing their 'otherness' from the reader." This emphasis on otherness often takes stereotypical and racist undertones: slanted eyes, larger noses, fat or emaciated bodies, pure ugliness and distortions etc. Such visuals create a very dualistic type of storytelling. Looking back at the original surge of superheroes in Marvel's comics, Stan Lee said that "In those days, we were of a more unsophisticated bent, seeing

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[13] Since its inception in the early 20th century, the effect comics have had in shaping the mind of the, often young, reader be it in a positive or a negative fashion has been heavily debated. See McCloud (1993, 2000); Wright (2001); and especially Hatfield, Heer, and Worcester (2013).

[14] Hatfield, Heer, and Worcester's *The Superhero Reader* (2013) and Peaslee and Weiner's *The Supervillain Reader* (2020) provide a wide array of articles dedicated to examining the superhero and villain, respectively.

things in terms of black and white"; for example, "the Communists were the bad guys and we were the good guys" (qtd. in Thomas Jr., 2009, p. 152). And so, racist caricatures would be almost indispensable in bringing to life 'the bad guys;' otherness then affects not only the comics' narratives, but also the visuality of the medium.[15]

The effects of this narrative on the reader is addressed by Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks*. Fanon argued that all societies require an outlet as a form of collective catharsis wherein they can release tensions of aggression, and a prime example of such an outlet was comic books, Tarzan adventures, Mickey Mouse storyworlds targeted towards children and young teenagers. It is comics which

> are put together by white men for little white men… [where] the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage are always symbolized by Negroes or Indians; since there is always identification with the victor, the little Negro, quite as easily as the little white boy, becomes an explorer, an adventurer, a missionary. (Fanon, 1952, p. 114)

According to Fanon, the Antillian black child identifies with the white hero, "the explorer, the bringer of civilization, the white man who carries truth to savages—an all-white truth," and he invests the white hero with a sadistic form of aggression (p. 115). Both "subjectively" and "intellectually," the Antillian black child comes to "conduct himself like a white man" because of the consumption of such imagery; but, as Fanon concludes, there is no denying that "he *is* a Negro" and will always be treated as such (p. 115). Ultimately, such narratives enforce the prevailing cultural hegemony and racial and political hierarchy. Fanon goes on to further argue that to counter the traumatization that such images cause, new media, such as comic

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[15] See also Wright's (2001) chapter "Race, Politics, and Propaganda."

books and songs, should be produced that are targeted towards and created specifically for black children.[16] Here, Fanon's argument reflects the importance of diversity in media representations, stressing how the absence of diversity and identifications can cause long-term negative effects in its consumers. At the core of Fanon's argument is the essential Manichean dichotomy of good and evil, superhero and villain, self and other that traumatizes the reader if presented in a one-dimensional and harmful manner. As comics rely on this framework, it is no surprise then that they more often than not, particularly in earlier years, uphold conservative values and the hegemonic system while simultaneously normalizing prejudices.[17]

Quite a few contemporary texts tackle how superhero comics contend with this hegemonic hierarchy, be it in a conservative or radical manner. For example, Jason Dittmer (2007b) links the superhero with nationalism, arguing that the serial nature of the superhero narrative has a "general inability to produce systematic social change and [is] therefore innately conservative" (p. 43), and his argument is seconded by Wandtke (2007). Michael Goodrum (2015) also analyzes how post-9/11 superhero comic book crossover narratives, such as *Civil War*, responded to cultural trauma primarily through fragmentation in narrative and space; these texts, Goodrum argues, largely upheld the status quo as they are "conservative and simplistic both in form and politics" (p. 141).

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[16] While Fanon considered how traumatization functioned on a racial level, others feared the ideological consequences these comics posed in the hands of 'unassuming children' in America from the 1940s to the 1950s; see Ong (1945); Wertham (1954); and Hatfield, Heer, and Worscester (2013).

[17] See Reynolds (1992); Coogan (2006); and Wright (2001).

When considering this discourse in relation to the MCU, we see differing opinions.

Spanakos (2011) challenges the conservative nature of the superhero text in his study of *The Incredible Hulk*, *Iron Man*, and *Iron Man 2*. Spanakos argues that these texts function as post-9/11 "fantasies of self-preservation" wherein the enemy is not the "distant other," but rather the military industrial complex and the self (2011, p. 15). Marc DiPaolo in *War, Politics, and Superheroes* (2011) similarly argues that political superhero narratives can be categorized into three groups: establishment, anti-establishment, and colonial narratives. So, while there are superhero texts which do function as conservative, pro-establishment, and/or pro-colonial hegemonic narratives, there are also texts which are anti-establishment; and this is illustrated in texts which follow an (at times) misguided establishment superhero who opposes "an evil governmental, corporate, or aristocratic villain" (DiPaolo, 2011, p. 12).[18]

Other academics, on the other hand, have maintained that the MCU is innately conservative. In *Avengers Assemble!*, McSweeney (2018) calls attention to the capitalist and corporate-owned industry in which the MCU is produced and points out how the MCU presents "dominant ideological perspectives on race, gender, and sexuality," all of which points to the hegemonic nature of the superhero genre as a whole. In analyzing *Thor: Ragnarok* and *Captain Marvel*, AlAwadhi and Dittmer (2020a) examine how the two films portray securitization and the refugee body in relation to whiteness, maintaining that even the MCU's more progressive films are still innately conservative. Expanding upon this discourse, AlAwadhi and Dittmer (2020b) also consider how the music of *Ragnarok* is used to convey both the inherent whiteness and colonialism of the superhero as well the film's

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[18] For more, see DiPaolo's chapter "Are Superheroes Republicans?"

broader postcolonial themes. It is also worth mentioning that many scholars examine the militarization and geopolitical tendencies of the superhero within the MCU (Chambliss, Svitavsky, and Fandino, 2018; Pardy, 2019; Novak, 2021; Medina-Contreras and Colón, 2020; Jenkins and Secker, 2021). Gruenewald (2018) in particular stands out as he examines how the representation of collateral damage in MCU films like *Iron Man*, *Age of Ultron*, and *Captain America: Civil War* "contribute[s] to the perception of the war on terror" while diminishing "accountability and government oversight of martial power and technology" (pp. 142; 163). It would seem that there is a general consensus regarding the conservative nature of the MCU and the superhero's connection to hegemonic power structures. Generally speaking, these themes dominate the academic discourse regarding the MCU, overlooking the franchise's representations of race and gender as other.[19]

c) Examining Race as Other in Superhero Comics and Film

There has been a great deal of literature written that examines the representation of race and the othering of race in superhero comics and film, with very little attention directed towards the MCU.[20] Many scholars have scrutinized how race and ethnicity are presented in a stereotypical and racist manner in superhero comics, particularly in relation to non-white

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[19] The MCU has been analyzed through a variety of other lenses including: history and geopolitics (Dittmer, 2011; Goodrum, 2016, 2018; Smith and Goodrum, 2011; Chambliss, Svitavsky, and Fandino, 2018); transmedia and intertextuality (Flanagan, McKenny, and Livingstone, 2014; Yockey, 2017; Taylor, 2021), disability studies (Alaniz, 2014; Grue, 2021), religion (Nichols, 2021) etc.

[20] Throughout this dissertation, I continuously refer to race, but it is important to note that race is ultimately a cultural construct (i.e. whiteness can only be defined in relation to blackness and vice versa), and we are all, of course, part of the same human race. By using the term 'race,' I am in essence referring to the cultural, political, and social constructs which are exploited by hegemonic structures. Since the 1970s, Critical Race Theory (CRT) has steadily grown as a field which investigates a variety of themes centered on the discourse i.e. critique of liberalism, storytelling and counter-storytelling, interest convergence, intersectionality, white privilege etc. For more see, Bell (1995); Crenshaw (1991); Diangelo (2011); and Delgado and Stefancic (2001).

minorities.[21] Will Brooker (2000), in his cultural and historical analysis of Batman, explored how the "unashamed hatred for the racial 'other' was enthusiastically taken up by many superhero comics" during the Golden Age of Comics (p. 91). In a similar vein, Dittmer (2007a) highlights this trend in examining how Captain America, as a symbol of American identity, is contrasted with other 'villainous' national identities i.e. cowardly German supervillains, Chinese ape-like and sharp-toothed mafia, lumbering, brainless Tibetan minions etc.[22] Similar studies are also carried out by Lupoff and Thompson (1970), who investigated the demonizing representation of Japanese characters in comics during World War II, and Jack Shaheen (1994; 2003), who overviewed how Arabs were similarly othered in the medium in the 1980/90s. Other notable examples include Adilifu Nama's (2011) study of Blaxploitation and black superheroes, Monica Chiu's (2018) overview of Chinese and Chinese-American characters (i.e. dragon ladies, Fu Manchus, and Nehru henchmen), Karen McGrath's (2007) work on Latinas in Marvel comics, and finally, Lawrence Baron's (2003) analysis of Jewish bodies in the *X-Men*.

A few scholars have also considered how whiteness functions within the superhero narrative. Facciani, Warren, and Vendemia (2015) execute a thorough content-analysis of race, gender, and class in Modern Age American comics books, highlighting superhero texts in particular; according to their data, "white males are the majority of overall characters," while women and people of color are severally underrepresented and stereotypical, and men of color are largely connected to a lower socioeconomic status (p. 216). In "Modernity, Race,

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[21] Kirkpatrick and Scott (2015) provide a thorough overview on the state of representation studies in comic studies and superhero comics, specifically. See also Bergengren (2005), Wertham (1954), and Wright (2001) for discourse about the early 1900s.
[22] For a thorough examination of the national stereotypes in early *Captain America* comics, see Dittmer (2007a, pp. 414-20).

and the American Superhero," Aldo Regalado (2005) also examines how the white superhero challenges modernity by historically viewing the relationship between race and superhero texts, primarily studying Superman, Tarzan, Captain America, and Black Panther. Georg Drennig (2010) tackles whiteness through a different angle. He argues that American superhero comics employ "anti-European discourse and representation through stereotypes as a part of comics vocabulary" (2010, p. 138). So though a villain may be Caucasian, they are still thrust into a stereotypical sphere of ethnicities-as-criminals. This happens, Drennig argues, because of the long-serial nature of comics; the mode of production in the comics industry relies on several artists, and in order to facilitate this system, the core identity of a character must be identified. Drennig argues that, more often than not, it is ethnic coding that is the core identity of a character, and this works perfectly into our understanding of otherness, as a character's ethnicity becomes the defining trait that demarcates them as other and separates them from the self.

While a great deal of literature has tackled the representation of race in superhero films (Miller, 2016; Nadkarani, 2018; Schumaker, 2011), the MCU has been given negligible attention. DiPaolo (2011) calls attention to how non-white characters in superhero comics and films often operate as sidekicks and token minorities. This lack of racial and gender diversity leads to primarily "Aryan" teams, such as the Avengers, which include a "blue-skinned, red-skinned, [or] green-skinned character" who can "represent a free-floating 'otherness' that could stand-in for any 'minority' or disenfranchised' American figure (DiPaolo, 2011, p. 241). True enough, there is a wide disproportion in non-white actors and actresses who are cast as alien or other-worldly characters in the MCU, and more broadly in

Hollywood film.[23] McSweeney (2018) provides a short analysis of the Orientalist representations of Arabs in *Iron Man*, i.e. the 'good' Arab, the terrorist, etc. (pp. 49-56),[24] and in *The Contemporary Superhero Film* (2020), McSweeney dedicates an entire chapter to reviewing the portrayal of ethnicity in superhero films; he discusses whiteness, the lack of diversity, whitewashing, and even includes a close-reading of *Black Panther*. Predictably, *Black Panther* has received arguably the most academic attention (Alexander, 2018; Griffin and Rossing, 2020). The *Review of Communications*' dedicated an issue to studying the film; and amongst the issue's many entries were texts which examined the film's portrayal of a politicized transnational Blackness (Asante and Nziba Pindi, 2020); the film's internalized neo-colonialism (Johnson and Hoerl, 2020); and even the film's empowering influence on Black/African American youth (González-Velázquez *et al.*, 2020). Though it is unsurprising that the majority of texts analyzing race in the MCU are centered on *Black Panther*, outside of this watershed film, the MCU does portray (and other) countless other non-white characters, cultures, and countries within the franchise, and so, in this respect, there is undeniably a gap in the academic canon, and we see this same trend occurring in relation to the portrayal of gender.

d) Examining Gender as Other in Superhero Comics and Film

There have been a wide range of texts which tackle how gender is often othered in superhero comics and films, though (again) very few focus on the MCU. Though there are exceptions, superhero narratives often enforce patriarchal and misogynistic standards, particularly in

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[23] Several scholars have considered how alien functions as other, particularly in relation to race and geo-politics; see for example, Cartmell (1999); Wagner (2015); and Nama (2008).
[24] Hassler-Forest (2012) also provides an in-depth analysis of Orientalism in relation to Christopher Nolan's *Batman* trilogy.

regards to women of color. For example, Couzelis (2018) confronts the hypersexualization and stereotypical representation of Asian American characters in superhero comics, while Brown (2011a; 2015) examines the portrayal of black superheroines and gender at large in superhero comics. In *Dangerous Curves* (2011), Brown analyzes how action heroines balance between eroticization and racial cultural change, arguing that superheroines alternate between performing masculinity and femininity through various tropes like the Bad Girl stereotype. Also of note is Gray II and Kaklamanidou's *The 21st Century Superhero: Essays on Gender, Genre, and Globalization*, a collection of essays which tackle the issue, perhaps the most significant of which is Christina Adamou's "Evolving Portrayals of Masculinity in Superhero Films." Adamou, like Brown, considers the intersections between race and gender and analyzes the gendered representation of masculinity in *Hancock* (2008) with a methodology that lies in gender theory and semiotics. She provides a very thorough examination of the film, while discussing the intersections between otherness, blackness, and masculinity.

Unlike the representation of race, there has arguably been more academic attention given to the portrayal of gender within the MCU. Walderzak (2016), for example, examines the portrayal of female characters as heroic damsels, who carry "traditional feminine characteristics and [challenge] the monopolization of strength and power by traditional masculine representation" (p. 162). Walderzak believes MCU women are not hypersexualized, maintaining that they combine traditionally feminine and masculine traits and assume a role of empowerment. However, both Cocca (2016) and McSweeney (2018) challenge this analysis. McSweeney, in particular, argues that the MCU only provides a superficial female empowerment while providing heteronormative patriarchal

representations. As he points out, there are "complicated" female characters which counter this sentiment, however they are all "impossibly beautiful, heterosexual, and (mostly) white" (McSweeney, 2018, p. 34). A more recent entry into the literature, Miriam Kent's *Women in Marvel Films* (2021) tackles the representation of female characters in both the MCU and other Marvel films, and of particular note includes: her analysis of superhero girlfriends who are portrayed as damsels in distress; the double standards and restricted power of the superheroine; the sexualization of female villains; the intersections between race and gender; and finally, the dysfunctional portrayal of heterosexuality. Though there are several minor studies taken of MCU's female characters, including Pepper Potts, Black Widow, Captain Marvel, Hela, and Nebula, Kent's broader focus of Marvel films at large overshadows her discussions regarding the MCU.

Generally speaking, the two films which have received the most attention in relation to their depiction of gender are *Captain Marvel* and *Black Panther*. While *The Routledge Companion to Gender and Sexuality in Comic Book Studies* (2021) provides a wide array of articles that tackles the representations of gender and sexuality in comics, Langsdale's (2021) article in particular stands out as it compares the feminist portrayal of Carol Danvers from the comics to *Captain Marvel*; Langsdale also draws upon Gould's (2019) analysis of the film and its depiction of Maria Rambeau as a Magical Negro. McSweeney (2020) briefly examines *Captain Marvel* and touches on the lack of queer representation in the MCU. *Black Panther*, again, has also been subject to academic interest via a gendered lens (Carrington, 2018; Deardeuff, 2019; Bucciferro, 2021). The Review of Communication's *Black Panther* issue also provides articles which examine queerness and the portrayal of Muslim women in the film (Meyer, 2020; Chrifi Alaoui and Abdi, 2020). Bucciferro's article is perhaps the most significant

because of its study of the film's female characters. Notably, though Bucciferro praises the film's empowering, subversive nature and its disruption of the common stereotypical portrayals of blackness and black women, she also identifies how the nature of the franchise impedes the film's progressiveness.

Despite the extensive literature that has been dedicated to the field, otherness can be succinctly defined as a system which relies on the self/other dialectic; it is a system which enforces the prevailing cultural hegemony through the structures of race, ethnicity, and gender. Superhero narratives recreate this system as they pit heroes against villains in Manichean landscapes that reflect cultural and political hierarchies, reinforcing the hegemonic order. The superhero genre is particularly guilty of this process as the genre itself critically relies on stereotypical representations of race, ethnicity, and gender narratively, stylistically, and linguistically in order to function. The MCU has received more academic attention in recent years, however, while *Black Panther* or *Captain Marvel* are privileged in this discourse, countless other films within the franchise are neglected. The underlying framework of this dissertation primarily relies upon the notion of otherness, examining how the self/other dialectic influences the portrayal of race, ethnicity, and gender; as the gaze is one of the processes used to construct these representations, the following section overviews the racialized and gendered gaze theoretically, before delving into the literature which has been written in relation to the superhero genre and the MCU at large.

3. The Gaze

Gaze theory intersects visuality and otherness and clearly exposes the self/other schema.[25] The gaze plays a significant role in dictating and positioning characters and their relationship to power both on the comics page and on screen. In this following section, I first define the gaze and its relationship to otherness, and I then overview how the gaze informs, first, race and ethnicity and, then, gender and sexuality. In both sub-sections, I track a wide array of gazes across different disciplines and then consider the respective scholarship in the superhero genre.[26]

Interestingly, Levinas's discussion of face-to-face relations can be understood as a precursor to gaze theory. Levinas presented in *Difficult Freedom* (1990) that:

> What one says… is possible only thanks to this face-to-face relationship in which the Other counts as an interlocutor prior even to being known. One looks at a look. To look at a look is to look at something which cannot be abandoned or freed, but something which *aims [vise]* at you: it involves looking at the *face [visage]*… The Other is the only being that one can be tempted to kill. This temptation to murder and this impossibility of murder constitute the very vision of the face. To see a face is already to hear 'You shall not kill.' (p. 8)

This look of equals is of course contrasted with the more voyeuristic gazes that John Berger or Laura Mulvey offered. However, Levinas maintains that murder can only be a reality when "one has not looked the Other in the face," by simply refusing to look at the visage of the Other, deliberately ignoring their humanity and rights (1990, p. 10). This refusal normalizes

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[25] Daniel Chandler (1997) has argued that in visual art, the gaze can be narrowed down to three forms: the spectator's gaze, the intra-diagetic gaze, and the look of the camera. In this dissertation, I am primarily referring to the spectator's gaze.

[26] It is important to mention that one of the principal problems in gaze theory, as Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman (1995) point out, is that it is based on a psychoanalytic framework, and it therefore "privileges gender inequalities over all other forms of inequality," such as race, ethnicity, class, generation etc. (p. 42).

the self/other dichotomy and, moreover, establishes the criteria and deliberately insinuates the supremacy of the self over the other.

In addition to Levinas' conceptualization, the gaze can also be traced back to Foucault's analysis of Diego Velázquez's painting, *Les Meninas* (1656), an image wherein the spectator becomes the painting's subject. In his analysis, Foucault (1966, p. 195) argues that the "observer and the observed take part in a ceaseless exchange. No gaze is stable… subject and object, spectator and model reverse their roles into infinity." Simply put, the relationship between the spectator and the object breaks down the binary relationship of the gaze. Foucault would later expand his understanding of the gaze into that of the panopticon and surveillance; this panoptic gaze is an inspecting, omnipresent look wherein the relationship between power and knowledge are battled out. Through the panopticon, power is established in a disembodied look; "the gaze is on alert everywhere" all at once, as the minute details of the everyday are dominated by internal surveillance (Foucault, 1995, p. 205). The panoptic gaze manifests in a multitude of ways in daily life; for example, racial profiling and microaggressions, more often than not, result in retroactively policing and transforming one's body and identity in order to fit into the current cultural hegemony. John Berger (1972) however understands this internal surveillance in a different manner. Berger contends that "soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen" (p. 9). The eye of the self combines with the eye of the other to comprehend and construct meaning out of the world around us. Berger's description of the gaze is scopophilic and voyeuristic, and it is complemented by Levinas's argument regarding the face and the look.

Said's arguments in *Orientalism* were influenced greatly by this Foucauldian discourse though he seems to depart from Levinas' and Berger's views on the balanced relationship between self/other. In his discussion of Orientalism, Said reasons that the Orient is viewed "as something whose existence is not only displayed but has remained fixed in time and place for the West" (1978, p. 108). "The West is the actor, the Orient a passive reactor. The West is the spectator" that constructs the Orient through an ethnocentric and Eurocentric gaze (p. 109). Ultimately, Said's hegemonic consideration of the gaze, as well as Levinas' and Foucault's understanding of it, rely on a dualistic discourse, of active/passive and self/other binaries, that more recent scholarship has worked to push past. Despite the discourse's challenges, there have been numerous conceptions of the gaze in relation to isolated identities, allowing for deeper analysis of racial, ethnic, and gendered representations in visual media.

a) Gazing at Race

A prime example of the racialized gaze at work can be found in Fanon's theory of the White gaze. Fanon describes the White gaze in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) as "being dissected under white eyes, the only real eyes...

> I am *fixed.* Having adjusted their microtomes, they objectively cut away slices of my reality. I am laid bare. I feel, I see in those white faces that it is not a new man who has come in, but a new kind of man, a new genus. Why, it's a Negro! (p. 87)

In other words, by inflicting this inferiority complex, and inherently creating the concept of blackness itself, the white man degrades and confines the black man. This objectification and dehumanization transforms blackness into a series of stereotypes; the black body is "sprawled out, distorted, recolored... The Negro is an animal, the Negro is bad, the Negro is

mean, the Negro is ugly" (p. 86). The White gaze distorts the black body for its own pleasure, for its dominance and superiority, and a panoptic gaze is further employed as the black man surveys and polices his own body. At the core of Fanon's gaze is a hegemonic whiteness that assumes the role of self. In *White*, Richard Dyer proposes that it is embodiment, "an exercise of spirit within, but not of the body" which defines a white person (2017, p. 35). He argues that whiteness is represented as natural, as default, an 'ideal' representation of Christianity, race, heterosexuality, imperialism; while "other people are raced, we are just people" (p. 38). Similarly, Lola Young has described whiteness as a "non-category…, the norm… [that] has no need for self-definition," (1990, p. 194) with bell hooks labelling this phenomenon as "the myth of 'sameness'" (1992, p. 167). The neutrality and idealness inherent in whiteness complements Fanon's gaze and contributes to the overall self/other schema.

In *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam consider the White gaze as a firmly colonial gaze, a "performance of a European selfhood" which causes the black spectator to withdraw from identifying with the white hero on screen (2014, p. 348). George Yancy also expands upon Fanon's concept in analyzing African-American blackness in *Black Bodies, White Gazes*. Citing numerous incidents of racial profiling, violence, and oppression, Yancy defines the White gaze as "the performance of distortional 'seeing' that evolves out of and is inextricably linked to various raced and racist myths, white discursive practices, and centripetal processes of white systematic power" (2016, p. xxxii). This gaze controls the black body and transforms it into a site of spectacle; the black body is the "quintessence of evil," it is dehumanized, violated, and humiliated (p. xxxiv). Yancy argues that decoding this dialectic will rely on black resistance, through opposition and affirmation, and white solidarity and

acknowledgment. Ultimately, the framework behind the dehumanizing and domineering White gaze can be broadened to apply to the non-white subject as well.

Film theory has also provided various readings of a racially and ethnically charged gaze. In "White Privilege and Looking Relations," Jane Gaines (1996) suggests that the gaze can also be returned, marking cinema as a site wherein spectators actively partake in what she calls "looking relations." Gaines was arguably the first to argue that white feminist film theory was too constrained to adequately address racial difference; according to her, the psychoanalytic model was used by feminists to universalize and "reaffirm white middle-class norms" in the study of black, and more generally speaking, non-white representations (1996, p. 61). Gaines further considers how the gaze functions as male privilege and the right to look, and how historically, particular dominant groups had "the license to look, while other" oppressed groups were forced to look "illicitly" (p. 76).[27] More recently, Caetlin Benson-Allott (2017) presented a similar argument, as she critiqued the female gaze in television for being historically biased towards white middle class women, disregarding narratives of minorities and women of color, recalling the myth of sameness. Though it is possible for the spectator to actively resist and identify with a film's othering and stereotypical representations, there still lurks an underlying hegemonic dialectic in society's social structures which can traumatize one's sense of self (Diawara, 1988, 1990; hooks, 1992; Stam and Spence, 1982). Fanon's inferiority complex did not only rely on children's comics, but also on the entire colonial system and its political and social structures.

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[27] For more on the spectator resisting identification, see Diawara (1988, 1990) and hooks (1992).

Considering the historical and power hierarchies is then, as always, key in understanding the gaze.[28] Building upon this notion and heavily influenced by Fanon and Gaines, E. Ann Kaplan (1997) offers the concept of the imperial gaze. Kaplan believed that looking relations are determined by history and power hierarchies; this type of looking is steeped in Western imperialism, national identity, and white supremacy. Examining colonialist films from the 1930s, Kaplan argues that the imperial gaze "is the assumption that the white western subject is central;" anxiety prevents the spectator "from actually seeing the people gazed at," and they are therefore unable to accept that non-Western people have their own "integral cultures" (1997, p. 103). The imperial gaze refuses looking relations and refuses "mutual subject-to-subject recognition" (p. 105). Therefore, in films such as *Tarzan, the Ape Man* (1933), the white male hero gazes at the woman and native, othering both in an attempt to strengthen his position as the dominant hegemonic power, and it is because of anxiety, the spectator is unable to perceive the othering that is taking place. It is also interesting to note that *Tarzan, the Ape Man's* titular character functioned as a predecessor for the superhero genre; and so, even though Kaplan introduced the imperial gaze through 1930s colonial films, this gaze arguably corresponds to the superhero genre both on page and on screen as well.

Numerous cultural studies writers have also considered the issue of the gaze and identification through the lens of ethnicity. In "New Ethnicities," (1988) Stuart Hall examines ethnic identity and black cultural politics in cinema, and he argues that "the term 'black'" in Britain:

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[28] See Shohat (1992).

was coined as a way of referencing the common experience of racism in Britain and came to provide the organizing category of a new politics of resistance, among groups and communities with… very different histories, traditions, and ethnic identities. (p. 27)

Blackness for Hall therefore denotes an inclusive racial and ethnic otherness for all people of color, one that is juxtaposed to whiteness and white power relations and hegemony. When looking at representations of this blackness in cinema then, Hall believes film is moving from a homogenous, limiting, and stereotypical representation towards diversification. However, Hall overlooks the contradictory identifications that may occur in an all-encompassing blackness, and Kobena Mercer (1991) calls attention to this. While Mercer identifies with Fanon's terms, of being fixed and dissected by the white gaze, he also argues that he personally inhabits two contradictory identifications as a gay black male (1991, p. 180). Shohat and Stam (2014) similarly argue against racially, culturally, or even ideologically essentializing the spectator as the spectator will always move within shifting identities and differences; they also remind us that according to identity politics, "people belong to recognizable social groups, and [typically] the delegated representatives can speak on their behalf." Consequently, they ask, how does expressing oppression or narratives particular to minorities translate to the screen? For example, "could only an African-American have directed Malcolm X?" (p. 343). In the same vein, would Patty Jenkins' *Wonder Woman* and Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther* have been so successful, a cultural moment, if a male or white director had been at the helm? Stam and Shohat conclude that it is more important to ask "how to speak together," to "plurilog," rather than focusing on who should speak. However idealistic this sentiment may be, it is premature to focus on p256iloging until genuinely diverse voices and representations permeate mass media.

There has been little discussion made on how a racial or ethnic gaze functions in superhero comics and film, and seemingly no in-depth analyses about the MCU. In exploring the intersection between masculinity, blackness, and technology in superhero comics, Anderson (2015) briefly examines how the black superhero is subjected to a predominantly white gaze through characters such as Luke Cage, Cyborg, and Black Lightning. Strömberg (2016) also briefly analyzes how Arab Muslim superheroes, such as Marvel's Dust, are depicted post 9/11, arguing that they are mediated by both an Orientalist ethnic gaze and a male gaze "with connotations of Western supremacy and dominance" (p. 587). Thomas Jr. (2017) specifically discusses how the white gaze functions in DC's television show *Arrow*, examining how the gaze affects *Arrow*'s main characters intending to raise awareness on "racial profiling and the subjection to violence suffered by black men;" however, the show, as Thomas Jr. points out, still relies on a "problematic white-dominated framework" (p. 171).

The racialized and ethnic gaze provides a fitting framework through which to analyze the construction of otherness. These looks reveal the underpinning system of power which helps enforce the self/other dialectic. Identification with stereotypical representations is not a straightforward process as the spectator can actively resist identifying with negative imagery on page or on screen. That being said, these structures ensure that the spectator is still greatly affected, if not traumatized by the constant barrage of degrading imagery. Though there have only been a handful of scholarly texts written on how the racial and ethnic gaze functions in the superhero narrative, the gendered gaze has been investigated much more in superhero scholarship as the next section will demonstrate.

b) Gazing at Gender

Catherine MacKinnon (1982) argued that "sexuality is gendered as gender is sexualized:

> male and female are created through the erotization of dominance and submission. The man/woman difference and the dominance/submission dynamic define each other… Sexual objectification, the central process within this dynamic, is at once epistemological and political. (pp. 635-36)

In order to tackle how otherness functions within the MCU, it is important to examine how gender and sexuality are represented in comics and on screen. Feminist film theory began to address these dynamics in the 1970s, heavily influenced by the works of Althusser and Lacan.[29] Discourse on the gendered gaze also emerged during the seventies, an era in which the second wave of feminism flourished and the dominant gaze was being challenged. In this section, I track a wide array of gendered gazes, examining how they engage with masculinity, femininity, and sexuality in the superhero genre, and I conclude by reviewing the literature written on this topic in superhero scholarship. These depictions illustrate how superhero narratives, and the MCU specifically, are often reliant on visually centering and othering gendered groups of people. Indeed, the hyper-sexualization and essentialization of gender (male, female, or non-binary) in the genre has also resulted in a similar othering, and in a sense, can be viewed as exemplary of what Judith Butler (1990) defined as gender performativity. "Gender proves to be performance- that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be," it is a series of repeated and stylized acts which construct the appearance of gender, just as the self constructs the identity of the other (Butler, 1990, p. 25).

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[29] Critical texts on feminist film theory include: Kuhn (1982), Doane (1987), Kaplan (1990), and Penley (1988).

In *Ways of Seeing*, Berger (1972) maintained that "*men act* and *women appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (p. 47). Much like Foucault discussed the gaze in relation to the panopticon as a stifling, controlling, all-powerful gaze which sets up the relationship between power and knowledge, so too does the cinematic gendered gaze function in a similar manner. The male gaze was first coined by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her seminal essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). Influenced by Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey argued that pleasure can be found in the distinction between active/male and passive/female on screen (1975, p. 27). It is through this voyeuristic and scopophilic gaze, that women in film are objectified and made into a spectacle; they are "simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact, so that they can be said to connote a to-be-looked-at-ness" (p. 19). This gaze constructs women as passive objects for the active gaze of the male audience, embodying the binary power imbalance of passive-object and active-viewer, and while this active-viewer objectifies the female body, so too does he, Mulvey argues, take part in a narcissistic identification with the ideal-ego. Identification plays a key role in this objectification of the female body, for it is "as the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence" (p. 28).[30] Woman becomes a pleasurable image, a spectacle, while the man is the "bearer of the look" (p. 27). However, at the center of this phallocentric gaze is a paradox, for the gaze relies upon the image of a

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[30] Christian Metz first used the term in "The Imaginary Signifier" (1975), applying a psychoanalytic lens, particularly Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, in order to analyze cinematic identification. See also Doane (1987).

castrated, objectified woman in order to give itself meaning, recalling the ironic dialectic that

is at the core of otherness.

While many intellectuals applauded Mulvey's arguments, many others still found

them to be essentialist and heteronormative, relying too heavily on binary oppositions. For

example, both Bergstrom (1979) and Neale (1983) challenged the sexuality of the male gaze.

Bergstrom rejected the notion that male spectators exclusively identify with male characters

and female spectators with female characters, basing her arguments on a Freudian

framework of bisexual responses (1979, p. 182). In later years, Mulvey herself would

reconceptualize her entire system, admitting that her initial argument hindered any prospect

for change; she maintained that the mechanisms of active/passive and masculine/feminine

were ultimately polarizing (a "polarization [which] allows only [for] an either/or,") and they

could not function outside of their own meaning: "there can be no space in between or space

outside such [pairings]" (1989, p. 162). Furthermore, the Lacanian and, more generally

speaking, psychoanalytic foundations of Mulvey's argument inherently define woman by lack,

by otherness, with sex functioning in default as masculine. As Luce Irigaray (1985) points out:

"Female sexuality has always been theorized within masculine parameters" (p. 99). Within

this dialectic, woman and female sexuality are both presented as passive entities.[31]

Since 1975, the gendered gaze has been reformulated in a variety of ways: Mary Ann

Doane's (1991) masquerading gaze, a masculinization of female spectatorship; Judith

Halberstam's (2001) study of transgender bodies which considers a trans gaze; Steven

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[31] Rich (1998) would encourage the female spectator's active participation and challenge the male gaze.

Drukman's (1995) gay-gazing and diva-identification; and Gamman and Marshment's collection of essays, *The Female Gaze: Women As Viewers of Popular Culture* (1989), which contains several forays into the female gaze. The nature of the female gaze has especially proven to be quite useful in studying the representation of gender on screen. In "Watching Detectives: The Enigma of the Female Gaze," Gamman argues that the female gaze "cohabits the space occupied by men;" it is not the reverse of the male gaze, but rather it disorders the that look's phallocentric system (1989, p. 16). Building on this argument, Joey Soloway (2016) classifies the female gaze as an intersectional gaze, one that functions as a "sociopolitical justice-demanding way of art making;" it is a political platform that seeks to create empathy and distinguishes the divisive nature of the male gaze. Kaplan however takes issue with this type of analysis, pointing out that while the gaze is not inherently male and can be initiated by a female spectator, "to own and activate the gaze, given our language and the structure of the unconscious, is to be in the 'masculine' position" (1990, p. 30). Regardless of how powerful and political a tool the female gaze may present, it is equally as harmful and destructive in its treatment of both the male and female body (Hansen, 1986; Benson-Allott, 2017; Taylor, 2014).

Though the gendered gaze's system may be constrained by its binary and limited parameters, that does not mean that today's visual media does not partake in exploiting the gaze, be it a male gaze, a female gaze, or otherwise. This gendered gaze has also functioned contextually and narratively in various texts through representations of masculinity and femininity. Masculinity has been a focal point of gender studies in film since the 1980s, and hypermasculinization in particular has played a critical role in the superhero genre since its

inception.[32] In 1969, Patricia Sexton proposed that masculinity values "courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, mastery…, adventure and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body," all of which are core tenets in the superhero (qtd. in Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, 1985, p. 562). This masculinity is strictly heterosexual in nature, and the emphasis on musculature is key. These features all meld together to construct what Robin Wood (2003) deemed as the cult of masculinity and Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) would define as hegemonic masculinity: a masculinity which allows for male dominance over women through "toxic practices" which is inherently linked with the male body (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 840).

In gazing at the male body, as well as the male superhero's body specifically, the spectator is gripped with images of musculature and power. The superhero has been classically read as an adolescent male power fantasy, wherein habitual violence is an expression of repressed sexuality. Bulky, muscled superheroes, often wearing tight fitting costumes, are presented to the spectator as an ideal with erotic undercurrents. Richard Dyer has extensively analyzed both the male body and its relationship to masculinity. "Developed muscularity— muscles that *show*—" Dyer argues, "is not in truth natural at all, but is rather achieved… a man's muscles constantly bespeak this achievement of his beauty/power" (1982, p. 71). In *White*, Dyer also connects this type of masculinity with whiteness, what he denotes as the white man's muscles, wherein he analyzes white action heroes such as Rambo, Tarzan, or Hercules:

> Classicism, Californianism, barbarianism and crucifixionism are specific, strongly white representational traditions. Equally, many

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[32] For more, see Neale (1983); Cohan (1997); Jeffords (1994); Tasker (1993); Powrie, Davies, and Babington (2005); and Lehman (2001; 2007).

of the formal properties of the built body carry connotations of whiteness: it is ideal, hard, achieved, wealthy, hairless and tanned (2017, p. 209).

Dyer fittingly further likens this physique to that of armor, as these good musclemen heroes, or "world policemen," a term that almost perfectly fits the definition of the superhero, are pitted against evil foreign adversaries (2017, p. 216). Even here, whiteness functions on multiple levels as it also represents a colonial and imperial framework as a racial state of exception. Superheroes, particularly those of the comics from the 1980s, align quite neatly into this reading of action heroes. Peter Lehman's (2007) exploration of how phallic masculinity is closely linked to the representations of the penis and the male body can similarly be applied to the superhero's costumed body, as Lehman is particularly interested in how and why patriarchal society oscillates around the penis while paradoxically keeping male genitalia "hidden from the spotlight" (p. 30). Though studying how the superhero's male body is important, as Stella Bruzzi has discussed, masculinity on screen is also informed by stylistic elements and mise-en-scène, through which the spectator is able to assume "a position of quasi-identification" (2013, p. 5).

Written in response to Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure," Neale (1995) tackles identification, looking, and spectacle in relation to images of male bodies on screen. He argues that narcissistic identification leads to spectators identifying with powerful, omnipotent male figures, and that 'male' genres, through voyeuristic and fetishistic looking result in sado-masochistic themes and images and repressed homosexual voyeurism. For Neale, the masculine character, much like the superhero, is "marked with emotional reticence, and also by silence" (1983, p. 7). Masculinity on screen "involve[s] phantasies of power, omnipotence,

mastery, and control" (p. 5). As a result, the spectator partakes in two forms of looking; first, (male) spectators enjoy the perverse spectacle of voyeuristic looking, of gazing at "battles, fights, and duels of all kinds [which] are concerned with struggles of 'will and strength,' 'victory and defeat'" (p. 12). Spectators next participate in a fetishistic look, as they gaze at the male body; though the erotic look is usually put aside for the female body, the spectator's look leads to the femininization of "the male body [that] has been unashamedly put on display" (p. 15). Male superheroes are subject to both types of looks, in the spectacle of violence and conflict that they participate in, as well as the hypermasculinization of the superhero's body. As Smith (1993) has pointed out, it is important to note that Neale's femininization argument is a "sweeping generalization" and is, in fact, "circular," for if "the apparatus is male, geared to a male gaze, then any instance of objectification will have to involve the 'feminization' of the object" (p. 93). Tasker (1993) furthers this sentiment as Neale's argument is ultimately based on a "heterosexual understanding of desire and difference" (p. 115).

The eroticization of the male body is taken a step further if one considers how male sexuality is also signified. Eve Sedgwick defines male homosocial desire as an erotic form of male bonding, where "male friendship, mentorship, entitlement, rivalry, and hetero- and homosexuality [are] in an intimate and shifting relation to class" (1985, p. 1). There is an "obligatory heterosexuality" in blockbusters and so it would seem in the MCU by association (p. 3). Sedgwick argues that this obligatory heterosexuality is at the root of all "male-dominated kinship systems," with homophobia therefore becoming a "necessary consequence" in order to ensure "heterosexual marriage[s]," and this concept can be further applied to the male-to-male relationships on screen in any action films and particularly in

superhero films (p. 3). "Patriarchy structurally requires homophobia," and blockbusters which often function as patriarchal narratives are therefore also homophobic (p. 4). Dyer (1993) analyzes male sexuality in the media from a different angle. He argues that there are three aspects in male sexuality: symbolism, comedy, and male sexual narrative. According to Dyer, these elements create the sexual grammar and structure of male sexuality, and such representations lead to the blurring of lines as to whether narrative structure is based on male sexuality or vice versa. Regardless, the male body and male sexuality in visual culture more often than not conform to hegemonic masculinity, and superhero narratives unfortunately follow this cisgendered, heterosexual, hypersexualized trend.

Just as the spectator gazes at the male body, so too does the spectator gaze at the female body, a body that is also hypervisible, hypersexualized, and often linked to monstrosity. While exploring the horror genre, Barbara Creed posited the concept of the monstrous-feminine, a concept which has become integral to wider feminist film theory. The monstrous-feminine, or the female monster, is perceived as such through yonic imagery and female sexuality, and it reflects male anxieties regarding sexual difference and castration (Creed, 1993, p. 2). What is at the core of the monstrous-feminine is that she "is defined in terms of her sexuality," as a virgin or a whore; it is gender which constructs her monstrosity (p. 3). This fear of female sexuality is at the core of the monstrous-feminine, the horror genre, and arguably the superhero genre as well, for in the representation of female characters and superheroines in particular, hyper-sexualization and objectification are the result of the unattainability of the female body. The fear of a powerful and domineering female body results in what could be passed as the monstrous-feminine. Neale similarly considers the male horror monster in terms of addressing and soothing castration anxiety; as most monsters tend

to be male with heterosexual desires for the female body, Neale argues, it would seem that "it is women's sexuality, that renders them desirable- but also threatening" (1980, p. 60). Opposed to Neale's argument and the general Freudian framework, Susan Lurie (1981) argues that woman is in fact not castrated, but whole, and this is what inspires male castration anxiety (p. 53). And so, in parallel to superhero narratives, the presentation of the superheroine provides an abject fear to both the male subjects of the text as well as the male readers and spectators. As such, the dehumanization and objectification of the female body occurs as a means of controlling such anxieties and re-establishing male dominance and control.

There has been a great deal of scholarship that contends with the representation of male and female superhero bodies. Avery-Natale (2013) argues that, in recent years, the physicality of both male and female superheroes have become more sexualized and exaggerated, and he connects bodybuilder and gaze theory in order to conclude that superheroes present the "ego ideal of Western representations of 'perfect' gendered bodies" (p. 71). Avery-Natale exclusively applies the male gaze in his study as he believes that superhero narratives cater specifically to heterosexual male fantasies. His arguments are countered by Aaron Taylor (2007), who views the superhero's body as engendered and a symbol of otherness; it exudes a "polymorphous sexuality… that dualistic logic cannot constrain" (2007, p. 346). Stabile (2009) argues that the gender representations of superheroes in post-9/11 media convey a "narrative of protection" which promotes sexism in a "militarized culture;" and she analyzes these issues primarily by a study of *Heroes* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The study of masculinity in relation to the superhero's body is also quite lengthy. For example, Dittmer (2009) has looked at the relationship between masculinity and

otherness, examining how Captain America represents a masculine superhero who lacks domesticity and represents the "force separating self from the other" through a brief overview and analysis of Captain America's history in the comics; his discussion would be expanded on in *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero*.

The representation of superheroines and female characters has also been tackled by numerous scholars.[33] Trina Robbins' famous essay, "Gender Differences in Comics" (2002), tracks the representation of gender throughout the twentieth century. Robbins asserts that by the end of the twentieth century, superheroes and superheroines began to drastically change as sexual characteristics became exaggerated. While male superheroes started to "sport enormous muscles, most of which don't exist on real human beings, necks thicker than their heads, and chins bigger than the rest of their heads," superheroines suddenly "[possessed] balloon breasts and waists so small that if they were real humans they'd break in half" (Robbins, 2002). Robbins further reasons that such representations of the female body would not appear to be unrealistic as the adolescent male readers would "have little or no experience with real women." Putting aside the fact that Robbins relies on the detrimental generalization of the reader's gender ("women readers are rare," Robbins says,) her descriptions of the hypersexualization of the superhero's body remain sadly true. Lebel (2009) builds off this argument, as she claims that the hypersexualization of female superheroes keeps their femininity intact with barely any effects to dismantle the shape of the female form which is viewed strictly through the male gaze (p. 65).

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[33] For example, Robinson (2004); Robbins (1996); Cocca (2016); Goodrum, Prescott, and Smith (2018); and Aldama (2021).

Several scholars have examined the male gaze in relation to the portrayal of superheroines and female characters in superhero narratives (Dittmer, 2013; Goodrum, 2016; Avery-Natale, 2013). Utilizing the male gaze, Gray II (2011) analyzes and deconstructs the superheroine through "bad girl art." Gray II examines the hypersexualization of the "hot bad girl" and the double standard inherent in that trope, that is the balance between sex appeal and physical strength, in both superhero comics and film. The danger in and fear of feminine power is similarly considered by Dittmer (2013). Madrid (2009), on the other hand, delves into a historical and social analysis of superheroines, and he inspects the balance between the superheroine's beauty and power with her objectification and trivialization. Brown (2011a) challenges these arguments, claiming that the action heroine assumes an active gaze that challenges the male gaze, and his analysis can arguably apply to certain superheroines. Similar to the detective heroine, Brown maintains that the action heroine enacts an investigatory gaze "without being victimized by a concomitant masochistic form of punishment" (2011a, p. 222). The action heroine functions as both subject and object, and through narrative reversal, the action heroine exploits those who objectify her and is not punished for her sexuality. Though these characters may still be fetishized by the male gaze, they are still able to enact their own aggressive look and assert control over their narrative.

Unfortunately, gendered gaze theory is rarely used by scholars in their analysis of the MCU. An excellent example would be Favara (2016), whose article examines how gender body capital enhances the manner which the audience perceives gender and masculinity ideals in *The Avengers*. Favara argues that the emphasis on the bodybuilding, transformation, and preparation MCU actors partook in as well as the use of CGI technology creates a hegemonic ideal of what masculinity is in contemporary cinema. Salter and Blodgett (2017) similarly

consider how hypermasculinity functions in the MCU's representation of Iron Man, his suit, and masculine identity, connecting that construction with fandom wish fulfillment fantasies (pp. 37-41). Along the same line, McGee (2011) also studies how hypermasculinity evolves in Phase One, applying Neale's understanding of masculinity in order to investigate how the MCU fails to portray alternative masculinities. The female body under the gaze is often mentioned, but only ever in passing (Peppard, 2017; Cocca, 2016; Yockey, 2017), though Jones (2022), in his analysis of how pop culture influences therapy, succinctly tracks the evolving depiction of female emotions in the MCU, briefly discussing the franchise's exploitation of the male gaze.

The gendered gaze, be it a male, female, or another type of look, exposes how gender and sexuality, and particularly masculinity and femininity, are depicted in visual media. Regardless of what gender the gaze is looking at, it ultimately serves as a voyeuristic and objectifying tool which others the male or female body by constructing domineering power relations and a self/other schema. The gaze defines masculinity in a toxic hegemonic manner as a white, cisgendered, and heteronormative muscled body while femininity is misogynistically presented as a hypersexualized, hypervisible body that is often linked to monstrosity. Despite the wide array of scholarship that has been dedicated to examining how the gaze functions through both masculinity and femininity in superhero narratives, there has been a glaring gap in MCU scholarship, as well as a lack of texts which consider non-binary genders and alternative sexualities, both of which I hope to further address in my dissertation. Ultimately, understanding how the racial and gendered gaze function allows us to explore how otherness influences the MCU's portrayal of race, ethnicity, and gender.

III. CONCLUSIONS

Otherness irrefutably plays a significant role in the superhero genre and, as I will argue, the MCU film cycle specifically. This dissertation's study of the Infinity Saga will demonstrate how the self/other schema (often via the gaze) heavily impacts representations of race, ethnicity, and gender. As this literature review hopefully demonstrates, there are several gaps within MCU scholarship. This is particularly apparent in the lack of MCU literature written in relation to the self/other dialect, the racial and gendered gaze, the portrayal of alternative masculinities and femininities as well as nonbinary genders. With this interdisciplinary approach and theoretical framework, I hope to address these gaps and suggest new ways to analyze the MCU. The MCU film cycle is the most popular, relevant, and culturally significant narratival production that the superhero genre and Hollywood, at large, has most recently produced, and its ability to disseminate either insular or more progressive portrayals of race, ethnicity, and gender to mass audiences attests to how essential it is to investigate and analyze the system of this pop culture phenomenon.

CHAPTER 1
THE MCU FILM CYCLE

The opening sequence of the Infinity Saga establishes the generic mood of the MCU film cycle. *Iron Man* opens to a military convoy of Humvees racing through the vast, empty desert of Afghanistan's Kunar Province. AC/DC's *Back in Black* blasts in the background while the convoy speeds past a poor shepherd herding his sheep. The audience is introduced to Tony Stark who, dressed in a designer suit and glass of whiskey in hand, breaks the ice and jokes around with the soldiers who are escorting him back from a missile demonstration. As Tony is taking pictures with the soldiers, the convoy is suddenly ambushed. Stark tries to escape the violence and the chaos, but he is heavily injured from the assault, and he passes out, only to wake up bloodied, disoriented, tied to a chair, with a camera pointed at him. The camera pans out to reveal Stark surrounded by a menacing group of terrorists, dressed in scarves, carrying guns, and vaguely Middle Eastern. The blood-red flag of the Ten Rings shadows the men while their leader aggressively talks to the camera in a foreign language. Abducted and powerless in the land of the other, the audience is confronted by the stark image of Tony staring at the camera with a harrowing look on his face before the film cuts to the title card.

The film's strong, visceral opening thesis builds the primary generic foundations and conventions of both *Iron Man* and the Infinity Saga, because of three overlapping components

which structure the sequence and construct the core theme of otherness. First, the film establishes the saga's first superhero with Tony Stark, a handsome and likeable character who is also straight, heteronormative, cisgendered, white, and a sleek symbol of American capitalism and hegemony. This protagonist is then abducted by an ambiguously eastern and highly Orientalist group of repulsive villains. There is a clear distinction established between the self (hero/Tony Stark/the American military convoy/the United States of America) and the other (villain/the terrorists/the Ten Rings/Afghanistan) in this sequence from the portrayal of characters to the depiction of setting, lighting, and mood, and these distinctions ultimately rely upon Manichean dichotomies. Second, though the film's introduction may take place before Stark's hero's journey, the superhero's connection to the American military and American geopolitical order is explicit in the film's opening sequence, as is the general propagandistic portrayal of these hegemonic power structures. Third, and lastly, the film's depiction of American hegemony was greatly shaped by the Pentagon's collaboration with Marvel Studios while creating *Iron Man*, from providing assistance with the script and wardrobe to supplying Airmen extras and access to various aircrafts, all in return for a positive (manufactured) depiction of the US military.

Iron Man's opening sequence is so striking because the audience watches these three interwoven themes appear, time and time again, and indeed develop and evolve for the remainder of the Infinity Saga. The audience is witness to a Manichean system of binaries which can be simplified as self versus other. They are witness to the inherent role of the superhero as a tool of hegemony, Whiteness, and (American) Empire. And finally, we see the influence that Marvel Studios' collaborations with military and governmental bodies has on their films. These three components cement the role of otherness within *Iron Man's*

characters, narrative, themes, mise-en-scène etc., and they continue to fluctuate and build upon one another throughout the course of the Infinity Saga, unwittingly structuring the Saga's predominant generic mood and constructing the MCU film cycle.

In order to examine how otherness is woven into the fabric of the Infinity Saga, it is essential that I first define and examine the MCU film cycle itself. I argue that there are three primary components which generically influence the MCU's first three phases, that is the Infinity Saga, and these are: Manicheanism, the superhero as cultural hegemony, and industrial influence. By closely examining how these three intersecting mechanisms build upon one another in order to create the cycle's language and system, one can then understand how otherness is integral to the MCU film cycle, and furthermore, it becomes clear how otherness functions in relation to race and ethnicity as well as gender and sexuality in the Infinity Saga.

Before delving into an analysis of the cycle's mechanics, it is first important to define the MCU film cycle itself. In this chapter's introduction, I first briefly overview how the MCU has been defined by the general public as 'the Marvel Formula' and by scholars most often in relation to its supergenre, the superhero genre. I then propose my own interpretation of the MCU film cycle and briefly define the recurring internal components of its system.

I. DEFINING THE MCU FILM CYCLE

Over the past decade, fans and scholars alike have attempted to define what characterizes the MCU's films. In a "common cultural consensus," fans (and, at times, even scholars)

commonly refer to the generic model of the MCU as the Marvel Formula, the formulaic

narrative and style that is synonymous with the MCU brand (Tudor, 1976, p. 173). Countless

blogs, YouTube videos, and articles detail the Marvel Formula's recurring features,

maintaining that the formula is subject to a repetitive narrative structure, action-heavy

sequences, a recognizable sense of humor, and PG-13 tone and content, all while maintaining

a politically conservative, or at the very least ambiguous, stance.[34] In addition to these

recurring characteristics, the MCU Formula also reflects the internal production system of

Marvel Studios, which is widely referred to as a 'sandbox' of characters and worlds which can

be 'played with' by various creators and directors. Seemingly appealing to the lowest common

denominators and evoking Burke's (2015) conglomerate argument, the MCU Formula is often

disparaged as its primary goal appears to be producing the most cost-effective and profitable

product. Though the Marvel Formula identifies several of the cycle's key characteristics in

broad strokes, it overlooks the deeper, undercurrent themes that are embedded within its

system.

In addition to the Marvel Formula, one can also consider the MCU exclusively in

relation to its supergenre, the superhero genre. The superhero genre has been defined and

redefined in plethora of ways over the past several decades. It has been distinguished via its

relation to other genres, via its own characteristics, tropes and conventions, and even as a

modern mythology (Rollin, 1970; Cawelti, 1976; Reynolds, 1992; Wright, 2001; Lawrence and

Jewett, 2002; Coogan, 2006; DiPaolo, 2011; Burke, 2015; Brown, 2016; McSweeney 2020).

The superhero genre can ultimately be understood as an ever-evolving narrative. Though it

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[34] As Bordwell (2008) notes, "Hollywood movies are usually *strategically ambiguous* about politics. You can read them in a lot of different ways, and that ambivalence is more or less deliberate. A Hollywood film tends to pose sharp moral polarities and then fuzz or fudge or rush past settling them."

may have once been defined by the specific conventions that Richard Reynolds, for example, outlined (i.e. the superhero's lack of parents; his secret identity and unearthly powers; his patriotism to the state, though he acts outside of the law etc.), superhero texts in comics, literature, film, and television have, over time, grown beyond those narrow limitations. This is evident in how the superhero narrative has changed from the Golden Age of Comics Books in the 1930s to the present Modern Age of Comics from 1980s onward. Over time, the superhero genre has steadily diversified, and this is apparent in: the broadened representations of race and ethnicity as well as gender and sexuality; the deconstructive reconceptualization of the superhero and many of the genre's tropes; as well as the introduction of more adult themes. When considering the MCU's first three phases, there is a clear echo of that very same, decades-long evolution of the superhero genre, which suggests that the MCU is a microcosmic echo of the superhero genre. While the first phase of the MCU focuses solely on origin stories with very conventional and Manichean superhero narratives, over the past decade there has been a slow and yet inexorable diversification of these texts.

Drawing from both the Marvel Formula as well as the superhero genre, the MCU can be understood as a distinctive, institution-based film cycle. Generally speaking, film cycle theory has often been overlooked in favor of genre theory, but in *American Film Cycles* (2011), Amanda Ann Klein explores in painstaking detail the nature of the film cycle.[35] Klein (2011) defines the film cycle as "a series of films associated with each other through shared images, characters, settings, plots, or themes," (pp. 3-4) and this is all the more explicit within the MCU as the franchise literally shares the same characters and universe. The film cycle, Klein

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[35] For more on film cycles, see Klein (2011) as well as Altman (1999) and Neale (2005).

argues, is subject to 'slavish repetition;' it is "not created for the purposes of elevating public taste but, rather, to provide audiences with versions of the same images, characters, and plots that they enjoyed in previous films..." and ultimately, "to cater to audience desires in order to turn a profit" (p. 6). Klein's argument does ring true in this respect, particularly when one considers both Disney as well as, to a lesser extent, Marvel Studios' economic imperatives and neoliberal capitalist identity; however, I would argue that to reduce the notion of the film cycle, and MCU film cycle accordingly, to simply a matter of slavish repetition and profit is rather an elitist view, overlooking a cycle's cultural significance, not to mention the proverbial blood, sweat, and tears which the cast and crew members have poured into making these films.[36] Another aspect of the film cycle that Klein identifies is how it is "subject to defined time constraints;" because the film cycle is so "dependent on audience desires," after a certain point, "a cycle must be updated or altered in order to continue to turn a profit" (p. 4). Klein continues that despite being associated with "commercialism" and "artlessness," (two criticisms that have greatly plagued the MCU since its early beginnings), the film cycle is so compelling "precisely because [it resists] neat categorizations and [has] the potential to disrupt or complicate the discrete categories frequently generated by genre studies" (p. 6). This again is quite evident in the MCU, as the portrayal of representation, be it race and ethnicity or gender and sexuality, fluctuates and evolves over the course of the Infinity Saga. The MCU, with its wide variety of genres, tones, characters, and settings, does change over time and reassess the superhero formula, and this notion will be explored throughout this dissertation.

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[36] For more on this, see Chapter 1's section Industrial Influences.

In essence, the MCU film cycle is then a series of films with shared images, characters, as well as a shared universe; the MCU portrays images, narratives, and themes (which often repeat in one manner or another) that the audience have enjoyed in previous films in order to successfully make a profit; and in order to continue turning this profit, this cycle, over time, naturally updates itself and evolves according to the desires of the audience. The MCU film cycle has been so commercially successful in creating this system that it has marked the franchise as a template for other entertainment franchises and their developing universes.[37] By considering both the thematic and industrial elements which connect the Infinity Saga's films together, it is clear that the MCU is not only based upon the commonly agreed-upon formula, but it has also cultivated itself into a unique institution-based and self-contained cycle. The MCU's films and its grand narrative are understood better collectively as they comment and build upon each other to construct this film cycle.

There is merit in considering the MCU in relation to the Marvel Formula as well as the superhero genre at large; however, I argue that further embedded within the MCU film cycle are key recurring components which greatly shape and influence the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In this first chapter, I propose that otherness is a central recurring theme in the MCU film cycle, and it primarily functions in the franchise via three recurring components that often overlap and build upon one another creating a discursive system which, as the cycle progresses, fluctuates and evolves over time; this system conveys a deep-rooted self/other dialectic that influences the cycle's conventions, themes, narratives, characters, power structures, as well as racial and gendered representations. The three core components are:

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[37] For example, the DC Extended Universe, the Monsters Universe, the Conjuring Universe, the Lego Cinematic Universe, and even Sony's Spider-Man Universe.

1. Manicheanism, that is the presence of the stark dualities of good and evil (and the predominant lack of grays). Manicheanism creates the apocalyptic mood that is prevalent in the MCU narrative, and it enforces the dualistic binaries in the franchise. This subsequently serves as the foundation of the self/other dialectic in the MCU film cycle, as superheroes battle villains and attempt to save the world from apparent destruction.

2. As a result of this encoded Manichean landscape, the superhero functions as a tool of cultural hegemony and is representative of a propagandistic nationalism. In saving the world, the superhero is fundamentally a conservative state of exception. Whiteness is key to this characterization as the superhero serves as an emblem of Western colonialism and American Empire which further results in (and relies upon) several types of looks, such as the panoptic gaze, the White gaze, the male gaze etc. This, again, furthers constructs the self/other dialectic.

3. Finally, it is important to consider how the MCU film cycle functions on an industrial level, as film studios often collaborate and receive funding from various government and military organizations. These alliances reinforce the propagandistic reading of the superhero narrative and the cycle's role in cultural hegemony. They further cater to the underlying self/other dialectic which informs the socio and geo-political readings of the superhero within the narrative.

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                    │    MCU Film Cycle    │
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│   Manicheanism   │ │ Superhero as Cultural │ │ Industrial Influence │
│                  │ │     Hegemony     │ │                  │
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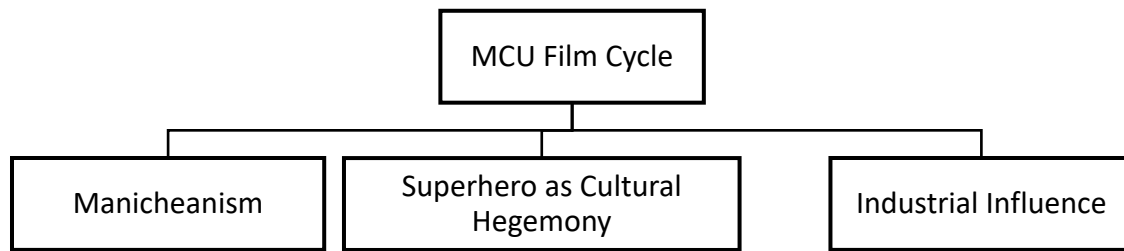
Figure 1: The MCU film cycle's three core components.

Over the course of this dissertation, I examine how these three recurring components appear and fluctuate over time within the Infinity Saga (that is, the first three phases of the MCU). This chapter is concerned with, first, dissecting these three themes, closely examining how they function and influence the MCU, and then, investigating which films confront and challenge the cycle's base structure. The subsequent chapters rely upon this fundamental understanding of the MCU film cycle, as it is the cycle's underlying system which primarily influences the representations of race and ethnicity as well as gender and sexuality, which will be discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, respectively.

In this chapter, I will first consider the MCU's connection to Manicheanism and how the self/other dynamic relays itself via both a binary system and apocalypticism. I then look at the cycle's conservative enforcement of cultural hegemony primarily through tools of panopticism and surveillance. Next, I examine the MCU's industrial relationship and its habitual collaboration with the US military and other various government agencies. I finally conclude with an overview of the evolution of the MCU film cycle over the course of the Infinity Saga, with an in-depth analysis of the MCU's most radical film: *Thor: Ragnarok*. In analyzing these core components of Manicheanism and apocalypticism, cultural hegemony,

panopticism, and surveillance, as well as the industrial machineries of the franchise, I hope to shed more light on inner workings of the MCU film cycle and its central theme of otherness.

II. MANICHEANISM

As was discussed earlier, Manicheanism is a thousands of years old dualistic philosophy which relies on the struggle between good and evil. This binary cosmology is at the core of the MCU's reliance on otherness, as it informs the dynamic between self and other in the MCU. In this section, I first connect Manicheanism to an abridged structuralist reading of the binary system. Then, as Manicheanism functions on several levels, I briefly consider how Manicheanism operates in the MCU through the fundamental clash between superhero and villain, with the superhero as the self and villain as the other. I next examine how apocalypticism feeds into the MCU's Manicheanism, and I conclude this section with a close-textual analysis of the saga's most popular texts: the apocalyptic *Avengers* quartet. It is only by examining how binarism and apocalypticism both inform the franchise that the cycle's internalized Manicheanism is evident.

1. Manicheanism and the Binary System

The dualism inherent to Manicheanism can be linked to a system that was first articulated in academia by structuralist Ferdinand de Saussure: the binary system. Similar to the self/other dialectic, binary oppositions are essentially a pair of signs, or concepts, which oppose each other while also drawing meaning from one other. A sign does not have "some fixed identity, but because it is different from other signs" it has meaning; therefore, "what a sign is is due to what it isn't" (Thwaites, Davis and Mules, 1994, p. 32). Just as the self cannot exist without, and relies upon, the other for meaning, so too good cannot exist without evil, nor a hero

without their villain, as well as other countless dichotomous concepts i.e. male/female, black/white, east/west etc. (*Figure 2*). Moreover, Derrida argued that the binary system is not a "peaceful coexistence of a vis-a-vis, but rather… a violent hierarchy" wherein one term governs and dominates the other; the audience then, when watching a movie, "see and interpret everything" characters do via this skewed system, thus influencing their interpretation of the text (Berger, 1997, p. 44).

Self	Other
hero	villain
male	female
subject	object
good	evil
white	nonwhite
the West	the East
rational	irrational
progressive	traditional
the center	the margin
sidekicks	henchmen

Figure 2: Examples of binary oppositions in the MCU film cycle

This 'violent hierarchy' of the Manichean binary system is front and center in the MCU film cycle, though, as the saga progresses, these binary oppositions and the system at large fluctuates and evolves. Generally speaking, the MCU hero (the self-subject-good-white-Western-rational-the center-sidekicks) is diametrically opposed to the villain (the other-object-evil-nonwhite-Eastern-irrational-the margin-henchmen). Though the relationship between these terms may be reciprocal in nature, feeding upon one another in order to gain meaning, the divisions within that system are (originally) clear and distinct, and the generic conventions of the cycle essentially privilege the superhero, be they Captain America and Iron

Man or Thor and Captain Marvel, and their subsequent signs, over their villain in a conservative system creating the Manichean landscape we view in the Infinity Saga. The following sections and chapters are heavily informed by the MCU film cycle's reliance upon this system. Countless scholars have discussed and analyzed Manicheanism when examining the superhero and/or villain of a text, though they may have not strictly expressed the system specifically in their analysis (Wright, 2001; Dittmer, 2009; Schumaker, 2011). However, what is often overlooked is how minor characters, who predominantly hail from marginalized racial, ethnic, and/or gendered communities, are cast as other as well, and this will be explored in depth in the following chapters.

It is, of course, important to note that because of the serialized nature of the MCU film cycle, the Infinity Saga's Manicheanism does develop and evolve as the franchise moves forward. The first half of the Infinity Saga almost exclusively relies upon an explicitly Manichean system of dualistic binaries. This is especially evident in Phase 1, wherein the texts are primarily adaptations of Golden and Silver Age comic book narratives, stories that heavily relied upon simple black and white Manichean narratives of good and evil and, more often than not, regressive portrayals of race and gender. The Manichean foundations of the cycle is also extremely evident in the *Avengers* quartet as will be discussed shortly. However, by Phase 3 (and even later, with the introduction of the Multiverse Saga), the Manichean model of the MCU is greatly complicated, and this reflects both the intrinsic structure of the cycle (as per Amanda Anne Klein's definition) as well as Disney and Marvel Studios' economic imperatives, all of which will be explored in depth throughout the dissertation. Essentially, the MCU film cycle expresses the tensions and pressure points of the Manichean binary system; and, as its politics and messages are presented to a large and rather diverse audience

in what is oftentimes a very broad and ambiguous manner, the spectator is left to negotiate meanings in the MCU, be it in a conservative or progressive manner.

Ultimately, the serialized nature of the MCU film cycle requires that the notion of Manicheanism is not strictly absolute. Instead, the MCU's dualistic binary system fluctuates in a flexible manner over time, relying upon a Manichean model and then inverting that very system contingent on the vision of the filmmaker, Marvel and Disney's flexibility and open-mindedness, as well as the desires of the audience, keeping the MCU film cycle's texts fresh and interesting and, of course, commercially successful. There are several examples of films which counteract the MCU's base Manichean binary system. While there are characters who are already in positions of marginalization at their start of their arcs (i.e. the superhero team of morally ambiguous outlaws in *Guardians of the Galaxy* or struggling ex-convict Scott Lang in *Ant-Man*), other films such as *Captain America: Civil War* and *Thor: Ragnarok* thematically engage with this reversal of the binary system, as will be discussed later in this chapter.[38] It is further worth noting that the binary oppositions which are so incumbent to the cycle's Manicheanism manifest in a variety of ways. Not only do they appear in the positioning of the Infinity Saga's characters, but as will be argued in the following section, they also find a home in the internal ideological workings of the MCU's films as well.

A noteworthy and somewhat unique example of the Manichean binaries at work within the MCU is witnessed not between the classic clash of superhero and villain, but rather within the anti-hero, Bruce Banner/the Hulk. Bruce Banner and his monstrous persona Hulk

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[38] There have also been countless readings of how the superhero functions as other (Bukatman, 2003b; Dittmer, 2005, 2009; Costello, 2009; Nama, 2011; Schumaker, 2011), though in MCU scholarship, these texts are few and far between.

is emblematic of the Manichean binary system at work within the cycle, as his tragic internal struggle is symbolic of the binaries of self/other. In *The Incredible Hulk* as well as other later appearances in the saga, the audience is witness to an incredibly unique interpretation of the MCU's Manicheanism. Initially, and echoing his comic book counterpart, Banner represents science and reason as a frail human while his massive and very green counterpart, the Hulk, is all emotion and brute strength. While it may be quite simple to read Banner as the self and the Hulk as other, this anti-hero experiences a triple othering. First, as a fugitive on the run, Banner is othered by the US government and military; second, the Hulk is othered by almost everyone he meets because of the creature's terrifying appearance and temperament; and finally, both Bruce and the Hulk other and marginalize one another in their bid to assume the role of self. Banner/Hulk then embodies the entire binary system of the cycle on a microcosmic scale. However, despite *The Incredible Hulk's* unique illustration of the MCU's Manichean dichotomies, the character inevitably evolves over the course of the Infinity Saga; in *Ragnarok*, we see a rejection of the human Banner while *Avengers: Infinity War* provides a near complete withdrawal of the Hulk in favor of the scientist. Ultimately, this fluctuation between the binaries of self/other, Banner/Hulk, are resolved with the merging of the juxtaposing figures through the creation of 'Smart Hulk' in the saga's final film, *Avengers: Endgame*. "For years," Smart Hulk explains,

> I've been treating the Hulk like he's some kind of disease, something to get rid of. But then I started looking at him as the cure. Eighteen months in a gamma lab. I put the brains and the brawn together. And now look at me. Best of both worlds...

The unification of Banner and the Hulk, of the 'brains' and the 'brawn,' could be read as a post-structuralist rejection and deconstruction of the Manichean system and an evolution of the MCU film cycle. However, if one interprets the Hulk as a symbol of otherness, and

therefore as close as a MCU hero can be to a villain via his rejection and threat to the status quo, Smart Hulk represents the anti-hero humanized, conservative, or just another superhero. By the end of the saga, *Endgame* strips away Banner and Hulk's otherness, simplifying the playing field and reinforcing the binary system of the MCU. The Hulk, of course, is only one hero in a vast universe of superheroes, and yet the evolution, or rather, devolution, of his character is emblematic of the tensions underlying within the film cycle regarding the fluctuating self/other schema. The manifestation of this Manichean mood and dichotomous background gives rise to an apocalyptic landscape in the MCU, wherein Manicheanism and apocalypticism build upon one another in a reciprocal fashion.

2. Apocalypticism within the MCU

It is quite fascinating that both an apocalyptic turn and a superhero turn have coincided since the turn of millennium, and the MCU seems to illustrate this convergence effortlessly (Walliss and Aston, 2011; DiTommaso, 2014). In this section, I examine how the Manichean tendencies of the MCU can be linked to apocalypticism, a narratival theme that is interwoven throughout the Infinity Saga, but is particularly germane when analyzing the *Avengers* quartet. First, I define apocalypse, and I then examine how apocalypticism is integrated within the franchise's grand narrative. I briefly overview the metaphysical, social, and cultural apocalypses that dominate the saga's films, and I conclude by exploring how the saga's eschatological tone reaches its peak in the final two *Avengers* films, *Infinity War* and *Endgame*.

a) Apocalypse Defined

If there is a battle between good and evil, some form of ending must come to pass, only for the cycle to repeat itself again; and so, Manicheanism and apocalypse feed off of and are vital to one another. As John Walliss (2006, p. 28) argues, "the apocalyptic imagination has a tendency to conceive the world in starkly dualistic terms... There are, in other words, no shades of gray within apocalypticism, nor any moral ambiguity:" there are only the binaries of good and evil. Amidst violent images of the world ending, apocalypse narratives are inherently dualistic, dividing "the world between the damned and the elect," between heroes and villains (Collins, 2014, p. 11).[39] Apocalypse is a revelation, it is the unveiling and uncovering of that which is hidden; it unearths a trauma through violence, and then confronts and seeks resolution in a cyclical manner, and otherness is key to apocalypticism. David Robson (1995, p. 63) argues that apocalyptic narratives "define, contain, and domesticate otherness," they "*reveal* the other." Though apocalypse narratives may depict some manner of the world ending, current pop culture apocalypticism is not, as W. Warren Wagar (1982, p. 5) reasons, "a restatement or exegesis of Biblical eschatology," but rather "a creative act of the secular imagination." This secularization of the apocalypse has permeated popular culture through recurring motifs and generic conventions; however, these conventions often rely on borrowed religious, particularly biblical, imagery and language (Simpson, 1999). The MCU film cycle, and the *Avengers* films in particular, rely on such conventions in depicting the end of the world, including: the use of stock figures; the presence of supernatural forces/fate; the proliferation of violence and spectacle; and finally, the cycle of resolution and sequel. Via these recurring motifs and the fundamental Manichean landscape, apocalypticism has become ingrained within the Infinity Saga.

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[39] See Frey (2004) for more on how dualism functions within the apocalyptic text.

b) Apocalypse in the MCU

Apocalypse plays a key role across the Infinity Saga; it is conveyed via spectacle, depicted in both metaphysical and metaphorical endings, and can even be linked to the cycle's tendency to articulate socio- and geo-political anxieties. Superhero films are a constant heightening of stakes, and the MCU does not fail in that regard. The end of the world is always around the corner with a bigger and badder villain in store. Dan Hassler-Forest (2012) connects apocalypticism to the superhero text; he argues that superhero movies provide the audience with:

> a way of mobilizing the contradictory desire to see spectacular images of mass destruction repeated over and over from the safety of a genre that is constructed around such endless repetition in serialized form. (p. 212)

Hassler-Forest pinpoints the key features and the general stimulus which attract the viewer to the apocalyptic superhero text. The audience craves the spectralized conflict and destruction provided by the prospect of apocalypse only to be diverted by their favorite superheroes. There are of course many iterations of this eschatological scenario in varying contexts throughout the MCU, as almost half of the Infinity Saga's films rely on the titular superhero averting an end-of-the-world scenario while dealing with and overcoming a past trauma in a Manichean good vs. evil battleground. Both of the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films revolve around the super team saving the galaxy from destruction, all while expounding upon the nature of family and trauma. *Doctor Strange* involves two apocalypses; the movie begins with a metaphorical apocalypse after Strange, a renowned surgeon, injures his hands in a near-fatal car crash, effectively causing the hero to lose his job and self-worth, and the film ends with a metaphysical apocalypse wherein Strange prevents Dormammu, a primordial

being who rules over the Dark Dimension, from subsuming Earth. Another apocalyptic film of note in in the saga is the third film in the *Thor* trilogy, wherein the Asgardian hero struggles to prevent the titular Ragnarok, a literal doomsday, with language and conventions drawn from Norse mythology. As the saga has progressed, the stakes have often grown higher and higher, the spectacle more fantastic, a point of contention for Marvel's many critics.[40]

Undoubtedly, spectacle and the ensuing end-of-the-world imagery are key characteristics of the apocalyptic landscape in the Infinity Saga; however, the MCU's apocalypticism comes as no surprise considering how the original Marvel comics, issue after issue, relied upon the same end-of-the-world scenarios. The eschatological tone in Marvel's comics was invariably influenced by the anxieties and fears of the day and age, and there have been countless scholars who have analyzed how these socio-political concerns have impacted Marvel's comics from the 1960s onwards (Wright, 2001; Costello, 2009; Nama, 2011; Hassler-Forest, 2012; Dittmer, 2013). A key example of this trend is witnessed for example in the permeation of nuclear anxieties heightened from Cold War tensions in comics starring the Hulk, Spider-Man, Captain Marvel, Iron Man etc. Of course, the Cold War is just one example of countless historical events that influenced the superhero text's apocalyptic mood; from the Red Scare and Yellow Peril to post-9/11 Islamophobia, such events and the ensuing public anxieties impose the dichotomies of good and evil and emphasize particular binaries, such as America vs. Russia/China/the Middle East, capitalism vs. communism, West vs. East etc., and these binaries come to further shape the representation of a text's characters, narratives, themes, and apocalyptic mood. Key socio- and geo-political conflicts then are routinely

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[40] There are of course films which seem to counter these high stakes and end of the world rhetoric. The *Ant-Man* and *Spider-Man* films, as well as their respective sequels, have been frequently hailed as low stakes narratives, palate cleansers which focus on an everyman protagonist and his own personal struggles.

conveyed by superhero texts via tales of apocalypse, tales that must also rely upon

Manichean binaries as well as propagandistic and prejudiced rhetoric. This trend has

transferred on screen in the MCU, as the franchise's films are directly or indirectly influenced

by anxieties and trauma triggered by key events since the start of the new millennium, the

most pertinent of which are the 9/11 attacks and subsequent 'War on Terror.'[41]

Apocalypticism then is firmly entrenched within the Infinity Saga; it is conveyed through the

representation of spectralized metaphysical and metaphorical apocalypses as well as via the

supergenre's tendency to examine the historical events and anxieties of its age; and as the

following section will discuss, this eschatological tone is only further developed in the saga's

Avengers films.

3. The Avengers as Apocalypse

The *Avengers* franchise (*The Avengers, Age of Ultron*, *Infinity War*, and *Endgame*) has played

the biggest role in disseminating the Manichean apocalyptic mode that permeates the rest of

the saga and, more broadly speaking, the MCU film cycle. Arguably the face of the MCU, the

Avengers films are the ultimate spectacle, as the audience get to witness their favorite

superheroes interact with one another on the big screen with grander and more fantastical

action sequences; so popular are these films that they have even ranked highest at the world-

wide box-office with a total $7.764 billion in earnings (Bean, 2020). The Avengers as

Apocalypse provide a simple, violent spectacle in a dualistic landscape. The binary system in

these films is strictly divided. There are heroes, the Avengers, and then there are villains, Loki,

Ultron, and of course, supervillain Thanos. The entire Avengers franchise sets a prevailing

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[41] For more, see: Dittmer (2007a; 2009; 2011), Walliss and Aston (2011), DiTommaso (2014), and Goodrum (2015).

eschatological mood, one that is backed by apocalyptic genre conventions, including:

predetermination, stock characters, violence and spectacle, and finally, the cycle of sequels.

a) Fate, the Infinity Stones, and Thanos

Predetermination, the presence of supernatural forces that are in control of fate, is key to the

apocalyptic mood of the *Avengers* grand narrative. Eschatological narratives are often

plagued by a notion "that the course of history is not controlled by human actions but by

greater, supernatural, forces" (Walliss and Aston, 2011, p. 9). This proves true in the MCU as

the films are guided by the Infinity Stones and the saga's supervillain, Thanos. The Infinity

Saga derives its name from the Infinity Stones, six powerful gems, each holding a unique

ability for the bearer. It is established in *Doctor Strange,* that "At the dawn of the universe,

> there was nothing. Then... boom. The Big Bang sent six elemental
> crystals hurtling across the virgin universe. These Infinity Stones
> each control an essential aspect of existence: Space, Reality, Power,
> Soul, Mind, and Time.

Since the appearance of the first stone in *Thor's* mid-credits scene, the Infinity Stones have

played a central role throughout the Infinity Saga.[42] Simply put, the Infinity Stones are at their

core McGuffins used by the creators and directors to help drive their plots forward as well as

to connect the saga's many narratives into a cohesive and functional Manichean universe.

The gems are coveted by supervillain Thanos whose goal throughout the saga is to collect

them in order to carry out his genocidal campaign. Ultimately, the stones function as an

overarching supernatural force, one which predetermines the fate of the MCU, guiding its

characters towards the eschatological resolution of the Infinity Saga.

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[42] The Infinity Stones appear or are at least mentioned in over half of the saga's films.

As the saga's supervillain, Thanos functions in a comparable manner to the Infinity Stones. During his first scene in *Infinity War*, the villain introduces himself to Thor and the audience having just attacked a ship of Asgardians and slaughtered most of them, "Destiny arrives all the same," Thanos says, "And now, it's here. Or should I say... *I am.*" Thanos equates himself, and indeed narratively functions as a supernatural power, echoing the Infinity Stones: he is predestined, ominous, and an unstoppable force of nature. From his very first appearance in *The Avengers*, Thanos hangs as an ominous shadow in the saga's background, a chess master that is always several steps ahead of the MCU's superheroes. And once he has collected the stones, Thanos uses their combined power to perform the Snap, eliminating half of the universe's population. As such, his black-and-white ideology casts judgment upon the universe's populace, dividing the elect from the damned and setting the saga's eschatological stage in a manner reminiscent to the Rapture. Ultimately, both the Infinity Stones and Thanos, himself, come to represent predetermination and fate in the Infinity Saga, and the cycle's apocalyptic mood is only further enhanced by the recurring motifs of trauma and guilt.

b) Trauma, Guilt, and (Pseudo-)Saviors

In addition to the presence of predetermination, trauma and guilt are also recurring motifs in the *Avengers* franchise. These two themes are tied directly to one another through the use of stock characters and biblical imagery, and is primarily observed via two key juxtaposing characters: Iron Man, that is Tony Stark, and Thanos.[43]

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[43] *Endgame* directly deals with both themes of trauma and guilt as a result of the apocalypse triggered by Thanos in *Infinity War*. As a time travel movie, *Endgame* functions as a continuous return of the repressed where each of the surviving Avengers attempts to confront their own trauma from the Snap and overcome it. Repetition is key as the Avengers along with the audience travel back to and relive key moments of MCU history such as the Battle of New York.

As a secular apocalypse narrative, the binary system in the *Avengers* films takes on a

religious tone as heroes are cast as Christ figures who sacrifice themselves for humanity. And

this is most true perhaps in relation to Tony Stark, for it is his final sacrifice and death in

Endgame which ultimately saves the universe from Thanos. Stark's role as a savior is reflected

over the course of the entire saga as he is fueled by both trauma and guilt and embraces the

role of herald and messianic savior.[44] Driven by his past trauma, Stark's obsession and fear of

the unknown, of that which is alien and other, feeds into the MCU's Manicheanism, and

consequently, its apocalyptic tone. This is first sparked by the climactic battle at the end of

The Avengers. With New York City overrun by aliens, Stark sacrifices himself in a bid to save

the city, and though he survives the ordeal, his PTSD from the event casts a long shadow over

his actions for the remainder of the saga as Stark becomes obsessed with protecting the

world, first from aliens (as we see in *Age of Ultron*), then from superheroes (*Civil War*), and,

finally, from aliens again (*Infinity War*). Time and time again, Stark functions as a herald who

prophesizes a rapidly impending doomsday; that is unless, Stark argues, the Avengers do

something about it.[45] As early as *Age of Ultron*, Stark warns the rest of his team of the

hopelessness of Earth's situation should any enemies invade from space: "That up there?

That's… that's the endgame." Plagued by visions of both the Avengers' and Earth's demise,

Stark claims in the film that he, "saw them all dead... I felt it. The whole world, too. It's because

of me. I wasn't ready. I didn't do all I could." Plagued by guilt and trauma, and truly embracing

the role of a messianic savior, Stark's anguished ramblings cast him as the herald of the final

days *unless* the Avengers do something about it. Stark's PTSD-influenced actions expose

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[44] Guilt is one of Stark's key character traits, and it can be traced back to his role as an arms dealer and his survivor's guilt over the death of Yinsen in *Iron Man*.
[45] Thor functions in a similar manner in *Age of Ultron*, wherein he is plagued by sinister visions which prophesize the role of the Infinity Stones and Thanos' rise.

issues of securitization and the justified necessity of the superhero in preserving the status quo.[46] Driven by his trauma and fears, Stark then enables the apocalyptic tone of the *Avengers* franchise, asserting a clear self/other dialectic in his bid to save not only the world, but the entire Marvel universe as a whole.

Even though Thanos is the MCU's most infamous and powerful supervillain, like Stark, the villain similarly poses as a savior while also symbolically functioning on multiple levels. Thanos, also known as the Mad Titan, presents himself as a savior figure, attempts (and succeeds) at becoming God, and is also paradoxically the personification of death and apocalypse itself. As *Infinity War* establishes, the villain is essentially an eco-fascist driven by Malthusian philosophy who wishes "to bring balance to the universe by wiping out half of all life." The Mad Titan is a genocidal puppet master, a character who seeks to overcome and become death while playing the dual pseudo-roles of savior and God.

Throughout *Infinity War*, Thanos and his followers paint the Mad Titan as a savior who paradoxically brings salvation through death to the universe. Ebony Maw, Thanos' mouthpiece, begins *Infinity War* by proclaiming to an Asgardian ship that has been attacked and near-destroyed to:

> Hear me and rejoice. You have had the privilege of being saved by the Great Titan. You may think this is suffering… no. It is salvation. Universal scales tip toward balance because of your sacrifice. Smile... for even in death, you have become Children of Thanos.

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[46] See AlAwadhi and Dittmer (2020a) for more on this theme in the MCU.

The language used by Maw carries on throughout the film as Thanos is cast as a patriarchal figure, a savior, who bestows salvation through death. After Maw's speech, Loki defiantly tells the Mad Titan, "You will never be a God," and the Mad Titan ultimately proves him wrong by first executing the Asgardian and eventually securing every Infinity Stone; and once Thanos fits them onto the Infinity Gauntlet, the villain takes on the role of God. Like a cruel Greek deity, Thanos uses the stones throughout *Infinity War* to toy with the superheroes, the clearest example of which is witnessed in his confrontation with the Guardians of the Galaxy; during the altercation: Thanos manipulates Gamora, his adopted daughter, into killing a fake version of himself; when attacked, he easily transforms Guardians members Drax and Mantis's physical forms in a psychotically playful manner; and finally, he plays cruel mind games with Star-Lord, forcing the hero to almost kill Gamora. Via his savior propaganda and backed by the Infinity Stones' godly power, Thanos poses as both savior and God, and this narrative would be juxtaposed during *Infinity War's* climax.

Thanos willingly sacrifices his daughter Gamora in order to gain the last Infinity Stone. While Stark succeeds as a savior because of the hero's willingness to sacrifice himself, Thanos is not only willing to sacrifice half of the universe for the greater good, but is also willing to murder the only person he ever loved, his daughter, to achieve his goal. Thanos then operates as a negative image to Tony's savior, and it is fascinating in how both characters seem to suffer from the same messianic complexes on opposite ends of the Manichean spectrum. Thanos' subsequent positioning as a Pseudo-Christ figure is clearest when, after the villain has performed the Snap, he experiences an eerie, blood-hued vision. In this vision, the Titan walks along a plane of water that is symbolically tinted red and speaks to a younger version

of his daughter who judges his actions. This scene firmly secures Thanos as not only an anti-savior and an Anti-Christ figure, but also an embodiment of death.

Juxtaposing his role as savior and God and building upon his anti-savior persona, Thanos can also be read as death and apocalypse personified; he is, as his infamous saying maintains, "inevitable."[47] Over the course of the Infinity Saga, the supervillain becomes equated with the end of the Marvel universe as the audience know it and the end of everything the superheroes have fought to preserve over the course of the saga. As Robson (1995, p. 63) argues, apocalyptic narratives are "hostile to the status quo," they "define" and "reveal" what is other. Accordingly, Thanos as death is a manifestation of otherness while the superhero embodies life and the self. As is seen in *Infinity War*, each planet that the supervillain visits is left an apocalyptic, uncanny landscape in his wake: Titan is a barren ruin; Xandar destroyed; Nowhere burning and collapsing in on itself; and Nivadellir a frozen star. Earth is similarly left a gray, silent post-apocalyptic society in *Endgame*, the paradise Thanos once promised a lie as the world suffers, their collective trauma a gaping wound five years onwards. When a post-Snap Earth is first revealed to the audience, the spectator is overwhelmed by long and stifling shots of a world haunted by death and trauma. Shots of an eerie, fog-descended New York City in cool, blue tones evoke feelings of mourning, despair, and emptiness. New York's towers are all dark and shadowy, the Statue of Liberty surrounded by abandoned boats, and Citi Field Stadium empty with cars left abandoned in its parking lot. There is a clear absence of people, life, and hope. Perhaps the most chilling image is witnessed in San Francisco, when Scott Lang visits the Wall of the Vanished, a memorial of seemingly

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[47] His very name translates to death and can be further linked to Freud's death drive, *thanatos*; see Freud (1920) for more on *thanatos* and the Death Drive.

endless massive marble slabs with the names of all those lost in the Snap. Thanos' Snap and

the ensuing deluge of death transforms Earth into Ground Zero on a galactic scale. It is no

surprise then, that loss, failure, and trauma are all recurring themes in *Endgame* as images of

the uncanny, of death and apocalypse, permeate every aspect of society as well as each

superhero's character arc. Though Stark and Thanos may narratively function on opposite

sides of the spectrum as stock characters enhanced by biblical imagery, both characters still

embody the apocalyptic themes of guilt, trauma, and loss in the Infinity Saga.

c) Spectacle and Sublime Horror

As much as the above themes establish the apocalyptic mood of the *Avengers* quartet, the

high prevalence of spectacle is just as essential. It is, of course, interesting to note how

spectacle is a key generic characteristic in apocalyptic narratives as well as in the MCU and

the superhero genre at large. In *Apocalyptic Bodies* (1999)*,* Tina Pippin connects the biblical

apocalypse to violence and sequels in relation to the horror genre; however, her arguments

can be applied to the MCU film cycle as well. Pippin argues that there is an intrinsic "sublime

horror" to the apocalyptic narrative, one that brings droves of viewers to the cinema each

year, as they:

> Descend into a tale of darkness. Enter a world, a mirror-world of
> your own earth, but one in which supernatural beings fill every
> space. Monsters roam, freedom dissolves, and death and
> destruction are at every turn. The violence is overwhelming. There
> is no escape… Imagine the worst; imagine the end of time, the last
> days of earth. (1999, p. 78)

This prevailing mood of violence, destruction, and death, a mood of "sublime horror," is both

a threat and reality in the *Avengers* franchise. Each film relies upon multiple action sequences

and fight scenes which always culminate in a climactic battle: *The Avengers'* Battle of New

York, *Age of Ultron's* Battle of Sokovia, *Infinity War's* Battle of Wakanda, and *Endgame's* critical final Battle of Earth. Moreover, each of these battles always include the major villain releasing their henchmen, who are depicted as frightening and demonic droves of dehumanized and evil creatures, be they aliens, such as in *Avengers*, *Infinity War*, and *Endgame*, or robots, as in *Age of Ultron*. Destruction of the surrounding environment is key. The damage to New York City is extensive, Sokovia's capital city Novi Grad is destroyed, and the aftermath of the Battle of Wakanda results in the death of half of all living creatures in the universe. The spectralized sublime horror of the *Avengers* franchise both facilitates and intensifies the MCU's apocalypticism, while also setting the stage for the final apocalyptic feature of the *Avengers* franchise and the cycle at large: the endless cycle of sequels.

d) The Endless Cycle of Sequels

The Avengers provided the first apocalypse of many in the Infinity Saga: "The Battle of New York was the end of the world. This, now, is the new world*,*" a world plagued by the possibility of further apocalypses.[48] Within the spectacle of the *Avengers* franchise, there is a desire for violence and carnage and destruction, but there is also the inevitable aftermath: the promise of resolution, peace, and hope, an end to instability and fear, and the promise of a new story to come. "Anger and fantasies of violence may be life-giving for the powerless," and so, apocalypse is as dualistic as Manicheanism itself (Collins, 2014, p. 12). There is still the promise of a retelling of the cycle, for "every apocalypse is a sequel" (Pippin, 1999, p. 1). Pippin explains that "there is disease at the end of a horror film as in a biblical apocalypse; one expects a sequel, a replaying of the violence in a grander scale" (p. 3). And quite similarly,

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[48] ('Pilot,' 2013)

sequels, reboots, and reinterpretations have always been a customary trend in the superhero genre. However, as Stark eulogizes in *Endgame*, "Part of the journey is the end," and indeed the last Avengers film was marketed as a conclusive end to the Infinity Saga. "The notion of an ending, the notion of a finale, became very intriguing to us," Kevin Feige said prior to the film's release, "in large part because you don't see it that often in this particular genre" (Breznican, 2018). And yet, though the film was touted to be a final conclusion to the Infinity Saga, this has of course proven untrue. The MCU film cycle cannot help but fall back upon sequels, revivals, and the next end-of-the-world scenario as is evident with Phase Four. Even Tony Stark's Robert Downey Jr. has said that he may be willing to cameo or appear in a future film in the MCU, "Never say never" (Heaf, 2021). And so, simply put, the superhero sequel cycle cannot end.

4. Conclusion

The MCU film cycle's Manicheanism finds its roots in the binary system as well as via a prevailing apocalypticism, and both of these themes enable the self/other dialectic in the saga's films. Though this system may evolve and fluctuate over time, binarism still casts a large shadow over the saga's characters, themes, and narratives, empowering the apocalyptic tone that is embedded within the *Avengers* franchise and the MCU film cycle at large. Apocalypticism is particularly evident in the presence of numerous motifs (including predetermination, guilt, and trauma), stock characters (such as the Savior and anti-Savior), as well the elements of spectacle and sequels. Tony's self-eulogy in *Endgame* succinctly sums up how the MCU operates as an apocalyptic Manichean landscape at its core:

> God, what a world. Universe, now. If you told me ten years ago that we weren't alone, let alone, you know, to this extent, I mean, I wouldn't have been surprised. But come on, you know? The epic

> forces of darkness and light that have come into play. And, for better
> or worse, that's the reality Morgan's gonna have to find a way to grow
> up in.

The MCU is about these "epic forces of darkness and light" clashing on a violent battlefield in a never-ending cycle of life and death. Of course, the serialized nature of this film cycle necessitates that this system fluctuate over time, relying upon a Manichean model (particularly with blockbuster darlings like the *Avengers* quartet) and then subverting that very same system in order to ensure the continuation and commercial success of the cycle. And yet, there is a pattern of return to Manicheanism which is very interesting. And as the following section will discuss, this Manicheanism lays the dichotomous foundations that connects the superhero to cultural hegemony.

III. SUPERHERO AS CULTURAL HEGEMONY

The MCU film cycle's Manicheanism creates a system which establishes the superhero as the self. This superhero is a heightened, exaggerated version of Hollywood's action hero (Dyer, 1982; Tasker, 1993). The Manichean foundations of the cycle heighten every aspect of the MCU superhero from his masculinity to his ideology; he becomes a hypermasculine defender and upholder of the status quo, a tool of cultural hegemony, representing a conservative state of exception and, oftentimes, a propagandistic nationalism. The MCU relies on this ensuing hegemonic narrative, enforcing and upholding sites such as Whiteness, American empire, and Western Colonialism. In this section, I first provide a succinct definition of hegemony, briefly overviewing its role in the MCU. I then investigate the MCU's relationship to cultural hegemony via three means: first, by analyzing the portrayal of two of Marvel's 'Big Three' heroes, Iron Man and Captain America; second, by exploring the world-building tools which

establish the Marvel universe; and third, by considering the pervasiveness of the repeated motifs of panopticism and surveillance. Examining these trends within the Infinity Saga exposes how the saga largely maintains a conservative cultural hegemony.

1. Cultural Hegemony in the MCU

It is important to note before delving into a deeper analysis of the MCU, that several scholars have previously examined the relationship between superheroes and power, nationalism, and exceptionalism (Dittmer, 2005, 2011; Wandtke, 2007; DiPaolo, 2011; Hassler-Forest, 2012). However, this dissertation concentrates instead on how the MCU film cycle's Manicheanism influences the superhero's relationship with hegemony in order to structure the theme of otherness.[49]

Antonio Gramsci posited the notion of cultural hegemony while imprisoned by the fascist regime in Italy (1926-1935), and his essays would be compiled in the *Prison Notebooks* wherein he applied a historical, sociological, and theoretical framework to explore how, in a modern state, the ruling class (the dominant order) can generate, shape, and secure the consent of the populace (the subordinate classes) in order to maintain and uphold capitalism. The notion of the generation of consent is key in Gramsci's studies, and he argued that the subordinate classes were not only swayed in a direct manner by political society (the army, police force, legal system etc.), but also in an indirect manner by civil society (the church, education system, family, newspapers etc.) (Gramsci, 1971, p. 238). Gramsci would succinctly summarize that "State = political society + civil society (in other words hegemony protected

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[49] While I use hegemony to denote cultural and political power inequalities, as Chalcraft & Noorani (2007, p. 9) argues, Gramsci "'championed a political and ideological struggle *for* hegemony' in the name of socialism."

by the armor of coercion),” a coercion that is structural and epistemological in nature (p. 532). Gramsci would further describe cultural hegemony as a “moving equilibrium,” one which manages to simultaneously embrace the “relations of forces favorable or unfavorable to this or that tendency” (p. 404). Cultural hegemony therefore must, as Stuart Hall (1975) maintains, continually reassess and recreate itself, it must constantly be “won, reproduced, sustained” through cultural, political, social, and economic forces (p. 40).

Hegemony, then, is not a static procedure with a concrete beginning and end. It is a constant underlying process, one which is designed to reflect the changing dominant ideas of a state (ideas such as the issue of representation on-screen) and therefore appeal to and become palatable to a large mainstream audience. The changing political ideals and shifting representational politics within the MCU film cycle, and the Hollywood landscape at large, are a reflection of this process at work. It is finally important to note that though the Infinity Saga and the MCU’s ideological and political bent is, more often than not, conservative, serving largely hegemonic interests, many of these films, as this dissertation will discuss, also manage to provide a form of resistance, at times even subverting the dominant ideology and hegemonic powers. Again, hegemony is not a static binary echo of political power at work, it is an unceasing active negotiation between countless sites, experiences, and movements that are in conflict. Here, Raymond Williams’ theory of ‘structures of feeling’ proves most pertinent as he problematized Gramsci’s theories on hegemony, arguing that hegemony and the domination of a state cannot ever be truly total; instead, there are always new emergent energies which can, and indeed do, conflict with the dominant order. These structures are “meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt, […] variable” in nature, and exhibiting a “more nuanced interaction between selected and interpreted beliefs and acted and justified

experiences" (Williams, 1977, p. 132). And indeed, with the MCU as globally popular and successful as it is, there inevitably is this conflicting negotiation in both the production and reception of its films, a tangible example of which we see occur as different audience factions boycott particular films based on their own respective political alignments (i.e. the Council of Conservative Citizen's boycott of *Thor's* casting of Idris Elba versus the boycott of *Doctor Strange's* whitewashing of the Ancient One).[50]

In summary, hegemony is maintained by the state politically, economically, and, more pertinently to this discussion, culturally. The state's power is enforced by its dominant cultural ideologies, systems that rely upon a Manichean binarism to position the state as the self and other forces which may threaten its power. Cultural hegemony then enforces the status quo, marking its exceptionalism as necessary and just in nature.[51] The superhero largely enforces this hegemony, transforming into a hegemonic tool in-universe and in a more extra-diegetic manner, enabling the power imbalances and imposed binaries and upholding the status quo as a conservative actor. The cultural hegemony that is implemented by the superhero heavily relies upon the cycle's binary foundations. And, over time, as the dominant ideas regrading representations evolve and fluctuate, so too shifts, albeit, in an arguably commercially driven-manner, the portrayal of the MCU superhero and the ideological drive of the cycle's narratives.

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[50] See Chapter 2 for a more in-depth discussion of these events.
[51] Dittmer (2011) connects the superhero to a state of exception, arguing how this exceptionalism plays parallel to the superhero's vigilantism. For more on America's state of exception see: (Agamben, 2008; Lockhart, 2003; Spanos, 2008).

As the MCU is primarily an American artefact, the primary hegemony that is represented can be linked to the American geopolitical order, or at the very least a Westernized and white hegemony. The cycle's hegemonic nature is further influenced by the events of 9/11 and its aftermath which manufactured a narrative, reactionary and Manichean at its core, which would establish America as the self, a force of good, against the ever-encroaching evil other (Hassler-Forest, 2012; Dittmer, 2013; Laderman and Gruenewald, 2018). As George Bush (2001) would state in his post-9/11 address to the nation, the impending War on Terror would "be a monumental struggle of good versus evil… but good will prevail." Though the Infinity Saga's first phase was more clearly affected by this rhetoric then later phases, it is nevertheless quite evident that the majority of the saga is influenced by domineering Manichean binaries and, critically, its resultant hegemonic power structures are key to constructing the superheroes and the saga's universe.

2. Superheroes as Hegemony

At the forefront of the MCU, Tony Stark/Iron Man and Steve Rogers/Captain America stand as two of Marvel's Big Three, both in the film franchise and the comics. Heading the Avengers, both of these characters have carried the Infinity Saga forward with their own trilogies, and these superheroes have enforced the hegemonic structures of the MCU film cycle in their own unique manner. While Iron Man represents a capitalist hegemony, Captain America's hegemonic power is more nationalistic in nature.

a) Iron Man

Though Tony Stark, and by association, Iron Man, embodies a capitalist hegemony throughout the franchise, the hero's relationship to hegemony is arguably most clear in the Infinity Saga's

first entry: *Iron Man*. After the film's opening sequence, which was already discussed in this chapter's introduction, the audience is transported back in time to a fictional awards ceremony where the attendees, along with the audience, watch a montage sequence detailing Tony Stark's life and achievements:

> Tony Stark. Visionary. Genius. American patriot… With the keys to the kingdom, Tony ushers in a new era for his father's legacy, creating smarter weapons, advanced robotics, satellite targeting. Today, Tony Stark has changed the face of the weapons industry by ensuring freedom and protecting America and her interests around the globe.

While the voiceover plays, a montage sequence illustrating Tony's history appears, including several graphics which detail Stark Tech's advanced technology. The montage concludes with a sea of images, depicting various weaponry, aircrafts, soldiers, and explosions, which are then overlaid and merged with the flag of the United States. And at the front and center of this image is a *Rolling Stone* cover of Tony Stark with the tagline "Tony wants to save the world."

This in-depth introduction to the character clearly marks Stark as the poster-boy for various American hegemonic structures that are enmeshed together, the most significant of which include capitalism and the military industrial complex.[52] Of course, this scene does take place before Stark is transformed into the superhero the audience know as Iron Man. Nevertheless, Stark would maintain a close relationship with the US military and government throughout the Infinity Saga, upholding the hegemonic power of America, and though Stark abandons his venture into weapons manufacturing, he continues his capitalist ventures by

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[52] See Thomas Jr. (2009) for an in-depth analysis of Iron Man and the military industrial complex in the comics.

expanding Stark Tech, remaining as ever a "Playboy. Billionaire. Philanthropist." Moreoever, as will be discussed in further detail in the following section as well as the next chapter, despite Stark witnessing the effects of American imperialism firsthand, the superhero enforces the American hegemonic order abroad in a conservative manner *without* questioning the status quo. And so, the visuals represented in *Iron Man's* ceremony scene affirm what is rendered over and over again in several of the saga's films: the metonymic relationship between superhero and the cultural hegemony of the state, for they are ultimately one and the same.

b) Captain America

While Iron Man functions as the face of capitalism, Steve Rogers as Captain America enforces a hegemony that is more nationalistic in nature. As both his name and suit represent, Captain America is a symbolic figure of the American geopolitical order. Over the course of the Infinity Saga, Steve Rogers' primary internal conflict lies between accepting this role and embracing his own individualism, and his dialogue with American hegemony is illustrated in the evolution of his superhero suit.

In *Captain America: The First Avenger*, Steve Rogers undergoes a scientific experiment wherein he is dosed with a Super Soldier Serum creating the superhero we now know today. He is then approached by a US Senator and enlisted by the USO to take on the persona of 'Captain America,' the embodiment of the American spirit and the ideal American soldier. Through this role of Captain America, Rogers partakes in scripted performance shows, propaganda reels, and even appears in comic books, all while wearing the original, brightly colored (and frankly, rather silly) red, white, and blue Captain America costume, designed

after the American flag. As Richard Reynolds (1992) explains, "Costume is more than a disguise: it functions as a sign for the inward process of the character development" (p. 29). Via his costume, Captain America becomes the perfect propagandistic emblem of the United States.[53] Eventually, Rogers has enough of playing the role of a faux hero, and finally leaves to go fight in World War 2. However, he maintains the Captain America persona and costume; subsequently, his look becomes more militarized, his individualism particularly displayed via his leather jacket, and most importantly, Rogers finally is fitted with his famous shield. Despite the hero's desire to embrace his individualism, the first *Captain America* film firmly establishes the superhero as a powerful symbol of American nationalist hegemony, one who embraces the role of the self and the American spirit as a force of good.

In *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, Rogers' relationship with American hegemony is complicated. Finding himself alone in the 21st century, the hero attaches himself to S.H.I.E.L.D., a covert American military and intelligence security agency. Previously in *The Avengers*, S.H.I.E.L.D. had been symbolically equated with the American geopolitical order, and this was particularly evident considering its role in the creation of the Avengers team. When working for S.H.I.E.L.D., Rogers' suit is altered; it takes on a darker and more muted tone, critically losing the red, white, and blue of his original uniform. As Ryan Meinerding, Head of Visual Development at Marvel Studios, explains, in *Winter Soldier*:

> Steve is being asked to go to places he wouldn't necessarily go. He's stepping away from the red, white and blue… There are obvious visual connotations for dropping away the patriotism, but it also shows he's willing to do night missions and black-ops… and he's willing to do that because he believes in the greater good of S.H.I.E.L.D.. (qtd. in Javins, 2014a, p. 30)

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[53] For more on the nationalist symbolism behind Captain American and his costume, see Dittmer (2007b).

Via the positioning of S.H.I.E.L.D. as the American state, it would seem that by enforcing American hegemony, Rogers begins to lose the morals and values which had made him into Captain America, i.e. abandoning the key traits of transparency and honesty in the face of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s system of subterfuge and lies. However, when the hero discovers S.H.I.E.L.D.'s plans for Project Insight, a covert spying operation which would eliminate any potential threats to the American geopolitical order worldwide (and the perfect example of a Manichean binary system at play), he rejects S.H.I.E.L.D., and by the end of the film, ensures its complete collapse. Critically, in this final battle, Rogers discards his S.H.I.E.L.D. suit and dons his original Captain America combat suit from *The First Avenger*. In *Winter Soldier* then, Rogers poses the question of whether the American geopolitical order, or indeed, any global hegemonic authority, deserves to maintain power if their power is generated via subterfuge and spying and is facilitated by persecuting thought-crime: "By holding a gun at everyone on Earth and calling it protection," Rogers tells Fury, "This isn't freedom, this is fear." This discourse would be extremely subversive had not the film revealed that S.H.I.E.L.D. had been in fact infiltrated by HYDRA, the same authoritarian military organization Rogers fought and supposedly defeated in *The First Avenger*. And so, the film's discussion and alleged anti-hegemonic stance becomes superficial in nature. This is confirmed in *Winter Soldier's* commentary by the film's co-writer, Christopher Markus. Captain America, Markus argues, "exemplifies the spirit of America, not a party, not a man of government. So that he's never going to fall along, you know, a political line. He stands for an ideal" ('Audio Commentary,' 2014a) Markus' reading of the superhero naively overlooks the fact that hegemony relies on constructing absolute truths in order to justify the necessity of their political order. Therefore,

regardless of Rogers rejecting the hegemonic order, the core mechanisms of his character do not permit any true anti-hegemonic sentiment.

This superficial cycle of insurgence and compliance would repeat yet again in *Captain America: Civil War*, wherein Rogers rejects the Sokovia Accords, discards his famous shield, and turns into a fugitive on the run largely in an effort to protect his friend, Bucky Barnes. Consequently, the hero's next appearance in *Infinity War* would show Rogers gruffer, suit now completely black, with a complete lack of any influence from the American flag, the central white star also absent. And yet, again, despite this superficial conflict with American hegemony, Rogers again takes up the Captain America mantle (and costume and shield) in *Endgame*. Fortified by the film's Manichean and apocalyptic influence, Rogers strives to reinstate the status quo and defeat Thanos, all while personifying the 'true' American spirit as his suit and shield represent. Ultimately, Steve Rogers symbolizes a nationalistic American hegemony; and despite his struggles to assert his individualism and character, Captain America can never truly embrace an anti-hegemonic tone as the superhero's internal mechanisms, the systemic Manichean undertones, and the cycle's power structures prevent any true subversive dialogue from occurring. Captain America's arc echoes the tensions within the MCU film cycle's Manichean hegemonic system, and yet the resolution of his arc seems to suggest that hegemonic power is ingrained within the MCU's superheroes regardless of what form that authority takes.

3. World-Building in the MCU

The film cycle's connection to cultural hegemony is further enhanced in the MCU through various in-universe elements which propagandize the superhero. This is witnessed via world-

building tactics including: news reporting and television shows; the representation of in-universe fans; as well as the presence of street art across countless settings. Though these elements do not always explicitly valorize the MCU's heroes, a dialogue is produced which propagandizes the superhero in the eyes of the audience.

Most films in the MCU utilize news channels, such as CNN, MSNBC, BBC, and ITV, as well as popular television shows in order to suspend the audience's disbelief, lend a sense of authenticity and realism to the fantastical MCU, and secure the hero as the self. These segments inform the public (and the audience) of breaking news in-verse while also reporting on the current activities of particular heroes. With real public figures such as Bill O'Reilly, Pat Kiernan, and Joan Rivers appearing in these films, the MCU is fleshed out and positions the audience to identify with the everyday populace of the universe. And though this news reporting is not always the kindest to our heroes, by enmeshing the superheroes within these familiar environments, these scenes imperceptibly shape the hegemonic structures of the MCU. They convey a level of humanization which firmly places the superheroes in the position of the self, centering and deifying these figures into revered celebrities that can be fawned over.

The representation of in-universe fans further connects the superhero to hegemony in the MCU. *Iron Man 3*, for example, finds two kids asking Stark to sign a drawing of himself from the Battle of New York; the hero also encounters his "biggest fan," Gary, a cameraman, who has a tattoo of Stark on his forearm and has even copied Stark's famous haircut and goatee. Greener heroes to the saga are also found to idolize the more established superheroes as we see with Peter Parker/Spider-Man and Scott Lang/Ant-Man fawning over

Iron Man and Captain America, respectively. However, it is post-Battle of New York in *Avengers* that the audience witness a radical increase in the representation of on-screen fans which, combined with a news reporting segment, truly fixes the superhero to cultural hegemony. In the wake of the climactic battle, the outpouring of support for the Avengers team is seen as numerous channels play out the populace's reaction to the superheroes saving the day. Various visuals are presented from around the world, including: a man getting a Captain America tattoo, a street artist selling paintings of the heroes, kids dressing up as various Avengers, and numerous images of graffiti including a detailed mural of Tony Stark with Hindi text and "Thank you Avengers" spray painted onto a wall. This imagery establishes the superheroes as lauded saviors and enforcers of the cultural hegemony, and it is the identification between the audience and the normal, everyday in-universe populace which establishes this key connection.

In addition to the portrayal of news reporting and in-universe fans, depictions of street art further demonstrate how even when the inverse of these visuals are offered to the audience, the superhero's relationship to hegemony remains intact, and this is clearest in *Age of Ultron*. *Age of Ultron* provides the first wave of anti-superhero sentiment in the Infinity Saga, and this is observed in Sokovia, a fictional south-east European country that has been through what is described as "rough times" to put it mildly. Echoing Cold War dichotomies and the aftermath of the failed Soviet era, Novi Grad, the country's capital, is desaturated, cold and cool in color, its people living in poverty and despair; numerous visuals across the city project anti-superhero, and consequently, anti-American sentiment. Street art of Iron Man with a big, green US dollar sign on his face adorn the city square's walls. And in a perhaps more provocative and (unfortunately) deleted scene, Rogers comes across a graffitied wall

with a classic Captain America comic drawing, his eyes red, and spray painted across his face in red text is "FAŠISTA." The reading of the superhero as fascist is nothing new as Walter Ong argued back in the 1940s. Nevertheless, the mere presence of this controversial image in the MCU is extremely subversive as the franchise generally steers away from any discourse which could tarnish the image of its American hero. It is therefore unsurprising that this scene was ultimately deleted. And yet, even if it had not been, Steve Rogers does not fully engage with this graffitied image which challenges his role in maintaining the American geopolitical order; instead, the street art is merely used to emphasize, quite condescendingly, the tragically misguided outlook of the Sokovian people furthering the self/other dynamic established in the film.

The Battle of Sokovia and the resultant destruction of Novi Grad would continue to shadow the superheroes in *Civil War* which examines the accountability and the ethics of superhero interventionism, and yet the following *Avengers* films once again revert to the prevailing Manichean apocalyptic mood dismissing any true challenge to the superhero's role in supporting American hegemony. Post-*Endgame*, in *Spider-Man: Far from Home*, the glorification and near-deification of the superheroes becomes the norm, as throughout the film, we see glimpses of street art that commemorate and celebrate Iron Man around the globe. In conclusion, the various world-building tactics which are employed to carefully construct the MCU portray the tensions within and, quite often, maintain the Manichean systems and integral hegemonic power structures of the cycle.

4. Panopticism and Surveillance

In addition to the portrayal of superheroes and in-universe world-building, panopticism and surveillance are two recurring motifs which further link the superhero to the state. In this section, I first define panopticism and surveillance, and I then examine how these two motifs are embedded within the MCU, with a brief analysis of one of *Thor's* major characters, Heimdall.

The panopticon derives from the Greek "*all seeing*," and the superhero in a sense fits into that description by the manner in which they control visibility and the power which resides within the exclusivity of looking. The panopticon was initially devised by Jeremy Bentham in 1791 as a model prison, one that is designed with a guard tower that is surrounded by an outer ring of prisoner cells.[54] The prisoner would be completely visible to the tower, but unable to see their fellow inmates or the guards themselves thus creating a "sentiment of a sort of invisible omnipresence," one which encourages self-discipline, internalizing surveillance (Bentham, 1796). According to Foucault (1995), this inspecting and omnipresent panoptic gaze functions as a mode of surveillance and establishes the relationship between power and knowledge. Power and control over the othered body then is established in this disembodied look.

Foucault continues, stating that authorities function via a system of Manichean-like dualism: "All authorities exercising individual control function according to a double mode;

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[54] The panopticon has been considered by many surveillance studies scholars including: Bigo (2006), Boyne (2000), Mathiesen (1997), and Lyon (2011).

that of binary division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal)" casting the self from other in society (1995, p. 199). These "dualistic mechanisms of exclusion" result in what David Lyon (2011) argues are key components to surveillance: sorting and urgency (pp. 26-67). Surveillance then is used to classify and categorize groups essentially creating the distinction between self and other, or those who pose a threat and those who do not. Surveillance privileges Whiteness as it is sustained by the hegemonic systems created by European colonialism and slavery, and ultimately it enables a white panoptic gaze and is a means of tracking and policing Blackness, or non-whiteness, or indeed any group which may be categorized as other (Fiske, 1998; Browne, 2015). As John Fiske (1998), succinctly puts it, "Today's seeing eye is white" (p. 69). Panopticism and surveillance then build off one another to generate a panoptic gaze. This underlying gaze exposes the hegemonic power structures of the MCU film cycle.

a) The Panoptic Gaze in the MCU

The panoptic gaze plays a major role over the course of the Infinity Saga and is a tool that is used by both superhero and villain.[55] Superheroes like Iron Man, Ant-Man, and later even Spider-Man, function as what Hassler-Forest (2012) dubs "panoptic machinery," as "their bodies [are] literally inscribed by the surveillance technology they utilize" (p. 160). As panoptic machines, these superheroes survey the population, sorting threat from non-threat, self from other, and defending the cultural hegemony. The gaze is a tool exploited by the hero to preserve the status quo, while villains on the other hand oftentimes exploit it in order to challenge those same states of power. This is witnessed throughout the Infinity Saga,

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[55] The superhero has often been connected to surveillance in superhero literature (Bukatman, 2003a; Hassler-Forest, 2012).

including: *The Winter Soldier's* Project Insight and its villain Arnim Zola; the militarization and marketing of Pym Tech as surveillance technology in *Ant-Man*; and even via Ultron's manipulation of the internet and digital technology in order to gather power and trigger the end of the world in *Age of Ultron*. The most relevant manifestation of the panoptic gaze within the MCU, however, is witnessed via Heimdall, a major character from the *Thor* franchise who upholds hegemony and the Asgardian state in a unique manner.

b) Heimdall as the Panoptic Gaze

In the *Thor* trilogy, Heimdall functions as a personification of the panoptic gaze. Resplendent in golden armor, Heimdall is the Gatekeeper to Asgard, and with his unblinking golden gaze, he is all-seeing and all-hearing. Stationed at the very edge of the kingdom, Heimdall is ever-watchful of all that occurs across the universe, and he determines who may enter and leave Asgard's borders: "I can see Nine Realms and ten trillion souls" (*The Dark World*). The Gatekeeper's look is as stoic and detached as his character (which is slowly humanized as the trilogy drags on); his is "a faceless gaze that [transforms] the whole social body" of Asgard and the universe as a whole, "into a field of perception" (Foucault, 1995, p. 214). Heimdall watches over Thor and the hero's companions while they are on missions, and he facilitates their mobility from one realm to the next through the use of the Bifrost, an interdimensional bridge that grants access across all Nine Realms. He is the first line of defense to the Asgardian kingdom, and he even keeps an eye on particular individuals if asked. Because of his all-encompassing surveillance, Heimdall becomes a legendary and uniquely frightening persona in Asgard. When Thor's friends, for example, conspire to treasonously go against the orders of their current king, Loki, Volstagg worries that, "Heimdall might be watching." The threat Heimdall poses ultimately polices their behavior; "the gaze is" truly "on the alert everywhere"

(Foucault, 1995, p. 205). This is furthered in a deleted scene wherein Volstagg yet again describes Heimdall's powers: "It's said the Gatekeeper can see a single drop of dew fall from a grass a thousand miles away… he heareth all" (*Thor*). Heimdall's panoptic powers are so mythic that even Asgard's warriors, the state's police-force, are frightened of him. The Gatekeeper's panoptic surveillance is also explicitly bound to the King of Asgard's order, as he is "sworn to obey him;" and so Heimdall's connection to the state and its authority is absolute (*Thor*). "Visibility" then, "is a trap" (Foucault, 1995, p. 200). It is a tool and enabler of hegemony, as Heimdall demonstrates.

It is finally worth noting that Heimdall not only functions as a tool of panoptic surveillance for the Asgardian state, controlling both its people and the realms under its rule, but he is also a personification of border control, and his surveillance is weaponized against all other outsiders and realms. Via his panoptic powers, Heimdall is "in complete control of immigration and [the] defense system of Asgard," and as a result he is the ultimate tool to maintain the Asgardian geopolitical order (Roussos, 2017, p. 268; AlAwadhi & Dittmer, 2020a). The Bifrost, of which Heimdall is in sole control (apart from the ruling King), not only functions as a means to control mobility in Asgard and across the realms, but also is a weapon of mass destruction in of itself, a tool of deterrence which can be used against Asgard's enemies if necessary (AlAwadhi and Dittmer, 2020a). And so, as much as the Gatekeeper's panopticism enables self-policing, it also enacts a harder form of power which protects the Asgardians' hegemonic order.

5. <u>Conclusion</u>

In conclusion, the MCU film cycle's Manichean tendencies enable the hegemonic power structures and narratives of its texts constructing a landscape wherein hegemony and ideology can be battled out. This is most clear in the representation of its superheroes who are primarily presented as propagandistic tools that represent a conservative state of exception while defending the status quo. World-building tactics which create the MCU also help deify and center these superheroes through various techniques. And finally, the two motifs of panopticism and surveillance converge to create a panoptic gaze which is often utilized in the cycle to convey and enable the hegemonic systems in play across the Marvel universe. Manicheanism and representations of hegemony sustain one another in informing the underlying self/other dialectic in the MCU, and this is further enhanced by Marvel Studios' industrial practices as the next section will argue.

IV. INDUSTRIAL INFLUENCES

In addition to Manicheanism and cultural hegemony, the final component which firmly shapes the MCU film cycle is that of industrial influence.[56] The inherently Manichean and hegemonic system of the MCU is extended via Marvel Studios' industrial relationship with various military and political bodies that the studio collaborates with in order to create their films. Before diving into a comprehensive analysis of Marvel Studios' industrial influences, I first briefly overview Marvel Studios' relationship with its parent company, Disney, considering the media conglomerate's economic imperatives. I then define the Military-Industrial-Media-

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[56] Of course, though I use the term 'industrial influence' to denote the relationship between Marvel Studios and MIME-NET, I am aware that Marvel Studios is itself part of the media industry with its own diverse share of, at times, conflicting interests and stakeholders.

Entertainment Network (MIME-NET) and contextualize the American Department of the Air Force Entertainment Liaison Office's (DAFELO) role within Hollywood. I next explore how Marvel Studios contributes to MIME-NET via its collaborations with DAFELO and other military and governmental entities. This is primarily accomplished by surveying which films in the Infinity Saga are informed by these relationships, and I finally conclude this section by examining Marvel Studios' collaborations with other various governments.

1. Disney's Economic Imperatives

"Perhaps no other cinema in the world can represent (albeit ideologically) the sheer power and pervasiveness of capital like Hollywood," Mike Wayne (2005) argues, "not least because in Hollywood, as in America generally, corporate capital and culture are so interconnected. (p. 18). And this is unfortunately quite clear when one examines the MCU film cycle. Marvel Studios and Disney's economic imperatives hinge upon corporate capital, or capitalist power, that is "the ability to control, modify and, sometimes, limit social creation through the rights of ownership" (McMahon, 2022, p. 2). This business model forms the foundation of most film production in Hollywood, with the Walt Disney company as one of the clearest examples of an encroaching neoliberal monopolizing multi-billion-dollar company, one whose economic motivations (to produce globally popular and financially successful films) affects and shapes the products of its subsidiary companies, including Marvel Studios. And consequently, this also heavily impacts the shifting representational politics of the MCU, as the ideological structures of the cycle come to be influenced by Disney's economic interests.[57]

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[57] For more on Disney and capitalism, see Bohas (2016). And for more on the political economy of superhero blockbuster films, see Brinker (2016).

Of course, as has already been noted (and as will be explored in both the final section of this chapter as well as the following chapters) representation and diversity have changed and evolved over time in the MCU film cycle, leaning towards more progressive representations by the end of the Infinity Saga. And yet this internal shift within the saga is more of a layered affair. Wayne (2005) rightfully points out that issues like "diversity, subversion and resistance, […] are also the stock-in-trade of capitalist mass culture and its endless self-promotion" (p. 2). The entry of these matters into Disney's current marketing strategy reflects the 'moving equilibrium' of hegemony and the changing political ideals within the MCU film cycle itself. And as Mark Fischer (2012) maintains in his seminal text, *Capitalist Realism*, "anti-capitalism is widely disseminated in capitalism. Time after time, the villain in Hollywood films will turn out to be the 'evil corporation,'" and any "gestural anti-capitalism actually reinforces it" (p. 15). Fischer fittingly uses the example of *Wall-E* (2008) (a film produced by Pixar only two years after it had been acquired by Disney) to demonstrate this process, arguing that films like Wall-E are exemplary of interpassivity, as the movie "performs our anti-capitalism for us, allowing us to continue to consume with impunity" (p. 15). We can arguably see this interpassivity come into play quite often in the MCU, particularly with the saga's more progressive films. Clearly, Disney and Marvel Studios' economic imperatives greatly influence the MCU film cycle, and though it is necessary to understand the economic processes which inform the production of the MCU, it is the franchise's relationship to MIME-NET and political bodies which sheds more light on the cycle's politics of representation, as the next section will explore.

2. The Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network

As Cynthia Weber (2009, p. 188) argues, "culture is political, and politics is cultural," and this reciprocal bond represents the relationship between many of Marvel's films and the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network (MIME-NET). Coined by James Der Derian (2009), MIME-NET is the evolution of the military industrial complex: it is a coalition between the US military, political structures, and the entertainment industry (including, but not limited to the film industry, the video game industry, the toy-making industry etc.). MIME-NET essentially "merges the production, representation, and execution of war" (Der Derian, 2009, p. 32). Therefore, via this system, war becomes a spectacle, a spectator-sport wherein the audience consumes banalized images of war which legitimize a US state of exception and establishes a Manichean narrative of good and evil (McInnes, 2002).[58]

As a critical geopolitical site, film, and Hollywood in particular, has provided a significant resource for MIME-NET. Hollywood's connection to MIME-NET can be traced back to its longstanding relationship with the Pentagon as early as the 1920s (Der Derian, 2009; Löfflmann, 2013; Kaempf, 2019).[59] And as a memo from the Pentagon reads, "military depictions have become more of a 'commercial' for us," a tool for recruitment and a means to promote a positive and tailored public image (Campbell, 2001). Stationed in both the Pentagon and Los Angeles, the Department of the Air Force Entertainment Liaison Office (DAFELO) provides filmmakers with a variety of services, including but not limited to: script

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[58] Marvel Comics has had a longstanding and oftentimes troubling history with MIME-NET. A few examples of their collaboration with the military include: collaborating with arms manufacturer Northrop Grumman to produce of a comic titled "Start Your N.G.E.N.S!" as well as co-producing *The New Avengers* with the Army and Air Force Exchange Service, who also often attend comic conventions for recruitment (Pearson and Gault, 2017).
[59] The DoD has collaborated with more than 800 films and over 1,100 television titles (Alford, 2017). For more on Hollywood and the Pentagon, see Der Derian (2005; 2009), Löfflmann (2013), and Kaempf (2019).

and story development, dialogue assistance, wardrobe and uniform assistance, cast training,

research visits, as well as use of vehicles and aircrafts (*Frequently Asked Questions*, no date).

DAFELO's cooperation hinges upon the Pentagon's approval of the script and the film's

representation of the military on screen. If this portrayal does not meet the approval of the

Liaison office. then they are given the boot.[60] The collaboration between Hollywood and the

Department of Defense (DoD) has often been described by Phil Strub, ex-head of DAFELO, as

a relationship of "mutual exploitation. We're after military portrayal, and they're after our

equipment" (Al Jazeera English, 2010).[61] Consigning the relationship as one of 'mutual

exploitation' simplifies the propagandistic implications and downplays the very nature of

MIME-NET; however, when asked if DAFELO's work was indeed propagandistic, Strub argued:

> I associate that with something that is not truthful… And maybe
> you'd accuse me of being too pro-military, but to me, the movies
> we work with, they're morale-improvement. We don't say, 'OK!
> Let's see what we can do to exploit this opportunity!' We're not
> trying to brainwash people! We're out to present the clearest,
> truest view. (Barshad, 2018)

Evidently, the "clearest, truest view" of the US military does not include supporting films

which do not align with the DoD's desired image, for example *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, and

(surprisingly) *The Avengers* as will be discussed later. Additionally, DAFELO's infiltration into

Hollywood became more critical after the events of 9/11. Post-9/11, the Pentagon met with

Hollywood to "solicit the help of Hollywood in the war against terrorism and imagine possible

future scenarios and responses to them"; these post-9/11 films "(re)author a new post 9/11

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[60] Films that collaborated with the Pentagon include *Top Gun*, *Armageddon*, *Pearl Harbour*, *Black Hawk Down*, among those that were rejected include *Platoon*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Forrest Gump*, *The Thin Red Line* (Lacy, 2003; Kaempf, 2019).
[61] Strub served in the Navy for 30 years; he headed the department from 1989 to 2018, fostering the US military's image in Hollywood. Also, Suid (2002) was the first to coin the Pentagon's relationship with Hollywood as one of mutual exploitation.

geopolitical certainty and for some observers… have paved the way for further US/Coalition interventions" (Power and Crampton, 2005, pp. 193-94). The collaboration between DAFELO and Hollywood has become a means to essentially rewrite history (Kaempf, 2019, p. 546).

Accordingly, the subsequent narrative that is manufactured is highly Manichean in nature and heavily relies on the binary system, dividing self from other, West from East, good from evil. The US as the land of the free is the ultimate White savior fantasy enforced by the military. And as Gore Vidal succinctly reasons, it is via these films that America comes to be perceived "as the one indispensable nation," the only state which can ensure justice and freedom on a global scale, legitimating the use of US military force at will; history becomes rewritten "into one where historical and moral ambiguity [is] replaced by certainty" (qtd. in Lacy, 2003, p. 614). There are no shades of gray regarding the military where DAFELO is concerned. "I think the only thing that would be taboo," said Strub, "is if the military was portrayed as a force for evil, and the behavior was tolerated" (Al Jazeera English, 2010). Indeed, dualism is always key in the narrative presented by the Pentagon, affirming Paul Virilio's (1989) argument that "the essential capacity of cinema in its huge temples [is] to shape society by putting order into visual chaos" (p. 39). The binary distinction between order and chaos follows a Lacanian 'primordial Discord' with the representation of the military and the US state as an active masculine force, one that creates organization and unity in the face of the passive, fragmented, feminized, and othered countries which require guidance and control (Lacan, 1977). The US is then the face of superiority, rationality, and progressiveness which must help the inferior and regressive East (Said, 1978). Illustrating the self/other dialectic, these films represent the alienated and demonized other in order to produce the image of the hegemonic self. Via this system, the Pentagon's collaboration with Hollywood

ultimately helps facilitate the film cycle's Manichean landscape and hegemonic power structures, feeding the MIME-NET engine. And as the next section will argue, this relationship of mutual exploitation is seamlessly demonstrated by numerous films in the Infinity Saga.

3. The MCU Film Cycle and DAFELO

As a 'direct liaison' with the military, DAFELO as well as other international government agencies have cooperated with Marvel Studios on several films, constructing Manichean landscapes, propagandizing and whitewashing the US military, as well as justifying the American geo-political hegemony and state of exception via the representation of its superheroes, narratives, and themes.[62] The clearest examples of this process in the Infinity Saga are the following films: *Iron Man*, *Captain America: The First Avenger, The Avengers, Captain America: The Winter Soldier,* and finally *Captain Marvel*.

a) *Iron Man*

Considering how superhero Tony Stark is thematically intertwined with the military industrial complex, it comes as no surprise that the production process behind *Iron Man* (and indeed the entire *Iron Man* trilogy) was heavily aided by DAFELO. As the first film in the Infinity Saga, *Iron Man* sets the tone for the MCU film cycle with its direct sponsorship and help from the Liaison Office and its depiction of the American military. On the DAFELO's now archived website, a portfolio detailing their work in Hollywood had previously been published; with the MCU's first film, the office assisted with:

> Script research, wardrobe and dialogue assistance; On-location
> filming at [Edwards Air Force Base], CA; Secured Airmen Battle

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[62] Jenkins and Secker (2021) recently released a well-researched, in-depth analysis of superhero films and their relationship with the "government-entertainment complex" (i.e. the DoD, NASA, and the Science and Entertainment Exchange) in order to create pro-establishment and exceptionalist texts.

> Uniform fabric for replication of new uniform; Provided filming access to F-22, C-17 aircraft and HH-60 helicopter; On-set technical advice; Combined Air Operations Center technical advisor; [as well as] Airmen extras from Los Angeles and Edwards AFBs. (*Portfolio*, no date).

The film even credits Phil Strub as well as several US Air Force Project Officers and military and science advisors. The Pentagon's presence was well integrated into the film's production process. And so, it is rather interesting that tensions were reportedly high on set between Marvel's team and DAFELO. Strub even admitted that he had an argument with director Jon Favreau over a particular line wherein a military officer said they would "kill themselves for the opportunities [Tony Stark] has":

> It never got resolved until we were in the middle of filming… Now we're on the flight lines at Edwards Air Force Base (California), and there's 200 people, and [the director] and I are having an argument about this. He's getting redder and redder in the face and I'm getting just as annoyed. (qtd. in Quigley, 2015)

Clearly, a highly curated image is everything when it comes to the Pentagon. When asked about the film, Air Force Captain Christian Hodge, DAFELO's Project Officer for *Iron Man*, said, "the Air Force is going to come off looking like rock stars" (qtd. in Miles, 2007). And Hodge was not wrong, because throughout the film the military is lauded and glorified in a manner that tonally feeds into *Iron Man's* Manichean language. As was discussed in the chapter's introduction, this is exemplified in the opening scene of the film, which depicts Stark being transported by an American military Humvee as it ventures into the land of the other: the desaturated rural desert and mountainous regions of the Kunar Province in Afghanistan. The Humvee races past a poor Afghani shepherd while the soldiers laugh and joke with Stark, and critically, AC/DC's *Back in Black* plays over the background of this sequence. In direct contrast

to the film's representation of Afghanistan, the American military are set up as technologically

advanced, politically powerful rock stars for the audience to admire.[63]

DAFELO's influence on *Iron Man* visibly impacts the film's deep-rooted power

structures, however it should be noted that *Iron Man's* representation of the military

vacillates between conforming and challenging.[64] A key moment in the creation of Iron Man

is the death of Yinsen, an Afghani doctor, who sacrifices himself in order to save Stark and

urges the hero with his dying breath not to waste his life. As Yinsen dies, the doctor's head

rests upon a sack of food aid with the American flag clearly printed on it; the less than subtle

inclusion of American-funded food aid only serves to unsuccessfully draw a veil over the crude

and yet efficient metaphor of Yinsen's blood being on Stark's and MIME-NET's hands. Through

his death, Yinsen as an Afghani man who has suffered from the consequences of Stark Tech's

weapons manufacturing and MIME-NET, more broadly speaking, functions as the catalyst

which creates Iron Man; however, despite his non-whiteness, Yinsen is coded as an educated,

Westernized character via his dress, language, etc.[65] Furthermore, Stark's decision to change

for the better and dismantle his company's weapons manufacturing division is not because

of Yinsen's sacrifice or because of how his company has devastatingly affected the lives of

non-Americans abroad. Instead, as Stark states during his first press conference post-rescue,

he decides to change because he "saw young Americans killed by the very weapons [he had]

created to defend and protect them." Stark does not rage against the machine, and though

he may try to reject the MIME-NET, his is a superficial rejection at best. The film as well as the

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[63] The representation of Afghanistan and the racial/ethnic dynamics of *Iron Man* are further discussed in Chapter 2.
[64] See also Dittmer (2011).
[65] Again, more on this in Chapter 2.

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titular superhero himself does not pose the military industrial complex as the villain. At most, the act of weapons manufacturing is called out in a cursory manner while shadowy foreign terrorists, like the Ten Rings, and individual warmongers, such as Obadiah Stane, are cast as the villains. Ultimately, Stark does not confront America's military and imperialistic endeavors abroad, and he does not push for systemic change. Though he has the money and power to push for this, Stark chooses instead to act only as a superhero in a constant state of exception, paralleling the US military as a whole, and for the remainder of the *Iron Man* trilogy, the military are lauded and considered heroic like him. They are both, as Hodge put it, "rock stars."[66]

b) Phase 1 and Beyond

DAFELO's extensive military support in the *Iron Man* films provides a glimpse into the later more shadowed collaboration between Marvel and the US military as well as other international military bodies. Nearly all of Phase 1's films collaborated with a military body. *The Incredible Hulk*, which filmed a substantial portion of its scenes in Canada, shot many scenes in the Canadian Forces Base Trenton, Ontario.[67] The Canadian Armed Forces also provided the team with two Canadian CC-130 Hercules air transports, and Canadian soldiers even dressed up as American soldiers during filming. *Captain America: The First Avenger*

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[66] It is worth noting that James Rhodes/Iron Patriot, stands as the face of the US military in the *Iron Man* trilogy, and on a grander scale, perhaps the MCU. He is a hero who is also a soldier, and his tension with the military only results from conflict with characters in higher positions of power rather than the ideological nature of the military as a whole. This is demonstrated time and time again, with Rhodey siding with the government in *Civil War* and sticking to his conservative beliefs. As Iron Patriot, Rhodes' armour is ultimately Stark Tech used as part of the American military's administration of 'justice' both in the US and abroad.

[67] Spanakos (2011) argued that *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2*, and *The Incredible Hulk* are post 9/11 "fantasies of self-preservation" whose enemy is not the other, but rather MIME-NET itself (p. 15). While this would seem to be somewhat misguided when considering Iron Man's representation of the military and the weapons industry, *The Incredible Hulk* stands out as the only film in the MCU wherein the military is specifically cast in an antagonistic role to the superhero. Nevertheless, it is specifically General Ross who is presented as villainous because of his personal vendetta against Banner (a result of Banner's romantic relationship with Ross's daughter), rather than the US military being portrayed as 'a force of evil' like Strub described.

would follow suit and similarly work with the United Kingdom Ministry of Defense, thanking them in the film's credits.

Surprisingly, with the end of Phase 1, *The Avengers* brought about what seemed to be the end of Marvel Studios' relationship with the Pentagon as DAFELO did not find the blockbuster's representation of S.H.I.E.L.D. and the US military, at large, to align with their desired image because of its unrealistic representation of military bureaucracy. During *The Avengers'* climactic Battle of New York, the World Security Council employs S.H.I.E.L.D. to send a nuclear weapon to New York in order to stop the alien invasion, heedless of the countless lives that would be lost in the process, and this is only prevented by Iron Man who diverts the nuclear bomb to space. "We couldn't reconcile the unreality of this international organization and our place in it," Strub said, "To whom did S.H.I.E.L.D. answer? Did we work for S.H.I.E.L.D.? We hit that roadblock and decided we couldn't do anything" (qtd. in Ackerman, 2012). *The Avengers* surprisingly manages to unsettle the Manichean tone of the cycle by casting S.H.I.E.L.D. as a morally ambiguous military organization that is willing to harm innocent people for the greater good. Though, it should be noted that despite the Pentagon cutting off their support to *The Avengers* mid-production, the DoD still provided the film with Humvees and stealth jets for filming.

After *The Avengers*, DAFELO would stop supporting Marvel Studios, and the company instead turned to NASA's Science and Entertainment Exchange to back most of the MCU's Phase 2 films. Interestingly, the only exception was *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, which is rather surprising considering the film's negative portrayal of S.H.I.E.L.D.. It however could be argued that since it is revealed that the security agency had been infiltrated by

HYDRA, the film's true villain is still a Manichean-esque 'big bad' of the past and not representative of any US agencies. And by the end of *The Winter Soldier*, the military and America as a whole is absolved in this narrative with the destruction of S.H.I.E.L.D.. Again, it is quite apparent that the US military's involvement in the MCU's films is contingent exclusively upon a positive representation.

c) *Captain Marvel*

For several years, it seemed that the MCU's relationship with the DoD was over, until it was reported that Phase 3's *Captain Marvel*, the first female superhero film in the franchise, would be heavily supported by the United States Air Force (USAF).[68] Playing the titular superhero, Brie Larson has said that "the core of [Carol] is the Air Force," and this is displayed via the film's production, themes, representation of its superhero, and finally its marketing (Marvel Entertainment, 2019).

During production of *Captain Marvel*, Larson met with several Air Force pilots including Brig. Gen. Jeannie Leavitt, the first female fighter pilot at USAF. The actress even got to fly in an F-16 aircraft which was heavily featured in promotional material (the film's Special Features include footage of Larson's experience, and before jetting off, she giddily exclaims: "This is going to be fun!"). Larson would also get to visit Nellis Air Force Base; there, the actress explains how she "learned how to dogfight on offense and defense. I pulled 6.5 G's… the level of loyalty, commitment, respect and humor I felt at that base, I took with me and

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[68] Captain Marvel's relationship to USAF can be traced back to its roots with Kelly Sue Deconnick's original comic, as her father was in the Air Force, and she therefore was raised in Air Force bases: "I pitched it as Carol Danvers as Chuck Yeager" (Captain Marvel: The Official Movie Special, 2019, p. 14).

brought to the set" (Collins, 2019). In addition to Larson's training, USAF would extensively

help with the film's production, as the official DoD website details:

> About 50 airmen from the Fresno-based 144th Fighter Wing of the California Air National Guard and the 412th Test Wing from Edwards Air Force Base, California, had roles as extras for the film. B-1 and B-2 bombers; F-16, F-22 and F-35 fighter jets; and a NASA Global Hawk unmanned aircraft, as well as housing, runways, the flight line and a hangar at Edwards were used in the film. About 490 cast and crew members with 37 trucks spent about 21 days on the base for setup, filming and tear-down. (Collins, 2019)

Clearly the DoD's engagement with the film is quite comprehensive, perhaps more so than in

any other MCU film. And so, it is rather hypocritical that *Captain Marvel* was promoted as a

feminist film, "the biggest feminist movie of all time" Larson has said (Kapetaneas and

McCarthy, 2019).

As the first female superhero film in the MCU, *Captain Marvel* engages with themes

which explore female empowerment and the patriarchal restrictions which restrain the

female body. Throughout the film, the audience watches as Carol Danvers manages and then

rejects the systemic misogyny she faces in various aspects in her life, including in the military.

Captain Marvel's core theme lies within Carol's desire to fly, to go, as the tagline of the film

states, 'higher, faster, further;' and this motto is meant to appeal in a broad fashion to the

patriarchal constraints around her gender. It therefore comes as no surprise, when

considering the backing of the Pentagon, that the film's purported feminism is appropriated

in order to make the Air Force and the military at large seem appealing and pro-women's

rights. Even the film's tagline is co-opted, as Secretary of the Air Force Heather Wilson said

that the ethos of 'higher, further, faster' encapsulated "what it means to be an American

Airman" (McRae, 2019). The film's paradoxical engagement with women's rights and the

military whitewashes the fundamentally anti-feminist nature of the US military as a machine of imperialism and hegemonic masculinity; the military cannot be compatible with feminism because of "the gendered destructiveness of military power," as well as "the misogynist culture of military institutions" (Duncanson, 2017, p. 54).[69] Ultimately, the feminist overtures of the film are hypocritical, contradictory in nature, while the fetishization of the Air Force contributes to the propagandistic overtures of MIME-NET and the rewriting of the imperialistic hegemonic narrative of the American empire as a whole.

In addition to the film's production and its themes, the manner in which Carol is represented further exposes the film's collaboration with USAF. As the titular superhero, Carol embodies the fetishization of USAF and the US military in a grander sense. Over the course of *Captain Marvel*, the superhero is rendered in a similar "rock star" fashion to Iron Man. From her slow-mo walk through a hanger towards her jet to her grungy *Nine Inch Nails* t-shirt and leather jacket, Carol as a superhero *and* as an airman is portrayed as the ultimate cool girl. The representation of USAF and the military as 'rock stars' is further emulated several times in the DVD's special features as Larson excitedly talks about meeting with Air Force pilots and gushing about how "cool" everything is. Just as *Top Gun* was effectively a commercial for the US Navy back in the 1980s, so too does *Captain Marvel* target young female spectators in an insidious manner. As the first superheroine film in the MCU, the film is the perfect recruitment tool for USAF, a division that has been struggling with a personnel shortage for years, and one which has also been concealing an increasing pattern of sexual assault.[70] Yet again, the paradoxical feminist overtures of the film strike hollow.

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[69] For more on feminist and queer anti-militarism, see Woodward and Duncanson (2017) as well as Rossdale (2019).

[70] For more, see: Hughes (2018) and Kirby (2019).

The DoD's fetishization and carefully calculated image does not only influence the film's production, themes, and titular superhero, but it is also blatantly evident in *Captain Marvel's* marketing. The film's teaser poster featured Captain Marvel standing at the doors of a hanger, fighter jets in the distance. USAF Thunderbirds would perform a flyover at the LA world premiere of the film, while Airmen were invited to attend the screening. USAF would perform another flyover in Disneyland where female fighter pilots, like celebrities, took pictures with attendees (*U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds celebrate Captain Marvel with Hollywood flyover*, no date). It is very telling how the Disneyfication of USAF plays into the overall objective of MIME-NET, casting the military as lauded heroes in a collaborative effort with the DoD. However, Marvel's symbiotic relationship with the Air Force is perhaps most palpable when examining one of USAF's recruitment ads that was heavily inspired by *Captain Marvel's* visual language. Targeted specifically towards a female audience, the ad echoes Carol's memory sequence, featuring a blonde pilot walking in slow motion to her jet plane while a female voice narrates, "Every superhero has an origin story. We all got our start somewhere. For us, it was the US Air Force… What will your origin story be?" (U.S. Air Force and Space Force Recruiting, 2019). The Origin Story recruitment ad would be played in 3,600 screenings of the film in America (Fuster, 2019). USAF's recruitment ad cements the relationship between the US military and Marvel Studios. Though there is a ten-year gap between *Captain Marvel* and *Iron Man*, there are striking similarities in how both films rely upon the US military and symbiotically uplift the military narratively and thematically; and this arguably confirms how there is indeed an integral component within the MCU film cycle that thrives through collaborations with governmental and military agencies.

d) Beyond America

It is worth nothing that Marvel Studios' industrial dealings have not been limited to collaborations with the US government. Several scenes in *Age of Ultron* were set and shot in Seoul, encouraged by the South Korean Film Council's incentive program; the program would pay 30% of the production cost, equating to around $3.8 million (*Regional Film Commissions*, no date). Again, public image is key, as the head of the Korean Film Council, Kim Young-gun said at the time, "If we have that kind of huge film, which shows Korea in a more positive way, then we think the image of Korea will be changed in a positive way" (qtd. in Power, 2015). *Black Panther* would follow a similar vein with scenes set and shot in Busan.

What is perhaps more relevant to this discussion is the co-production of *Iron Man 3* between Walt Disney Company China, Marvel Studios, and DMG Entertainment.[71] With Marvel's foray into Phase 2, the studio wished to "[add] a local flavor, and working with our new local partner… enhance the appeal and relevance of our characters" to Chinese audiences (qtd. in Brzeski, 2012). To put it bluntly, Marvel and Disney hoped to expand their profits by appealing to the Chinese market's unexploited potential. This would result in a jarring (and widely mocked) Chinese extended cut of the film which included scenes set in Shanghai, famed Chinese actress Fan Bingbing who did not appear in the international cut of the film, and two Chinese ad placements: Gu Li Duo, a dairy product from Yili and a construction company called Zoomlion. In one particularly confusing extended scene, Dr. Wu asks, "What does Iron Man rely on to revitalize his energy?" before drinking Yili. The Chinese government's influence on the film is more apparent when one realizes that any movie

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[71] Marvel Studios would also pander to the Chinese government during the production of *Doctor Strange*, as will be discussed in Chapter 2.

screened in China is ultimately censored by the Film Censorship committee, with non-Chinese films having to meet any amendments proposed by the board. It was even reported that filming was monitored by Chinese government officials who would often visit *Iron Man 3's* set (Mullany and Cieply, 2013). While no information has been officially released regarding how *Iron Man 3* may have been amended by the Chinese government, the Mandarin's name in the Chinese cut was translated to "Man Daren," effectively distancing any association with the character's racially charged stereotypes. And when conversing with a Mandarin-speaking JARVIS, Dr. Wu emphatically declares that "Tony doesn't have to do this alone, China can help." Yet again, another MCU film is intertwined with constructing the manufactured hegemonic representation of a state.

4. Conclusions

As has been argued, the reproduction of the MCU film cycle's Manichean dichotomies, conservative ideologies, and hegemonic power structures often rely upon and are bolstered by external influences such as military or governmental agencies. This is apparent throughout the Infinity Saga and is particularly clear in films like *Iron Man, Captain Marvel,* and *Iron Man 3.* Obviously, there are films within the MCU which were not directly sponsored or supported by the US military, the US government, or indeed any international governmental body. There are also films which seem to diverge from and counter DAFELO's ideological leanings, as was witnessed with *The Avengers'* production difficulties. And yet, there is still something to be said about the recurrent symbiotic relationship between these agencies and Marvel Studios, and indeed, Disney more broadly speaking. The collaborations here seem to both unearth and intensify the cycle's Manichean foundations and hegemonic power structures. They also reveal how vital image and public perception is to any hegemonic power, exposing the

mechanisms which keep the MIME-NET machine operating. Over the course of this chapter, I have delved into the three significant tenets which characterize and shape the MCU film cycle (Manicheanism, cultural hegemony, and industrial influences), uncovering how these themes often overlap and build upon on another in the representation of the Marvel superhero. However, in the following and last section of this chapter, I examine the films which challenge these intersecting themes, deconstruct the core foundations, and initiate the cycle's evolution.

V. THE EVOLUTION OF THE MCU FILM CYCLE

As has been argued, the MCU film cycle establishes and relies upon a Manichean landscape, fixing the superhero to a propagandistic cultural hegemony wherein the hero is in a constant state of exception, operating as an emblem of nationalism and conservativism. This narrative is often enforced by industrial dealings with various governmental and military agencies during film production.

When broadly considering the MCU, it would seem that a wide majority of the Infinity Saga's films rely upon these structures. The entirety of Phase 1 clearly exhibits these generic characteristics, as does the *Avengers* quartet, and countless other films in the saga. However, over the course of the saga's three phases, there has naturally been a slow and yet inexorable complexification of the film cycle, one which only truly starts to take shape in Phase 3. In this section, I first broadly consider which films in both Phase 2 and 3 contribute to this slow transformation of the MCU. I then execute an in-depth analysis of *Thor: Ragnarok*, a film

which I argue is the saga's most subversive entry because of its deconstructive and postmodern nature.

1. Complicating the MCU Film Cycle

As the Infinity Saga approached the ten-year mark, it perhaps came as no surprise that in order for the MCU to continue to commercially thrive and remain beloved by its audience, it would need to produce innovative and creative approaches to the superhero narrative. Accordingly, the complication and subversion of the MCU film cycle's core system initially emerges in a few of Phase 2's films only to truly materialize in Phase 3.

The two notable Phase 2 films which planted the seeds of the cycle's deconstruction are *The Winter Soldier* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*. *The Winter Soldier* played a vital role in evolving the system via its villainization of S.H.I.E.L.D., an agency that was originally presented as a force of good. This is particularly pertinent since S.H.I.E.L.D.'s director, Nick Fury, founded the Avengers team in the first place. However, with Project Insight, *Winter Soldier* poses the question if such, or indeed if any, global hegemonic authority could not be corrupted by absolute power. As was discussed, since the film reveals that S.H.I.E.L.D. had in fact been infiltrated by HYDRA, this inquiry becomes rather superficial in nature. *Guardians of the Galaxy* is also of note, as the morally gray team of superheroes disorders the Manichean system. However, despite the Guardians' ambiguous principles and, at times, reprehensible

actions, the superhero team still upholds the hegemonic power of the Nova Empire geopolitical order.[72]

Phase 3's opening film, *Captain America: Civil War*, is the first, true foray into the subversive tone many of this phase's films strive to achieve, in gradually eroding the stark black and white dualities of the MCU film cycle. One of the internal mechanisms that defines *Civil War* is the recurring theme of perspective. Generally speaking, the films of Phase 1 and Phase 2 habitually rely upon very clear and distinct roles of hero and villain, self and other. However in *Civil War*, hero and villain are enmeshed, the Manichean foreground of the MCU wrought into chaos. Co-director Anthony Russo has said that Zemo, the film's major antagonist, is

> morally constructed to be both right and wrong, much like the other characters in the film. It was very important for us to give Zemo a valid point of view. That was the heart of how we constructed the narrative and the storytelling of this movie- every character has some validity to their point of view. (qtd. in Johnston, 2016a, p. 119)

The ternary conflict within *Civil War* between the Avengers and Zemo, between the Avengers as they split into two opposing factions, and between Tony Stark and Steve Rogers all lend to this overarching theme. Furthermore, because of the destruction and ruin wrought by the Avengers during their many battles across the world, governmental bodies begin to question the superhero as a state of exception via the Sokovia Accords. Many films throughout the Saga cater to othering the superhero, however this is often a superficial othering (with

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[72] The Nova Empire is a state that is meant to represent an idealized pseudo-American/Western body, one that is familiar and trustworthy to the audience and deemed by the Guardians as the only empire trustworthy enough to safekeep an Infinity Stone; according to Costume Designer Dan Grace, Xandar, the empire's home planet, "is the world that we would recognize the most [in the film] as a sort of sci-fi, futuristic place… it's maybe the Earth that we can aspire to" (qtd. in Perry, 2014).

exception to the Hulk perhaps), as by the end of one's film, the respective superhero is customarily back in the grace of the public. *Civil War* throws a wrench into that pattern with the Sokovia Accords as half of the Avengers are forced into becoming fugitives fleeing international law, while the other half remain as part of a sanctioned world police. Of course, this later (and again) becomes a superficial othering, as the fugitive superheroes are repositioned as the self during the events of *Infinity War* and *Endgame*.

Spider-Man: Homecoming, *Black Panther*, and *Ant-Man and the Wasp* all carry on this complication of the self/other dynamic as the films' main antagonists are presented as anti-villains. *Homecoming's* villain, Adrian Toomes/Vulture, in classic *Spider-Man* tradition, is a working-class father trying to support his family after being put down by the system too many times. While Toomes characterizes class struggles, *Black Panther's* Erik Killmonger represents a tragic African-American treatise on seeking justice in a systemically racist society. And just as sympathetic is *Ant-Man and the Wasp*'s antagonist, Ava Starr/Ghost, who is mistreated, manipulated, and weaponized by S.H.I.E.L.D.; despite her villainous deeds, her primary motive throughout the film is simply to find a cure to the disease that is killing her. Despite Toomes being imprisoned, Killmonger dying a tragic death, and Starr fleeing from the authorities, all three films muddle the distinct binary system of the cycle as these characters are humanized while challenging key hegemonic structures. *Doctor Strange* plays the inverse of this reversal as the titular superhero is considered heroic because of his moral flexibility, while his friend, Mordo, turns to villainy because of his inability to see past a strict sense of morals.

As many of these indicate, the saga's third phase (and to a lesser extent, its second phase) challenge and begin to alter the foundations of the MCU film cycle, reassessing both the black and white Manichean dichotomies of its characters, narratives, and themes as well as the hegemonic role of the superhero within the Marvel universe itself. And this deconstruction of the very traits which had shaped the MCU is most clear with *Thor: Ragnarok*.

2. The *Thor* trilogy

The film which perhaps does the most to subvert the MCU film cycle's foundations is *Thor: Ragnarok*. *Ragnarok* achieves this subversion by deconstructing, and in a sense, decolonizing the generic traits that were established by the first two films in Thor's trilogy. The film challenges the binary systems which initially founded *Thor* and *Thor: The Dark World* while also subverting the cultural hegemonic power of Asgard and the titular superhero. In this section, I first briefly analyze how *Thor* and *The Dark World* are representative of the cycle's established system. Then, I delve into a deep textual analysis of *Ragnarok*, wherein I examine how the film's postmodern tendencies subvert the cycle as a whole through its use of parody, demythologization, and its representation of the schizophrenic experience.

a) *Thor and The Dark World*

In order to appreciate the deconstructive nature of *Ragnarok*, it is first important to examine how both *Thor* and *The Dark World*, films from Phase 1 and 2 respectively, are emblematic of the cycle's foundational elements by analyzing how these films represent Asgard and other their villains. Both movies establish Asgard as a major political superpower, with its king reigning as the Protector of the Nine Realms. The planetary realm of Asgard is depicted as

idyllic and technologically advanced, opulent with rising golden towers and lush greenery.

Asgard functions as a galactic hegemon, whose rule is characterized as just, a necessary

deterrent to any who would pose as a threat to the Nine Realms, such as *Thor's* Frost Giants

or *The Dark World's* Dark Elves. The Asgardian state achieves this galactic order via their

control of the Bifrost Bridge, their advanced technology and weaponry, as well as their army

of elite warriors, the Einherjar, with Thor at the lead. Throughout *Thor* and *The Dark World*,

Asgard and its people are effectively coded as White because of the "aesthetic modernity of

their empire, their connection to Norse mythology," and of course, "the Medieval tone of

their culture, dress, and speech" (AlAwadhi & Dittmer, 2020a, p. 16). Asgardians are therefore

positioned as the self, and the resultant othering of the remaining realms (which often takes

on racialized undertones) ranges from dehumanizing and vilifying, as is seen with the Frost

Giants and Dark Elves, to feminizing and Orientalising, as seen with Vanaheim's Vanir, a tribal

and nomadic race that is coded as indigenous, with darker skin and facial paint.[73]

This Asgardian cultural hegemony is primarily established through two methods: the

opening monologues of Odin, Asgard's reigning king, during the introductions of both films as

well as the representation of the films' villainous races. At the beginning of both *Thor* and *The*

Dark World, Odin composes a propagandistic narrative which institutes and justifies the

Asgardian geopolitical order by creating clear Manichean self/other divisions (AlAwadhi and

Dittmer, 2020a). In his first speech in *Thor*, Odin claims,

> Once, mankind accepted a simple truth, that they were not alone
> in this universe. Some worlds, man believed to be home to their
> gods. Others, they knew to fear. From a realm of cold and darkness,
> came the Frost Giants, threatening to plunge the mortal world into
> a new ice age. But humanity would not face this threat alone. Our

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[73] See Chapter 2 for more on the racialization of the Vanir.

armies drove the Frost Giants back into the heart of their own world. The cost was great. In the end, their king fell. And the source of their power, was taken from them… Here, we remain as the beacon of hope. Shining out across the stars. And though we have fallen into man's myths and legends, it was Asgard, and its warriors, that brought peace to the universe.

Odin's pretty speech determines racialized binary distinctions, clearly isolating good from evil. Simultaneously through his language, the Frost Giants are dehumanized and cast as other, as they are a "threat" which should be feared hailing from "a realm of cold and darkness," while Asgard is presented as an empire of white messianic saviors, a "beacon of hope" martyring themselves in the hopes of bringing "peace to the universe." The opening monologue is the perfect microcosmic depiction of the MCU's Manicheanism at work. In comparison to the Asgardians' strong, beautiful, and white-ideal human features, the physical appearance of the Frost Giants furthers this dynamic, as they are red-eyed, blue-skinned humanoid beings with prominent facial ridges; they are cold to the touch, scantily clad, imposing and enormous in size. The Frost Giant's world, Jotunheim, also heavily contrasts with Asgard as it is frozen, eerily silent, and in perpetual darkness. Empty of life and joy, Jotunheim lays in ruin as a result of the violent confrontation Odin mentions in his monologue. When the audience meet the Frost Giants for the first time, the Jotun are often shrouded in darkness, half-hidden in the shadows, a deliberate choice as "not only did dark lighting… make the Giants seem all the more threatening, but it also caused their Asgardian opponents to look more heroic" (qtd. in Manning, 2011, p. 150). The entire construction of this fictional race establishes them as other and monstrous, extending the hegemonic portrayal of Asgard, while whitewashing Asgard's appropriation of the Casket of Winters (Jotunheim and the Frost Giants' life source) which ultimately led to the realm's ruin. The othering of the Frost Giants further parallels its foundations in the comics, wherein the first depiction of the King of the Frost Giants was

heavily Orientalised and coded almost as a Fu Manchu stereotype. Though the MCU may not rely on such crude imagery, the distressing racialization of the Frost Giants nevertheless remains intact when considering the construction of Asgard as White.

This Manichean system is reiterated in *The Dark World*, though the conflict now takes places between the Asgardians and the Dark Elves. Yet again, the film opens with Odin monologuing; the Asgardian king states that:

> Long before the birth of light, there was darkness, and from that darkness, came the Dark Elves. Millennia ago, the most ruthless of their kind, Malekith, sought to transform our universe back into one of eternal night. Such evil was possible through the power of the Aether, an ancient force of infinite destruction. The noble armies of Asgard, led by my father, King Bor, waged a mighty war against these creatures.

Again, the language used in this dialogue clearly constructs the dichotomies upon which the Asgardian geopolitical order is founded. Perhaps more so, as the Dark Elves, as their names impart, are denoted as destructive "creatures" who are "dark" and "evil" in comparison to the good, "light," and "noble" Asgardian army. The physical traits of the Elves further this contrast with their grooved faces, long ears, and blank, uncanny pearlescent masks. Much like Jotunheim, Svartalheim, the Dark Elves' realm, also appears to be uninhabitable and lifeless; it is "a world in peril, it's empty of life… where nothing could exist, nothing could grow" (Javins and Moore, 2013, p. xvi). Once again, the audience only witness this realm *after* the Asgardians have waged their "mighty war" against the elves, ultimately leading to the near extinction of the entire race and the destruction of their home planet.

In both *Thor* and *The Dark World*, then, Asgard denotes the MCU film cycle's Manichean and hegemonic system. The kingdom is represented as a utopian ideal, a justified and necessary empire whose cultural hegemony is absolute. The empire establishes their hegemony by constructing the binary oppositions which dehumanize and other any and all who may threaten their geopolitical order. Furthermore, the caricature-like representation of the Frost Giants and Dark Elves feeds into the Manichean dichotomies of both texts. *Thor* and *The Dark World* then code the Asgardian Empire as White, as the self; and since Thor is the key face of this kingdom in the MCU, the superhero functions in a synecdochal role, representing this overarching system. As the following section will argue, *Ragnarok* works to deconstruct this established narrative and system.

3. *Ragnarok* as Postmodern

What is so revolutionary about *Ragnarok* is how the film deconstructs this established narrative, subverting the cycle's deep-rooted Manicheanism and power structures. Maori director Taika Waititi's reinvention of Thor can be read as a postmodern take on the MCU film cycle, and this deconstruction is accomplished via several elements of the movement.

The core principle of postmodernism is the rejection of any absolute fixed truths and principles, be that of the self or the center; it is culturally constructive and values the subjective over the objective.[74] The postmodern is "self-conscious, self-contradictory, [and] self-undermining," and most importantly, the postmodern encompasses "fluctuating meanings;" it "maintains a volatile, mercurial definition that applies to our changing times…

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[74] Scholars have debated the exact nature of postmodernism for several decades, however I have drawn from an abridged interpretation of the movement and its theories in order to convey how the MCU film cycle has evolved. For more on postmodernism in film, see Degli-Esposti (1988), Denzin (1991), and Constable (2015).

[seeking] its own definition, [creating], and then [reinforcing] its own culture" (Degli-Esposti, 1988, p. 3). The postmodern text then imitates the past in order to produce a political and historical confrontation with the present through the use of parody, or pastiche; and the postmodern self, as a result, becomes decentered and othered, what Fredric Jameson labels the schizophrenic self (Hutcheon, 1988; Jameson, 1992). Though *Ragnarok* may not employ all the elements of the movement, there yet remain key postmodern tendencies in the film. *Ragnarok* contains a certain level of genre reflexivity, and it is both self-conscious and self-contradictory of the MCU film cycle's conventions. The key postmodern bent of the film is primarily witnessed in its overall thrust towards confronting and deconstructing *Thor* and *The Dark World's* pre-established self/other dynamics; this theme is accomplished through both the representation of the schizophrenic experience as well as via the tools of parody and demythologization. *Ragnarok* ultimately challenges and pushes towards an evolution of the MCU's three core processes.

a) Sakaar and the Schizophrenic Self

The reversal of the self/other dynamic is a recurring theme in *Ragnarok*, as several key subjects degenerate into what Jameson described as the schizophrenic self; the schizophrenic experience is conveyed primarily through the planet of Sakaar and via Thor's arc in the film. After Thor's initial confrontation and skirmish with Hela (the film's primary villain), the hero is kicked out of the Bifrost stream. Thor subsequently is thrust away from the center, from Asgard and the action, into Sakaar, an artificial trash planet that is described as "a collection point for all lost and unloved things." Once stranded on Sakaar and enslaved as a gladiator, Thor is forced to watch a holographic presentation in which a soothing female voice introduces Sakaar to both him and the audience:

Fear not, for you are found. You are home, and there is no going back. No one leaves this place. But what is this place? The answer is Sakaar. Surrounded by cosmic gateways, Sakaar lives on the edge of the known and unknown. It is the collection point for all lost and unloved things. Like you. But here on Sakaar, you are significant. You are valuable. Here, you are loved. And no one loves you more than the Grandmaster… Where once you were nothing, now you are something. You are the property of the Grandmaster.

During this scene, the audience watches as Thor is bombarded with strange images, bright flashes and colors that grow increasingly intense; fittingly, an instrumental version of "Pure Imagination" from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971) plays in the background, though the presentation is perhaps more akin to the film's unsettling psychedelic tunnel scene. Via this sequence and the general construction of Sakaar, the planet can arguably be read as a manifestation of Jameson's schizophrenic experience. As Jameson (1992) argues, the

schizophrenic experience is an experience of isolated, disconnected, discontinuous material signifiers which fail to link up into a coherent sequence. The schizophrenic thus does not know personal identity in our sense, since our feeling of identity depends on our sense of the persistence of the "I" and the "me" over time. (p. 119)

Accordingly, all subjects are disoriented via this system with an absence of personal identity as time continuity breaks down creating what Jameson describes as a "powerfully, overwhelmingly vivid 'material'" world, an "unreality" (Jameson, 1992, p. 120). Much like the holographic presentation which introduced Sakaar to the audience, the planet and all of its subjects correspond perfectly to this description: it is a world "on the edge of the known and the unknown" that is home to countless species and races all lost and unloved, othered, and objectified as "property" by the Grandmaster; it is a world where time flows differently to the outside universe, and it is a world that is vibrant and vivid and uncanny in color, architecture,

and experience.[75] Brad Winderbaum, the film's executive producer, succinctly describes Sakaar as a "hyper color science fiction circus of a planet that is the toilet of the universe" ('Sakaar,' 2017).

Though Thor may already have been on the journey towards this schizophrenic experience before he reaches Sakaar, he only truly experiences that disjointed and isolated otherness once he is on that planet. Thor as the schizophrenic self loses everything that he believed made him who he was, everything that made him a hero, from his name, his hair, his superhero costume, and right eye, to Mjolnir, his father, mother, girlfriend Jane, and even Asgard. The superhero is transformed into a liminal figure, and the resultant overarching themes of loss and anger cloud Thor in his struggle to understand who he is. For arguably the greater part of *Ragnarok*, Thor does not function as the self; he is instead isolated and disconnected from the center and from the self, as all preconceived absolute truths are swept away by the tide of Hela. And this deconstruction of absolute truths is carried out in two manners in *Ragnarok*, through parody and demythologization.

b) Asgard Parodied and Demythologized

In addition to the schizophrenic experience, *Ragnarok's* postmodern tendencies also take shape through the tools of parody and demythologization. Just as the postmodern utilizes parody in order to create a commentary on the past, so too does *Ragnarok* satirize the previous two films of the Thor trilogy in order to create a dialogue through a mocking sense of humor; and a key example of this process is witnessed in a play put on by Loki, called "The

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[75] Costume Designer Mayes Rubeo describes Sakaar: "Sakaar was made with a brand-new design that we inherited from Jack Kirby, which is a world of geometrics and dimensions of layers, trapezoids and rhomboids and half-circles and different lines and very, very bright colors" (qtd. in Watkins, 2017).

Tragedy of Loki of Asgard." The film's use of parody enables its major theme: the demythologization of the past; via this theme, *Ragnarok* confronts the Asgardian geopolitical order, and as a result, the absolute truths that were established in the previous two films are stripped away and reassessed.[76] By analyzing how both parody and demythologization function in the film, it becomes apparent how *Ragnarok* challenges and reassesses the internalized structure of the MCU.

The clearest example of parody in *Ragnarok* is witnessed quite early on in the film with the enactment of "The Tragedy of Loki of Asgard." The audience's first visit to Asgard in the film finds the state being run by the God of Mischief Loki who is disguised as Odin. A newly erected, huge and golden statue built in commemoration of Loki overlooks the scene as Loki-as-Odin and the audience watch a play commissioned by the trickster. "The Tragedy of Loki of Asgard" re-enacts a subversive and tongue-in-cheek reinterpretation of the events that occurred in *The Dark World*, honoring Loki's supposed death scene in an overwrought and dramatized manner while exonerating the God of Mischief. The play is not only Loki's attempt to rewrite history in his own favor ("You're the savior of Asgard," Thor's actor cries with Loki's actor replying, "Build a statue for me"), but the play also exploits the same (though perhaps cruder) language Odin used in his previous opening monologues to establish the White messianic savior complex of the Asgardian empire; at the end of the play, Odin's actor sadly tells the audience: "And so, Loki died of his wounds, giving his life for ours. He fought back those disgusting dark elves. He brought peace to the realm." In "The Tragedy of Loki of Asgard," we see a parodic confrontation, highly satirical in nature, one which challenges the

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[76] While Jameson (1992) argued that parody (or pastiche) is imitation without humor or purpose, I am drawing from Hutcheon's understanding of the term as "repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of the difference at the very heart of similarity" (1989, p. 26).

established truths of the previous two films while also highlighting their constructedness. It is a confrontation which also highlights how those in power control and shape the narrative of their empires to satisfy their own goals, incorporating a powerful and somewhat radical critique of hegemonic power structures considering the film cycle. With its humorous tone, the sequence acts as an introduction to the film's core theme of demythologization, and it is the first of many instances in which *Ragnarok* deconstructs Asgard, the film's characters, and the *Thor* trilogy as whole.

The primary manner in which demythologization is conveyed in *Ragnarok* is via the film's antagonist, Hela, the Goddess of Death and Odin's firstborn daughter, a character who both exposes the true nature of the Asgardian Empire and one who also destabilizes the notion of a savior/hero.[77] As Odin's former executioner, Hela was originally Odin's right-hand woman in his bid to build and expand the Asgardian empire. Hela would be imprisoned when, according to Odin, "Her violent appetites grew beyond my control." After Odin passes away, Hela is released from her chains and returns to Asgard, reclaiming the realm as her birth right and decimating the Einherjar and all who oppose her. And in the ensuing scene, Hela subverts both Thor and the audience's perceptions of the Asgardian empire in one fell swoop, demythologizing the state's propagandistic hegemony. As the goddess walks through the halls of the Asgardian Palace, via the camera both she and the audience look up at the circular fresco that adorns the palace's ceiling. There, a mural shimmers and glows in deep golds and warm colors, an ode to and illustration of the Asgardian empire's history as saviors who have brought and kept the peace across the Nine Realms (AlAwadhi and Dittmer, 2020a). The mural

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[77] See Kent (2021) for an analysis on Hela and white supremacy through the lens of post-feminism.

depicts several paintings that are essential to the Asgardian narrative. In one painting, the audience sees the Asgardian royal family and its famous warriors adorned with halos. In another, we see the Asgardians drinking and celebrating in their veritable Eden, while Odin signs a peace treaty with Laufey, King of the Frost Giants. And at the heart of the fresco, lies the city of Asgard, golden and pristine. Scoffing, Hela angrily shouts:

> Does no one remember me? Has no one been taught our history?
> Look at these lies. Goblets and garden parties? Peace treaties? Odin,
> proud to have it, ashamed of how he got it.

Enraged, the goddess destroys the mural, revealing the original frescos which lay beneath, and Odin's lies that were established in the previous two films crumble away to reveal the true foundations and reality of the Asgardian empire. At the heart of this mural is not Asgard, but rather a large, imposing image of Odin, with Hela's distinct horned helmet branching out behind the king's crowned head. Contrasting with the earlier calming palette and clear-cut images, the original mural is predominantly steeped in vibrant blood reds, surrounded by dark, encroaching hues and chaotic images of war and bloodshed. Upon closer inspection, the audience discovers the true history of Asgard: of slaves building Asgard's golden towers while being whipped; of Hela holding Mjolnir, Thor's famous weapon, with Odin at her side; and of Hela leading her army of Berserkers in their conquest across the Nine Realms. "We were unstoppable," Hela monologues in an ironic juxtaposition to Odin's speeches:

> I was his weapon in the conquest that built Asgard's empire. One by
> one, the realms became ours. But then, simply because my ambition
> outgrew his, he banished me, caged me, locked me away like an
> animal.

To finalize this demythologization of the Asgardian Empire, Hela would further condescendingly ask, "Odin and I drowned entire civilizations in blood and tears. Where do

you think all this gold came from?" Like the Palace's beautiful mural, the entirety of Asgard's image is left in ruins; and with Hela having the power to wield Mjolnir, which had been initially established as a weapon that could only be wielded by those who were worthy, Thor's worthiness and title of superhero is also questioned. By displacing the established self/other power structures of *Thor* and *The Dark World*, this one critical scene subverts the core foundations of the Thor trilogy and dismantles the MCU film cycle's system.[78]

This thematic demythologization continues during the film's climax, when Thor is trying (and failing) to subdue his sister. As the siblings battle, Hela goads her brother, "I'm Odin's firstborn, the rightful heir, the savior of Asgard." Her words allude to the MCU's dependency on the superheroes as saviors motif; however, *Ragnarok* both questions what makes a savior/hero and, more importantly, subverts the notion of a savior/hero through Hela. Saviors are key to the cycle's construction of the superhero, and this is particularly true when evaluating the *Thor* trilogy as is evidenced through its representation of Thor, Asgard, Loki, and in an inverse manner, even Hela. Thor is, of course, the perfect example of this motif as he is the primary superhero of the trilogy who, film after film, endeavors and succeeds at saving Asgard, Earth, and the universe as a whole. Indeed, Thor's initial transformation into a worthy hero was contingent upon this savior theme; his worthiness and redemption were only secured once he had sacrificed himself to save those in need in his first film, *Thor*. The hero's worthiness is even linked back to his kingdom, for despite its troubling history, Asgard as a nation has always presented itself as good, noble, and heroic in its pursuit to guard the Nine Realms; it is an empire built upon a narrative of saviors and heroes. "The Tragedy of Loki

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[78] The unveiling of a whitewashed history is a repeated motif within Phase Three i.e. *Black Panther, Captain Marvel,* and *Ragnarok*. However, *Ragnarok's* take on this narrative is the most radical and effective of the three. For a comparison between *Captain Marvel* and *Ragnarok's* take on this motif, see AlAwadhi and Dittmer (2020a).

of Asgard" reveals that even a villainous outcast like Loki wishes to embrace the role of a savior, a hero. And in *Ragnarok*, so too does Hela adopt that title, for she was Asgard's savior and hero when she helped found and create its glorious empire, and Hela firmly believes that only she can restore her kingdom to its past glory. When Hela is on the verge of delivering the final blow to her brother, she righteously declares, "I'm not a queen or a monster, I'm the Goddess of Death." To be a savior then is not to be a "queen," a force of good, a hero, or a "monster," a force of evil, a villain, but simply a bearer of death. This short piece of dialogue firmly eradicates the Manichean dichotomies intrinsic to the MCU film cycle; it equates the Asgardian geopolitical order and the superhero's role within it with all it can ever truly be: death. Death via its bid to shape, control, and maintain hegemony.

"It hurts, doesn't it?" Loki says, "Being lied to. Being told you're one thing and then learning it's all a fiction," and yet as *Ragnarok* argues the only way to truly move past the corrupted foundations of an empire, or conversely the conservative constraints of the MCU film cycle, is by accepting this truth and learning from the past in order to build something new. This theme is conveyed when Thor realizes that the only way to stop his sister and her vicious imperial aspirations is to stop trying to prevent the titular Ragnarok event of the film and instead actively trigger it. This results in the complete and total destruction of Asgard. The remaining Asgardians flee the destruction of their home planet as newly minted refugees, and a member of Thor's troupe, Korg, says, "As long as [Asgard's] foundations are strong, we can rebuild this place. It will become a haven for all people and aliens of the universe-," only for Asgard to be totally annihilated in one last big explosion. "Nope, those foundations are gone sorry," Korg amends. The decolonization of the Asgardian empire is completed as the foundations of the state are deemed too corrupt and irredeemable to be saved, a highly

controversial commentary both politically and in terms of the MCU as a whole. The status quo is completely overthrown by the film's own hero, and the Asgardians once at the center, once in the role of self, are transformed into alienated others in search of a new home. This postmodern, deconstructive take on the superhero was largely facilitated by the decolonial and subversive approach of the film's director, Taika Waititi.

c) Ragnarok *Behind the Scenes*

In addition to *Ragnarok's* use of postmodern tools like the schizophrenic experience, parody, and demythologization, Waititi's progressive vision was further embedded into the film's production process through a variety of means. On the first day of filming in Australia, a local indigenous community held an opening Karakia ceremony, as according to Waititi, "You wouldn't really start a movie in New Zealand without asking the local tribe to come in and bless you and send you to work with some good mojo. Especially if you're on their land, you're in their backyard, it's sort of just nice manners to get in touch" (qtd. in Bizzaca, 2017). Australian Indigenous and Maori actors and crew were hired, with indigenous filmmakers shadowing the crew during filming on the Gold Coast. Asgardian shield-maiden Valkyrie has also been read by many indigenous viewers as an emblem of the indigenous experience.[79] And there still remain several scattered Easter eggs throughout the film which point towards Waititi's political inclinations, the most relevant of which include the Commodore ship design, which is based on the Aboriginal flag's black, red, and yellow; when Thor and his troupe are trying to escape the Grandmaster, "it's like they're escaping Sakaar on the colors of the aboriginal people" as Waititi puts it ('Audio Commentary,' 2017). The Maori Tino Rangatiratanga flag is also used for Valkyrie's ship's color scheme, furthering her coding as

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[79] See Taipua (2017) for an in-depth, nuanced reading of the character.

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indigenous and embedding the suppressed other. Though Waititi may try to downplay this Easter egg as "nothing political, just cool" in the film's commentary, the embedded visuals are nothing short of groundbreaking considering the more conservative foundations of the cycle ('Audio Commentary,' 2017).

d) Ragnarok *and the MCU Film Cycle*

The MCU film cycle's traits which are, initially, so central to the Infinity Saga are immaculately deconstructed in *Ragnarok* via several postmodern tools. The Manichean dichotomies of the text are flipped primarily via the decentering of Thor and Asgard. The film essentially subverts the dynamic of villain to hero, other to self, and the Manichean boundaries of the cycle are questioned because the system as a whole is questioned. Furthermore, the hegemonic power structures which were instilled over the course of the saga are toppled in *Ragnarok* via its themes of decolonization and demythologization as Asgard's insidious imperial and colonial nature is exposed; this is further emphasized via the questioning of worthiness and what it means to be a savior and hero. Even when read as an apocalypse film (which corresponds quite neatly into the cycle's apocalyptic leanings), *Ragnarok*'s eschatological drive is subverted as, during the film's climax, Thor stops trying to prevent the end of the world and instead actively triggers it in order to stop Hela. Asgard as the geopolitical hegemon of the Nine Realms is overthrown and completely destroyed *because* of Thor's actions as he strikes against the status quo. Clearly, Waititi's Maori heritage and identification as indigenous is reflected in the film and further bolsters the postmodern movie's progressive and postcolonial themes and narrative.

Of course, *Ragnarok* is still a superhero blockbuster, so the film is not wholly subversive, relying upon particular tropes from the MCU. During the film's climactic battle, Thor rediscovers himself as the God of Thunder. By embracing his suffering and growing from it, the hero repositions himself back into the role of self essentially weaponizing his otherness. Furthermore, though Thor and the Asgardian refugees can be arguably read as othered because of the destruction of their homeland, post-*Ragnarok*, the Asgardians find a new home on Earth and are welcomed with open arms, their coded Whiteness unthreatening as opposed to the racialized otherness of *Captain Marvel's* Skrull refugees for example, who are not given the same courtesy (AlAwadhi and Dittmer, 2020a). *Ragnarok* also still inevitably dehumanizes the film's henchmen, including the Grandmaster's guards ("the helmets were designed to remove any humanness from their faces," concept artist Jonay Bacallado explains) and Hela's undead Berserkers (qtd. in Roussos, 2017, p. 161). It would seem that no Marvel movie can function without othering and exploiting the story's henchmen for the sake of its action sequences.[80] And so, *Ragnarok* is ultimately double coded and paradoxical in its critique of the MCU. As Linda Hutcheon (1989, p. 101) argues, parody "both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies," but regardless, the subversion remains critical, and this is unmistakably apparent in *Ragnarok's* confrontation with the cycle's system as the subversion is interwoven throughout the text.

Though Fredric Jameson condemned pastiche and Hollywood film as symptoms of late capitalism, arguing that postmodern texts were empty cannibalizations of the past, Hutcheon (1989) believed that

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[80] See Chapter 2 for more on the henchman as the racialized other within the Infinity Saga.

> postmodern film does not deny that it is implicated in capitalist modes of production, because it knows it cannot. Instead it exploits its 'insider' position in order to begin a subversion from within, to talk to consumers in a capitalist society in a way that will get us where we live, so to speak. (p. 114)

Ultimately, *Ragnarok* corresponds quite neatly to Hutcheon's analysis. It is a superhero movie at the end of the day, and as a result, there are some lines that even Waititi cannot cross. Nevertheless, *Ragnarok* is the most progressive and radical entry in the entire Infinity Saga because of its bold deconstruction of the MCU film cycle. *Ragnarok* proves that the MCU film cycle has the propensity for experimentation as well as the incorporation of counter-hegemonic ideas.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Over the course of this chapter, I have argued that the MCU film cycle is heavily influenced by three intertwined themes which color and shape the saga's films and its underlying relationship to otherness. These include: the Manichean tendencies which implement binary dichotomies and an apocalyptic tone within the superhero narrative; the superhero's role in embodying and enforcing cultural hegemony (upholding Whiteness, American Empire, Western colonialism etc.) via the tools of surveillance and panopticism; and finally, the industrial collaborations with various governmental and military bodies that influence these texts. These characteristics function as the cycle's foundations and are perhaps most tangible within the saga's first phase as well as the most significant franchise within the cycle itself, the *Avengers* quartet. Of course, as has been argued, a film cycle is not a static or fixed model, but rather it develops and fluctuates over time according to audience desires as well the current accepted hegemonic ideals, and this process is evident in the MCU film cycle. The MCU film cycle is not a monolith. It may often be somewhat predictable in its ideological

structure and Manichean hegemonic system, but there are many characters and films which seem to counter the established system. Moreover, the cycle's progression further echoes the decades-long evolution of the superhero genre in comics, and this evolution is primarily witnessed in the saga's third phase, its films challenging and subverting the cycle's internalized system, with *Thor: Ragnarok* as the leading example.

Though there are films within the Infinity Saga which begin to confront and reshape the cycle, this process will arguably be rather tedious and slow-going. Indeed, despite *Ragnarok's* deconstructive tone, Phase Three includes several films which heavily prescribe to the saga's original generic traits, the most glaring of which include the Avengers films, *Infinity War* and *Endgame*, as well as *Captain Marvel*. Concluding the Infinity Saga, all three films are emblematic of the Manichean and apocalyptic language which shapes the cycle as a whole, all while uplifting the superhero as a hegemonic and conservative power that preserves the status quo. And *Captain Marvel* further proves that Marvel Studios is not finished collaborating with governmental and military bodies to reproduce the cycle's propagandistic rhetoric. By the end of the Infinity Saga, it is clear that the MCU film cycle as a whole does allow for a certain level of experimentation, and while there is a conforming to the conservative Manichean hegemonic ideals which are emblematic of the cycle's beginnings, there is also a propensity for anti-hegemonic and progressive ideas as well as the diversification of race and gender representation.

All three of the components which this chapter has investigated clearly demonstrate that the MCU film cycle's system relies upon there being a prevailing notion of otherness. Otherness is ingrained within the MCU film cycle. The MCU superhero narrative thrives

through the self/other dialectic as the schema both feeds into and feeds upon the MCU's Manichean landscape, the superhero's role in relation to hegemony, and the external influence of industrial dealings. Hopefully, moving forward, it will be interesting to see if the future of the MCU will provide more films which challenge rather than conform to the cycle's primary characteristics, reevaluating the representation of otherness, and this dissertation's conclusion will briefly consider these tensions. Regardless, with the thematic groundwork of the MCU film cycle examined, the next chapters of this dissertation will explore how these structures influence and shape the saga's representations of otherness in relation, first, to race and ethnicity, and then, gender and sexuality.

CHAPTER 2
RACE AND ETHNICITY

Magic, mystery, and Eastern mysticism are all key motifs that dictate the tone and narrative

of *Doctor Strange*, and when Stephen Strange first enters the Sanctum Santorum in New York

City, these three themes coalesce in the Chamber of Relics. A gallery which displays various

artefacts and relics of mystical nature, the Chamber of Relics is a site where "everything" was

designed to "be slightly intriguing and mysterious" (Johnston, 2016b, p. 238). Strange first

encounters his famous Cloak of Levitation in the Chamber, the audience also privy to

countless Orientalized artefacts, most of which are clearly coded as Eastern. The Chamber of

Relics, like many other sites in the saga, functions much like a museum, and the manner in

which the chamber is portrayed exposes a recurring racialized gaze within the MCU. This

museum gaze can be linked back to Timothy Mitchell's seminal article, "Orientalism and the

Exhibitionary Order," where Mitchell explores how world exhibitions, much like museums,

recreate an Orientalist version of the Middle East via essentialism, otherness, and absence.

Mitchell (1992) argues:

> The effect of such spectacles was to set the world up as a picture.
> They ordered it up as an object on display to be investigated and
> experienced by the dominating European gaze… The world-as-
> exhibition means not an exhibition of the world but the world
> organized and grasped as though it were an exhibition. (pp. 296-98)

This 'dominating European gaze' can be equated to what Frantz Fanon labelled the White gaze as it is a look that reorders, objectifies, and creates an exotic spectacle out of the Orient, or more broadly speaking the racialized other. The manner in which the exhibition is ordered via both Mitchell and Fanon's gazes structures the greater meanings of "History or Empire or Progress" (Mitchell, 1992, p. 298).[81] In a museum, one's gaze is always objectifying and assessing, the exhibited objects are hidden and protected behind glass walls and even separated from the visitor by signs and ropes; the objects are purely to be gazed upon and not to be touched. *Doctor Strange's* Chamber of Relics clearly emulates this process while also paralleling Mitchell's world-as-exhibition; "the curiosity of" the audience "demanded by a diversity of mechanisms" renders the artefacts in the Room "up as its object" (Mitchell, 1992, p. 296). "The representation of reality," Mitchell explains, "was always an exhibit set up for an observer in its midst, an observing European gaze," or a White gaze in this case, "surrounded by and yet excluded from the exhibition's careful order" (p. 299). The Chamber of Relics is then Orientalised and fetishized by both Strange and the viewer via both a museum gaze and a White gaze. Storing and hiding these appropriated artefacts in a New York brownstone house reeks of the colonial theft and cultural appropriation that is inherent to the system of museums. And to add insult to injury, these relics become toy-like weapons and tools which only Doctor Strange and other Masters of the Mystic Arts can exploit in their adventures.

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[81] London (2009) further confirms how these greater meanings as well as the glorification of colonialism have been inherited by science fiction from world fairs. For more on museums and the gaze, see Fyfe and Ross (1995), Bouquet (2012), Chambers *et al*. (2017), as well as Troelenberg and Savino (2017).

There are several other museums which appear over the course of the Infinity Saga which also emulate this recurring objectifying look.[82] *Guardians of the Galaxy* provides a rather more sinister version of this gaze through Tanaleer Tivan, also known as the Collector, and his personal Museum: "the galaxy's largest collection of fauna, relics, and species of all manner." With his strong, assessing gaze and distinctive spectacles, the Collector objectifies everything and everyone around him; in addition to the mentioned fauna and relics, his museum also contains caged beings, including a Frost Giant, Dark Elf, Hurctarian, and a Chitauri, amongst other aliens. In one scene, the Collector even propositions Guardians member Groot for his corpse. The Collector's Museum is essentially a museum at its worst and most disturbing, as all those who have been collected are ordered up as objects on display, inspected and examined by the Collector while perpetually trapped inside their glass cages. That members of the audience, particularly fans of the comics, comb over these scenes searching for Easter eggs hidden within the Collector's Museum adds a further dimension to the dehumanizing effects of this gaze.

It is worth mentioning that, unlike *Doctor Strange* and *Guardians*, *Black Panther* provides a subversive portrayal of the museum in the MCU. The film comments on the inherently colonial nature of museums as well as the issue of restitution via its portrayal of the Museum of Great Britain, a fictionalized version of the British Museum. It is in this museum that the audience is introduced to the film's antagonist, Erik Killmonger. During the scene, the Museum Director engages in a White gaze while explaining several Sub-Saharan

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[82] This look is not always racially tinged, and yet the objectification remains. For example, a key scene in *The Winter Soldier* has Steve Rogers walking through a Captain America exhibit in the Smithsonian; the objectification, commodification, and historification of Rogers' life highlights the character's internal struggle between individualism and his duty as Captain America.

and West African artefacts to Killmonger to which he angrily retorts, "How do you think your ancestors got these? You think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it like they took everything else?" *Black Panther* subversively calls attention to and inverts the White gaze while also touching on the film's overarching themes of empire, colonialism, and reparations.

There have clearly been various iterations of the museum gaze throughout the Infinity Saga, and this recurring motif is reflective of a broader look, Fanon's White gaze. The Chamber of Relics, The Collector's Museum, and the Museum of Great Britain all exhibit how race is more often than not subjected to otherness via a gaze that ranges from exotifying and spectralizing to dehumanizing and demarginalizing. Over the course of this chapter, I consider how race and ethnicity in the Infinity Saga are depicted and othered in a variety of ways. The portrayal of race and ethnicity in the MCU is generally fraught with a lack of diverse representation, a reliance on stereotypes, and the implementation of a variety of gazes which enforce the MCU film cycle's system of otherness.

The first section of this chapter is a broad and brief overview of the cycle's treatment of race and ethnicity. In it, I consider how the White gaze pervades the Infinity Saga: first, through the representation of geographical settings which produce a Manichean landscape; second, via the depiction of characters of color who are for the most part marginalized sidekicks and minor characters; and finally, by examining how the casting of actors of color complicates this analysis. The following sections of the chapter are in-depth studies which question how the cycle engages with race and ethnicity through two specific lenses: the representation of the alien body and the Oriental body.

I first consider how aliens are racialized over the course of the Infinity Saga via a White gaze, a look that is inherently linked to fantasy and science fiction genres through the themes of colonialism and whiteness. I then examine how the White gaze objectifies the alien body through two methods: first, via the construction of a racialized schema, one that privileges particular humanoid alien species contingent on whether they have been coded as white or non-white/alien; and second, by surveying which alien species are presented as monstrous and creature-like and how their role as henchmen adds to the discussion of otherness.

The final and most extensive portion of this chapter is an in-depth analysis which investigates how Orientalism functions in the Infinity Saga through an Occidental Gaze. I argue that this gaze determines hero from villain through the use of Orientalist stereotypes and coded imagery; the look constructs a colonial fantasy which positions the audience as the Occident, the West, in viewing the Oriental body as lesser and other. I examine how the Occidental gaze is adapted from the original comics and develops over the course the saga by analyzing one film from each of the MCU's three phases: *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 3*, and *Doctor Strange*. By exploring these patterns of race and ethnicity as other within the Infinity Saga, the MCU film cycle's system becomes clearer, as does the question of how the saga's first three phases push towards an evolution of the franchise's Manichean and hegemonic system.

I. OVERVIEW OF RACE AND THE WHITE GAZE IN THE MCU

In this section, I consider how the White gaze is embedded within the Infinity Saga; I first define the White gaze, and I then examine how this look impacts the MCU's films. This is

accomplished by observing three key patterns: the representation of settings, which reflect the Manichean dichotomies of East and West; the depiction of characters, via the repeated presence of stereotypical non-white characters who generally function as sidekicks or minor characters; and finally, the wide disparities witnessed within casting in the MCU. I conclude this section by briefly examining which notable films in the saga subvert or negate the White gaze, providing both complex characters of color and diverse casting.

1. <u>The White Gaze</u>

As was discussed in the literature review, Fanon proposed the concept of the White gaze in the mid-twentieth century, and since then, this theory has been considered and re-evaluated by several individuals (Diawara, 1988; Gaines, 1986; Shohat & Stam, 2014; Yancy, 2016). It was concluded that through the White gaze, the white self creates the notion of otherness, instilling an inferiority complex within the non-white other. The White gaze fixes and distorts the body of the other, dehumanizing and objectifying it to satisfy and enforce a hegemonic whiteness. This gaze, which is panoptic and rooted in colonialism, spectralizes and degrades the non-white body, ultimately reducing it to a series of racially and/or ethnically charged stereotypes. The White gaze influences how a spectator engages with the non-white body on screen, and despite the viewer's attempts to resist identifying with these damaging depictions, the gaze's hegemonic dialectic still retains its inherently traumatizing effects, particularly on the non-white viewer (hooks, 1992; Diawara, 1988).

The White gaze appears in the MCU through a variety of means. It is initially witnessed by casting the main superhero in a film as a White savior, one who functions as a hegemonic and propagandistic tool enforcing the MCU film cycle's underlying system as was discussed in

the previous chapter. Subsequently, the White gaze others the non-white body, exoticizing and dehumanizing it in order to satisfy the cycle's Manichean system. This othering look structurally occurs by informing the representation of setting and characters, further affecting the casting of actors in the MCU.

2. <u>Settings under the White Gaze</u>

Over the course of the Infinity Saga, the White gaze constructs a discernable juxtaposition between the representation of East and West, and this is evident in the representation of various geographical locations depicted in the films. The MCU's superheroes are based in, and indeed, the majority of the saga's films take place in, the United States. Tony Stark is initially located in Los Angeles and Stark Tower is built in New York City with the onset of the Avengers; Steve Rogers travels from New Jersey to Europe during World War II and back again to Washington D.C. in *The Winter Soldier*; Thor spends much of his first film in New Mexico; and late-comers such as Ant-Man and Spider-Man are based in San Francisco and Queens, respectively. Even when considering films set in space, more often than not the superhero is based on a planet coded as Western and White, as is seen with *Thor*'s Asgard and the *Guardians of the Galaxy's* Nova Empire.[83] When the MCU's superheroes travel around Earth, countries which lie in the East or the Global South are, more often than not, portrayed in a stereotypical and degrading manner. Terrorist-ridden Afghanistan and Pakistan, bleak faux Eastern European Sokovia, and even Brazil's *favelas* and India's slums are all key locations which enable the White gaze's narrative. And this juxtaposition between East and West is perhaps most clear in the first *Avengers* film.

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[83] See also AlAwadhi and Dittmer (2020a) for more on this subject in relation to *Ragnarok* and *Captain Marvel*.

Over the course of *The Avengers* (2011), clear distinctions are drawn in the film's numerous settings, particularly in the scenes which take place in Russia and India as opposed to the United States and Germany. Natasha Romanov/Black Widow's entrance to the film takes place in an old, abandoned warehouse in Russia, the base of which is an arms-smuggling operation; the constructed mise-en-scène heavily conveys the atmosphere of a derelict USSR. Crystal chandeliers are hung along with heavy chains, and ornate mirrors, stolen paintings, and several crates of guns are scattered around the warehouse. During the scene, the darkness enveloping the space contrasts with the harsh spotlight hanging over a supposedly incapacitated Romanov. The superheroine is interrogated by, and then interrogates and takes down the old and leering General Luchkov and his henchmen, characters who Production Designer James Chinlund describes as "unsavory former Soviet Union types" (qtd. in Surrell, 2012, p. 80). In designing the warehouse, Chinlund had hoped to "[bring] the textures of the old world into this twentieth century space" (p. 80). The construction of the scene then conveys an outdated Russia, bare and desperate, and morally corrupt, feeding into an essentialist and stereotypical reading of the country and further echoing Cold War-era anxieties.[84]

This essentialization continues in the following scene which introduces the audience to Banner hiding in a slum in Calcutta, India. The choice of Calcutta echoes *The Incredible Hulk*, as Banner hides in key locales of otherness on the margins while still prevailing as a White savior, only this time he is a doctor desperately trying to help sick children. Banner is led by a

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[84] This recurring pattern of East European Cold War stereotypes is repeatedly witnessed in the saga i.e. *Iron Man 2's* villain Ivan Antonovich Vanko, *Age of Ultron's* representation of Sokovia, *Civil War's* HYDRA facility in Siberia etc.

little girl to an abandoned shack, and along the way, the audience is immersed in a muddy and grimy slum pulsating and overflowing with people. At one point, the audience even catches a glimpse of two men seated outside with a TV amongst a group of goats. Banner is led to a haphazard, cold shack at the slum's margins, and there, he is confronted by Romanov who tells him, "You know, for a man who's supposed to be avoiding stress, you picked a hell of a place to settle." A hell of a place is perhaps an understatement. Like the Russian warehouse, the entire construction of the slum, as rural, poverty-stricken, filthy, and broken-down, is set up to contrast other destinations in *The Avengers*, and indeed, Chinlund himself describes what "a pleasure" it was "to bring the rich contrast of a world like India to the hyper-tech world of *The Avengers*" (qtd. in Surrell, 2012, p. 90).

Both representations of Russia and India clearly juxtapose the superheroes' 'hyper-tech world,' from the opening scene which takes place in Project PEGASUS's laboratories to the state-of-the-art Stark Tower and S.H.I.E.L.D.'s aircraft base, the Helicarrier. Emphasizing highly advanced technology, as well as a clear militarized modernity, these locales seem worlds away from Russia and India. The dichotomies between East and West are glaring. This is even more clear during a key scene set in Stuttgart, Germany wherein the Avengers take their first stand against the film's villain, Loki. The scene takes place at an art gallery where a string quartet plays Schubert as swathes of the elite drink champagne and mingle. Under the White gaze's weight, the imagery and tone of the entire scene is diametrically opposed to corrupt and dilapidated Russia and dirty, poverty-stricken India.

It is worth pointing out that, in contrast to *The Avengers* and many of the saga's films, *The Incredible Hulk* (2008) seems to invert this dialectic as a result of Banner/the Hulk's own

unique relationship to otherness. As was discussed in the previous chapter, Banner undergoes various degrees of othering in the film, the most significant of which is that he is othered by the United States government and military. As a result, there is a reversal of the center and the margin, and the dichotomies of East and West are reversed; the United States comes to symbolize conflict and danger, while the countries Banner hides in provide safety and sanctuary. Banner finds refuge in the largest favela in Brazil, Rocinha, a slum that is both vibrant in color and life and yet rife with poverty. It would then seem that the White gaze is inverted in *The Incredible Hulk*, and yet, the representation of the few Brazilians in the film are still quite stereotypical in nature. For example, Banner takes a lesson on how to control his anger through his body from an unnamed teacher; during his one scene, this tutor performs a breathing technique while manipulating his diaphragm: the camera lingers upon his body, the White gaze exoticizing and constructing it into a site of spectacle. Banner also saves a potential love interest turned damsel in distress, named Martina, when she is being harassed by a group of Brazilian men, credited as 'Tough Guys'. The White gaze is relentless, casting Banner as a White savior amidst a land of dangerous, sexually aggressive natives. Moreover, the representation of Brazil in the film points towards the anti-Modernist tradition that casts the Global South in a romanticized and exoticized light as a beacon of nature, spirituality, mysticism etc. And so, despite the film's slight subversion of the gaze, *The Incredible Hulk* still heavily relies upon one-dimensional and racist representations of Brazilians, and Manicheanism remains a driving influence in the portrayal of Brazil.

While the more Manichean-influenced settings of the MCU appear for the most part during the first half of the Saga, there seems to be a more rounded, less stereotypical depiction of the East and Global South by the end of Phase Three. For example, *Doctor*

Strange provides an interesting glimpse of Nepal which attempts to subvert the White gaze as will be discussed later on in the chapter. *Black Panther* also offers a rich investigation of what an African country unburdened by the weight of Western colonialism and imperialism may look like through the setting of Wakanda. Even *The Avengers'* slum in Calcutta is later contrasted with a short scene in *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, wherein Stark is seen attending a brightly colored wedding in India. And finally, though films like *Ant-Man* and *Spider-Man* are set within the United States, they provide a decently diverse casting, reflecting the multicultural settings in which they are based, i.e. San Francisco and Queens, respectively.[85] There nevertheless is still quite a disparity in the representation of non-white characters in the Infinity Saga, as they are dissected, exoticized, and dehumanized under the White gaze.

3. <u>Characters and Casting Influenced by the White Gaze</u>

In addition to the representation of setting, the White gaze also informs the manner in which the Infinity Saga's characters are depicted. Whiteness is presented as the default in the superhero text. "Whites must be seen to be white," Richard Dyer (2017, p. 82) says, "yet whiteness as race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen." Perhaps a fitting allegory for the superhero, whiteness is the default and is integral to the MCU. In the Infinity Saga, the White gaze ultimately privileges and elevates both the white body and white actors while casting non-white characters and actors as sidekicks and minor characters who are always on the margins and never at the center.

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[85] This may be due to the fact that the first two phases are eclipsed by Marvel's leading white superheroes (i.e. Iron Man, Captain America, Thor etc.) while the MCU's final phase unveils lesser known heroes, bringing about a slow diversification in the cycle's representation of characters and settings.

Non-white characters, for the most part, either function as sidekicks to the main white superhero, are merely minor characters, or are part of what Kirsten Warner (2017) dubs as 'plastic representation,' background characters who lend a superficial and meaningless sense of ethnic diversity in their respective films. This pattern can be traced back to the original comics, and such characters, particularly sidekicks, are usually two-dimensional in nature, operating as plot devices whose primary function in the narrative is to help uplift the main superhero. The MCU's non-white sidekick trend begins with James Rhodes/War Machine in *Iron Man* and is witnessed across all three phases of the saga: Hogun, Heimdall, and later Valkyrie in the *Thor* trilogy; the Howling Commandos and Sam Wilson/Falcon in the *Captain America* trilogy; Wong in *Doctor Strange*; the Wombats and Bill Foster in the *Ant-Man* franchise; *Spider-Man's* Ned and MJ; and finally, *Captain Marvel's* Maria Rambeau. Even villainous sidekicks contribute to this recurring pattern as is seen with *The Dark World's* Kurse and *Guardians of the Galaxy's* Korath, for example. Essentially, the sidekick, as Ron Buchanan (2003, p. 16) explains, "assumes a subservient role to the master," which in this case is the superhero. The relationship between superhero and sidekick then is always one of imbalances and never of equals. James Rhodes is perhaps the clearest example of that imbalance at play.

The first major character of color in the Infinity Saga, Rhodes is the quintessential sidekick. His principal role over the course of the MCU is to uplift and support his best friend, Tony Stark, and Kevin Feige succinctly summarizes Rhodes's character as "Tony's conscience" ('War Machine,' 2013). In *Iron Man,* Rhodes is first introduced to the audience after Stark has skipped an awards ceremony wherein his friend was meant to present an award to him, and later, Stark makes Rhodes wait for three hours before their flight to Afghanistan. Stark's conduct, and more importantly, Rhodes' exasperation, are presented as a source of comedy;

however, Rhodes calls out Stark's childish behavior: "You don't respect yourself, so I know you don't respect me... I'm just your babysitter. So, when you need your diaper changed..." This sentiment arguably overshadows Rhodes and Stark's entire relationship. Though Rhodes would appear to be tired of cleaning up Tony's messes in *Iron Man 2*, the conflict between the two characters is ultimately resolved by the end of the film, and Rhodes would subsequently emerge as a fully formed sidekick named War Machine/Iron Patriot. James Rhodes however remains subordinate to Stark and other white superheroes over the course of the saga, and his character is barely developed, only ever present to support Stark or augment the Avengers when needed. Critically, Rhodes is heavily injured during the battle between the saga's superheroes in *Civil War*; the sidekick is consequently paralyzed from the waist down, undeniably 'fridged'. Fridging, a comic book trope originally posited by writer Gail Simone (1999), occurs when a female character is "depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator," her suffering becomes a plot device to anguish the male superhero and further his arc.[86] Fridging arguably also presents a racial dimension, in that non-white characters are similarly often sacrificed and relegated to plot devices for the sake of their white superhero counterparts. In *Civil War*, Rhodes is unquestionably fridged, echoing the death of Bill Foster/Goliath in the *Civil War* comics storyline; his near-death both heightens the stakes of the film while fueling the conflict between Tony Stark and Steve Rogers. Everything presented in the film, both during and after the incident, revolves around Stark's guilt and his desire for revenge, completely neglecting Rhodes' own traumatic experience. Rhodes' treatment is emblematic of how non-white characters are largely marginalized and degraded by the White gaze in the MCU film cycle.

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[86] See Simone's website *Women in Refrigerators* for an extensive list of examples.

In addition to the representation of non-white characters in the MCU, the saga's casting is also heavily influenced by the White gaze. The MCU's cast, and generally speaking, its directors, production teams, and crews are predominantly white.[87] As whiteness becomes default, this recurring trend becomes further complicated by fan and audience expectations. An infamous example of this merging can be witnessed in the controversy sparked by the casting of Black British actor Idris Elba as the Norse god Heimdall in *Thor*. After Elba was confirmed as Heimdall, a white nationalist organization called the Council of Conservative Citizens organized a boycott of the film. Their boycott brings to attention how Vikings both aesthetically and culturally have often been by co-opted by white supremacist movements, heightening the Asgardian Empire's functionality as a predominantly White site.[88] It further exposes how integral the White gaze is to the *Thor* franchise, the MCU, and its fandom at large. Commenting on the outrage, Elba pointed out that: "Thor's mythical, right? Thor has a hammer that flies to him when he clicks his fingers. That's OK, but the color of my skin is wrong?" (qtd. In Jones, 2010). Though Elba's casting would seem to be subversive, his character (like Rhodes) still functions as a sidekick to the film's white superhero. And though *Ragnarok* goes to great lengths to establish the Norse god as a heroic defender of the Asgardian refugees quite independent from Thor, Heimdall is nevertheless fridged at the very start of *Infinity War*, and his sacrifice is used as fodder to fuel Thor's anguish and desire for revenge against Thanos. Both Rhodes and Heimdall's treatment displays the cycle's repeated othering of non-white characters, and Heimdall's death is evidence that though a radical film

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[87] *Forbes* examined the first twenty movies in the Infinity Saga, contending that 61% of actors in the MCU are white or of Caucasian descent. See Karim (2018) for a more thorough breakdown on the statistics. It is also important to note that only two non-white directors were hired over the course of the entire Infinity Saga.
[88] For more on the intersection between Vikings and the Alt Right movement, see: Young (2016), Burley (2019), and Blake (2020). Also see Council of Conservative Citizens (no date) for more on the Council itself.

like *Ragnarok* may try to recenter non-white characters, future texts within the film cycle often return to decentering of these characters, exploiting them as marginalized plot devices and sacrificing them in order to uplift the primary white superheroes' character arcs.

There has of course been a slow, inexorable diversification of casting and therefore range of characters in the MCU, and this has become particularly evident in Phase 3. *Guardians of the Galaxy* was the first film to push towards a more diverse cast and set of characters, a trend which would continue in films like *Doctor Strange*, *Ragnarok*, *Black Panther*, and *Captain Marvel*. Rather significantly, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* racebent several classic white characters from the comics, including Mary Jane Watson, Elizabeth Allen, and Flash Thompson, as well as villains such as Shocker and Scorpion. Echoing the controversy behind Elba's casting, African American actress Zendaya's casting as the typically white MJ, and Tessa Thompson's casting as Valkyrie would both spark outrage and controversy. It would seem that even though the MCU is steadily diversifying, discourse, particularly stemming from fans, regarding the race-bending and reinterpretation of classically white Marvel characters continues to plague the MCU. Arguably then, the White gaze does not only infect the MCU film cycle, but it also sways the franchise's audience.

It would be negligent not to discuss a pivotal film in the saga which arguably disrupts the White gaze's tyrannical hold: the critically and financially acclaimed *Black Panther*. The titular hero was the first black superhero in Marvel's comics, and *Black Panther* fittingly mirrors this with T'Challa as the first black superhero lead in the MCU. The film has been praised for its predominantly black cast and crew as well as its complex, three-dimensional characters of color. In *Black Panther*, the White gaze is inverted through a variety of means.

This is accomplished via its representation of Wakanda and through its extensive casting of actors of color. *Black Panther* also engages with ideas which thematically subvert the White gaze, as the film's underlying question ponders what it means to be black, further examining notions of African American diaspora, colonialism and imperialism, and more. Despite this, however, *Black Panther* falls into the traps of the MCU's system, in that it is ultimately still a Manichean narrative wherein T'Challa, who is critically both a superhero *and* the king of Wakanda, enables Wakandan cultural hegemony, enforcing the status quo of his nation. Furthermore, as the only predominantly non-white film of the Infinity Saga, the film is unfortunately tokenistic. Robert Saunders (2019) further calls attention to how *Black Panther* functions as a neo-liberal text, one which paradoxically "espouses anti-imperialism, black liberation and an inclusive pan-Africanism, while simultaneously reproducing Africa as a 'space of violence' … and profiting off of black spending power during a critical moment of empowerment" (p. 139). *Black Panther* then, like other films in the saga such as *Captain Marvel*, cannot fully be emancipated from the clutches of the White gaze because of its reliance upon the saga's Manichean hegemonies.

This brief overview of the Infinity Saga demonstrates that the White gaze is integral to the formation of race relations and the othering of the non-white body in the MCU. The MCU's representation of setting and character as well as the issues of casting and audience expectations all confirm the role of the White gaze within the saga. Though there are a few notable films which attempt to counter the effects of this look, the foundations of the MCU film cycle prevent any radical change from occurring, at the very least during the franchise's first two phases. The next sections of this chapter will provide in-depth explorations of how

the White gaze pervades the Infinity Saga, first, via the alien body, and then, through the Oriental body.

II. RACIALIZING ALIENS

In this section, I consider how alien characters in the MCU are racially coded and, as a result, othered through the White gaze. I begin by examining the White gaze's connection to the fantasy and science-fiction genres. I then survey the Infinity Saga's portrayal of aliens through close-textual analysis: first, I consider the representation of humanoid aliens which reflect a racialized schema, and I then analyze the more monstrous, creature-like aliens of the saga who generally function as henchmen.

1. Aliens and the White Gaze

The reading of aliens as a racial and ethnic schema has been explored by many scholars over the past several decades (Cornea, 2007; Mirzoeff, 1999; Young, 2016).[89] The definition of alien relies on the notion of difference; the etymological root of the word is *aliēnus*, that is 'foreigner' or 'stranger' (*Alien*, no date). As Constance Penley (1991) points out, inherent to the science-fiction genre is the question of difference, "typically posed as that of the difference between human and non-human" (p. vii).[90] To be alien then is to be other, and in the MCU, the representation of extra-terrestrials relies on a schema which privileges particular aliens while demonizing others contingent upon their relation to whiteness. In the

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[89] See also Cartmell *et al.* (1999).
[90] Most genres do rely upon a fundamental binary or existentialist threat of sorts, though, of course, this binary differs from one genre to the next.

MCU, aliens are racially coded via a White gaze that is inherently linked to the melding of the fantasy, science fiction, and the superhero genre.

The relationship between the White gaze and colonialism is imperative when considering how aliens function in fiction. Mirzoeff (1999) argues that disputes from the era of colonialism concerning what he calls the "culture/civilization divide," that is disputes regarding who embraces the role of the self and who is shackled into the role of the other, have not disappeared. Instead, these anxieties have been displaced during the postcolonial era into texts fascinated by the extra-terrestrial. Mirzoeff claims that:

> At the time of the first contacts between Europeans, Africans, Amerindians, Asians and others, Europeans often assumed that the people they met were from different species from their own. For [the Europeans, it seemed obvious] that the West had civilization and its Others did not. More recently, advocates of multi-culturalism have insisted that all human culture is civilization and worthy of equal respect… [this] is clearly not yet universally accepted in EurAmerican society. For our television and cinema screens are endlessly debating the culture/civilization divide in the displaced format of the alien or extraterrestrial. Are aliens good or bad? What do non-humans look like? What will the encounter with such beings be like? (1999, p. 193)

This culture/civilization divide which was once at the heart of the encounter between the colonist and the colonized is rooted in a human's encounter with an alien. In fiction then, the alien as other has roots in colonial anxieties that are centuries old. This comes as no surprise when both fantasy and science fiction genres heavily rely upon colonial wish-fulfilment fantasies of White saviors discovering, exploring, and conquering the land of the other, of encountering and dominating the non-human. Whiteness is key; it is, as Rachel Young (2016) argues, the "default setting" in fantasy, as much as it is in science fiction and essentially the

MCU film cycle (p. 13). "Fantasy habitually constructs the Self through Whiteness and Otherness through an array of racist stereotypes," Young continues, "particularly but not exclusively those associated with Blackness." (p. 24) The audience identifies with the protagonist, who if not white is then coded as white, while the alien is coded as non-white and other often via stereotypes which emphasize their difference through their body, physical features, language, social structures, and functionality in the narrative itself; the construction of this generic coding clearly relies upon the White gaze. Moreover, John Rieder (2008) similarly argues that a colonial gaze is key to science fiction, as it is a look which:

> distributes knowledge and power to the subject who looks, while denying or minimizing access to power for its object, the one looked at. This structure… both rests upon and helps to maintain and reproduce the political and economic arrangements that establish the subjects' respective positions. (p. 7)

In the MCU then, this colonial White gaze is preoccupied with objectifying the alien body, and this look is embedded through two manners in the saga: first, it appears by constructing a racialized/ethnic schema of aliens, a hierarchy which privileges particular aliens over others depending on the extent to which they have been coded as white; and second, the White gaze is utilized in order to demonize and militarize aliens who primarily operate as villainous henchmen. Both of these motifs result in binaries, be they of human vs. alien or good alien vs. evil alien, echoing and reinforcing the MCU's Manichean schema.

2. Humanoid Aliens under the White Gaze

While the majority of the Infinity Saga takes place on Earth, there are several films which are set in space across the MCU with humanoid aliens at their front and center. The most pertinent of these films include: the *Thor* franchise, the first films in the saga to instill the

White gaze in space; both of the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films, movies that greatly magnify the look and complicate it; and finally, *Captain Marvel*, a film which ultimately attempts to subvert the White gaze.

a) Thor

Young (2016, p. 24) maintains that "the Middle Ages are, anachronistically, considered White space in the popular imagination," and the *Thor* trilogy echoes this sentiment. As was discussed in the previous chapter, the *Thor* franchise revolves around the Asgardian geopolitical order, an empire built upon colonialism and Whiteness. The Asgardian people are coded as White and positioned as the self when juxtaposed with other alien races. This is unmistakably evident when considering the villainized Frost Giants and the Dark Elves as I have already discussed in depth, and it is also apparent in both the trilogy's Viking/Nordic and Shakespearean aesthetic Whiteness (AlAwadhi and Dittmer, 2020a). However, the White gaze is perhaps clearest when considering the representation of other alien races who inhabit the Nine Realms, particularly the Vanir.

In *The Dark World*, the audience engage with the White Gaze in one of the film's opening scenes set in Vanaheim, home to the Vanir. After the destruction of the Bifrost in *Thor*, the hero and the Einherjar are forced to battle with a group of raiders called the Marauders who have launched several coup d'états across the Nine Realms. The audience watch as these raiders invade and pillage a rural village in Vanaheim. Contrasting the pristine golden towers and shiny beacons of Asgard, Vanaheim is earthy and green, the village the audience visits perched on the edge of a forest. Dust and dirt cloud the air in the midst of the

battle, upturned clay pots lay scattered amongst bowls of spices. The spectator even catches

glimpses of ancient pillars and large yurts on fire in the distance. Vanaheim appears to the

audience as a realm pre-industrialization; as Production Designer Charlie Wood explains in *The*

Art of Thor: The Dark World, the team wanted Vanaheim to appear "tribal":

> Early on it looked as though [the Vanir] were going to have more of
> a tribal culture - but we didn't want to do something that was
> stereotypical. So we ended up looking at a lot of different early
> architectural types: Mayan, early Christian, Asian, and different
> religious orders and influences… We basically wanted to see
> something that was nomadic and something that was ancient. (qtd.
> in Javins and Moore, 2013, p. 37)

In order to further establish the indigenous/Asian tone of the realm, *The Dark World's*

production team had also originally intended on filming the Vanaheim sequences in China and

Bolivia in order to accentuate its tribal look, though they would eventually decide on filming

in Bourne Woods, England (Javins and Moore, 2013, p. 37). Even when conceiving the Vanir,

Concept Artist Andy Park said that their physical features "heavily referenced indigenous

looks- especially traditional Asian influences;" these people are darker skinned than the

Asgardians with earthier tones in clothing and can also be seen wearing facial paint (qtd. in

Javins and Moore, 2013, p. 40). Jackson Sze, another concept artist who worked on the film,

further clarifies:

> The Vanirs draw their look from Asian cultures. I borrowed from
> Tibetan and Mongolian influences for my designs. Colorful
> beadwork and fabrics hopefully help emphasize their crafts and
> draw a contrast with the more refined Asgardian citizens. (qtd. in
> Javins and Moore, 2013, p. 40)

Needless to say, primarily connecting Asian cultures with the tribal and primitive Vanir, a

people contrasted against the "more refined Asgardian citizens" is quite implicitly Orientalist

and unmistakable evidence of the White gaze at work. It is further important to note that the

sole Asian character present in the *Thor* franchise, Thor's ally Hogun, is the only Vanir whose character is fleshed out. That being said, Hogun is still two-dimensional in nature. Dubbed Hogun the Grim, the Vanir rarely smiles or speaks, and his demeanor is always solemn and stoic. Hogun's characterization from both the comics and the first *Thor* film draws on that of a stereotypical samurai (despite his weapon of choice being a mace) while his look has been described numerous times as emulating Genghis Khan (Manning, 2011, p. 74; Javins and Moore, 2013, p. 10). Hogun's Orientalist racialization is unfortunately aggravated by the construction of Vanaheim in *The Dark World*. The Vanir's racialization (essentialized Asian, tribal, primitive, and indigenous) and coding (less advanced, less 'refined', feminized in its need to be rescued by the Asgardian Empire) is only exacerbated when *Ragnarok* establishes that the Asgardian Empire was founded through colonial and imperialistic methods. The White gaze then in the *Thor* franchise works to establish race relations that hinge upon the construct of whiteness, creating a hierarchy of races and realms which are only deemed worthy contingent upon their relationship to the Asgardian state.

b) Guardians of the Galaxy

While the *Thor* trilogy is rather limited in its representation of alien races, both *Guardians of the Galaxy* and its sequel, *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* expand the MCU's assemblage of aliens as the franchise is almost exclusively set in space. The *Guardians* franchise engages with the White gaze via its representation of aliens, through the racialized schema of the Nova Empire, and even by the casting of its actors of color; and *Vol. 2* conversely subverts that same look in its depiction of the alien race, the Sovereign.

Over the course of both movies, the audience visits a wide variety of planets, and they come across countless alien 'races' such as the Kree, Krorians, Zehoberei, Kylosians, Halfworlders, Celestials, and Luphomiods. Similar to the Asgardian Empire, the Nova Empire is coded as a White, pseudo-American state that is both familiar and trustworthy to the audience, and its home planet Xandar is constructed as an "Earth that [the audience] can aspire to" (qtd. in Perry, 2014). The empire is made up of many races, including the pink-skinned Krylorians, the yellow-skinned Aokons, and the brown-skinned, cybernetically enhanced Hurctarians; the Nova Empire, however, is primarily ruled by the Xandarians, a race who appears for all purposes to be human in physical features, though their blood may run blue at times. Though all of the Nova Empire's people are essentially coded as white, it is telling that only the white-skinned, human-looking Xandarians control the empire. This racialized schema is further stressed in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, as the Nova Empire is pitted against the militaristic Kree Empire, whose people, the Kree, are for the most part blue-skinned. The ensuing racial schema presented in the *Guardians of the Galaxy* conforms quite neatly into a hierarchy which privileges whiteness (AlAwadhi and Dittmer, 2020a).

Another dimension added to this schema is exposed when examining the casting of actors of color as aliens in the film. *Guardians* was arguably the first film in the MCU to push for a more ethnically diverse cast of actors. That being said, while the franchise's superhero is the white Star-Lord, Peter Quill, the actors of color are for the most part cast as aliens, their ethnicity erased in favor of the various colors and physical features of their respective alien species. The leading example of this trend can be observed with Puerto Rican-Dominican American actress, Zoe Saldana, who plays the only major female role in *Guardians* as Gamora, a green-skinned Zehoberei. Dave Bautista, who is half-Filipino, also plays a gray/blue skinned

Kylosian named Drax with raised red tattoos all over his body. *Vol. 2* would introduce several minor characters of color; however, this trend would continue as the newest addition to the superhero team, Mantis, would be played by Korean-French Pom Klementieff whose character is somewhat insect-like with two antenna and enlarged, black eyes. Mantis in particular presents a further complication to the White gaze in that her character corresponds quite neatly into the stereotype of a docile and submissive Asian woman.

Finally, it is important to mention that the only major non-white character in *Guardians* whose race is not erased is Korath, a villainous Kree operative and Ronan's sidekick who is played by Beninese-French actor Djimon Hounsou. Essentially then, the only non-white character of note whose race is not erased in the *Guardians* franchise is a black sidekick villain, one whose physicality and black body is often emphasized on-screen.[91] During the press tour of *Guardians*, Hounsou himself repeatedly spoke out about how important diversity is in genre films, relating a story about his son:

> I have a four-year old son who loves superheroes from Spider-Man to Iron Man to Batman. He's got all the costumes. One day he looks at me and says 'Dad, I want to be light-skinned so I could be Spider-Man. Spider-Man has light skin.' That was sort of a shock. This is why I am excited to be a part of the Marvel Universe, so I could hopefully provide that diversity in the role of the superhero. (qtd. in Ibarra, 2013)

Hounsou continues saying that "the lack of diversity, specifically in genre films and the superheroes our kids grow up watching and emulating, they can't really identify with… it leaves you out of this world, a little bit. It gives a certain social distance with your world" (qtd. in Radish, 2013). Hounsou's story regarding his son tragically echoes Fanon's discussion of the

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[91] Before Hounsou was cast, Korath was meant to be a blue-coloured Kree.

black Antillian child who, when reading comics, identifies with the white hero, "the explorer, the bringer of civilization, the white man who carries truth to savages—an all-white truth," all while "the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage [is] always symbolized by Negroes or Indians" (1952, p. 114-15). And so, even when there are characters of color in the Saga's space films, they are still exploited by a White gaze which privileges and establishes whiteness as default, enforcing the MCU's Manichean and dichotomous system. The one alien race which seems to subvert this baseline system in the *Guardians* franchise is the Sovereign.

In *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2*, we see a small glimpse of this racial schema inadvertently subverted via the introduction of the Sovereign, a genetically engineered and highly advanced race of aliens. In *Vol. 2,* the Sovereign hire the Guardians of the Galaxy on a dangerous mission. Once the team have successfully completed the task, the Guardians gather in the Sovereign throne room where Ayesha, the Golden High Priestess of the Sovereign, thanks them:

> We could not risk the lives of our own Sovereign citizens. Every citizen is born exactly as designed by the community. Impeccable, both physically and mentally. We control the DNA of our progeny... germinating them in birthing pods.

Genetically engineered, the Sovereign are completely golden in color, from their eyes and hair to their skin and, often, even their clothing. Ayesha and her people adhere to Western, white standards of beauty and perfection, and yet their beauty, their art deco-inspired throne room, their entire culture is heightened and exaggerated to satirical levels. "They are easily offended," explains Quill, and "the cost of transgression is death." Production Designer Scott Chambliss further clarifies how their "self-obsessed obliviousness" transforms them into "gorgeous, garish airheads" (qtd. in Johnston, 2017, p. 38). It would be rather easy to interpret

the Sovereign as an allegory of white supremacy obsessed with eugenics who other any group not of their race, considering them inferior. And Elizabeth Debicki, who plays the role of Ayesha, corroborates this interpretation: "Yes, [Ayesha's] a supremacist and she's very strained, but she's imperfect and quite vulnerable" (qtd. in Buchanan, 2017). The imperfections of the seemingly perfect Sovereign are what interestingly subvert the White gaze in *Vol. 2*; because despite the manner in which this race is coded, the Sovereign are still ridiculed, and their behavior is a source of humor for both the Guardians and the audience. It would seem then that while the first *Guardians* film falls back upon a more undeveloped racialization of its aliens, the sequel somewhat calls attention to the absurdity of white supremacy and, in a sense, the White gaze itself.

Ultimately, the *Guardians* franchise generates the most colorful landscape of alien races in the Infinity Saga; however, and despite *Vol. 2's* noteworthy depiction of the Sovereign, the franchise's representation of alien races is still heavily influenced by the White gaze. Under this look, aliens racially coded as non-white are generally represented as other/lesser in contrast to white humanoid characters, as is seen with the Nova Empire's citizens for example; the ethnicity and race of actors of color is also generally erased i.e. Gamora and Drax; and finally, these characters are also demonized as lesser villains i.e. Korath.

c) Captain Marvel
The final film of note which contrasts both *Thor* and the *Guardians'* depiction of the alien body is *Captain Marvel*. In *Captain Marvel*, the White gaze inserts itself via the juxtaposing racializations established between the Kree and the Skrull alien species. *Captain Marvel* is set in the midst of a thousand-year intergalactic war between the Kree Empire and the Skrulls. At

the start of the film, Carol Danvers (and as a result, the audience) is under the impression that she is a Kree operative, named Vers, and a member of Starforce, an elite military taskforce assigned to stop a Skrull Invasion from taking place. However, after being stranded on Earth, Danvers discovers that she is in fact human and was originally captured and manipulated by the Kree Empire's ruler, the Supreme Intelligence, a collective artificial intelligence. It is further revealed that the Supreme Intelligence have been restricting Danvers' superpowers and committing genocide, destroying the Skrull home world and actively exterminating any remaining Skrulls. In *Captain Marvel* then, the White gaze is mirrored via Danver's perspective, and it is only when the superhero realizes who the true villain of the film is, that the system of self/other is inverted and the White gaze rendered in upon itself. This reversal of the look is primarily depicted in the racialized schema of the Kree and Skrull aliens.

The Kree alien species are initially coded as a white, masculine, Westernized race positioned in the role of the self. The White gaze establishes this positionality in many ways; it is observed in: the portrayal of the Kree Empire and Carol's relationship to these people; the physical representation of the Kree; and finally, it is directly correlated to the film's feminist themes. Prior to this movie, little had been seen of the Kree Empire, but *Captain Marvel* depicts the Kree civilization as a technologically advanced and highly militaristic industrial society. The Kree are "hyper-intellectuals," Brie Larson explains, a species that is "also totally devoid of emotion" (qtd. in Roussos, 2019b, p. 42). Despite the previous appearances of the Kree as villains in the *Guardians* franchise, the empire is initially coded in a similar manner to both the Asgardian and Nova empires because of Danvers' association with them. As a result, the Kree Empire takes the position of self, firmly placed in the center of the narrative and unchallenged in their marginalization of the Skrulls. The physical features of the Kree furthers

this positioning as self. Following the trend from *Guardians*, though there are several Kree characters in *Captain Marvel,* most of whom appear blue-skinned (including the majority of Starforce's taskforce, but excluding Korath), the two major faces of the empire are white, as is seen with Danvers' mentor, Yon-Rogg, and the Supreme Intelligence who takes the form of a white woman. The Kree Empire enforces their hegemonic power via propaganda and establishes a narrative which casts the Skrulls as other. For example, littered across the Kree home world, Hala, are large anti-Skrull propaganda posters which demonize the Skrulls, denoting the race as frightening and monstrous and instilling a fear of infiltration and miscegenation within the Kree population. The Supreme Intelligence spews the most atrocious bits of this propaganda to Danvers: "the Skrull expansion… has threatened our civilization for centuries. Imposters who silently infiltrate then take over our planets… those insidious shapeshifters will threaten our borders no more."[92] Carol, while still under the impression that she is Vers, disseminates this same rhetoric regarding the Skrulls, further glorifying Starforce and describing them as "noble warrior heroes," despite their genocidal tendencies. Therefore, because the audience identifies with and trusts Danvers/Vers as the film's protagonist, they also come to fear and distrust the Skrulls.

The Kree's racialization is further grounded by the film's feminist themes which further cement the binaries between the Kree and any other species, be they Skrulls or humans. Danvers is constantly told to control her emotions by her mentor, Yon-Rogg, and the Supreme Intelligence. In a key scene, he chastises Danvers, telling her to "Stop using this," Yon-Rogg gestures towards her heart, "and start using this," he points to her head. The classic gender

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[92] The Supreme Intelligence's glaringly bigoted language mirrors current discourse regarding refugees crossing borders over the past decade (AlAwadhi and Dittmer, 2020a).

constructs equating man with law, logic, and reason juxtaposed to woman's nature, intuition, and emotion are clear in how the hyper-intellectual Kree are represented as a masculinized patriarchal entity which strives to control Danvers and any other species or planets which they may deem as threatening, including the Skrulls. Danvers' 'femininity,' that is her emotions, her empathy for the Skrulls, as well as her anger at the injustices both she and the aliens have faced, are essentially what liberate the superhero from the Kree's control, allowing her to embrace her own superpowers and rescue the Skrulls. Consequently, the Kree Empire is constructed as a society coded as the white self, masculine, Westernized, an imperial empire with a strong military force hellbent on eliminating any threats i.e. the Skrull. And so, much like *Ragnarok*, *Captain Marvel* exposes the Kree's imperialistic and genocidal tendencies. The White gaze appears to be subverted in *Captain Marvel* since the Kree's coded whiteness and positionality as the self is seemingly disrupted. However, this disruption is complicated by the racialization of the Skrulls.

Captain Marvel provides the MCU's first glimpse of the Skrulls, a green-skinned reptilian-like shapeshifter race who, over the course of the film, shift from the role of other to self. In the comics, the Skrulls initially posed as a supervillain race of evil aliens, their physical features ugly and exaggerated, ranging from goblin-esque and ape-like to, at times, even Orientalist in nature. *Captain Marvel's* Skrulls are heavily influenced by their comic book counterpart. In developing the Skrulls' look, costume designer Sanja Milkovic explained that "the idea was to make them as different as possible from Starforce, and in a sense, all the other Marvel heroes" (qtd. in Roussos, 2019b, p. 162). From their green skin and physical features to their shape-shifting abilities and strange manner of dress, the Skrulls embody physical difference. A key marker of this difference and otherness is evident in the Skrulls' chin

grooves, for example; as Concept Artist Tully Summers explains, "grooved chins are a common design element for a lot of Marvel villains," such as the Frost Giants and even Thanos (qtd. in Roussos, 2019b, p. 204). The Skrulls' alterity is best witnessed in their opening scene in *Captain Marvel*, wherein the aliens engage in battle with Starforce, snarling, grunting, and groaning like animals as they bare their teeth. This scene would set the tone, and for the first half of the film, the Skrulls are profoundly dehumanized and framed as villains who abduct Danvers and persistently pursue her.

The reversal of the Skrulls' othering only occurs when Danvers discovers a large group of Skrull refugees who are in hiding, witnessing firsthand the evidence of the Kree Empire's genocidal endeavors. As Talos, the leader of the Skrulls, is reunited with his wife and daughter, the audience catch their first glimpse of Skrull women and children. These Skrull are only humanized via their adaptation to human culture and when their own natural Skrull characteristics are softened and made palatable. For instance, during this scene, the refugees are seen wearing a ragged combination of both human and Skrull clothing, and a Skrull boy releases cute little trills as he shows Danvers his high score on a pinball machine. The Skrulls' otherness is further reversed in "the portrayal of Skrull heteronormative family relations," via Talos' family, which is "familiar to the Western viewer and activate[s] deeply set somatic markers" (AlAwadhi and Dittmer, 2020a, p. 24). *Captain Marvel* strives to challenge the White gaze's system in its reversal of the racialized schema presented between the Kree and the Skrulls. The film directly exploits and manipulates this look. Carol operates as an avatar of the White gaze, espousing the Kree Empire's propagandistic narrative and beliefs, and it is only when the superhero truly faces the Skrull, echoing Emmanuel Levinas' face-to-face encounter

(1990), that the White gaze is subverted and the self/other dialectic inverted, surfacing the film's core themes.

Though there is a clear attempt to disrupt the White gaze in *Captain Marvel*, there are several issues which complicate this subversion. First, in addition to the Skrulls' representation as the racialized other in contrast to the white-coded Kree, the aliens are also indigenized. This is witnessed for example in how Talos performs what is similar to a hongi with both his wife and daughter after being reunited. A hongi is a traditional Māori greeting wherein two people press their noses and foreheads together at the same time. It could be argued that the appropriation of the hongi as part of the Skrull culture is a tool which both codes the alien race as indigenous while also demonstrating their difference in the film's racialized hierarchy. The othering and feminization of the aliens further continues as the Skrulls only find respite from the Kree Empire because of Danvers, a White savior who rescues the refugees and vows to find them a new home (AlAwadhi and Dittmer, 2020a, p. 29). To add further insult to injury, despite their transition from other to self, the Skrulls are ironically not allowed to seek refuge on Earth as "they won't be safe here," contrasting the white-coded Asgardian refugees who create their own community in New Asgard on Earth after the destruction of their home world in *Ragnarok*.[93] Finally, it is particularly important to note that despite the film's somewhat subversive take on notions of empire and otherness, as was discussed in the previous chapter, *Captain Marvel* received extensive funding and backing from the Pentagon both during its production and after its release. And so, any groundbreaking steps *Captain Marvel* may take

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[93] However, in *Spider-Man: Far from Home*, it is revealed that Talos and other Skrulls are in fact hiding on Earth, though this has yet to be explained.

in challenging empire and otherness via its racialized representation of refugee aliens is arguably negated, and the White gaze remains embedded within the film's subtext.

d) Conclusion

In conclusion, across the *Thor* franchise, both *Guardians* films, and *Captain Marvel*, there seems to be a recurring pattern of Empires coded as Western and White, wherein a racialized schema privileges that whiteness while othering both characters and actors of color via a White gaze. The first two *Thor* films provide the foundations of this system in the Infinity Saga through its portrayal of Asgard, with the *Guardians* film further complicating the schema by including several actors of color; however, as these characters are for the most part cast as colorful aliens, the actors' ethnicity is either erased or simply villainized. The White gaze is embedded in both franchises, excluding the subversive depiction of the Sovereign. Though *Captain Marvel* provides a laudable attempt at subverting this look via its portrayal of the Kree and Skrulls and its reversal of the self/other schema, the film nevertheless provides a messy racialization of the Skrull while also hypocritically relying on industrial and financial backing from the very apparatuses it aims to criticize. The racialized representation of the alien body under the White gaze does somewhat evolve over the course of the MCU. However, the franchise's reliance upon the self/other dynamic, its Manichean and hegemonic underpinnings, and even its industrial connections continue to insert themselves into the MCU superhero narrative.

3. <u>Monstrous Aliens as Henchmen</u>

When considering aliens who appear to be more creature-like rather than humanoid in the MCU, there is a complete lack of Levinas' face-to-face encounter. There is instead a deeply

rooted dehumanization which situates this alien's function as a mere plot device. These aliens

are monstrous in nature; they embody otherness completely and totally and serve as fodder

for the heroes. Critically, their designation as henchmen is the primary reason for their

othering. Mongrain and Perlmutter (2020) extensively map out the characterization of

henchmen:

> They are sketchily individualized (but easily visually identifiable)…
> [and] come in masses… Their motivations for being henchmen are
> somewhat opaque. They tend to die, in droves. The act cannot
> quite be considered noble sacrifice… they often appear basically
> almost dumb, in the original sense of the word: cattle too stupid to
> see their own self-interest and mute in expressing it. [And finally,]
> They are often preternaturally loyal to the villain… they obey
> orders, even when fatal to themselves, and never seem to 'reason
> why.' (pp. 112-13)

Monstrous alien henchmen, then, operate exclusively as a plot device; they form a

homogenous mass, are cattle for the slaughter, and slaves to the villain's schemes. Their

subservience is key, as "without a villain as their soul and brain, they collapse" (Mongrain and

Perlmutter, 2020, p. 123). Alien henchmen do not function at the same complex level of

racialization that other humanoid aliens in the MCU follow. Instead, their othering is more

severe in nature as they are essentialized and demonized to a greater degree because of their

functionality in the narrative as well as the way they are portrayed. The self/other schema

deteriorates into a master/slave dialectic. These aliens are purely monstrous in nature with

no redeeming human traits. "The monster," or the alien in our case, "is difference made flesh"

as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (1996, p. 7) puts it; "in its function as dialectical Other or third-term

supplement, the," alien "is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond."

The functionality and representation of alien henchmen further parallels Rachel

Young's (2016) analysis of orcs in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Young's argument

corresponds to how the saga's monstrous aliens function as the monstrous Other via a racial

schema. Orcs, she argues,

> are a monstrous Other constructed through racial discourses. They
> are: somatically different to the White Self of the Fellowship; part
> of a millennium-old Western cultural discourse that Others the East
> and its people; and the embodiment of racial logics and
> stereotypes, and the perceived threat of miscegenation. They are
> the prototypes for the massed armies of evil's foot-soldiers which
> swarm the worlds of High Fantasy under different names… Orcs are
> commonly Othered by the following: their skin color, be it green,
> brown, or black; extreme aggressiveness and irrationality. (Young,
> 2016, p. 110)

Echoing Young's analysis, the primitive, monstrous aliens of the MCU parallel the functionality

of Tolkien's orcs and the fantasy genre at large, as there is an embedded racialization

occurring in the depiction of these henchmen races. The MCU's monstrous aliens are then

essentially signifiers of pure dialectical otherness, and their alterity is established by their role

as henchmen. There are countless examples of the monstrous alien across the Infinity Saga,

the most pertinent of which include the Chitauri, the Sakaarans, and finally the Outriders.[94]

The first appearance of alien henchmen in the Infinity Saga is witnessed in *The

Avengers*. During the Battle of New York, Loki invades Earth with his alien army of Chitauri, a

race of cyborg biomechanical warriors, "foot soldiers" whose greatest strength is their

excessive numbers (Patches and Failes, 2018). Overall, the Chitauri function as unnatural

aliens, dehumanized plot devices that move the narrative forward; as director Joss Whedon

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[94] Other examples of henchmen within the MCU can be found with Ultron's robot henchmen, as well as Ant-Man's armies of ants; both subjects function in a slave-like manner while partaking in the same self/other dialectic.

explains, the aliens "didn't need any kind of explanation. They just needed to show up and kick ass" (qtd. in Surrell, 2012, p. 220). The insectoid hermaphrodite Sakaarans function in a similar manner. These dark and leathery-skinned aliens wear faceless masks with jarring holes for their eyes, their blood spills yellow, their voices deep and garbled, and their ships are similar to large flies. Concept artist Jared Marantz "aimed to create a look that could be mass-produced," and their helmets were designed to evoke World War II German headgear (qtd. in Javins, 2014b, pp. 52-54). The Sakaarans in *Guardians* then easily fit in to the role of villainous henchmen, their alterity primarily lying within their physiognomy as well as via the aesthetics of their uniforms. The saga's final monstrous aliens of significance are Thanos's army of Outriders who appear in both *Infinity War* and *Endgame*. Biomechanical in nature, the Outriders are eyeless and nose-less with clawed four arms and black and gold skin. Highly animalistic in nature, these growling 'space dogs' have prominent monstrous mouths with a large set of teeth. They are near mindless with little sense of self-preservation, they simply do as they are told, moving in raging droves. The Outriders seem to be a natural final development in the slow devolution of alien henchmen over the course of the Infinity Saga. As an alien-creature race, with physical features so far removed from what is considered human, the Outriders perfectly parallel both Mongrain and Perlmutters' analysis on henchmen as well as Young's study of orcs. They are wholly loyal to Thanos, aggressive, irrational, and somatically opposed to the White self of the superhero in their stark alterity.

It is worth noting that in *Ragnarok*, Thor and the audience actually visit the Sakaarans' home world, Sakaar, where the audience finally meet the more insectoid-like members of the race through the character Miek. A warrior enslaved by the Grandmaster and forced to fight in the Contest of Champions, Miek is a large and mute worm-like alien; she is proficient in

combat with the help of her mechanical exoskeleton, and she helps Korg start an uprising against the Grandmaster's tyranny. In true *Ragnarok* form, the film subverts the monstrous alien as villainous other trope by casting a Sakaraan, one that quite simply looks like a large worm as a revolutionary hero. Like Miek, Korg's characterization also sustains this subversion as he simultaneously contrasts *The Dark World's* portrayal of a one-dimensional and dehumanized Kronan while also enhancing *Ragnarok's* deconstructive themes of decolonization.

4. Conclusion

Though the MCU's monstrous alien henchmen can be read quite simply as plot devices, it is the manner in which these aliens are othered that points towards the larger pattern of racialized otherness in the MCU. These aliens' monstrosity and otherness stems primarily from their physical features and is also linked to the threat they pose to the status quo, which they upset, though never for long. Their physical features heavily rely upon difference, from the biomechanical Chitauri to the bug-like Sakaarans and animalistic, dog-like Outriders. These aliens are somatically different from the white superhero and the hegemonic structures they uphold. The monstrous alien henchman symbolizes anxieties regarding infiltration and invasion, while further augmenting the violence and spectacle of the MCU and its apocalyptic mood. Excluding *Ragnarok's* deconstructive subversion of the monstrous alien, these creatures seem to only devolve over the course of the Infinity Saga, evidence of the cycle's language at play.

As this section has illuminated, aliens in the MCU more often than not engage with a White gaze via the manner in which they are coded. Humanoid aliens are subject to a

racialized schema, one that privileges whiteness while othering any alien characters/races that are coded as non-white. Monstrous aliens, however, represent near total dehumanization in their role as henchmen and plot devices. Regardless of whether these aliens are humanoid or creature-like, it is clear that the MCU film cycle's core themes greatly empower the White gaze with only very few examples of the alien body successfully challenging that look. As the next and final section of this chapter will discuss, the representation of the Oriental body in the MCU similarly parallels how the alien body is impacted by the cycle's hegemonic and binary mechanisms.

III. ORIENTALISM AND THE OCCIDENTAL GAZE

In this last section of this chapter, I examine how the Oriental body is othered by what I name as 'the Occidental gaze' in the MCU film cycle. I first define the Occidental Gaze and then carry out a close-textual analysis which investigates how this look is either exploited or challenged in three core movies in the saga: Phase One's *Iron Man*, Phase Two's *Iron Man 3*, and finally, Phase Three's *Doctor Strange*. By carrying out this investigation, I hope to analyze how deeply embedded otherness is within the MCU, as well as examine how representations of race and ethnicity as other have slowly evolved over the course of the Infinity Saga.

1. The Occidental Gaze

Applying Edward Said's theory of Orientalism onto Fanon's White gaze yields an Occidental gaze, a gaze which controls, spectralizes, and others the Oriental body. As was discussed in the literature review, Edward Said (1978) argued that Orientalism is a system of cultural representations, wherein the dichotomies of West and East, or 'the Occident' and 'the

Orient,' emulate the dialectic of self/other. Said maintains that this system is exploited by the West in order to both restructure and other the Orient as well as cast the West in the role of the hegemonic self and enable its colonial and imperial ambitions. While the Orient is framed and othered as an inferior, irrational, regressive land, the Occident is firmly centered as the self, signifying superiority, rationality, and progressiveness. It is quite important to note that Said's theories on Orientalism clearly mirror the cycle's three recurring tenants, as it is a system that relies upon Manichean binaries in order to instill a propagandistic narrative that empowers a hegemonic state.

In combining White gaze theory with Orientalism, an Occidental gaze emerges. This look restructures the Oriental body and degrades it to a symbol of otherness and spectacle. Not only is the Oriental body distorted, but this Eurocentric look also others and manufactures the Orient as a dangerous and exoticized realm of the unknown, a regressive land of the Other. As Said would argue, "The West is the actor… the spectator," while "the Orient [remains] a passive reactor" (p. 109). In the context of the MCU, the Occidental gaze determines hero from villain through the use of particular stereotypes and/or coded imagery, functioning as a colonial fantasy wherein the spectator is positioned as the Occident, the West, in viewing the Oriental body as lesser and other. In the saga then, the audience is thrust into the exotic realm of the Orient, gazing at the Oriental body, objectifying and dehumanizing it because of the manner in which it is represented. White savior superheroes, and the hegemons that they represent, are firmly placed in the center, while the non-white Oriental body is firmly othered. Via the Occidental gaze, the MCU's representation of the Oriental body then is stereotypical and clichéd, highly tokenistic, and habitually villainized.

The Occidental gaze has woven itself into the Infinity Saga's grand narrative in numerous films. Three texts, however, which stand out in their portrayal of the Oriental body are *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 3*, and *Doctor Strange*. In this section, I employ close-textual analysis to analyze the Occidental gaze, examining both the self/other dialectic as well as how racialized and ethnic stereotypes are adapted in these films. This section tracks the Occidental gaze's evolution across the Infinity Saga, considering how these three texts vacillate between embracing the gaze in deliberately vilifying characters and entire regions based on race and ethnicity, challenging the look via ironic deconstruction, and finally, attempting to completely reject and invert the Occidental gaze as a whole. The MCU's socio-political leanings are further exposed as I both compare the films' Orientalism to that of the original comics and explore the influence of fan reactions on the films.

2. *Iron Man*

In addition to setting the generic tone of the Infinity Saga, *Iron Man* (2008) arguably also fixes the saga's overarching mood in its portrayal of the Oriental body. *Iron Man* adapts the built-in underlying Occidental gaze from Iron Man's origin story in the comics, updating the text to reflect modern-day fears and anxieties. In this section, I analyze the adaptation of this gaze first by examining Iron Man's comic book origin story, specifically exploring: the representation of its setting in Vietnam; the depiction of the Oriental body via Wong-Chu and Ho Yinsen; and lastly, the portrayal of Tony Stark as a White savior. I then consider how the MCU's *Iron Man* adapts and updates the text; I argue that *Iron Man* merely updates the Occidental gaze and intentionally constructs dehumanizing Orientalist imagery, and this is demonstrated in how the film: updates its setting to Afghanistan; reinterprets the Oriental body in Raza, Abu Baker, and Ho Yinsen; and finally, still casts Stark as a White savior.

a) "Iron Man is Born!"

Iron Man's origin story in Marvel's comics is highly impacted by the White gaze, as is evident in its representation of setting, non-white characters, and of course the superhero himself. Tony Stark's first appearance and origin story take place in "Iron Man is Born!," *Tales of Suspense* #39 (1963). A weapons manufacturer for the US military, Stark is the "quintessential capitalist," a handsome playboy, wealthy businessman, brilliant scientist, and staunch anti-communist (Lee and Mair, 2002, p. 160). The issue follows Stark as he is kidnapped into the heart of an exotic South Vietnamese jungle by the Viet Cong; there, he comes head to head with "red guerrilla tyrant" Wong-Chu before creating his Iron Man armor and escaping to freedom. Written at the height of the Vietnam War, Stan Lee said that Stark's origin story was composed "at a time when most of us genuinely felt that the conflict in that tortured land really was a simple matter of good versus evil and that the American military action against the Viet Cong was tantamount to St. George's battle against the dragon" (Lee, 1975, p. 45). Simply put, Wong-Chu is "a North Vietnamese general who's the very epitome of a comicbook bad guy" and Stark is "the good guy... a noble American helping the noble Vietnamese battle the sinister Commies from the North" (p. 45).[95] The setting of the narrative then is vital in the construction of the Occidental gaze, as the Manichean binary oppositions which are underlying in the issue, that of Viet Cong and the American military, of capitalism and communism, West and East, good and evil, which are exemplified by Wong-Chu and Stark, provide the foundation for the Oriental body's demonization.

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[95] Lee further admits "we've all grown up a bit... [and] realized that life isn't quite so simple," an understatement when considering how racism and Yellow Peril clearly informed this story amongst countless others Marvel comics (Lee, 1975, p. 45).

The Oriental body in "Iron Man is Born!" manifests in two juxtaposed characters, Wong-Chu, the villain of the story, and Professor Ho Yinsen, a scientist who helps Stark escape from captivity. Despite the fact that one is presented as a villain while the other is heroic, both characters are depicted in a stereotypical fashion under the Occidental gaze. Throughout the narrative, Wong-Chu is shown to be a cruel, merciless warlord who derives his power from his physical strength. Represented as an Oriental communist menace, both Wong-Chu and his minions speak in broken English, their leader even refers to himself often in the third person. The Occidental gaze furthers the distinction between East and West as Wong-Chu constantly refers to Stark as "Yankee." Finally, and most damningly, Wong-Chu and his followers, in classic Silver Age fashion, are stylized in an exceedingly racist manner with stereotypically exaggerated features as opposed to the more handsome features of playboy Stark. The blatant stereotypical physiognomy of Wong-Chu and his minions is both exemplary of Marvel's treatment of the Oriental body during the Golden and Silver Age as well as key in the construction of the Occidental gaze itself.

Unfortunately, even when the Oriental body is not explicitly villainized, "Iron Man is Born!" illustrates how the Oriental body remains a humiliating site of spectacle and an espousal of white hegemony. During his imprisonment, Stark is forced to work with Professor Yinsen, a physicist who speaks perfect English and is well respected and known in the Western world. Yinsen spends the entire issue tending to Stark, helping him devise an escape, and he ultimately ends up sacrificing his life for Stark because, as he reasons, his "life is of no consequence!" when compared with our main hero.[96] Essentially, Yinsen functions as Stark's

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[96] (Lee, Lieber, and Heck, 1963, p. 7)

first non-white sidekick, subservient to the end.[97] He also functions as a strange Orientalist version of the Magical Negro trope, as he provides the wisdom and moral boost necessary to stop Stark from giving up while in imprisonment. Mathew W. Hughey (2009, p. 564) argues that at the core of the Magical Negro is redemptive suffering: the Magical Negro endures violence in a sacrificial manner in order "to transform the white character into a morally improved person."[98] Yinsen as the Orientalised version of this stock character, suffers under the cruelty of Wong-Chu and his communist regime, and his death is the final sacrifice necessary to enlighten and empower Stark and create the Iron Man superhero. Yinsen helps maintain the hegemonic whiteness of the narrative as the Orientalised Magical Negro by "[helping] the main broken white character," that is Stark, "reclaim a position of cultural authority… while simultaneously distancing himself from traits and people coded as non-white" as is seen with his perfect grasp of the English language and clear Westernization (Hughey, 2009, p. 566). Even the depiction of his physical features when compared with Wong-Chu and his henchmen is more appealing and pleasing to the eye, though to be fair, Yinsen does bring to mind a more gentle depiction of the Fu Manchu stereotype. Regardless, it is the fact that Yinsen is Westernized that any worth is attributed to his character in the first place. And so, he fulfils his purpose as a plot device by helping Stark create the Iron Man armor and then sacrificing himself in order to save the hero's life. As Said (1978, p. 102) would argue, Yinsen "is first an Oriental, second a human being, and last again an Oriental." Ho Yinsen's blood and life then ironically births Iron Man as a superhero though he is promptly forgotten and rarely mentioned.

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[97] Yinsen's cliched role further draws upon the stereotypical associations between the East and spirituality, wisdom, mysticism, enlightenment etc.

[98] For more on the Magical Negro, see Bugle (2001), Hicks (2003), as well as Glenn and Cunningham (2018). See also Dittmer (2013) for more on Stark's origin story.

Through Yinsen's death, Iron Man is created, fueled by a desire for revenge and justice, and Yinsen's death justifies Iron Man as a superhero. By association then, US interventionism in Vietnam is transformed into a site of colonial fantasy with Iron Man as a White savior who executes Wong-Chu, destroys his camp, and frees the Vietnamese villagers from the dreaded cloud of communism. "Iron Man is Born!" was originally released at a time when the Vietnam War was still in its early beginnings, with Yellow Peril plaguing the comic sphere, and popular culture at large, and so the handling of the Oriental body in this issue perhaps comes as no surprise.[99] The narrative, via its representation of Iron Man, glorifies US intervention and imperialism abroad, enforcing a geo-political status quo through the Occidental gaze. This is accomplished: by casting Stark, a champion of the military industrial complex and the Western values of capitalism and democracy, as the self; by villainizing the Viet Cong, primarily through Wong-Chu, as other and further equating the Orient with communism via the comic's characters, art, dialogue, and narrative; and finally, by presenting the Vietnamese villagers as poor, helpless natives, background characters who are in dire need of liberation by the white superhero. "Iron Man is Born!" then, through a variety of means, relies upon the Occidental gaze in order to manufacture a narrative that is inflamed by Yellow Peril and the Orientalism of that time.

b) Iron Man *on Film*

This core orientalist rescue narrative would be adapted by director Jon Favreau in *Iron Man*, a film which updates the story to modern times and also translates the original comic's

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[99] For more on Yellow Peril in comics, see Wright (2001), Dittmer (2007b), and Mayer (2014).

prominent Orientalism into one heavily tainted by Islamophobia as a result of 9/11.[100] The

Occidental gaze is witnessed in the film through the updating of its setting to Afghanistan, the

representation of the Oriental body via the Ten Rings, Raza, Abu Baker, and Yinsen's film

counterpart, and the positioning of Tony Stark yet again as a White Savior.

Just as "Iron Man is Born!" relies on Manichean distinctions between East and West,

so too does *Iron Man* create such divisions heavily influenced by an Occidental gaze. However,

while Stark's origin story initially took place in a Vietnamese jungle, in this text, the exoticized

and unknowable East finds its setting in the 'terrorist-ridden' deserts of Afghanistan.

Storyboard artist David Lowery said that even though "early on" in the production process,

the Ten Rings were not the original antagonists of the film, "the final showdown was going to

be in the villain's homeland way over in 'Whereever-istan'" (qtd. in Thomas, 2010, p. 173).

Needless to say, the filmmakers' perception of 'Wherever-istan' clearly influences the

depiction of Afghanistan in the film, as the country is portrayed in monotonous and

stereotypical Hollywood fare, from the cold mountains which frame Stark as he is driven

through the Kunar Province to the dark and dank tunnels of the Ten Rings' hidden base.

Indeed, the very first shot of the film establishes the distinction between Orient and the

Occident by drawing an immediate contrast between Kunar's mountainous deserts with the

sudden blasting of AC/DC's *Back in Black* in the background as a military convoy carries Stark

towards his inevitable abduction. During this scene, and indeed throughout the film,

Afghanistan suffers from severe color desaturation, primarily cast in hues of grays, browns,

and greens, the look distorting Kunar's lush geography as a lifeless desert wasteland despite

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[100] *Iron Man's* modern update can be traced back to Warren Ellis and Adi Granov's run with *Extremis* (2006).

the region's rich mountainous ranges and plentiful rivers. As the military convoy rushes through this land of the other, the spectator catches the first glimpse of the Oriental body: an unassuming shepherd herding his goats along the path. The contrast between the technologically advanced Western envoy and the rural Afghani man is glaring, and this quick snap-shot visual would be the first of many in a film which paints the native Afghani body in a demeaning manner via the Occidental look; it is marginalized from the narrative, one-dimensional, and ultimately a plot device which establishes *Iron Man's* Manichean system.

Whereas the original comic relied upon the Viet Cong to be the great villainous specter that overshadows the Orient, in *Iron Man*, the role is transferred to the Taliban-esque Ten Rings, a criminal and terrorist organization that abducts Stark while he is in Afghanistan while secretly purchasing their weapons from Stark Industries. The organization is cast in an Orientalist light through a variety of means. First, the Ten Rings are presented as an essentialized multicultural organization; as this film's Yinsen explains, "They speak Arabic, Urdu, Dari, Pashtu, Mongolian, Parsi, Russian," and another unnamed Ten Rings member even speaks Hungarian. Language is key here as it essentializes and demonizes almost an entire continent as a potential threat. The terrorist, or rather the Oriental body, then becomes everywhere at once, unknowable. The Ten Rings' henchmen wear dirty, ragged clothes in browns and greens, with prominent beards and the inevitable scarves. For the most part, the henchmen are in the margins, with Raza, the leader of organization, and his right-hand man, Abu Baker, at the front and center. The gaze's demonization of the Ten Rings is perhaps most clear when, in one critical scene, the audience watch in horror as Tony is waterboarded and tortured after refusing to cooperate with the organization. The scene is set in a dark cave that is cast in shadows, and the camera is jerky with short, quick shots and a series of close ups

which ratchet up in tension and intensity as Stark is thrust in and out of the water. Lighting

here is key, as Stark is the most visible of the group at the center of the frame, while the rest

of the Ten Rings members are for the most part cast in shadow, witnessed with only small

glimpses of light. These characters grunt and shout incomprehensible things while pushing

and pulling the superhero, and the audience is imprinted with images of bared teeth and dirty

hands, while the head of the Ten Rings, Raza, sadistically enjoys the scene in the background.

The Oriental body here is truly savage and demonical.

The Oriental body's dehumanization continues with the depiction of Wong-Chu's

counterparts in *Iron Man*, two minor characters named Raza and Abu Baker. Originally, Raza

is depicted as the leader of the Ten Rings. He is a menacing figure who is enamored with

accumulating power through technology. During his inflated villainous monologue, Raza's

ideological point of view clearly relies upon the binaries of the Occidental gaze, as he preaches

to Stark:

> The bow and arrow once was the pinnacle of weapons technology.
> It allowed the great Genghis Khan to rule from the Pacific to
> Ukraine, an empire twice the size of Alexander the Great and four
> times the size of the Roman Empire. But today, whoever holds the
> latest Stark weapons rules these lands, and soon it'll be my turn.

By drawing from (and ultimately equating himself to) Genghis Khan, Raza seeks to place clear

divisions between East and West, to create his own empire for the Ten Rings that would rival

even Khan's Mongol Empire. The villain is obsessed with amassing Stark technology, and he

is willing to go to any length to achieve his goal. Raza is shown to be as sadistic as Wong-Chu,

enjoying Stark's waterboarding and more than willing to place a burning hot coal in Yinsen's

mouth when he requires information. However, the audience discovers with the film's plot

twist that the villain has in fact been dealing with Obadiah Stane, the CEO of Stark Industries, who hired the Ten Rings to capture Stark in the first place. And so, Raza is downgraded to a second-hand villain, as he is ultimately outwitted by Stane who eventually and mercilessly kills off Raza and all of his henchmen. Dan Hassler-Forest (2012) maintains that the stereotypical representation of Orientalist villains in post-9/11 superhero films establishes their otherness; however, "the Orientalist villain's unmasking as a red herring also robs the character of agency in the narrative… [it] removes the stereotype's narrative power, without dissolving the negative connotations that continue to define it, thereby adding insult to injury" (p. 92). Hassler-Forest's analysis of the Orientalist villain rings true when considering the treatment of Raza in *Iron Man*. We see that the Occidental gaze stereotypes Raza as a vaguely Middle Eastern terrorist that is sadistic, dangerous, and happy to spew a Manichean rhetoric, only to then reduce him to a sub-par villain, one that is easily outwitted by the film's actual (white) villain, Stane.

In addition to Raza, the other character of note who carries traces of Wong-Chu, is Raza's right-hand man, Abu Baker, a sidekick villain who perfectly fits into the stereotype Jack Shaheen (2003) calls the villainous bumbling buffoon. Abu Baker is paradoxically inept, a prime source of comedic relief in *Iron Man*, while at the same time quite dangerous in his dealings with Stark. When Abu Baker speaks in Arabic, notably the only accurate Arabic in the film, there are no subtitles, and this exoticizes the character, eradicating his agency as the audience only ever hear a vague and, oftentimes, inaccurate translation of his words via Yinsen. In one particular scene, this results in a humorous moment where Stark is rude straight to his captor's face without any consequences as Abu Baker does not understand English. Consequently, Abu Baker is presented as a bumbling buffoon, one who the audience,

the majority of which do not understand Arabic, would find at times disorienting, intimidating, or simply annoying. Because the Arabic is untranslated, the audience's perception of Abu Baker is severely warped. The lack of subtitles is key in instilling the Occidental gaze, as the audience identifies with Stark; they feel Stark's frustration as much as his disdain towards the sidekick villain. This deliberately constructed affect is also produced in the infamous scene before the film's title card, wherein Tony has been captured by the Ten Rings and is being supposedly filmed for a ransom video. As Tony is surrounded by the masked Ten Rings members, including Abu Baker, Raza reads off a paper in Urdu. No subtitles are provided, and the audience is left with the impact of the visual imagery and Stark's traumatized, shocked face. This scene is later subverted when Pepper Potts, Tony's personal assistant, discovers that the video is in fact directed towards Obadiah Stane, revealing his villainous nature. Of course, the twist would have been spoiled for any audience members who understand Urdu, but regardless, the lack of subtitles remains harmful in nature as it directly strives to dehumanize and alienate the Oriental body as a threatening and incomprehensible site of the unknown.

While Raza and Abu Baker fill in the role of Wong-Chu in *Iron Man*, Ho Yinsen is updated into an Afghani scientist and surgeon, one who miraculously still retains a Chinese name, and he functions in a near identical manner to his comic book-counterpart. *Iron Man's* Yinsen is an even more Westernized Oriental body than in the comics. The scientist's perfect grasp of the English language is tinged with a British accent, heavily contrasting him to his less educated captors, particularly Abu Baker who cannot even speak English. The bespectacled doctor is fluent in multiple languages, and despite his imprisonment, he is introduced to the audience wearing a suit and tie, clothing which clearly sets him apart from his captors, who

wear a combination of military camo and ethnic wear such as the shalwar kameez and keffiyeh, further emphasizing the distinctions between East and West. Echoing his comic book-counterpart, Yinsen essentially functions as Stark's first non-white sidekick, sacrificing himself to save the white superhero, and correspondingly, his last words also revolve around Stark: "Don't waste it, don't waste your life." *Iron Man's* Yinsen further mirrors his comic-book counterpart in that he embodies the Orientalised Magical Negro via his coded Westernization, and perhaps more significantly, by helping and, ultimately, sacrificing himself for Tony, and therefore enabling the superhero in retaining his hegemonic authority. Unlike the comics however, Yinsen's death attempts (however superficially) to call attention to the military industrial complex and America's imperialism abroad. As was argued in the previous chapter however, the cycle's system is in full effect in this film, and as such, Stark as Iron Man takes on a metonymic position to America, with its state of exception, as he is judge, jury, and executioner in any and all battles he takes part in while abroad.

This is most apparent during the Gulmira battle sequence in the film, which is Iron Man's first appearance after Stark's escape from Afghanistan. Gulmira, a true colonial fantasy, is described as a "modern day heart of darkness" by a reporter in the film, where "simple farmers and herders from peaceful villages have been driven from their homes, displaced from their lands by warlords." Again, much like the comics, the audience is presented with the imagery of the helpless native who must be protected and liberated by a White Savior, the film barely acknowledging that these villagers are in fact in such dire straits because of Stark's role in the military industrial complex and American imperialism. Regardless, during the Gulmira battle, Tony battles Ten Rings insurgents with many a blockbuster bomb and explosion, turning Afghani soil into Stark's personal video game playground without any

repercussions. The native Afghani refugees in this scene are highly feminized and othered in their helplessness. This is particularly evident when one Afghani family, for example, is separated in the chaos; the mother desperately holds on to her son as he cries out for his father who is about to be executed by the Ten Rings, only for Iron Man to intervene and save the day. As the news reporter confirms, "with no political will or international pressure, there's very little help for these refugees… There's very little hope for these refugees. Refugees who can only wonder who, if anyone, will help." The reporter's account perfectly highlights how the Occidental gaze explicitly Orientalizes the people of Gulmira, emphasizing the Oriental body's powerlessness and lack of agency, all while uplifting Stark as a classic White savior.

c) *Conclusion*

It would seem that while the original comics relied on an Occidental gaze inflamed by Yellow Peril, *Iron Man* is heavily influenced by post-9/11 rhetoric with its Islamophobic tendencies and essentialization of the Middle East and much of Asia as a whole. The original stereotypes that were used in "Iron Man is Born!" are merely updated to reflect that change while carrying remnants of that problematic text. The feminized indigenous natives are transferred from Vietnam to Afghanistan; the Viet Cong become the Ten Rings; Wong-Chu's sadism and buffoonery is relegated to Raza and Abu Baker, respectively; and Yinsen is a near identical Afghani copy of his comic book counterpart. And finally, even the revelation of Stane as the film's true villain ultimately does not negate the painstaking Orientalist imagery that is carried out throughout the entire film. In conclusion, the Occidental gaze in *Iron Man* is merely updated in its translation of the original text subsequently fortifying the MCU's conventions,

and the Oriental body in the film is either demonized and deprecated or feminized as a plot device with no agency of its own.

3. *Iron Man 3*

Unlike *Iron Man's* straightforward updating of the text, Phase Two's *Iron Man 3* attempts to challenge the Orientalist imagery and stereotypes which founded its characters as well as the expectations of its audience through the use of irony. In this section, I analyze *Iron Man 3's* attempt at disrupting the Occidental gaze by, first, comparing the representation of the Mandarin of the comics to his film counterpart, and then, closely examining the Mandarin's Lessons, which are heavily influenced by this gaze. I conclude this section with a brief investigation of the film's Orientalist representation of the veil and the keffiyeh.

a) *"The Hands of the Mandarin!"*

The character of the Mandarin is deeply intertwined with the Fu Manchu stereotype. Ruth Mayer (2014) describes Fu Manchu as a "Chinese master criminal and global plotter"; these characters are always illustrated with "sculpted moustaches, carved eyebrows, skullcaps or shaved heads, and evil grins" (p. 121). A key element in the character is his "mix of ancient Chinese knowledge and modern techno-scientific prowess" (p. 121). Mayer furthers argues that Fu Manchu insinuated itself in the popular culture of the twentieth century, signaling the looming infiltration of the Orient into the West "while refraining, at the same time, from locating or specifying the parameters of this threat" (p. 126). The essentialization of the East as a looming, unfathomable sphere compounds with and expands Said's Orientalism to Asia as a whole. The imaginative production of the Orient is then produced via these stereotypes through the Occidental gaze.

Iron Man faces off with the Mandarin, a Chinese supervillain sorcerer who wishes to conquer the world, for the first time in "The Hands of the Mandarin!," *Tales of Suspense* #50 (1964). Laden with dragon imagery, the Mandarin is a fully-fledged Fu Manchu stereotype; he is cruel and arrogant, his face framed by a classic Fu Manchu moustache, and he "[possesses] super-human strength, but [is] the brainiest enemy [Stark has] ever faced."[101] The Mandarin clearly functions as a Yellow Peril figure. With exaggerated features and an even more exaggerated ego, the sorcerer even claims to be a descendent of Genghis Khan, which quite poignantly connects the villain to *Iron Man's* Raza (*Tales of Suspense #*62 [1964]). The language that is used in introducing the Mandarin in "The Hands of the Mandarin!" heavily relies upon the Occidental gaze's dialectic:

> In the remote vastness of Red China stands the castle of the most mysterious, the most feared Oriental of all time! Some claim he has lived for many centuries! Others claim he is far more than human! But none know the real origin, the true power of the evil genius of the East – the Dreaded Mandarin!! ... To those of the western world, he is little more than a fearsome legend! But in the orient – in seething, smoldering, secretive Red China, men know – to their sorrow – how real the Mandarin is! (Lee, Lieber, and Heck, p. 1)

Colorful alliteration and blunt racism aside, the clear binaries instituted between East and West are explicit, and the Mandarin, "the most mysterious, the most feared Oriental of all time," is established in the issue as a clear foil and adversary to Tony Stark. Just as Mayer argues, the Mandarin embodies the central narrative features of Fu Manchu. The villain clearly personifies the fears and anxieties of Yellow Peril, symbolizing a threat of Asian infiltration. He is also characterized by the trope's "mix of Ancient Chinese knowledge and

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[101] (Lee, Lieber, and Heck, 1963, p. 11)

modern-techno scientific prowess," as it is later revealed that the Mandarin discovered his mystical ten rings in an old, abandoned alien spaceship which had once belonged to a dragon called Axon-Karr. Incidentally, it is revealed in *Tales of Suspense* #62 (1964) that the Mandarin's father "was foolish enough to marry a high-born Englishwoman," which further draws the Mandarin into the trope of only being a worthy opponent to Stark because of his relation to whiteness.[102] Ultimately, Marvel comics' Mandarin is a classic Fu Manchu stereotype that illustrates the comic's reliance upon the Occidental gaze as is evident in his physical features, language, powers, and narratival function, all of which *Iron Man 3* struggles to subvert.

b) Iron Man 3's *Mandarin*

Iron Man 3's adaptation of the Mandarin initially appears to mirror *Iron Man's* same technique of simply updating and modernizing the original text's Orientalism. However, the film's plot twist subverts both the audience's expectations and the Occidental gaze itself. In *Iron Man 3,* the Mandarin is at first presented to the audience as an Oriental bogeyman, a textbook illustration of the modern-day terrorist. Over the course of the film, the villain broadcasts several propagandistic videos, also known as the Mandarin's Lessons, taking responsibility for (what appears to be) countless terrorist attacks both in the United States and abroad. It is only midway through the film that the audience (alongside Stark) discovers that the Mandarin is actually an imposter, a persona played by an English actor named Trevor Slattery, who has been hired by the film's actual villain, the rich American evil genius, Aldrich Killian, to play the role of Oriental bogeyman. It is this critical twist which subverts the

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[102] (Lee and Heck, 1964, p. 2)

Occidental gaze within the text. However, *Iron Man 3* still exploits harmful imagery in order to create the Mandarin persona, inflaming the Oriental/Occidental conflict of the film; and this is in great part due to the film's initial depiction of the Mandarin as well as the construction of his Lessons, both clear illustrations of the Occidental gaze at work.

In *Iron Man 3,* the Mandarin initially is presented as an updated version of the comics' Oriental bogeyman. He is a theatrical persona laden with a wide range of incendiary imagery and codings which are specifically designed to represent the perfect modern-day terrorist. In depicting this character, *Iron Man 3's* filmmakers assembled a variety of seemingly incongruous essentialized visual images. The Mandarin: wears a samurai top knot, Ghaddafi-esque glasses, and a heavy beard which is reminiscent to one sported by Bin Laden; his manner of speech emulates both President Richard Nixon and that of a preacher; and his robes draw from Chinese influence with distinct dragon imagery. "His name," Stark says, "is an ancient Chinese war mantle, meaning 'adviser to the King.' South American insurgency tactics, talks like a Baptist preacher. There's lots of pageantry going on here… lots of theatre." Stark's reference of theatre, of course, foreshadows the film's plot twist. It is through the heavy, image-laden construction of the Mandarin that the villain comes to function simultaneously in two manners: he is, as co-writer Drew Pearce describes, "a pastiche of American iconography," while also operating as a catch-all terrorist (qtd. in Schaefer, 2013).

The Orientalisation of the Mandarin is further evidence in that there are clear remnants of Fu Manchu within this terrorist version of the Mandarin. *Iron Man 3's* Mandarin is essentially set up as an Oriental specter, a ghost that exposes anxieties of Eastern infiltration. As the Mandarin claims when he is first introduced, "You know who I am, you

don't know where I am, and you'll never see me coming." The Mandarin as Fu Manchu personifies post-9/11 anxieties. In the film's commentary, Pearce explains that the Mandarin of the comics was an emblem of the "demonization of the American political enemy" of the sixties; the film's adaptation of the character as a result is

> Taking what the modern-day version of that demon would be… it wasn't the Chinese communists anymore… it was this amalgam unknown vaguely Middle Eastern, American targeted bad guy… we updated that analog, but also commented on it at the same time. ('Audio Commentary,' 2013a)

Essentially then, *Iron Man 3's* Mandarin operates on numerous levels: he is an updated version of the comics' Mandarin; he is a contemporary Fu Manchu; and he is a flawless textbook example of a modern-day terrorist. What is created out of this painstakingly manufactured character is a terrifying, enigmatic villain, who exemplifies the Occidental gaze in action. Both the Mandarin's character as well as the theatricality of terrorism are brought to the forefront of *Iron Man 3* via propaganda videos that are interspersed throughout the film. These propaganda videos, unofficially titled the Mandarin's Lessons, are broadcast across the United States on screens, and they heavily rely upon and exploit the Occidental gaze.

c) The Mandarin's Lessons

The Mandarin's Lessons are comprised of three short videos that bring the Occidental gaze to the forefront of the film. These shorts are broadcast across America as the Mandarin addresses both the country and the President of the United States. The first lesson's primary function is to establish the Manichean narrative of East versus West. Throughout the first video, the audience listens to the Mandarin as he introduces himself as a "teacher" and philosophizes upon the nature of America. The supervillain first brings up the 1864 Sand Creek

Massacre, during which a US militia slaughtered and mutilated hundreds of Cheyenne and Arapaho people, and then he shares how he has just bombed an American military base in Kuwait, "a quaint military church filled with wives and children." His words and the visuals presented during this lesson are meant to shock and cause outrage while confronting America's bloody history. And yet, the Occidental gaze is still invoked as a series of rapid shots juxtapose East and West in the video. This contrast is set by establishing and demonizing a fantastical version of the East through shots of shouting, bearded men dressed in turbans and scarves who participate in and cheer on a firing squad execution. These men wear dirty clothing, and the audience is barely given a chance to see any of their faces. They live in dilapidated villages, wielding guns, and incessantly cheer for the Mandarin. This Orientalist vision of the East is juxtaposed with shots of an idealized West, one whose ideology and culture appears to be threatened by those very same men. Here, we see shots of two white children dressed as cowboys as well as two white women smiling at the camera. Critically, a shot of the White House and the American flag are also briefly seen. In addition to the conveyed Manichean dichotomies, there is also an implicit temporal contrast established as the images presented of the East appear to be taken in the present while those of the West are old found footage denoting the past, eliciting an ideological representation of the American dream.

The Mandarin's second lesson continues to shape this narrative through its manipulation and arrangement of sound. Michel Chion (2019, p. 144) argues that "with film… the image is projected and the sound is a *projector,* in the sense that the latter projects meanings and values onto the image." This reciprocal relationship between image and sound is critical during the Mandarin's second lesson. The aural introduction of the lesson

simultaneously and quite rapidly plays the sounds of gunfire, an explosion, a person ululating, and a small segment of the *athan* (the Islamic call to prayer), all within the short span of four seconds. These sounds are further accompanied by several rapid shots: an American soldier running towards something offscreen; an unidentified man throwing a rock (a highly symbolic image that can easily be connected to Palestinian stone-throwing); as well as numerous American ads including a gym advertisement and a Slap Chop infomercial. The merging of these sounds and images projects a clear Occidental gaze, and accordingly, the Mandarin's second lesson, yet again, casts the East as a strange and violent realm, the use of the athan particularly insidious in its implicit Islamophobia as it connects Islam to violence and terrorism. The contrast between the selected shots and sounds depicts how the Occidental gaze is exploited in *Iron Man 3* to construct a particular narrative regarding the Mandarin and the all-encompassing East.

While the first two lessons are played directly to the audience, the audience get to see how the Mandarin's third and final lesson is staged and produced in a longer scene. When the scene starts, the spectator watches as a full crew prepares to film and broadcast the lesson. The villain enters the set, hooded and dressed in his robes, and he is accompanied by two silent Asian women who tend to him. Once the camera rolls, the Mandarin monologues, and he ends the lesson by (appearing to) execute a man on live television. This third lesson is particularly significant in its depiction of the staged set, which is a chaotic disarray of faux American and Oriental iconography. Dragons and incense are front and center; UN helmets with gunshot holes are scattered at the villain's feet; and the opening phrase to the US constitution, "We the people," is graffitied onto the wall behind the Mandarin's jade and wooden throne. The staged set emphasizes the pastiche of Western and Eastern iconography

that is so fundamental to the Mandarin character. The Mandarin's third and final lesson is further significant in that the audience is allowed to observe *how* the propaganda film is created. This scene displays the underlying theatricality and artificial nature of the Mandarin, and it further foreshadows the film's plot twist and Mandarin reveal. And most significantly, even though the audience may not know that the Mandarin is an imposter yet, the scene however briefly inverts the Occidental gaze. There is a clear disruption of the Occidental gaze in this scene, as the audience is not focused exclusively upon the Mandarin anymore; instead, the gaze's imposed blinders are lifted, and the camera takes a step back to see how the Occidental gaze is constructed through a highly manufactured and elaborate system. Though this sequence as a whole may subvert the Occidental gaze, the Mandarin's three lessons, through their manipulation of particular imagery, sound clips, and editing, still heavily employ the look, dehumanizing and essentializing the Oriental body and the Orient as a whole via a variety of stereotypes. The iconography which the lessons draw upon establishes the landscape of the look constructing the concepts of Orient and Occident.

Shortly after the final lesson's broadcast, the plot twist of the film is revealed. The Oriental bogeyman that had been initially presented via the Mandarin's Lessons is, as Stark puts it, a "custom-made terror threat," one that was produced by Killian's think-tank in order to gain more power. Killian claims that he is the true Mandarin, maintaining that anonymity and ruling behind the scenes is his strategy at "[owning] the war on terror," by having "the world's most powerful leader," the president of the United States, "in one hand and the world's most feared terrorist," the Mandarin, "in the other:" once "you give evil a face, a Bin Laden, Ghaddafi, a Mandarin, you hand people a target." Killian's little speech puts into simple words how the Occidental gaze is often manipulated to create a scapegoat, a villainous

Eastern terrorist that the Western masses can be frightened of, in order to secure one's own interests, be they financial, economic, political, or otherwise. On a larger scale, this highlights the constructed nature of the Occidental gaze and, indeed, of all gazes. As the film's true villain, Killian exploits the Occidental Gaze; he wields the gaze as a weapon: triggering the distinction between the Orient and the Occident; dominating and restructuring the Orient and the Oriental body; and finally, establishing power by taking on the role as the hegemonic self. For a superhero movie, this is all quite radical to say the least. By subverting the role of the Mandarin, *Iron Man 3* ironically deconstructs, or at the very least attempts to ironically deconstruct the Occidental Gaze, the *Iron Man* trilogy, as well as the original *Iron Man* comics.

We see then that the Occidental gaze in *Iron Man 3* is used ironically to undermine the inherent Orientalism of the original Iron Man narrative as well to subvert the audience's expectations. The Mandarin twist proves that with the exploitation of the right imagery and the manipulation of fear, it is rather easy to create a particular narrative. And it is for that very reason that the Mandarin's Lessons are so critical in the construction of the Occidental gaze in the film. Pearce has explained that the imagery chosen in these scenes was deliberate, they

> purposely connect with images from the last fifteen years of terrorism we've been shown. It's interesting to note how quickly you can find those hot-button images that go straight to a place of fear for us, and I think that that also relates to how the last fifteen years have played out in news coverage. (qtd. in Harding, 2013)

These 'hot-button images' are so critical in maintaining the persona of the Mandarin and the film's Orientalism. And as a result, despite *Iron Man 3's* attempt to subvert the Occidental gaze by bringing to attention the spectator's preconceptions regarding Orientalist imagery,

terrorism, and the gaze itself, these hot-button images nevertheless remain at the forefront of the viewer's mind. The satire and deconstruction are unfortunately not clear enough, or are arguably overshadowed by the cycle's repeated exploitation of Manicheanism, and so any laudable attempt to confront the Orientalist nature of the Iron Man narrative is severely weakened, as the presented imagery is what the audience is left with at the end of the film. Calling back to Hassler-Forest's argument, the negative connotations of violence and terrorism continue to define the Middle East even when another rich, white American man is revealed to be the film's villain. To make matters worse, *Iron Man 3's* struggle to deconstruct the Occidental look is only aggravated by how it presents the Oriental body in association with the veil and keffiyah.

d) The Veil and Keffiyeh

The depiction of the veil and keffiyah in *Iron Man 3*, and indeed across the Infinity Saga, further stand as evidence of how the Oriental body is dehumanized by the Occidental gaze in the MCU. *Iron Man 3's* portrayal of the veil is a prime example of how the film ultimately fails to deconstruct the Occidental gaze. During a particular scene in the film, James Rhodes as Iron Patriot is instructed by the President of the United States to go to Pakistan to locate the Mandarin at a Ten Rings base. While searching for the supervillain, Rhodes uncovers a sweatshop occupied by several women dressed in niqabs. After realizing the supervillain is not in fact in this meagre sweatshop, Rhodes lowers his weapons, and the terrified veiled women rush to the superhero, shaking his hand and thanking him before exiting the scene. "Yes, you're free," he tells them, "if you weren't before." In a surprise twist, the last woman to shake Rhodes' hand turns out to be one of Killian's henchmen, and after incapacitating him, she quickly pulls off her niqab and captures the hero. *Iron Man 3*'s misogynistic portrayal

of the helpless veiled woman in need of rescue is cliched and tiresome to say the least, though

Rhodes (only barely) seems to call himself out. Hollywood has doled out this near century-old

harmful stereotype since the early 1920s, a trope described by Jack Shaheen (2003, p. 51) as

the stereotypical "Bundles of Black, a homogenous sea of covered women."[103] Yvonne

Yazbeck Haddad (2007, p. 260) further argues that "the Western agenda of liberating the

women of Islam is the constant" in the West, whether these women require liberation from

"overindulgence of sex" as was demanded during the nineteenth century, or are now "in the

need of liberation in order to have more sexual freedom." Veiled Muslim women, regardless

of the manner in which they assume the veil, must always be in need of rescue, of liberation,

as they are viewed through the Occidental gaze as completely helpless, powerless, and lacking

any agency. And yet, even this stereotype is paradoxical in nature, for while the veiled woman

is infantilized, cast as vulnerable and in need of rescue, she is also gazed upon as something

to be feared, unknowable, and potentially monstrous. Unfortunately, *Iron Man 3* falls into

this trap. The film depicts the veiled Oriental body as a body that must be saved, and yet, also

as a body that one must be suspicious and wary of, for it is ultimately a threat. This very

fleeting subversion in the film does not attempt to problematize the stereotypes surrounding

the veiled body, instead it confirms the Islamophobic and racist caricatures that Hollywood

has been presenting to audiences for decades which the MCU has adopted.

It is worth noting that such disappointing imagery regarding the veil appears yet again

in one of the most progressive films of the saga, *Black Panther*. During a key scene set in

Nigeria, T'Challa along with Nakia and Okoye take on a group of traffickers who are a thinly

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[103] See also Shaheen (2003), Alsultany (2012), and Mahdi (2020).

veiled fictionalized version of terrorist organization, Boko Haram. Driving through the jungle in the middle of the night, the heavily armed men are seen transporting a group of women and girls, all dressed in hijabs. After T'Challa confronts and defeats the traffickers, the team free the women and tell them to go home. "Thank you, thank you," the women repeat over and over again echoing the scene from *Iron Man 3*. Critically, once they have been liberated, the women immediately discard their hijabs. Whether or not these women have been forced to wear the hijab by their abductees is moot, as the film falls back on the stereotypical narrative of Muslim men as villainous and misogynistic villains (one of the men shouts, "Wallahi, [I swear to God] I will shoot her right now" as he holds a gun to a kidnapped girl's head), and the resulting scene associates the veil, in this case, the hijab, with those very same traffickers; and more damningly, freedom and agency only become a possibility via the veil's removal.[104]

In addition to the representation of the veil, the depiction of the keffiyeh in the Infinity Saga is also exploited to demonize the Oriental body. An Arabian checkered piece of traditional men's headwear, the keffiyeh is regularly exploited in Hollywood films as well as across the MCU; the article of clothing is regularly used when dressing up terrorists and villains on screen, or even, ironically, US military personnel across the MENA region. The keffiyeh appears numerous times in the Infinity Saga: in *Iron Man,* the headgear is worn by members of the 10 Rings; *Iron Man 3* offers glimpses of the keffiyeh in several of the Mandarin's Lessons; several shots during a montage sequence in *The Winter Soldier* features

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[104] For more, Chrifi Alaoui and Abdi (2020) provide an interesting analysis of these scene, while examining the portrayal (and erasure) of Islam in *Black Panther*. Also, it should be noted that in *Spider-Man: Far from Home* (2019), one of Parker's classmates includes a young woman who wears the hijab; however, this tokenistic character is unnamed and only reserved for background shots echoing Warner's 'plastic representation' theory (2017).

Palestinians wearing the keffiyeh; *Ant-Man* also provides a shot of one of the film's villains, Mitchell Carson, an underground HYDRA agent who works at S.H.I.E.L.D., wearing the scarf in an old picture; and even *Black Panther's* Boko Haram-esque villains are seen wearing the scarf. Though the keffiyeh is commonly worn across various Arab countries and comes in different color schemes, both *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 3* show a penchant for portraying their villains with the black and white patterned keffiyeh, overlooking, or perhaps deliberately observing the keffiyeh's significance as a symbol of Palestinian nationalism and solidarity.[105] The connective tissue between the images used here are critical, and the Occidental gaze's reliance on the dichotomous binaries of self and other, West and East, Occident and Orient are further enflamed by considering the appropriation and commodification of the keffiyeh by the fashion industry. As Evan Renfro (2018, p. 573) argues, "the East/West dichotomy is in play, as we move from the crucial political element of the keffiyeh to its sterilized Other in an Orientalist maneuver whereby the Occident's privilege strains the political from the cultural, allowing only the fashionable (and billable) to accessorize the body;" the keffiyeh can only be accepted as an appropriated fashion item when worn, completely depoliticized, its historical and national significance erased, while the on-screen representation of the headscarf where it is worn by the villainized Oriental body remains a sign of terrorism and otherness.

Before concluding, it is worth exploring how the Occidental gaze similarly depicts the keffiyeh in several montage sequences over the course of the Infinity Saga. The clearest example is witnessed in *The Winter Soldier* which features a fast-paced montage sequence detailing HYDRA's infiltration of S.H.I.E.L.D. since World War II. As one of the film's villains,

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[105] For more on the keffiyeh, see: Shirazi-Mahajan (1993), Salem (2008), and Renfro (2018).

Arnim Zola, narrates how "for seventy years, HYDRA has been secretly feeding crisis, reaping war," several significant historical images and videos are played rapidly in succession in the span of a few seconds, feeding into the themes of "crisis" and "war." A good majority of these images transpire across the MENA region, including shots of: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the *Sepâh*, wearing their famous red and green headbands in the midst of the Iranian Revolution (this image is strangely used twice); Muammar Ghaddafi holding up a peace sign; the burning of an oil well during the Gulf War in Kuwait, as well as the surrender of Iraqi soldiers in the aftermath. Quite significantly and paralleling one of the shots from the Mandarin's Lessons, as Zola says "reaping war," the montage displays an image of a Palestinian man who is clearly wearing a keffiyeh throwing a rock. Before Zola moves onto a discussion of surveillance, he states that "HYDRA created a world so chaotic," and the last two historical shots of the montage show an explosion and then an image of what appears to be members of the PLO, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, during the Jordanian Civil War, carrying guns and yet again, dressed in keffiyehs. The Occidental gaze in this short montage sequence equates crisis and war, chaos and instability with the MENA region, and it further equates terrorism and violence with Palestine specifically via the visuals of rock throwing and the keffiyeh. These montage sequences explicitly bind the saga's narrative to the history of Western interventionism in the Middle East. The portrayal of the keffiyeh in conjunction with the manner in which these montage sequences are structured, effectively enforces the Occidental Gaze across the Infinity Saga.

e) Conclusion

Iron Man 3 would be a huge financial success at the box office. The film, however, was received much less favorably by fans who were angered by the movie's translation of the

Mandarin. In the film's commentary, director Shane Black and co-writer Drew Pearce spoke about the fans' negative reaction regarding their subversion of the Mandarin character: "There were fans who objected to our portrayal of the Mandarin, saying you've set him up as the thing we expect and gave him power and the robe and then you take it away" ('Audio Commentary,' 2013a). The fans' demand for the power, for the robe, for the Fu Manchu stereotype, or at least some version of that stereotype, perhaps calls back to their expectations from the established MCU film cycle conventions, or indeed any film adapted from Marvel's comics from the Golden and Silver ages. And regardless of whether these vocal fans were the majority of the film's audience, their voices were heard, as *Iron Man 3* and its translation of the Mandarin would be retconned in a short film called *All Hail the King* (2014). The short would establish that Killian was also an imposter, and the true Mandarin has yet to reveal himself, drawing yet again from the exotic, mysterious Orientalist nature of the character, and ultimately, completely negating the subversion and deconstruction of the Occidental gaze that *Iron Man 3* had endeavored to achieve.[106]

Though *Iron Man 3* attempts to ironically deconstruct the Orientalist stereotypes and narrative inherent in the original text, it ultimately fails because of its heavy reliance upon harmful, stereotypical imagery. Yet again, we see the Oriental body essentialized in this film and the overarching influence of post-9/11 Islamophobia. The Orient, specifically the MENA region, functions as a site associated with war and instability, violence and chaos. The Oriental body is similarly othered and dehumanized as: poor and dirty children are seen happily flocking to the Mandarin's open arms; veiled women are liberated by the West so as to secure

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[106] Though not part of this dissertation's scope, it is important to note that Phase Four's *Shang-Chi and the Ten Rings* (2021) would successfully reinterpret the Mandarin and the Ten Rings; see the Conclusion.

their 'freedom;' angry, grimy men wildly shout indecipherable things while waving guns and wearing keffiyehs; and most importantly, modern day terrorists such as the Mandarin can only emulate essentialized Asian iconography. The recurrent trends within the MCU film cycle help establish the Occidental gaze, and via this look, the niqab, the hijab, and the keffiyeh, become somatic markers which denote otherness and further demarcate the alterity of the Oriental body. Though *Iron Man 3* ultimately struggles to contend with the cycle's Manichean and hegemonic system, for a superhero movie of its time, the film's confrontation of the gaze is, frankly, more than impressive.

4. *Doctor Strange*

While *Iron Man* updates the Occidental gaze that is inherent to its original narrative and *Iron Man 3* pushes to ironically deconstruct that very gaze, Phase Three's *Doctor Strange* strives to completely eradicate that look. In this closing section, I analyze how *Doctor Strange* engages with the Occidental gaze in its translation of the original comic's setting in Kamar-Taj as well as the characters of the Ancient One, Wong, and Doctor Strange himself.

a) *"The Origin of Doctor Strange"*

Created by Stan Lee and Steve Ditko, Dr. Stephen Strange first appears in *Strange Tales* #110 (1963), a neurosurgeon who becomes the Master of Black Magic, Earth's guardian against magical threats. Ditko came up with the concept of the character, hoping it would have "sort of a black magic theme."[107] The comics were famous for their vivid psychedelic imagery, surrealist art, and more pertinently, heavy influence from Eastern mysticism. Wright (2001,

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[107] The quote is from a letter Stan Lee wrote to Jerry Bails in 1963 that was later published in the fanzine, *Comic Reader*.

p. 213) elaborates, the comics were "inspired by the pulp-fiction magicians of Stan Lee's childhood as well as by contemporary beat culture, *Dr. Strange* remarkably predicted the youth counterculture's fascination with Eastern mysticism and psychedelia" of the sixties. The obsession with Eastern mysticism is key in that it facilitates the Occidental gaze in the comics. The Occidental gaze was crucial in establishing the comics' narratives and imagery, and this is particularly relevant when one considers the representation of Kamar-Taj, the Ancient One, Wong, and Doctor Strange.

Kamar-Taj functions as a classic version of the Orient, exoticized as a mystical land of the East and first appearing in Strange's origin story. The opening panels of "The Origin of Doctor Strange," in *Strange Tales* #115 (1963) depicts Strange solemnly standing, with incense billowing across the panel. Questions like "Where does he come from? How did he get his powers? Who is he?" shrouds the character with mystery and exoticism (Lee and Ditko, 1963b, p. 1). Over the course of the story, we learn that Strange had once been a rich and famous surgeon, egotistical and a sceptic at heart, until a near-fatal car crash resulted in Strange injuring his hands, severely damaging his nervous system and destroying his career. As a result, Strange travels the world in search of a cure for his hands until he discovers Kamar-Taj and the Ancient One, also known as the Sorcerer Supreme, a Tibetan spiritual man who becomes Strange's mentor. It is at Kamar-Taj that Stephen studies the mystical arts and eventually learns about selflessness and faith. Over the course of the issue, Kamar-Taj is repeatedly portrayed in an Orientalist light. Kamar-Taj is located "somewhere in the remote vastness of Asia," a "hidden land high in the Himalayas… populated by a race of people who, though not outwardly advanced, had developed the arts of joyous living to a degree undreamed of by more complex civilizations" (Lee, O'Neil, and Everett, 1966, p. 2). The

contradictory manner in which the site is described both romanticizes the place while also degrading it: ultimately, Kamar-Taj is nothing more than an exoticized Shangri-La for Strange to conquer. Furthermore, the juxtaposition between East and West is further presented in the comics as a contrast in ideology, themes, and belief systems: of Kamar-Taj and New York, spirit and body, the physical and the mystical, magic-faith and science, and even life and death, as Kamar-Taj is where Strange is essentially reborn.

Needless to say, the Asian characters in these early issues are also presented in a caricature-like manner. Strange's master, the Ancient One first appears in *Strange Tales* #110 (1963) as an old, wizened character from whom Strange seeks help, and in *Strange Tales* #115 (1963), we see the Ancient One's character developed as he guides Strange to enlightenment while teaching him the mystical arts. The Ancient One, somewhat similar to the Mandarin, operates as a 'good' Fu Manchu. However, though he is depicted as immensely powerful, the Ancient One is old and near the end of his life, and it is for that reason that he takes on Strange as his apprentice. Consequently, the slowly fading Sorcerer Supreme's power and authority merely become a tool for empowering Strange in his road to enlightenment. Another key character in these early comics is Wong, Strange's manservant; Wong's first appearance in the comics is that of a nameless (and almost faceless) character, and indeed, his sole function in that issue is only to open the door for one of Strange's guests. This portrayal would set the tone for his character over the next several decades, as Wong accompanies Strange on his adventures as a sidekick, calling Strange his 'Master,' and corresponding quite neatly into the stereotypical, meek Asian valet. The Oriental bodies then in these early comics suffer greatly under the Occidental gaze as they function simply as racist and stereotypical plot devices who uplift the main white superhero in his adventures.

Much like the *Iron Man* comics, Doctor Strange as the titular superhero is also painted as a White Savior. Strange's spiritual journey in Kamar-Taj earns him the title of Sorcerer Supreme, and he becomes the first symbol of mysticism, of an acceptable version of the East, in Marvel's comics. As a "man of the western world," as the Ancient One calls him, his whiteness is constantly pointed out and is integral to his character. Strange's ability to traverse between both worlds, between East and West as well as between numerous dimensions and realms, and yet remain in the role of the Self in the land of the Other primarily stems from his whiteness and is also indicative of the superhero genre's colonial roots. Furthermore, as Strange has acquired his powers from the East, he becomes an offshoot of a White Savior, what is colloquially referred to as a Mighty Whitey, a white character who travels to an Eastern realm, living with the native people of that land, studying their ways, and eventually becoming their leader. This trope originally materialized in eighteenth and nineteenth century adventure fiction, and so it can easily be linked to that of a colonial fantasy, of exploring and in a sense conquering the East/the Global South, a feat that Doctor Strange unquestionably accomplishes as he assumes the role of Sorcerer Supreme. Ultimately, though *Doctor Strange* may not be directly influenced by Yellow Peril, like the *Iron Man* comics were for example, *Doctor Strange's* initial issues fall back on several stereotypical Orientalist tropes which are guided by an Occidental gaze that centers the white hero while marginalizing non-white characters, and this is evident in the representations of *Doctor Strange's* setting, characters, and overall mood.

b) Doctor Strange on Film

In adapting this narrative on screen, director Scott Derrickson attempted to eliminate and invert the comics' original racist stereotypes; however, as will be argued, despite his best efforts, Phase 3's *Doctor Strange* could not fully extricate itself from the Occidental gaze. This is primarily witnessed via the film's translation of Kamar-Taj and the main characters on-screen.

c) Kamar-Taj

In *Doctor Strange*, Kamar-Taj is located in Kathmandu, Nepal. The city's otherness is heavily stressed upon when viewed through the eyes of Strange, as he is initially the bearer of the Occidental look. While Strange is on his journey to find the fabled Kamar-Taj, he works his way through Kathmandu, visibly taller than the native Nepalis in the crowd. During the sequence, the city is filled with smoke and incense, vibrant reds and yellows, as well as old models of cars and bustling crowds. Production Designer Charles Wood describes the challenges in recreating Kathmandu for the film: "It's a frenetic city. It's choking. It's extraordinary, it's colorful. It's mad. It's crazy" (qtd. in Johnston, 2016b, p. 38). Derrickson continues with this exoticizing language, emphasizing the difference inherent to Kathmandu, "It is a city with virtually no Western influence in it- it's 85 percent Hindu and 15 percent Tibetan Buddhist. It is a large city that is so deeply mystical and religious in all operations - but in the most peaceful, beautiful, colorful way" (qtd. in Johnston, 2016b, p. 40). The contrasting representations established between Kathmandu and New York in the film highlights Wood and Derrickson's impression of the city as it is heavily juxtaposed to New York's slate grays, upscale, technologically advanced, and, simply put, familiar setting. The Occidental gaze is perhaps most clear when, as Strange searches for Kamar-Taj, he comes

across countless Buddhist and Hindu structures and iconography, clearly confused and wary. The audience sees Kathmandu and these religious images through the eyes of an (as of yet) still arrogant and disrespectful Strange, and so the contrast between East and West is heavily emphasized. This is perhaps most apparent in a key scene when Strange is led by Karl Mordo, one of the Ancient One's disciples, to the entrance of Kamar-Taj, an unassuming door on one of the main streets in the city. Strange immediately scoffs at Mordo, "Really? Are you sure you got the right place? That one," he says, pointing towards a group of *sadhus*, Hindu and Jain monks, "looks a little more... Kamar-Taj-y." Though Strange's disrespect and ingrained Occidental gaze is criticized by Mordo, it is only until much later in the film that Strange begins to slowly understand his ignorant and offensive behavior and reassess his internalized Occidental gaze.

After Strange is taken on by the Ancient One, we see Kamar-Taj again through the hero's eyes. Hidden in the center of the city, Kamar-Taj is a school for sorcerers and sorceresses, "a place that collects broken things… with the promise of being healed." The students and masters who study and live there come from all across the world. Kamar-Taj is also connected to three international sanctums, located in New York, London, and Hong Kong, "two cities in the East and two cities in the West;" Derrickson explains in the film's commentary that he did not want "to make the obvious mistake of having [the film] be too American-centric when sorcerers are protecting the earth, not just the Western world and certainly not just America" ('Audio Commentary,' 2016). The director further acknowledges how "Western film[s] approaching the East can be guilty of what's called exoticism… the tendency to take a Western view of the East and commercialize it for consumption," and while there is an effort to portray Kathmandu in a positive, well-rounded light, that does not detract

from the fact that *Doctor Strange* somewhat essentializes the city as it is experienced through Stephen's Occidental gaze. This struggle in confronting and eradicating the gaze is further witnessed in the translation of its characters on screen.

d) The Ancient One and Wong

In addition to the portrayal of Kamar-Taj, there is a clear attempt to subvert the comic's Orientalised depiction of both the Ancient One and Wong in *Doctor Strange*. The stereotypical portrayal of The Ancient One as Fu Manchu is primarily disrupted in the film via the character's casting, though this would present other troubles for the character. The introduction of the Ancient One in *Doctor Strange* is a significant example of how the film exposes and challenges the audience's internalized Occidental gaze. When Strange is first received at Kamar-Taj, he is brought into a room where an old, bespectacled Asian man with a long beard is reading a book. Strange approaches him assuming that he is the Ancient One, only for the camera to then pan out towards a white, androgynous woman of Celtic origin who offers Stephen a cup of tea. In a minor plot twist that almost echoes *Iron Man 3's* Mandarin reveal*,* this woman reveals herself as the Sorcerer Supreme. Though the casting of Tilda Swinton as the Ancient One does dismantle the racist tropes inherent to the original comics, the Ancient One's Tibetan nationality is consequently erased and whitewashed. There is a subversion of the Occidental gaze, but more realistically, the reinterpretation of the Ancient One is simply fixed to Marvel Studios and Disney's desire to not anger the Chinese government and risk losing out on a *Doctor Strange* release due to a Tibetan character. And so, regardless of the film's attempt to eradicate the Occidental gaze, it would seem that the MCU's industrial influences remain embedded within *Doctor Strange*, a clear signifier of both Marvel and Disney's chief interest in box office revenue. Furthermore, though Swinton's

casting subverts both the racial and gendered expectations of the Ancient One, the character's whitewashing stands as evidence that even in a new and updated 'non-racist' adaptation, it is nigh impossible to recreate the system which the original narrative relied upon. The Occidental gaze, and otherness itself, is virtually indispensable to Marvel's texts.

Wong's translation on-screen is another attempt to reassess the original story and present a three-dimensional character who is an equal to Strange in every manner. As opposed to the comic's lowly manservant, *Doctor Strange's* Wong is both Kamar-Taj's head librarian and a Master of the Mystic Arts. In the film, Wong is depicted as a serious character, one who helps challenge Strange and facilitate his studies in the mystic arts, and by the end of the movie, Wong takes on a leadership position at the school. Despite the admirable reinterpretation of the character, Wong is still constrained by several tropes that are often relegated to the non-white body in the MCU. Wong is tokenistic in that he is the only Asian character with any lines throughout the entire movie, and the character also functions to a certain extent as a form of comedic relief, one that is inverted in how he refuses to engage in Strange's antics. And finally, as much as Wong is established as his own character, he is still the non-white sidekick that caters to Strange's white superhero.

Explaining the difficulties in translating the text onto the screen, director Scott Derrickson justified his directorial decisions in *Doctor Strange*:

> The Ancient One and Wong in the comics were 1960s Western stereotypes… My first thought was to make the Ancient One a woman and middle-aged, not a fanboy's dream girl… that would be an Asian woman but then it felt like it was falling into the Dragon Lady stereotype... I wasn't going to perpetuate that stereotype. And it would make it all about a Western character coming to Asia to learn about being Asian. It was a minefield… I also felt a great

> burden to make Wong a major character… So I inverted everything
> from the comics... Asians have been whitewashed and stereotyped
> in American cinema for over a century and people should be mad
> or nothing will change. What I did was the lesser of two evils, but
> it is still an evil. (qtd. in Kyriazis, 2016)

Obviously, Derrickson is quite aware of *Doctor Strange's* Orientalist foundations as well as the narrative's limitations. His inversions of the three main characters, the Ancient One, Wong, as well as Strange himself, is laudable. Nevertheless, Derrickson's difficulties in translating the original superhero text on screen, describing the process as a no-win situation, yet again brings to attention how intrinsic Orientalism, the Occidental gaze, and more broadly speaking, the self/other dialectic is within the MCU. Furthermore, his justifications do not excuse the whitewashing of the Ancient One in what was clearly a bid to secure Chinese box office revenue. In an interview during the film's press tour, co-writer C. Robert Carghill would admit how the Ancient One

> originates from Tibet, so if you acknowledge that Tibet is a place
> and that he's Tibetan, you risk alienating one billion people who
> think that that's bullshit and risk the Chinese government going,
> 'Hey, you know one of the biggest film-watching countries in the
> world? We're not going to show your movie because you decided
> to get political…' If you are telling me you think it's a good idea to
> cast a Chinese actress as a Tibetan character, you are out of your
> damn fool mind and have no idea what the fuck you're talking
> about… We knew that the Social Justice Warriors would be angry
> either way. (Double Toasted, 2016)

Carghill would later apologize for his statement, stating that his opinions did not represent Marvel. And yet, his words ring true, particularly in the face of Marvel's lack of a response to questions regarding the Tibetan's erasure as well the company's past history with catering to the Chinese government as was seen in *Iron Man 3*.

e) Conclusion

Despite its best efforts, *Doctor Strange* vacillates between inverting and removing the Occidental gaze and falling victim to that very same look. Strange himself is used as an instrument of the gaze; he is a narratival tool which exposes his internalized Occidental gaze, while also pointing out the audience's culpability in engaging with that look as well. It is important to note that there was an uproar by Marvel's fans in the casting and whitewashing of the Ancient One. As was the case with Heimdall, this led to many campaigning against and boycotting the film, though this did not greatly impact the film's earnings (Fuchs, 2016; Krishna, 2016).

It would seem that while the Occidental gaze is quite blatant at the beginning of the Infinity Saga; over the course of its three phases, the gaze is complicated, developing into a look that is more implicit in nature. This is evident as: *Iron Man* merely updates the Occidental gaze; *Iron Man 3* struggles and ultimately fails at ironically subverting that look; and *Doctor Strange* likewise attempts to translate the inherent Orientalism of the comics by inverting and eradicating that gaze. By considering a movie from each phase, it could be argued that over the course of almost a decade, the MCU has moved towards adaptations which are more self-aware of their problematic beginnings. And this is clear in *Iron Man 3* and *Doctor Strange's* attempts at removing and inverting both the in-built Orientalist stereotypes and the Occidental gaze as a whole. Though both of these films attempt to challenge and produce a new narrative unencumbered by any racially insensitive tropes, as Derrickson and Carghill noted, there is almost no way to completely remove oneself from the Occidental gaze and the system set in place in these narratives; one can only choose the lesser of two evils in adapting these texts. Carghill likens the scenario to *Star Trek's* Kobayashi Maru, a no-win

scenario where "it all comes down onto which way you're willing to lose" (Double Toasted, 2016). Contrasting the distinctive approaches of all of these films seems to confirm how Marvel's history of regressive and racist imagery is continually undergoing a process of adaptation. It further confirms the slow development and fluctuations within the film cycle itself and mirrors the saga's changing hegemonic ideas about representation. Investigating the Occidental gaze in the Infinity Saga motions to two conclusions: first, that the cycle's grand narrative, its tropes, stories, themes, and structure are all heavily shaped by a system of otherness and that self/other dialectic is facilitated through the Occidental gaze as well as via other gazes that have been discussed; and second, that the MCU film cycle is slowly, but surely evolving.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Over the course of this chapter, I have examined how race and ethnicity are clearly fixed to otherness within the MCU. From the representation of non-white superheroes and characters to the depiction of the alien body and the Oriental body, the Infinity Saga clearly relies upon an underlying White gaze, one which is informed by the MCU's recurrent trends. The White gaze in all its forms, be it a broad reading of the look or a narrower interpretation like the Occidental gaze, enables the self/other dialectic of the cycle, fixing the non-white body as other via a series of intersecting tropes and stereotypes. Ultimately, the non-white body's role within the MCU is to center and uplift the white male superhero and the hegemonic sites which he represents, i.e. Whiteness, Empire, colonialism etc. And the inherently political nature of this racialized look is reflective of broader socio-political and geo-political tensions,

as is clear with the post-9/11 Islamophobia of *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 3* as well as the remnants of Yellow Peril in *Doctor Strange*.

In examining how these representations have evolved and diversified over the course of the Infinity Saga, it is quite clear that more and more films in the MCU are starting to challenge the MCU's system. This is clear in how *Black Panther* provides a huge shift in black representation in the saga. It is also evident in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* and *Captain Marvel*, two films which both confront the racialized schemas that are often imposed upon the saga's alien and space stories. And it is finally clear, in *Iron Man 3* and *Doctor Strange's* attempts to subvert and eradicate the Occidental gaze. These films commendably endeavor to challenge the saga's self/other dialectic and hegemonic ideals though they are often still constrained by many of the cycle's internalized components. There remain several insurmountable conventions which seem impossible to subvert, from centering the white superhero and relying upon monstrous alien henchmen to the saga's dependence upon gazes which order its characters. As the next and final chapter of this dissertation will argue, the saga's representation of gender and sexuality seems to mirror this tension between conforming to and reforming the MCU's Manichean and hegemonic system.

CHAPTER 3
GENDER AND SEXUALITY

In September of 2018, the official trailer for *Captain Marvel* premiered, and accompanying its release was a highly hostile, sexist reaction from a number of 'fans' online. Angry that the superheroine did not seem to smile in the trailer or, indeed, in any of the promotional material for the film, these particularly loud fans took to social media, complaining about Brie Larson's 'wooden' facial expressions and, spewing the age-old sexist refrain, repeatedly protested that she needed to smile more. One fan, in what would become a viral post, went as far as to photoshop a smile onto the actress's face in several shots from the film's trailer as well as its poster. In a humorous turn of events, Larson herself would respond to the online drama. The actress reposted photoshopped posters of *Doctor Strange*, *Iron Man 3*, and *The Winter Soldier* on her Instagram, the typically stoic countenances of the superheroes replaced with uncanny and creepy smiles.

The highly misogynistic reaction to the *Captain Marvel* trailer would be just one of the many obstacles the film would face prior to its release, and the trailer's intense online

reaction exposes several issues which plague the MCU.[108] First, it tells how *Captain Marvel* was subject to countless double standards both before and after the film premiered. The film quite frankly struggled in breaking through to a substantial portion of the saga's fandom, as they had come to expect only straight, white male superheroes at the forefront of the MCU's films. The intense online smear campaign obviously does not reflect the MCU's overall audience, however it is not surprising *why* these expectations were there in the first place. The Infinity Saga films via their internalized generic mechanisms reiterated and implemented a misogynistic and homophobic patriarchal system, one that thrives upon uplifting the heteronormative, cisgendered white male hero while marginalizing, as was discussed in the previous chapter, not only non-white, but also female, queer, and non-heteronormative bodies. There is a clearly informed and callous gaze that is imposed upon the female body and the queer body in the MCU both in its films and by the audience, and this is achingly clear in the Infinity Saga and in how the films have been marketed.

Highly influenced by a patriarchal gaze, these hegemonic power structures are clearly witnessed in the majority of the Infinity Saga's promotional material and even more so in its posters. Throughout all three phases of the Infinity Saga, the white, straight male superhero, in typical Hollywood fashion, is always front and center; he is the subject, the heart, the focal point of the image, while women (if present at all) are relegated to being sexualized objects which must be protected. In arguably all the main posters of the saga's films, female, non-white, and queer characters are mere accessories to the central superhero, relegated to the

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[108] Prior to the film's release, *Captain Marvel* was subject to over 4,500 one-star bad-faith reviews on *Rotten Tomatoes*. The scandal would lead *Rotten Tomatoes* to prevent any reviews being submitted by users if a film has not been released yet (Abad-Santos, 2019).

margins of the poster, smaller in stature, and quite plainly secondary in focus.[109] *Captain Marvel's* poster and trailer would be a clear inversion of this recurring pattern, as a female superhero, stoic gaze and serious demeanor on display, was now the focal point and center of attention. Ultimately, the patently cruel online reaction to *Captain Marvel's* trailer and poster and the sexist double standards the film was placed under are unfortunately unsurprising considering how the MCU, from its posters and trailers to the films themselves, has more often than not relied upon a hegemonic Manichean system while also heavily utilizing the male gaze.

It is quite ironic that *Captain Marvel* faced the 'smile more' controversy prior to its release, particularly because the film itself contains a scene that addresses this very issue. While Carol is on Earth, struggling to discover more about her murky past, an arrogant stranger tries to approach the hero; Carol politely rebuffs his advances, only for the man to tell her, "How about a smile for me… I'm offering to help you, the least you could do is smile." This scene, amongst many in the film, directly draws attention to how the female body is often objectified by the gaze and directly echoes the trailer's online reception. However, despite being amongst the saga's more progressive films, *Captain Marvel* is one of the last entries in the Infinity Saga. Unfortunately, the saga suffers greatly from a gaze-controlled schema, one which privileges the male body while marginalizing female and queer bodies, and this can be linked back to the cycle's internalized system. While the previous chapter was concerned with images of races and ethnicity in the MCU, this third and final chapter

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[109] It is also worth mentioning that when the *Endgame* poster was released, Okoye actress Danai Gurira was the only cast member who appeared on the poster, but was not included in the top credit line. It was only after fans took to social media criticizing the poster and insisting that Gurira's name be included, that Marvel Studios released a new poster with the actress's name, the accompanying tweet stating: "She should have been up there all this time" (Marvel Studios, 2019).

examines representations of gender and sexuality in the Infinity Saga. The MCU's system reinforces Manichean dichotomies and hegemonic power structures within the binaries of gender and sexuality. Primarily constrained by androcentric, patriarchal gazes and themes, the portrayal of gender and sexuality in the Infinity Saga is primarily heteronormative and cisgendered, with misogynistic portrayals of the female body as well as villainized and feminized depictions of characters coded as queer.

In this chapter, I first analyze representations of the male body on screen. I consider how the male gaze casts the male superhero body as the self. Though a new iteration of the Hollywood action hero, the MCU superhero, more often than not, represents a regressive hegemonic and toxic hypermasculinity. I further consider how the superhero's weapons are fetishized as an extension of the male body, and I conclude the section with an in-depth analysis of Thor, exploring how the hypermasculine superhero functions under both the male gaze and the female gaze and eventually is presented as an alternative form of masculinity. The development of Thor's masculinity on screen stands as evidence of the evolution of the MCU film cycle's conventions.

The chapter's next section considers the representation of the female body in the MCU by observing how the male gaze visually and narratively objectifies female characters in the saga. I particularly focus on the recurring archetypal tropes of the Mother, the Side-lined Superheroine, and Fridging. I then conduct an in-depth close textual analysis of the saga's leading superheroine: Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow, examining how the female body is presented as a paradoxical site of spectacle. Finally, this section ends with a brief survey of Phase Three's more progressive representations of the female body, with an analysis of *Black*

Panther's black female characters. Having considered the male and female body, in the closing section of this chapter, I briefly examine the MCU's undeveloped representation of queerness. I review the very few queer characters presented in the MCU and then go on to examine the recurrent patterns of queer coding villains and queerbaiting the audience with homoerotic superheroes. By examining the Infinity Saga's portrayal of the male body, the female body, and the queer body, it will further be evident just how fundamental otherness and the self/other dialectic is within the MCU film cycle.

I. THE MALE BODY

In the MCU film cycle, the male body is central; it dominates as the saga's most crucial site, enabling the MCU's grand narrative to flourish and advance. In this section, I overview the MCU's representation of the male body. I first briefly review how the male body is presented as the subject in relation to the MCU, with a brief analysis of what I term 'the weapon gaze.' I then consider how superheroes in the MCU often denote a hegemonic and toxic masculinity as is most apparent in *Avengers: Infinity War*. I conclude the section with a close-textual analysis of superhero Thor and his masculinity. This analysis is achieved by: first, examining how Thor is emblematic of the superhero's hegemonic hypermasculinity; second, considering how the hero functions under both a male gaze and female gaze; and finally, analyzing how the character is transformed in *Avengers: Endgame* to represent an alternative form of masculinity in the MCU.

1. Superhero as the Muscular Self

As was discussed in the first chapter, the male superhero body primarily functions as the self in the Infinity Saga.[110] The male body is the nucleus of the MCU. It symbolizes the Manichean dualities of the text, and it is a site of propagandistic cultural hegemony, a site of Whiteness, colonialism, and Empire. "Just as the cowboy served as a masculine source for (racialized) order on the Western frontier, protecting a feminized 'civilization' in regions beyond the reach of the state," Jason Dittmer (2013) reasons, "superheroes serve as a masculine barrier between the vulnerable, feminized urban population and the chaotic savagery of criminals and supervillains" (p. 28). Centering the MCU, the male body is accordingly cisgendered, heterosexual, and an emblem of the phallus. Consequently in the saga, the male body engenders a hegemonic masculinity which is oftentimes toxic. The superhero's body can then be interpreted as a physical embodiment of a hegemonic and hypervisible masculinity, one that is emphasized by the male gaze.

The rendering of the male body in the MCU can be understood via both Laura Mulvey's male gaze and Stephen Neale's theories on masculinity. As Mulvey (1975) argued, the male gaze is a voyeuristic, scopophilic look which objectifies the female body, converting it into a fetishized spectacle. The female body is "simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact, so that they can be said to connote a to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 19). The spectator becomes the "bearer of this look," identifying with the male characters and actively objectifying the female characters on-screen. The phallocentric male gaze imposes gendered binaries (male/female, active/passive, subject/object, self/other) echoing the MCU's Manicheanism as well as its cisgendered and

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[110] This section will primarily consider the male body via the superhero. Male villains who are othered and queered will be examined in-depth in the last section of this chapter.

heterosexual system. Moreover, the male gaze via sexual difference controls the objectified, passive female body while glamourizing and centering the active hypermasculine male body.[111] Advancing this argument, Neale (1983) maintains that the spectator identifies with the powerful, omnipotent male figures of a text (particularly in 'male' genres such as action), and accordingly, engages in two forms of voyeurism. The spectator first enjoys the spectacle of violence and battle, and then the viewer fetishizes the hypermasculine male body that is put on display. Masculinity then "involve[s] phantasies of power, omnipotence, mastery, and control" (Neale, 1983, p. 5). Of course, Neale's argument is limited by its heterosexual reading of the spectator; however, there remains a clear homoerotic impact, as will be discussed in the final section of this chapter. Furthermore, it is worth noting that though Mulvey and Neales' theories hailed from 1975 and 1983, respectively, the fact that their theories, decades on, still ring true in the MCU's depiction of masculinity speaks of the regressive nature of the MCU franchise.

Through Mulvey's system and Neale's theories, the male superhero's body is then paradoxically put on display as a spectacle of violence and hypermasculinity. The male superhero is an active savior who protects feminized, vulnerable citizens (and their female love interests) primarily by enacting violence. Though the superhero is placed in the role of active subject however, the irony is that the spectator still voyeuristically takes pleasure in the male body's hypermasculine to-be-looked-at-ness (Jeffords, 1994; Tasker, 1993). Under the male gaze, the male body is not (primarily) fashioned as a source of pleasure for the

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[111] As was discussed in the literature review, even though the system of the gaze may be constrained by its binary parameters, visual media still partakes in exploiting and emulating the male gaze as well as other gazes.

heterosexual female spectator as is often perceived. Its to-be-looked-at-ness is instead constructed as an idealized male body for the heterosexual male spectator.[112] This idealized male body is, as Dworkin and Wachs (2009) argue,

> defined by the image of musculature, muscle size, greater muscle density, and less body fat... Bulging pectoral muscles, biceps, shoulders, and well 'cut' 'six- or eight-pack' abdomens adorned almost all of the men's health and fitness covers. The fundamental assumption that underlies men's fitness is that men should strive to increase their muscle mass and decrease their body fat. (p. 74)

This body is then hypermuscular, exaggerated, and near-unattainable. Edward Avery-Natale (2013) further confirms that it represents the "ego ideal of Western representations of 'perfect' gendered bodies;" as a result, the superhero text is primarily written as a heterosexual male wish-fulfilment fantasy (p. 92).[113] There is an obviously voyeuristic facet to the hero's unattainability, from skintight costumes to a more visible nakedness. Shirtless scenes have become an almost obligatory feature in all of the Infinity Saga's films, the shots accentuating the superhero's body and masculinity and engaging with the male gaze (eighteen of the Infinity Saga's twenty-two films include male-gaze driven shirtless scenes). The scopophilic nature of the gaze is also apparent in the loaded representations of the superhero's weapons and armor in the MCU.

2. The Weapon Gaze

The superhero's weapon and/or armor functions in a synecdochal relation to the male body. This gear more often than not is fetishized, gazed at with awe and wonder, and a symbol of

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[112] Though numerous scholars have posited different interpretations of masculinity (Gross and Woods, 1999; Shary, 2013; Halberstam, 2019), this paper is concerned with Hollywood's more dominant and stereotypical depiction of heterosexual masculinity.

[113] See also Favara (2016) for more on how gender and technology are presented within the superhero body.

the hero's masculinity and power. From Tony Stark's classic Iron Man suit to Thor's hammer, Mjolnir, and the Captain America shield, these hard metal tools primarily function as symbols of the hero's masculinity which generate the cycle's spectacle of violence. What consequently emerges is a weapon gaze, wherein the to-be-looked-at-ness of the male body is transferred to a hero's weapon and/or armor. These instruments (which can almost be read as their own characters) elevate the spectralized masculinity of the cycle, as they are instruments of excessive violence and destruction, and they are also gazed upon in reverence, often in a voyeuristic manner.[114] The clearest example of the weapon gaze at work in the saga can be witnessed with the introduction of Mjolnir in *Thor*. The hammer is first witnessed by the spectator in a prolonged scene during which Odin proudly declares that the weapon was "forged in the heart of a dying star. Its power has no equal! As a weapon to destroy, or as a tool to build, it is a fit companion for a King." As the Allfather speaks, the camera ever so slowly tracks down the length of the hammer echoing how a camera tracks down a woman's body in a typical male gaze. The phallic weapon here is clearly fetishized, a symbol of Thor's manhood, and via the weapon gaze, Mjolnir is positioned as the most straightforward example of a phallic weapon in the MCU. Of course, Iron Man's armor and Captain America's shield do not necessarily embody the phallus as clearly as Mjolnir. The Iron Man armor can be read essentially as a hyperbolic hypermasculine hard body that facilitates Stark's masculinity; his signature move of shooting white repulsor beams out of his suit's hands is also quite phallic in nature, evoking an ejaculatory move. Though the Captain America shield traditionally functions as a tool of defense rather than aggression, the shield paradoxically echoes Thor's hammer and Iron Man's phallic repulsor beams, as Steve's classic move is

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[114] See also Salter and Blodgett (2017) for an analysis of the Iron Man suit and masculinity.

flinging his shield at his opponent. Of course, the symbolic power of each superhero's respective armor/weapon is thematically different; nevertheless, they all function as extensions of their respective heroes and are clearly fetishized and viewed through a scopophilic gaze. Mjolnir, the Iron Man armor, and Captain America's shield all facilitate the superhero's violent tendencies and enable his role as the hegemonic self.

The weapon gaze can also be witnessed with other depictions of weaponry that are not directly connected to the superhero. In *The Winter Soldier* for example, while Nick Fury is introducing Project Insight to Steve Rogers, there are numerous lingering shots of the project's armory: the audience is bombarded with shots of three new helicarriers, countless quinjets, and various weaponry including long-range missile precision guns which Fury smugly claims, "can eliminate a thousand hostiles a minute." Rogers does not actively fetishize Project Insight's technology, and instead is so wary of the project that he leaves S.H.I.E.L.D.. Nonetheless, the manner in which the scene is shot leaves Rogers and the spectator in awe as they are both left to gaze upon the myriad of planes and high-tech weapons. Echoing Stark's demonstration of the Jericho missile in *Iron Man,* the manner in which the camera sweeps over and zooms in upon Project Insight is reminiscent to that of a military advertisement, especially with Fury's accompanying proud narration and the celebratory soundtrack in the background. Project Insight and the Jericho Missile are just as fetishized as Mjolnir or any other superhero's weapon/armor. Weaponry in all its forms, whether it is connected to the hero or the villain, is then subject to the weapon gaze, symbolizing the cycle's penchant for violence and its relationship to masculinity.

It is worth noting that in the third act of each of the Big Three's trilogies, there is a recurring thematic appraisal of what it means to be a superhero. As a result, the men are tested by being removed from the narratival elements which had originally cast them as heroes, including the removal of their defining weapons/armor. In the first half hour of *Ragnarok*, Mjolnir is destroyed which subsequently results in Thor reassessing what makes him the God of Thunder, eventually discovering his own internal powers. Stark similarly does not have access to his Iron Man suit for most of *Iron Man 3*, and at the end of the film, he decides to destroy the thirty-five suits which he had been compulsively making in an effort to cope with his PTSD. Rogers also discards his shield during *Civil War's* climax, rejecting the Captain America title and embracing his own individualism. Via these 'threequels,' it would appear that the fetishization and symbolic role of the superhero's weapon is subverted; alternatively however, it can also be read that the superhero body instead *becomes* the phallus and stands as a superior colonial site, one whose legitimacy is innate regardless of their choice of weapon. Regardless, the MCU necessitates the reinstating of the fetishizing weapon gaze, and this is apparent with the conclusion of the Infinity Saga: Thor wields an even more powerful and upgraded version of Mjolnir, called Stormbreaker; Iron Man's suit is upgraded to hold the Infinity Stones; and Captain America not only gets his shield back, but also uses Mjonlir during the Battle of Earth. *Endgame* restores the weapon gaze's system and affirms the cycle's intrinsic reliance upon the fetishization of the male body and his weapon/armor. The weapon gaze then seems to be just one of many gazes within the film cycle that enforces its hegemonic power structures.

3. Toxic Hegemonic Masculinity

In addition to the weapon gaze, the gendered manner in which the male body is displayed firmly informs the superhero's masculinity. Toxic masculinity is a defining feature in the construction of the male body in the Infinity Saga, and *Infinity War* is the clearest example of this regressed form of masculinity on display. As was explored in the literature review, Patricia Sexton defined masculinity as a series of gendered ideals, ideals which included: "courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, mastery…, adventure and considerable amounts of toughness in mind and body" (qtd. in Carrigan, Connell, and Lee, 1985, p. 562). These traits enmesh together to construct a normative, hegemonic masculinity (Wood, 2003; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Creighton and Oliffe, 2010). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) further argued that this type of masculinity is:

> currently [the] most honored way of being a man, it [requires] all other men to position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically [legitimates] the global subordination of women to men… Hegemony… [is] ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion. (p. 832)[115]

Hegemonic masculinity is then white, heterosexual, cisgendered, and it reproduces the self/other dialectic. Furthermore, it is "characterized by homophobia and the domination and subjugation of weaker men and women… [it is] the most extreme version of hyper masculine communities of practice" (Creighton and Oliffe, 2010, pp. 414-15). Hegemonic masculinity exaggerates the gendered ideals Sexton had noted while instituting a patriarchal order as well as excusing and normalizing misogyny, homophobia, violence, and emotional repression.

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[115] Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) do note that the concept of a hegemonic masculinity has been widely debated, as there are numerous types of masculinities uninfluenced by heteronormativity, race, etc. (pp. 836-844). Nevertheless, that does not deter the superhero's connection to represent a hegemonic white, heteronormative masculinity.

Though the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been re-evaluated and, indeed, evolved over the past two decades, the MCU film cycle seems to emulate the classic, and more often than not, toxic representations of this masculinity. This is most apparent in the *Avengers* franchise (as well as *Civil War*), where interpersonal conflicts between the male superheroes is rampant. Each of the *Avengers* films relies upon a critical moment wherein the superhero team clash about issues of leadership and who is the true 'alpha male.'[116] *Infinity War* arguably illustrates the clearest example of this toxic masculinity, as throughout the film, countless male heroes are in perpetual conflict as they try to aggressively establish their authority, superiority, and ultimately, their masculinity. Co-writer Christopher Markus notes in the film's commentary that "there is a natural competition when the leads of two franchises get together, and it plays right into the competition of two heroes getting together. Who has primacy, these are all leaders? […] Who gets to call the shots?" ('Audio Commentary,' 2018b). Though this conflict is oftentimes played for comic relief, it does not detract from the toxic portrayal of masculinity.

We see this conflict take place between two sets of characters in *Infinity War*: Iron Man and Doctor Strange as well as Peter Quill/Star-Lord and Thor. While the former duo is more a clash of ego and intelligence, the latter strive for a more primitive dominance in regard to physical attractiveness and musculature.[117] Peter Quill and Thor's conflict is arguably more pertinent as it is rooted in a very traditional and regressive understanding of masculinity. When the two heroes first meet in *Infinity War*, Drax claims, much to Peter's outrage, that

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[116] See Ging (2019) for more on alpha masculinity.
[117] As two of the smartest characters (with the largest egos) in the MCU, Stark and Strange constantly try to establish their own authority in the film, often resorting to petty remarks and name-calling; their masculinity and self-worth revolves around their intellect.

"[Thor] is not a dude. You're a dude. This…," he continues, pointing at Thor, "this is a man. A handsome, muscular man." A 'handsome, muscular man' seems to epitomize what makes a man a superhero and a superhero a man in the MCU. To make matters worse, Rocket joins the conversation, declaring that Quill is just "one sandwich away from fat," (a fatphobic comment which is ironic, considering Thor's future arc in *Endgame*, as will be discussed later). As a hero who already struggles with emotional maturity, Quill's fragile masculinity is easily threatened when Thor is perceived as being more handsome, cooler, stronger, and ultimately a real man. As a result, Peter desperately tries to assert himself as the alpha male, and his behavior only devolves over the course of the scene. This is demonstrated as Quill openly glares at Thor when the God of Thunder places his hand on Gamora's shoulder. Quill also tries to out 'manpain' Thor's tragic backstory: "I mean it's not a competition, but I've been through a lot. My father killed my mother, then I had to kill my father. And that was hard. Probably even harder than having to kill a sister. Plus, I came out of it with both of my eyes." And it only degenerates from there, as Quill puffs up his chest, copying Thor's body language and accent, which results in both superheroes telling the other to "stop copying me." Quill and Thor's childish competition is only put to an end when an unamused Gamora intervenes. Though the scene is primarily played for laughs and the toxic masculinity conveyed is more implicit than aggressive, there remains an embedded narrative determining the nature of the superhero's hegemonic masculinity. Later in the film, Quill describes (and indeed feminizes) Thor as a "Tall guy, not that good-looking. Needed saving." illustrating what a normative hypermasculine hero is: attractive (via looks and musculature) and an active, masculinized figure who *does* the saving.

Most films in the saga represent this form of hegemonic masculinity in one way or another, with very few examples of accepted alternative masculinities. As was discussed in Chapter 1, Bruce Banner and the Hulk can be interpreted as a dual embodiment of both the self and other, playing both sides of the spectrum of masculinity (though the creation of Smart Hulk seems to negate the non-normative aspects of Banner's masculinity). Interestingly, *Guardians'* Drax also functions as a near total negation of toxic masculinity, though this is due more to his alterity as an alien as well as his role as comic relief in the franchise, rather than a deliberate attempt to create a non-normative superhero. Moreover, as I will demonstrate in the last section of the chapter, queer masculinities are also often othered, villainized, or simply erased. The saga's strongest illustration of an alternative masculinity, however, is depicted in *Endgame*, shockingly via the character of Thor.

4. The Evolution of Thor

One of the Big Three, Thor's body is the most hypervisible form of masculinity in the Infinity Saga. The evolution of the hero's body and his masculinity over the course of the franchise illuminates how the cycle has progressed over the past ten years. In this final portion of this section, I closely examine how Thor's body is depicted throughout the course of the Infinity Saga. I first consider how his body is a representation of hypermasculinity, examining how his character is impacted by both the male gaze and the female gaze. I then conclude by exploring *Endgame's* reinterpretation of Thor as an alternative form of masculinity.

a) Thor as Hypermasculine

Throughout the Infinity Saga, Thor's body epitomizes hypermasculinity. Played by actor Chris Hemsworth, the Asgardian God of Thunder is physically the largest and brawniest of the

Avengers team (excluding the Hulk's monstrous body, of course). His hypermasculinity is amplified by his towering figure, his Herculean musculature, and his rugged, traditionally Eurocentric good looks i.e. blond hair and blue eyes. Thor's stoic machismo is only heightened by his superhuman powers and aggressive combat skills; even Thor's weapon of choice, the phallic hammer, Mjolnir, boosts this hypermasculine imagery. The hero's home planet, Asgard, further adds to this dialogue, as it connects Thor to signifiers which further his brute warrior image i.e. Vikings, the Medieval period, the fantasy genre etc. Though the superhero's character substantially develops over the course of saga, Thor's masculinity remains intrinsic to his character, and it is the superhero's musculature which seems to have a metonymic relationship to this hypermasculinity. As *The Avengers'* Costume Designer Alexandra Byrne contends, "[Hemsworth's] muscular arms are the iconic statement of Thor" (qtd. in Surrell, 2012).

Over the course of the Infinity Saga, the spectator is continuously subjected to Thor's body and his muscles, in particular, on screen. With each film, his Asgardian armor is steadily stripped away to reveal more of his strapping, bulky arms. In every film he appears in, barring *The Avengers* and *Infinity War*, Thor delivers the mandatory MCU shirtless scene. With his well-defined abs, veined arms, and bulging biceps on display, Thor's to-be-looked-at-ness connotes the ideal male body. Accordingly, the hero's muscles function under both the male gaze and the female gaze.

b) Thor under the Male Gaze
Under the male gaze, Thor is firmly placed in the role of the active, masculine self, perfectly positioned within the self/other dialectic of the Infinity Saga. Through this orientation, Thor

embodies the ideal male body for the male spectator, his musculature enabling his to-be-looked-at-ness, and the hero's defined muscles and hypermasculinity are presented as the ultimate male wish-fulfillment fantasy. Thor's hypermusculature further echoes Neale's spectralized masculinity, as the male spectator voyeuristically gazes at and takes pleasure in the Asgardian's fetishized hypervisible body as well as in how the superhero fights and brawls. And so, even though there is a certain to-be-looked-at-ness within Thor's body, and the superhero male body more broadly speaking, the body is not purely dehumanized, in so much that it is idealized and revered to the point of objectification, perpetuating patriarchal standards of masculinity.

As was previously argued, the male gaze's impact on the male body hinges on the musculature of the superhero; the look further exposes the superhero's ideological role within the MCU film cycle. Dyer (2017) connects musculature with bodybuilder culture and adventure films set in a colonial setting. Actors who play characters like Tarzan, Hercules, and Rambo must have built physiques, and Dyer further contends that "bodybuilding in popular culture articulates white masculinity" (p. 207). With armor-like bodies, these heroes:

> show us ideal, hard, achieved, wealthy, hairless and tanned white male bodies set in a colonialist relation, of aid as much as antagonism, to lands and peoples that are other to them. This body in this setting constructs the white man as physically superior, yet also an everyman, built to do the job of colonial world improvement. (p. 221)

Dyer's analysis of colonial adventure heroes parallels Thor and, more broadly speaking, the superhero within the MCU franchise as propagandistic tools of cultural hegemony, Whiteness, colonialism, and Empire. Thor's bodybuilder physique is "ideal, hard, achieved, wealthy, hairless and tanned;" and his hypermasculine body, his to-be-looked-at-ness is

central to his character. "It leads," the superhero "as both a social and sexual figure… the body shapes not only his demeanor and outlook, but the very fabric of his self as well" (Cornelius, 2011, p. 160).

In order to manufacture this powerful and symbolic site, Hemsworth and Marvel's filmmakers would pay special attention to the depiction of Thor's body on screen. Prior to *Thor's* release, Hemsworth divulged in an interview that once he was cast in the role, the actor "immediately started looking at the comic books, and the guy is 500 pounds or something and looks like Schwarzenegger. And I thought, 'OK, I'm not gonna get to *that*.' But I have to get bigger" (qtd. in Kaufman, 2011). As Hemsworth started to bulk up, "[The filmmakers] kept saying 'Yeah, get as big as you can, as big as you can,'" and only when Hemsworth started camera tests before filming, did the film's crew realize that none of the costumes could fit his body (qtd. in Kaufman, 2011). Concept Artist Ryan Meinerding elaborates, "they [had] to carve out on the inside [of the chain mail arms] so they could actually fit [Hemsworth's] arms in" (qtd. in Manning, 2011, p. 27). Ultimately, Hemsworth, at both his own and the filmmakers' behest, bulked up to the point that he could not even fit his own costumes, all with the objective of portraying a fantasy masculinity. Thor's nigh unattainable body feeds into the toxic masculinity dogma, imparting to the audience, and the male viewer specifically, how a man must look, and pressuring the male spectator to aspire to a virtually unachievable body. The presentation of Thor's body is so intrinsic to his character that, during press tours, Hemsworth is routinely asked about his workout routines and how he maintains his Thor-like physique.[118] Over the course of the saga, Chris Hemsworth

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[118] This would be a recurring trend for other male superhero actors in the MCU.

would only continue to bulk up, and by *Ragnarok*, the character's musculature is clearly larger and more defined, Thor's fantasy hypermasculinity all the more aggressively evident and unattainable.

All of the *Thor* films include pivotal scenes that illustrate the hero's to-be-looked-at-ness and this fantasy masculinity, and directors often refer to the *necessity* of Thor's shirtlessness. Director Kenneth Branagh relates in *Thor's* commentary that during filming, he had asked Hemsworth, "'Do you mind taking your shirt off?'" To which the actor purportedly responded, "'Do I mind? I've been doing this for nine months mate. Of course, I'm going to get my shirt off.' It produced gasps in early screenings. We need Thor to look like a god. Chris Hemsworth does" ('Audio Commentary,' 2011). *The Dark World* would also include a gratuitous shirtless scene which director Alan Taylor would address in the commentary, stating "it was pointed out to us when we shot a version of this movie that didn't include that moment and there was an outcry amongst a certain segment of a population to perhaps include that moment and we put it there hoping that it would somewhat fit into this storyline" ('Audio Commentary,' 2013b). Even Waititi would push for *Ragnarok's* shirtless scene midway through filming despite the actor's now reluctance ("Do you want bums on seats?" the director reportedly asked Hemsworth) (qtd. in Polowy, 2017). The male gaze then hinges upon Hemsworth's bodybuilder physique and the hypervisibility of his body and musculature as enforced by the film's directors; the look creates an unattainable wish-fulfilment fantasy through Thor's hypermasculine body which firmly places the hero in the role of the self at the center of the superhero narrative. While Branagh's description of Thor's godly physique places the hero in the key hegemonic role of savior, Taylor and Waititi's reference to the female spectator exposes how Thor's body is also affected by the female gaze.

c) Thor under the Female Gaze

Though many of the MCU's superheroes operate under both a male gaze and a female gaze, the Asgardian God of Thunder is the clearest example of that dual-gaze at work. Needless to say, this female-oriented look does not disrupt the phallocentricism of the male gaze nor does it displace the voyeuristic tendencies of the look towards both the male and female body as Gamman (1989) posited. When examining Thor's body, the female gaze appears to behave in two manners: first, as an objectifying voyeuristic gaze, and second, via Soloway's (2016) 'feeling-seeing' interpretation of that look.

As a scopophilic and voyeuristic system, the female gaze eroticizes the male body as is witnessed with Thor's hypervisibility and hypermasculinization.[119] As much as Thor's idealized body is a male wish-fulfillment fantasy, it is also a source of pleasure fetishized by the heterosexual female spectator. This scopophilic gaze is present throughout the saga, but it is particularly evident in a key scene which takes place in Jane's house during *Thor* wherein the superhero changes into human clothes for the first time. The scene starts with the camera placed strategically, angled to voyeuristically watch the shirtless hero through the reflection of a bathroom's mirror. As Thor fiddles with the button of his jeans, Jane guiltily peeks at his exposed body several times while her lab assistant, Darcy, shamelessly ogles him. Thor's to-be-looked-at-ness is highly emphasized in the scene, particularly when Darcy says, "You know, for a crazy, homeless person, he's pretty cut," and even more so when Jane stops a still shirtless Thor from handling her lab equipment, and as a result, both Jane and the spectator's

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[119] This type of scopophilic female gaze also appears in other MCU films i.e. Peggy Carter ogling Steve's shirtless, newly enhanced body post-serum in *The First Avenger*.

gaze are blatantly drawn towards the hero's bared chest. As was mentioned earlier, Thor would also be needlessly shirtless in *The Dark World* (where the hero bathes his forearms before stoically gazing out at his kingdom, his narrow waist and broad shoulders on display) as well as in *Ragnarok* (where a group of women tend to and heal the shirtless Asgardian; Thor would only don his armor much later in the scene). Of course, despite this voyeuristic look placing Thor's body on display, the hero remains firmly in the role of the active self.

Under Soloway's interpretation of the female gaze, the look targets Thor's character (and his body to a much less extent) creating a female wish-fulfillment fantasy. Soloway (2016) argues that the female gaze is a mode of 'feeling seeing,' wherein the spectator's "emotions are being prioritized over the action;" the look positions women and gender non-conforming people as a Subject. In *Thor*, and indeed throughout the saga, the Asgardian god is just as much a strong, bulky, hypermasculine warrior as he is a chivalrous, kind, female-gaze oriented fantasy for the female spectator. This female gaze-driven fantasy is most clear in Thor's character arc in the first film as well as via the narratival tropes that the hero portrays throughout the saga. Thor's character arc in *Thor* is the strongest example of the female gaze in the entire saga. In a sense, *Thor* is a *bildungsroman*; it is a coming-of-age story, where the hero learns the true meaning of worthiness. The beginning of the film paints the hero as an arrogant, hot-headed, and naïve warrior (a "vain, greedy, cruel boy" as Odin would say), who is more than happy to reignite a bloody war between Asgard and Jotunheim for his own pleasure. By the end of the film however, Thor evolves into a mature, wise, and humble future king of Asgard. Paralleling this narrative, it is only when Thor becomes worthy that he is able to wield Mjolnir; worthiness via the symbol of the hammer then symbolizes manhood (both as adulthood and the phallus) as well as morality and goodness. Through this underlying

narrative, the female gaze finds its roots through the character of Thor's romantic interest, Jane. Jane is key in Thor's transformation as several times throughout the movie, she points out and admonishes the hero's entitled, ill-mannered conduct, and surprisingly, he actually listens to her and actively changes his behavior. In a manner of speaking then, *Thor* plays out the common female-driven narrative of a woman helping the male romantic interest change for the better and redeem himself, quite similar to *Beauty and the Beast* for example.[120]

Another aspect of his character that is influenced by Soloway's female gaze is reflected in his depiction as a 'himbo.' Over the course of the saga, Thor is the MCU's leading example of a himbo; he is kind-hearted, handsome, and rather vacuous, particularly when compared to the other Avengers. Michael S. Kimmel (1994) argues that there are two forms of himbos: the woman's himbo, whom Kimmel nicknames Fabio, and the man's himbo, or Arnold Schwarzenegger.[121] While Fabio is a lady's man, kind and gentle, Schwarzenegger is more a representation of prowess and pure strength. Thor manages to portray both of these gendered fantasies, mirroring both the male and female gaze. As a woman's himbo, the Asgardian god does not threaten Jane's intelligence nor her agency. He is the ideal female fantasy of a caring, handsome man. And as a man's himbo, the hero presents the ultimate fantasy of a godly force of hypermasculinity and strength. It is remarkable how Thor uniquely embodies these dual roles and fantasies, both of which fundamentally rely upon the portrayal of his body and, to a lesser extent, his character. Whether one examines how the superhero is shaped by a scopophilic or feeling-seeing female gaze, Thor represents an ideal male body/persona. From a woman falling onto Thor's chest on a train in the London Underground

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[120] This trope can be related to the fairy-tale Animal Bride trope; for more, read: Sax (1998) and Silver (2005).
[121] See Campbell (1994) for more on Kimmel's reading on the himbo.

(*The Dark World*), to a couple of female fans giddily approaching the hero for a selfie in New York City (*Ragnarok*), Thor is portrayed as the ultimate wish-fulfilment fantasy to the female spectator, that is until his depiction in *Endgame.*

d) Thor as an Alternative Masculinity

Thor's relationship with both the male and female gaze would ultimately be erased and then reinterpreted in *Endgame*. The final film of the Infinity Saga presents a new reading of Thor as depressed, overweight, and, ultimately, a failed hero. Despite the film's fatphobic tendencies, *Endgame's* Thor can be read (to a certain extent) as a depiction of an alternative masculinity. Following Thanos' success in performing the Snap in *Infinity War*, the MCU's superheroes are left fractured and struggling to process their grief and failure. Thor in particular feels personally guilty as he critically failed to kill the supervillain after spending all of *Infinity War* locating and crafting the only weapon which could stop Thanos; his depression is further intensified as a result of the loss of his family and home planet, Asgard. Consequently in *Endgame*, the audience is introduced to a new Thor, one who bunkers down in New Asgard, escaping from his responsibilities as a hero, heavily depressed and most significantly, overweight. This Thor, who has been universally dubbed as Fat Thor by the general public (despite *Endgame's* special features nicknaming him Bro Thor and Lebowski Thor), is a polar opposite to the hypermasculine hero the audience is familiar with. Gilman (2004) argues that "Obesity eats away at the idealized image of the masculine," and fatness becomes a 'deviant masculinity' (p. 9). Recalling Dworkin and Wachs's description of the ideal male body: "The fundamental assumption that underlies men's fitness is that men should strive to increase their muscle mass and decrease their body fat" (2009, p. 72). Fatness is then incompatible with the hegemonic hypermasculinity Thor had initially embodied.

Dehumanized as other, the fat male body is represented as lazy, undesirable, undisciplined, childish, immoral, a source of humor, and ultimately an ineffectual phallus (Gilman, 2004; Richardson, 2010; Benson-Allott, 2013; Plotz, 2021). Furthermore, as this body is desexualized, it stops being a source of objectification or fetishization by both the male and female gaze.

Initially, *Endgame's* Thor embodies this highly emasculated fatness. When Thor is introduced in the film, the hero is first seen walking through his house in New Asgard via a closeup of his face. As he reaches for a bottle of beer, the camera pans out, and a shirtless Thor slowly turns to face the audience only to reveal his overweight figure, a clear departure from the hero's famous physique. His fat body becomes a source of shock and then humor when Thor hugs Rocket Raccoon, giving the raccoon a noogie and smothering him in his exposed belly. *Endgame's* opening scene for the character is particularly cruel in that shirtless scenes, as has been argued, are used to represent the superhero's idealized male body, and this is especially true for Thor. And yet Thor's exposed portly figure is instead played up for laughs, despite the hero's clear depression. Thor's depiction is further exacerbated by the fact that Hemsworth clearly dons a fat suit for the role. Fat suits are widely regarded as fatphobic, offensive and dehumanizing to people who are overweight. These suits are only ever a temporary plot point, and as Deborah Harris-Moore (2014) argues, "the fat suit only reminds audiences of the actor's own thinness and beauty underneath it" (p. 107).[122] And indeed, this rings true for Thor's fatness in that it is a clear contrast to and reminder of Hemsworth's celebrated muscular physique. There is an innate reflexivity in the portrayal of Bro Thor in

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[122] From more on fat suits, see Mendoza (2009).

Endgame, as Thor's body is in direct dialogue with both Hemsworth's physique as a celebrity and Thor's physique in earlier films, and the loss of Thor's muscles equates to a complete loss of masculinity.

Thor's emasculation is further reflected in the physical and emotional changes of the character. As a fallen hero, Thor believes himself to be unworthy, a complete failure; consequently, "He lets himself go, physically and emotionally" Hemsworth explains (Roussos, 2019a, p. 90). The superhero as the active self is meant to be a body in action, however Thor's depression results in his inability, or even desire to perform as a superhero. While the Avengers actively plan out how to steal the Infinity Stones, Thor for the most part passively lounges about, drinks beer, and takes naps; and this passivity unfortunately only feeds into his emasculation. The representation of Thor's overweight body and physical appearance are further fashioned to reflect this newly founded alterity: he chugs beer after beer; his hair is greasy and unkempt, and his beard is long and bushy; Thor's belly is also often seen peeking out from under his shirt; and he dresses in dark sunglasses, cardigans and hoodies, plaid fleece pajama pants, and even red crocs. The hero's non-normative body becomes a source of casual mockery over the course of *Endgame*. There are several fat jokes in the film, from Rocket telling the hero, "You look like melted ice cream," and Rhodey nicknaming him "Cheez Whiz," to Thor's mother's parting words being, "Eat a salad." Critically, Jane is also absent in the film, and there are no gratuitous scenes that display how women are attracted to him, further emasculating the Asgardian god. As *Endgame* co-director Anthony Russo explains, Thor "[becomes] the opposite of what we've known him to be in the past," and the film indeed creates this clear juxtaposition via its portrayal of Thor's body ('Bro Thor,' 2019). *Endgame's* Thor unquestionably prescribes to a stereotypical and dehumanizing

representation of fatness. His alternative masculinity hinges upon the depiction of his body, in addition to his depression. Ultimately, Thor is emasculated, desexualized, and othered *because* of his failures as a superhero.

This emasculation is only disrupted midway through film when the hero travels back in time and is given the chance to speak with his dead mother Frigga again. After he confides in his mother about his shortcomings, Frigga advises her son, "Everyone fails at who they are supposed to be, Thor. The measure of a person, of a hero, is how well they succeed at being who they are." This heart-to-heart critically reinforces the hero's sense of self. And before returning to the present, Thor decides to try summoning Mjolnir; when he succeeds, he is both elated and astonished to find that, despite his failures, he is still worthy. After this crucial scene, Thor is re-centered back into the role of self and his masculinity is reestablished. The hero visibly becomes more confident and comfortable in his body, and he even debuts with a new look during the Battle of Earth. His costume is a similar take on his classic armored outfit (though, notably, no skin shows); Thor's beard is braided, his hair partly swept into a topknot, and the hero wields both Mjolnir and Stormbreaker (which only further confirms the weapon gaze's relationship to the male superhero's masculinity). By the end of *Endgame*, the movie's filmmakers confirm in the commentary that Thor is sober and confident of who he is in terms of his weight and character. It could be argued then that since Mjolnir accepts the hero, reaffirming his worthiness and his masculinity, *Endgame's* Thor presents an alternative form of masculinity to the MCU's hegemonic order. Via Thor's non-normative body, fatness becomes accepted and normalized by the end of the Infinity Saga, launching an unforged path in the representation of the MCU male superhero body.

In an interview with *Vulture*, co-writer Markus elaborates on the writers' decision to forge this new path for Thor:

> What is the end result of a guy who has lost so much and just blatantly failed? We wondered, "Okay, well, what if he *does* become a sort of depressive alcoholic?" And the weight gain was just part and parcel of that state of mind… And we leave him in that state at the end of the movie… We fix his problem, and it's not his weight. I know some people are sensitive about some of the humor that comes from it, which I understand. But our issue that we wanted him to deal with was his emotional state that his mom addresses. And I think he is the ideal Thor at the end of the movie, and he's carrying some weight. (qtd. in Riesman, 2019)

Despite Markus' justifications, *Endgame's* fatphobic tendencies undoubtedly complicate Thor's alternative masculinity. After the film's release, the fatphobic nature of Thor's body transformation was a point of contention between fans and critics alike. For even though Thor does not get rid of his weight by the end of the film, the initial dehumanizing portrayal of his fatness remains. It should be noted that Thor was initially meant to revert to his classic, muscular figure midway through *Endgame*, however Hemsworth reportedly pushed to keep Thor's weight throughout the film (Setoodeh, 2019). Regardless, the loss of Thor's innate to-be-looked-at-ness is presented as a form of comic relief. The by-products of Thor's trauma, his depression, inactivity, and coping mechanisms (i.e. overconsumption of alcohol and food) are trivialized by the implied juxtaposition between fatness and hypermasculinity. It is true that Thor does eventually accept himself and his fatness, and narratively, wielding Mjolnir is tangible proof of his worthiness as a man and superhero. And yet, as we see in *Thor: Love and Thunder*, Thor's fatness is not only erased and forgotten in Phase 4, but it appears that Hemsworth has bulked up even more than in any previous films. As a result, *Endgame's* version of Thor (and his masculinity) becomes an aberration in his character arc. A final point which confirms the temporary nature of this non-normativity is witnessed during *Endgame's*

extended end credits. In the credits, the main Avengers cast are each silhouetted against a backdrop of their most famous scenes across the saga, and Chris Hemsworth appears sans fat suit with no shots behind him including *Endgame's* version of Thor.

5. Conclusion

Over the course of this section, I have considered how the male superhero body is portrayed within the Infinity Saga. The superhero's body is the heart of the MCU film cycle; it embodies countless overlapping hegemonic positions, including the self and the center, Whiteness, Colonialism, Nationalism, and Empire. The superhero's body becomes a site of hegemonic and, more often than not, toxic hypermasculinity, and the weapon gaze further exposes the synecdochal role between the hero and his armor/weapon. Thor's character arc over the course of the saga exemplifies how the superhero body and his masculinity are impacted by both the male and female gaze, and the hero is particularly unique in his exclusive representation of an alternative masculinity. Though it is a site of contradictions, Thor's body is essentially the ultimate wish-fulfillment fantasy. With *Love and Thunder* re-hypermasculinizing Thor, it would suggest that the hero's fatness and non-normativity was a deviation in the MCU franchise's norms, and it almost seems to assert that the cycle is contingent upon the male superhero body and its fantastical hypermasculinity. Much like the male body is constrained by gendered patriarchal expectations, as the next section will also argue, the female body is no better off.

II. THE FEMALE BODY

In this section, I consider how the female body is depicted on screen in the Infinity Saga. Informed by the male gaze, the female body is hypervisible, hypersexualized, hyperfeminine,

and confined by a series of misogynistic tropes. I first present a brief overview of the MCU's portrayal of female characters, examining how the male gaze infringes upon the female body. Next, I explore how the three following recurring tropes, the Mother, the Side-lined Superheroine, and Fridging, overshadow female characters and superheroines throughout the saga. An in-depth study of Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow's character is then carried out, which will expose how these tropes more often than not contradict and coincide with one another. The section will then conclude with a brief examination of how the representation of the female body has slowly evolved and progressed in the Infinity Saga's final phase.

1. Overview of the Female Body in the MCU

In the MCU, the female body is marginalized and subject to the male gaze's objectification both physically and narratively.[123] Female leads are indisputably in short supply in the Infinity Saga. *Captain Marvel* stands as the only superheroine solo film, with *Ant-Man and the Wasp* co-led by Hope van Dyne. Most other superheroines play second fiddle and are subordinate, one way or another, to the male heroes i.e. Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow, Maria Hill, Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch etc. The remaining female characters in the Infinity Saga for the most part play love interests or side characters who support and narratively cater to the male superhero of the text; this is evident with characters like Pepper Potts, Betty Ross, Peggy Carter, and even Sharon Carter. Female villains in the MCU are also few and far between. While *Iron Man 3's* Maya Hansen, *Guardians'* Nebula, and *Ant-Man and the Wasp's* Ghost are morally ambiguous villains who have (however brief) redemption arcs, there are only a few

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[123] See McSweeney (2020 pp. 59-60) for a review of empirical studies which track the marginalization of female voices on-screen and behind the camera.

other villainous female characters in the MCU, including *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol.2's* Ayesha, *Ragnarok's* Hela, and *Captain Marvel's* Supreme Intelligence, who, though is technically an artificial intelligence hive mind, takes on the form of a human woman. The majority of these women are white, thin, heterosexual, cisgendered, and conventionally beautiful by Western standards. Excluding *Black Panther,* the few female characters of color in the MCU are at best sidelined or at worst tainted by racially charged stereotypes i.e. *Vol. 2's* Mantis as a quiet, submissive Asian woman.

Female characters in the Infinity Saga are largely subject to Mulvey's male gaze. The female body is visually objectified as it is hypervisible on-screen, and women often are both hypersexualized and hyperfeminized, constrained by patriarchal gender roles. The female body's to-be-looked-at-ness is defined by skin-tight bodysuits which leave little to the imagination, as well as ample bared skin, perfect and impractical hair styles, and stoic countenances. As Gavaler (2017) points out, superheroines unlike their male counterparts "are not drawn to resemble female body-builders" (p. 196). "Obviously, we do not emphasize muscles on a female," Stan Lee has said, "a woman is drawn to look smooth and soft as opposed to the muscular, angular rendition of a man" (Lee and Buscema, 1984, p. 44). Under the male gaze then, the female body is 'smooth and soft,' even though a superheroine should arguably be visibly muscular and well-built, and this constricting representation of the female body lends to her subordination to the male superhero.[124] Accordingly, the female body

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[124] It should be noted that Feige has gone on record stating that Captain Marvel and Scarlet Witch are the two strongest superheroes in the MCU. However, even with Carol and Wanda wielding the strongest powers, Carol only appears in the last two films of the saga's twenty-two movies, while Wanda is generally a supporting character in the grand narrative of the franchise. Furthermore, both heroine's powers lie in magical and cosmic powers rather than a combination of superpowers/combat prowess.

cannot be "too violent, too tough, or too masculine;" her power is instead constrained, and it cannot disrupt the male gaze (Gray II, 2011, p. 77).

The female's body objectification is not only fetishistic, but also narratival. Stripped of their agency, women are decentered and marginalized in the saga, and they primarily function as one-dimensional plot devices who cater to the male superhero's journey. Complexity is saved for the male superhero, and it is only by Phase Three that women are granted character growth and three-dimensionality. But generally, most, if not all, female characters in the MCU behave as series of clichéd tropes. For example, the longstanding trope of the Damsel in Distress appears repeatedly in the saga. This trope strips the agency of the female character, relegating her to a plot device that portrays the superhero's heroism. In being saved by the male hero, the Damsel in Distress is symbolically presented as a trophy, a prize to be won. Critically, this objectification of the female body guarantees the male superhero's heterosexuality in a film cycle teeming with homoeroticism. And moreover, as Carol A. Stabile (2009) points out, the "inability to imagine femininity as anything but a condition of vulnerability… [undermines] women's ability to protect themselves, while at the same time encouraging sexist violence by emphasizing female vulnerability" (p. 89). Countless women in the MCU are written as Damsels in Distress. Pepper Potts is placed in danger at the end of both *Iron Man* and its sequel, requiring Stark to save her in the nick of time. Betty Ross also needs to be saved twice over the course of *The Incredible Hulk*.

As the next sections of this chapter will argue, the Damsel in Distress is just one of the many misogynistic tropes that confine and restrict the female body in the Infinity Saga. The female body is primarily subject to: the Mother, the Side-lined Superheroine, and Fridging.

These tropes often overlap and even build upon one another, as I will demonstrate with the character of Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow. De Beauvoir (1949) argued that woman as the Eternal Feminine is ambivalent, overflowing with contradictions, double standards, and "incompatible myths" (p. 316). And indeed, the portrayal of the saga's women for the most part truly does align with a paradoxical figure, one whose entire narratival role revolves around the text's male characters; subsequently, the female body becomes a site of decentered otherness. Of course, there are films and characters which belie this cliched and aggravating cycle of rehashed, one-dimensional tropes; to this end, the final portion of the section will discuss and examine *Black Panther* and its portrayal of female characters.

2. The Mother

In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich (1976) describes the experience of motherhood as a series of 'unexamined assumptions:'

> First, that a 'natural' mother is a person without further identity, one who can find her chief gratification in being all day with small children, living at a pace tuned to theirs; … that maternal love is, and should be, quite literally selfless… I was haunted by the stereotype of the mother whose love is 'unconditional'; by the visual and literary images of motherhood as a single-minded entity. If I knew parts of myself existed that would never cohere to those images, weren't those parts then abnormal, monstrous. (pp. 22-23)

The Mother, a 'person without further identity,' a 'single-minded entity' who gratifies herself by selflessly caring and sacrificing for her children, is an archetype that plagues most female characters of the MCU.[125] These women are grounding, guiding, comforting caretakers. Their own character arcs and growth are eclipsed by selflessly bettering and uplifting the men who

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[125] For more on motherhood, see Kaplan (2013).

surround them. At the same time, they are also uptight and controlling, hardworking and prudish, nagging and mature, completely at odds with their male partners, who are often depicted as laid back and emotionally immature.[126] "It is through motherhood that woman fully achieves her physiological destiny," says de Beauvoir (1949), "that is her 'natural' vocation, since her whole organism is directed toward the perpetuation of the species" (p. 597). The Mother's social function clearly follows patriarchal confines. Her womb and reproductive capabilities hold a metonymic role, objectifying and dehumanizing the female body. To make matters worse, the MCU does not complicate this archetype. There are no examples of Bad Mothers, only Good Mothers.[127] These Good Mothers are witnessed either as literal maternal figures, whom I term as 'Literal Mothers,' or simply symbolic archetypes, termed as 'Symbolic Mothers,' both of which represent growth (exclusively for male characters) and maternalism.

a) Literal Mothers

There are several examples of Literal Mothers in the MCU, all of whom are juxtaposingly marginalized into plot devices while also being deified and idolized by the narrative as they guarantee the completion of the male superhero's journey. Oftentimes, these mothers are barely witnessed, though they cast impressive shadows upon their respective sons and narratives. For example, the murder of Tony Stark's mother, Maria Stark, triggers the final explosive battle of *Civil War*, and Janet van Dyne's disappearance is also the primary source

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[126] Both McDonald (2007) and Oliver (2012) briefly consider variations of this trope in romantic comedies.

[127] *Captain Marvel's* Supreme Intelligence could, to a certain extent, be read as the saga's one example of a symbolic pseudo-Bad Mother, in that the artificial intelligence takes on the shape of Mar-Vell, Carol's mentor, who is also arguably the hero's maternal figure. Via this interpretation, the Supreme Intelligence suffocatingly holds back and gaslights Carol throughout the film while representing the misogynistic constraints of the patriarchy.

of conflict between Hank Pym and his daughter Hope in *Ant-Man*. Many films and superheroes in the MCU rely upon mothers who explicitly embody their archetypal roles. Lacking any true self-identity, the MCU's Literal Mother becomes Rich's single-minded entity, and this is clearest with the two characters, Frigga and Meredith Quill.

As the All-Mother of Asgard, Frigga is relegated to a plot device, and all of her scenes revolve around her two sons and husband. In the first *Thor* film, she is depicted as a matronly character, and Frigga's screen time was greatly reduced, several of her scenes cut out, in favor of the film's engagement with the thematic dynamic between father and sons; as director Kenneth Branagh would put it bluntly in the film's commentary, "We didn't have room for her scenes" ('Audio Commentary,' 2011). Though the film's sequel, *The Dark World*, would provide a closer glimpse into her character (as well as display her prowess in both magic and combat), Frigga would be fridged as a means to reunite Thor and Loki, as will be discussed in further detail later in this chapter. The All Mother's final appearance would be in *Endgame*, when Thor travels back in time and is given the chance to talk to his mother again. This scene, which has already been examined, provides a more playful side to the mother; nevertheless, Frigga's role, yet again, rests solely in uplifting her clearly depressed and struggling son and reminding him of his self-worth. In *Endgame's* commentary, co-writer Stephen McFeeley would elaborate that "the emotional work for Thor wasn't romantic or scientific, it was absolution that only [a] mom could give" ('Audio Commentary,' 2019). Frigga then simply functions as a means of absolution, guidance, and comfort for Thor (and Loki). This deification of her character parallels the reverence bestowed upon all Literal Mothers in the MCU, and it is particularly evident with Meredith Quill.

Another key maternal figure in the MCU, Peter Quill's mom, Meredith Quill, is the most tangible example of a deified Literal Mother. Embodying the archetype, Meredith's character is enmeshed into the very fabric of *Guardians of the Galaxy*; she is indispensable to *Guardians'* framework narratively, musically, and thematically. *Guardians'* base storyline is about Peter Quill and his team preventing Ronan the Accuser from finding and exploiting the Orb to destroy Xandar and the Nova Empire. The film's underlying metaphor, however, is actually about Quill's journey in accepting and healing from the traumatic death of his mother. The opening scene of *Guardians* depicts a young Quill at his dying mother's bedside, terrified of saying goodbye. Bald and pale, with an ethereal white light shining upon her, Meredith is beautiful and angelic even in her last moments. She gives Quill a parting gift and asks her son to "take [her] hand," only for the frightened young child to refuse and watch his mother pass. Despite her death, Meredith's presence lingers throughout the film, and this is most clear perhaps in *Guardians'* renowned soundtrack. *Awesome Mix Vol. 1* is a mixtape, a gift from Meredith to young Quill, which symbolizes the hero's connection to his mother, "the songs *are* his mother," confirms director James Gunn ('Audio Commentary,' 2014b).

The narratival and thematic impact of the character continues, as Meredith's cancer is also symbolically represented via Ronan and his army. One of *Guardians'* most infamous Easter Eggs is seen when Ronan's warship, the Dark Aster, is first introduced, and the coordinates of its location can be deciphered to spell, "THIS IS MOMS+CANCER." Equating the Dark Aster, a symbol of Ronan's hostile and aggressive invading force to a cancer adds another layer to the film. *Guardians'* primary conflict can now be read as Ronan and his army symbolizing a cancerous tumor which seeks to destroy the Nova Empire. Not only that, but Ronan's abuse of the Orb and cooperation with Thanos would ultimately lead to the

destruction of the entire universe. In creating the final battle scene on screen, Concept Artist

Jackson Sze says: "To organize the aerial battle, the configuration was supposed to mimic a

neuroimaging scan of Peter Quill's mom. The lump in the middle reminds Quill of the tumor

that took her" (qtd. in Javins, 2014b, p. 312). This battle scene is then a symbolic return of the

repressed, one where Quill revisits his mother's death and is able to prevent it. When Quill

stops Ronan from taking the Orb, he has a vision of his mother on her deathbed, yet again,

asking him to take her hand, and this time he actually takes it. Via this interwoven subtext,

Meredith is not only Quill's mother, she is also a deified Mother. She embodies Life itself in

contrast to the villain's symbolic role as a cancerous Death. Even decades after her passing,

Meredith embodies selfless love for her son, providing emotional and spiritual comfort and

healing for the superhero. This remains true even in the film's final scene when Quill finally

opens her parting gift to him: a new mixtape of songs to guide him forward titled, *Awesome

Mix Vol. 2*.

b) Symbolic Mothers

In addition to the Literal Mother, the Symbolic Mother is another recurring maternal

archetype in the MCU. More often than not, female characters, who ironically are usually also

love interests, embody the same selfless ideals of the Mother. As Symbolic Mothers, these

women uplift the male superhero and are relegated to plot devices; however, because they

also function as a romantic interest for the superhero, these women are often characterized

by the misogynistic convention which plagues the Symbolic Mother as well as wives,

girlfriends, and partners in popular culture: the tendency to be characterized as nagging,

uptight, and mature in contrast to the laid back, emotionally immature male hero. Unlike the

static representation of Literal Mothers in the MCU, there seems to be a slow evolution in the

depiction of Symbolic Mothers in the saga, and this is evident with Betty Ross, Pepper Potts, and Gamora.

In *The Incredible Hulk*, Betty Ross is the ultimate maternal figure for her love interest, Bruce Banner. Throughout the film, Betty functions as a nurturing, maternal Mother for both Banner and the Hulk. Her ability to calm down the Hulk when he is enraged echoes the manner in which a mother calms down a child in the middle of a tantrum. "It's ok," becomes Betty's repeated mantra throughout the film, whether she is confirming that the couple are safe from the military or even comforting the Hulk from a thunderstorm. When the Hulk reverts back to Banner, Betty's maternal instincts continue: she shelters Bruce's naked body, finds a safe space for them to hide, clothes him, and even cuts his hair. Betty's role as a Symbolic Mother is further fortified as the couple cannot even engage in sexual intercourse because Banner is worried of "[getting] too excited" and reverting back to the Hulk. Ultimately, Betty's sexual desire for Banner, a symbol of her fertility as Mother, lends to the tragedy of the Hulk's character arc. The entire construction of her character is for Banner/the Hulk's benefit. Betty Ross is the closest example of a Symbolic Mother that is more maternal than romantic for the superhero, and the unique nature of her character contrasts with later manifestations of this trope, as is apparent with Pepper Potts and Gamora.

As a Symbolic Mother, Pepper Potts fulfills her archetypal responsibilities as both a mother and romantic partner to Tony Stark. Potts begins the saga as Tony's obedient, meek personal assistant, and by *Endgame,* the couple are married with a daughter named Morgan. Though Stark is shown to mature considerably over the course of the saga, he is originally presented as egotistical, sexually promiscuous, immature, and frankly disrespectful to

everyone around him, a juxtaposition to Pepper's sensible demeanor. "Pepper's the voice of reason," actress Gwyneth Paltrow explains, "She's a good girl, she's a grounded person" ('Pepper and Tony,' 2010). As Stark's assistant, Pepper is reliable, responsible, and level-headed. She cares for and nurtures Tony when he is upset or injured, and even goes so far as to initially rebuff his romantic interest in her, as she is his assistant. As a result, Pepper as the Symbolic Mother also falls into the frustrating confines of an uptight and prudish stick-in-the-mud. For most of the *Iron Man* trilogy, Pepper and Rhodes are left to rein in Tony as surrogate maternal and paternal figures: "I don't think you could tie your shoes without me," she frankly tells him in *Iron Man*. Even though Tony names her CEO of Stark Industries in *Iron Man 2*, Potts still struggles to manage the spiraling superhero's outrageous behavior: "People are relying on you to be Iron Man and you've disappeared, and all I'm doing is putting out your fires and taking the heat of it. I am trying to do the job that you were meant to do." After several films of character development, Pepper and Stark's relationship eventually matures, the final film of the *Iron Man* trilogy inverting many sexist tropes as will be discussed later, but nevertheless, Pepper is firmly placed in the role of a guiding, nurturing Symbolic Mother for Tony.

Interestingly, *Guardians'* Gamora functions in a similar manner to Pepper; however, she is more fleshed out (and sexualized), and her role as Symbolic Mother extends to the entire Guardians team. Gamora is the only woman in the Guardians of the Galaxy, and she is subsequently the Symbolic Mother in its found-family configuration. Her character clearly contrasts with Peter Quill, her love interest who, like Stark, is emotionally immature and in dire need of character growth. The heroine, however, is more uptight than Pepper and is constantly struggling to rein in the chaotic and senseless behavior of the team; it is no surprise

then that she comes off as a nagging mom. As Rocket tells her, "You just wanna suck the joy out of everything." This becomes even more apparent in *Vol. 2*, where the heroine is constantly deescalating tensions, putting out fires, and steering the group towards more ethically driven decisions i.e. trying to stop Quill and Rocket's incessant squabbling, preventing Drax from doing absurdly dangerous things, and mothering Baby Groot. Actress Zoe Saldana says, "We know where that line is of her turning into like a Mom, you know? And her just being just a meticulous, detailed, professional individual;" she continues, "But now it's like… let's just establish some rules and let's stick by it… She's definitely really OCD about that. Hasn't changed. I think it's gotten worse" (qtd. in Nemiroff, 2017). And so, there is a clear awareness of Gamora functioning as the Guardians of the Galaxy's Symbolic Mother, and though the heroine may have more agency and complexity to her character than Pepper for example, the heroine nevertheless still functions as the dysfunctional Mother to her dysfunctional family of outcasts.

As has been argued, the archetypal Mother materializes in various shapes and forms in the Infinity Saga, and yet the underlying narrative which plagues these female characters is an obligatory maternal selflessness towards the male superhero which resultantly others the female body, relegating it into a plot device that solely works to guide and facilitate the hero in completing his emotional journey. Unlike the fixed model of the Literal Mother, the Symbolic Mother is complicated in its romantic relation to the superhero. Ultimately however, as the Mother, the female body nevertheless becomes marginalized as a one-dimensional, misogynistic trope.

3. <u>Side-lined Superheroines</u>

In addition to the abundance of Mothers in the saga, the franchise is also inundated with Side-lined Superheroines. The Side-lined Superheroine is a recurring trope in the MCU film cycle, and the superhero genre more broadly speaking: she is a hardworking, capable, and powerful female character, one who is perfectly, if not overly qualified to complete a mission and save the day. However, this superheroine is side-lined in favor of a mediocre male character, one who is less capable and, quite frankly, less deserving than her. The superheroine subsequently only supports the lead male hero and is cast aside as a mere love interest. The Side-lined Superheroine represents an abject fear to male characters and the male audience. She is a more palatable version of Barbara Creed's monstrous-feminine, as a powerful, domineering female body who is overlooked and disregarded. By dehumanizing and objectifying this superheroine, the female body is constrained, and male dominance is reinstated, its anxieties quelled. There are many examples of this trope in action in the MCU. For example, in addition to performing the role of Symbolic Mother, Gamora also functions as a classic case of the Side-lined Superheroine. She is a skilled warrior and lethal assassin, a living weapon surgically modified and trained by Thanos, and unlike Quill, the superheroine is the driving moral backbone of Guardians team; however, because of her gender, the character is marginalized from the narrative in the face of Quill's mediocrity. *Iron Man 3's* Maya Hansen and *Ant-Man's* Hope van Dyne/The Wasp both mirror Gamora's arc, however these characters are both unique in the Infinity Saga in that Hansen is a Side-lined Villain, while van Dyne's cliched portrayal of the trope is eventually subverted.

a) Maya Hansen as a Side-lined Villain

Iron Man 3's Maya Hansen seamlessly operates as the villainous version of the Side-lined Superheroine, and the treatment of her character is particularly significant because it exposes how the MCU's industrial processes oftentimes intervene and shape female representation in the MCU by instilling traditional gender binaries and decentering female characters. In the film, Maya Hansen is presented as a minor villain; she is Killian's sidekick and one of Stark's long-forgotten one-night stands. Hansen is the one who creates the Extremis technology that Killian uses to create his own personal army. But when the Extremis Project results in casualties, Maya betrays Killian and tries to stop him, only for the film's villain to ruthlessly kill her. After the release of the film, it was revealed that in earlier drafts of the movie, Hansen was originally meant to be *Iron Man 3's* central villain. In an interview with *Uproxx*, director Shane Black would divulge that,

> We had finished the script and we were given a no-holds-barred memo saying that cannot stand and we've changed our minds because, after consulting, we've decided that toys won't sell as well if it's a female… So, we had to change the entire script because of toy making. Now, that's not Feige. That's Marvel corporate… But New York called and said, "That's money out of our bank." In the earlier draft, the woman was essentially Killian – and they didn't want a female Killian, they wanted a male Killian... So, we had to change the entire script because of toy making. (qtd. in Ryan, 2016)

Rebecca Hall, who plays Hansen, would corroborate this story, explaining that she "signed on to do something that was a substantial role… Halfway through shooting they were basically like, 'What would you think if you just got shot out of nowhere?' I was meant to be in the movie until the end...." (Daniell, 2016). Though she is the mastermind behind Extremis and indeed was written as the film's primary villain, it is simply because Hansen is a woman that her complexity and villainy is deemed implausible for viewers and unmarketable for children

who readily buy toys of angry, green monsters and flying gods.[128] [129] Hansen then stands as a unique offshoot of the Side-lined Superheroine, proving that the marginalization of the female body is outsourced to both heroic *and* villainous women in the MCU film cycle, with justifications that extend beyond the narratival and thematic territories into the industrial sphere.

b) Hope van Dyne Deconstructing the Side-lined Superheroine

While Hansen is an example of a Side-lined Villain, Hope van Dyne is a textbook example of the trope in *Ant-Man*, and it is only in the film's sequel, *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, that the Side-lined Superheroine would be subverted with Hope coming into her own as a superheroine. In *Ant-Man*, Hope is introduced as Hank Pym's daughter and Pym Technologies' no-nonsense chairwoman; she is, as Director Peyton Reed insists, "the toughest person in the movie… no question" ('Audio Commentary,' 2015). Hope's tough exterior is reflected in: her simmering anger and resentment towards her father; her mistrust of Scott Lang/Ant-Man; it even translates into her manner of dress as she wears masculinized, sharp, black and white professional outfits. However, it is the tension between father and daughter, Hank and Hope, that is at the crux of the character's side-lining. The core plot of *Ant-Man* follows Scott Lang when he is hired by Hank to steal villainous Darren Cross's Yellowjacket gear, a suit which exploits Hank's technology, Pym Particles. In order to complete the heist, Hank appoints his

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[128] Marvel Entertainment's chairman and former CEO, Isaac Perlmutter, is generally regarded as the reason behind Hansen's side-lining. Perlmutter is also well-known for being one of the key players who blocked Marvel Studios' diversification before he was replaced with Feige, and there have been numerous reports detailing Perlmutter's racism and misogyny i.e. replacing Terrence Howard's Rhodey as "no one would notice because black people 'look the same,'" or preventing superheroine films because he "[did] not believe that anyone will go to a female-starring superhero movie" (Smith, 2020).
[129] It is also worth noting that Marvel has repeatedly been criticized about the erasure of female characters in their toy production, oftentimes leading to social media campaigns i.e. Black Widow, Gamora, Scarlet Witch etc.

daughter as Lang's teacher, and over the course of the film, the hero takes lessons in combat training from Hope who also teaches Lang how to manipulate the particles in the Ant-Man suit and communicate with ants. Employing and centering Scott Lang is highly illogical in the narrative considering that Hope is already an expert in her father's technology, a master martial artist, and her ability in manipulating insects via the Ant-Man suit demonstrates how incredibly powerful Hope is, perhaps even more so than her own father: "I know the facility inside and out, I know how Cross thinks. I know this mission better than anybody here." The superheroine is clearly the safer and superior choice for carrying out the mission, and Hank's outright refusal to trust and support Hope because he loves her and does not wish to put her at risk epitomizes the broader patriarchal restraints which confine the female body in the Infinity Saga. Even Kevin Feige would guiltily agree with this reading of her character: "You could see in [*Ant-Man*] that she was frankly more capable than Scott Lang was at being a superhero, and her father because of the loss of her mother, emotionally didn't want her to do this" ('A Suit of Her Own,' 2018).

Ultimately, Hope is othered because of the manner in which her gender is positioned within the MCU. She is forced into passivity and relegated to the sidelines while Scott is thrust into the center of the narrative. Hope subsequently operates as a plot device in three ways: first, she insures the creation of Ant-Man as a superhero via her instruction of Lang; the father/daughter conflict that defines her character is further meant to stand as a cautionary tale for Scott in his own relationship with his daughter; and finally, as she is both Scott's love interest and characterized as tough and hardworking, uptight and the voice of reason, van Dyne also functions as an example of the Symbolic Mother. Though by the end of *Ant-Man*, father and daughter eventually reconcile and forgive one another, Hank only offers her his

complete trust in the film's mid-credit scene where he gives Hope the Wasp suit. Looking up at the suit and her potential finally permitted by a patriarchal figure, Hope smiles and says, "It's about damn time." There is something to be said about how the Infinity Saga took two whole phases to bring the Wasp, the sole female heroine from the original Avengers roster, onscreen. Even the joy that this mid-credits scene is meant to produce for the audience feels undeserved (and just as patronizing as Hank's over-protectiveness) because of how Hope was treated throughout *Ant-Man*. Hope only gets her dues as a superheroine once the film is over, and the audience is robbed of seeing her in action.

Fortunately, *Ant-Man and the Wasp* would rectify this side-lining, casting van Dyne as one of the only lead superheroines in the entire Infinity Saga. In the sequel, Hope finally takes on the mantle of the Wasp and is presented as an equal partner to Ant-Man. She is visibly more confident and comfortable in her character, and Hope is an active agent in the race against time to save her mother, the film's main storyline which director Reed describes as *her* mission. In the sequel then, Hope as the Wasp becomes her own superhero, and in Feige's words, "frankly a much better one than Scott" (qtd. in Roussos, 2018a, p. 37). Peyton Reed elaborates in the film's commentary:

> One of the big thrills of doing this movie in the first place, and it being called *Ant-Man and the Wasp* was to finally give [Hope] her day in the sun. We obviously didn't tell her origin story in the first movie that she's extremely powerful and smart and capable, a super scientist, the daughter of two superheroes, and then she's sidelined in the first movie because her dad is being overly protective and doesn't want to meet the same fate as her mom did. But obviously she's the person who trains Scott Lang to be Ant Man in the first movie. So, when we knew we were going to be making this movie, there was a huge responsibility. I felt like this is Wasp's coming out party, and working closely with Evangeline in the very beginning about creating a dimensionalized character for Hope and how we were going to progress that character… She and her father

had reconciled, and the weight of that has really been lifted from her. ('Audio Commentary,' 2018a)

Reed would continue, explaining how actress Evangeline Lilly was adamant about the detail work: "I don't want to do these, you know elaborate fight scenes and then have my hair and nails perfect and, you know, when I fight, I want to sweat… I don't want to be on glam, I wanted to be in a very practical ponytail because that's the only way that helmet will come on and off." The desexualization of Hope in *Ant-Man and the Wasp* fashions a messy, lively, and most importantly, human superheroine, one who juxtaposes the picture-perfect, coiffed hair, and impractical suits of both her own previous appearance in *Ant-Man* as well as the depiction of other superheroines in the saga, i.e. Black Widow and Scarlet Witch. The sequel's portrayal of Hope, then, creates an active, centered, dimensionalized, and desexualized superheroine, one which combats the stereotypical tropes that plague the female body in the MCU franchise.[130] In an interview with *Hollywood Reporter*, Evangeline Lilly would expound upon how she pushed for this repositioning of the character:

> Even for the first film, it was very important to me that Hope be an extremely empathetic and compassionate person. And I still did that while having that stereotypical or archetypical [quality] of femininity of being nurturing, compassionate, empathetic. Men can of course be compassionate or feminine, but femininity is at the core of what is disrespected in the patriarchy, so it was important to me to always push for feminine qualities to be apparent when she is dealing with situations — how she emotionally reacts to them [for instance]… It would be so easy… for her to become the motherly figure that's constantly scolding the juvenile boys, saying, "Now boys, let's focus, let's stop goofing around." I was just was terrified of the idea of this female superhero who's meant to represent a modern woman being some kind of horrible stereotype of "mommy." So I really voiced that *a lot*, and every scene where there was any potential for that, I would push up against that and say, "Let's pay attention to this. Let's make sure we represent a

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[130] Kent (2021) rightfully points out that despite the progressive portrayal of Hope in the *Ant-Man* sequel, the film "significantly [relies] on the established convention of an imperilled woman," that is, Hope's mother (p. 91).

woman who can also smile and have a little fun, can understand that there can be levity in moments of severity, that gets a joke, that isn't a heavy." Because you often see female characters — especially in the superhero world — being super-serious characters, and the boys get to have all the fun. And I really felt heard, and I feel like when you see the movie, you're going to see that. (qtd. in Kilkenny, 2018)

Lilly clearly grasps how ingrained these harmful tropes have become within the representation of the female body in the superhero genre. Her reference to the 'mommy' stereotype in particular further exposes how a patriarchally-informed motherhood and femininity imprison the female body while liberating the male body. Now, while it may be true that Hope does seem more relaxed and feminine in *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, there remain clear remnants of the Symbolic Mother within her character. Hope is still "intense" and "tough," and at times a "horrible stereotype of a 'mommy.'" Furthermore, since Hope is glaringly absent in *Civil War* and also subject to Thanos' Snap in *Endgame*, the superheroine is subject to the cycle's recurring misogyny as the character's treatment outside of the *Ant-Man* franchise falls back to the classic positioning of the male superhero as the self with the marginalization and even total eradication of the heroic female body. Regardless, it would be remiss to not acknowledge how much the character has been given room to grow and develop in *Ant-Man and the Wasp*. Over the course of the *Ant-Man* franchise, Hope is transformed from a passive, marginalized Side-lined Superheroine to an active, centered superheroine with agency, one who is in equal partnership with Lang.

4. Fridging Women

In addition to the Mother and the Side-lined Superheroine, the female body is subject to one last significant trope: Fridging. As was briefly discussed in the previous chapter, fridging is a

recurring comic book trope, coined by Gail Simone in 1999, wherein a female character is "depowered, raped, or cut up and stuck in the refrigerator" in order to anguish the male superhero, generating the audience's empathy, and furthering both the hero's arc as well as the plot development. As Tiffany Hong (2017) argues, fridging is not merely a recurring misogynistic trope, but on a grander scale, it reflects how the "male narrative is privileged and prioritized, normalized and historicized as rightfully reliant on the (self-)sacrificial and often violent erasure of the female" (p. 278). The Infinity Saga is shamefully guilty of this trope, predominantly privileging male narratives and normalizing the sacrifice and excision of its female characters (and non-white characters).[131] Of course, though gendered violence usually comes hand in hand with fridging, as the MCU is a family friendly, PG-13 franchise, this violence is greatly tempered into a trope that is more sinister in its normalization. There are countless examples of both the implicit and explicit fridging of female characters in the Infinity Saga. We see: examples of implicit fridging, as seen with Peggy and Pepper; examples of explicit fridging, as witnessed via Frigga and Gamora; and finally, a deconstructive take on the trope with Pepper (again) in *Iron Man 3*.

a) Implicit Fridging

Implicit fridging can be understood as an indirect version of the trope, one where the female character is not explicitly killed, but rather removed from the narrative for one reason or another, while still being subject to the trope's harmful effects. The clearest example of implicit fridging is perhaps witnessed in *Captain America: Civil War*, with both Steve's old flame, Peggy Carter, and Pepper Potts. The core conflict of *Civil War* lies between Steve

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[131] See Kent (2021, pp. 29-46) for thorough analysis of superhero girlfriends being fridged in Marvel films.

Rogers and Tony Stark, and in order to realistically elevate their conflict, several steps are taken to up the stakes of the film. One particular angle that is used involves removing the heroes' respective romantic interests from the larger picture by implicitly fridging them: Peggy passes away while Pepper and Tony are said to be on a break.[132] The situation is further degraded by the fact that both women operate as Symbolic Mothers for the two heroes, emotionally grounding the men while also functioning as their conscience. By killing off Peggy and completely eliminating Pepper from the equation, both Steve and Tony are left visibly grieving, emotionally vulnerable, and off-balance which earns the audience's sympathy and helps excuse their violent behavior in the escalating conflict. "The intent was always to put Tony in a very vulnerable place," co-director Joe Russo explains:

> We needed him off-balance for the way he behaved in the third act. He's lost Pepper. He's feeling an incredible amount of guilt. The movie tries to dig at the emotional trigger points so that by the time we reach that third act, his emotions will supersede his logic. (qtd. in Nugent, 2016)

Steve's emotional journey parallels Tony's via Peggy's passing. With grief as the guiding theme of *Civil War*, Peggy and Pepper's implicit fridging guides the heroes' journeys forward, sacrificing the women as mere plot devices in order to ensure the film's core conflict.

b) Explicit Fridging

Examples of explicit fridging are also witnessed countless times in the MCU. Under this trope, the female character is explicitly killed, privileging the male superhero's character arc, all while moving the plot forward. There are two key instances of explicit fridging in the Infinity

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[132] Here, I argue that Peggy's death is a more implicit take on the trope, since she is not explicitly or violently killed off, but rather passes away due to old age.

Saga: the deaths of Frigga and Gamora. In *Thor: The Dark World*, the titular superhero's

mother, Frigga, is murdered by the Dark Elves while protecting Jane, and the All Mother is

essentially fridged in order to reunite her two sons. Director Alan Taylor even confessed that

they "decided early on to kill Frigga" as her death would be "the one thing that could make

these two," Thor and Loki, "collaborate" ('Audio Commentary,' 2013b). As the All Mother,

Frigga's entire character is subsumed by motherhood, and as such her death is directly

exploited to bridge the gap between Thor and Loki and jumpstart the process of rekindling

their broken relationship post-*Thor* and *The Avengers*.

In *Infinity War*, we see a continuation of this trope with Gamora. While Frigga's

fridging privileges her sons' narratives, Gamora's death revolves around her abusive father

figure, Thanos. Gamora's fridging is rather unique in that the person who fridges her, Thanos,

is also one who is positively impacted by the trope's effects. Once the superheroine is

captured by Thanos, she becomes a pawn in his games, lacking any agency, only present to

witness and listen to the villain's tiresome justifications. During *Infinity War's* climax, the

superheroine is literally sacrificed in order for Thanos to acquire the Soul Stone on the planet

of Vormir. The one key female character of the film with a predominantly male cast, Gamora

is ultimately murdered by her surrogate father; she is fridged and relegated to a plot device

in order to ensure Thanos' success and further the film's plot.[133] Gamora simply becomes a

means to an end, and to add insult to injury, her death is later narratively exploited to enrage

Peter Quill who, incensed, inadvertently becomes responsible for failing to stop Thanos in a

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[133] Though Thanos is not a superhero, he is *Infinity War's* main protagonist, and the film follows his archetypal Hero's Journey as he succeeds in performing the Snap. Therefore, Thanos sacrificing Gamora still follows the fridging trope's guidelines, especially because her death privileges Thanos's character arc and enables his success.

critical battle. Both of *Infinity War's* writers considered Gamora's fridging as a necessary sacrifice for Thanos' arc. Co-writer Christopher Markus reasons: "If we were going to kill off Gamora- if we're going to kill off Thanos' daughter- there has to be a massive plot reason for it" (qtd. in Roussos, 2018b, p. 270). Co-writer Stephen McFeely continues, "'Oh, we lost Gamora. That's bad for the Avengers. That's bad for us as an audience member.' That's not why it's the end of [*Infinity War's*] act two. It's the end of act two because it's bad for Thanos. It's the worst thing that could happen to Thanos" (p. 270). Gamora's entire character is subsumed by Thanos and the plot in *Infinity War*. Simply put, she is not Gamora, she is rather, as Markus demeaningly labels her: "Thanos' daughter." Furthermore, the superheroine's murder is not about Gamora, and it is not tragic because she is sacrificed by her abusive adopted father; her death purely revolves around Thanos, and it is perversely tragic because "it's the worst thing that could happen to Thanos." What marks the superheroine's treatment as even more malevolent is how Gamora had originally asked Peter to kill her if Thanos were to capture her so that the supervillain would not know the location of the Soul Stone. Martyring herself for the greater good, a classically masculine trope that is generally reserved for the male superhero, would ensure her own agency in her presumed death. However, as *Infinity War* proves, Gamora's agency was never an option; from the moment Thanos toys with his daughter's emotions by allowing Peter to shoot her, only for the blast to turn into bubbles, Gamora's agency is thoroughly eradicated from the text. And though Gamora's death would be retconned in *Endgame,* her resurrection does not negate the horrendous treatment of her character in *Infinity War*, particularly when only male superheroes are given rounded and interesting character arcs in the film.

c) Fridging Deconstructed

While the MCU is replete with examples of implicit and explicit fridging, there is one film which surprisingly deconstructs the trope. In *Iron Man 3*, a movie which ironically was released before all of the previous films mentioned in this section, we see an interesting subversion of both this trope and that of the Damsel in Distress with Pepper Potts.[134] Halfway through the film, Pepper is abducted by Killian who injects her with Extremis, a serum which genetically manipulates a person's DNA granting them advanced healing capabilities. Tony and the audience are forced to watch a live feed of Pepper who is in extreme pain as she cries and suffers through the Extremis transformation. The heroine's suffering is exploited as a plot device to motivate Stark in the film's final, climatic battle sequence. Furthermore, Pepper's abduction casts the character as a helpless Damsel in Distress, objectified not only for Stark's anguish but also for Killian's pleasure, as the villain guiltily admits while chuckling, "Having you here is not just to motivate Tony Stark, it's um, actually more embarrassing than that. You're here as my…" "Trophy," Pepper finishes for him. Later, in the film's final battle sequence, Pepper is restrained and completely helpless, and in a critical moment, Tony fails to save her, and she appears to fall to a fiery death, effectively fridged. Enraged and filled with purpose, Stark faces off Killian in the film's final showdown. Up until this point in *Iron Man 3*, Pepper clearly aligns with countless misogynistic tropes: she is a Symbolic Mother to Tony Stark; also as a Damsel in Distress, she is a passive object that is kidnapped, tortured, and restrained; she is a trophy to be won by Killian; and finally, Pepper appears to be explicitly fridged to dramatize the film's closing battle, anguish Tony, and jumpstart the final confrontation between hero and villain.

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[134] See also Kent (2021) for an analysis of Potts' *Iron Man 3* character arc.

The subversion of these misogynistic tropes comes into effect when Pepper, powered by the Extremis technology, is revealed to have survived her fatal fall, and in a change of pace, Pepper saves Tony from film's villain, killing her captor herself. In an interview, Feige explained how the film "[plays] with the convention of the damsel in distress. We are bored by the damsel in distress. But, sometimes we need our hero to be desperate enough in fighting for something other than just his own life. So, there is fun to be had with 'Is Pepper in danger or is Pepper the savior?' over the course of this movie" (qtd. in Bryson, 2013). From the Damsel in Distress trope to fridging, *Iron Man 3's* deconstructive tendencies successfully invert several sexist tropes which have plagued Pepper throughout the *Iron Man* trilogy.

It would seem that nearly all the main female leads in the Infinity Saga have been affected one way or another by these tropes, be it the Mother, the Side-lined Superheroine, or Fridging, and it is indisputable that their narratives are disrupted for the sake of privileging the saga's male characters. The MCU's enforced male dominated narratives primarily endures because of the suffering, marginalization, and othering of its female characters. Male story arcs and male trauma overshadow the female body. Women are eclipsed by their lovers, teammates, and fathers in a parasitical fashion, and the Infinity Saga's female characters are excised merely to service the grander narrative, their agency tragically eliminated. Though Hope and Pepper stand in the minority of progressive (rather than feminist) representations of the female characters, this trend of othering the female body is particularly evident with the Infinity Saga's leading superheroine, Black Widow, as will be discussed in the following section.

5. Natasha as Femme Fatale turned Monstrous Mother

As the Infinity Saga's headlining superheroine, it is no surprise that Natasha Romanoff's character arc is muddled with inconsistent characterizations while being subject to nearly all of the MCU's misogynistic tropes. Initially, Romanoff is depicted as a dangerous femme fatale, only to eventually take on the role of Symbolic Mother; however, this framing is further complicated by Natasha's infertility, and she is subsequently painted as a monstrous figure. Framed by these juxtaposing characterizations, Natasha is ultimately punished and fridged in the Infinity Saga's final film, *Endgame*.

a) Natasha as Femme Fatale

Before delving into the Black Widow's role as a femme fatale, it is first important to understand the nature of the trope itself. A powerful stock figure, the femme fatale is morally ambiguous and dangerous, beautiful and seductive, "she harbors a threat, which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable" (Doane, 1991 p. 1).[135] The trope's abandonment of traditional gender roles, of motherhood and domesticity, in pursuit of narratival and sexual agency marks the femme fatale as unknowable and other. The femme fatale further upsets the traditional gender dichotomies of a narrative, as she is active, aggressive, and assertive while driving the plot forward. Critically, the femme fatale is diametrically opposed to the Mother (Allen, 1983; Doane, 1991; Sully, 2010; Grossman, 2020). "The antithesis of the maternal- sterile or barren," the femme fatale "produces nothing in a society which fetishizes production," for as fetishized as the character may be, her active agency, overt sexuality, and innate otherness pose a direct threat to the male hegemonic order via "male fears of an

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[135] Both Doane (1991) and Grossman (2020) provide in-depth analysis on this stock character.

engulfing femininity" (Doane, 1991, p. 2; Stott, 1992, p. 30). Consequently, the femme fatale is not a feminist figure, but rather "a symptom of male fears about feminism," and she is villainized, punished, and occasionally even killed for her transgressions.

Heavily inspired by her comic book counterpart, Romanoff is a textbook example of a femme fatale. Fetishized by the male gaze, the superheroine is mysterious, morally ambiguous, and seductive, her body hypersexualized in her infamous skin-tight catsuit.[136] Natasha is primarily characterized as a femme fatale during the saga's first two phases. Her first appearance in *Iron Man 2* firmly establishes her role as a femme fatale. During the film, Romanoff is presented as a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent working undercover with the alias of Natalie Rushman, and her assignment is to infiltrate Stark Industries and assess if Tony Stark would be a suitable candidate for the Avengers. As Rushman, Romanoff is highly sexualized and degraded by the male gaze, and her to-be-looked-at-ness is emphasized in a variety of ways in *Iron Man 2*; this is most evident in Romanoff's opening scene, the Black Widow reveal, and the superheroine's first action scene.

When Natasha as Rushman first appears in *Iron Man 2*, the audience is situated to gaze at her body through eyes of Stark and his bodyguard, Happy. During the scene, both men abruptly stop training and unashamedly watch Natasha/Natalie as she enters the room. Stark even invites her into the boxing ring he is training in, only to then blatantly stare at Natalie in an appraising and frankly demeaning manner for a solid ten seconds of silence. Later, Pepper (very lightly) berates Stark when he asks who Rushman is: "She is from legal," Pepper explains,

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[136] Classically, the femme fatale is a more seductive as well as sexually available and aggressive character, but because of the constraints of the MCU film cycle, Natasha functions as a strictly PG-13 version of the figure.

"and is potentially a very expensive sexual harassment lawsuit if you keep ogling at her like that." Stark then proceeds to run a search on her name, only to focus on Rushman's stint as a model, ogling risqué pictures of her in lingerie. At the end of the scene, as Stark watches Rushman leave the room, he tells Pepper, "I want one." This scene would set the tone for the rest of the film, as Romanoff is visibly fetishized and degraded into a sex object via the manner of her dress and speech as well as the way in which male characters interact with her while the camera lingers upon her body. Though Natasha's to-be-looked-at-ness is also a tool that she employs as a femme fatale, it is also undoubtedly exploited by the male gaze.

The hypersexualization and objectification of her body lingers even when Romanoff discards her fake identity and embraces her Black Widow persona. The first time Stark and the audience see Romanoff in her infamous catsuit, the superheroine enters the scene with the camera following her from behind, the gaze primarily focused on her hourglass figure, and more importantly, her backside. Later, the audience is also treated to a scene of Natasha changing into her suit with glimpses of her black bra and stocking-ed foot on show, all while Happy unsuccessfully tries not to stare. Finally, Black Widow's take down of several men during her first tough-action-girl scene caters to the male gaze, from her use of the stereotypical thigh-fighting technique (one that is exclusively reserved for women during fight sequences) to her body-tight catsuit on full display, unfastened long curls, and ceaselessly blank, stoic expression. Far from an empowering feminist figure, Black Widow is fetishized and gazed at voyeuristically under the male gaze. The representation of Natasha as an objectified femme fatale continues for several films, including *The Avengers, Captain America: The Winter Soldier,* and beyond. Aggressive and assertive, with an overt fetishized

sexuality, Natasha would ultimately be punished and (arguably) fridged for her transgressions as a femme fatale turned Mother.

b) Natasha as Mother/Monster

Though the femme fatale would continue to define Natasha as a superheroine over the course of the Infinity Saga, her depiction in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* complicates her character; in addition to being presented as a femme fatale, the heroine is also framed as both a Symbolic Mother and, conversely, a Monster.[137] As a femme fatale, Natasha is visibly hypersexualized in *Age of Ultron*, and she is placed as a love interest for Bruce Banner even though she had previously also played that role for Rogers in *The Winter Soldier*. Throughout the film, Natasha flirts with nerdy and awkward Banner, generating a clear male wish-fulfillment fantasy that is further stabilized by the male gaze; one scene even goes as far as to employ one of the saga's most appallingly forced shots wherein Banner face-plants into the heroine's breasts in the midst of a battle. In addition to the femme fatale, Natasha is also framed as a Symbolic Mother in the configuration of the Avengers family. She is the only woman on the team, and the heroine herself alludes to her maternal role several times in *Age of Ultron*. This is witnessed for example when Natasha, tongue-in-cheek, says, "I'm always picking up after you boys," after picking up Steve's fallen shield in the middle of a battle sequence. The superheroine's role as a Symbolic Mother is further established in *Age of Ultron* in that she is the only character seen performing the Lullaby, a new tactic of calming down the Hulk and helping him revert back to his human self. Coupled with the Freudian

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[137] This duality can easily be linked to castration anxiety. Additionally, it is worth noting that Natasha is also written as a Damsel in Distress in *Age of Ultron*, as she is kidnapped by Ultron and requires the Avengers team to save her from her imprisonment.

implications of Natasha both mothering the Hulk/Banner while also being his love interest in the film, the incompatible myths of the Eternal Feminine seem quite evident.

It is only later in the film, that the femme fatale's inherent infertility comes to complicate Natasha's placement as a Symbolic Mother casting the heroine as a monstrous figure; the convergence of these tropes is exposed through the visions that Scarlet Witch triggers in both Romanoff and Banner. In *Age of Ultron*, Maximoff uses her powers to make the Avengers face their worst fears. Natasha's vision includes a series of flashbacks which take place in the Red Room where she was trained to become an assassin and assume the role of Black Widow. Near the end of her vision, the audience watch as a young and frightened Natasha is wheeled on a gurney towards an unidentified room. Critically, Banner's vision, which is not actually seen, results in him transforming into an enraged Hulk who goes berserk and uncontrollably trashes Johannesburg. After this battle and while the Avengers are regrouping, both characters are plagued by their visions: Natasha with flashbacks of a doctor performing a procedure on her and Banner of his latest rampage as the Hulk. In the following scene, the couple try to come to an understanding about their romantic relationship, but Banner insists that there is no future with him. "I can't have this, kids," Banner tells her, to which Natasha replies:

> Neither can I. In the Red Room, where I was trained, where I was raised, um, they have a graduation ceremony. They sterilize you. It's efficient. One less thing to worry about. The one thing that might matter more than a mission. It makes everything easier. Even killing. You still think you're the only monster on the team?

Natasha's speech, and indeed the entire scene, is set up to equate Banner's monstrosity as the Hulk not to Natasha's crimes as a femme fatale/assassin, but rather to her infertility.

Natasha's monstrosity is directly correlated to her inability to fully embrace motherhood and become an archetypal Mother. Her only potential of engaging in that role is mothering her fellow teammates, a practice which only becomes more toxic by the end of Natasha's arc in the Infinity Saga.

As is evident with Natasha's treatment in *Age of Ultron*, the infertile female body is conceived as monstrous in that it does not align with the patriarchal gender constructs of the woman as Mother.[138] Infertility is further stigmatized and becomes a source of shame, a signifier of otherness. Natasha functions as a female monster because her reproductive bodily functions are sterilized; this intrinsic lack, the inability to procreate, strips away her femininity and prevents her from truly embodying the Mother.[139] Furthermore, the superheroine's representation somewhat diverts from Barbara Creed's (1993) theories on the Monstrous-Feminine, for even though Creed argued that female monsters are intrinsically linked to their reproductive bodily functions, particularly in the powerful and fecund body, it is Natasha's infertility which marks her as monstrous and other. And not only does Romanoff's infertility cast her as monstrous, but it also negates her power as a femme fatale who symbolically rejects motherhood.

After *Age of Ultron's* release, critics and fans alike were swift to criticize the depiction of the superheroine, but director Joss Whedon would adamantly defend himself. Several months after the film's release, Whedon would post on his Tumblr blog that Natasha "said she was a monster because she was an assassin. Being rendered infertile made her feel

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[138] For more on the intersections between monstrosity and the female body, see Creed (1993), Ussher (2006), and Edge (2015).

[139] See also Brown (2011b) for an exploration of the representation of pregnancy in superhero comics.

unnatural, made her feel cut off from the natural world. But it was her actions that defined her. Her murdery actions. That's what 'monster' meant" (Whedon, 2016). Putting aside Whedon's frankly weak argument, connecting infertility with unnaturalness in of itself relies upon patriarchal and misogynistic definitions of motherhood and what it means to be a woman. Furthermore, following Natasha's confession, Banner does not comfort her or, at the very least, simply reassure her that she is not a monster because of her infertility. Banner and *Age of Ultron's* deafening silence confirms how infertility is coded as monstrous. Furthermore, as this scene establishes, both Natasha and Banner symbolize alternative representations of femininity and masculinity: Natasha in that she is infertile and Banner in his inability to become a father. And so, *Age of Ultron's* patriarchal faults are twofold as its narrowminded representations of family, fertility, and parenthood affect both characters while also degrading non-normative styles of womanhood and manhood. *Age of Ultron* complicates Natasha's character, converging several misogynistic tropes including the femme fatale, the Symbolic Mother, and finally casting the heroine as an infertile Monster, and unfortunately, she is ultimately punished and fridged for her transgressions.

c) Natasha Fridged

Because Natasha is framed as a femme fatale, a Symbolic Mother, and an infertile Monster, the superheroine is ultimately fridged in the saga's final film, *Endgame.* Markus and McFeelys' misogynistic treatment of Gamora in *Infinity War* would be replicated in *Endgame*, where Natasha is implicitly fridged in order to further the plot of the film, raise the stakes, and privilege the remaining male Avengers' character arcs. Early in *Endgame*, a clearly struggling and grieving Natasha tells Steve that "I used to have nothing. And then I got this. This job… this family. And I was… better because of it." By failing to prevent Thanos' Snap and protect

her only family (the Avengers) as well as the rest of the galaxy, Natasha's tenuous role as a Symbolic Mother is further muddied. Her failure and grief and fragile hold on the title of Symbolic Mother become Natasha's principal motivation in *Endgame*, shaping the heroine's final scene on Vormir, where Natasha and Clint Barton/Hawkeye are faced with the dilemma of who will sacrifice themselves for the Soul Stone. During the scene, Natasha and Clint argue about who will sacrifice themselves, and after a brief skirmish, Natasha ultimately succeeds by throwing herself off the cliff edge, ensuring that Clint obtains the Soul Stone.

Romanoff's self-sacrifice can be read as a reclamation of agency wherein the heroine actively martyrs herself in traditional male superhero style; however, Natasha's imposed role as femme fatale, Symbolic Mother, and infertile Monster color her death in a different light. When Natasha sacrifices herself, she does so in order to right her perceived failure as a Mother and bring back her adopted family. Critically during the scene, she argues that Clint has his own wife and children to return to, and so despite the fact that an unstable Clint has spent the past five years, post-Snap, acting as a vigilante and remorselessly killing criminals across the globe, Natasha is the one to sacrifice herself for the stone. This yet again confirms the cycle's penchant for framing motherhood, fatherhood, and families as only acceptable if they are part of a traditional, heteronormative nuclear family. The remaining Avengers from the original roster, all men, spend around two minutes of screen time grieving the superheroine, only for her to then be, for the most part, forgotten and disregarded for the remainder of the film. Natasha's death, though not an explicit form of fridging, still erases the sole original female Avenger to further the plot of the film, anguish and motivate the main male superheroes, and privilege their narratives as the primary text.

Natasha's fridging is particularly heinous when compared to Tony's long-winded funeral service and self-eulogy at the end of *Endgame*. In the film's commentary, co-director Joe Russo and co-writer Stephen McFeeley would weakly counter that Tony is a "massive public figure," while Natasha has been a "cipher" for the majority of the saga, and though Natasha would have her own upcoming (and frankly overdue) solo film, Tony's story in the MCU was finished ('Audio Commentary,' 2019; qtd. in Itzkoff, 2019).[140] In another interview, McFeely would also defend their decision to kill off the superheroine, maintaining that "many of the women on the crew were passionate about giving her the hero moment – don't take it away from her" (Travis, 2020). Of course, as was already mentioned, there is something to be said about giving the saga's leading superheroine a "hero moment;" and yet, harkening back to *Age of Ultron's* vilification of Natasha and its equating of monstrosity with barrenness, Natasha's sacrifice as opposed to Clint's is insulting. Both Natasha and Clint suffer from the same crucial motivations in *Endgame*: the desire for redemption and the desire to bring back their respective families. However, Clint's nuclear family means more in the grand scheme of the MCU than Natasha's adopted one in her impure form as a Symbolic and Monstrous Mother.

Romanoff's character arc in the saga is ultimately fraught and inconsistent. Black Widow is symbolic of patriarchal double standards as she is both hypersexualized as a femme fatale and eventually desexualized as an infertile and monstrous Symbolic Mother. Recalling Jackson's argument, as the femme fatale inverts the dialectical roles between male/female,

[140] Though it could be argued that Natasha and Stark both perform the same act of sacrifice, the ingrained tropes within Natasha's character mark her death in a different manner. Furthermore, Tony, like Clint, has a daughter and wife while Natasha has no partner, child, or normative family so to speak, and therefore, Stark's death is judged as more meaningful than Natasha's death.

active/passive etc., Romanoff's transition over the course of the Infinity Saga from femme fatale to Mother is ironically almost a step backwards. The contradictions within her characterization reflect the clash between the femme fatale and the Mother, as both tropes are diametrically opposed to one another. Furthermore, Natasha is ultimately perversely punished for her transgressions as femme fatale via her infertility and failure to assume the role of Mother, and her character arc ends with *Endgame* fridging her. Natasha Romanoff as Black Widow then embodies how the female body is cast as other in the Infinity Saga, and her otherness and marginalization is primarily instilled because of the convergence of these juxtaposing tropes.

6. Phase Three Diversifying

Over the course of this section, I have analyzed how the female body is constrained by several misogynistic tropes in the Infinity Saga, undertaking a close-textual analysis of Black Widow in the Infinity Saga. However despite the franchise's many failings, I would be remiss not to discuss how, by the end of Phase Three, there is a clear progression in the portrayal of female characters in the MCU film cycle. And so, I conclude this section with a brief overview of progressive and diversified representations of the female body in the saga's last phase, followed by an analysis of *Black Panther's* wide range of dynamic female characters. Barring the disappointing last two Avengers films, Phase Three is overflowing with superheroines and women who are complex, unfettered by the men who surround them, and granted dynamic character arcs. This is witnessed for example in *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2,* a film which examines Gamora and Nebula's sibling rivalry while exploring their shared trauma from being raised under Thanos' abusive hand. It is also clear in *Ragnarok's* depiction of Valkyrie's PTSD and alcoholism as well as *Ant-Man and the Wasp's* centering of Hope and anti-villain

Ava/Ghost. *Captain Marvel* is also key as it is the first superheroine-led film of the entire Infinity Saga. There is a clear absence of the male gaze in the film, and Carol is highly desexualized in comparison to other women in the MCU; raging against the patriarchal machine, Carol is depicted as an angry, complex human character. The film was also the first in the saga to be co-directed by a woman, Anna Boden, and four out of five of the film's writers were also female. Unfortunately however, *Captain Marvel's* feminist themes are counteracted by the film's reliance upon the cycle's Manichean and hegemonic system as Carol essentially operates as a male-coded superhero. And as was argued in Chapter 1, Carol is proudly presented as a propagandistic tool of the US military, and her journey as a superhero hinges upon rescuing feminized, othered, and indigenized aliens.[141] The film also relies upon other stereotypical tropes, including relegating Carol's black friend, Maria Rambeau, to a non-white sidekick whose sole purpose is to uplift Carol throughout the film.[142] Phase Three is by no means the ideal model of female representation, however there is a clear effort in the saga's last phase to diversify and recenter the female body in a grand narrative that is dominated by male superheroes, and this is most clear in *Black Panther*.

a) Black Panther

The one film which truly stands out in terms of female representation in the saga's final phase is *Black Panther*. Throughout the film, the movie's titular superhero, T'Challa, is surrounded by several dynamic, powerful women in leadership positions.[143] The three main female characters of note are Shuri, Okoye, and Nakia. None of these women are hypersexualized or

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[141] For more on *Captain Marvel*, see AlAwadhi and Dittmer (2020a).
[142] See Langsdale (2020) as well as Gould's (2019) interesting analysis of Maria Rambeau as a Magical Negro.
[143] For more on gender and *Black Panther,* see Carrington (2018); Deardeuff (2019); Bucciferro (2021); Kent (2021). See also the *Review of Communication's* dedicated issue on the film.

objectified, and their actions do not revolve around T'Challa. Instead, they are all intelligent, skilled in combat, and their agency is also intact as they work tirelessly to build a better Wakanda. *Black Panther's* innate blackness is also intersectionally linked to its depiction of femininity. Black femininity in the film is not erased nor is it homogenized, but rather it is illustrated in a myriad of forms, all of which are accepted. Natural black hair is embraced, colorism absent, the film's female characters fight in both desexualized and yet beautiful gowns as well as in more sensible combat gear. It is also frankly refreshing to see these characters engage in battle realistically with passion and candor and not merely as stoic, pretty faces like Black Widow for example. Furthermore, unlike the majority of non-white characters in the MCU, the female body in *Black Panther* is not tokenized or stereotyped. Shuri, Okoye, and Nakia defy the MCU's problematic tropes, all while representing unique characteristics and perspectives towards the film's central conflict: what Okoye's actress, Danai Gurira, defines as "the structure of our traditions versus our modernity, and who we become as a modern people" ('Crowning of a New King,' 2018).

The first of *Black Panther's* trifecta, Shuri, is T'Challa's younger sister. She is the princess of Wakanda and also the head of the country's Science and Information Exchange. A groundbreaking and inspirational example of a young black female character in STEM, Shuri pushes both her brother and Wakanda towards scientific progress and innovative technological advancements. General Okoye, on the other hand, is a strong traditionalist. She is the head of the Dora Milaje, an all-female Wakandan elite special forces (akin to the US Navy SEALS), and excluding Black Panther himself, Okoye is "the greatest warrior Wakanda has." Okoye's complexity is noteworthy as she is both stoic in relation to her responsibilities as the leader of the Dora Milaje while also very human in her interactions with other

characters: she teases T'Challa, jokes with Shuri, and is clearly in love with her husband,

W'Kabi, though she does not hesitate to confront him when he commits treason. Her fraternal

relationship with T'Challa is particularly interesting as it poses a unique friendship between a

man and a woman that is not sexualized or romanticized. Okoye's traditionalism and strict

loyalty to Wakanda's throne is heavily contrasted to Shuri's scientific innovations and Nakia's

desire for political progress.

Interestingly, Nakia functions as T'Challa's true foil in *Black Panther*, a role that is

usually reserved for a film's villain; from her personality traits and romantic relationship with

T'Challa to her ideological views and profession as a War Dog, Nakia actively moves the plot

forward and engages with the film's core themes. Nakia is a free-spirited, independent, and

empathetic woman, and her complicated romantic relationship with T'Challa rests upon their

ideological differences, particularly her desire for Wakanda to open its borders and lend aid

and its ample resources to those in need. The heroine is skilled in surveillance and combat as

a member of the Wakandan War Dogs, the country's central intelligence service. Critically, it

was her time abroad as a War Dog which gave her the opportunity to witness first-hand the

world's struggles, subsequently informing her political stance: "I found my calling out there.

I've seen too many in need just to turn a blind eye. I can't be happy here knowing that there's

people out there who have nothing." As opposed to T'Challa naively following the footsteps

of his father and ancestors, embracing tradition and ensuring the safety of Wakanda through

closed borders and secrecy, Nakia represents progress: a Wakanda with open borders,

"[providing] aid and access to technology and refuge to those who need it... Wakanda," Nakia

argues "is strong enough to help others and protect ourselves at the same time." The

heroine's nonconformist outlook extends to how she interacts with other characters and is

even represented via her weapon of choice, a ringblade that is similar to a chakram and "[represents] a new take on tribal weaponry," especially when contrasted with the Dora Milaje's spears for example (Roussos, 2018c, p. 186). Throughout *Black Panther*, Nakia's agency is intact as she actively drives the plot forward, and her knowledge procured as a War Dog is crucial as she takes the initiative to save the Heart-Shaped Herb (the magical plant which grants the powers of the Black Panther) before the film's villain, Killmonger can burn them all. It could be argued that Nakia fits into the Side-lined Superheroine trope, as she does not take the Heart-Shaped Herb herself, though she has the moral and physical capacity to take on the Black Panther mantle, and instead plans to give the plant to another patriarchal figure: M'Baku, T'Challa's rival and the Jabari Tribe's leader. However, Nakia rightfully reasons that Killmonger can only be defeated with M'Baku's army in tow. By the end of the film, T'Challa opens his eyes to the failings of his ancestors and is convinced by Nakia's call for progress. The hero also asks Nakia not to return to her life as a War Dog, pleading with her to "Stay. I think I know a way you can still fulfil your calling." The lovers reconcile, and Nakia gets her love interest while still fulfilling her calling of helping people by opening Wakanda's borders.[144] Unlike most depictions of women in the saga, Nakia is not a Damsel in Distress who needs to be saved or a trophy to be won. She is not a Mother whose sole purpose is to guide and uplift the main hero, nor is she sidelined. She is instead an equal to T'Challa and his ideological foil who actively persuades the hero to change the status quo.

Ultimately, *Black Panther* is a watershed film for the MCU, and Hollywood more broadly speaking, because of its diverse and complex representations of blackness and

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[144] It is worth noting that both Nakia and Okoye are female characters whose loyalty and devotion for their lovers does not compromise their loyalty and devotion to their country, a rather unheard-of concept within the MCU.

femininity. *Black Panther's* depiction of women is not cliched or stereotypical, nor does it fall into the cycle's hackneyed tropes of Mothers, Damsels in Distress, or Side-lined Superheroines. Instead, *Black Panther* is teeming with, as M'Baku's actor, Winston Duke says: "Women as leaders, women as warriors, women not limited by conventional ideas of femininity. They're still beautiful and they're strong and they're capable. They're deadly. They're all these things, not confined to any one stereotype" ('The Warriors Within,' 2018). In addition to its wide array of female characters, the film's crew would also be headed by many women, including Cinematographer Rachel Morrison, Co-Editor Debbie Berman, Production Designer Hannah Beachler, and Costume Designer Ruth E. Carter. This is not to say that the film is without its criticisms, such as: the near Orientalist melting pot portrayal of African culture within Wakanda, its somewhat propagandistic take on the CIA, the radicalization and villainization of Killmonger, and of course T'Challa's clear embrace of the MCU's core tenets despite the superhero's blackness.[145] Furthermore, as Claudia Bucciferro (2021) points out, *"Black Panther* offers progressive representations woven into a story that emphasizes masculinity enough to fend off anti-feminist pushback" (p. 11). *Black Panther* is still an MCU blockbuster film, and the innate narrative is still one that relies upon the cycle's Manichean and hegemonic system. However, that does not detract from the film's progressive portrayal of its black female characters.

7. Conclusion

Over the course of this section, I have examined how the female body more often than not exemplifies otherness within the Infinity Saga. I first briefly overviewed representations of the

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[145] For more, see Serwer (2018).

female body, before exploring how the othering tropes of the Mother, the Side-lined Superheroine, and Fridging influence and impact the female body in the saga. By then investigating how these tropes shape and dehumanize Black Widow in her saga-long character arc, it becomes clear that the female body is primarily fashioned as a plot device, one which centers and privileges the male superhero's narrative. The Infinity Saga's portrayal of the female body personifies the Eternal Feminine, resplendent with juxtaposing tropes and incompatible myths. It is a body whose to-be-looked-at-ness is highly fetishized. It is a source of maternal comfort and guidance. It is a site that is marginalized and sidelined as lesser and other. And it is ultimately a site that is callously sacrificed for the sake of the plot and male hero. The female body is indeed the other to the male body's self; its othering enables the MCU's grand narrative as well as the cycle's Manichean system. Though Phase Three may provide more diversified and progressive depictions of the female body, these depictions are few and far in between. Having examined the male body and the female body, I will conclude this chapter with a final overview of the queer body and its relationship to otherness in the Infinity Saga.

III. THE QUEER BODY

In addition to the depiction of the male and female body, it is also important to address how the MCU has dealt with representations of alternative sexualities and genders on-screen. The Infinity Saga is highly cisgendered and heteronormative, with a near-total absence of queer representation. In this final section of the chapter, I briefly overview how queerness is often defined as other. I then analyze the few instances of visible queer representation in the saga, exploring how these depictions are plagued by comic relief, intervention behind-the-scenes,

and underwhelming, irrelevant characters. I conclude this chapter by exploring how the franchise is further guilty of queer-coding its villains and queer-baiting its audience with only vague promises of queer representation.

1. <u>Queer as Other</u>

In *Saint Foucault*, David Halperin (1997) defines queer as "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (p. 62). Queerness transcends "normative heterosexuality and traditional gender roles to encompass a more inclusive, amorphous, and ambiguous contra-heterosexuality" (Benshoff, 2020, p. 5). By its very definition then, that which is queer is also other. The otherness intrinsic within queerness parallels its situational nature. "One function of the deviant," Gross and Woods (1999) explain, "is to help define for others that which is *not* deviant" (p. 5). Performative gender which is transgressive and pushes the boundaries of what is deemed normative therefore echoes the self/other dialectic, as that which is 'deviant,' queer, and other gives meaning to the normative, heterosexual self. Any engagement with that performativity immediately results in "ostracism, punishment, and violence" (Butler, 1991 p. 13).[146] This misogynistic and homophobic grasp on queerness generally informs how it is represented in popular culture and in the MCU franchise. Though comics have normalized depictions of queer superheroes and characters over the past several decades, filmic adaptations and the MCU in particular have, for the most, part greatly fallen short of any positive queer representation. The absence of queer characters in the saga arguably stems from the internalized trends of the cycle, particularly the franchise's repeated return to conservative hegemonic ideals and Marvel

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[146] See Gross and Woods (1999), for more on how queerness gives definition to that which is not queer.

Studios and Disney's fear of box office losses. In the Infinity Saga then, the heterosexual, cisgender self is the expectation, leaving the othered queer body as a clear aberration.[147]

2. Queer Characters in the MCU

There has been a profound scarcity of queer representation in the MCU franchise. The Infinity Saga clearly fails the Vito Russo Test at large by failing to include a single explicitly queer character who is "tied into the plot in such a way that their removal would have a significant effect" upon the narrative.[148] The absence of any visibly queer and significant characters is particularly jarring considering Marvel's expansive cast of queer characters in the comics, and it is even more disappointing as several characters were straightwashed in their adaptation on-screen i.e. Loki, Korg, Okoye, Ayo, Valkyrie, and even Captain Marvel.[149] By the end of the Infinity Saga, there are only three flimsy examples of queer characters in the MCU, and they are: Justin Hammer, Valkyrie, and an unnamed character credited as Grieving Man.

a) Justin Hammer

The Infinity Saga's first queer character is one of *Iron Man 2's* villains, Justin Hammer, whose sexuality is revealed in the Marvel short, *All Hail the King* (2014). The fifth film in Marvel's *One-Shots* series, the short film was released in *Thor: The Dark World's* DVD extras. *All Hail the King* primarily focuses on the Mandarin, Trevor Slattery's time in prison, where it is revealed Hammer is also residing. During the mid-credits sequence, Hammer is seen criticizing Slattery while sat next to a silent younger, effeminate inmate. The unnamed inmate, who is

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[147] For more, see Shyminsky (2011) and Panuska (2013).
[148] For more details on this test, see *The Vito Russo Test* (no date).
[149] In their 2018 Studio Responsibility Index, GLAAD made a point to call attention to the MCU's failure of the Vito Russo Test, its straightwashing of particular characters, and the studio's opportunity to introduce more characters in the future.

clearly Hammer's boyfriend, comforts the villain, and tries to put his arm around him, only for Hammer to tell him, "Not here, baby." The short scene, like much of the short film, is merely played up for laughs. As the first visibly queer character in the MCU, Hammer's sexuality is ultimately a punchline and a portrayal of the decades-old disparaging stereotype of a prison gay, a man who only engages in homosexual relationships while in prison. Via this scene, *All Hail the King* ties connotations of homosexuality and transgressiveness to a site already beleaguered by deviancy (the prison). Even if one were to take the representation of Hammer's sexuality in good faith, since his queerness has only been depicted in one of Marvel's shorts, only the most dedicated of fans would be aware that he is gay.

b) Valkyrie

The second character of note who was originally written as queer is *Thor: Ragnarok's* Valkyrie, played by Tessa Thompson. An Asgardian shield-maiden, and a famously queer character from the comics, Valkyrie was initially written and filmed as a bisexual character. In a critical flashback sequence where the audience watches Hela defeat the Valkyries in battle, Valkyrie relives the moment were one of her blonde comrades sacrifices herself for the shield-maiden and is ultimately slain by Hela. This scene from *Ragnarok* is key in illuminating Valkyrie's motivations, her guilt, PTSD, and alcoholism. Thompson, however, has been very vocal in clarifying another layer to the scene, as she argues that the blonde shield-maiden who sacrificed herself for Valkyrie was meant to be her lover. "There were things that we talked about that we allowed to exist in the characterization, but maybe not be explicit in the film," Thompson said in an interview with *Rolling Stone*. The actress also stated that an earlier cut of the film shows a glimpse of a woman leaving Valkyrie's bedroom, though the shot "eventually… had to be cut because it distracted from the scene's vital exposition" (Nicholson,

2017). The actress would later go as far as to confirm Valkyrie's sexuality on Twitter, and Feige recently also confirmed that Valkyrie's sexuality would visibly impact her storyline as the new King of Asgard in *Thor: Love and Thunder* (Thompson, 2017). Regardless of whether Valkyrie's straightwashing was perhaps the work of the studio behind the scenes or merely an issue of editing, the shield-maiden's queerness remains pivotal to her characterization. It is also worth noting that this phenomenon would similarly occur in *Black Panther*, wherein a highly flirtatious exchange between the Dora Milaje characters, Okoye and Ayo, (who are romantically involved in the *World of Wakanda* comics), was reportedly cut out of the final film. Marvel would deny any romantic exchange between the two characters; however, when co-writer Joe Robert Cole was asked if the queer romance was originally meant to be included in *Black Panther*, he would provide an unclear, and frankly, dodgy answer: "I think the short answer is yes… [but,] I can't remember the exact exchange you're talking about, but I think it was really brief" (qtd. in Whitney, 2018).[150] Despite *Ragnarok* and *Black Panther* being two of the saga's more progressive films, Valkyrie, Okoye, and Ayos' straightwashing points towards a broader pattern of queer erasure in the MCU.

c) Grieving Man

The final queer character of note in the Infinity Saga is *Endgame's* Grieving Man. Prior to the film's release, *Endgame's* directors promised a milestone moment in the MCU with the appearance of the first visibly gay character in the saga. However, the outcome would be more than underwhelming (and overhyped) with a character simply credited as Grieving Man, cameoed by co-director Joe Russo himself. Grieving Man appears in a short scene at a

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[150] See also Robinson (2017), and for an in-depth examination of *Black Panther's* queer erasure, see Meyer (2020).

Brooklyn support group run by Steve Rogers. The character talks about a date he went on, the hardships of life post-Snap, and he then recounts how both he and his date ended up crying and grieving together before promising a second date. The heralded Grieving Man has less than a minute of screen time, though the film's directors would maintain the importance of the character. In an interview with *Deadline*, Russo stated that:

> Representation is really important… It is a perfect time, because one of the things that is compelling about the Marvel Universe moving forward is its focus on diversity… When you have a story point that includes killing half of all humans on Earth, you're telling a bigger story than *The Avengers*. So that scene was important to us in telling the story of the larger world… We wanted it to be casual, with the fact that the character is gay tied into the fabric of the storytelling and representing what everyday life is. (qtd. in Fleming Jr., 2019)

Despite how well-meaning the Russo Brothers may have been in their desire to push towards more diversity in the franchise, there still remains several problems with the depiction of the first visible gay character in the MCU, from his glaring lack of a name to the character's clear failure of the Vito Russo Test. Furthermore, the construction and brevity of Grieving Man's scene lends itself quite easily to censorship in cinemas across the world, a fact which Marvel Studios and Disney have obviously exploited to their benefit. Disney in particular has had a long history in including queer representation that is easily censored, catering to the diversification trend while ensuring that their films are not banned.[151]

It is rather depressing to see that with ten years' worth of films, the saga's portrayal of the queer body has been plagued by characters whose sexuality is a source of comic relief,

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[151] For example, this trend is seen with movies like *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (2019)*,* and *Onward* (2020).

characters who are straightwashed in the final cut of their films, and even characters who truly are of little consequence in the span of the saga's grand narrative, all of which is ultimately sustained by the cycle's internalized system.

3. Queer-Coding and Queerbaiting

The shortage of explicitly queer characters is only exacerbated by the saga's troubling history of queer-coding its villains and queerbaiting its audience with potentially gay characters and relationships. In this closing section, I will define queer-coding and then examine how the saga's villains are coded as queer, particularly via the villains Loki and the Grandmaster. I then similarly define queer-baiting and overview the MCU's relationship with fandoms, shipping, and slash pairs, primarily via Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes' relationship.

a) Queer-Coding

Queer-coding is a process which has informed the representation of villainous characters on screen in popular culture since the early twentieth century. Queer-coding is the manner in which a character is sub-textually depicted as queer via particular signifiers.[152] These traits include: their physical features, costume, dress, makeup, manner of speech, personality, behavior etc.[153] Characters who, however implicitly or explicitly, take part in these gendered transgressions are othered and painted as villains (Li-Vollmer and LaPointe 2009). The

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[152] The origins of queer-coding can be traced back to the implementation of the Hays Code in the 1930s, which would echo the implementation of the Comics Code Authority in the 1954, both of which policed representations of alternative sexualities and classified queerness as perverse.

[153] For more on the intersections between queerness, villains, and monsters, see Russo (1987), Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003), Schildcrout (2014), Elliott (2018), Brennan (2019), and Benshoff (2020).

feminization of the villain is key in the process of queer-coding, as it brings in sharp contrast the core heterosexual and masculine attributes of the hero. As Vito Russo (1987) explains:

> After all, it is supposed to be an insult to call a man effeminate, for it means he is like a woman and therefore not as valuable as a 'real' man. The popular definition of gayness is rooted in sexism. Weakness in men rather than strength in women has consistently been seen as the connection between sex role behavior and deviant sexuality. (p. 4)

For a male character to be anything other than a hot-blooded, bare-chested, heterosexual, and cis-gendered male results in the misogynistic and othering process of queer-coding. By its very definition then, queerness perpetuates a Manichean system and the self/other dialectic, echoing the situational relationship between superhero and villain. Of course, representations of queerness and alternative masculinities have evolved on screen over the years, and yet there remain remnants of the process in popular culture, as is quite apparent in the Infinity Saga.

The MCU villain always takes on the role of other as a result of the character's dialectical relationship to the text and hero, and queer-coding is often used to help better illustrate the villain's otherness. The MCU superhero, who is a heterosexual, cisgendered, and hypermasculine male, or a woman coded in similar terms, takes on the role of the self, while most other alternative sexualities and genders are firmly placed in the role of the villain and the other. And so, while the villain is ideologically at odds with their respective superhero, they are also queer-coded via a variety of signifiers in order to fully embrace the role of other.

In the Infinity Saga, we see that villains oftentimes denote a wide array of signifiers, coding them as queer.[154]

There are several examples of villains in the Infinity Saga that are queer-coded, however embedded the signifiers may be. Many of the saga's villains relatively adhere to what Li-Vollmer and LaPointe (2003) describe as the villain-as-sissy archetype; these characters are coded to appear as deviant in order to "enhance the gender qualities" of the superhero (p. 89). While Li-Vollmer and LaPointe surveyed Disney villains in their analysis, characters who are quite frankly more flamboyant and explicitly queer-coded then the MCU's villains, the saga's villains still express numerous signifiers that promote the Manichean distinctions of the MCU. The villain-as-sissy trope pivots upon "gender transgressions," Li-Vollmer and LaPointe argue; it "is highly salient in their delicate physical features that invoke traditional ideals of feminine beauty" (p. 97). And indeed, many of the saga's villains boast tall, elegant, slender and at times even effeminate or androgynous frames which contrast with the bulkier, muscular heroes. This is evident across the board in the Infinity Saga from villains like Loki and Johann Schmidt/Red Skull to Justin Hammer and Malekith, all of whose body structures clearly contrast their counterpart heroes. Another standard signifier of the trope is how villains are consistently guilty of vanity, a quality that is traditionally tied to femininity, and perhaps the leading example of this recurring trait in the Infinity Saga is witnessed with *Iron Man 3's* Aldrich Killian. Li-Vollmer and LaPointe further point out that:

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[154] It is of course worth noting that there are villains in the MCU who are not directly queer-coded. As a result of these villains' moral corruptness and, more importantly, their failure to defeat the superhero in combat, these villains' masculinity is ultimately deemed lesser or even excessive in the face of the normative burgeoning and formidable superhero's masculinity i.e. *The Incredible Hulk's* Emil Blonsky who transforms into a meaner, grotesque, sickly-yellow version of the Hulk; Obadiah Stane as Iron Monger and Darren Cross as Yellow Jacket are also brought to mind as villains who are ultimately defeated because they are inferior/extreme mirrors of their superheroes.

whereas male protagonists exhibit high levels of physical activity and exertion in performing their many heroic deeds, villains have much lower levels of activity… [and] have henchmen do the manual labor… real men are shown as active and physical, whereas villains are more likely to be grouped with representations of women as passive and inactive. (pp. 101-102)

This is, yet again, demonstrated with many of the saga's villains. Though there is always one last climactic battle between hero and villain, the villain's feminization and queerness are contingent on their reliance upon henchmen. Queer-coding's intrinsic connection to a transgressive femininity others the male villain as an effeminate, vain, passive, inactive creature, and two particular characters which exemplify this misogynistic and homophobic process are the villains Loki and the Grandmaster.

Brother and foe to Thor, Loki, the Asgardian God of Mischief is perhaps the clearest example of queer-coding in the MCU. Loki acts as a clear foil to his brother, Thor, and his gendered performance is highly coded as queer and other via his effeminate body, character traits, dress, and superpowers. Loki's lean, slender physical build and his higher pitched voice highly juxtapose his brother's stocky, thick, muscular body and deep voice. The Trickster God is often presented as highly emotional, and indeed he is constantly on the verge of tears throughout his first few films. A "full-tilt diva," as Stark calls him, Loki's penchant for showmanship and flair for drama are also intrinsic to his character; and this is portrayed throughout the Infinity Saga, from his elaborate villainous overtures in *The Avengers* to his equally over-the-top, though now tinged as puerile, actions in *Ragnarok* i.e. fashioning a play in tribute to himself; ordering a memorial built in honor of his (fake) death; presenting himself as a savior once he is a reformed anti-villain etc. Even in terms of dress, "Loki wants to look good, he's a man of style," says Producer Craig Kyle, and in *Thor*, the villain would boast three

different looks as opposed to Thor's singular hero outfit (qtd. in Manning, 2011, p. 63). Loki's

powers are also feminized as he relies chiefly on magic and trickery, skills which he learnt

from his mother, Frigga; these powers subsequently align the character more to his mother

than father and is (again) highly contrasted in the face of Thor's brute strength and weapon

of choice being a phallic hammer. This gendered performance is further heightened because

Loki's otherness stems from familial disputes and his Jotun blood: "He's an outsider, he's a

misfit," explains actor Tom Hiddleston ('Sakaar,' 2017). Ultimately, this otherness as well as

Loki's moral transgressions as a villain are paralleled and intensified by his androgynous,

queer coding. It is also worth mentioning that the character is in fact pansexual in Marvel's

comics, though his sexuality would be straight-washed in the Infinity Saga. Loki ultimately

represents a character who adheres to Vollmer and LaPointe's villain-as-sissy archetype via

numerous signifiers, all of which compound to recreate the self/other dialectic of the MCU.

One last villain of note who both magnifies and pushes the boundaries of queer-coding

in the Infinity Saga is *Thor: Ragnarok's* Grandmaster. The Grandmaster's gender performance

heavily relies upon a deviant femininity, even more so than Loki, and there seems to be a

deliberate conscious effort in the queering of this character. From his styled hair, tall, slender

figure, colorful, flowing gown, and use of matching makeup and nail polish to his general

passivity, heavy reliance on henchman, and feminine mannerisms and hand gestures, the

Grandmaster is intensely coded as queer. The Grandmaster epitomizes a hedonistic and

exceedingly vain temperament, and his highly flirtatious demeanor is hypersexualized. Like

Loki, when contrasted with Thor's brawny, muscular physique, the Grandmaster's

transgressive gender behavior clearly sets him apart as other. However, *Ragnarok's* evolution

of the franchise's system and its confrontation of the nature of otherness seem to impart a

similar awareness and acceptance of the Grandmaster's innate campness, and though the Grandmaster is frankly a source of comic relief, his entertaining behavior does not denote his queer-coding as much as it reflects the humorous tone of the film. The Grandmaster arguably manifests as a hyper-aware queer-coded villain, one that embraces the feminization and inherent camp of the sissy-as-villain, though there is no explicit confirmation of his queerness in the film.

b) *Queerbaiting*

A final issue that must be addressed is the recurring pattern of queer-baiting in the Infinity Saga. In this last section, I first define queerbaiting and then briefly survey the process's trend in the MCU, primarily via the prevalence of 'slash ships' as well as through Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes' relationship.[155] In his seminal book, *The Celluloid Closet* (1987), Vito Russo describes queerbaiting as a collection of queer "subtexts [that present] themselves constantly," in a text and are ultimately, "left unresolved" (p. 76). This definition is expanded on by Eve Ng (2017), who describes queerbaiting as an industry tactic, one where media creators "court viewers interested in LGBT narratives… and encourage their interest in the media text without the text ever definitively confirming the nonheterosexuality of the relevant characters." Queerbaiting is then a highly exploitative method employed by industry and media creators. It dangles the promise, but only ever a promise, of queer representation in a text, deliberately engaging in signifiers of queerness with no true outcome. Significantly, queerbaiting is awash in genres "imbued with homoeroticism," ones which are more often

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[155] Shipping is a term used in fandom wherein fans actively support two or more characters engaging in a romantic relationship, and the phenomenon often results in fans creating transformative works about their favorite 'ships' such as fanfiction, fanart, and other creative works. Slash ships represent same-sex pairings, specifically male/male relationships. For more on shipping and fandom, see Jenkins (2006), Coker and Pande (2018), and Coppa (2018).

than not dominated by male characters i.e. the western genre, buddy genre, sword-and-sandal genre etc. (Brennan, 2019, p. 6). The superhero genre then falls perfectly into the trap of this industrial tactic, the MCU film cycle perhaps more so, and this phenomenon is evident in the MCU fandom's fixation with slash ships.[156]

In a franchise that is starved for representation, it is rather ironic that the MCU's fandom is dominated by countless slash ships. A good majority of the fans' preoccupation with gay relationships in the saga goes back as far as Phase One's opening films, with a deluge of transformative works produced in fan theories, fan-fiction, fan-art, cosplaying, and other content. From Steve Rogers/Tony Stark to Steve Rogers/Bucky Barnes and Clint Barton/Phil Coulson, the MCU's slash ships have consistently appeared in the annual top pairings on several fan-based platforms including *Tumblr* and, leading fanfiction website, *Archive of Our Own*.[157] As all of these male characters are canonically straight in the MCU, the preoccupation with reading these men as queer and constructing slash ships could arguably be read as a consequence of the saga's predominantly male cast as well as the fact that it is male characters who are granted the most fulfilling arcs, space for character development, and interesting and emotionally gripping interpersonal conflict. However, as was previously argued, there is also a blatant homoerotic tone informed by the male gaze in the Infinity Saga, one which is heightened exploitatively by the filmmakers in order to entrap its audiences with the false promise of queer representation.

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[156] For more on queer-baiting, see Brennan (2019).
[157] See centreoftheselights (2021).

Perhaps the clearest example of this process lies within the Steve Rogers/Bucky Barnes ship, most commonly referred to as Stucky. The queer reading of Stucky finds its roots in both the presentation of their relationship in-text as well as a result of paratextual signifiers. Over the course of the *Captain America* trilogy, Bucky is unswervingly one of Steve's main narratival motivators: from playing the role of a tragic Damsel in Distress who is ultimately fridged in *The First Avenger* to being woken up from his HYDRA brainwashing by Steve's love (the romantic undertones particularly evident with their catchphrase: "I'm with you 'till the end of the line"), and finally to Steve consciously sacrificing everything he has built for Bucky in *Civil War*.[158] Marvel's media creators have also fanned the flames of their fans' expectations with their handling of the ship in interviews and at conventions. The clearest example is perhaps when, prior to *Civil War's* release, co-director Joe Russo infamously described the film as a love story fueling the audience's hopes: "What's fascinating about the Cap-Bucky story as well is it's a love story" (qtd. in de Semlyen, 2016). After *Civil War* clearly did not canonize the ship and, instead, inserted the obligatory left-field heterosexual kiss between Steve and Sharon Carter, only for Carter to then disappear for the remainder of the saga, fans retaliated by starting a hashtag campaign, titled #GiveCaptainAmericaABoyfriend. The MCU has continued, and undoubtedly will continue, to rely upon queer-baiting its audience and fans until more visible queer representation is normalized onscreen.

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[158] See Coppa (2018) for more on Bucky, the gaze, and slash fanfiction.

4. Conclusion

As has been argued, explicit representations of alternative sexualities and genders are almost non-existent in the Infinity Saga, and when they are present, they are either reduced to comedic relief, straightwashed, or are simply irrelevant to the text. Queer representation in the MCU then can only be found with either queer-coded villains or via fans reading the MCU's heroes as queer. When attached to villains, queerness immediately correlates as other as it is presented as highly transgressive and deviant, and queer-baiting is simply an industrial tactic that promises gay representation without any follow through. Ultimately, queerness is erased or villainized in the Saga, and it is exploited dialectically by the cycle's Manichean and hegemonic system to denote otherness.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Over the course of this final chapter, I have examined how gender and sexuality function in relation to otherness within the MCU film cycle's dialectical system. It is clear that while the male body is centered as the hypermasculine self, embodying the cycle's primary underlying hegemonic themes (including Whiteness, colonialism, Empire, nationalism etc.), both the female body and the queer body are marginalized as other in order to privilege the male superhero's narrative. Female characters are hindered by classic misogynistic tropes which degrade the female body into a site of incompatible myths; the female body becomes a plot device that is hypersexualized, maternalistic, side-lined, and ultimately sacrificed in order to fulfill the male superhero's narrative. The queer body is almost completely erased from the narrative, and when it is depicted, the portrayal of queerness is either highly deficient or exploited to code villains and queer-bait the audience. By analyzing how the male, female,

and queer body function within the Infinity Saga, it becomes clear that the MCU's internalized components are entrenched within the franchise, and that, much like the previous chapter contends, when considering the saga in broader terms, it is clear that the MCU film cycle heavily relies upon otherness in order to narratively and thematically function. The rare and, at times, rather feeble cases which confront and counter the normative, patriarchal, misogynistic, and homophobic landscape of the cycle, such as Bro Thor, Hope as the Wasp, *Black Panther's* female characters, and the Grandmaster, primarily appear towards the end of Phase Three. The rather late entry of complex and layered female characters and acknowledged queer characters, yet again, points to the changing dominant ideals and expectations of the MCU film cycle's audience as well as the natural, albeit exceedingly slow-moving, evolution of the cycle itself.

CONCLUSION

Over the course of this dissertation, I have investigated how otherness inserts itself in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Infinity Saga, delving into an in-depth study of the politics of representation. I have not only analyzed the relationship between otherness and the Infinity Saga through a variety of lenses, but I have also contributed to the broader canon by proposing distinctive readings of the gaze, as can be seen with the Occidental gaze and the weapon gaze, two looks which reinforce the MCU film cycle's system of otherness.

In Chapter 2, I proposed the Occidental gaze, a look which merges Frantz Fanon's White gaze with Edward Said's theories on Orientalism. The Occidental gaze is essentially a look which controls and others the Oriental body; the Orient, the East, is cast as the spectralized other while the Occident, the West, is centered as the hegemonic self, justified in its colonial and imperial practices. This self/other dialectic relies upon framing the Orient and the Oriental body as irrational, regressive, and inferior while the Occident is presented as a beacon of rationality, progressiveness, and superiority. Via this gaze, the Oriental body, and the Orient more broadly speaking, is exploited and restructured into a site of spectacle, beleaguered by racially charged and gendered stereotypes and tropes.

The Occidental gaze has played a heavy role within the MCU since its inception, determining hero from villain via the exploitation of specific stereotypes and coded imagery resulting in the objectification and dehumanization of the Oriental body. This gaze positions the audience in the role of the Occident as it gazes upon the Orient and the Oriental body, its self/other dialectic often reflective of existing socio and geo-political anxieties i.e. 9/11 and Islamophobia, Yellow Peril etc.. White savior superheroes, such as Tony Stark, and the broader hegemonic sites they symbolize and defend, are firmly cast as the self as the hero explores and masters the dangerous, exotic land of the Orient in a classic colonial wish-fulfillment fantasy. In order to preserve the privileging of the white superhero, the non-white Oriental body *must* be dehumanized and demarginalized in turn, its one-dimensional portrayal marred by racist and misogynistic stereotypes, i.e. the exotic East, fridged non-white sidekicks, Magical Negros, the Orientalist villain as a red herring, veiled women in need of saving, savage terrorists in keffiyehs, whitewashed Asian characters etc.. Essentially, the Oriental body lacks any agency or true depth, and its portrayal ranges from tokenistic to wholly vilified. Even when films such as *Iron Man 3* or *Doctor Strange* push towards deconstructing or completely eradicating the Occidental gaze, there nevertheless remains an embedded strain of Orientalism within the text, as both the original texts from which they are adapted from and the cycle's language rely upon a system of otherness, further evidence of how Marvel's history of racism is continuously being reassessed via the process of adaptation on-screen.

In Chapter 3, I proposed another look titled the weapon gaze. The weapon gaze is a look which depicts the superhero's weapon/armor of choice in a fetishized manner; the too-be-looked-at-ness of the male body is transferred to the hero's weapon/armor, which

becomes a synechdochal extension of the superhero. Though the weapon gaze varies in how it functions from one superhero to the next, the result is still the same, as the often phallic weapon/armor is fetishized via a scopophilic look, one which facilitates the superhero's violent actions, secures their masculinity, and stabilizes their role as the hegemonic self in the narrative. From Tony Stark's Iron Man suit and Thor's hammer, Mjolnir, to Captain America's shield, the audience is continuously bombarded with fetishistic shots of the superhero's weaponry in the Infinity Saga. The clearest example of this gaze at work can be seen when Mjolnir, a classic phallic instrument that confirms Thor's worthiness, is introduced to the audience, the camera panning down the length of the hammer in a manner reminiscent to how the male gaze prompts the camera to pan down the female body.

The weapon gaze further affects the portrayal of weaponry in a broader sense in the saga, as depictions of weapons, whether they belong to the hero or villain, are lauded and fetishized (i.e. Project Jericho and Project Insight). Moreover, though it could be argued that the weapon gaze is subverted in the Big Three's threequels, as the heroes are separated from their weapon/armor, the nature of the MCU necessitates the reinstatement of the weapon gaze. Ultimately, all three superheroes not only recover their armor/weapons, but they inevitably receive an upgrade with a more powerful weapon at hand. Essentially, the weapon gaze exposes the intrinsic relationship between the superhero and power, violence, spectacle, and the hegemonic self; the gaze, then, in whatever form it manifests, reinforces the power structures and self/other dialectic of the MCU film cycle.

Based on these conceptualizations and my overall analysis of the Infinity Saga, I can conclude that the saga's portrayal of otherness is primarily informed by the recurring

conventions of the MCU film cycle, and these are: Manicheanism, the superhero as cultural hegemony, and Marvel Studios' industrial practices. Manicheanism serves as the foundation of the MCU film cycle, in that it frames the core dualistic binary system of self versus other, while further fashioning the apocalyptic landscape of the MCU via key conventions, i.e. the proliferation of violence and spectacle, the unending cycle of sequels etc.. This Manichean apocalyptic landscape lays the dualistic foundations of the cycle and uplifts the superhero as the self. Placed at the center, the superhero becomes a defender of the conservative status quo, a tool of cultural hegemony and propagandistic nationalism, as well as a symbol of various overlapping hegemonic sites including Whiteness, Empire, and Colonialism; and this construction of the superhero is witnessed in the portrayal of the saga's heroes, the MCU's world-building, and the motifs of surveillance and panopticism. The third and final component of note in the film cycle is Marvel Studios' industrial practices, as the saga's filmmakers often collaborate with both American and international military and governmental bodies, who they allow creative license and control in exchange for funding and resources, further reinforcing the self/other dialectic and Manichean, propagandistic, and conservative themes of the franchise. These three recurring components build upon one another in order to construct the cycle's initial foundations, instilling the self/other dialectic, numerous gazes, as well as the franchise's language, imagery, tropes, major themes and motifs, and overall mood. As time progresses and in order to keep turning a profit, the cycle reinvents and restructures itself according to the tastes and changing hegemonic ideals of its large and mainstream audience. And consequently, both the racial and gendered body are subject to the cycle's system, as the white male superhero is centered as the self while non-white, female, and queer characters are, for the most part, marginalized, dehumanized, and ultimately pinned under a variety of gazes as other.

Representing the self, the white superhero is the ultimate male wish-fulfillment fantasy, and he embodies a myriad of overlapping hegemonies. The superhero *is* Whiteness. He is Empire, colonialism, and nationalism. He is patriarchy, hypermasculinity, and heteronormativity. He is the self. He is a force of active power, a metaphorical and literal weapon, a state of conservative exception which enforces and preserves the status quo. And even when the superhero is not explicitly white or male, these engendered roles remain infused within the symbolic character and are quite difficult to separate. For example, Black Panther's blackness does not eradicate the deep-rooted whiteness of the superhero, nor does Captain Marvel's femininity eradicate the superhero's embedded masculinity. The gaze always defends and uplifts the superhero, and this is true even with the male gaze, a look which fetishizes the male body, but does not diminish or undermine the superhero's internalized power. In all of its forms, the gaze positions the superhero as the self. From the White gaze, the Occidental gaze, and the male gaze to the panoptic, weapon, and museum gaze, all of these looks synchronously work together to uplift and center the white male superhero body, constructing the saga's power relations and establishing a clearly set self/other dialectic. Ultimately, the white male superhero becomes the self because of the reciprocal nature imbued within otherness; that is, the superhero is the self as a result of the othering of non-white, female, and queer bodies, and his sense of being specifically relies upon this process.

Consequently, the Infinity Saga and the narratives of its superheroes are built upon the othering of non-white, female, and queer characters. And indeed, it is only via their othering that the superhero is allowed to thrive and grow. The MCU film cycle's language,

conventions, exploitation of the gaze, and its overall system enforce this schema. The non-white body is dealt a great number of indignities for the sake of the cycle's self/other dialect. Non-white characters are sidelined, tokenized, exotified, feminized, and villainized. This body is pinned under various racialized gazes, from the overarching White gaze to more specific looks such as the museum gaze and the Occidental gaze, and accordingly, non-white characters are spectralized and othered. Structures of power such as colonialism or Empire are intrinsic within these racialized gazes and directly inform the self/other dialectic. This is evident in how both humanoid and monstrous aliens are relegated to a racialized/ethnic schema in the MCU, constructing a hierarchy which clearly privileges encoded Whiteness, and it is even more obvious in the racially charged representation of the Oriental body in the saga.

The same process occurs in the Infinity Saga in relation to the female body, as female characters are primarily subjugated and othered by the male gaze. Under this look, and in order to satisfy the self/other schema, the female body suffers from juxtaposing and misogynistic archetypal roles and tropes, including the Damsel in Distress, the Mother, the Side-lined Superheroine, the Femme Fatale, fridging etc. Female characters in the saga are for the most part defined by their to-be-looked-at-ness and are attractive accessories to the male superhero; regardless of whether their role is maternalistic, romantic, or a Freudian combination of the two, the female body's primary purpose is to uplift the male protagonist, and any suggestion of empowerment or centering results in the character's dismissal from the main narrative: being side-lined, labeled monstrous, and explicitly or implicitly fridged. This is clearly witnessed with Natasha Romanoff's misogynistic arc over the course of the saga.

And finally, it is clear that the queer body bears the most damaging portrayal in the Infinity Saga, simply because there is a near-total absence of queer representation in ten years' worth of films. Queer characters are barely present in the saga, and in the very few instances that they are portrayed, the characters are a source of comedy, completely inessential, straightwashed, or, again, like the non-white and female body, villainized. As it threatens the masculinity and heterosexuality of the male superhero body, queerness is cast as a clear source of otherness, and yet it hypocritically has also been exploited repeatedly by Marvel and Disney to queerbait their audiences. Ultimately, the representation of gender and sexuality in the MCU is highly limited by a patriarchal gaze which enforces inhibiting traditional gender roles and casts queerness as form of deviancy. Of course, in academia and many instances of Hollywood film, there has been a significant and more nuanced complexity applied to the portrayal of gender identity and sexuality; however, it is telling that the MCU, which is little more than a decade old, does not prescribe to this fluidity as it seems to fall on decades-old norms and conceptualizations on gender and sexuality. By analyzing how all of these bodies are depicted, it is quite clear that otherness is entrenched within the Infinity Saga. Otherness informs the representation of the saga's characters, settings, themes, motifs, the manner in which these movies are filmed, as well as its ideological drive.

Despite these conservative, restrictive representations structuring the core generic model of the MCU, it must be reiterated that the film cycle is not a static model, but an ever-evolving phenomenon, and so over the course of the Infinity Saga's ten year-run, there remain many films which counter and challenge the cycle's ingrained otherness and subvert the gaze in the Infinity Saga. From *Thor: Ragnarok*, *Black Panther,* and *Captain America: Civil War* to *Doctor Strange, Ant-Man and the Wasp*, and *Captain Marvel*, the Infinity Saga has slowly

begun the process of diversification, confronting the MCU film cycle's stereotypical representations of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality while also reassessing and subverting the genre's Manicheanism and hegemonic themes. By the end of Phase Three, though the white male hero's narrative is still privileged, there are more non-white and female voices centered as is most clear with *Black Panther*, *Ant-Man and the Wasp*, and *Captain Marvel*. Moreover, there are many commendable instances where the gaze is either subverted or subversive in of itself. Just as *Iron Man 3* and *Doctor Strange* attempt to disrupt the Occidental gaze, *Black Panther* also subverts the museum look. And, as Thor's relationship to the male gaze, female gaze, and Soloway's feeling-seeing gaze demonstrates, numerous juxtaposing looks can operate simultaneously both enforcing and challenging the MCU's system of otherness. Ultimately, there are spaces within the MCU film cycle that allows its films to experiment and deviate from the pre-established Manichean system and dialectic and indeed to even integrate counter-hegemonic and progressive ideas into the franchise.

Over the course of this dissertation, I have carried out several close-textual analyses of both films and character arcs spanning the saga's three phases, all of which generally seem to concur that there is indeed a gradual progression of the cycle's conventions. For example, studying the Occidental gaze seems to confirm the saga's ongoing endeavor to resolve the cycle's Manichean system and the underlying Orientalism of Marvel's comics i.e. *Iron Man 3* and *Doctor Strange's* push to deconstruct and eradicate the Occidental gaze. This is also true in regards to the *Thor* trilogy's postcolonial and postmodern conclusion in *Ragnarok* as well as Thor's overarching character arc which strives to reassess and subvert the nature of the hypermasculine male superhero with Bro Thor in *Endgame*. Even DAFELO's unwillingness to continue working on *The Avengers* and the long break in collaborations between Marvel

Studios and the DoD seems to point towards the flexibility of the MCU film cycle. But even so, there are countless other examples of the cycle's system of otherness dominating the franchise; this is evident in the Hulk's deradicalization, the privileging of whiteness in the racialization of humanoid aliens, and more damningly, the depiction of the female body as Black Widow's tragic character arc only devolves throughout the Infinity Saga. Furthermore, I should emphasize that the saga's more radical films (which are greatly in the minority) are by no means perfect or progressive representations of these subjects. Indeed, many of these films are still greatly held back by the cycle's overarching system i.e. the Ancient One whitewashed for financial reasons; Bro Thor's fatphobic portrayal; *Captain Marvel's* symbiotic relationship with the US Air Force etc. Nevertheless, how these films strive to reassess the self/other dialectic points towards the MCU film cycle's natural evolution.

The question which now remains in relation to the Infinity Saga is whether MCU film cycle's continued progressive and diverse evolution is a reformist possibility or an impossibility. Based on this dissertation's exploration of the Infinity Saga, I can undoubtedly conclude that the evolution of the MCU film cycle is a reformist possibility, and this evolution is a result of: the innate evolutionary nature of a film cycle; the shifting hegemonic ideals of the audience and America, at large; and concurrently, the reigning economic imperatives of Disney and Marvel Studios. All of these processes coalesce to allow for (and conversely, at times, even hold back) more progressive portrayals of race and ethnicity as well as gender and sexuality. But unfortunately, it is quite clear that most of the progressive work accomplished in the Saga's radical films is ultimately negated by the Saga's conclusion in *Endgame*. It bears repeating that the *Avengers* franchise are the financial and narratival core of the Infinity Saga, and as was discussed in Chapter 1, these films embody the cycle's core

tenets. Manicheanism and the self/other schema become more unambiguous in these films, as hegemonic sites and the status quo are venerated and secured. The MCU's cyclical nature of sequels and its deep-seated financial drive seem to require a return to the characteristics and features of the *Avengers* films and the base generic structures of MCU film cycle, seemingly confirming that the MCU's language of otherness is a central driving force in the MCU's grand narrative. However, with Phase Four introducing a new arc of films into the MCU film cycle, a generic and ideological battle with the Infinity Saga already seems to be taking place.

I.   PHASE FOUR, THE MULTIVERSE SAGA, AND BEYOND

Having begun in 2021, Phase Four jumpstarts a new arc of films and television shows called the Multiverse Saga. In examining Phase Four's released texts, it would appear that there have already been many strides taken in correcting the Infinity Saga's depiction of race and ethnicity as well as gender and sexuality. In terms of race, many Phase Four entries have firmly centered non-white superheroes and characters, as is most evident with the franchise's first Asian superhero in *Shang-Chi and the Ten Rings* and the introduction of a black Captain America in *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, with also a more diverse selection of filmmakers and crew creating these films i.e. *Shang-Chi's* director and co-writer Destin Daniel Cretton, *Eternals'* director and co-writer Chloé Zhao. Moreover, a large majority of upcoming films and television series in this new phase will also focus on non-white heroes and characters with non-white filmmakers at the helm, including films like *Thor: Love and Thunder, Black Panther: Wakanda Forever, The Marvels*, and series such as *Moon Knight, Ms. Marvel*, *She-Hulk, Iron*

Heart, Armor Wars etc.[159] Though it remains to be seen whether the inclusion of more non-white characters and filmmakers will counter the cycle's established system of otherness, the in-world and industrial diversification of the franchise is clearly a step in the right direction.

In regard to the representation of race and ethnicity, *Shang-Chi and the Ten Rings* is perhaps the most significant entry in Phase Four thus far. *Shang-Chi* demonstrates that even origin stories that hailed from the more racially charged eras of the Gold and Silver Age of Comics can be adapted with a near total eradication of the racism and otherness that originally defined its characters, narratives, and themes. Unlike *Iron Man* and *Doctor Strange*, *Shang-Chi* carefully translates the deep-seated Orientalism of the comics, by carefully fashioning a new story unimpeded by stereotypical and racist conventions, and confronting and eradicating the Occidental gaze. Perhaps the greatest example of this translation at work in the film is the conversion of Shang-Chi's father from a two-dimensional, racist Fu Manchu stereotype into a fully fleshed out and humanized villain named Wenwu. Quite fittingly, co-writer Dave Callaham explained in an interview that prior to making the film, the *Shang-Chi* team created the Wenwu List, a list of stereotypical Yellow Peril tropes "we were looking to destroy" (qtd. in Fransisco, 2021). The film's approach of completely rewriting Shang-Chi's father is a not new tactic for Marvel, however, it quite frankly surpasses how Marvel has adapted Orientalist characters into the MCU in the past i.e. *Iron Man 3's* Mandarin, *Doctor Strange's* Ancient One etc. Of course, there is something to be said about the first Chinese, and more broadly speaking, the first Asian superhero in the MCU being characterized by kung fu, dragon imagery, and secret mystical realms, all tropes which are classically quite

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[159] Following the release of *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, lead actor Anthony Mackie has become more outspoken about the predominantly white crews employed by Marvel (Variety, 2020). See Mackie's *Actors on Actors* interview for more on the tensions surrounding race, hiring practices, and the MCU.

Orientalist in nature. In an interview, Shang-Chi's actor Simu Liu has talked about his "fear [that] this movie and its success… will perpetuate this kind of narrative that Asian people can only lead martial arts movies, which is not true" (First We Feast). However, the film's adaptation of the original comic's racist narrative is truly commendable, as it creates a progressive translation that is unconstrained by the original comics and unmarred by any explicit racism.[160] Ultimately, *Shang-Chi* is the most successful text in the MCU in translating and eliminating the Orientalism and Occidental gaze inherent to the comics, creating a new and complex film that centers the non-white body.

In addition to producing more progressive portrayals of race and ethnicity, Phase Four also counters the Infinity Saga's skewed gender divisions, introducing numerous multi-dimensional female characters into the franchise. Such new films include the long-awaited (though frankly underwhelming) *Black Widow* which was directed by Cate Shortland, as well as Zhao's *Eternals*. Disney+ has provided more substantial entries with Jac Schaeffer's critically acclaimed series *WandaVision*, and Kate Herron and Kari Skogland directing *Loki* and *Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, respectively. Several future entries in this new phase will also be headed by female creators i.e. Jessica Gao's *She-Hulk*, Bisha K. Ali's *Ms. Marvel*, as well as Nia DaCosta's *Captain Marvel 2*. Paralleling the franchise's racial diversification, Marvel is clearly taking strides to incorporate more female characters and hire female filmmakers in Phase Four. Many of Phase Four's texts have brought more racially diverse and three-dimensional female characters to the forefront of the MCU's grand narrative, and these characters are not as weighed down by the male gaze or explicitly tied to the sexist tropes of

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[160] For a more critical appraisal of the film, see Chaw (2021).

the Infinity Saga. From *Loki's* Sylvie and Ravonna Renslayer, *Shang-Chi's* Katy and Xialing, *Hawkeye's* Kate Bishop, Yelena Bolova, Eleanor Bishop and Maya Lopez/Echo to *Eternals'* Sersi, Sprite, Makkari, Ajak, and Athena, there is clearly a wider range of female characters in the MCU canon now. However, and again, merely incorporating more female voices is not enough, as these texts should be addressing and challenging the film cycle's internalized misogyny, and thus far, Phase Four has provided varying results.

Thus far, the two key Phase Four texts that specifically focus on the female body are *Black Widow* and *WandaVision*. *Black Widow* unfortunately followed the same formulaic structure of its predecessors with quite feeble feminist themes and a female superhero who, like Captain Marvel, sadly embodies the white, masculine hegemonic power of the MCU superhero. On the other hand, *WandaVision* centers Scarlet Witch, privileges several other female characters, including the show's villain, while also providing a frankly more engaging narrative. As the first entry in the Disney+ era, *WandaVision* delved into a close character study of Scarlet Witch and her underlying trauma, exploring themes of grief and loss, all the more poignant as the series was released at the height of the pandemic. Wanda, once a Side-lined Superheroine, embraces the archetypal roles of the Mother and the Monster; however, these tropes do not constrain and confine her, but are rather elements to explore in her multi-faceted character. Unlike her predecessors, Wanda is not a single-minded Mother exclusively performing for the male protagonist nor is she a Monster because of her inability to become a Mother like Natasha. Instead, Wanda's desire for motherhood is part of her yearning to settle down with Vision and live a happy life unmarred by the trauma they both suffered during the Infinity Saga, and her implied monstrosity is sympathetically portrayed as a consequence of untreated grief and trauma. The show is not without its flaws of course, the

one most worth noting is the depiction of Monica Rambeau who, much like her mother in *Captain Marvel,* functions as a non-white sidekick who uplifts Wanda throughout the series; furthermore, *WandaVision's* positive and somewhat propagandistic depiction of the FBI seems to echo Marvel's past relationship with DAFELO. Regardless, following in *WandaVision's* footsteps, Phase Four's women range from brave superheroines and morally dubious characters to flat out villains which is quite refreshing. Overall, there is still a privileging of the male superhero and there are still remnants of the Infinity Saga's misogynistic tropes; however, Phase Four is clearly taking large strides in redefining and re-centering the female body.

In terms of queer representation, Phase Four has also provided varied results. For example, Loki comes out as bisexual in a throwaway line in his titular show, while *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* has carried on the MCU tradition of queerbaiting its audience, Bucky's homoerotic relationship with Steve now transferred to Sam Wilson. Several episodes throughout the short series implicitly queer Bucky while also heavily relying upon romantic tropes to depict Sam and Bucky's relationship i.e. the heroes rolling around in a field in the midst of a battle, partaking in a soul-gazing exercise in couples therapy etc. Despite the show's queerbaiting, there have been other more well-rounded representations of queerness within the MCU. *Eternals*, in a surprising twist, presented an openly gay black superhero with Phastos as well as the MCU's first gay kiss. Phastos' queerness is explicit in the film and is merely one facet of his character; the hero is depicted as having a husband named Ben, and they raise their son, Jack, together. Phastos is further groundbreaking as a character, as he follows in Bro Thor's footsteps of presenting a non-heteronormative superhero body, this

time sans the fat suit. In a press conference prior to the film's release, actor Brian Tyree Henry

talked about his experience in being hired by Marvel. He said:

> They were like, "We want you to be a superhero," and I was like,
> "Cool. How much weight do I have to lose?" And Chloé was like,
> "What are you talking about? We want you exactly as you are." To
> be a Black man, to have someone look at you and say, "We want
> you exactly the way you are," is unlike anything that I've ever felt.
> It just triggered me to be an 11-year-old kid who is watching these
> superhero movies, and not ever seeing anyone like me reflected.
> And how I would take these posters and put them in my locker, and
> just hope that one day there will be somebody representing me, in
> the way you know that I am. (qtd. in Vary, 2021)

Henry's interview echoes back to Djimon Hounsou's words regarding Korath and even farther

back to Fanon's discussion of the Antillian child. The intersectional representation of Phastos

as a black queer non-heteronormative hero speaks to perhaps a hopeful turn in the MCU film

cycle. Of course, because of the inclusion of this gay superhero, *Eternals* would be banned in

several countries across the world which seems to argue that Marvel Studios and Disney,

more broadly speaking, are becoming more protective of their filmmakers' visions and less

likely to censor queer content during production for the sake of profit. And this has also

proven true with the release of *Doctor Strange: Multiverse of Madness*, which was also

banned in countries like Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Egypt as Disney would not allow them to

censor a scene in the film in which America Chavez mentions that she has two mothers.[161]

With Phase Four's texts breathing new life into the franchise, it cannot be denied that

the MCU film cycle is indeed evolving and reassessing its roots. The seeds that were planted

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[161] Ironically, both *Eternals* and *Multiverse of Madness* were also been banned in China, not as a result of the films' queer content, but rather because of political reasons i.e. Zhao's critique of the Chinese Communist Party and *Multiverse of Madness's* inclusion of a scene in which a newspaper kiosk bears an anti-Chinese Communist Party message.

in the Infinity Saga by films like *Ragnarok* and its predecessors have blossomed in this new arc of texts. Phase Four is clearly more diverse in terms of race, gender, and sexuality both on-screen and behind the cameras. However, though there are generic and ideological tensions within these new texts, particularly when in comparison to the Infinity Saga, it seems that the core components of the cycle's first arc continue to resurface, and this is most apparent with *Loki*.

Loki is the first MCU text which truly focuses on an MCU villain. Throughout the Infinity Saga, the God of Mischief is portrayed as a beacon of otherness, and this is due to his villainous actions, his non-heteronormativity, his queer-coding etc. However, in becoming the protagonist of his show, Loki is converted from other to the self, and this is reflected in a variety of ways. *Loki* examines villainy and attempts to dismantle the Manichean dichotomies of the MCU in its appraisal of heroes versus villains as well as via the construction of the Time Variance Authority (TVA), an organization allegedly created by the Time-Keepers which is tasked with maintaining the sacred timeline, preventing any branching timelines from occurring, and pruning (that is, killing) any variants, people who diverge from the main timeline. The core premise of the series follows Loki and his partner and variant Sylvie as they attempt to bring down the TVA, challenging the notion of one accepted timeline. Eventually, Loki and Sylvia discover that a man known as Kang created the TVA, pruning all variants and destroying any branching timelines in order to prevent a Multiversal War; Kang further warns the two, if he is killed, then his own variants will take over the timelines and restart this war. Once learning the truth, Loki is unsure of how to proceed and, though he tries to convince Sylvia otherwise, he fails to stop her from following through on their plan of killing Kang and ending the TVA.

The introduction of Kang the Conqueror, a notable antagonist from Marvel's comics, seems to foreshadow the introduction of a supervillain comparable to that of Thanos into the Infinity Saga, and via Kang's own narrative, his variants, like Thanos, emulate death, apocalypse, and an innate otherness that now poses danger on a broader multiversal scale in the MCU. *Loki* goes to great lengths to question the nature of the TVA, radically challenging the idea of a single accepted truth or timeline, and yet the show, in a laudable attempt to fashion a redemption arc for Loki, unfortunately transforms the God of Mischief, a character who symbolizes chaos, queerness, and otherness into an ordinary superhero who strives to keep the status quo. Regardless of his intentions, it is unquestionable that Kang's actions are villainous, as he has established an organization that murders variants throughout the multiverse in order to preserve one timeline that only he deems sacred. Ultimately, Sylvie's decision to kill Kang and put an end to the TVA is portrayed as heavily misguided, with Loki's decision not to end the villain as heroic. From opposing the destruction of the TVA and maintaining the status quo to having the obligatory MCU shirtless scene and a romantic female partner, *Loki* washes away the intrinsic otherness of the character, deradicalizing him and reinstating the Manichean dichotomies of the text, a process which seems to echo the devolution of the Hulk throughout the Infinity Saga.

Loki demonstrates that even though beginnings of the Multiverse Saga have diversified and corrected many of the missteps taken in the Infinity Saga, there still will be fluctuations within the MCU film cycle. The cycle is indeed evolving, and yet the dogged persistence of Manicheanism and hegemonic power structures demonstrates that these mechanisms are still shaping the Marvel Cinematic Universe and constructing a prevailing

theme of otherness. This is true, from the franchise's PG-13 tone to the recurrent conservative mood of the genre and the prevalence of the gaze in Phase Four. Explicit use of the racialized and gendered gaze has dramatically decreased, and yet we still see glimpses of the Occidental gaze at work in *The Falcon and the Winter Solider*, and the weapon gaze is still functioning as is evident with Shang-Chi's rings and Sam Wilson's Captain America shield.

Of course, expanding into online streaming has provided a platform where more in-depth and complex studies of character can be achieved. As popcorn blockbusters, the saga's films are greatly constrained by so many factors, financial and otherwise, but Disney+ has offered an opportunity at more tonal and narratival experimentation as well as the freedom to center stories about characters of color, female characters, and queer characters. That being said, the MCU's slow diversification (and the subsequent evolution of the cycle) can again be linked to Disney and Marvel's economic imperatives in that it is merely another tactic at keeping the franchise fresh and engaging, ensuring that its audience keeps returning, and indeed, this argument could be applied more broadly to Hollywood's diversification trend in general. Nevertheless, whether this may be a tactic to financially secure the MCU franchise or not, if the result is the centering of non-white, female, and queer heroes and narratives, actors and filmmakers, and the production of more radical and progressive stories, then it could be argued that, for the time being, that just might be enough.

The evolution of Marvel's comics from the Golden Age to the Modern Age seems to parallel the development of the MCU with the emergence of deconstructive texts and a diversification trend. As we are still at the start of this new arc of MCU texts, we can only wonder what the Multiverse Saga will bring us. Will there be a narratival, thematic, and

financial equivalent to the Avengers in Phase Four and beyond, and will Kang the Conqueror deliver the same Manichean apocalyptic collision of Thanos? Will the original generic conventions of the MCU film cycle and the financial ambitions of its studios continue to reign over the franchise? Will Whiteness, heteronormativity, and masculinity continue to define the MCU superhero? And will this new arc of films echo the Infinity Saga's portrayal of the non-white, female, and queer body, or is change on the horizon? It will be very interesting to see how these texts either conform to or challenge the MCU film cycle.

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