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"Nothing's Been the Same Since New York": The Marvel Cinematic Universe's Engagement With 9/11 and the War on Terror

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“Nothing’s Been the Same Since New York:” The Marvel Cinematic Universe’s Engagement With 9/11 and the War on Terror

by

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Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Coleen Hubbard and Larry Bograd, whose emotional, financial, and spiritual support has been unwavering during my graduate education. You are my heroes, Wonder Woman and Superman. Your superpowers are your brilliance, compassion, and endless delight in this experiment we call life.

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Abstract

"Nothing's Been The Same Since New York": The Marvel Cinematic Universe's Engagement With 9/11 and the War on Terror

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2015

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Abstract: This thesis explores how the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has engaged with 9/11 and the War on Terror since its inception in 2008. This thesis examines industrial and cultural factors affecting the way these post-9/11 superhero films engage with contemporary sociopolitical concerns and argues that the Marvel Studios films both attempt to engage with said concerns and also sanitize and rework references to terrorism, war, torture, and destruction in order to remain palatable for the widest possible audience (including a family audience and a growing international market). In contrast to other superhero franchises, several of which intentionally play on post-9/11 feelings of vulnerability and terror, the MCU films and television series use a combination of humor, a brightly colored comic book aesthetic, and impressive visual spectacles in order to ensure that the primary focus is on entertainment. This thesis provides a detailed analysis of the characters, ideological content, and visual elements of the MCU as they relate to 9/11 and the War on Terror.

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Figure 1.1: “Marvel Cinematic Universe Chart.” *DeviantArt*. Accessed April 25, 2015.
<http://mrsteiners.deviantart.com/art/Marvel-Cinematic-Universe-Chart-513307986>

Introduction: 9/11 and the War on Terror in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

"Only madmen could contain the thought, execute the act, fly the planes. The sane world will always be vulnerable to madmen, because we cannot go where they go to conceive of such things. We could not see it coming. We could not be here before it happened. We could not stop it. But we are here now." —Spider-Man, *The Amazing Spider-Man #36* (December, 2001).[1]

An airplane is hijacked. A terrorist threatens the United States in a video broadcast from an unknown country of origin. A young leader brashly invades a foreign land, restarting a war his father fought—and won—in the past. A roadside bomb destroys a Humvee carrying American soldiers. Panicked New Yorkers run through the streets as skyscrapers burn and debris falls from above. At first glance, these might seem like headlines lifted from the pages of a newspaper published since the events of September 11, 2001. These specific events, however, also occur in a different and potentially unexpected context: they are all scenes from the superhero films comprising Phases One and Two of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) to date.

The attacks on September 11, 2001 and the ensuing War on Terror defined the early 21st century in the United States. Because 9/11 is still so present in the national psyche, scholar Roger Simon argues that what we refer to as the "event" of 9/11 never actually ended. "Rather than something past," he claims, "it is a social experience still in process, very much a present occurrence, something we are still living through."[2] Art, including film, is one way to make sense of cultural traumas like 9/11. As film scholar

John W. Jordan writes in his discussion of Paul Greengrass's 9/11-themed docudrama *United 93* (2006), "We look to film not to provide us with objective reality, but for symbolic material with which we may engage and interpret our lived experience and its meaning."[3] Film is a way to process not just the events of 9/11 but also the larger consequences—both international and domestic—of a prolonged War on Terror, specifically the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In particular, genres such as horror, the action thriller, science fiction, fantasy, and the superhero film have engaged symbolically with the post-9/11 political and cultural climate. Notably, these are also the genres that make up the bulk of contemporary blockbuster film releases. As Francis Kelly writes in her book *Fantasy Film Post 9/11*, "The fantasy film has proved particularly fertile ground for oblique mediations of 9/11, achieving phenomenal and, indeed, groundbreaking box office success."[4]

Research Questions/Hypotheses

Superhero movies experienced unprecedented financial success in the 2000s and 2010s. Two of the top ten domestic box office earners of all time as of 2015 are superhero movies (*The Avengers* and *The Dark Knight*, numbers three and four respectively) and there are fourteen total in the top one hundred. Worldwide, there are seventeen superhero films in the top one hundred (if you count the Will Smith superhero comedy *Hancock*). Of all of these films, only one (Tim Burton's *Batman*, 1989) was released before 2000.[5] The Marvel Cinematic Universe recently became the second highest grossing worldwide franchise of all time after the Harry Potter films.[6] Not only

are the box office earnings impressive, so are the total number of films produced. Between 2001 and 2014, there were forty-two films based on Marvel and DC (the two most popular superhero comic book publishers) characters, and this output is unlikely to diminish. There are at least twenty-nine superhero films scheduled for release between 2015-2020, an average of five point eight films per year.[7]

Although other factors like advancing digital technology and genre are important to the popularity of superhero films, I argue that the opportunity they provide to work through cultural traumas like 9/11 merits equal consideration. As scholar Martin Fradley observes:

> It barely needs pointing out that Hollywood's numerous comic-book adaptations have dominated the global box office over the last 10 to 15 years. Moreover, it is inarguably within the compulsive semiotic regime of fantasy films that post-9/11 anxiety has most transparently registered itself.[8]

Post-9/11 superhero films like Sam Raimi's original *Spider-Man* trilogy (2002-2007), Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy (2005-2012), Zak Snyder's *Man of Steel* (2013), and the MCU all contain visual and allegorical references to 9/11 and the War on Terror, although the scale and ideological complexity of their engagement with these events varies between franchises. For example, Nolan's films are sophisticated, cynical mediations on post-9/11 social, political, and economic anxieties. *Batman Begins* is a meditation on fear: the hero's initiation involves facing his worst fears and the film's villain uses fear-inducing drugs to manipulate the population of Gotham. *The Dark Knight* evokes 9/11 even more explicitly through its imagery, a villain intent on sowing terror and chaos, and even a brief foray into the ethical implications of mass surveillance.

The Dark Knight Rises features terrorist bombings and points to the economic consequences of the 2008 recession and the War on Terror, containing multiple references to the financial crisis and the Occupy Wall Street movement. In *Man of Steel*, the destruction of Metropolis is a blatantly exploitative cinematic recreation of 9/11 in which Superman, our "hero," pays little attention to loss of life on a massive scale. Even the non-MCU films based on Marvel characters, which tend to be slightly lighter in tone than the DC Comics adaptations, include post-9/11 themes such as grief, loss, and trauma. In both the *Spider-Man* and the *Amazing Spider-Man* films, for example, Peter Parker copes with the original trauma of his Uncle Ben's murder and attempts to balance protecting the people he loves with protecting New York from powerful villains.

Although the MCU films and TV series exhibit many of the same genre conventions as the aforementioned post-9/11 superhero films, I believe the MCU employs these conventions to a different end. Writing about 9/11, cultural and political scholar Douglas Kellner observes:

> The images of the planes hitting the World Trade Center towers and their collapse were broadcast repeatedly, as if repetition were necessary to master a highly traumatic event. The spectacle conveyed the message that the US was vulnerable to terror attack, that terrorists could create great harm, and that anyone at any time could be subject to a deadly terror attack, even in Fortress America.[9]

I agree with Kellner's observation that 9/11 brought up feelings of anxiety and vulnerability for many Americans. The difference between the MCU and other post-9/11 superhero franchises—*The Dark Knight* trilogy and *Man of Steel* in particular—is how Marvel Studios approaches political and visual references to cultural traumas like 9/11 and the War on Terror. The differences between the MCU and other post-9/11 superhero

films gave rise to my primary research questions: How does the MCU engage ideologically and aesthetically with 9/11 and the War on Terror, and how does its approach to these topics differ from other post-9/11 superhero films? Is the MCU politically conservative, politically liberal, or neither? And finally, how do images evoking 9/11 and the War on Terror function in the MCU films and television series?

As I argue in the following pages, the MCU engages visually and ideologically with 9/11 and the War on Terror in a way that both evokes these historical realities and provides remediation through the tropes of fantasy. While the films and television series analyzed contain varying amounts of political criticism and range from politically liberal to politically conservative to politically ambiguous, they all demonstrate the extent to which 9/11 and the War on Terror have infiltrated the superhero film genre. In his essay on *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), scholar James Gilmore comments that Nolan's films evoke 9/11 without offering comfort or redemption, therefore "decrying the pleasure of the superhero genre."[10] In contrast, pleasure is a major goal of the MCU films, which is one reason why the films often disguise their ideological and aesthetic engagement with 9/11 and the War on Terror using spectacle and humor. I argue the MCU *does* engage with these events, albeit in a more coded manner.

As Douglas Kellner writes in his book *Cinema Wars*, "…contemporary Hollywood cinema can be read as a contest of representations and a contested terrain that reproduces existing social struggles and transcodes the political discourses of the era."[11] This is certainly the case with the MCU, where the tension between engaging with contemporary anxieties and providing superficial entertainment creates the "contested

terrain" Kellner describes. Because of these competing agendas, although the MCU refers to 9/11 and the War on Terror both directly (through plot and dialogue) and indirectly (using allegory and visual iconography) it is more difficult to determine what these films are actually trying to say about post-9/11 American society and politics (if indeed there *is* anything consistently being said). In his article "The Politics of Superheroes," scholar Jesse Walker notes of superhero narratives in general:

> One factor that has to be acknowledged is the comic books' philosophical flexibility. As comic-book crimefighters found a mass audience at the multiplex, they displayed an almost unerring ability to evoke important issues without coming down on one side or the other.[12]

For example, Walker observes that conservative critics widely viewed *Iron Man* (dir. Jon Favreau, 2008) as a celebration of capitalism and felt (Robert Downey Jr.) Tony Stark's appealing embodiment of American technological superiority helped improve the nation's global image. On the other hand, liberals generally interpreted *Iron Man* as an allegory for the Military Industrial Complex's hand in creating political and economic instability in the Middle East. Disagreements over *Iron Man*'s message make the film a political Rorschach test of sorts. The varying interpretations of *Iron Man* support Douglas Kellner's claim that:

> Film and media culture in the United States has been a battleground between competing social groups, with some films advancing liberal or radical positions and others reproducing conservative ones. Many films, however, are politically ambiguous, exhibiting a contradictory mixture of political motifs or attempts to be apolitical.[13]

The MCU films and television series are often ideologically inconsistent and politically contradictory in the manner Kellner describes. Marvel Studios' tendency to both invoke 9/11 and attempt to provide a more palatable, comforting take on issues like

terrorism troubles some critics. For example, *The New York Times*' Manhola Darghis writes of *Iron Man 3* (Shane Black, 2013), "[The film]… at once conjures Sept. 11 and dodges it, and does so with a wink and a smile," and deems the film "the latest, most conspicuous example of how profoundly disconnected big studio movies of this sort are from the world in which the rest of us live."[14] Darghis implies *Iron Man 3* uses 9/11 as a trope in the name of entertainment without giving it the sober, respectful treatment it deserves. This accusation was also aimed at other popular post-9/11 blockbusters such as *Star Trek: Into Darkness* (J.J. Abrams, 2012).[15] Although I do not disagree with Darghis's assessment, in this thesis I argue that a film like *Iron Man 3* fits Kellner's description of "contested terrain," simultaneously exploiting the post-9/11 zeitgeist and containing genuine political criticism.

Opposing Darghis's perspective, comics and film scholar Anthony Spanakos argues of the first three MCU films:

> They [*The Incredible Hulk*, *Iron Man*, and *Iron Man 2*] are all post-September 11 fantasies of self-preservation, but what is noteworthy is that the consistent enemy is not the distant other, but the military industrial complex…which gave initial life and meaning to the protagonists. The heroic struggle is to offer an alternative patriotism by defending what is just against official versions and representations.[16]

The "alternative patriotism" described by Spanakos is more overt in recent MCU films than in earlier films. For example, I argue that Phase One films such as *Iron Man* and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (Joe Johnston, 2011) are fairly politically balanced, containing mild criticism of jingoistic nationalism and the Military Industrial Complex while remaining primarily socially and politically conservative. These two films valorize the U.S. military, celebrate white masculinity, and promote "American" values like freedom, individualism, and capitalism. While *Iron Man* critiques the Military Industrial Complex and American foreign policy, it also reifies weapons technology and the

involvement of the private sector in military operations. *First Avenger* pokes fun at the use of patriotic imagery as propaganda, but still presents the United States military as courageous, morally correct, and triumphant. In contrast, later MCU films including *The Avengers* (Joss Whedon, 2012), *Iron Man 3*, and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Joe and Anthony Russo, 2014) incorporate political criticism in relation to themes such as surveillance, preemptive warfare, and the manipulation of a fearful American populace through media propaganda. Spanakos' alternative patriotism hypothesis does not contradict my argument that the MCU's primary goal is lighthearted entertainment, however. Rather, it speaks to the primary tension within the franchise, which is that encoded references to cultural anxieties and traumas are upstaged by humor and visual spectacle. Overall, the MCU provides an engaging ideological and aesthetic examination of post-9/11 cultural and political themes, often criticizing the ethics and behavior of those in positions of power, while still functioning primarily as pure entertainment designed to please the widest possible audience.

Methodology and Scope

This thesis integrates industrial analysis, formal textual analysis of key films and television episodes, and ideological analysis of the plots, themes, and characters that make up Phases One and Two of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Ideological analysis supports an examination of themes such as patriotism, military ethics, and surveillance; it also contributes to issues of characterization, such as whether or not Loki should be viewed as a terrorist or what the Hulk's anger represents in the context of the post-9/11 response to cultural trauma. The 1993 book *Camera Politica* by Douglas Kellner and Michael Ryan provides insight into the ideological foundations of mainstream American

cinema, and more recent literature including Douglas Kellner's *Cinema Wars* and *The Hollywood War Machine* by Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard provide essential contemporary context. I also rely on Kolker's analysis of the way Hollywood blockbusters (and American film in general) support the dominant ideology in his book *The Cinema of Loneliness*. While Kolker's book focuses on specific filmmakers such as Steven Spielberg, Oliver Stone, and Martin Scorsese, his ideas are applicable to other contemporary American films.

Media industry studies supports analysis of production practices and film style, providing a comprehensive perspective on the MCU as a franchise.[17] In the chapters that follow, I examine industrial discourse about the MCU, mostly from interviews with actors, directors, producers, and Marvel executives in trade publications, director's commentaries, and DVD bonus material. Formal textual analysis of the films, meanwhile, considers aspects such as misé-en-scene, dialogue, costuming, plot, action, and cinematography. To support my aesthetic analysis of the MCU films, I draw upon work on contemporary film style by media and film studies scholars. For example, I draw on David Bordwell's 2006 book *The Way Hollywood Tells It*, particularly his discussion of how contemporary Hollywood films employ what he calls "intensified continuity." [18] Intensified continuity takes filmmaking techniques established in the classical studio era of Hollywood filmmaking—such as continuity editing and temporal and spatial unity—and intensifies them with rapid editing, multiple close-up shots, and a camera constantly in motion. Film scholar Geoff King uses the term "impact aesthetic" to describe how this contemporary style functions in the action blockbuster.[19] The impact aesthetic ideally

balances narrative and spectacle, although there are certainly counterexamples of action films that forsake a coherent narrative in favor of pure spectacle. The impact aesthetic is often present in films that rely on digital effects, particularly in the science fiction, action, and fantasy genres.

Focusing on the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) specifically provides several methodological advantages. First, because of the MCU's transmedia and serialized nature, it is possible to trace aesthetic and ideological consistency (and inconsistency) across films. For example, I can look at *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*. and the MCU films as narratives taking place in the same universe with a variety of characters and plotlines connecting the two. Therefore, it is possible to draw general conclusions about the franchises' visual style and ideology. This is particularly advantageous as the MCU was conceptualized as a unified cinematic universe as early as 2005 when Feige and Avi Arad (the former Chief Creative Officer at Marvel) began to seek financing in order to produce films independently.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe has also received the least amount of scholarly attention in terms of the post-9/11 superhero film, particularly in comparison to the *Spider-Man* and *X-Men* films (both non-MCU franchises based on Marvel characters) and Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy. While Derek Johnson's comprehensive article "Cinematic Destiny: Marvel Studios and the Trade Stories of Industrial Convergence," analyzes the industrial aspects of Marvel Studios during its pre-Disney years (2005-2008), there are only a few articles and chapters containing textual analysis of the films themselves. These include Harrison and Hagley's analysis of *The Avengers,*

which focuses on the political identities of the film's various characters. Anthony Spanakos analyzes *Iron Man, Iron Man 2* (Jon Favreau, 2010) and *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier) in his chapter on the concept of American exceptionalism in relation to these first three MCU films. While these two works focus on the political content of specific films, this thesis attempts to provide a much broader analysis of the MCU in terms of character, ideology, and visual style in order to explore how the franchise both evokes and simultaneously dodges the ideological complexities and traumatic nature of 9/11 and the War on Terror.

The discrepancy in the amount of scholarship dedicated to the MCU as opposed to other post-9/11 superhero films exists for several reasons. For one, the MCU is more recent than other superhero franchises such as *Spider-Man* and *X-Men*. Scholars have not yet had time to catch up with Marvel's output, leading to the lack of academic analysis of the post-*Avengers* films and television programs. Secondly, scholars such as Thomas Schatz and J.M. Tyree have described the MCU as having a lighter tone than DC Comics/Warner Brothers' *The Dark Knight* franchise. As Schatz observes, in comparison to *The Dark Knight*, "*Iron Man* had not provoked this kind of discourse two months earlier, despite a plot involving Afghani-terrorist heavies and a U.S. industrialist who is exploiting the War on Terror to make a fortune and rule the world." Schatz goes on to note that *Iron Man*'s "hip-ironic comic-book mentality towards the Military Industrial Complex"[20] may be why film critics (and academics) preferred to write about more "serious" films like *The Dark Knight*. In this vein, Tyree adds, "The summer Marvel films self-presented as uncomplicated, harmless fun, while *The Dark Knight* arrived

freighted with political and social resonances."[21] While I do not disagree with Schatz and Tyree, I do argue that *Avengers* and Phase Two films such as *Iron Man 3* and *Winter Soldier* contain no small amount of editorial-worthy commentary on issues like surveillance and political propaganda although their ideological content is still cloaked in the fantastical trappings of the superhero genre.

The scope of this thesis encompasses the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) to date. The Marvel Cinematic Universe is the term Marvel Studios uses to refer to the films and television programs based on Marvel Comics characters and produced by Marvel as an independent production company (2005-2009) and then as a subsidiary of Disney after being purchased by the conglomerate in 2009.[22] The MCU is a transmedia franchise tied together by serial storytelling strategies such as recurring characters, cliffhanger endings, and overlapping plots. The MCU also has a variety of intertextual and paratextual elements like post-credit teasers, short films, comic book tie-ins, and episodes of the Marvel television shows that tie-in with the films. The MCU currently includes ten films: *Iron Man*, *The Incredible Hulk, Iron Man 2*, *Captain America*: *The First Avenger*, *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011) *The Avengers*, *Iron Man* 3, *Thor: The Dark World* (Alan Taylor, 2013), *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (Joe and Anthony Russo, 2014) and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (James Gunn, 2014). The MCU also includes two network television shows: *Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*. (2013-present) and *Agent Carter* (limited series, January-February 2015), both on the Disney-owned network ABC. The studio has produced five Marvel One-Shots (short films set in the MCU), and currently has one series (*Daredevil*) on Netflix, with plans to produce others. The MCU

does *not* include films based on Marvel characters produced by other studios such as the *Spider-Man*, *X-Men*, and *Fantastic Four* films.

Marvel Studios uses the term "phases" to organize their films chronologically. Dividing the films this way is primarily a marketing strategy. For example, you can now purchase a "Phase One" box set of DVDs, and announcing a new phase has become a huge publicity generator for the studio. In terms of order, Phase One (2008-2012) introduced key characters in *Iron Man, The Incredible Hulk*, *Iron Man 2, Captain America: The First Avenger*, and *Thor* and ended with those heroes teaming up in *The Avengers*. The Phase Two sequels are *Iron Man 3*, *Thor: The Dark World,* and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. During Phase Two (2013-2015), Marvel also introduced a new franchise with the release of *Guardians of the Galaxy*. Phase Two concludes with *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, May 2015) and the introduction of a new character in *Ant-Man* (Peyton Reed, July 2015). Phase Three was also announced in the fall of 2014, consisting of eleven films to be released between 2016 and 2019.[23] The infographic on the next page illustrates the organization of the MCU. Although I do not include detailed case studies of superhero films outside the MCU, I do reference films such as Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy, the *Spider-Man* and *Amazing Spider-Man* films, and *Man of Steel* to provide industrial context and contrast the MCU's approach to the post-

9/11 superhero film.

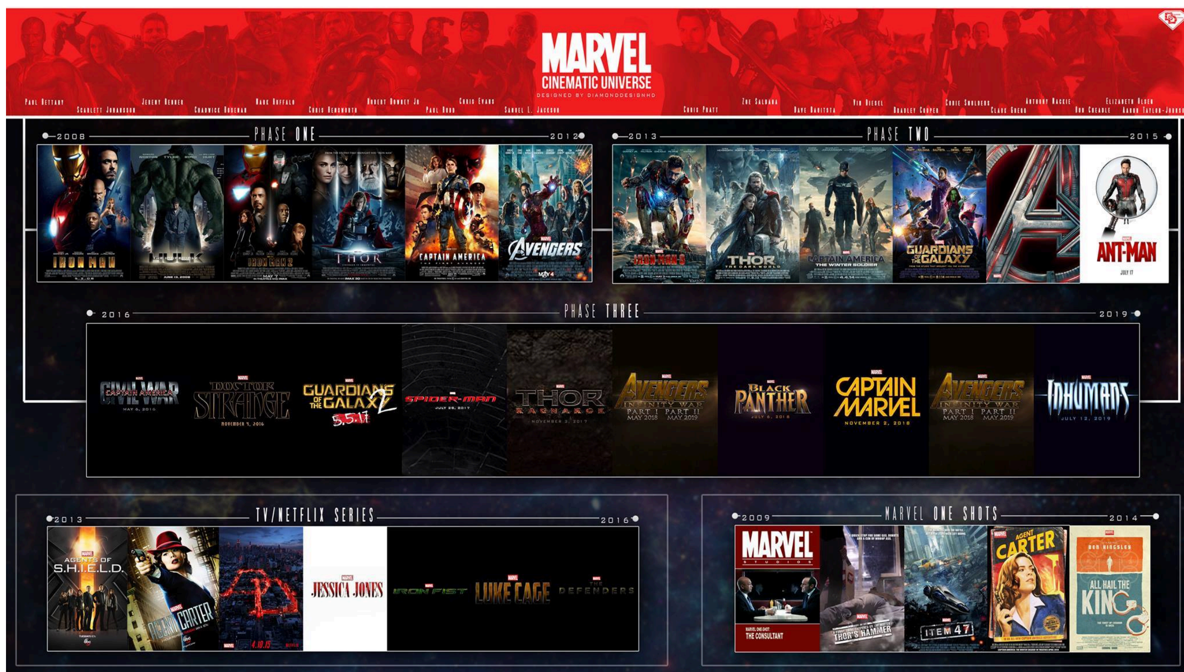

Figure 1: A visual depiction of the MCU's organization, including relevant dates.

Review of Literature

This thesis draws on a variety of scholarly traditions, which can be organized into several overarching categories. For this project, it was important to support my conclusions about the political ideology and aesthetic style of the MCU films with literature focused on 9/11 and the War on Terror from a historical, psychological, and cultural perspective. Works like Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Faludi's *The Terror Dream*, Jeffery Melnick's *9/11 Culture,* and Tom Junod's "The Falling Man" essay provide insight into 9/11 from a general cultural perspective. Additionally, the writings of scholars including Brian Monahan, Geoff King, and Richard

Schechner examine the attacks and their aftermath in terms of their visual impact and mediated quality. Scholar Roger Simon sees culture—including art, literature, political discourse, and philosophy—as part of a larger "9/11 imaginary," which includes references to the attacks in art, political debate, and the media.[24] Film is an important part of the 9/11 imaginary. There are films that directly address 9/11 such as *United 93* and *World Trade Center* and documentaries like *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004) and *9/11* (Geodon and Jules Naudet, 2002) and films that indirectly refer to or evoke 9/11 like the Oscar-winning documentary *Man on Wire* (James Marsh, 2008). Both types of films encourage the processing of cultural trauma.

According to scholar Richard Schechner, the spectacle of the towers on fire and collapsing contributes to the World Trade Center attacks' prominence in the 9/11 imaginary.[25] Because the attack on the Pentagon killed 184 people on the ground (compared to 2, 753[26] in New York City) and collapsed only one section of the building, the visual impact was significantly less dramatic than the horrific scene in Manhattan. Furthermore, there was no footage of the United 93 crash, and the Pentagon attack was given a minuscule amount of screen time compared to the World Trade Center attack. The symbolism of New York City also provides significant insight into why the destruction in Manhattan dominated the 9/11 narrative. As Schechner puts it, "New York is a real place, but it is also Batman's Gotham and Superman's Metropolis. It is, to many Americans, simply the City, quintessentially American and foreign simultaneously."[27] Note Schechner's references to superheroes in his description of New York as a symbol of the United States. New York City has been an iconic location in superhero films and

comic books for decades prior to 9/11; Marvel heroes like Spider-Man, the Avengers, and the Fantastic Four have all been based in Manhattan or its boroughs at some point in the comics. Beyond the symbolism of New York City, the visual and heavily mediated spectacle of 9/11 ensured the World Trade Center attacks would become the most iconic element of that day.

Much of the literature focused on the visual and mediated aspects of 9/11 and its aftermath is informed by theoretical work on media spectacle. Douglas Kellner claims:

> Political and social life is also shaped more and more by media spectacle. Social and political conflicts are increasingly played out on the screens of media culture, which display spectacles such as sensational murder cases, terrorist bombings, celebrity and political sex scandals, and the explosive violence of everyday life.[28]

Supporting Kellner's argument, other scholars have theorized that the 9/11 attacks were deliberately planned with visual impact in mind. As scholars Frosh and Pinchevski observe in their article "Crisis Readiness and Media Witnessing," "In the case of 9/11, moreover, we are haunted by the possibility that this event was designed precisely as an act of communication, as the definitive media event to be witnessed from afar, making television viewers across the globe its true addressees."[29] Frosh and Pinchevski observe that the media spectacle created by 9/11 led to a cultural state of permanent "crisis-readiness" caused by the now-ubiquitous practice of "media-witnessing" during major global events, whether such events are documented by professional journalists or spectators with cell-phones. The scholars write, "It [media witnessing] produces a special kind of cosmopolitan empathy, potentially loosening exclusive allegiances to nation or denomination, fostering a worldwide crisis-readiness in the face of impending threats."[30]

In the age of the 24-hour news cycle and the proliferation of social media, the concept of witnessing and crisis readiness has a specifically visual dimension. Most people in the U.S.—and worldwide—saw the World Trade Center disaster unfold on television screens. Although 9/11 was experienced primarily as a televisual event, the images themselves were distinctly cinematic and eerily reminiscent of Hollywood action and disaster films.

The idea of 9/11 being "like a movie" comes up repeatedly in scholarship about the attacks. In order to process an event so incomprehensibly destructive, it is logical Americans would turn to what they know: movies, or, more specifically, the spectacular Hollywood[31] blockbuster. As cultural critic Susan Sontag explains, "The attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, was described as 'unreal,' 'surreal,' 'like a movie,' in many of the first accounts of those who escaped from the towers or watched from nearby."[32] Echoing Sontag's sentiments, *New Yorker* film critic Anthony Lane argues in a 2001 essay that associating 9/11 with movies allowed Americans—a citizenry unused to mass destruction and murder on domestic soil—to attempt to fathom the events of that day. Lane states:

> The shock [of 9/11] springs not only from the intolerable loss of life but from a growing realization that America had so much else to lose. When a European surveys the wreckage of the towers, he or she will summon, consciously or otherwise, a folk memory of catastrophe. Not "It's like *Die Hard*" but "It's like the Blitz," or "It reminds me of Dresden."[33]

Lane observes that only the images of those who jumped from the flaming World Trade Center towers interrupted the perception of 9/11 as a "cinematic" event: these images were horrific enough to jar spectators into accepting 9/11 as reality. At the end of his

essay, Lane writes of his hope that 9/11 will signify the end of massive destruction in future blockbuster films: "the disaster movie is indeed to be shamed by disasters," he predicts.[34] That Lane's prediction turned out to be blatantly inaccurate says much about the American cultural psyche and our undiminished desire to experience cinematic disasters in the face of real-world catastrophes.

The superhero film—with its source material located in the brightly colored pages of comic books—might seem like an unlikely candidate for engaging with current events, especially an event as traumatic as 9/11. Actually, superhero films are often referenced in literature about post-9/11 cinema. As Jason Dittmer writes:

> Still, if one of the most-cited facts about the 11 September 2001 attacks is that viewers felt like it was something they had seen in a movie…then a superhero movie is exactly the kind of place in which to witness a supervillain plotting mass murder in an urban setting and the emergence of a superhero determined to foil any further fiendish plots.[35]

As Dittmer points out, the proliferation of superhero films post-9/11 can be viewed as a cultural reaction to the disaster. Superhero films prior to 9/11, many of which featured superheroes protecting cities from destruction, can be seen as prefiguring 9/11 while superhero films produced after 9/11 can be seen as a response to the attacks. There are notable historical precedents. Comic book superheroes have responded to a variety of national and international crises since their inception. The idea of the superhero as global savior is made explicit clear in Marvel Studios' 2012 film *The Avengers* when the film's heroes are referred to as a "response team" after an alien terrorist threatens Earth. Even so, superheroes initially struggled to respond to 9/11 in comic books directly following 9/11.

Although the idea of an invincible hero capable of saving the world may have seemed infantile in the direct aftermath of 9/11, comic book publishers still felt pressure to acknowledge the event. Because of the speed and frequency of comic book publishing, comic books were able to react to 9/11 more quickly than other media such as film and television.[36] With headquarters in New York and a variety of characters associated with the city, the two largest superhero comic book publishers, DC and Marvel, both released special issues benefiting rescue workers and the families of 9/11 victims. In her article "Crisis of Memory: Memorializing 9/11 in the Comic Book Universe," comics studies scholar Cathy Schlund writes: "These comics were both born out of crisis, redolent of paradox, and reflect a still-forming sense of post-9/11 selfhood and nationhood."[37] One of the paradoxes Schlund observes is the comics' attempt to craft an inclusive response to 9/11 in the face of the divisive "us vs. them" rhetoric that surfaced after the attacks. Another challenge was to memorialize and valorize 9/11 heroes like firefighters and paramedics without these "everyday heroes" being diminished by the presence of superheroes.

In a rare occurrence for superhero comics, many of these post-9/11 books admitted their heroes were incapable of both preventing and responding to 9/11. As comics studies scholar Jeff Geer writes:

> On September 11th, the American superhero failed. Not only did the destruction of the World Trade Center represent the collapse of one of the most dominant symbols of American and Western culture, but it also reminded Americans of the vulnerability of their cultural worldview and identity.[38]

To complicate Greer's statement, I argue it was not the superheroes themselves who failed, but rather the superhero mentality, the fantasy that someone bigger, faster, or stronger could have saved the nation from terrorist attacks on American soil. If our own government couldn't predict or prevent 9/11, how could a superhero—no matter how gifted—be expected to do so? Characters like Superman and Captain America were initially designed as juvenile fantasies in the comics: all-powerful individuals who always triumphed in the end no matter what evils they faced. In light of the inadequacy of superheroes post-9/11, Marvel and DC faced the difficult challenge of adapting their characters to the post-9/11 moment in their books and the film adaptations that followed.

Marvel Comics initially responded to 9/11 in the pages of their books seven months before Spider-Man first swung across the screen in Sam Raimi's 2002 film, and seven years before the Marvel Cinematic Universe officially began with *Iron Man* in 2008. In October of 2001, Marvel published a special issue called *Heroes*, a tribute issue benefiting 9/11 rescue workers and their families. Marvel also published a second tribute issue entitled *A Moment of Silence* in January of 2002.[39] Marvel's most significant 9/11-related publication was *The Amazing Spider-Man #36* (December, 2001), also known as the "black issue" because of its all-black cover. In this book, Spider-Man is completely distraught and can only stand aside and watch as other Marvel heroes support the rescue workers. Spider-Man must also defend himself against angry New Yorkers demanding to know where he was when the attacks occurred, further evidence of the superhero's insufficient ability to protect the innocent.[40] Marvel Entertainment's Chief Creative

Officer, Joe Quesada, elaborates on the company's decision to commemorate 9/11 in the *Amazing Spider-Man* issue:

> We're a company and a universe that has Spider-Man swinging between those towers. We had to address 9/11. The idea [was] our characters spiritually being behind the rescue workers and in awe of them…the police department, the fire department, EMS workers, volunteers, anyone who was there.[41]

Quesada's statement indicates Marvel's awareness of the impact of 9/11 on their fictional universe, an awareness that appears to have permeated the company's film and television productions as well as their comics more generally. This awareness implies that Marvel executives and creative talent were thinking about their characters in relation to 9/11 in the years leading up to the inception of the MCU.

Quesada and other current Marvel executives, including Marvel Studios President Kevin Feige, were also producers on pre-9/11 Marvel films including *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000) and *Spider-Man*. Released in the spring of 2002, *Spider-Man* was directly affected by 9/11, although primary filming was completed before the attacks. Mostly notably, Sony decided to pull a trailer featuring a helicopter trapped in a web between the World Trade Center towers. The scene featured in the trailer was cut from the film entirely.[42] Director Sam Raimi also added a scene at the very end of the film where Spider-Man poses against a large American flag in a direct nod to America's (and specifically New York City's) resistance to terrorism.[43] *Spider-Man* seemed to resonate with post-9/11 audiences because of its setting and themes of redemption and resilience. As journalist Scott Mendelson observes in *Forbes:*

> Also of note, every major comic book film after the first *X-Men* was released in the shadow of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. *Spider-Man* somewhat benefited from the attacks at the box office, as it had the "good fortune" to be the distinctly American, relentlessly optimistic, New York-centric adventure film that audiences were clamoring for. And pretty much every superhero film after had to directly or indirectly deal with the aftermath of what happened that Tuesday.[44]

The chronology of American popular culture's engagement with 9/11 is significant in terms of the superhero genre and post-9/11 film in general. Schatz cites 2008 as a banner year for films evoking 9/11 in many genres, including the superhero film. He sees the popularity of superhero/fantasy blockbusters in 2008 as being connected not only to the cultural and political moment but also to the economic recession, which made studios more aware than ever before of the "worldwide appeal of high-cost, high-yield blockbusters."[45] Many superhero films from the early to mid-2000s such as *X2* (Bryan Singer, 2003) and *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006) did engage with 9/11 to some extent, but not at the same level of complexity as the films that followed. Superhero films from 2008 onward, including DC/Warner Bros.' *The Dark Knight* (Christopher Nolan, 2008) and Marvel Studios' *Iron Man* dealt with 9/11 on a more complex allegorical level. In her 2012 article on the *Spider-Man* films, scholar Jeanne Holland supports the idea that it took Hollywood several years after 9/11 to begin processing the events onscreen: "The delayed production of such films reflects Hollywood's implicit awareness of a central feature of trauma: belatedness."[46] This belatedness may be why two films depicting the events of 9/11, *United 93* (Paul Greengrass) and *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone) were released in 2006 and also why the more political superhero films began to appear in 2008. By this point, I argue that audiences had gained enough distance from 9/11 to better engage with overt and visceral cinematic representations of the event.

In order to understand the MCU's engagement with 9/11 and the War on Terror, I

rely on specific textual analysis of the MCU films and television programs. Drawing upon scholarship on film narrative and style by Schatz, David Bordwell, and Geoff King, I observe that the MCU films rely on traditional narrative structures and employ many of the visual tropes of the action genre. Schatz explains, "Classical Hollywood film centers on an active, goal-oriented protagonist who confronts various obstacles in a quest to attain certain objectives."[47] The MCU films follow this classical narrative formula and employ the contemporary filmmaking style described by Bordwell and King. As Bordwell notes:

> Far from rejecting traditional continuity in the name of fragmentation and incoherence, the new style amounts to an intensification of established techniques. Intensified continuity is traditional continuity amped up, raised to a higher pitch of emphasis. It is the dominant style of American mass-audience films today.[48]

According to King, the action blockbuster's obsession with rapid editing and camera movement is partially due to the popularity of such techniques in other genres and forms of media: "Today's action cinema is encouraged to adopt a frenetic approach if its impact is to be maintained in this cultural context, especially given the overlap between its audience and that of formats such as the music video."[49] While the narrative structures of the MCU television series differ slightly because of their episodic nature, both the films and television programs have similar aesthetics.

Impact aesthetics are an essential part of Marvel Studios' visual style; the MCU films and TV shows rely on fast-paced editing, digital effects, explosions, and an emphasis on spectacle alongside a coherent narrative. This emphasis on spectacle is part of why political commentary is often oversimplified or dumbed down in MCU films:

digital effects and the requisite climatic final battle sequence take precedent over ideology and narrative. Although the films vary visually, particularly in later entries like *Winter Soldier* and *Guardians of the Galaxy*, they share enough in common aesthetically as to harken back to the studio era where each major studio had a recognizable "house style," albeit in a very different manifestation (less artisanal, more technological). The Marvel Studios aesthetic includes bright primary colors (a nod to their comic book origins) and a heavy reliance on digital effects and CGI. Many of the films also feature soundtracks that combine pop-rock songs with a traditional classical score, most notably in the *Iron Man* films and *Guardians of the Galaxy*.[50] The MCU also distinguishes itself in terms of its humor, particularly its reliance on sarcasm and witty one-liners. As *Thor: The Dark World* director Alan Taylor puts it in an interview, "The key to the Marvel universe is you're screwed if you don't keep it funny."[51]

From an industry studies perspective, it is helpful to analyze the Marvel Cinematic Universe and other post-9/11 superhero films as action blockbusters produced by a franchise-centric entertainment industry dominated by massive multimedia conglomerates. This approach helps explain how industrial factors affect the way the MCU engages ideologically and stylistically with contemporary sociopolitical anxieties and themes. According to Schatz, "The movie-driven entertainment franchise has become the holy grail of the media conglomerates, and has fundamentally transformed studio filmmaking in the process."[52] The four primary studios involved in producing superhero films—20th Century Fox, Sony Pictures, Marvel Studios and DC Comics/Legendary Pictures—are all part of major media conglomerates (NewsCorp., Sony, Disney, and

Warner Bros.). Fox produces the *X-Men* movies, and Sony had sole rights to Spider-Man until recently.[53] Of the superhero film production companies, Marvel Studios is arguably a trendsetter in terms of its production model and approach to collaborative authorship and transmedia storytelling. Marvel's shared universe model has spread to other superhero franchises and non-superhero franchises including the *X-Men*, *Star Wars*, *Ghostbusters*, *Transformer*s, and Universal's monster movies.

Marvel Studios' organizational structure and approach to production is demonstrative of comic book publishing's influence, resulting in a production model that employs collaborative authorship, transmedia logic, serial storytelling strategies, and a "house style" approach to aesthetics and visual effects. Like Pixar—another Disney subsidiary whose leadership is shared by a "Brain Trust"—Marvel Studios is governed by a group called the Creative Committee. The committee consists of executives and artists from both the production and publishing arms of the company. Although creative decisions are made collaboratively, Marvel Studios President Kevin Feige has the final say and is considered the ultimate authority on all MCU film and television productions.[54]

Henry Jenkins' work on convergence provides additional insight into the Marvel Studios production model. Describing the *Matrix* franchise, Henry Jenkins writes:

> Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained so you don't need to have seen the film to enjoy the game, and vice versa. Any given product is a point of entry into the franchise as a whole. Reading across the media sustains a depth of experience that motivates more consumption.[55]

Jenkins' description applies to the MCU. For example, having seen the first two *Iron Man* films, *Thor*, and *Captain America: The First Avenger* may enhance a viewer's

enjoyment of *The Avengers*, but familiarity with the previous films is not required to understand the plot. The serialized nature of the MCU arguably contributes to its immense popularity among fans and the marketing hype around its films. Post-credit sequences tease events from upcoming films or provide inside jokes. Objects like the Tesseract, Loki's scepter, and the Infinity Stones are relevant to the plots of multiple films, and recurrent characters provide links between films and time periods. For example, *Iron Man 2* contains many references to Tony Stark's father Howard who also appears in the first *Captain America* film. In *First Avenger*, audiences are also introduced to the Tesseract, an object with an important role in both *Thor* and *Avengers*. In *Thor*, we first meet Loki (Tom Hiddleston), the main villain in *Avengers*. Finally, the ending scenes and post-credit sequences in both *First Avenger* and *Thor* lead directly into *Avengers*, showing Captain America resurrected in modern times, and Loki arriving on Earth to steal the Tesseract. Perhaps most importantly, fan response to particular characters has encouraged Marvel to spin them off into TV shows and the Marvel One-Shots. Phil Coulson (Clark Gregg), for example, became so popular that *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* was created as a vehicle for the character. The same is true of Agent Peggy Carter (Haley Atwell), Captain America's love interest in *First Avenger*. Carter appears in a One-Shot and is also the protagonist of the series *Agent Carter*.

In terms of collaborative authorship, creative talent is regularly shared between the MCU films and television shows, and occasionally between films and comic books. For example, Marvel Comics writer and Creative Committee member Brian Michael Bendis helped write *Iron Man*'s post-credit sequence.[56] Within the MCU, *Avengers*

director Joss Whedon served as an uncredited script doctor on other MCU films including *Thor*, and was one of the creators of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*.[57] Marvel Studios is also increasingly relying on particular directors and screenwriting teams to write and direct multiple films, further unifying the MCU in terms of tone, characterization, and style. For example, *Winter Soldier* directors Joe and Anthony Russo are not only attached to direct the third Captain America film, *Civil War* (2017), but will also helm the next two *Avengers* films *Infinity War Part I* (2018) and *Part II* (2019). Similarly, *Winter Soldier* screenwriters Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely are also writing *Captain America: Civil War*, and after the success of *Guardians of the Galaxy*, director James Gunn was immediately hired to direct *Guardians of the Galaxy 2* (2017).

The relationship between Marvel's film and television productions and their comic books is essential in understanding the way the Marvel Cinematic Universe functions. While most of the MCU films are not direct adaptations of specific comic books, they draw heavily on the comics as source material. Characters and plots lifted directly from the comics are combined with original characters and plotlines to create a cinematic universe that stands on its own but is deeply rooted in Marvel Comics mythology. This approach ensures that the MCU appeals to both comic book readers and moviegoers alike. Knowledge of Marvel comics is not required to enjoy or understand the MCU films and TV shows. However, Marvel Studios makes sure to include inside jokes, references, and "Easter eggs" appealing specifically to comic book fans, hoping this core audience maintains interest in the MCU as well as the comics.

From a financial perspective, the revenues and royalties from Marvel licensing its

characters to Hollywood studios in the late 1990s and early 2000s saved the publisher from bankruptcy. As Derek Johnson describes it in his article "Cinematic Destiny: Marvel Studios and the Trade Stories of Industrial Convergence":

> By 2005, these successes [in film] encouraged a stabilized Marvel to finance production on its own and recapture creative control and box-office profit from its studio partners. With *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008)—the first of these self-financed pictures—Marvel launched a unique model for cinema production in the age of convergence: an independent company with expertise in a different media industry drove blockbuster film content.[58]

As Johnson observes, Marvel owes its financial rehabilitation to its success in the film industry, ensuring Marvel is driven both financially and creatively by film and television rather than comic book publishing. Johnson sees this as an indication of the continuing centrality of film and television in the age of media convergence, an argument reinforced by industrial discourse. For example, as Kevin Feige told the *New York Times*, he sees Marvel comics as "research and design" for the films because "it's a hell of a lot less expensive to take a chance in a comic than it is take a chance in a movie."[59]

Another way to understand the post-9/11 superhero film is by looking at genre and generic conventions. The issue of genre is an important and complicated one as it relates to the superhero film in general and the post-9/11 film in general. One defining trait of any genre is a shared set of visual and narrative conventions. Many of the conventions of the superhero film—such as images of mass destruction, heroes with traumatic origins, and an oft-present distrust for authorities such as government officials and the military—were in place prior to 9/11. Therefore, it is uncertain whether or not the post-9/11 superhero film is actually its own genre. I argue post-9/11 superhero films

update genre tropes to better resonate with the cultural moment, however. For example, many superheroes receive support from "everyday heroes" like firefighters and police officers, figures often valorized in film and television post-9/11. Post-9/11 films also share specific iconography: buildings collapsing, ash-covered city-dwellers, and Ground Zero-like piles of rubble and twisted metal.

Complicating the issue of genre, Kevin Feige states "We [Marvel Studios] don't believe that the superhero film is a genre unto itself. We love [choosing] subgenres and then adding the superhero elements into other genres of film."[60] For example, the *Iron Man* films are essentially action films, *The Incredible Hulk* is a monster movie, the *Thor* films are Tolkien-esque fantasies with a science-fiction twist, and *First Avenger* is a World War II drama. *Winter Soldier* directors Joe and Anthony Russo wanted their film to emulate '70s political thrillers (even casting Robert Redford of *Three Days of the Condor* and *All The President's Men*), and *Guardians of the Galaxy* employs many of the conventions of space operas like *Star Wars*. I nevertheless argue that superhero films share many aesthetic and narrative conventions including (obviously) characters with enhanced abilities, climactic final battles between heroes and villains, and a heavy focus on digital effects. Looking at superhero films through the lens of genre is useful in analyzing how the MCU's engagement with 9/11 and the War on Terror differs from that of other superhero franchises in terms of ideology, tone, and style.

A brief examination of DC Comics' approach to film and television provides essential context for understanding the MCU's unique approach to the superhero franchise. Films based on Marvel and DC characters dominated the post-9/11 superhero

film landscape, but Marvel Studios and DC (a subsidiary of Warner Brothers) have disparate approaches to storytelling, aesthetics, and tone. For example, the MCU has always relied on the shared universe model, but DC only recently decided to launch a shared cinematic universe. Unlike the MCU, DC had a fragmented production history in the 2000s and early 2010s, and its television properties do not overlap with its films. Aside from producing films based on their two most popular characters— *Superman Returns* (Bryan Singer, 2006) and Christopher Nolan's *Dark Knight* trilogy (2005, 2008, 2012)— DC and Warner Brothers also produced *Catwoman* (Pitof Comer, 2004), *Watchmen* (Zak Snyder, 2009), *Jonah Hex* (Jimmy Hayward, 2010), and *Green Lantern* (Martin Campbell, 2011).

DC and Marvel have taken different approaches to their television properties. Marvel's *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and *Agent Carter*, which are direct spinoffs of *The Avengers* and *Captain America: The First Avenger*, are fully integrated into the MCU and are broadcast on the Disney-owned network ABC. Characters from the films appear in the television shows and are played by the same actors in both. Even the recent Netflix series *Daredevil*, described by critics as diverging from Marvel's more family-friendly properties, is still considered part of the MCU and occasionally references the films.[61] In contrast, there are TV programs based on DC characters on several networks and each is entirely unrelated to the current DC cinematic universe. For example, DC and Warner Bros. are producing films based on Green Arrow and The Flash using different actors than The CW's *Arrow* and *The Flash*. *Gotham* (Fox), *Constantine* (NBC) and the upcoming *Supergirl* (CBS) are also individual entities and do not tie into the films in any

way.

The DC films also differ from the MCU films tonally and aesthetically. Nolan's trilogy, for example, epitomizes DC's post-9/11 style and tone. According to scholar Martin Fradley:

> Opening with *Batman Begins* (2005), the franchise has been widely interpreted as sensitively attuned to the anxieties of the sociopolitical moment, imbuing the holiday-season event film with a political intelligence and seriousness of purpose that have critically rehabilitated the most derogated of cinematic forms: the fantasy blockbuster.[62]

The *Dark Knight* trilogy is much darker in tone than the MCU films. Aesthetically, *The Dark Knight* is described by critics as a "dazzling spectacle" (*Rolling Stone*) with a "frenetic pace," (*SF Chronicle*), and a "robust physicality and a commitment to taking violence seriously" (*Variety*).[63] The film's tone is "despairing" (*LA Times*), "haunted" (Roger Ebert), "gritty" (*Variety*) and "relentlessly serious" (*Newsweek*).[64] The *Dark Knight* films are arguably intended for a more mature audience. Although *The Dark Knight* and MCU films are all rated PG-13, *The Dark Knight* trilogy takes a more realistic approach to violence (torture, machine guns, the Joker's stories about how he got his scars, etc.) while the MCU mostly provides bloodless action sequences. Part of this realism is a result of Nolan's fondness for practical effects and location shooting, in contrast to Marvel Studios' preference for CGI and studio sets. Nolan's trilogy also does not shy away from death, even of major characters. For example, the love of Bruce Wayne's life is killed in *The Dark Knight*, while Tony Stark's girlfriend Pepper Potts (Gwyneth Paltrow) escapes death several times in the *Iron Man* films. These different approaches to violence and death are significant in how the two franchises function post-9/11.

Zak Snyder's *Man of Steel*, which Nolan produced, has much in common with the *Dark Knight* films tonally and aesthetically, but was received far more negatively by critics. As *Washington Post* critic Ann Hornaday writes,

> Produced by Christopher Nolan, who brought such grim self-seriousness to the Batman franchise, *Man of Steel* clearly seeks the same brand of grandiose gravitas. But that dour tone turns out to be far more appropriate for a tortured hero brooding in his cave than for an all-American alien who is as much a product of the wholesome windswept Plains as a distant planet called Krypton.[65]

Critics accused the film of being generic and "the exact opposite of the radical and unique stamp Nolan placed on the *Dark Knight* trilogy" (Miami Herald).[66] *Man of Steel* was also widely criticized for blatantly exploiting 9/11, an issue I discuss in a later chapter. Therefore, although the DC films and the MCU films employ similar tropes of the superhero genre, DC's "grittiness" and willingness to engage with the traumatic nature of 9/11 differs from Marvel Studio's desire to provide easy thrills and witty one-liners alongside any political commentary present in their films.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter One, entitled "'I'm Always Angry!': Characterizing the MCU's Post 9/11 Heroes, Antiheroes, and Villains," introduces the characters that populate the Marvel Cinematic Universe and describes how those characters symbolize various post-9/11 political identities. The chapter focuses on Phase One of the MCU, the phase designed to introduce and assemble the Avengers. Discussing Phase One characterization provides a framework for the following two chapters, which are dedicated to the MCU's politics and aesthetics. Chapter One begins by discussing Tony Stark/Iron Man Bruce Banner/Hulk (Edward Norton and Mark Ruffalo) Steve Rogers/Captain America (Chris Evans) and

Thor (Chris Hemsworth) in the films *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *Captain America: The First Avenger*, *Thor*, and *The Avengers* with brief references to *Iron Man 3*, *Thor: The Dark World*, and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. I then introduce S.H.I.E.L.D., the intelligence agency responsible for monitoring superheroes and bringing the Avengers together. I analyze four characters associated with S.H.I.E.L.D.: Director Nick Fury, Agent Phil Coulson, Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow and Clint Barton/Hawkeye. Examining S.H.I.E.L.D. provides additional context for how the MCU's heroes operate both in collaboration with, and outside of, established government and military bodies in *The Avengers* and beyond. Finally, the chapter briefly introduces the Phase One villains and provides a detailed character analysis of one of the MCU's most complex antagonists, Loki (Tom Hiddleston).

Chapter Two, entitled "'A Good Old-Fashioned Notion': Politics and Ideology in the MCU," focuses on the political content of the MCU in order to discuss the way the films engage ideologically with post-9/11 political issues such as national security, the ethics of surveillance, and the evolving meaning of patriotism and heroism. Where Chapter Two focuses on Phase One, this chapter discusses the Phase Two films *Iron Man 3* and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, as well as the television programs *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* and *Agent Carter*. The chapter begins with an overview of political ideology in the MCU. The first part of the chapter discusses the concept of blowback, which is the idea that the United States was partially responsible for 9/11, as many of the MCU films deal with the concept of creating one's own enemy. The next section focuses on *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* and that film's exploration of mass surveillance and

preemptive warfare. Finally, the chapter explores how the MCU broadly defines patriotism and the role of the hero.

Chapter Three, entitled "'SMASH'! The MCU's 9/11 and War on Terror Iconography," focuses on MCU's visual style and imagery. The MCU films, many of which contain scenes of urban destruction on a mass scale, consistently present images associated with 9/11, terrorism, and war. The first half of the chapter concentrates on images that evoke 9/11. For example, many of the MCU films are preoccupied with flight, particularly aircraft crashes and hijackings. Another recurring image is falling bodies, which play a role in remediating the horrifying images of the so-called 9/11 "jumpers." The first part of the chapter concludes with a discussion of the MCU's obsession with spectacular urban destruction and how images of destruction have become fetishized in the contemporary superhero film. The second half of the chapter focuses on images that evoke the War on Terror, including the depiction of terrorists, torture, wounded or disabled soldiers, military technology and weapons, surveillance, and patriotic imagery.

Conclusion

In the next three chapters, I argue that the MCU aims to sanitize, redeem, and even occasionally completely erase, the trauma of 9/11 and the War on Terror using humor, a colorful aesthetic, and a notable absence of onscreen death (both of major characters and innocent bystanders). In terms of ideology, even the more critical and left-leaning MCU films avoid post-9/11 political complexities, opting for films that exploit the post-9/11 milieu while remaining both politically correct and family-friendly. In my

conclusion, I address how the research presented here could be expanded in the future. For example, the ideas explored in this thesis could be extended to other post-9/11 superhero films in order to offer a comprehensive analysis of the genre. A more detailed side-by-side comparison of the Marvel and DC cinematic universes, for example, would provide valuable insight into the similarities and differences in the two franchises' engagement with 9/11 and the War on Terror. Work comparing post-9/11 superhero films to pre-9/11 superhero films would also support the argument that the genre has shifted and evolved in the 2000s and 2010s.

I believe this thesis fills a gap in scholarship about the MCU, expanding on the work of other scholars such as Harrison and Hagley and Anthony Spanakos by including content related to films such as *Iron Man 3*, *Winter Soldier*, and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* as well as focusing on film style in addition to ideology. Future work could continue to examine the Marvel Cinematic Universe's engagement with 9/11, the War on Terror, and other contemporary political and social issues by analyzing the end of Phase Two and the beginning of Phase Three. For example, the trailer and synopsis for *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Joss Whedon, May 2015) indicate it will address the theme of freedom versus security introduced in *Avengers*, and the recently released synopsis for *Captain America: Civil War* (Joe and Anthony Russo, May 2016) implies the film will address similar concepts:

> Following the events of *Age of Ultron*, the collective governments of the world pass an act designed to regulate all superhuman activity. This polarizes opinion amongst the Avengers, causing two factions to side with Iron Man or Captain America, which causes an epic battle between former allies.[67]

Captain America: Civil War is inspired by a 2006 comic book event of the same name which pitted Captain America against Tony Stark in a debate about superheroes' role in

national security which divided the superhero community in half.[68] The plot of *Civil War* is an indication that the MCU films are becoming more, rather than less, political, although many of the Phase Three films appear to indicate a more global and even cosmic focus as opposed to espousing specifically American ideologies, an idea I explore in the following chapters.[69]

Notes

[1] J. Michael Straczynski and John Romita. *The Amazing Spider-Man # 36*. New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 2001.
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Chapter One. "I'm Always Angry!": Characterizing the MCU's Post-9/11 Heroes, Antiheroes, and Villains

"Let's do a head count here: your brother the demi-god, a super soldier, a living legend who kind of lives up to the legend, a man with breath-taking anger management issues, a couple of master assassins…when they come, and they will, they'll come for you." —Tony Stark to Loki, *The Avengers*

In his essay, "American Cultural Anxiety and the Post-9/11 Superhero," comic book scholar Jeff Geers writes,

> Comic book superheroes, traditionally symbolic of the strength and invulnerability of American culture, struggled to find a way to respond to the September 11th attacks, which represented not only physical destruction, but identified weakness and vulnerabilities in American collective identity and culture. Where the traditional hero failed, new, post-disaster superheroes emerged in direct response to cultural anxieties.[1]

While the MCU superheroes are not recent creations, they received updated post-9/11 identities as they transitioned from page to screen. With the exception of Captain America, most of Marvel's most popular characters were created in the 1960s.[2] In the comics, Iron Man initially battled Communist foes, and the Hulk represented nuclear-age anxieties about radiation poisoning and science gone wrong. While the Marvel heroes and villains are still exaggerated and larger than life, they also seem to exist more firmly in a reality mirroring the audience's own. As scholar Michael Atkinson observes, "This is the kiddie-escapist paradigm tinctured with memories of 9/11; today, the vigilantes in primary-color tights we hanker for don't confront the conjectural fears of the Cold War, but the all-too tangible, falling-bodies verities of the new millennium."[3] Even Captain America's World-War-II-era wholesomeness is tinged with self-doubt as he questions his

role as obedient soldier in each of his cinematic appearances.

Beyond their newly resonant post-9/11 identities, several of the MCU characters display different personality traits than their comic book counterparts, partially because of industrial pressures requiring the MCU films to be appropriate for younger audiences. Although the films are rated PG-13 and some feature "edgier" characters like Tony Stark, there is little that passes for "mature" content aside from brief references to sexuality and alcohol or drug use. Since Tony Stark *is* Iron Man, he has to be tame enough that parents are comfortable spending money on Iron Man paraphernalia for their children. Stan Lee initially created Tony Stark to see if he could take an arrogant, womanizing, alcoholic billionaire/weapons dealer and make him likeable,[4] but these negative traits are toned down significantly in the films. For example, Jon Favreau comments that he reduced Stark's struggle with alcoholism (a central theme in the comics) from a major plot element to one party scene in *Iron Man 2*.[5] Additionally, Disney apparently told *Iron Man 3* director Shane Black to remove any references to Stark's alcoholism. Black explains: "I think we were just told by the studio that we should probably paint Tony Stark as being kind of an industrialist and a crazy guy, or even a bad guy at some points, but the Demon in a Bottle [comic book storyline] of him being an alcoholic wouldn't really fly."[6] Due to industrial pressures and the studio's need to adapt their characters to post-9/11 social and cultural conditions, the MCU heroes and villains differ in varying degrees from their comic book counterparts.[7]

Examining the characterization of the MCU heroes and villains provides insight into how the films deal with 9/11 and the War on Terror. Through the origins,

personalities, and actions of their heroes and villains, the films symbolically engage with the political and psychological complexities of the past 14 years. According to Harrison and Hagley in their analysis of *Avengers*:

> The post-September 11 resurrection of the superhero genre, particularly in film, is a direct response to the feelings of helplessness and terror that Americans experienced in the days and years following the attack. This renewed interest is also a revealing look at the psyche of a nation as it struggled with war, retribution, and its own constitutional and democratic imperatives.[8]

Although the "resurrection" of the superhero genre Harrison and Hagley mention began just prior to 9/11 with *X-Men* and *Spider-Man*, they are correct in their assessment that *Avengers* is laden with post-9/11 political and cultural significance, expressed primarily through the film's characters and visual references to 9/11. The goal of this chapter is to expand on Harrison and Hagley's work by analyzing the entirety of the MCU's Phase One in terms of character development, beginning with the four super-powered Avengers: Tony Stark/Iron Man, Bruce Banner/Hulk, Steve Rogers/Captain America, and Thor. I also look at characters associated with the intelligence agency S.H.I.E.LD., including Director Nick Fury, Agent Phil Coulson, Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow, and Clint Barton/Hawkeye. The chapter ends with an examination of the franchise's villains and a character analysis of the MCU's most complex antagonist, Loki. Textual analysis and industrial discourse informs this chapter methodologically. Beyond the films themselves, interviews with actors, directors, and Marvel executives provide insight into the depictions of particular characters and how their onscreen incarnations have been updated to resonate with contemporary audiences.

One issue with analyzing the MCU's characters is that characterization can be inconsistent from film to film. For example, in *Avengers*, Loki is depicted as a sociopathic and manipulative terrorist whose goal is to enslave and rule humanity. Contradictorily, Loki receives little more than a slap on the wrist for terrorizing New York City in *Thor: The Dark World*. Loki, like other characters, can be adapted to suit the narrative needs of different films. Inconsistencies in characterization occur for several reasons. For one, individual directors may conceptualize characters differently. In his article "'I Am Iron Man': The Marvel Cinematic Universe and Celeactor Labour," scholar Wilson Koh argues that individual characters (which he calls "celeactors") are the most important elements of the MCU. A character with near-universal name recognition like Captain America transcends both the actor who plays him and the way he is characterized in different films. [9] As Wilson puts it, "These superheroes are concepts, the centerpieces of long-running, character-driven commodity franchises."[10]

The central importance of the MCU's characters, especially the main Avengers, allows Marvel to respond to fan preferences as well as shifting industrial and cultural contexts. Characters can be recast as the actors who play them age, and their stories can adapted to different cultural moments. This occurs in other franchises as well. Just look at the campy, theatrical Joker played by Jack Nicholson in Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) compared to Heath Ledger's terrifying sociopath in *The Dark Knight* (2008). In many cases, differences in characterization are acceptable as long as the essence of the character does not change. For example, audiences were able to accept Mark Ruffalo in place of Edward Norton because they were already invested in the concept of the Hulk.

Koh sees the adaptability of characters as yet another legacy of the Marvel comic universe. In the comic book industry, one character can have multiple iterations (often at the same time) because of alternate universes and reboots. As a result of this multiplicity, for example, individuals other than Peter Parker have been Spider-Man, and the current Captain America in the comics is not Steve Rogers.[11] The name and costume are more important than whether the person behind the mask is male or female, Caucasian or African-American, etc.

Character variation from film to film (or from film to television) also stems from shifting industrial contexts such as Marvel Studios' increasing investment in the global market, which I discuss in depth in Chapter Two. As the MCU evolves over time, issues around characterization can become increasingly complicated and muddled. Superheroes like Captain America—a literal embodiment of nationhood—also have to be palatable in other countries. No longer are superhero films (and blockbusters in general) primarily telling American stories aimed at American audiences. This shift from the American to the global is evident when examining how the MCU has changed over the years. In fact, the Phase One films, which introduced heroes who have been associated with American culture and American history in comic books for decades, performed only moderately well overseas. In contrast films that are less overtly pro-American and culturally specific— like *Iron Man 3* and *Winter Soldier*—were financially successful internationally. Therefore, examining the Phase One Films provides context for my

discussion in Chapter Two of how the MCU's characters and themes evolve in Phase Two.

Heroes and Antiheroes

When Marvel Studios began producing films independently (2005-2009), many of their most popular characters were licensed to other studios and production companies. Spider-Man and the X-Men were licensed to Sony and Fox respectively, and many of the characters the studio did have film rights for were relatively unknown outside of comic book circles. In 2006, *LA Times* critic Geoff Boucher wrote:

> If your planet is imperiled by scaly aliens or some flame-headed demigod, there's no one better to have on your side than Captain America, Thor, Iron Man and the Ant-Man, who have saved Earth on a monthly basis for four decades in the pages of Marvel Comics. But what if you needed to launch a Hollywood franchise—are those the superheroes you would really turn to?[12]

The answer to Boucher's question turned out to be yes, but not many in critical or industrial circles believed it at the time. In fact, producer Jeremy Latcham stated that more than 30 writers passed on *Iron Man*.[13] Had the film been unsuccessful, it is doubtful the MCU would be the franchise juggernaut it is today. Marvel's industrial discourse, as Johnson points out, is a narrative of "cinematic destiny," meaning Marvel executives can look back at the now-successful MCU and retroactively say that every aspect of the franchise was planned from the beginning. While this is partially true, Marvel Studios also had to respond to unpredictable industrial factors. For example, they needed to gauge the success of *Iron* Man, deal with casting issues such as replacing Cuba Gooding Jr. and

Edward Norton, and evolve from an independent upstart desperate to save a failing publishing company into a cog in the Disney machine. Luckily for the studio, audiences responded well to *Iron Man* and the film grossed nearly $100 million dollars in its opening weekend [14] Casting Robert Downey Jr. as Tony Stark was part of *Iron Man*'s appeal. Between Downey's comeback story as an actor and his history of substance abuse, which mirrors Tony Stark's own, his suitability for the role became another narrative of cinematic "destiny" in action.

Tony Stark is an appealing character and he easily fits into the post-9/11 superhero zeitgeist. Like Batman, another popular post-9/11 superhero in his latest cinematic iteration, Tony Stark is a self-made superhero and has no special powers beyond his personal fortune, charisma, genius IQ, and engineering talents. Stark's stubborn individualism, technological proficiency, wealth, and corporate associations make him a particularly American hero who Stan Lee compared to eccentric American aviator Howard Hughes.[15] Stan Lee also notes that when he created Iron Man in in 1963, his goal was to see if he could create a popular character who was deeply involved in the Military Industrial Complex: "The only thing young people hated in the 1970s was war, so I made a character that represented that to the 100th degree."[16] As actor Robert Downey Jr. observes, "I see Tony Stark as the best and occasionally worst in Americans and citizens around the world. He's a brilliant guy, an inventor who can't totally separate himself from the repercussions of the weapons he builds."[17]

Stark could also be interpreted as an antihero because he prefers to operate outside the military and governmental establishment and lacks many traditionally heroic

personality traits. In their article "The Antihero in Popular Culture: Life History Theory and the Dark Triad Personality Traits," Jonason et al. analyze contemporary antiheroes in terms of three principal qualities: narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. The scholars remark:

> In the recent film adaptations of *Iron Man*, Robert Downey Jr.'s portrayal of Tony Stark stands out from other Marvel Comics heroes as a "likable a**hole." Despite his claims that he is "not the hero type," Tony Stark is generally seen as a hero—albeit one with little modesty (narcissism) or concern for the morality (psychopathy) of building and making a profit from deadly military weapons.[18]

Although Jonanson et al. see Stark as an anti-hero, they argue his anti-heroic traits are far less pronounced than those of Bruce Wayne (Christian Bale) in *The Dark Knight* trilogy or a character like Gregory House (Hugh Laurie) on the television show *House M.D.* (Fox, 2004-2012).

At the beginning of *Iron Man*, Tony Stark is a wisecracking playboy who inherited his father's company and fortune. He appears to naively accept Stark Industries' involvement in the weapons business, and is comfortable enjoying his vast fortune and serving as the public face of his company. When he demonstrates a new Stark weapon for Army officials in Afghanistan, he says: "They say that the best weapon is the one you never have to fire. I respectfully disagree. I prefer the weapon you only have to fire once. That's how Dad did it, that's how America does it, and it's worked out pretty well so far." Stark justifies his company's actions using the paradoxical logic that advanced weapons are necessary to ensure national security: "The minute weapons are no longer needed to keep the peace I'll start making bricks and beams for baby hospitals, " he tells a reporter early in the film. In their book *Contemporary Hollywood Masculinities*,

scholars Susanne Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer remark that Stark represents the "myth of American excess."[19] Everything about Tony Stark is excessive: he lives in an opulent Malibu mansion, drives expensive cars, and is a shameless womanizer who knows Hugh Hefner (played by Stan Lee as a cameo in *Iron Man*) and brags about sleeping with a dozen Maxim cover models.

After being captured in Afghanistan and learning that the terrorists who held him captive possess Stark weapons, Tony Stark becomes horrified by his company's legacy. After escaping the terrorist camp, Tony immediately announces that Stark Industries will stop producing weapons: "I saw young Americans killed by the very weapons I created to defend them and protect them. And I saw that I was part of a system that was comfortable with zero accountability," he states in a press conference. He also tells his business partner, Obadiah Stane (Jeff Bridges), "I don't want a body count to be our only legacy." Stark spends the rest of the film trying to prevent Stane from creating his own version of the Iron Man armor.

The debate over who should control the Iron Man technology continues to an almost disturbing effect in *Iron Man 2*. In a congressional hearing, Stark states: "I'm your nuclear deterrent. It's working. We're safe. America is secure. You want my property? You can't have it. But I did you a big favor." In a post-9/11 context, this is a scene contributing to the ideologically contradictory nature of the MCU's political commentary. Although Stark Industries has stopped producing weapons, Stark still believes advanced weapons are necessary as long as he is the one controlling them. The fact that Stark has, as he puts it, "successfully privatized world peace" leaves the world's

safety vulnerable to the whims of one individual. *Iron Man 2* glosses over the question of whether or not the Iron Man technology is safer in Stark's hands than in the hands of the government; he is our hero and therefore a model of right action. This theme is underscored in *Avengers*, when Stark uses the Iron Man armor to defend New York City from a 9/11-type threat. Stark's consistent status as a hero also reinforces the argument that the MCU's political commentary is often subordinated to the franchise's preoccupation with maintaining a sense of humor and ensuring its characters' likeability. While the citizens of Gotham can loathe and hunt Batman in *The Dark Knight*, Iron Man needs to be admired by the public (both in the milieu of the films and by the MCU's fans).

Tony Stark struggles with his mortality and his memories of his father Howard in *Iron Man 2*. According to director Jon Favreau, "Tony is struggling with the idea of legacy. Did he inherit the sins of his father? What were the best parts of his dad? What is he going to do with his life?"[20] In *Iron Man 2* the arc reactor technology powering the Iron Man armor, which Stark invented to save his life, is now killing him. Stark literally needing a new heart underscores several shifts in personality, including his eventual attempts to temper his egocentrism and self-destructive streak. Part of Stark's character arc in *Iron Man 2* involves strengthening his personal relationships. For example, he accepts the stabilizing presence of his secretary Pepper Potts, who he names CEO of his company and ends up pursuing romantically. Additionally, while Stark tells his friend Colonel James "Rhodey" Rhodes (Cuba Gooding Jr.) in *Iron Man* "Iron Man doesn't have a sidekick," but Rhodes eventually becomes a trusted ally and friend. Stark also

receives assistance from Nick Fury and S.H.I.E.LD., which helps resolve his lingering issues with his deceased father and find a solution to his health problems. Tony Stark learning to accept assistance and work with others sets the stage for his involvement with the Avengers.

At the beginning of *Avengers*, Tony Stark reminds Agent Coulson why he didn't qualify for the Avengers Initiative: "I'm volatile, self-obsessed, and don't play well with others." This turns out to be only partially true. Stark bonds with Bruce Banner straightaway over their mutual interest in science, but his relationships with Thor, Black Widow, and Hawkeye are more tenuous. Most importantly in terms of narrative tension, Stark immediately reacts negatively to Steve Rogers and it is implied that his conflict with Rogers stems partly from his jealousy that Rogers had a father-son type relationship with Howard Stark. In return, Rogers disapproves of Stark's irreverent humor and narcissism. As Harrison and Hagley observe, "The two characters for the most part, are presented in sharp contrast to one another, as exemplified by Stark's desire to 'watch the watchmen' and by Rogers' uneasy patriotism."[21] Both men eventually realize their initial assumptions about each other were wrong—Rogers is not blindly patriotic and Stark is capable of self-sacrifice. In fact, Tony Stark proves the ultimate contradiction in *Avengers*. Avowedly not a team player, he ends up becoming one of their de facto leaders. For example, Stark encourages Bruce Banner to embrace the Hulk as a tool rather than a monster beyond his control. At the end of *Avengers*, what began for Stark as revenge for Coulson's murder transforms into self-sacrifice when he carries a nuclear weapon bound for New York City through a wormhole to outer space, risking his own

life in the process. An Avenger and a defender, a narcissist capable of selflessness, the contradictions in Stark's personality exemplify the challenges of being a hero in post-9/11 society.

Like Tony Stark, Bruce Banner is a scientist constantly haunted by his past. When we first meet Banner (Edward Norton) in *Incredible Hulk*, he is an exile: coping with guilt over Hulk's destructive power, hiding from the Army, and desperate to find a cure for his condition. A deleted scene in which Banner attempts to commit suicide emphasizes this inner turmoil, as the Hulk is capable of protecting Banner but his presence also denies him the escape death would provide. Banner's struggle with guilt and anger makes him an appropriate post-9/11 hero. Intriguingly from a post-9/11 geopolitical perspective, Banner finds the most peace in impoverished and chaotic parts of third-world countries. According to scholar Anthony Spanakos in reference to *Incredible Hulk*:

> The irony is that the anarchic space at the margins of global society, a space of high rates of crime, murder, and gang activity, is a space of peace and healing to the itinerant superhero until the global sovereign enters, transforming it into a space of danger and anarchy.[22]

This is the case in *Incredible Hulk* and *Avengers*, which opens with Banner (Mark Ruffalo, replacing Edward Norton) providing humanitarian aid in Calcutta. Ironically, the greatest danger to Banner in both films is the U.S. Army and S.H.I.E.LD, forces that draw him into dangerous situations and threaten his control over the Hulk. According to General Ross (William Hurt) in *Incredible Hulk*, "As far as I'm concerned, that man's entire body is the property of the United States Army." Ross sees the Hulk as a potential

weapon but doesn't recognize Banner as an individual with human rights. Spanakos, discussing the military's treatment of Banner, writes: "This, of course, is an exaggeration of U.S. power, but the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as a host of other countries, display a preoccupying precedent."[23]

In *Avengers*, Banner is infuriated to learn that Fury intends to use the Tesseract to make weapons. Another complexity of Banner's character is that he becomes more dangerous when he is treated as a threat. Being poked with a sharp object by Tony Stark, someone who is not intimidated by the idea of the Hulk, does not bother him. Seeing the cage Fury built for him "in case of emergency," however, intensifies Banner's perception of himself as a monster. In *Avengers*, there are explicit parallels between Hulk's rage and the rage felt by many Americans after 9/11. As scholar Tom Pollard notes, "In times of national trauma, film audiences find superheroes like the Hulk especially attractive. This character serves as a perfect post-9/11 superhero because his superpowers flow from his anger."[24] The Hulk's animalistic and aggressive response to anything he perceives as a threat to his own security resembles the attitude of many Americans directly following 9/11, an attitude exemplified by the outpouring of hate-crimes and vitriol directed against Muslim-Americans.

The inability to physically separate Banner and the Hulk make Banner vulnerable in both *The Incredible Hulk* and *Avengers*, and the crux of Banner's character arc is his battle for control over "the other guy." As Edward Norton says of *Incredible Hulk*, "The story isn't really ultimately about the Hulk, it's about Bruce Banner…[it's] the story of a maligned and oppressed and persecuted and hunted man who is moral, who is trying to

contain this thing, to protect other people from it."[25] In *Avengers*, when Tony Stark deems being Iron Man a "terrible privilege," Banner replies, "I don't get a suit of armor. I'm exposed, like a nerve." In *Incredible Hulk*, there are hints that Banner has a modicum of subconscious control over the Hulk. During a full-scale battle against Ross's Army forces (including tanks and helicopters), the Hulk protects his love interest, Betty Ross (Liv Tyler), from explosions and gunfire. As another character tells General Ross: "He [Hulk] protected her. You almost killed her." In *Avengers*, Banner's major character evolution occurs when he is able to transform into the Hulk at will, entering the final battle with full mastery of the creature:

> **Steve Rogers:** Dr. Banner, this might be a good time for you to get angry.
> **Bruce Banner:** That's my secret Cap, I'm always angry!

According to Joss Whedon, this is the most important part of Banner's character arc in the film: "You have two different Hulks in this movie: the one he becomes unwittingly and the one he decides to be, and the difference is palpable."[26] Whedon adds, "Banner has a bumbling kind of grace to him that is based on the fact that he understands that control means accepting the thing within you and not sublimating it."[27]

Controlling the Hulk also allows Banner to form lasting connections with others, something he was not able to achieve in *Incredible Hulk*. Knowing that maintaining his connection with Betty would place her in constant danger, Banner parts from her at the end of *Incredible Hulk*. In *Avengers*, Banner opens up to Tony Stark and forms personal relationships with the other Avengers. In a promotional interview for *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, Mark Ruffalo states, "Hulk has found his family."[28] Of course, bonds with other

superheroes are safer because Hulk poses less of a danger to them. By the end of *Avengers*, the team comes to see the "rage monster" as an asset rather than a danger.

Particularly in *Avengers*, Bruce Banner becomes a symbol for the myriad potential responses to a traumatic event like 9/11. To quote Harrison and Hagley:

> The duality of his nature speaks to the contradiction between the human capacity for great intelligence, kindness, and empathy, and an astonishing ability to twist those characteristics and use them to "smash."[29]

Intriguingly, while the ability to contain the Hulk seems to indicate a more mature Banner, the Hulk still takes pleasure in "smashing" Loki at the end of the film. Like Tony Stark, Bruce Banner is an ambiguous character. Does he represent the necessity of tempering aggression with thoughtfulness and diplomacy? Or does he merely embody the joyful possibility of administering righteous vengeance? In terms of post-9/11 political commentary, it is worth pointing out that the Hulk came about as a result of the military trying to recreate Captain America. Is Hulk a post-9/11 perversion of Captain America, twisted by rage? Or is his anger exactly what is needed to achieve victory against a terrorist like Loki? Although Ruffalo observes that Bruce Banner views Tony Stark as representing what Banner could have become without the Hulk[30]—a talented scientist respected only for his intellect— I argue Steve Rogers is another of Banner's mirror images, a symbol of what American scientific potential achieved in a simpler, more innocent era.

On the surface, Steve Rogers (Chris Evans) might seem like a more uncomplicated hero than the other Avengers (except for Thor, perhaps). Captain America was the first Avenger to debut in Marvel Comics, appearing in 1941.[31] In his article

"Written in Red, White, and Blue: A Comparison of Comic Book Propaganda from World War II and September 11," scholar Cord Scott writes, "One of the most notable features of these wartime superheroes was that they had a tangible connection to the United States: namely some sort of red, white, and blue in their uniform."[32] At the time, Captain America provided a genuine symbol of hope during wartime, a hero who could stand up to Hitler and Nazi Germany. In fact, an image of Captain America punching Hitler appeared on the cover of the very first issue of the comic, which was especially significant given the fact that America was not yet officially involved in World War II. According to Captain America co-creator Jack Kirby, "This was a time when everybody was patriotic. There wasn't a day that we didn't get news from Europe in the newspapers and it was ridiculous not to do Captain America, because [that] was an idea that would have been bought by everybody."[33]

Marvel Studios was initially concerned about adapting the character for film, worrying Captain America's World War II sensibilities wouldn't appeal to younger audiences. According to Joe Quesada, however, the powers-that-be at Marvel felt it was important to give the character context: "There is no way that the Steve Rogers you see in *[later films]* resonates as much with an audience if you don't see that first movie and really understand where he's coming from."[34] According to scholars Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard in their book *The Hollywood War Machine*, World War II represents "the ideal example of a 'good war' fought by good, civilized people for exalted causes against hated, barbaric enemies."[35] This is the case in *First Avenger*. World War II, the "good war," is especially appealing post-9/11, where the enemy is more difficult to identify and

the definition of victory unclear. Nazis—who have come to represent absolute evil in American popular culture—are reassuringly recognizable villains, although *First Avenger*'s interpretation of World War II has a post-9/11 twist. At the end of the film, the evil Red Skull (Hugo Weaving) hints at a future of stateless warfare: "You wear a flag and think you fight a battle of nations. But I have seen the future: there are no flags!" "Not my future," replies Rogers. The idea of the stateless war is relevant to the War on Terror because the majority of terrorist groups are not officially associated with any sovereign nation. Bin Laden and Afghanistan are not one and the same, which is similar to how Red Skull's ambitions transcend those of the Nazi Party.

At the beginning of *First Avenger*, Steve Rogers is a scrawny young man denied by the Army because of health problems. Even as a 95-pound weakling, however, Rogers demonstrates all the qualities that will serve him later as Captain America. He is chivalrous, loyal, and courageous, at one point standing up to a group of bullies who speak disrespectfully about the war. When Rogers is discovered by a scientist named Abraham Erskine (Stanley Tucci), it becomes clear that his reasons for wanting to become a solider are morally sound:

> **Erskine:** So why do you want to kill Nazis?
> **Rogers:** I don't want to kill anyone. I don't like bullies. I don't care where they're from.

Although the military brass questions Erksine's selection of Rogers for a new super soldier program, they eventually realize that Rogers' integrity and courage outweigh his lack of physical strength and military training. As Erskine puts it, "The strong man who

has known power all his life, may lose respect for that power, but a weak man knows the value of strength, and knows... compassion."

After his transformation, Rogers realizes the military does not intend for him to fight overseas. "I asked for an army and all I got was you. You are not enough," says Colonel Chester Phillips (Tommy Lee Jones). Rogers eschews becoming a lab experiment, instead agreeing to perform in USO fundraising tours. Although he is clearly a patriot, Rogers doesn't see performing in a star-spangled propaganda show as an appropriate way to serve his country. According to screenwriter Stephen McFeely, "This was our way of showing how he chafes when he is used as a superficial symbol or the misuse of his abilities. He wants to go save people, he doesn't want to be a symbol."[36] Once he arrives in Germany, Rogers proves his true value: not just as a symbol or even a soldier. Instead, he is clearly a born leader unafraid of questioning authority and operating in accordance with his own moral code. As soon as he enters the European theater, Rogers defies the first direct order from his superior officer. After learning that HYDRA captured his best friend, Bucky Barnes (Sebastian Stan), Rogers leads a daring rescue behind enemy lines. Rogers manages to rescue Bucky and his entire unit of POWs, decisively proving his worth as a commanding officer. While Rogers may represent old-fashioned American patriotism, that patriotism does not consist of unquestioningly obeying the will of those higher up in the military hierarchy.

In *Avengers*, Rogers learns of Nick Fury's desire to recover the Tesseract, a powerful object used by Red Skull to make weapons in *First Avenger*. When Fury asks

him if there's anything he should know about the cube, Rogers replies: "Yeah, you should have left it in the ocean." As Harrison and Hagley observe:

> Rogers traditionally has seen the world in black and white, with a clearly defined enemy, and to that end, he has followed an operational hierarchy as a way of showing patriotic support for the war. This attitude is already unraveling at the beginning of the film, however, as Rogers resists Fury's call to arms.[37]

Doubting organizational hierarchy is part of Rogers questioning the value of his brand of heroism in the modern era throughout the film. When Agent Coulson tells Rogers that updates have been made to the Captain America uniform, Rogers replies "Don't you think the stars and stripes are a little old fashioned?" Coulson responds, "Everything that's happening…the things that are about to come to light…we might just need a little old-fashioned," indicating that Captain America is still equally important—or perhaps more important—as a symbol of what is good about American society in the modern era as he was during World War II. As *First Avenger* director Joe Johnston notes, "He wants to serve his country, but he's not this sort of jingoistic American flag-waver. He's just a good person."[38]

Significantly in light of Rogers questioning Tony Stark's plan to spy on Fury, the Captain is the one to discover Fury's secret stash of advanced weapons. In spite of distrusting Fury and S.H.I.E.L.D., Captain America helps rally the team to battle Loki, demonstrating his ability to adapt to a new situation without compromising his integrity. After the death of Agent Coulson, Rogers convinces Tony Stark to join the fight:

> **Steve Rogers**: Is this the first time you've lost a soldier?
> **Tony Stark:** We are not soldiers! I am not marching to Fury's fife!
> **Steve Rogers:** Neither am I! He's got the same blood on his hands that Loki does. But right now we've got to put that behind us and get this done.

This conversation demonstrates Rogers' unwavering belief in the importance of questioning whether the government and the military are doing the right thing. Rogers fights Loki because his moral code requires him to protect the innocent from bullies, not because he is merely following orders. Roger's complicated sense of patriotism continues to evolve in *Winter Soldier* as S.H.I.E.L.D. grows increasingly obsessed with preemptive war. As a "man out of time" thrown into a complex post-9/11 political culture, Rogers proves that "truth, justice, and the American way" need not stand opposed to questioning the ethics of the establishment.

Although Thor (Chris Hemsworth) is the only nonhuman Avenger,[39] his experiences with war and diplomacy make him relatable and his storyline particularly relevant to the MCU's allegorical engagement with the War on Terror. At the beginning of *Thor*, the mythical kingdom of Asgard has experienced a long period of peace under the rule of Thor's father, Odin. Thor's reaction to the resurgence of an old enemy threatens this peace and endangers his status as the future king of Asgard. His arrogance and love of battle make him blind to the possibility of diplomacy. Odin cautions Thor to proceed cautiously: "A wise king never seeks out war, but he must always be ready for it." Thor refuses to accept his father's council, instead advocating a policy of preemptive war. He tells his father that invading the enemy's planet is the "only way to ensure the safety of our borders."

The parallels to the invasion of Iraq are numerous: an act of terrorism on domestic soil causes a young leader to restart a war his father had fought and won in the past,

though the young leader's inexperience and lack of knowledge about the enemy ensures he gets more than he bargained for. As Laufey, (Colm Feore)—the king of the enemy race—tells Thor, "Why have you come here to make peace? You long for battle, you crave it. You're nothing but a boy trying to prove himself a man." As scholar Anthony Spanakos says of the second Gulf War, "Had the USA misrecognized the 'other'? Had it allowed the military-industrial complex to drag it and its citizens into conflict with the other (Iraq) that it essentially did not know?" Something similar seems to be the case when Thor is easily defeated by his enemies. After stepping in to prevent a bloody battle, Odin chastises Thor for his arrogance and shortsightedness. In response, Thor tells his father he was simply protecting his home; he wants Asgard's enemies to fear him and believes Odin would rather "wait and be patient while the nine realms laugh at us." Actor Chris Hemsworth explains Thor's immaturity at this point in the film: "There's a bit of a childlike quality, in the sense that, if he believes something and wants to do something, he does it and says it. Kids own their environment. There are no opinions that they really care about."[40]

After enduring a sobering series of events, including being betrayed by his own brother Loki, Thor ends the film a wiser leader who wants to protect innocent lives. Significantly, S.H.I.E.L.D. initially treats Thor like a hostile outsider in *Thor* before recognizing his potential as an ally and a member of the Avengers. In *Avengers*, Thor functions both as an outsider and the voice of reason in the conflict between Nick Fury and the rest of the team. Harrison and Hagley write: "In *The Avengers*, Thor, chastened by his warmongering and reconciled with his father Odin's wiser stance on diplomacy, is

the exterior force of the all-American avenging team."[41] Possibly because of Thor's outsider status, Fury tries to use his presence on Earth as an excuse for S.H.I.E.L.D. developing weapons of mass destruction. Thor reminds Fury that S.H.I.E.L.D. experimenting with the Tesseract drew Loki to Earth in the first place. Thor's loyalties are initially conflicted in *Avengers*. Loki is his brother, but as a leader his first responsibility is protecting the innocent. Thor hopes for a diplomatic solution to the Loki crisis, although the film predictably ends in a major battle.

Thor's disinterest in rushing into battle demonstrates his newfound maturity, telling Agent Coulson wearily, "In my youth I courted war." When Thor does enter the fray, he does so with the hope of containing the damage done by Loki, rather than for personal glory. Harrison and Hagley observe:

> When he joins the Avengers in their mission while maintaining his independent Asgardian identity, Thor moves from representing jurisdictional tensions to serving as a proxy for the shifting and fractious relationship between the United States and her allies …that slowly withered and cracked as the United States continued to prosecute the war in ways that some European and traditionally more neutral countries resented.[42]

Notably, Thor takes Loki back to Asgard at the end of the film, stating that he will face Asgardian justice rather than be tried as a war criminal on Earth. It is implied that Thor believes Asgardian justice is more civilized and fair than Earth's justice. Thor's developing grasp of the burden of leadership represents hope for a wiser and more evolved United States when it comes to issues of preemptive war, international relations, and diplomacy.

The four super-powered Avengers vary vastly in terms of disposition and personal

values, but they also have a great deal in common. All four are exceptional individuals who struggle with how best to wield their power. They demonstrate that there are many ways to be a leader and a hero, representing the assortment of post-9/11 American political identities described by Harrison and Hagley. Examining these characters in their pre-*Avengers* films allows for a comprehensive analysis of how they function as individuals and the compromises they each make to become part of a team. As Harrison and Hagley point out:

> All of the Avengers must find common ground in the recognition that their response to being attacked cannot involve a black and-white reaction, nor can it be the simple deployment of missiles and use of technology. It cannot be resolved solely through underground espionage and "black operations," it cannot ignore the pain, anger, and rage that the combined human psyche brings to the battlefield, and should not ignore the desires of allies nor court the abuse of jurisdictional authority.[43]

Based on the above statement, *Avengers* makes clear that the multiplicity of post-9/11 political identities is a good thing, and the reason why the MCU's most dangerous villains can only be defeated by the whole team. The two Avengers who round out the team, Black Widow and Hawkeye, have very different loyalties and backgrounds, partially due to their association with S.H.I.E.L.D., an organization that plays an increasingly important role in the MCU. There are minor references to S.H.I.E.L.D. in *Iron Man*, but the organization takes center stage as it responds to new mysteries and threats in *Avengers*, *Winter Soldier*, and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*

"An Intelligence Agency That Fears Intelligence?": S.H.I.E.L.D.'s Role in the MCU

S.H.I.E.L.D.—which stands for the Strategic Homeland Intervention,

Enforcement and Logistics Division—is an intelligence agency operating within the Marvel Cinematic Universe. According to Marvel Studios Co-President Louis D' Eposito, S.H.I.E.L.D. is a "constant," the glue holding the MCU together.[44] The agency bears similarities to the C.I.A., the F.B.I., and the Department of Homeland Security, although its exact relationship with the U.S. government is unclear in the films.[45] In fact, one of the reasons the Pentagon, which advised on and provided equipment for other MCU films including *Iron Man*, refused to endorse *Avengers* is because it wasn't clear how S.H.I.E.L.D. fit into the government/military hierarchy.[46] The organization has several primary goals, including keeping Earth safe from alien threats and monitoring the existence of superheroes. According to Agent Phil Coulson, " We protect people from news they're not ready to hear." Coulson also says the agency is "the line between the world and the much weirder world." S.H.I.E.L.D appears or is mentioned in all MCU films except for *Guardians of the Galaxy*, and the organization and its agents provide the premise for the television program *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*.

In theory, S.H.I.E.L.D. are the "good guys," providing support for heroes like Iron Man and the rest of the Avengers, yet the organization is extremely secretive and employs covert tactics such as extensive and invasive surveillance, operating secret prisons, and using enhanced interrogation techniques.[47] Harrison and Hagley note, "Representative of all of the covert forces employed by the U.S. government in the declared 'War on Terror,' both at home and abroad, S.H.I.E.L.D. mirrors a number of the more controversial acts of the agency, including warrantless wiretapping."[48]Although S.H.I.E.L.D. is not under federal jurisdiction, many of its actions seem to mirror the post-

9/11 tactics of the C.I.A., Homeland Security, and the NSA. In *Winter Soldier*, the idea that S.H.I.E.L.D. has a watch list of potential threats is based on actual national security policies. According to a 2012 *New York Times* article, "Mr. Obama has placed himself at the helm of a top secret 'nominations' process to designate terrorists for kill or capture,"[49] a concept which inspired *Winter Soldier* directors Joe and Anthony Russo to center the film around themes of preemptive aggression, threat elimination, and surveillance.[50] In *Avengers,* the agency's use of personal cellphones and cameras to search for Loki echoes concerns about the NSA and other government surveillance programs. In *Winter Soldier*, S.H.I.E.L.D. is revealed to have been corrupted from the inside by the Nazi organization HYDRA, and the remaining S.H.I.E.LD. agents become fugitives from the United States government. Tony Stark's jab at S.H.I.E.L.D. in *Avengers*—"an intelligence agency that fears intelligence? Historically not awesome"—could be read as a critique of the lack of credible intelligence regarding WMDs in Iraq or other failures of the US intelligence apparatus.

Director Nicholas Fury is the man at the top of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s hierarchy. Fury's role in the MCU has grown more central in each film, which is partially a result of Samuel L. Jackson's star power. According to Jackson, he took the role because of Nick Fury's depiction in a 2002 comic book called *The Ultimates #1*, in which the formerly white Fury bore a strong resemblance to the actor. He says, "Nick Fury was a white guy running through the jungle with a bunch of other white guys, and then he was David Hasslehoff, and then I picked up a comic book one day and was like, hey, that's me!"[51] Jackson's casting is one example of how Marvel comics impact the MCU in unexpected

ways. Nick Fury is S.H.I.E.L.D.'s most mysterious operative: according to Tony Stark, "His secrets have secrets." In addition, Fury is a particularly utilitarian character. His modus operandi is protecting humanity at all costs, and he is willing to make sacrifices to do so. According to Jackson, "Wars have casualties, and he's a warrior. He understands the nature of war and the nature of what it takes to get things like that done, and the toll that it takes on a person for having to do certain things."[52] In *Avengers*, Fury is the figurative "man behind the curtain." He convinces Steve Rogers to join the fight, telling him S.H.I.E.L.D. intends to use the Tesseract to develop sustainable energy (a lie). Tony Stark is immediately suspicious of Fury's motives and eventually convinces Steve Rogers, Bruce Banner, and even Thor to question S.H.I.E.LD.'s intentions regarding the cube. In one of the primary conflicts in the film, Fury justifies his actions by stating that Thor's appearance on Earth (in *Thor*) proved that humanity is "hopelessly, hilariously outgunned." "A nuclear deterrent? Because that always works," retorts Tony Stark.

Although he wears a patch over his bad eye, Nick Fury metaphorically represents surveillance, a post-9/11 theme that reoccurs in several MCU films and *Agents of S.H.I.E.LD*. "I've got my eye on you," he tells Tony Stark in *Iron Man 2*. When Harrison and Hagley note that Tony Stark "watches the watchmen," it is clear Fury is one of the watchmen they refer to. Fury's willingness to employ ethically questionable methods (including surveillance) is a major plot point in *Avengers* and later in *Winter Soldier*. According to Joss Whedon, Fury operates in "a real moral gray area where you really have to decide: Is Nick Fury the most manipulative guy in the world? Is he a good guy? Is he completely Machiavellian or is it a bit of both?"[53] In the MCU, which often relies on

Manichean divides between good and evil, Fury's character adds a layer of moral complexity appropriate to a post-9/11 political climate.

Intriguingly, while Fury convinces the Avengers to become a team, he does so deceitfully and never manages to convince the Avengers to fight *for him*. In fact, it could be argued that he intentionally antagonizes the Avengers in order to get Stark and Rogers—the team's leaders—on the same side. Fury also uses Phil Coulson's murder to provide a more powerful incentive than loyalty to himself or S.H.I.E.L.D.: revenge. Fury shows Stark and Rogers Coulson's set of blood-spattered Captain America trading cards, telling them Coulson died with the cards in his pocket, "still believing in heroes." Agent Maria Hill (Cobie Smulders) later points out that the cards were in Coulson's locker, not in his jacket. "They needed a push," he responds. Fury also claims S.H.I.E.L.D.'s work with the Tesseract was merely a stopgap measure in case the Avengers Initiative failed as a crisis response plan.

At the end of the film, the audience learns that even Fury's utilitarianism has limits. When the World Security Council orders Fury to destroy Manhattan in order to contain the alien threat, Fury disobeys. Instead, he sends Stark to destroy the missile. While Fury is willing to potentially sacrifice an Avenger, he also understands that trading one life for millions is the moral choice. In *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.,* Fury transfers leadership of the organization to Agent Coulson. The two men represent slightly different leadership styles. While Fury operates entirely in the shadows, Coulson attempts honesty and transparency with his team in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*. That is not to say that Coulson avoids deception altogether, he is more than willing to lie a teammate if he believes doing

so will protect them or serve the greater good. In fact, S.H.I.E.L.D.'s obsession with secrecy under Fury, and then under Coulson, is a theme still resonating within the MCU, particularly in Season Two of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*.[54] Nick Fury trusts a select few, including Coulson and Maria Hill, but ultimately realizes he can only rely on himself. Coulson relies on his team for support, which is part of why he feels personally betrayed when members of his team turn out to be untrustworthy.

Both Fury and Coulson are willing to make sacrifices for the greater good, but Coulson is less utilitarian and more aware of power's potential to corrupt. Fury entrusts Coulson to rebuild S.H.I.E.L.D. from the ground up and to "do it right this time," implying his own leadership style and the agency's obsession with secrecy contributed to S.H.I.E.L.D.'s downfall. S.H.I.E.L.D.'s actions can be interpreted as an allegory for both post-9/11 Presidential administrations. Bush-era themes including torture, a lack of government transparency, and the ethics of the Military Industrial Complex during wartime are present in many films. There are also themes that more closely evoke Obama-era anxieties about surveillance and drone warfare in films like *Avengers* and *Winter Soldier*.

Agent Phillip Coulson (Clark Gregg) is a high-ranking S.H.I.E.L.D. operative and one of Fury's right-hand men. Coulson appears in *Iron Man*, *Iron Man 2*, and *Thor*, and plays a major role in *Avengers*. He also has lead roles in two of the Marvel One-Shots, *The Consultant* and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Thor's Hammer,* both released in 2011 as part of the lead-up to *Avengers*. In *Avengers*, Coulson stands up to Loki—telling the villain he "lacks conviction"—and ends up paying for his courage with

his life. According to Feige, "Coulson's death is the only thing that can motivate a group as diverse as the Avengers to work as a team."[55] Adds Gregg, "What I loved about Coulson is at first he just seems like an annoying bureaucrat. As the story goes along, he turns out to be a much more formidable character."[56] Gregg now stars in the TV series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, which revolves around the adventures of Coulson and his team of agents. Coulson is also significant as an avatar for the MCU's fans—his admiration for the Avengers, particularly Captain America, is a source of humor in the films. As Joss Whedon notes, "He's an enthusiast. And he loves this world as well as wanting to protect the people in it."[57]

Coulson is also another of the MCU's wounded and traumatized soldiers. After his "death" in Avengers, Fury resurrects Coulson using an experimental medical protocol. Aside from the trauma of being killed and revived, Coulson also struggles with trusting S.H.I.E.L.D. and Director Fury after learning that the details of his "death" have been kept from him. Coulson's extreme loyalty to S.H.I.E.L.D. makes Fury's betrayal particularly ironic. He regularly tells members of his team to "trust the system," and then finds out the system tortured him and lied about it. Coulson is a gifted leader because of his courage and intelligence, not because he has special powers. Coulson is a "common man in an uncommon world,"[58] as Joss Whedon puts it, and demonstrates that ordinary bravery and compassion are just as valuable as superpowers. In *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.,* Coulson represents the ability of leadership to adapt to new threats and emerging crises, as well as the value of cleverness and diplomacy. Coulson works with a small strike team who are able to think on their feet and evade their enemies despite their small numbers

and lack of destructive weapons. In fact, Coulson's team is particularly non-violent compared to the rest of S.H.I.E.L.D., preferring to stun and/or capture their enemies when possible rather than killing them. The range of attitudes toward the use of lethal force, torture, and other ethical dilemmas within S.H.I.E.L.D. is representative of similar divisions with the US government and military.

Coulson also plays a paternal role when it comes to his relationship with his team, especially with the younger agents. According to scholar Jeffery Melnick, many post-9/11 films share a central anxiety regarding the bad or absent father. As Melnick notes, in a variety of post-9/11 films including Steven Spielberg's remake of *War of the Worlds* (2004), "The father has been rendered powerless by the attacks, or, worse yet, is revealed to have been powerless all along."[59] In Melnick's view, the absent father represents the failure of the paternalistic American government and military authorities to adequately protect the American people from threats like Al-Qaeda or the consequences of the War on Terror. Melnick's observations apply to the MCU: there are many bad and/or absent fathers and father figures in the films, including Howard Stark, Odin, and even Nick Fury. Coulson, on the other hand, is a caring, protective, and reliable father figure for his team. Coulson's status as an ordinary man trying to do the right thing in a world full of complex threats and ethical dilemmas make him one of the most relatable characters in the MCU.

Scarlett Johansson's Black Widow and Jeremy Renner's Hawkeye are the two Avengers without superpowers.[60] Harrison and Hagley point out that both Widow and Hawkeye hearken back to the Cold War era of Marvel Comics: Natasha Romanoff is a

former Russian spy, and both characters reference past missions in Eastern Europe.[61] Black Widow first appears in *Iron Man 2*, where she is undercover at Stark Industries in order to keep an eye on Tony Stark for Fury. Most of my analysis of Romanoff is from *Avengers*, as her character is little more than a sketch in the *Iron Man 2*. In contrast, she plays a central role in both *Avengers* and *Winter Soldier*.

Black Widow is intriguing in terms of post-9/11 gender politics. Scholars such as Susan Faludi and Stacey Takacs have argued that the plight of Afghan women became an excuse for the U.S. to go to war, creating a post-9/11 "rescue narrative," and casting both Afghan women and female POWs like Jessica Lynch as "damsels in distress."[62] According to Faludi, the media framed Lynch in exactly this manner. "She [Lynch] may have been in uniform, but this wasn't a story about a soldier's return to her brothers-in-arms. It was a tale of a maiden in need of rescue."[63] Although Natasha Romanoff is independent, intelligent, and gifted in many forms of martial arts and hand-to-hand combat, the gender politics around her character are more complicated than they first appear. For example, Black Widow is blatantly sexualized in a way her male counterparts are not. At the beginning of *Avengers*, she fights off a group of men in a tight tank top and heels. She is also sexually and physically threatened twice in *Avengers*. These experiences separates her from the male Avengers, all of whom face general danger but are not subject to direct threats of an intimate and personal nature.

On the one hand, the film frames Widow as uniquely vulnerable. Although she is skilled in physical combat, she has no weapon or power capable of overpowering an opponent as strong as the Hulk (for example), unlike Iron Man with his armor or Thor

with his hammer. On the other hand, the circumstances in which she is threatened complicate the "damsel in distress" cliché. For example, during a conversation with Loki, the villain threatens to have Hawkeye (who is possessed) kill Romanoff "slowly, intimately, in all the ways he knows you fear." The implication of rape and murder at the hands of a man she trusts is emphasized when Loki refers to her as a "mewling quim" (a slang term for female anatomy). This is a particularly unsettling moment in a film that mostly avoids sexual and violent language and imagery. While the intent may be to enhance Loki's menace as a villain, it also emphasizes that Black Widow's gender is the primary reason she is more susceptible to violence than the other Avengers. Although Romanoff uses Loki's misogyny against him in this scene—feigning an emotional breakdown in order to extract information—the film still casts her as a potential damsel in distress, which is emphasized when she runs into the Hulk.

Romanoff is near Bruce Banner when he transforms into the Hulk during an attack on the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier and is forced to flee when she fails to calm him down. On the *Avengers* commentary track, Whedon states that he wanted the Hulk to threaten the film's "physically weakest" character.[64] Although it can be argued that these two incidents are unrelated to her gender, I maintain Romanoff is singled out as the most vulnerable member of a seemingly invincible team. Even Whedon—a director and writer known for strong female characters such as Buffy the Vampire Slayer—deliberately calls attention to Romanoff's physical weakness in his commentary, playing into the post-9/11 rescue narrative. Similar events occur in *Winter Soldier*, in a scene where Steve Rogers physically shelters her from debris after an explosion. Even though Natasha demonstrates

above average competency and skill throughout the film, in perilous situations she ultimately is repositioned as a damsel in distress in need of Steve's aid or protection.

More important than Romanoff's gender, however, are her personal politics and ethics. Like Nick Fury, Widow has a utilitarian perspective on the sacrifices demanded in wartime, except when it comes to the two people she is closest to: Nick Fury and Clint Barton. Romanoff considers Fury a father figure, and she reveals to Loki that Hawkeye was sent to assassinate her and instead chose to recruit her for S.H.I.E.LD. When Loki mocks her for caring about Hawkeye's fate while "the fate of your race hangs in the balance," Romanoff replies: "Regimes fall every day. I tend not to weep over that, I'm Russian." Her response makes it clear that Romanoff is loyal to individuals rather than to the United States or S.H.I.E.LD. In *Avengers*, Loki goads Romanoff further by calling her a "liar and killer in the service of liars and killers." Romanoff admits she feels guilty for all the "red in her ledger" and wants to atone for her sins, but moments later she reveals that her vulnerability was a performance staged to extract information from Loki. According to Scarlett Johansson, however, Natasha Romanoff does struggle with her violent past: "She is dark and has faced death so many times that she has a deep perspective on the value of life."[65]

Romanoff's loyalties—like those of the other Avengers—shift from film to film, although she has more experience serving multiple agendas than the other heroes. In *Winter Soldier* she tells Rogers, "When I first joined SHIELD, I thought it was going straight. But I guess I just traded in the KGB for HYDRA. I thought I knew whose lies I was telling, but...I guess I can't tell the difference anymore." In fact, Romanoff's

association with the KGB and Russia could be interpreted as implying that the United States is not morally superior to our historic Soviet enemies. Unlike Tony Stark and Steve Rogers, Widow is unfazed by S.H.I.E.L.D.'s obsession with secrecy and surveillance. When Bruce Banner incredulously points out that Captain America is on S.H.I.E.L.D.'s threat watch list, Romanoff replies, "We all are." In *Winter Soldier*, when Nick Fury tells Steve Rogers that Agent Romanoff is "comfortable with everything," it's only partially a joke. Black Widow's acceptance of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s intrusion into personal privacy can be interpreted as a critique of the post-9/11 counterterrorism apparatus, or merely an indication of the type of personality required to be a successful spy. As Harrison and Hagley observe of both Black Widow and Hawkeye: "By the nature of their work, these kinds of people will always be outside both the legal and ethical norms that govern others."[66] Therefore, they must rely on their own moral codes.

Clint Barton—known as Hawkeye because of his excellent aim as an archer and habit of perching on rooftops and in rafters—appears briefly in *Thor* as a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent assigned to take out the thunder god should he prove hostile. Like Nick Fury, Hawkeye represents surveillance. He tells Fury, "I see better from above." Barton's stealth abilities and tendency to focus on the bigger picture rather than details make him useful during a battle, but also separate him from the rest of the team. His only close relationship in the film is with Natasha Romanoff. According to actor Jeremy Renner, "Just by his nature as a sniper if you will, as a guy who hangs out in rooftops, in trees, and takes out his targets from a distance… he's a loner and a lone-wolf kind of character anyway, and a rebel."[67] At the beginning of *Avengers*, Loki corrupts Hawkeye using mind

control, creating an internal danger that threatens the Avengers' unity. According to Harrison and Hagley, "The fact that Loki turns him in the first few minutes of action suggests the duality of espionage and underscores the idea that in a world of double and triple dealings there are no 'good' spies."[68]

The brainwashed Hawkeye helps Loki steal the Tesseract and attack the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier. From a post-9/11 perspective, Hawkeye represents the enemy within. While under Loki's control, Barton personifies cultural anxieties about domestic terrorists and Al Qaeda sleeper cells; he is an enemy who looks just like everybody else or, worse, a trusted ally turned threat. His corruption also highlights the potential dangers of S.H.I.E.L.D. trusting agents with backgrounds like Barton's and Romanoff's. Eventually, his connection with Black Widow and personal investment in defeating Loki finds him suiting up for battle with the other Avengers. According to Joss Whedon, "It's this guy's job to be removed from everybody else and just to watch. So for him to throw in is a very personal thing."[69] Jeremy Renner has stated in interviews that he was disappointed in Hawkeye's character development in *Avengers* as a result of being brainwashed for two thirds of the film.[70] Regardless of Renner's feelings about the character, the fact that a trained spy like Hawkeye can be completely controlled by Loki shows the extent of the villain's power.

Aliens, Industrialists, Communists, and Nazis: Loki and the MCU's Villains

According to Anthony Spanakos, a defining characteristic of many post 9/11 superhero films is that "the consistent enemy is not the distant other, but the military

industrial complex." This is the case in many MCU films. Although Tony Stark is seemingly threatened by a foreign Other in all three *Iron Man* films, the true threats are villains associated with the U.S. Military Industrial Complex. In *Iron Man*, the Ten Rings terrorist group is a front for Tony Stark's business partner, and the same holds true for *Iron Man 2* where the Russian antagonist Anton Vanko is working for Stark's rival, Justin Hammer. In *Iron Man 3*, a terrorist known as the Mandarin turns out to be completely fictional,[71] created to draw attention away from the schemes of a power-hungry scientist named Aldrich Killian. In *Incredible Hulk* the greatest danger to Bruce Banner is the U.S. military. In *Winter Soldier*, a dangerous threat lurks inside S.H.I.E.L.D. and Rogers is forced to face his former best friend, Bucky Barnes, who was brainwashed and turned into an assassin (the titular Winter Soldier). Even Loki is not a true Other because he is Thor's brother. Nick Fury makes a point of telling the World Security Council that Loki is operating on his own and not as a representative of Asgard: in effect, making Loki a stateless terrorist.

The villains in *First Avenger* and both *Thor* films are more traditional: Captain America fights Nazis, while Thor battles other races from foreign worlds. Still, the true villain is never Muslim: the MCU offers politically correct post-9/11 antagonists. According to Jesse Walker, *Iron Man* attempts to oversimplify terrorism by implying that the War on Terror can be resolved by "eliminating one well-placed crook."[72] By depicting a handful of bad apples as symbolic of all the worlds' evils, the MCU films avoid projecting general blame for the War on Terror onto either specific foreign enemies or the American government and military. This method renders the films politically

“correct” (or at least neutral) because their villains are not Islamic terrorists, although the franchise is still problematic in terms of racial representation as I discuss in the next chapter. Conversely, several MCU villains do provide commentary on the nature of terrorism, particularly Loki who is perhaps the MCU’s most complex and nuanced villain so far. In fact, Loki is one of the MCU’s most dangerous villains and impacts each of the Avengers in distinct and personal ways. Although the MCU’s heroes are the main attraction of the films, a film like the *Avengers* could not succeed without a compelling villain. The MCU’s villains sometimes seem like two-dimensional caricatures, but Loki has more complex motives.

Neither consistently sympathetic nor purely antagonistic, Loki’s murderous and destructive actions are motivated by a backstory established in *Thor* and elaborated on in *Avengers* and *Thor: The Dark World*. It is no coincidence that Loki is the Asgardian god of mischief, a trickster figure in Norse mythology. In the films, Loki retains the mythical ability to change forms and project visual illusions, a power he often uses to deceive the people around him. In *Thor*, Loki is second in line for the throne and therefore deeply jealous of his brother. He desires power and feels neglected by his father, Odin. Loki’s sense of disenfranchisement worsens when he learns Odin adopted him as an infant. Loki’s biological father is Laufey, the king of Asgard’s sworn enemy the Frost Giants, making Loki an Other in Asgard and in his own family. Says actor Tom Hiddleston:

> [Loki] just seems like a lost, damaged soul who was brought up believing in a particular truth, which is that he was entitled to rule. He was a born prince, and that one day he would be a king. And then he finds out that the entire narrative of his life is a lie, that Odin adopted him as the neglected, abandoned bastard son of their mortal

> enemies. And he feels so betrayed and so hurt by that, and that's a very relatable thing.[73]

Loki is motivated by personal betrayal and abandonment, in contrast to a terrorist like Osama bin Laden whose motives were, according to American political and media rhetoric, inscrutable.

In another possible parallel to Jihad, Loki is driven by the idea that humanity will benefit from the imposition of his values. In *Avengers*, according to Joss Whedon, "Loki really believes that freedom is crippling. That humanity isn't doing a good job taking care of itself, and what we really need is Daddy to make it better."[74] When Loki forces a crowd to kneel before him in Germany, he taunts, "Is this not your natural state? It's the unspoken truth of humanity: that you crave subjugation." This particular philosophy actually makes Loki appear more like a dictator than a contemporary terrorist. In fact, the crowd scene in Germany draws direct parallels between Loki and Hitler. One elderly man, implied to be a Holocaust survivor, refuses to kneel before the villain, telling Loki "there are always men like you." It seems overly simplistic to label Loki a terrorist in light of his complex history with Thor and his resemblance to historical dictators, but some aspects of his behavior support the notion that he is, in fact, a terrorist.

Loki's recruitment methods, obsession with creating spectacle, and ability to spread fear and chaos support the film's portrayal of the villain as a terrorist. Loki uses mind control to turn Hawkeye and other S.H.I.E.L.D. agents against their own, literalizing cultural anxieties about terrorist groups using brainwashing as part of their recruiting and training tactics. Furthermore, his acts of violence are public and intended

to draw attention to himself and his agenda. A primary aspect of the 9/11 attacks, and contemporary terrorism in general, is that acts of terror are visual and public spectacles. According to psychology scholar Gabriel Weimann:

> Modern terrorism can be understood in terms of the production requirements of theatrical engagements. Terrorists pay attention to script preparation, cast selection, sets, props, role-playing, and minute-by-minute stage management. Just like compelling stage plays or ballet performances, the media orientation in terrorism requires full attention to detail to be effective.[75]

Loki engages in acts intended to inspire fear and provide visual spectacle, such as removing a man's eye in a crowded opera house and choosing to unleash his army in New York City. Tony Stark points out Loki's theatricality towards the end of the film, observing: "Loki's a full-tilt diva. He wants flowers, he wants parades, he wants monuments to the sky with his name plastered on it."

Loki also intentionally uses manipulation and deceit to divide the Avengers and prevent them from working as a team. He uses his scepter to provoke Bruce Banner's transformation on the helicarrier, and by brainwashing Hawkeye he pits Black Widow against her most trusted ally. Loki also attempts to murder his own brother during his escape from the helicarrier, but his real misstep is murdering Agent Coulson. Loki's greatest flaw is his belief in humanity's inferiority, which makes him unaware that one man's life could have such an impact on the Avengers. According to Tom Hiddleston, he played Loki far less sympathetically in *Avengers* than in *Thor*: "Joss and I talked about dialing up the menace and his extraordinary danger, that Loki is an incredibly dangerous, feral, anarchic and chaotic personality."[76]

Loki is not a one-sided villain, and he displays different sides of his personality depending on the situation. The only consistent aspect of Loki's his character is his duplicity; it is impossible to trust anything he says or does, as even his moments of honesty are questionable. For example, Loki is in disguise the only time he expresses how he truly feels about his brother. In *Thor: The Dark World*, disguised as Odin, Loki tells Thor: "If I were proud of the man my son has become, even that I could not say." Loki's arc in future films may reveal more of what the MCU has to say about the potential redemption of its villains. Regardless, the amount of depth granted to Loki by various screenwriters, directors, and producers avoids common post-9/11 binaries, providing a complex exploration of the concepts of evil, terrorism, and revenge. Loki's complexity is unique in comparison to villains like Obadiah Stane and Red Skull who are more stereotypically "evil." These villains' motives are never made explicit beyond a basic desire for power, and they are both killed rather than demonstrating any potential for redemption.

Conclusion

The heroes, antiheroes, and villains of the Marvel Cinematic Universe represent a diverse collection of backgrounds, political perspectives, and personality traits. This variation is part of what makes the MCU more ideologically complex than it appears on the surface, especially as the franchise evolves and expands. Particularly in *Avengers*, traditional Manichean binaries are avoided. The resolution of the film's conflict may seem easy: the city is saved, the villain banished. To this point, *Vulture* critic Kyle

Buchanan sees *Avengers* as a film in which "the splintering of New York City was cause for lighthearted super-banter."[77] In spite of the film's lightheartedness, I argue that the identities and personal struggles of the film's characters echo the ambiguities characteristic of post-9/11 American and global society. The trauma caused by the Battle of New York has a profound impact on Tony Stark in *Iron Man 3*, and S.H.I.E.L.D.'s increasingly troubling response to outside threats is a major conflict in *Winter Soldier*. Although the end of *Avengers* can be viewed as a response to the trauma of 9/11 in the sense that the city is saved from total destruction, the heroes do not restore society to a state of innocence. Lingering doubts and moral quandaries leave room for new conflicts in subsequent films, indicating that American society has not moved past the trauma of 9/11.

Notes:

[1] Jeff Geers. "The Great Machine Doesn't Wear a Cape!" *American Cultural Anxiety and the Post-9/11 Superhero*, 251.
[2] Including Iron Man, Captain America, Hawkeye, Daredevil, Thor, Black Widow, Hulk, Nick Fury, most of the X-Men, Spider-Man, The Fantastic Four,
[3] Michael Atkinson. "All Surface, No Feeling." *Sight and Sound* 18, no. 12 (2008): 21-23.
[4] Stan Lee. Bonus Features, *Iron Man*. Paramount Home Entertainment, 2008. DVD.
[5] Jon Favreau, director's commentary, *Iron Man 2*. Paramount Home Entertainment, 2010. DVD.
[6]Josh Wilding. "Shane Black And Drew Pearce On Not Incorporating 'Demon In A Bottle' Into *Iron Man 3*." *Comicbook Movie*. April 21, 2013. Accessed April 25, 2015.
[7] Interestingly, Marvel appears to be using Netflix as a platform for their more mature content. The new series *Daredevil* features intense violence and adult themes.
[8] Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison. "Fighting the Battles We Never Could," 120.
[9] Wilson Koh. "'I Am Iron Man': The Marvel Cinematic Universe and Celeactor Labour." *Celebrity Studies* 5, no. 4 (2014): 484-500
[10] See above, page 488.
[11] Katherine Trendacosta. "Your New Captain America Is Sam Wilson." *Io9*. July 16, 2014. Accessed April 2, 2015.
[12] Geoff. "Ka-pow, Spidey!" *Los Angeles Times*. July 22, 2006. Accessed April 18, 2015.
[13] "Marvel Studios: Assembling a Universe."
[14] The Numbers
[15] Stan Lee, bonus features, *Iron Man*. Paramount Home Entertainment, 2008. DVD.
[16] See above.
[17] Jim "Stax" Vejvoda. "The Politics of *Iron Man*?" *IGN*. April 27, 2007. Accessed April 1, 2015.
[18] Peter K. Jonason, Gregory D. Webster, David P. Schmitt, Norman P. Li, and Laura Crysel. "The Antihero in Popular Culture: Life History Theory and the Dark Triad Personality Traits." *Review of General Psychology* 34, no. 4 (2012): 192-99.
[19] Susanne Kord, and Elisabeth Krimmer. *Contemporary Hollywood Masculinities: Gender, Genre, and Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 108.
[20] Jon Favreau, director's commentary, *Iron Man 2*.
[21] Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison. "Fighting the Battles We Never Could," 121.
[22] Anthony Spanakos. "Exceptional Recognition: The U.S. Global Dilemma in *The Incredible Hulk*, *Iron Man*, and *Avatar*," 19.
[23] See above.
[24] Tom Pollard. *Hollywood 9/11: Superheroes, Supervillains, and Super Disasters*, (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2011), 82.
[25] "Edward Norton Talks *Incredible Hulk*."
[26] Joss Whedon, director's commentary, *The Avengers*.
[27] Noelene Clark. "*Avengers*: Mark Ruffalo Says the Hulk Has 'Found His Family." *LA Times*. May 10, 2012. Accessed March 5, 2015.
[28] See above.
[29] Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison, 121.
[30] Noelene Clark, "*Avengers*: Mark Ruffalo Says the Hulk Has 'Found His Family.'"
[31] Cord Scott. *Comics and Conflict: Patriotism and Propaganda from WWII through Operation Iraqi Freedom*, 25.
[32] Cord Scott. "Written In Red, White, And Blue: A Comparison Of Comic Book Propaganda From World War II And September 11." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 2 (2007): 330.
[33] "Truth, Justice, and The American Way." Kantor, Michael. *Superheroes: A Never-Ending Battle*. Minseries. PBS. Television.

[34] Devin Leonard. "Kevin Feige, Marvel's Superhero at Running Movie Franchises."
[35] Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard. *The Hollywood War Machine: U.S. Militarism and Popular Culture*, (Boulder: Paradigm, 2007) 53.
[36] Geoff Boucher. "*Captain America* Writers: Cap Would Be on a Watch List today." *LA Times*. July 30, 2011. Accessed March 5, 2015.
[37] Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison, 121.
[38] Geoff Boucher. "Comic-Con 2010: *Captain America* Director Has Different Spin on Hero: 'He's Not a Flag-waver.'" *LA Times*. July 21, 2010. Accessed April 1, 2015.
[39] In MCU mythology, Thor is not a god but instead a member of a more advanced extraterrestrial race. Asgardians visited Earth in ancient times, and early humans mistook their science and technology for magic, inspiring Norse mythology.
[40] Christina Radish. "*The Avengers* Cast Interview." *Collider*. April 12, 2012. Accessed March 5, 2015.
[41] Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison, 122.
[42] Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison, 122.
[43] Annika Hagley and Michael Harrison, 123.
[44] "Marvel Studios: Assembling a Universe."
[45] S.H.I.E.L.D. does not report directly to the U.S. government, but has a headquarters in Washington D.C. and bases all over the world. Most of the MCU agents are American and British. Director Fury reports to the World Security Council, but it is unclear whether they are a global governing body like the UN or a private group.
[46] Spencer Ackerman. "Pentagon Quit *The Avengers* Because of Its 'Unreality'" *Wired*. May 7, 2012. Accessed April 1, 2015.
[47] In *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* it is revealed that S.H.I.E.L.D. operates a secret prison called the "Fridge" that is outside of government jurisdiction. Fury threatens Loki with torture (*Avengers*), several agents use physical violence against prisoners during various interrogations (*Agents*), and agents are seen threatening hostiles with being ejected from an airplane (*Agents*) or dropped from the roof of a building (*Winter Soldier*).
[48] Annika Hagley, and Michael Harrison, 123.
[49] Jo Becker, and Scott Shane. "Secret 'Kill List' Proves a Test of Obama's Principles and Will." *The New York Times*. May 28, 2012. Accessed April 1, 2015.
[50] Asawin Suebsaeng. "*Captain America: The Winter Soldier* Is Actually about Obama's Kill List, Say the Film's Directors." *Mother Jones*. April 4, 2014. Accessed February 7, 2015.
[51] "Marvel Studios: Assembling a Universe."
[52] Noelene Clark. "*Avengers*: Samuel L. Jackson on His 'Master Manipulator' Nick Fury." *LA Times*. May 3, 2012. Accessed March 5, 2015.
[53] Matt Goldberg. "Joss Whedon Talks about the Characters of *The Avengers*." *Collider*. November 18, 2011. Accessed March 5, 2015.
[54] In Season Two, another S.H.I.E.L.D. faction calling themselves the "real S.H.I.E.L.D." wants to remove Coulson as director because they believe he has been too secretive about his missions.
[55] "Marvel Studios: Assembling a Universe."
[56] See above.
[57] James Poniewozik. "Joss Whedon Talks *SHIELD*, Superheroes, and Secrets: 'I Guess I'm Just Not Very Good At Reality.'" *Time*. September 12, 2013. Accessed March 5, 2015.
[58] See above.
[59] Jeffrey Melnick. *9/11 Culture: America Under Construction* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 128.
[60] It may be more accurate to say that Black Widow has no superpowers as far as the audience knows so far. In various comic book incarnations, Black Widow was injected with a version of the super soldier serum that was used on Steve Rogers. This version of Widow's history has been hinted at in the Marvel television series *Agent Carter*. For more information see: Meagan Damore. "Marvel's *Agent Carter* and the Road to the Red Room." *Comic Book Resources*. January 29, 2015. Accessed March 20, 2015.

[61] Annika Hagley, and Michael Harrison, 121.
[62] See Stacy Takacs: "Jessica Lynch and the Regeneration of American Identity and Power Post-9/11." *Feminist Media Studies* 5, no. 3 (2006): 297-310.
[63] Susan Faludi. *The Terror Dream: Fear and Fantasy in Post-9/11 America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 169.
[64] Joss Whedon, director's commentary, *The Avengers*.
[65] Lynn Hirschberg. "Scarlett Johansson Is Nobody's Baby." *W Magazine*. February 9, 2015. Accessed April 1, 2015.
[66] Annika Hagley, and Michael Harrison, 121
[67] Noelene Clark. "*Bourne Legacy* Star Jeremy Renner on *Avengers* Action and More." *LA Times*. August 6, 2012. Accessed April 1, 2015.
[68] Annika Hagley, and Michael Harrison, 121
[69] Geoff Boucher. "*Avengers*: Joss Whedon Says Jeremy Renner's Hawkeye Is a 'Loner.'" *LA Times*. April 16, 2012. Accessed April 1, 2015.
[70] Noelene Clark. "Bourne Legacy Star Jeremy Renner on *Avengers* Action and More."
[71] The Marvel One-Shot *All Hail the King* seems to imply that there is a real Mandarin out there somewhere, but the Mandarin is not the actor Trevor Slattery (Ben Kingsley).
[72] Jesse Walker. "The Politics of Superheroes."
[73] Noelene Clark. "*Avengers* Blu-ray: Tom Hiddleston Hopes for Redemption In Loki." *LA Times*. September 24, 2012. Accessed April 1, 2015.
[74] Joss Whedon, director's commentary, *The Avengers*.
[75] Gabriel Weimann. "The Psychology Of Mass-Mediated Terrorism." *American Behavioral Scientist* 52, no. 1 (2008): 71.
[76] Noelene Clark. "*Avengers* Blu-ray: Tom Hiddleston Hopes for Redemption In Loki."
[77] Kyle Buchanan. "Is It Possible to Make a Hollywood Blockbuster Without Evoking 9/11?" *Vulture*.

Chapter Two. "A Good Old-Fashioned Notion": The Marvel Cinematic Universe and Political Ideology

"There was an idea, Stark knows this, called the Avengers Initiative. The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people to see if they could become something more. To see if they could work together when we needed them to, to fight the battles that we never could. Phil Coulson died, still believing in that idea. In heroes. Well, it's a good old-fashioned notion." –Nick Fury, *The Avengers*.

Superhero narratives are ideologically potent because they comment on, among other things, the nature of power. According to scholars Matthew Costello and Kent Worcester:

> No matter how narrowly or broadly we define the term "politics," superheroes—by their very nature as cultural representations of super-empowered individuals—mirror, comment on, and sometimes parody the kinds of ideas, movements, policies, and institutions that interest political scientists.[1]

There is no question that superhero films, including the MCU films, contain political commentary, but it is often unclear whether the MCU is politically conservative, liberal, or a combination of the two. The most obvious answer, and one that helps frame this chapter, is that the MCU's political orientation depends on the specific film (or television episode/storyline). Examining the MCU's politics contributes to understanding how the franchise engages with 9/11 and the War on Terror. As I discuss in this chapter, films like *Winter Soldier* and *Iron Man 3* are more liberal than earlier films such as *Iron Man*, although they still maintain the MCU's mandate to entertain a mass audience. However, the Phase Two films regularly mock government and military inefficiency, warn about the dangers of blind patriotism and media propaganda, and advocate tearing down

existing power structures. In *Iron Man 3*, Tony Stark defeats a terrorist while a weak U.S. President cowers in fear and a scheming Vice President conspires with the film's villain. And in *Winter Soldier*, Captain America himself is the one to criticize post-9/11 America's militarization and preoccupation with preemptive security and drone warfare.

Political orientation is only one aspect of cinematic ideology. Films also reinforce or question existing social structures through representation. When it comes to issues of representation, the MCU films tend to reproduce prevailing social structures by predominantly featuring white, heterosexual, male heroes. While the Phase Two films may be more politically liberal than previous MCU films, they remain, for the most part, socially conservative. Five out of the six Avengers are white men, there are no openly LGBT characters or in the entire franchise, and racial minorities are often relegated to token sidekick roles. There are also no women of color in the films, with the exception of Latina actress Zoe Saldana who plays the green-skinned Gamora in *Guardians of the Galaxy*. *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* is slightly more racially diverse and gender balanced, although television has historically been ahead of film when it comes to issues of representation. Perhaps this discrepancy between the franchise's political and social representation is again a function of audience. When Disney initially bought Marvel, much of the industrial and trade discourse framed the deal as Disney' attempt to solve their "boy" problem. Says Disney CEO Bob Iger of the Marvel acquisition: "We view this as an opportunity to attract more boys and older kids."[2]

The MCU's lack of diversity is not surprising by action blockbuster standards, but stands out in comparison to various current Marvel comic publications, which feature a

female Thor, an African-American Captain America, a young Muslim Ms. Marvel, all female X-Men and Avengers teams, and a new series called *Spider-Gwen,* in which Peter Parker's girlfriend is the one bitten by a radioactive spider.[3] The differences between the film and comic books indicate varying marketing imperatives. Marvel publishes hundreds of comics, so diversity among various iterations of their heroes is not an issue: if a reader doesn't want to see a female Thor, her or she simply won't buy the comic. The MCU is slowly diversifying its roster, however, possibly as another way to compete with the DC cinematic universe,[4] though the MCU is still guilty of tokenism and placing characters of color into smaller "sidekick"' roles. For example, African-American actors Don Cheadle and Anthony Mackie have supporting roles in *Iron Man 2* and *3* and *Winter Soldier*. Both will appear in *Age of Ultron*, however, and there are rumors that they will both play a larger role in future films.[5]

Currently, Coulson's eight-person team on *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*. is split evenly between men and women and has three characters of color. *Agent Carter* centered on a female protagonist, and Marvel also recently announced its first solo films for a female superhero (*Captain Marvel*) and an African-American superhero (*Black Panther*).[6] While these developments are somewhat progressive, the MCU is still predominantly white and heterosexual, leading to the paradox that while the MCU has become increasingly liberal politically it remains socially conservative and continues to be problematic in terms of gender and racial representation, contributing to the debate about whether mainstream American film reinforces or questions the dominant sociopolitical ideology.

In many cases, popular American film reinforces prevailing social and political conditions. According to film scholar Robert Kolker in his book *A Cinema of Loneliness*:

> Every culture has a dominant ideology, and, as far as individuals assent to it, that ideology becomes part of the means of interpreting the self in the world and is seen reflected continually in the popular media, in politics, religion, education. But an ideology is never everywhere monolithic. It is full of contradictions, perpetually shifting and modifying itself as struggles within the culture continue and as contradictions develop. American film is both the carrier of the dominant ideology and a reflector, occasionally even an arbitrator, of the changes within it.[7]

Kolker's statement that cultural ideology is not fixed helps account for ideological contradictions within the MCU. I argue that there are two factors that contribute to ideological shifts between Phase One and Phase Two, both of which relate to the progress of the franchise over time. The concept of belatedness (discussed in the introduction to this thesis) allows for a more critical examination of the cultural impact of 9/11 and the War on Terror. Because more than a decade has elapsed since 9/11 and U.S. involvement in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is essentially over, I argue that American domestic and foreign policies like the PATRIOT Act and the Bush Doctrine of preemptive warfare can be scrutinized and critiqued in greater depth.

Another industrial factor introduced in Chapter One is the increasing transnationalism of the "American" film industry. Marvel Studios is heavily invested in the global market, especially after being purchased by a global brand like Disney. For example, *Avengers*—the first MCU film distributed by Disney—is currently the third highest-grossing film of all time and made almost twice as much overseas (approximately $1.5 billion)) than domestically ($623 million). When asked why *Iron Man 3* opened internationally before it premiered in the U.S., Disney's Vice President of Distribution

Dave Hollis notes that their release strategy is the result of Marvel Studios' films being intentionally crafted for a global market. Says Hollis, "These movies transcend geography and culture. They have a universal appeal."[8] The MCU films are especially translatable across cultures. This is an indication that although the MCU films do contain political commentary, they are not ideologically potent enough to alienate non-American audiences. This is especially true as their spectacular visual thrills are more important than their dialogue or U.S.-specific cultural references. Marvel Studios' international marketing strategy fits into Disney's overall goal in the sense that standardization and global brand awareness have become more important than cultural specificity. Disney theme parks around the world, for example, share similar layouts, designs, and even rides, with only subtle examples of cultural adaptation.[9]

As scholar Diana Crane observes in her discussion of transnational film, in contemporary Hollywood blockbusters "references to American culture are less specific while themes and motifs from other cultures are more prevalent."[10] Crane's observation is true where the Phase Two MCU films and *Agents of S.H. I.E.L.D*. are concerned. *Iron Man 3* critiques post-9/11 American society by implying that U.S. imperialism, lack of corporate ethics, and nationalistic media propaganda are far more dangerous than the nebulous threat of international terrorism. In addition, scenes set in Beijing and featuring Chinese actors were added for the Chinese version of the film.[11] *Thor: The Dark World* is about a war between races from other planets, and the scenes on Earth are set in London rather than in New York City or Los Angeles. *Guardians of the Galaxy* removes Earth from the equation entirely, and the forthcoming *Avengers: Age of Ultron* takes

place in various global locations including Seoul, South Korea. [12] According to director Joss Whedon, "[Age of Ultron] is a very global film. We wanted the world perspective on the Avengers."[13] Disney and Marvel's desire to continue to succeed overseas may contribute to why the Phase Two films are markedly less jingoistic than earlier MCU films.

The goal of this chapter is to examine how ideology functions in the MCU. The aim is not to establish whether the films are primarily liberal or conservative, as such a categorical determination is impossible given the contradictions mentioned previously. Instead, this chapter examines several critical post-9/11 political themes in order to examine how the MCU engages with contemporary cultural and political anxieties. I argue that the MCU films become more critical of the dominant ideology starting at the end of Phase One in *Avengers*, but especially in *Iron Man 3*, *Winter Soldier*, and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*. Each of these films and the TV show question and even subvert a pro-American, conservative political ideology.

Avengers and *Iron Man 3* both engage with the theme of "blowback," which is the idea that the United States was partially responsible for the international political climate resulting in 9/11. Both films illustrate the concept of creating one's own enemy by introducing villains who have a history with one of the protagonists. The theme of blowback in the MCU would appear to critique American arrogance regarding our own invulnerability to terrorism. In *Winter Soldier*, the enemy is within S.H.I.E.LD. in a play on the idea of the terrorist sleeper cell. *Avengers* and *Winter Soldier* also examine the consequences of expanded government surveillance and the dystopian consequences of

preemptive warfare Finally, all three films struggle with the true meaning of heroism and patriotism.

While *Avengers*, *Iron Man 3*, and *Winter Soldier* are more political and overtly critical of the U.S. government and military than other MCU films, they still do not completely escape the general conservatism of the Hollywood blockbuster. As Darghis argues of *Iron Man 3*, the MCU consistently falls into the trap of presenting post-9/11 political criticism and simultaneously dodging it by cloaking it in the trappings of fantasy. For example, Nick Fury's transformation from being obsessed with national security at the expense of individual freedoms to helping Rogers take down S.H.I.E.L.D. occurs fairly quickly, and (unsurprisingly) none of the MCU's primary heroes are involved in the Nazi conspiracy growing within S.H.I.E.L.D. All it takes is a few convincing speeches from Captain America to convince Nick Fury and Black Widow to let S.H.I.E.L.D. fall and declassify the agency's most incriminating secrets.

Even in the case of *Winter Soldier*, perhaps the MCU's most political film to date, critics were divided as to the depth of the film's critical commentary. *Entertainment Weekly* critic Owen Gleiberman says, "*Captain America: The Winter Soldier* is the first superhero film since the terrorist-inflected *The Dark Knight* that plugs you right into what's happening now."[14] *Atlantic* writer Christopher Orr adds: "The movie's message is exquisitely calibrated to the political moment and is one that speaks to apprehensions shared on both left and right: In a world as chaotic as this, the temptation to trade freedom for security is ever-present."[15] Other critics, by contrast, found little to distinguish *Winter Soldier* from the other MCU films. *Salon* critic Andrew O'Hehir says

the film's surveillance plot "makes the movie sound 'subversive,' or something, but this purported anti-fascist tale is delivered in high-fascist incoherent action-movie style."[16] And Joe Williams of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* observes that the film "retreats from the very issues it raises."[17] This lack of consensus demonstrates the challenges involved in reading mainstream film ideologically, as well as the possible variations in reception even among a fairly uniform group such as film critics. In spite of these difficulties, I attempt just such an ideological analysis in this chapter by integrating textual analysis and industrial discourse.

"We Create Our Own Demons": Blowback and Post-9/11 Guilt

In her article "Villains, Victims, and Melodrama," scholar Elizabeth Anker describes the way post-9/11 America was characterized in political and media rhetoric, writing, "America is fashioned as an imagined community unadulterated by immorality or evil. The country is designated as both unified and virtuous, and any state action taken…is predicated by the justification of moral righteousness."[18] However, many scholars, philosophers, and artists have struggled with the depiction of America as a nation of innocent victims, at least in terms of our foreign policy and history of intervention in the Middle East. As post-colonial scholars Ella Shohat and Robert Stam point out:

> While the United States thinks of itself as promoting peace in the world, much of the world finds it bellicose. Delusion and narcissism are intimately linked. And because neither the government nor the media explain what the government is really doing abroad and with what consequences, uninformed Americans are usually surprised by the angry ''blowback'' provoked by U.S. policies. The shock

> derives from the gap between the idealized self-perception and the unflattering reflection of oneself in the eyes of others.[19]

The gap between how America sees itself and how the rest of the world sees us is partially responsible for the many moral and political gray areas indicative of post-9/11 international relations, complexities that manifested themselves in cultural products including film and television.

According to post-colonial scholar Edward Said, best known for his work on Orientalism, framing terrorists as "evildoers" without specific political motivations for their actions creates a binary that inevitably leads to racist and nationalistic conceptions of the Other. In an opinion piece in *The Guardian*, published only days after 9/11, Said critiques how quickly the media and politicians framed the attacks as evidence of a fundamental divide between "East" and "West," "Us" and "Them," "America" and "the terrorists." Said states:

> You'd think "America" was a sleeping giant rather than a superpower almost constantly at war, or in some sort of conflict, all over the Islamic domains. Osama bin Laden's name and face have become so numbingly familiar to Americans as in effect to obliterate any history he and his shadowy followers might have had before they became stock symbols of everything loathsome and hateful to the collective imagination.[20]

Using Osama bin Laden as a symbol of pure evil conveniently obscures political intricacies that contradict the narrative propagated by two presidential administrations and the media between 2001 and bin Laden's death in 2011. According to Boggs and Pollard:

> Far from being mysterious or irrational, popular Arab/Muslim anger toward the United States turns on several mundane (and globally recognized) outrages:

> American political hegemony, a long history of bloody military interventions, unwavering support for Israel, enforcement of a neoliberal globalization regimen. These issues are routinely ignored or downplayed in Hollywood movies dealing with terrorism, as the more convenient "clash" scenario is preferred.[21]

Many post-9/11 films depicted this "clash of civilizations" scenario, although they did so in code by setting films in different time periods or by making films in fantastical genres in order to avoid obvious political allegories. Given Hollywood's preference for a simple division between "ourselves" and "Others," it is especially significant that a franchise as mainstream as the MCU takes on the issue of blowback.

There are several reasons the more recent MCU films contain stronger themes of post-9/11 guilt and anxiety about blowback, one being the previously mentioned concept of belatedness. As Douglas Kellner observes, "Some of the superhero films of the late Bush-Cheney administration…can be read as a critique of the failed conservative regime."[22] In addition to the MCU, other post-9/11 superhero films including *The Dark Knight* explore the concept of blowback. When Bruce Wayne tells his butler Alfred that Gotham's mob crossed the line by working with the Joker, Alfred replies: "You crossed the line first, sir. You hammered them, and in their desperation they turned to a man they didn't fully understand." The emergence of increasingly dangerous and unpredictable villains in response to militaristic superheroes like Batman and Iron Man could be interpreted as an allegory for how an imperialistic global superpower like the United States awakened enemies across the globe. Unlike the Joker, most of the villains in the MCU have some motivation for their actions such as gaining power or wealth. Their goal is not merely (as Alfred observes of the Joker) "to watch the world burn."

The consequences of blowback are introduced early in the MCU but become more pronounced in *Avengers*, *Iron Man 3*, *Winter Soldier*, and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*. The first two *Iron Man* films introduce the idea of creating one's own enemy by featuring villains like Obadiah Stane, Justin Hammer, and Anton Vanko, all of whom have personal vendettas against Tony Stark and/or Stark Industries. In *Iron Man*, Tony Stark's own business partner, Obadiah Stane, sees Stark's disillusionment with his company's bloody legacy as a sign of naïveté and weakness. Stane is not bothered by the ethics of producing weapons. In the end, Stane is the one who experiences blowback as his attempt to recreate the Iron Man armor fails and ends up killing him. In *Iron Man 2*, as mentioned in Chapter One, blowback comes in the form of the film's "sins of the father" theme. The same thing happens in *The Incredible Hulk*, when the man the Army hires to take out Bruce Banner turns into a monster known as the Abomination. Bruce Banner, the film's Other, ends up saving the day when the military's arrogant and misguided attempt to create another Hulk backfires.

In *Thor*, Loki's sense of abandonment and ambivalence toward his father Odin clearly contributes to his evolution into villain. In *Avengers*, the idea of terrorism as a response to American global hegemony is made explicit through the conflict between Nick Fury and the other Avengers. As briefly mentioned in Chapter One, Fury uses Thor's presence on Earth in *Thor* as a reason for his agency's increasing obsession with eliminating potential threats: "The world is filling up with people that can't be matched, that can't be controlled!" says Fury. "Your work with the Tesseract is what drew Loki to it…and his allies. It is a signal to the Realm that Earth is ready for a higher form of war,"

responds Thor. Not only does *Avengers* imply that Fury and S.H.I.E.L.D. are partially responsible for Loki's terrorist actions, Thor himself struggles with his own sense of guilt about his brother's behavior. "When I first came to Earth, Loki's rage followed me here and your people paid the price," Thor tells Agent Coulson, "and now again."

Blowback is the primary theme of *Iron Man 3*, in which Tony Stark struggles with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, one of several indications that the Battle of New York in *Avengers* is the 9/11 of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. At the beginning of the film (which is narrated by Stark), the hero states: "A famous man once said, we create our own demons." In a flashback, Stark is introduced to a young scientist named Aldrich Killian, who wants the billionaire to invest in his scientific research. Stark ignores Killian in favor of seducing a woman, setting off a chain of events that will come back to haunt him over a decade later. "I'd just created demons and I didn't even know it yet," says Stark in voiceover. Stark's guilt and the effects of trauma literally prevent him from sleeping, even though, as he says, "I have neat stuff, a great girl, and occasionally save the world." Although Stark is supposed to be a hero, his previous arrogance and refusal to recognize the humanity of others helps turn a promising young scientist into a terrorist. Ironically, Stark's main goal is to "protect the things I can't live without" such as his girlfriend Pepper, but being Iron Man often puts the people he loves in harm's way.

The first hint of blowback in *Iron Man 3* comes in the form of a threat against the United States by a terrorist known as the Mandarin. "Some call me a terrorist, I consider myself a teacher," taunts the Mandarin (Ben Kingsley). The Mandarin intentionally resembles bin Laden in a variety of ways, from his long beard to the anti-American

iconography in his videos and the fact that he threatens the United States with future acts of terrorism. The Mandarin also has obscure geographic origins, and does not appear to be associated with any nation or state. "You know who I am, you don't know where I am, and you'll never see me coming," threatens the Mandarin, perfectly encapsulating the most frightening aspects of modern day terrorism. If the implication of blowback wasn't obvious enough, the Mandarin also refers to America's imperialist history in his video, describing the way the United States massacred Native Americans. The Mandarin blows up military installations and kills American civilians in the Middle East in order to teach America "another lesson." In a later video, he murders an accountant who works for an American oil company, telling the President, "You continue to resist my attempts to educate you sir." In both cases, the Mandarin holds the United States accountable for his acts of terrorism. According to Douglas Kellner in his article "Preemptive Strikes and the War on Iraq," "Becoming hegemon breeds resentment and hostility and when the Empire carries out aggression it elicits anger and creates enemies, intensifying the dangers of perpetual war."[23]

The references to blowback in *Iron Man 3* are multilayered and affect the United States as a whole and Tony Stark personally. After another Mandarin attack puts Stark's friend and bodyguard in the hospital, Tony Stark threatens the terrorist, insulting his masculinity and daring him to reveal his identity (he even gives the Mandarin his home address). It is not until the Mandarin destroys Stark's home and nearly kills his girlfriend Pepper that Stark realizes the terrorist has a personal vendetta against him. The theme of creating one's own enemy becomes explicit after the film's main plot twist reveals that

the Mandarin is actually an actor. Rather than an evil terrorist, the Mandarin is actually a fictional creation of Aldrich Killian's, what Stark refers to as a "custom-made terror threat." The Mandarin turns out to be a smokescreen designed to hide the fact Killian's unethical scientific experimentation on disabled American soldiers, which may be another reference to post-9/11 American guilt; this time regarding the treatment of war veterans.

I argue that *Iron Man 3* explores the idea of the Orientalized villain as a way to distract American anxiety from our own nefarious role in foreign affairs. The blowback against Tony Stark in the film stems not from a general threat of global terrorism, but from his own past involvement in the Military Industrial Complex. Killian, who uses the technology he invents for evil, is exactly who Tony Stark might have become had he chosen to continue in the weapons industry after becoming aware of the unethical use of Stark technology. Instead of fearing a shadowy terrorist hiding somewhere across the world, *Iron Man 3* implies that US citizens should instead concern themselves with the expansion of American imperial power and the use of American science and technology for immoral purposes. *Iron Man 3* takes the criticism present in earlier MCU films—that the biggest danger to the United States comes from within, particularly from the Military Industrial Complex—and makes it more explicit. American corporate and political greed and hunger for power is not merely the hidden evil behind the smokescreen of the foreign Other; it is the *only* threat.

The Mandarin reveal is significant for several reasons. First, Killian actually thanks Stark for inspiring him to design the Extremis[24] project that resulted in the murder

of American soldiers and several acts of terrorism. By brushing him off, Stark gave Killian the "greatest gift anyone's ever given me: desperation." Killian further credits Stark for giving him the idea for the Mandarin ruse: "Anonymity, Tony. Thanks to you, it's been my mantra ever since, right? You simply rule from behind the scenes. Because the second you give evil a face, a bin Laden, a Gaddafi, the Mandarin, you hand the people a target." Killian's words essentially echo a decade's worth of political justifications for invading Iraq and Afghanistan. Echoing Killian's statement in her article about the post-9/11 counterterrorism efforts, scholar Karen Engle states, "…in addition to the U.S. Administration's official policies of surveillance…the solution to this 'stuff of nightmare' has been overwhelmingly simple: Give the enemy a mug [face] and a moniker."[25]

Iron Man 3's criticism of the government is enhanced when the film reveals that Killian is part of a conspiracy that includes the Vice President. The Vice President supports Killian's schemes, and in exchange, Killian agrees to assassinate the President. According to director Shane Black, the Mandarin's portrayal "offers up a way that you can sort of show how people are complicit in being frightened." Black goes on to say: "I think that's a message that's more interesting for the modern world, because I think there's a lot of fear that's generated toward very available and obvious targets, which could perhaps be directed more intelligently at what's behind them."[26] Again, the MCU's need to appeal to a global market makes a difference here. Had the Mandarin—who was essentially a racist caricature in the comics—remained a cliché Asian villain, the film may have alienated foreign audiences. Making him the fictional creation of an American

think tank is not only a politically correct move, but also a more interesting one in terms of how the film views American imperialism and the Military Industrial Complex.

Black's choices regarding the Mandarin are part of what makes *Iron Man 3* more politically cynical than other films in the MCU. The film appears to be saying that there are aspects of America's War on Terror that require elements of political theater to be convincing. The Mandarin's soundstage, complete with props and costumes, brings to mind instances of post-9/11 political theater like George W. Bush's "Mission Accomplished" speech in 2003. As Boggs and Pollard comment:

> Media construction of events and manipulation of popular consciousness have become integral to American political culture, and this lies at the center of all recent U.S. military interventions. Increasingly, media involvement in government lies, myths, and distortions has contributed vitally to legitimation of war as a means to advance U.S. global interests.[27]

Aside from its warning about the dangers of propaganda, the film further cautions that those in power should be cautious in their treatment of the those they consider Others, an idea relevant to the United States in terms of international relations. Just as Tony Stark must accept his share of responsibility for Killian's actions, the United States must also recognize that it cannot always behave like an empire while referring to itself as a democracy. While none of this is particularly politically radical, *Iron Man 3*'s critique of our nation's motives for participating in the War on Terror make the film slightly more anti-establishment than earlier MCU films.

Winter Soldier and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*. both pick up on *Iron Man 3*'s anxiety about the enemy within. The reveal that HYDRA has been growing within S.H.I.E.L.D. demonstrates that even the most well-intentioned government organizations (not to

mention those with questionable motives) can be corrupted, echoing fears about the unethical behavior of the CIA in regards to torture and the NSA in terms of mass surveillance and government secrecy. In another post-9/11 reference, HYDRA is literally a "sleeper cell" within S.H.I.E.L.D. In *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, Agent Grant Ward (Brett Dalton), a series regular and core member of Coulson's team, is revealed to be a double agent working for HYDRA. After this reveal, the rest of the team is forced to cope with the revelation that they may have no idea who their true enemy is. This is also the case in *Winter Soldier* when the HYDRA reveal turns S.H.I.E.L.D. in on itself. During the film's climactic battle, Sam Wilson tells Captain America that it's impossible to tell the good guys from the bad since they all look like S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. "If they're shooting at you they're bad," replies Steve Rogers.

In *Avengers*, *Iron Man 3*, *Winter Soldier*, and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.,* the primary conflict is that America, a supposed paragon of freedom and democracy, has a shadowy underbelly where greed, torture, espionage, and secrecy prosper and where dangerous enemies lurk undetected. As scholar Jane Caputi observes of 9/11, "The destroyed towers remind us that much violence results from the categorical oppositions that structure our consciousness, leading to our inability to perceive the abiding reality that what we do to another we also do to ourselves."[28] Only by realizing that binaries like "us and them" and "good and evil" are, as Edward Said puts it, "false banners,"[29] can heroes like Tony Stark and the United States as a whole stop the cycle of violence and blowback that has defined U.S./Middle Eastern relations for decades. The themes of blowback and government corruptions are central to *Iron Man 3* and are even more pronounced in *Winter Soldier*. In

the film, those responsible for protecting our nation are actually the biggest threats to freedom, and Captain America can no longer trust anyone in an authority position.

"Captain America is on Threat Watch?" Freedom vs. Security in *Winter Soldier*

Captain America: The Winter Soldier takes several thematic elements from *Avengers* and expands upon them, particularly S.H.I.E.L.D. and Nick Fury's increasing obsession with national security at any price. The film moves beyond Phase One's Bush-era concerns to evoke Obama-era anxieties regarding the NSA, Wikileaks, and government secrecy. At the beginning of the film, Nick Fury sends Steve Rogers and Agent Romanoff on a mission to save S.H.I.E.L.D. hostages captured by pirates. When Rogers finds out the hostages were a distraction to allow Romanoff to steal data for Fury, he confronts the Director about keeping secrets from him. "It's called compartmentalization," Fury tells Rogers. "Nobody spills the secrets because nobody knows them all." According to scholar Nancy Baker, "National security and the war against terrorism have heightened the administration's determination to control the flow of information to an unprecedented degree," [30] a preoccupation shared by Nick Fury and many within S.H.I.E.L.D. In contrast, Steve Rogers challenges Fury with the argument that armies and organizations function best when the members trust each other and the truth is out in the open. Compartmentalization of knowledge is also an issue in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, which indicates that secrecy is intrinsic to S.H.I.E.L.D.'s operations. At one point, Coulson tells his teammate Skye, "If S.H.I.E.L.D. keeps secrets it's for a good reason." As previously mentioned, even Coulson realizes that S.H.I.E.L.D.'s secrecy can

have unethical consequences when he learns about Fury hiding the details of Coulson's "death."

Rogers' conflict with Fury in *Winter Soldier* deepens when he learns about Project Insight, a S.H.I.E.L.D. threat identification and elimination program:

> **Fury:** We're gonna neutralize a lot of threats before they happen.
> **Rogers:** I thought the punishment usually came after the crime.
> **Fury:** We can't afford to wait that long. After New York, I convinced the Security Council we needed a quantum surge in threat analysis. For once we're ahead of the curve.
> **Rogers:** By holding a gun to the world and calling it protection.

This dialogue brings up two substantial post-9/11 political concerns: surveillance as a tool for preemptive security and the Bush Doctrine of preemptive warfare. In Fury's mind, surveillance is a logical way to ensure S.H.I.E.L.D. will never again be taken by surprise like they were with Loki. While this may seem like a logical response to potential threats, it also creates a dangerous policy of preemption. According to scholars David Lyon and Kevin Haggerty: "Commitment to 'pre-crime' or preemption produces early intervention and social sorting and minimizes civil liberties. This is a paradox because although the practice is 'pre-crime' (no law is broken yet), suspects are treated as if they are criminals."[31]

Surveillance and preemptive security aside, the truly chilling consequences of Project Insight relate to the elimination aspect of the project rather than the threat identification aspect. The Project Insight satellites are linked to a weapons system that can "eliminate a thousand hostiles a minute," reveals Fury. "This isn't freedom, this is fear," responds Rogers. Clearly, the Project Insight technology in the wrong hands is

extremely dangerous. When Rogers asks HYDRA agent Jasper Sitwell who they intend to target with the Project Insight system, Sitwell replies: "You! A TV anchor in Cairo, the Under Secretary of Defense, a high school valedictorian in Iowa City, Bruce Banner, Stephen Strange, anyone who's a threat to HYDRA, now or in the future." According to *Winter Soldier* co-director Joe Russo, "The question is where do you stop? If there are 100 people we can kill to make us safer, do we do it? What if we find out there's 1,000? What if we find out there's 10,000? What if it's a million?"[32] Fury's willingness to eliminate thousands of people on the chance they might become dangerous demonstrates the extent to which S.H.I.E.L.D. has stopped believing in the value of individual human lives.

In addition to its implications regarding domestic surveillance, Project Insight also functions as an allegory for post-9/11 U.S. foreign policies that justified preemptive war. As historical scholar Arthur Schlesinger observes of the second Bush administration in his book *War and the American Presidency*, "The essence of our new strategy is military: to strike a potential enemy unilaterally if necessary, before he has a chance to strike us. War, traditionally a matter of last resort, becomes a matter of presidential choice."[33] Schlesinger refers here to the Bush Doctrine, which was the center of U.S. foreign policy during the George W. Bush Administration. As political scholars Peter Dombrowski and Rodger Payne describe it:

> At its most basic, the Bush Doctrine to date consists of two interrelated elements. First, the United States reserves the right to use force preemptively against terrorists, their state supporters, and rogue states that seek to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Second, the United States makes no distinction between those who undertake terrorism and those who harbor terrorists.[34]

There is a difference between preemptive and preventative warfare. According to political scholar Jack Levy, preemptive warfare occurs when those in power believe an attack or threat is imminent, while preventative warfare is a response to a future threat that is potentially dangerous, but not immediate.[35] Much of the debate regarding the Bush Doctrine as a justification for the 2003 invasion of Iraq revolves around whether the administration made a preemptive or a preventative decision by declaring war. The eventual reveal that Iraq did not have weapons of mass destruction led many to believe the administration engaged in preventative war based on faulty, or even intentionally manipulated, intelligence. Critics of the Bush Doctrine believe that America engaging in preventative war creates a dangerous precedent that threatens international order.

Regardless of whether the war in Iraq is an example of preemptive or preventative warfare, in *Winter Soldier* Project Insight is clearly an example of preventative aggression. As Levy observes:

> Prevention is a response to a future threat rather than an immediate threat. It is driven by the anticipation of an adverse power shift and the fear of the consequences, including the deterioration of one's relative military position and bargaining power and the risk of war—or of extensive concessions necessary to avoid war—under less favorable circumstances later. The incentive is to forestall the power shift by blocking the rise of the adversary while the opportunity is still available.[36]

Prevention is clearly Nick Fury and S.H.I.E.L.D.'s motivation for creating Project Insight, as many of the individuals on their watch list have yet to present a threat to S.H.I.E.L.D. and some are even S.H.I.E.L.D.'s allies. In fact, the project's goals are so aggressive that Fury himself eventually becomes disillusioned and attempts to stop the

project from going forward. When U.S. Secretary of Defense and World Security Council member Alexander Pierce (Robert Redford) turns out to be HYDRA and sends an assassin to kill Fury, Fury finally agrees with Steve Rogers that S.H.I.E.L.D. should be dismantled entirely. Before going undercover to flee HYDRA, Natasha Romanoff decides to declassify all of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s files; an obvious nod to whistleblowers like Edward Snowden and Wikileaks' Julian Assange. While revealing S.H.I.E.L.D.'s secrets makes the public aware of some of the agency's unethical dealings, it also ensures HYDRA cannot blackmail them.

Winter Soldier makes the point that while a fearful nation may be willing to sacrifice personal freedom in exchange for a sense of security and safety, the consequences of such a sacrifice are frightening to consider. In fact, it is exactly this logic that allows HYDRA to gain power. As a HYDRA scientist, Arnim Zola (Toby Jones), tells Steve Rogers, "HYDRA was founded on the concept that humanity could not be trusted with its own freedom." Zola goes on to say, "HYDRA has created a world so chaotic that humanity is willing to give up its freedom to gain its security." Not only does HYDRA take advantage of post-9/11 anxieties about national security, they also use 21st century technological tools to do so. When Captain America goes on the run, a HYDRA operative tells his underlings to "scan all open sources, phones, PDAs, whatever. If someone Tweets about this guy, I want to know about it." While Captain America being on threat watch is a bit of a joke in *Avengers*, in *Winter Soldier* he must flee an actual manhunt. Agent Jasper Sitwell, another HYDRA turncoat, credits the surveillance state for HYDRA's ability to infiltrate S.H.I.E.L.D: "The 21st century is a digital book. Zola

taught HYDRA how to read it. Your bank records, medical histories, voting patterns, emails, phone calls, your damn SAT scores! Zola's algorithm evaluates people's past to predict their future." *Winter Soldier*'s warning about the consequences of expanded surveillance has obvious parallels to our current reality. As a recent *Time* article notes:

> Almost overnight, and with too little reflection, the U.S. and other developed nations have stacked the deck in favor of the watchers. A surveillance society is taking root. Video cameras peer constantly from lamp poles and storefronts. Satellites and drones float hawkeyed through the skies.[37]

Winter Soldier's criticism of the surveillance state is part of what makes it more politically liberal than other MCU films. While those in power have consistently defended the necessity of expanded surveillance, the surveillance programs revealed by Edward Snowden and other whistleblowers demonstrate the extent of the American intelligence operation's intrusion into personal privacy.

The debate about the value of freedom over security is likely to play a role in future MCU films. For example, the trailer for *Avengers: Age of Ultron* shows Ultron, an Artificial Intelligence program designed by Tony Stark, turning against its creator and unleashing mass destruction. "I tried to create a suit of armor around the world," Stark says in the trailer. "Instead I created something terrible." *Captain America: Civil War* (2017) is also likely to address similar themes, although the actual ideology of the film is impossible to predict given the industrial shifts I mention earlier. Phase Three might be just as different (if not more so) from Phase Two than Phase Two was from Phase One. Contrastingly, as Nancy Baker observes, the semi-permanent status of the War on Terror may indicate that the debate over civil liberties in American society will continue to be an

important one for years to come. Baker writes:

> Liberties are not luxuries to be sacrificed in the short term until we can afford them again. Liberties are gaping holes in the security fabric; they must be sealed off permanently if the nation is to be safe. The demands of a war on terrorism also undercut the likelihood that liberties can be reasserted, because a war without a clear end will never produce the peace of mind necessary to reflect on what we have lost.[38]

Winter Soldier could be viewed as a meditation on what the U.S. has lost since 9/11 as Steve Rogers represents an earlier era. Although the film's hero fought in the so-called "good war," where the enemy was easy to identify and the reason to go to war clear, Captain America must instead find out where he fits into an ethically murky 21st century society.

Post-9/11 Patriotism and the Role of the Hero

Avengers, *Iron Man 3*, and *Winter Soldier* all demonstrate that patriotism is a troubled concept in post-9/11 American society and that the role of the hero is not necessarily to blindly follow authority and support existing power structures. Again, the "alternative patriotism" Spanakos describes is present in earlier MCU films, but it is far more explicit in these later entries. Although the MCU heroes do believe in, as comics scholars Richard Gray and Betty Kaklamanidou put it, "the idea of peace, safety, and freedom and seek to restore the planet to a nostalgic harmony,"[39] this belief does not require them to buy into simplistic notions of nationalism. In fact, Tony Stark, Steve Rogers, Bruce Banner, and Thor all demonstrate true patriotism when they question Fury and S.H.I.E.L.D. in *Avengers*, and Rogers continues to question what it means to be

patriotic and an American in *Winter Soldier*. The fact that these heroes express their dissent may be a product of belatedness. In the years directly following 9/11, dissent was considered unpatriotic. As scholars such as Thomas Schatz and Douglas Kellner have pointed out, American film from 2008 onward engaged more directly with the consequences of 9/11 and the War on Terror, often in critical ways. As Kellner notes, many of these films were:

> marked by critical examination of recent history, the rupture of conservative ideological consensus concerning American triumphalism, and controversial presentation of major figures and events that opened up discussion and debate rather than comforting ideological closure.[40]

The MCU also criticizes government hegemony by having its heroes work outside of official channels and often without military authority. Although heroes seeking justice outside of the establishment has a historical basis in pre-9/11 superhero films and comic books, the post-9/11 state of permanent national security crisis makes the MCU's accusations of government and military inefficiency more significant. According to Mathew Costello:

> The new political economy of the Marvel universe, like that of the United States, is one where the government is increasingly untrustworthy, every group has a private and often sinister agenda, and global threats need to be faced but often lead to the realization that the source of these threats emanates from those who are supposed to be defending against them.[41]

As I've noted, the government proves untrustworthy in *Iron Man 3* when America is threatened by a conspiracy involving the Vice President and the military is unequipped to handle the Mandarin crisis. At the beginning of the film, James Rhodes tells Tony Stark that the Mandarin situation is "Not superhero business, it's American business."

Unfortunately, Rhodes' attempts to resolve the crisis under the command of the U.S. Army fail miserably. For example, the Mandarin tricks Rhodes into storming a factory in Pakistan that ends up only containing female textile workers. "You're free, if you weren't already," stammers Rhodes, exemplifying military incompetence. This moment can also be interpreted as a critique of globalization. The Pakistani women in the factory are not threatened by Arab terrorists, instead they are laboring to produce clothing likely to be sold overseas.

The film's pointed critique of American patriotism deepens when Killian uses Rhodes' Iron Patriot armor to kidnap the President. Because of the armor's red, white, and blue design and the fact that he was sent by the military, no one questions his presence on Air Force One. As is the case in all the *Iron Man* films, Tony Stark must eventually take matters into his own hands. According to Susan Kord and Elisabeth Krimmer, "Iron Man always gets the job done, while the U.S. military is entangled in a bureaucratic web of restrictive regulations and conflicts between its various branches of service. The only job that the government accomplishes more effectively than Iron Man concerns the deception of the public."[42] Even more significant than the fact that Stark solves the Mandarin crisis on his own is that he mostly does so without the help of his Iron Man armor. At the beginning of the film, Pepper accuses Tony of using his suits as a distraction. Building new armor is a way for Stark to cope with his PTSD and to ensure he will never be vulnerable, but after the Mandarin attacks his home Tony must rely on his ingenuity and courage to locate and defeat the terrorist. Stark is able to infiltrate the Mandarin's lair using devices made from items he purchased at a drugstore. In this

sequence, Stark is an effective symbol of American individualism, technological superiority, and heroism. In *Iron Man 3,* true patriotism involves doing the right thing, even when the correct course of action goes against the wishes of the authorities.

Steve Rogers' perspective on patriotism also continues to evolve in *Winter Soldier*. At the beginning of the film, he tells Peggy Carter (now an old woman), "For as long as I can remember I just wanted to do what was right. I guess I'm not quite sure what that is anymore. And I thought I could throw myself back in and follow orders, serve. It's just not the same." At one point in the film, Rogers goes incognito to visit a Smithsonian exhibit celebrating Captain America. The exhibit's patriotic imagery presumably reminds Rogers of a more innocent time, which stands in stark contrast to the threats he currently faces. He even steals the older version of his uniform from the exhibit and wears it at the end of the film instead of the less patriotic "stealth suit" created by S.H.I.E.L.D.

As a former soldier, it is difficult for Rogers to process that doing the right thing requires him to work against S.H.I.E.L.D. and be pursued by his own government. Like Tony Stark, Rogers is willing to work alone, although he hopes his example will encourage other S.H.I.E.L.D. agents to join the fight against HYDRA. "I know I'm asking a lot," says Rogers towards the end of the film, "but the price of freedom is high. It always has been. And it's a price I'm willing to pay. And if I'm the only one, then so be it. But I'm willing to bet I'm not." In *Winter Soldier,* true patriotism forces Rogers to operate outside of the law. It also requires him to tear down the power structure entirely. At the end of the film, Rogers tells Fury, "We're not just taking down the carriers, Nick. We're taking down S.H.I.E.L.D." Rogers recognizes the impossibility of weeding out the

bad apples within S.H.I.E.L.D. Therefore, starting over from scratch is the only responsible decision. Taking down S.H.I.E.L.D. may be the right choice, but it also leaves the organization's agents in a vulnerable position: by the end of the film they believe Nick Fury is dead with no obvious successor, and they must decide whether to remain loyal to the remnants of S.H.I.E.L.D., join HYDRA, or take another path entirely. For example, Natasha Romanoff goes off on her own, Steve Rogers and Sam Wilson begin a search for the Winter Soldier, and Fury's right-hand woman Maria Hill goes to work for Tony Stark.

The idea of operating in secrecy and without S.H.I.E.L.D.'s protection initially unsettles many of the members of Coulson's team in *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, but Coulson maintains that the team's actions need not be publicly sanctioned or even visible to be morally valid. Skye, a newly minted S.H.I.E.L.D. agent, tells Coulson, "We'll be ghosts…not agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., just agents of nothing." Coulson reminds her that the team can still uphold the agency's original mission: "To serve when everything else fails. To be humanity's last line of defense. To be the shield." *Avengers*, *Iron Man 3*, *Winter Soldier*, and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* all make the point that truth and justice rarely come from official sources like the government and military. There are also economic implications to the Phase Two films' critique of American power: corporations engage in unethical science and are part of secret conspiracies. Through the words and actions of its heroes, the MCU demonstrates that positive American values like justice, courage, and compassion are still present in post-9/11 society, even with the "new normal" where the

government, military, and private economy are often hindered by paranoia, greed, and an imperialistic obsession with power and security.

Conclusion

Although the Phase Two films and *Agents of S.H.I.E.LD*. may be more explicitly liberal and politically critical than earlier MCU films, they still exemplify the tension between Marvel Studios' attempts to engage with current sociopolitical issues and its tendency to oversimplify complex themes and lighten up serious material in the name of entertainment. For example, there is a constant emphasis on maintaining the MCU's trademark style of humor. In *Winter Soldier*, for example, Steve Rogers and Natasha Romanoff banter about Steve's romantic life while on missions. Their interactions and the amusing "bromance" between Rogers and Sam Wilson add lightness to an otherwise weighty narrative. *Iron Man 3* employs similar strategies to break up narrative tension. For example, Tony's attempts to be a good boyfriend fail miserably when he gives Pepper a giant stuffed rabbit as a Christmas gift, and the middle stretch of the film pairs Stark with a precocious boy named Harley (Ty Simpkins), providing comic relief after the Mandarin's attacks.

The films also ensure that visual spectacle takes center stage. Major set pieces, such as a giant battle featuring over forty different versions of Tony's armor in *Iron Man 3*, provide the customary effects-driven thrills. Despite their political commentary, therefore, these are certainly not radical or even strikingly progressive films; they are clearly designed to entertain and please a wide audience. The MCU has a long way to go

before it is truly socially and politically progressive. Even in the more critical MCU films, the franchise still glorifies war and destruction. Issues of representation also maintain the films' conservatism: casual sexism remains an unfortunate pattern within the franchise, as does the lack of racial diversity.

Although the MCU could be described as ideologically conservative for the above reasons, such a reading is complicated by the political themes that emerge at the end of Phase One and evolve throughout Phase Two. In *Avengers*, *Iron Man 3*, *Winter Soldier*, and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.,* part of the hero's mission requires what Anthony Spanakos describes as, "finding an authentic and just patriotism while rejecting official accounts and/or the narrative of the military industrial complex."[43] The counter-patriotism present in these films is especially surprising given the power of what Boggs and Pollard refer to as the "Hollywood war machine." They write:

> TV, radio, and print journalists have been central to this process [of war propaganda], routinely carrying forward those false discourses, bolstering the dominant ideological framework, and failing to critically investigate the claims and pretensions of government and military officials. Media culture has evolved into a propaganda apparatus, especially in the realm of international concerns, where corporate and Pentagon interests are able to create their own version of "reality" for an American public already inclined to follow the prevailing discourses.[44]

Iron Man 3, in particular, criticizes the entire notion of propaganda. The existence of the Mandarin, a terrorist dreamed up by a think tank, is testament to the ease with which a provocation for war can be faked or exaggerated. James Rhodes' transformation from War Machine to Iron Patriot because the name tested better with focus groups is a more humorous, but still critical, sendup of post-9/11 patriotic propaganda.

In the next chapter, I address the aesthetic elements of the MCU's engagement with 9/11 and the War on Terror. Like the political critiques discussed in this chapter, imagery related to 9/11 and the War on Terror both evokes cultural trauma and also attempts to reverse the traumatic nature of the images. In various MCU films, for example, scenes of falling bodies reminiscent of the 9/11 jumpers are reinscribed as fantasy. The falling person is rescued at the last second by one of our heroes, and tragedy is averted. Because ideology is inextricable from film style, both play a role in defining Marvel Studios' approach to 9/11 and the War on Terror.

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Chapter Three. SMASH!: The MCU and the Post-9/11 Aesthetic

"To be sure, a cityscape is not made of flesh. Still, sheared-off buildings are almost as eloquent as bodies in the street."—Susan Sontag[1]

"Once we loved movies where tall buildings exploded or burned to the ground. Now we don't like those so much. And then again, ***now*** *we do." –Jeffery Melnick*[2]

The events of September 11, 2001 created a collection of images that have become part of the national—and global—consciousness. With over a decade of news reports, documentaries, films, anniversary retrospectives, comic books, art exhibitions, and novels contributing to the 9/11 imaginary, most Americans can easily call to mind smoke billowing from the towers of the World Trade Center, skyscrapers collapsing in real time, photographs of ash-covered New Yorkers running through the streets, and the incomprehensibly horrific images of those who jumped (or were blown out) from the upper floors. Scholar Geoff King refers to 9/11 as a "megaspectacle."[3] A megaspectacle is a dramatic event—such as a hurricane or Presidential assassination—which draws media attention from across the globe. According to Brian Monahan in his book *The Shock of the News*, 9/11 was "the most widely and intensely covered event in the media age."[4] Because of 9/11's classification as a spectacle, references to the attacks have permeated art, literature, and film, sometimes in unexpected ways.

Iconic images from 9/11 are a part of the collective cultural memory and have had profound psychological and political reverberations in the years following the attacks. The War on Terror, particularly the fighting in Iraq, spawned its own set of images,

although they may not have achieved the same iconic status. In his article "9/11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation," Douglas Kellner writes of 9/11:

> Many people who witnessed the event suffered nightmares and psychological trauma. For those who viewed it intensely, the spectacle provided a powerful set of images that would continue to resonate for years to come, much as the footage of the Kennedy assassination, iconic photographs of Vietnam, the 1986 explosion of the space shuttle Challenger, or the death of Princess Diana in the 1990s provided unforgettable imagery.[5]

When a traumatic set of images emerges, there is a dual temptation to view them repeatedly in an attempt to make sense of the disaster and a paradoxical desire to avoid them entirely. In her 2003 book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, which is an exploration of visual representations of violence and suffering, Susan Sontag explains:

> Shock can become familiar. Shock can wear off. Even if it doesn't, one can *not* look. People have means to defend themselves against what is upsetting…this seems normal, adaptive. As one can become habituated to horror in real life, one can become habituated to the horror of certain images.[6]

The film industry initially avoided images and plotlines directly referencing 9/11 and terrorism in general, but the moratorium didn't last very long. The changes made to *Spider-Man* and other films that either delayed their release dates or erased the Twin Towers indicate an initial attempt to show sensitivity towards the 9/11 victims and a traumatized nation, yet Hollywood's comfort level with plots involving terrorists and mass destruction has increased as the years have passed.[7] One accusation aimed at the MCU and other post-9/11 superhero films by critics is that they callously exploit 9/11 as entertainment with little regard for the consequences of the real-life catastrophe. Action, science fiction, and superhero films—which draw upon 9/11 iconography including collapsing skyscrapers, ash-covered civilians, hijacked planes, and falling bodies—share

a tendency to use 9/11 as a backdrop instead of an opportunity to engage in deeper cultural and political dialogues. As Geoff King writes, "The Hollywood versions [of real disasters] offer enjoyable fantasies of destruction, enjoyable precisely because they can safely be indulged in the arena of fantasy."[8] Whether filmmakers exploiting 9/11 as spectacle is acceptable or not is a debate that has only surfaced in industry discourse in the past few years.

Only a few individuals involved in the production of superhero films have publicly expressed awareness of the impact of 9/11 imagery in their films. Such expressions are usually response to film critics. Reacting to the exploitation of 9/11 in several recent films including *Stark Trek: Into Darkness* (J.J. Abrams, 2003), critics were especially dismayed by the urban devastation in *Man of Steel*. *Grantland*'s Wesley Morris writes, "By the time Laurence Fishburne, playing the *Daily Planet*'s editor, Perry White, is covered in dust and helping to dig out an employee trapped beneath rubble as skyscrapers collapse around them, the movie has turned the iconography of terror attacks into pornographic exploitation."[9] In several interviews, director Zak Snyder has attempted to explain the motivations behind using visual references to 9/11 in the film. His defense speaks to his critics but is also an excellent description of DC's strategy for representing 9/11 and the War on Terror in its films. Snyder says:

> For me, a good movie has a pokey feel, and its surface has sharp edges. It's hard to hold in your hand, but fascinating to look at. The "Hollywood committee," on the other hand, is always trying to get rid of those edges, to make it softer, lighter, more palatable. Those movies are easier to sit through and accept but once the lights come on you've forgotten all about it.[10]

Snyder seems to be making excuses, however, as it is unclear how DC/Warner Bros. is any less representative of the so-called “Hollywood Committee” than any other media conglomerate.

Perhaps in an attempt to distinguish themselves from their rival and likely aware of the negative critical and fan response to *Man of Steel*, Marvel’s latest industrial discourse lays out a philosophy vastly different from Snyder’s. In a recent interview, *Avengers* director Joss Whedon observed that although MCU films revolve around spectacles of mass destruction, Marvel’s approach demonstrates a respect for the value of human life. For example, Whedon says he and Kevin Feige made sure that protecting innocent people was a major theme in the upcoming *Avengers* sequel, *Age of Ultron*. Whedon explains, “I wanted to get back to what’s important, which is that the people you’re trying to protect are *people*. We knew that we wanted to play with a lot of big, fun destruction, but at the same time, we wanted to say, ‘There’s a price for this.’”[11] There is obviously a great deal of irony in Whedon’s comments given the amount of destruction and collateral damage occurring throughout the MCU and reaching its apex in *Avengers*, although he does accurately point out that MCU films like *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Avengers* highlight the heroes evacuating cities and buildings, something Superman never seems to consider in *Man of Steel*.

While Whedon’s statements present an appealing (from a public relations standpoint) perspective on destruction in the MCU, I argue that showing respect for innocent lives is not the studio’s main motivation for sanitizing potentially traumatic images. Rather, I see it as yet another example of industrial conditions driving Marvel

Studios to appeal to viewers of all ages and across the globe by placing a premium on humor, on bright, comic-inspired aesthetics, and on effects-driven visual spectacles (especially in the climatic final battles at the end of each film). The MCU exemplifies Francis Kelly's argument that the post-9/11 fantasy film "draws attention to real traumatic events (often by the death of characters and the destruction of buildings), but simultaneously disavows them, partly because of fantasy's implausibility, but also through the pleasurable experience of its aesthetic disarray."[12] Therefore, although Marvel Studios uses the same post-9/11 visual references—falling bodies, hijacked planes, etc.—as other superhero films, they use them to different effect. Moments that are truly terrifying or tragic in the *Dark Knight* trilogy might be depicted in a breezier manner in an MCU film, and I explore examples of this contrast throughout this chapter.

The chapter is structured around the MCU's use of specific post-9/11 visual conventions, including images of airplanes flying, falling bodies, and urban destruction. Using spectacular digital effects, especially in the predictably overwrought final battle scenes, the MCU films transform potentially traumatic content into an occasion for thrills and witty banter. I also analyze how images related to the War on Terror are utilized in various MCU films. As with 9/11, there is a set of aesthetic conventions associated with the War on Terror, including images of military technology and weapons, terrorists, surveillance, torture, and wounded soldiers. The chapter ends with a brief look at the significance of the American flag and patriotic iconography in the franchise. The chapter as a whole focuses on Marvel Studio's visual style and tone, which, according to *EW* critic Darren Franich "trends bright and peppy"[13] and lacks any moments of real danger

or terror. In the MCU, film style and tone vary less from film to film than either characterization or political ideology. This is especially true of Phase Two, which is more visually consistent and cohesive than Phase One as a result of brand standardization under Disney and the ever-more popular practice of hiring the same directors for multiple films. For example, even though *Winter Soldier*'s tone is darker and more political and features a more muted color palette than *Avengers*, it still looks and feels like a Marvel movie. The same is true for *Guardians of the Galaxy*, a film on the more comedic, whimsical, dazzlingly colorful end of the spectrum. The studio also employs the same visual effects teams on various films, overseen by Vice President of Visual Effects Victoria Alonso who has worked on every MCU film and One-Shot except for *Incredible Hulk* (which incidentally boasts a grittier, more low-budget look than the rest of the films). I therefore draw examples from all ten films and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* for my analysis of the MCU's post-9/11 aesthetic.

The 9/11 Aesthetic: Falling and Flying

Flight has always been the providence of the superhero in comic books and superhero movies. Whether occurring genetically, with the aid of technology, or by some other means, flight is a popular superpower that lends itself well to cinematic spectacle. Superheroes are remarkably resilient, and even those who cannot fly can usually survive falls from dangerous heights. In the MCU, Iron Man, War Machine, and Falcon fly with the aid of technology and Thor can fly using his hammer. Captain America cannot fly, but his super strength and agility allow him to jump out of airplanes without parachutes

and land unscathed. Hulk can also survive falls because he is virtually indestructible. When superheroes do fall, it is usually during their initiation or training. For example, Tony Stark falls in *Iron Man* when his suit ices over but later perfects the armor's engineering. Superheroes also experience falls as a way to emphasize their vulnerability or create emotional drama, like when Stark crashes into a snowy forest in *Iron Man 3* after a terrorist destroys his mansion.

Flying sequences have been some of the most exciting and iconic elements of the superhero movie throughout the genre's history. The tagline for *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978) was "You'll believe a man can fly." Who can forget the first time Spider-Man swung through the air, or Batman diving from a Hong Kong skyscraper in *The Dark Knight*? Significantly, like other genre conventions, flight took on a different and more dangerous connotation in post-9/11 films. Although many superhero films still contained joyous flying sequences, there was also a pronounced emphasis on crashing planes and falling bodies. Hijackings and other crises on airplanes, for example, played upon the fears many Americans developed related to air travel post-9/11. *War of the Worlds* (2005), *Flightplan* (2005), *Red Eye* (2006), *Knowing* (2009), *Flight* (2012), and *Non-Stop* (2014) all feature airplane hijackings, crashes, or crimes occurring in the air. In the superhero genre, both *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012) and *Iron Man 3* (2012) have hijacking sequences. There are also airplane (or other flying craft) crashes or near-crashes in non-MCU superhero films like *Superman Returns* (2006) and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014). In the MCU, there are crashes in *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), *Captain*

America: The First Avenger (2011), *The Avengers* (2012), *Agents of S.H.I.E.LD.*, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014), and *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), among others.

Once again, however, the MCU distinguishes itself from other superhero films and post-9/11 films by removing the terror and death that would realistically come along with a plane crash or hijacking. Even in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2*, a film based on a Marvel character, a plane crash ends in the permanent and untimely death of Peter Parker's parents. In the MCU, the plane crashes in *First Avenger* and *Iron Man 3* and the near-crash of the S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier in *Avengers* do not end in the death of any of our heroes or their loved ones. At the end of *First Avenger*, Steve Rogers crash-lands a plane carrying a nuclear weapon bound for New York City, sacrificing himself to save innocent lives. Although the film is set in the 1940s, the ending alludes to the crash of United Flight 93 on 9/11. In his book *9/11 Culture*, American Studies scholar Jeffery Melnick writes of the United 93 crash, "…there was instant unanimity around the notion that its defiant passengers were freedom fighters."[14]

The MCU plays upon the concept of a hero forcing a plane to crash in order to prevent an act of terrorism. Before becoming Captain America, Rogers was "just a kid from Brooklyn," making his sacrifice to protect New York City a personal one. The sequence's editing emphasizes both Roger's bravery and the emotional impact of his sacrifice. The camera cuts between a medium shot of Rogers in the cockpit—capturing his reactions and the blowing snow and dust behind him—and shots of from his POV as well as from outside and above the plane. Rogers is talking to love interest Peggy Carter

via radio throughout the scene, and the camera frequently cuts away to her tear-stained face.

Carter's presence adds greater emotional drama to the crash sequence. According to Melnick, the United 93 crash differed from the World Trade Center crashes due to the lack of visual imagery recorded. Instead, the United 93 crash was defined by sounds, specifically the calls and messages from passengers to their loved ones: "Media reports of final, heartbreaking phone calls to loved ones turned family members into surrogate heroes, "[15] writes Melnick. The final conversation between Rogers and Carter has a similar resonance:

> **Steve Rogers:** There's not gonna be a safe landing, but I can try and force it down.
> **Peggy Carter:** I'll-I'll get Howard on the line. He'll know what to do.
> **Steve Rogers:** There's not enough time. This thing's moving too fast and it's heading for New York. I gotta put her in the water.
> **Peggy Carter:** Please don't do this. W-we have time. We can work it out.
> **Steve Rogers:** Right now I'm in the middle of nowhere. If I wait any longer a lot of people are gonna die. Peggy, this is my choice.

While Rogers' "death" might be initially upsetting, the film (in typical form) immediately negates any opportunity to process the weight of his sacrifice. He does not even remain "dead" for the rest of the film, as the final scene shows him resurrected in modern times.

Iron Man 3 features an airplane hijacking sequence, another example of a terrifying 9/11 type disaster transformed into an occasion for witty banter and an easy rescue. Disguised as Tony Stark's friend Colonel James Rhodes (aka "Iron Patriot"), a terrorist infiltrates Air Force One and kidnaps the President. The plane is torn apart, and Iron Man rescues over a dozen people thrown from the plane. While the hijacking

sequence initially plays on post-9/11 fears about flying, it also mediates anxiety by delivering a happy ending. Not only does Iron Man easily prevent a dozen people from falling to their deaths, it turns out Stark was operating the suit remotely the entire time—meaning he was never in any physical danger. The ease of the rescue and the scene's light, humorous tone—Tony Stark delivers witty one-liners throughout the rescue—differentiates *Iron Man 3* from a similar sequence in *The Dark Knight Rises*. In *Iron Man 3*, serious post-9/11 anxieties are sublimated in favor of a visual spectacle that results in zero loss of life. Contrastingly, the villain Bane hijacks a plane with the intent of crashing in the opening scene of *The Dark Knight Rises*. Bane is a terrifying villain, and the scene is equally terrifying as Bane announces, "There will be no survivors." The sequence recreates the terror inherent in a hijacking. Although the *Dark Knight Rises* and *Iron Man 3* are both fantasies, Nolan's film is much more realistic when it comes to the deadly consequences of terrorism.

The opposite of flying is, of course, falling. Falling scenes in superhero films attempt to remediate the most traumatizing and taboo images resulting from 9/11: people jumping from the upper floors of the World Trade Center towers. In fact, Jeffery Melnick refers to falling as the "central visual reality" of 9/11.[16] Upsetting photographs of the jumpers, like Richard Drew's iconic *Falling Man*, seem to defy any attempt at remediation. According to scholar Kartik Nair, "Unlike images of the planes crashing into the Twin Towers or smoke billowing in the city's streets, these other images blasted onto our screens without a sense of remediation or cinematic precedent."[17] In his now-famous essay in *Esquire*, "The Falling Man," journalist Tom Junod writes, "From the

beginning, the spectacle of doomed people jumping from the upper floors of the World Trade Center resisted redemption….No one ever got used to it; no one who saw it wished to see it again, although, of course, many saw it again." Junod goes on to say, "And it was, at last, the sight of the jumpers that provided the corrective to those who insisted on saying that what they were witnessing was 'like a movie,' for this was an ending as unimaginable as it was unbearable."[18] Although these images are particularly horrific, the superhero film provides an opportunity to work through the trauma by creating rescue fantasies. While saving people from falling was a trope of the superhero film before 9/11, the ability of superheroes to prevent these types of deaths is far more significant afterwards. The only people who tend to die from falls in superhero film are villains such as Harvey Dent/Two Face (Aaron Eckhart) in *The Dark Knight*.

Although a villain or two might have died from a fall, falling bodies were still some of the earliest 9/11 images to be addressed and redeemed by superhero films. In her essay on *Spider-Man 2* (2004), Jeanne Holland notes that Spider-Man frequently catches people, "reversing the horrific visual imagery" of the 9/11 jumpers.[19] The MCU employs consistently employs this trope. In the opening scene of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*'s first episode, a superhero (Mike Petersen, aka Deathlok) rescues a woman from a burning building. They fall several stories and land safely while onlookers film with their cell-phones. In *Guardians of the Galaxy* the tree-like alien Groot prevents his companions from dying in a spaceship crash by extending his branches to form a protective nest, and in *Avengers* the Hulk catches Iron Man, saving his life. In each of these cases, superheroic intervention prevents fatal falls. Although falling body imagery is a trope the

MCU shares with other superhero films, the franchise once again distinguishes itself through its complete avoidance of onscreen death by falls. For example, Pepper Potts survives a terrible fall in *Iron Man 3*. While Tony Stark avoids losing the person he loves the most, other cinematic superheroes haven't been so lucky. In *The Amazing Spiderman 2,* for example, Peter Parker (Andrew Garfield) fails to prevent Gwen Stacy (Emma Stone) from falling to her death. This scene is extremely upsetting (we hear the sound of Gwen's neck breaking), and the victim's death in permanent, unlike Groot's "death" in *Guardians*, which is extremely short-lived. By providing happy endings, the MCU consistently re-contextualizes the events of 9/11 in a manner suitable for cinematic fantasy (and a family audience).

The Aesthetics of Destruction

Urban destruction is central to post-9/11 superhero films and the scale of devastation has steadily increased over time. Images of destruction have become almost a fetish: skyscrapers crumbling in slow motion, shattered glass, fire, fleeing civilians, and the twisted ruins of buildings are the visual bread and butter of the superhero movie. Nearly every post-9/11 superhero film contains a final battle sequence that evokes 9/11 by featuring urban destruction on a massive scale. While scenes of urban devastation are not unique to the MCU, the franchise once again handles associations with 9/11 in a unique manner. In *Man of Steel*, Metropolis is completely and irreversibly devastated, leveled by a brawl between Superman and the evil General Zod. Similarly, the bombings of Gotham in *The Dark Knight Rises* are inescapable. Calling to mind desperate New

Yorkers trying to leave Manhattan by foot on 9/11, Bane destroys several Manhattan bridges. In both films, the cities are permanently scarred and the heroes receive little gratitude for saving the day. In contrast, the Battle of New York in *Avengers* is won quickly and with little collateral damage. The end of the film shows footage of people across the world celebrating and thanking the *Avengers*. The minor impact of such spectacular destruction is demonstrated by the heroes' casual attitude throughout the battle. The *Avengers* keep up an ongoing of exchange jokes as they fight off Loki's army. Tony Stark jokes about going out for schwarma as he and the other *Avengers* start the cleanup effort, ensuring the scene ends in a laugh.

Discussing only the major scenes of destruction in the MCU would exclude countless other explosions, crashed vehicles, shattered windows, and imperiled civilians. In Phase One alone, Hulk crushes tanks and army helicopters (*The Incredible Hulk*), a battle between Thor and a Destroyer robot obliterates a small New Mexican town (*Thor*), and Iron Man's battles with his enemies destroy various locations including a racetrack in Monaco (*Iron Man 2*). At the end of *The Incredible Hulk*, a battle between Hulk and the Abomination destroys several blocks of Harlem. Kevin Feige notes that the set "looked like a war zone with things on fire and cars destroyed."[20] Urban destruction occurs in both real and fictional locations: the Chinese Theater in Los Angeles, Tony Stark's Malibu mansion, the mythical city of Asgard, an oil rig off the coast of Florida, S.H.I.E.L.D. headquarters in Washington D.C., and Red Skull's secret base in Germany. In all of these scenes, similar action-movie tropes combine to create images of

destruction that are aesthetically pleasing, rather than recreating the terrifying chaos associated with the actual events of 9/11.

As previously noted, the most blatant instance of destruction in the MCU is the final battle in *Avengers*, also known as the Battle of New York. On the director's commentary, Joss Whedon refers to the film as a "disaster movie,"[21] a sentiment echoed by Kevin Feige who says "in a lot of ways, we're looking at it as a disaster movie."[22] The battle takes up the final third of the film, in which the Avengers take on Loki and his alien army. Nearly every frame of the battle contains a visual allusion to 9/11. Multiple skyscrapers are on fire, and smoke billows across the skyline. The Avengers crash through office windows in pursuit of their quarry, while the giant alien creatures destroy entire buildings. Shattered glass and falling debris are everywhere. Hawkeye and Captain America save trapped citizens from an overturned bus and work with the NYPD to evacuate panicked crowds, and the Avengers finish the battle in front of the crumbled ruins of Grand Central Station. The battle is fascinating as it is both the most realistic recreation of 9/11 in the MCU and yet, by its very nature, is a complete fantasy. The MCU's aesthetic approach allows for the appreciation of what Susan Sontag, referring to Ground Zero, calls a "landscape of devastation" through the guilt-free lens of fantasy.

As *ThinkProgress* critic Alyssa Rosenberg observes:

> The buildings didn't fall. We didn't have to go to war, because we could shut the border between our world and the one from which our enemies came. We didn't even have to conduct a mop-up operation or interrogate detainees because when that portal closed, the invaders collapsed like toys….It's a dream of resilience and clean war….where we can end the war in a day; where we can avoid doing grievous harm to ourselves and our values in the process.[23]

New Yorker critic Richard Brody echoes Rosenberg's comments, calling the film a "9/11 revenge fantasy"[24] where the heroes prevent the worst of the damage and instantly track down and punish the perpetrator. Significant in terms of the evolving discourse about destruction in the MCU, which I mention earlier, the heroes are shown acting responsibly. While the destruction in *Avengers* is no less pornographic than in *Man of Steel*, the heroes—unlike Superman—are at least shown attempting to contain the damage and evacuate innocent civilians

The bloodless nature and cartoon violence that define the MCU's destructive spectacles strips these sequences of their traumatic potential. There is relatively little collateral damage in any of the films (in terms of lives lost), and much of it occurs off-screen. While there is no limit on crushed cars and broken windows, we almost never see blood or dead bodies in these PG-13 films. For example, *Avengers* is rated PG-13 for "sequences of sci-fi action," which seems to delineate the violence in the film from examples of "real" violence. In a recent essay entitled "How Hollywood Killed Death," *New York Times* writer Alexander Huls states:

> How is an audience supposed to feel that a death matters when the movie doesn't bother to lend it meaning? Writers are so focused on finding ways to give us crowd-pleasing destructive pyrotechnics that they undermine the required emotional setups without even realizing it. Death has become a mere transition device.[25]

In his essay, Huls refers both to the lack of collateral damage in the action film and the negation of audience grief when characters are killed and quickly resurrected. Huls mentions the MCU in several instances, including the near-death of Pepper Potts in *Iron*

Man 3, Loki being "killed" and reincarnated in *Thor: The Dark World*, and Agent Coulson's "death" in *The Avengers* and resurrection for *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*

Of course, the impermanence of death is another inheritance from comic books (and video games), as well as a consequence of the industrial pressures discussed in the first two chapters. Unlike other post-9/11 genre tropes, the absence of death functions similarly in the MCU as it does in other superhero franchises, although both the *Spider-Man* and *Amazing Spider-Man* franchises appear more comfortable including the onscreen deaths of secondary characters like Peter Parker's Uncle Ben. As I mention in Chapter One, any franchise hinges on the popularity of its characters, therefore those characters must be infinitely revivable and rebootable. As a consequence, Spider-Man is on now on his third reboot in little more than a decade, Batman is due to return in 2016's *Batman v. Superman*, and of course each of the Avengers have survived an absurd number of near-death experiences. While 9/11 imagery plays a large role in the MCU's aesthetic, it is only half of the post-9/11 puzzle, the other being the War on Terror.

The Iconography of the War on Terror

The visual and aesthetic aspects of the MCU's engagement with the War on Terror are more complex than those evoking 9/11. This may be because 9/11 was a single, defined event while the War on Terror is a broad conceptual formation that includes the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as ongoing and evolving domestic concerns about issues like surveillance, the economic consequences of a decade and a

half of war, and the treatment of wounded or disabled war veterans. According to scholar Michael Griffin:

> Until the invasion of Iraq, the War on Terrorism was not marked by any clearly defined period of military action. Indeed, a salient characteristic of the War on Terrorism, as it has been defined and presented to the public, is that it is a "war" without clear boundaries.[26]

The ongoing War on Terror has been fraught with conflict over how the media represented the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. From the outset, the U.S. government and media censored certain images from war zones, particularly images of the dead or wounded. Journalists had to receive written permission to show images of wounded soldiers, and still risked ejection from their military units if they did publish.[27] Therefore, journalists with up-close access to the battlefield and the technology to distribute images instantaneously still managed to obscure the reality of the War on Terror. As scholar Liam Kennedy notes:

> The advent of digitalization has affected the production and dissemination of war images by American media but the results, within the more mainstream media channels at least, have neither been a more plural nor a more investigative visual repertoire.[28]

In lieu of images of the dead and wounded, scholars such as Griffin and Kennedy have identified defining characteristics of American photojournalism during the Afghan and Iraq wars. They found images of military technology and weapons to be the most common in popular U.S. newsmagazines like *Time*, *Newswee*k, and *U.S. News and World Report*. Griffin, who examined these publications in depth, notes:

> [There were] numerous graphic illustrations of aircraft carriers, missiles, stealth fighters and bombers, drones, chemical suits and masks, and various classes of tanks, armored vehicles, mobile artillery, and rocket launchers….There is a great

> preoccupation with photographs of fighter planes lined up on the decks of aircraft carriers, of pilots in the cockpits of warplanes, and with the seemingly endless lines of tanks and armored vehicles "rolling" into Iraq.[29]

Along with this focus on military might, several other visual themes emerge from the period between 9/11 and the initial invasion of Iraq: images related to surveillance; photographs of President Bush and his advisors; and photographs of Saddam Hussein along with pictures of bin Laden and other terrorists or presumed terrorists. There were also shocking photographs the government wasn't able to suppress, especially those of prisoner abuse and torture at the Abu Ghraib prison. In later years, especially during the Obama administration, new images emerged: the death of Osama bin Laden, drones, and images related to domestic surveillance.

Across its films and television episodes, the MCU incorporates many of these visual references, including military technology (tanks, missiles, and aircraft carriers), torture, wounded soldiers, satellite surveillance, drones, Air Force bases, mysterious terrorists, and explosions in Middle Eastern villages and deserts. Much like the 9/11 imagery I discuss earlier, however, these images are reworked to fit into the MCU's aesthetic and tonal sensibilities. Most of the warfare in the MCU is clean and bloodless; torture scenes are rare and not graphic, and darker moments are interspersed with lighter scenes to balance the films' tone. For example, the opening of *Iron Man*, which I discuss in depth in the next section, begins with Tony Stark being captured by terrorists. This is an intense and fairly violent sequence by MCU standards. As a contrast, the narrative of Stark's capture is then interrupted by a flashback that introduces us to the cocky, sarcastic Tony Stark. In this sequence, Stark ditches an awards ceremony in his honor to gamble and flirt with women, an indication of his carefree lifestyle before his traumatic experiences in Afghanistan. Through this contrast, it becomes clear that the film engages

with serious themes such as terrorism and war without losing the sarcastic, jocular tone that has come to define the MCU overall and the *Iron Man* films in particular.

Iron Man's depiction of the War on Terror follows many of the conventions of other films about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to scholar Roger Luckhurst:

> Cinematic fictions about the war [have] determined much of the iconography of contemporary asymmetric warfare: dusty checkpoints, handheld cameras, choppy edits, inscrutable Arabs, Humvees, IEDs, hooded prisoners, queasy torture scenes, vague liberal angst.[30]

Here, Luckhurst could have been describing *Iron Man* although the film takes the real life war and turns it into a backdrop for the adventures of the film's charming hero. Out of all the MCU films, the *Iron Man* series is the most visually evocative of the War on Terror, however. This is the case from the very beginning of the film: *Iron Man* opens with an establishing shot of a desert with mountains in the distance and then cuts to a shot of several Humvees with the caption "Kunar Province, Afghanistan." Inside one of the vehicles, Tony Stark poses for a photograph with a young soldier. A sudden explosion destroys the Humvee, killing the soldiers and ejecting a wounded Stark, who lands on the ground nearby. The next shot is of Tony Stark being held at gunpoint by a group of mysterious terrorists, many wearing turbans and scarves covering their noses and mouths. Stark, a weapons manufacturer is in Afghanistan to demonstrate his newest missile to the United States Army. The weapon, called the Jericho, is part of the so-called "Freedom Line," possibly a play on "Operation Iraqi Freedom." The Jericho will, according to Stark, ensure "the bad guys won't even want to come out of their caves." Stark's jokes throughout the demonstration show the character's casual attitude towards war. Ironically, the terrorist group who captures Stark—called the Ten Rings—wants him to

build a replica of the Jericho missile using components from Stark weapons. Stark is horrified to learn that the Ten Rings are equipped with weapons manufactured by his own company. The relationship between image and ideology is explicit in this scene. For example, a Stark missile half-buried in the Afghan sand is an example of the U.S. Military Industrial Complex's role in the War on Terror; the scene underscores the fear that once weapons of mass destruction are created it is impossible to control their distribution.

According to actor Faran Tahir, who plays the film's terrorist leader Raza, the members of the Ten Rings were initially supposed to be all Muslim. Tahir says he encouraged director Jon Favreau and producer Kevin Feige to depict the group as composed of international mercenaries, rather than Islamic terrorists.[31] By presenting the villains as soldiers for hire and revealing Stark's own business partner is behind his capture, *Iron Man* manages to bring up the War on Terror and also avoid its religious, racial, and political complexities. This is another instance of Marvel Studios attempting to be inoffensive, although in truth there is little to visually distinguish *Iron Man*'s depiction of the Ten Rings from any other film featuring Islamic terrorists.

Downplayed allusions to Arab terrorism are only one example of the film's attempt to show a sanitized version of the War on Terror. For example, Tony Stark's adventures in the Iron Man armor make fighting terrorists look like a good deal of fun: he kills the bad guys while sparing civilians and cracking jokes. And (ironically), like censored images of American casualties during the actual war in Iraq, we never see the bodies of the soldiers who die in the attack on Stark's convoy. As previously mentioned,

the film also tries to warn about the consequences of dangerous weapons in the wrong hands without condemning Tony Stark for having private control over one of the most lethal weapons in the film (i.e., the armor). Other films like *The Dark Knight* at least acknowledge that, as Shaun Treat writes of post-9/11 superheroes in general, "today's charismatic hero…risks the hubris of becoming tomorrow's tyrannical demagogue."[32] As the film's fallen hero, Harvey Dent, warns Bruce Wayne, "You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become the villain." Unlike in Nolan's film, the idea that power has the potential to corrupt a wealthy, charismatic figure like Tony Stark is never engaged with in any depth in the *Iron Man* films.

Iron Man 3 also plays with audience expectations regarding the motivations and physical appearance of terrorists through its depiction of its villain, the Mandarin (Ben Kingsley). In the comics, the Mandarin is the son of an aristocratic Chinese family and a descendent of Genghis Khan. Director Shane Black explains the changes to the character:

> Part of it was that we would rather have the Mandarin be of indeterminate ethnicity than the Fu Manchu stereotype that the comic books portrayed, but that's not the only reason…I wanted to do something that was an interesting story choice, that felt like there was a little bit of satire, that was a little bit about our own fear and our own ways of viewing villains.[33]

Avoiding cultural specificity, Kingsley's Mandarin sports a long, bin-Laden-esque beard; a samurai hairstyle, Chinese-inspired robes, and American dog tags and military fatigues. This is one reason why the actor refers to his character as a "cultural nightmare."[34] The videos in which he threatens various acts of terrorism, another allusion to Bin Laden, contain a variety of iconography related to the War on Terror including men in turbans holding guns and chanting, explosions at U.S. Air Force bases, and the American

President being burned in effigy. These are exactly the types of images that were broadcast in the aftermath of 9/11 in attempt to reinforce the "clash of civilizations" narrative I mention in the previous chapter. The fact that the Mandarin turns out to be a fictional invention both enhances the international appeal of the film by not implicating a Middle Eastern terrorist as the film's primary threat and prevents the film from becoming too dark. By the end of the film, the Mandarin poses no real danger, the true threat is eliminated, and Tony Stark finally fixes his wounded heart, which may be why (as quoted the my introduction) Manohla Darghis accuses the film of both evoking and dodging the very real threat of terrorism.

Militarization and Surveillance

Although the *Iron Man* films—unlike the more fantastical *Thor* series, for example—are the most directly evocative of the War on Terror, the post-9/11 milieu permeates the entire MCU. Military technology is a popular visual motif in each of the MCU films and television series *Captain America: The First Avenger* and *Agent Carter*—which both take place in the 1940s—delight in featuring "old-school" weapons like pistols and poisoned lipstick. In *Iron Man 2*, business rival Justin Hammer attempts to use Stark's designs to create weaponized drones for the U.S. military, and in *Thor,* S.H.I.E.L.D. turns part of the New Mexican desert into an Area 51-esque militarized zone after discovering Thor's hammer. Director Jon Favreau also employed a military advisor on *Iron Man*, and part of the film was shot on Edwards Air Force Base in California using real soldiers as extras. The film also used real military aircraft and pararescue

troops during a scene where Tony Stark is rescued from Afghanistan after escaping captivity.[35]

Avengers and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* both focus on S.H.I.E.L.D.'s attempts to build increasingly powerful weapons. *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D*. unveils even newer technologies in its first season, including a non-lethal weapon called the "Night-Night Gun," drones used to map unfamiliar areas and collect surveillance data, and jets equipped with cloaking technology. A scene in *Winter Soldier* featuring a confrontation between Nick Fury and Steve Rogers exemplifies the MCU's technological and militaristic aesthetic that is a consistent element in the MCU, particularly in earthbound movies like *Incredible Hulk*, *Avengers,* and the *Iron Man* and *Captain America* films. The sequence in *Winter Soldier* features various shots of guns and missiles and the gleaming surfaces of fighter jets.

In terms of surveillance, S.H.I.E.L.D, the military, and the MCU's heroes and its villains all exist in a world teeming with screens, satellites, cameras, biometric scanners, and facial recognition software. These technologies, while ostensibly exaggerated for cinematic effect, are not the fantastical inventions of comic books or superhero films. Instead, the world of MCU echoes our own: a burgeoning surveillance state obsessed with threat analysis and counter-terrorism. This surveillance imagery is a frightening visual manifestation of the political consequences of expanded government surveillance. In a society where the PATRIOT Act, Edward Snowden, and Wikileaks are part of the common vocabulary, surveillance is far from fantasy. Unlike other references to the War on Terror in the MCU, themes and images related to surveillance actually diverge from

the franchise's tendency to trivialize post-9/11 sociopolitical concerns. In fact, films such as *Winter Soldier* actually contain fairly dire warnings about the consequences of expanding government surveillance. This is one reason why critics were so divided over that particular film: some viewed it is par for the course for a Marvel movie, while others thought it was a more mature and cynical film than other Marvel Studios projects.

The surveillance aesthetic in the MCU begins in *The Incredible Hulk*, where the U.S. Army collaborates with S.H.I.E.L.D. during a manhunt for Bruce Banner. In *Iron Man*, Tony Stark uses motion-controlled computer screens that allow him to shift through an array of images, satellite feeds, and news footage. Many shots in the *Iron Man* films and *Avengers* are shot from Tony's POV inside the Iron Man suit and show his in-helmet display. The readouts include weather updates, air traffic patterns, and the suit's targeting system—a sort of all-powerful Google Glass. *Winter Soldier* is particularly concerned with surveillance, as detailed in Chapter Two. Before crisis is averted at the end of the film, the Project Insight satellites are being controlled by the evil organization Hydra. A montage sequence shows the satellites targeting various hostiles, including Captain America, Tony Stark, and thousands of others. Satellite footage and targeting crosshairs are familiar to anyone who has watched news coverage in the last several decades. From satellite images supposedly showing WMDs in Iraq, to aerial views of the bin Laden compound in Pakistan, to magazine covers with the faces of terrorists crossed out or viewed through a targeting scope, the MCU references an aesthetic audiences are used to seeing on a regular basis. In the MCU, however, this aesthetic is highly stylized and often made to look "cool" or futuristic rather than violent and frightening. For example, the

Iron Man suit's helmet display, while employing surveillance technology, mostly adds to the hero's hip, modern appeal.

S.H.I.E.L.D. regularly uses surveillance technology to gather information on enemies and to search for people, places, and objects. At one point in *Agents of S.H.I.E.LD*., the team hijacks an NSA satellite to find the location of a hidden city. The team also has drones equipped with cameras for mapping potentially dangerous areas. Agent Phil Coulson comments on this obsession with mapping and identification directly in another episode. During the search for a criminal, Coulson's team uses social media to identify the woman. Coulson says, "Between Facebook, Instagram, and Flickr, people are surveilling themselves,"[36] which calls to mind the way police used images from social media during the hunt for suspects in the Boston Marathon bombing. According to scholar Louise Amoore:

> Recognition has become pivotal to the watchful technologies of sovereignty deployed in this war. Facial-and gait-recognition surveillance, biometric identity cards, and expedited airport security clearance programmes, for example, are at the forefront of the drive to secure the state from the threat of the Other, and to do so via identity.[37]

These "watchful technologies" are omnipresent in the MCU. S.H.I.E.L.D. uses biometric scanners and facial/voice recognition technology for internal security, a process mocked in *Avengers* when Loki gruesomely removes a man's eye in order to gain access to a secret research facility.

In the first season of *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.,* Coulson's team faces an enemy nicknamed the Clairvoyant. The Clairvoyant is believed to be psychic, which confuses Coulson and his team because S.H.I.E.L.D. does not believe true psychic powers exist.

In a plotline similar to the Mandarin setup, the team's hacker figures out that the Clairvoyant is not truly psychic—he is a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent-turned-HYDRA. The Clairvoyant is actual a man named John Garrett (Bill Paxton) who manipulates Coulson's team using knowledge gleaned from the S.H.I.E.L.D's vast intelligence apparatus. The aesthetics of surveillance play a significant role in the MCU and in other post-9/11 superhero films and post-9/11 films in general. In *The Dark Knight*, Lucius Fox (Morgan Freeman) expresses dismay when Bruce Wayne taps Gotham's cell phones in order to find the Joker. Unlike with other conventions of the genre, the MCU's engagement with surveillance themes is actually fairly close to that of other superhero films. Both the *Dark Knight* and *Winter Soldier* emphasize that the power to watch and listen to anyone, anywhere, and at any time, could be catastrophic in the wrong hands. The fact that surveillance may be the one issue not softened by the MCU's lighter tone could be an indication that it is one of the more powerful cultural anxieties of the post-9/11 era.

The Physicality of War: Torture and the Wounded Soldier in the MCU

As mentioned earlier, the wound Tony Stark sustains in Afghanistan casts him in the role of wounded POW. Stark is tortured and waterboarded during his capture, and wakes up to find that his fellow prisoner—the scientist Ho Yinsen (Shaun Toub)—has rigged him up to a magnet powered by a car battery. The magnet is keeping Stark alive by preventing shrapnel from reaching his heart and killing him. Stark then builds a rudimentary version of the arc reactor in a desperate attempt to save his own life. However, the powerful technology that powers the Iron Man armor also leaves Stark

vulnerable. Later in the film, for example, Obadiah Stane forcibly removes the arc reactor from Stark's chest and he almost dies. Francis Kelly writes:

> …despite Stark attaining superhero status as Iron Man, the implanted arc reactor ostensibly renders him a wounded hero. The wounding of post 9/11 cinematic heroes has become increasingly commonplace, doubtless reflecting the physical and psychological damage inflicted on the United States and here further commenting on perceived vulnerabilities regarding its defense program.[38]

The visual representation of Stark's wound is particularly dramatic in *Iron Man 2* when he learns the arc reactor is poisoning him. The veins on his chest near the device have turned a deep blue/black color, and Stark uses a small device to test the toxicity of his blood. In *Iron Man 3*, Stark finally finds a way to permanently remove the shrapnel from his chest, getting rid of his need for the arc reactor and symbolically representing his healing from trauma. Again, this is a way to reclaim negative imagery related to the War on Terror. Unlike many war veterans who lost limbs or were otherwise severely injured, Tony Stark is able to heal himself. In fact, as Kelly notes, Stark actually becomes more physically capable than he before his injury thanks to the Iron Man technology. Like Bruce Banner with the Hulk, Stark's traumatic experience ends up strengthening and protecting him instead of simply causing him pain and suffering.

Stark is not the only wounded soldier in the MCU. In several instances, images of wounded soldiers defy redemption, mirroring, rather than sanitizing, real-life trauma. These particular scenes and plots seem to indicate that not even Marvel can entirely gloss over the physical and psychological effects of war. For example, one of the most disturbing aspects of *Iron Man 3* is that Aldrich Killian (the real Mandarin), is experimenting on disabled American war soldiers and veterans. Promising his Extremis

technology can regrow lost limbs, Killian uses his power to manipulate these soldiers into doing his bidding. Furthermore, his technology fails, causing the victim to overheat and essentially explode. The figure of the wounded soldier calls to mind real-life images of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as contemporary controversy about the medical treatment of veterans. The films also comment on the deeper psychological wounds of war including PTSD, which Tony Stark experiences to a debilitating extent in *Iron Man 3*. Stark starts having panic attacks after his experience falling through the wormhole in *Avengers*, and begins creating more and more Iron Man suits in attempt to make himself feel secure. In *Winter Soldier*, Sam Wilson runs a group for returned war veterans, and Wilson and Rogers bond over the difficulty of readjusting to everyday life after experiencing war and death. Although these serious moments are broken up by humorous exchanges, they are still among the more sobering aspects of the MCU's representation of the War on Terror. The MCU films also comment on the public relations aspect of the war by including the use of patriotic imagery as nationalistic propaganda, a concept I discuss in the next section.

Stars and Stripes: Patriotism as Propaganda

The American flag as a patriotic symbol is employed in the MCU in two primary ways. In some cases—such as with Captain America's forced stint as a USO performer in *First Avenger*—patriotic imagery functions as a cynical critique of government and/or military propaganda. As Cord Scott notes of wartime comic books, "the American flag—either as tangible object or iconic talisman—becomes a vehicle for nationalist sentiment,

sometimes even xenophobia. Its colors alone become symbolically charged."[39] Scott's observations relate to Captain America's costume along with other instances of flag display in the MCU. How does the visual presence of the American flag in the MCU connect to 9/11? According to a University of Chicago study based on national surveys, between seventy-four and eighty-two percent of Americans reacted to the attacks by displaying the American flag on or around their home, car, or person.[40] The flag as propaganda and as a symbol of resilience played an early but significant role in the post-9/11 superhero film. As mentioned earlier, the only change Sam Raimi made to *Spider-Man* after 9/11 was adding a shot where Spider-Man poses in front of a large American flag. According to scholar Joseph Sommers, "Spider-Man finds himself prominently displayed in front of American flags, as if he were an ambassador of American goodwill against the incursion of alien threats to the sovereignty of his city."[41]

Although the American flag motif appears in several MCU films, it is logical to start with the most overt use of the Stars and Stripes: Captain America's uniform and shield. During his forced stint as a USO performer, Rogers wears a cartoonish version of the costume, which was inspired by the 1940s comic books. According to director Joe Johnston, "This approach, it's the only way we could justify ever seeing him on a screen in tights, with the funny boots and everything. The government essentially puts him up there as a living comic-book character."[42] In a montage sequence, Rogers poses onstage in front of a group of female dancers scantily clad in red, white, and blue outfits and then fights a fake Hitler. The performance is set to a patriotic tune written specifically for the film. The lyrics of the song demonstrate the government's hyperbolic attempt to sell the

war to the American people: *Who's strong and brave, here to save the American Way?/Who vows to fight like a man for what's right night and day?/Who will campaign door-to-door for America/Carry the flag shore to shore for America/From Hoboken to Spokane/The Star Spangled Man with a Plan!* The lyrics underscore the fact that Rogers is not contributing directly to the war effort: the song clearly states he is "campaigning," not fighting, for America. Rogers also stars in newsreel-style propaganda films. The tragic irony of his relegation to figurehead is that Rogers longs to be a soldier. Before becoming a super soldier, he is a scrawny underdog who did not qualify for the draft. Rogers is so committed to joining the military that he volunteers to subject himself to scientific experimentation.

The true artifice of Rogers' stage performance is revealed when he travels to Germany to perform in front of an Army unit. The contrast between his upbeat, pro-war charade and the faces of the hungry, freezing, battle-weary soldiers finally shames Rogers into rebelling against his role as patriotic puppet. Learning the villainous Red Skull captured an entire unit, including his best friend Bucky Barnes (Sebastian Stan), Rogers tries to persuade his commanding officer to lead a rescue mission. The Colonel mocks him, calling him a "chorus girl." As previously mentioned, Rogers proceeds to lead a daring rescue mission behind enemy lines and brings the entire unit back safely. Johnston sees this as Rogers "reclaiming" some of his campy comic-book imagery: "When he does go AWOL, he covers up the suit but then, after a few things happen, he realizes that this uniform allows him to lead. By then, he's become a star in the public mind and a symbol. The guys get behind him because he embodies something special."[43]

Captain America's uniform—and its symbolism—continues to change during his subsequent film appearances. In *Avengers*, as the heroes attempt to save New York from total destruction, Captain America's uniform once again serves as a symbol of hope and the belief in the positive power of superheroes. He wears a more modern and functional version of the costume, but it still retains its patriotic look. Finally, in *Winter Soldier*, Rogers wears his most modernized and understated uniform yet. As director Anthony Russo describes it, "It's a suit that he goes on covert operations in… it's dark, stealth-like, it's based on military styling and designed for body protection. We wanted to do a very grounded version of what the uniform could be for a man who's the greatest soldier in the world, now, today."[44] Downplaying the patriotic excess of his costume matches the darker, more cynical tone of the film, in which Rogers questions his role as obedient soldier. It is no longer safe or appropriate for Captain America to be ostentatiously patriotic in the face of new and more complex threats, which potentially indicates *Winter Soldier*'s status as a film more representative of the Obama era than the years directly following 9/11. However, Rogers chooses not to wear the stealth uniform during the film's final battle, instead stealing the older version of his uniform from an exhibit at the Smithsonian in order to disassociate himself with S.H.I.E.L.D. The trailers for *Age of Ultron* show Rogers wearing the more patriotic uniform. Perhaps the MCU is trying to say that Roger's brand of patriotism is timeless. Rather than being showy or blatantly nationalistic, Captain America is a symbol of the nation's positive potential, even in the face of domestic concerns and international instability.

The American flag is also an important symbol in the *Iron Man* films. Speaking of *Iron Man*, Jason Dittmer observes, "The hero himself serves as an icon of American technological innovation and the hierarchies of domination it permits."[45] In all three *Iron Man* films, both Stark and other members of the Military Industrial Complex use patriotic imagery and rhetoric for their own purposes. For example, at the beginning of *Iron Man 2*, Stark (in the Iron Man suit) dives onto the stage to open up his Stark Expo. Much like in *Captain America*, Stark poses in front of a giant flag background to the thrill of the crowd. The commercialization of the American flag was a common practice in the aftermath of 9/11, turning newfound patriotism into profit. As scholar Greg Dickinson writes of corporate advertising post-9/11:

> Enjoying life, shopping, and playing, filling leisure time by visiting theme parks, buying jewel-studded flags and star-spangled dog accessories serve as the props for contemporary citizenship and are the surest signs the terrorists have not won. This vision is an image of citizenship that U.S. corporations tried to sell in the month after the tragedy.[46]

Much as Dickinson describes, Stark uses the flag to sell his technology and the Iron Man persona, exploiting concepts of patriotism and transforming a nationalistic symbol to represent commercialism and corporate dominance.

The most overt political critiques of excessive post-9/11 patriotism occur in *Iron Man 3*. At the beginning of the film, Stark's friend Colonel James Rhodes—who pilots his own Iron Man type suit— tells Tony that the military has decided to change his nickname from "War Machine" to "Iron Patriot" and paint his suit red, white, and blue because it "tested better with the focus groups." As the Mandarin threatens the United States, the government decides the name "War Machine" is "too aggressive." Both Stark and the

national media mock the War Machine makeover, seeing it as a weak attempt to inspire confidence in the United States government and military. As scholars including Diana Crane have argued, *Iron Man 3*'s critique of patriotism and nationalism may be an example of American films becoming less American in order to translate better for international markets. *Iron Man 3*'s critique of patriotic propaganda and Steve Rogers' attempts to reconcile pre-9/11 American values with modern-day complexities could be interpreted as attempts to reclaim the American flag as a genuine symbol of national values like freedom and democracy and removing its associations with Bush-era jingoism and post-9/11 commercial exploitation.

Conclusion

While the Marvel Studios films are known for being visually pleasing, with bright colors and iconic costumes inspired by their comic-book origins, they nevertheless use images inspired by the world we actually live in, including satellite surveillance, Manhattan skyscrapers on fire, wounded soldiers, and falling bodies. Based on interviews with key industry figures, it seems grounding comic-book fantasy in contemporary reality is an intentional choice on the part of the films' producers and directors. For example, in his commentary on *The Incredible Hulk* Louis Leterrier points out the similarity between an army unit and a film production, while Jon Favreau notes in the *Iron Man* commentary that the soldiers he used as extras in the film were about to ship out for Afghanistan, adding an emotional weight to their scenes. Even the more fantasy and science fiction-inspired MCU films contain contemporary references. Thor's gleaming kingdom of

Asgard is destroyed by enemy fire in *Thor: The Dark World*, and the heroes of *Guardians of the Galaxy* must protect a civilian population from eradication at the hands of a religious extremist. By playing on anxieties about terrorism and war, the MCU creates entertaining films that feel relevant without being traumatizing, what Francis Kelly calls "oblique mediations of 9/11."[47]

The MCU's approach to engaging visually with 9/11 and the War on Terror appears to indicate that images evocative of terrible events in our nation's history can be stripped of trauma and easily transformed into enjoyable entertainment. Taking pleasure in representations of war and disaster is a concept discussed in post-9/11 literature by scholars such as Susan Sontag, Carl Boggs, Tom Pollard, and many others. Writing of the incomprehensible destruction represented by Ground Zero, Sontag writes, "The landscape of devastation is still a landscape. There is beauty in ruins."[48] 9/11's terrible beauty is part of its iconic presence in the American (and global) collective imagination; it is an event prefigured by blockbuster films in the decades leading up to the attacks and created a new set of aesthetic conventions for many of the films that came after. The visual appeal of both 9/11 and the War on Terror is not difficult to understand. In the case of 9/11, there was clearly something about the videos of the Towers collapsing that compelled so many to view them over and over again, unable to look away.

In the same vein, films about or alluding to the War on Terror demonstrate why the war film is still such a popular genre in American cinema. As Boggs and Pollard observe:

> If war is a brutal, dehumanizing experience for those who must endure it, Hollywood cinema performs the function of aestheticizing and romanticizing it in hundreds of movies, as dashing male heroes (military and civilian) take on demonic enemies in defense of every noble cause: democracy, freedom, human rights, civilization itself.[49]

Boggs and Pollard see the aestheticization of war and destruction as endemic to Hollywood, perpetuating the never-ending Hollywood war-machine. Even in a drawn-out, increasingly unpopular and seemingly endless War on Terror, the war film has remained popular. Like the war film genre as a whole, the post-9/11 superhero film varied in tone from realistic and grim to romantic and entertaining.

Although romanticizing war and disaster is not unique to the MCU, the studio's need to appeal to a family audience and ensure the global success of its brand places specific restrictions upon the franchise. There are certain things that will probably never occur in the MCU, as evidenced by industrial discourse relating to (for example) Bruce Banner's suicide attempt being cut from *Incredible Hulk* or the *Iron Man* films downplaying Tony Stark's alcoholism. Thrilling spectacles of destruction, witty humor, and the absence of blood and death have come to define the MCU. Unlike *The Dark Knight* films with their obvious post-9/11 political and aesthetic parallels, the MCU's cultural commentary is buried under layers of spectacle and fantasy, contributing to the ideological contradictions and inconsistencies that define the MCU's engagement with 9/11 and the War on Terror.

Notes:

[1] Susan Sontag. *Regarding the Pain of Others,* 13.
[2] Jeffrey Melnick. *9/11 Culture*, 18.
[3] Geoff King. *The Spectacle of the Real*, 25.
[4] Brian Monahan. *The Shock of the News: Media Coverage and the Making of 9/11* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 9.
[5] Kellner, Douglas. "9/11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation," 44.
[6] Susan Sontag. *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 82.
[7] "Twin Towers Erased from Some Films after 9/11." *Today*. September 13, 2011. Accessed April 18, 2015.
[8] Geoff King. *The Spectacle of the Real*, 47.
[9] Wesley Morris. "Jesus Christ Superman." *Grantland*. June 13, 2013. Accessed February 7, 2015.
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[12] Francis Kelly. *Fantasy Film Post-9/11*, 14.
[13] Darren Franich. "17 Signs It's a Marvel Studios Movie." *Entertainment Weekly*. January 27, 2015. Accessed April 18, 2015.
[14] Jeffrey Melnick. *9/11 Culture,* 78.
[15] See above, pg. 79.
[16] Jeffery Melnick. *9/11 Culture*, 118.
[17] Kartik Nair. "Plummeting to the Pavement: The Fall of the Body in Spider-Man." In *Terror and the Cinematic Sublime: Essays on Violence and the Unpresentable in Post-9/11 Films*. Comer, Todd A., and Lloyd Isaac Vayo, eds. (Jefferson: McFarland and Company, 2013),17.
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[20] Bonus Features, *The Incredible Hulk*. Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2008. DVD.
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[29] Michael Griffin, 395.
[30] Roger Luckhurst. "In War Times: Fictionalizing Iraq." *Contemporary Literature* 53, no. 4 (2012): 717.
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[33] Anthony Breznican. “*Iron Man 3* Does WHAT to The Mandarin?” *Entertainment Weekly*. May 4, 2013. Accessed February 7, 2015.
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[37] Louisa Amoore. “Vigilant Visualities: The Watchful Politics Of The War On Terror.” *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 2 (2007): 218.
[38] Frances Kelly. *Fantasy Film Post 9/11*, 144
[39] Cord Scott. *Comics and Conflict*, xi.
[40] Linda Skitka. “Patriotism or Nationalism? Understanding Post-September 11, 2001, Flag-Display Behavior.” *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* 35, no. 10 (2005): 1995.
[41] Joseph Sommers. “The Traumatic Revision of Marvel’s *Spider-Man*: From 1960s Dime-Store Comic Book to Post-9/11 Moody Motion Picture Franchise,” 201.
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[43] See above.
[44] Andrew Dyce. “*Captain America: The Winter Soldier* Directors Talk Politics, Widow & The ‘Stealth Suit.’” *Screen Rant*. August 12, 2013. Accessed February 7, 2015
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[47] Francis Kelly. *Fantasy Film Post 9/11*, 8.
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Conclusion. "Because We'll Need Them To": "Post-Post" 9/11 and the Marvel Cinematic Universe

> *"Each time we take 9/11 as the answer to a major cultural question, we are admitting that it has the most awesome reflecting power. However imperfectly our image comes back to us in this glass, the most important thing that is happening each time we evoke 9/11 as an answer to our question is that we are admitting that 9/11 is too high to get over, too wide to get around."* Jeffery Melnick, *9/11 Culture*.[1]

In a 2013 speech at the National Defense University in Washington D.C., President Barack Obama remarked on the nation's transition into what *New York Times* writer James Traub refers to as "post-post 9/11 America."[2] Despite the inelegance of the term, it seems plausible to argue that there was a change in the scale and focus of the War on Terror following the "Arab Spring" that began in 2010 and Osama bin Laden's death in 2011. In his speech, President Obama stated:

> Today, the core of al Qaeda in Afghanistan and Pakistan is on the path to defeat. Their remaining operatives spend more time thinking about their own safety than plotting against us. They did not direct the attacks in Benghazi or Boston. They've not carried out a successful attack on our homeland since 9/11.[3]

While the President accurately describes the conclusion of one phase of the War on Terror, one defined by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the end of George W. Bush's presidency, and his own first term, the phrase "post-post 9/11" does not seem an appropriate descriptor of the cultural and political climate of America today. At best America is "post-bin Laden." However, the threat of international terrorism is still present, Guantánamo Bay remains open, and government surveillance programs allowed under the PATRIOT Act have only expanded in scope.

Perhaps most importantly, the term "post-post 9/11" implies a large-scale cultural shift and that America has somehow "moved on" from 9/11 as a psychological and artistic preoccupation. I argue this is not the case. If superhero film and television adaptations are any indication, 9/11 is something the nation is still working through. While the immediate trauma of the event has lessened, it may never entirely disappear. Just as nation and world altering events from the Civil War to the Holocaust have yet to be forgotten and are still regularly represented in art, film, and literature, 9/11 has passed permanently into the collective historical imagination. As Roger Simon notes, "As long as people are moved to document their practices of memory, the event of 9/11 is still in formation; an event whose boundaries are neither static nor stable."[4] As I've discussed in the last several chapters, ideological and aesthetic content related to 9/11 and the War on Terror has become more, rather than less, explicit in superhero films from the past several years including in *The Dark Knight Rises*, *The Amazing Spider-Man* films, and *Man of Steel*. This is also true of the end of Phase One and much of Phase Two in the MCU.

This thesis documents Marvel Studios' approach to engaging with 9/11 and the War on Terror by analyzing the MCU films and TV series in three primary areas: character development, political ideology, and aesthetics. In doing so, I support my argument that the MCU's approach to incorporating contemporary sociopolitical references differs from other post-9/11 superhero franchises. Instead of using 9/11 allegories and imagery to create a sense of terror and exploit audience vulnerability, the MCU disrupts the potentially traumatic work of processing terrorism and war. Using many of the generic conventions of the superhero film, Marvel Studios relies on humor, a

flashy comic book aesthetic, and toned-down references to death and mass trauma to neutralize any underlying cynicism or genuinely subversive political commentary present in their films. As Kolker notes, "from its beginnings [American film] has attempted to hide itself, to make invisible the telling of its stories, to downplay or deny the ways it supports, reinforces, and even sometimes subverts the major cultural, political, and social attitudes that surround and penetrate it."[5] Kolker's description is applicable to the MCU, a franchise that consistently attempts to hide itself behind conventions of spectacle and fantasy.

Contributions and Directions for Future Research

I believe this thesis fills a gap in scholarship about the political ideology of the MCU and the way the franchise engages with 9/11 and the War on Terror. By providing in-depth profiles of the MCU's primary heroes and villains, examining the films and TV series in terms of ideology, and analyzing visual references to 9/11 and the War on Terror, this thesis has expanded upon existing literature regarding the MCU and the post-9/11 superhero film. For example, Chapter One is an extension of Harrison and Hagley's study of *Avengers,* which expands to focus on those characters in their pre-*Avengers* film appearances in order to gain a deeper understanding of character development. Chapter Two takes a similar approach to Spanakos' work by examining ideology and "alternative patriotism" in the MCU but focuses on *Avengers*, *Iron Man 3*, *Winter Soldier*, and *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* whereas Spanakos examines the first three Phase One films. Additionally, while a few scholars and a core group of critics have noted how the MCU differs from other post-9/11 superhero films, none have provided an extended analysis of these

differences. I find variations within the post-9/11 superhero genre (or genre cycle) particularly intriguing, leading to the primary research questions for this project.

The research presented here could be expanded on in many ways. For one, a comparison of pre-9/11 and post-9/11 superhero films would provide deeper insight into the ways the genre has evolved since the attacks. Another possible research direction would be an in-depth comparative analysis of the MCU in contrast to the DC/Warner Bros. films and DC television adaptations. I believe this particular undertaking would be especially valuable, as it would illuminate how two comic book publishers and their parent companies took vastly different approaches to engaging with contemporary anxieties related to 9/11 and the War on Terror. Cultural trauma manifests itself in many ways. Some are lighthearted, like *Iron Man*'s fantastical adaptation of the War on Terror, while others are more ominous. Beyond DC/Warner Bros. and the MCU, the *Spider-Man*, *Amazing Spider-Man*, and *X-Men* franchises (along with a handful of solo films like Ang Lee's 2003 version of *Hulk*) have also taken on contemporary sociopolitical concerns in their own unique ways. An expansive analysis of all the superhero films since 9/11 would merit an entire volume and would provide invaluable perspective on the genre. Future studies could also compare post-9/11 superhero comics to their cinematic adaptations. Although the same companies often create them, film and comics tend to be discussed separately. Combining film and comics studies would be a useful theoretical approach.

The final potential expansion on this thesis, and the one that interests me most, is scholarship that continues to track the ideological and aesthetic evolution of the MCU in relation to evolving cultural and political concerns as well as new or increasing industrial motivations and pressures. The industrial pressures influencing Marvel Studios, for example, are characteristic of blockbuster film production in general but manifest themselves in a manner unique to the franchise. On the one hand, most franchise films

are intended to appeal to the widest possible audience in terms of age, geographical location, and (to a lesser extent for Marvel) gender. On the other hand, the ubiquity and popularity of the MCU's heroes along with the growing aesthetic and tonal standardization of the franchise under Disney make it a unique case. For example, while the studio has perpetuated a discourse of "risk" when it comes to launching new franchises like *Guardians of the Galaxy*, it is in a position to take such risks because it has already established itself as a majorly successful brand in the comic book film industry. From a visual perspective, while many scenes in *Guardians* have a unique look, the film still contains many elements of Marvel Studios' signature visual style. This "house style" is an inevitable effect of the MCU's serial storytelling. A certain amount of variation is allowed, especially with the studio's desire to make superhero films in various genres (political thriller, animation,[6] space opera, etc.), but must also be immediately recognizable as a Marvel Studios production.

Another indication that Marvel Studios is far more risk-averse than its discourse implies is the studios' increasing reliance on a small pool of directing and screenwriting talent, resulting in films that are more ideologically and visually similar to one another than earlier MCU films. The shift in the studio's hiring strategy reflects this desire for consistency and employing proven quantities. Instead of hiring directors with auteur reputations like Branagh and Whedon and allowing them to—as Feige often phrases it—"play in the Marvel sandbox,"[7] Marvel now prefers to hire directors with backgrounds in television or lower budget indie films. The studio seems to believe these new directors will better conform to the studio's overall vision for the franchise, preventing the types of "creative differences" that resulted in Edgar Wright's departure from *Ant-Man*, a film he'd been developing for nearly a decade.[8] For example, *Winter Soldier* co-directors Joe and Anthony Russo have essentially been given the keys to the Marvel Studios kingdom.

After the success of *Winter Soldier* and aware of Whedon's impending departure, the pair was entrusted with the upcoming *Avengers* sequels *Infinity War Part I* (2018) and *Infinity War Part II* (2019) along with *Captain America: Civil War* which stars Robert Downey Jr. alongside Chris Evans.

The Russos' background in television is particularly significant in understanding Marvel's evolving hiring strategy. In a recent *Flow* journal column, Derek Johnson notes "the contemporary comic book blockbuster has given film an increasingly *televisual* quality."[9] The Marvel Cinematic Universe is emblematic of the blockbuster film's shift towards the televisual. Common practices in television such as cliffhanger endings, an overarching narrative, and "teasers" which hint at the next installment are all televisual tropes used in the MCU films. Creatively, the televisual nature of the MCU places Kevin Feige in the role of showrunner. Like in television, individual directors are replaceable, interchangeable, and valued for their ability to execute the Creative Committee's vision for the franchise. From one perspective, this may be too strong of a statement. Directors like the Russos and *Guardians'* James Gunn certainly have a great deal of creative influence on their films, even if they lack total authorial control. However, the studio's awareness of its characters as global brands makes its desire for creative oversight all the more potent. As *EW* critic Darren Franich observes, "it's hard to imagine Marvel ever working with a high-powered director or any up-and-coming director with a truly bold take on the material."[10] Globalization, standardization, and televisiualization are all likely to have a dramatic impact on the future of the MCU, meriting further academic analysis.

Conclusion

The crucial element in any superhero narrative is, of course, the hero him/herself. Although post-9/11 superhero films may vary in style and tone, they are all driven by the

hero's mythical struggles and victories. In an iconic speech from *Spider-Man 2* (Sam Raimi, 2004) Aunt May tells Peter Parker: "Everybody loves a hero. People line up for them, cheer them, scream their names. And years later, they'll tell how they stood in the rain for hours just to get a glimpse of the one who taught them how to hold on a second longer." Clearly, heroes matter a great deal, as the popularity of post-9/11 superhero films and other franchises featuring epic heroes (*Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, etc.) indicate. But why do we place such stock in heroes? In a post-9/11 interview, philosopher Jurgen Habermas notes, "It seems to me that whenever 'heroes' are honored the question arises as to who needs them and why."[11]

Whether male or female, alien, human, or mutant, "out" like Tony Stark as Iron Man or living in secret like Clark Kent, post-9/11 superheroes seemed to fulfill the needs of a wounded nation in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 and continue to represent (at the very least) the possibility of protecting the world and allowing it to recover from traumas like war and terrorism. Even the darker, more cynical superhero films are ultimately about redemption and healing. As Anker observes of post-9/11 hero worship, "The heroic deed often signifies less a material than symbolic reparation: a shift of affect from the vulnerability of victimization to the powerful confidence of valiant accomplishment."[12] As the canon of post-9/11 superhero films demonstrate, heroes may represent a variety of possible responses to trauma and crisis, but all are engaged in the symbolic work that Anker describes. The political and philosophical flexibility of the genre allows the superhero to adapt to the current cultural moment, contributing to the longevity of the genre in its various forms including comics, television, and film. At the end of *Avengers*, Maria Hill asks Nick Fury what happens now that the heroes have gone their separate ways:

> **Maria Hill:** Sir, how does it work now? They've gone their separate ways, some pretty extremely far. We get into a situation like this again, what happens then?
> **Nick Fury:** They'll come back.
> **Maria Hill:** You really sure about that?
> **Nick Fury:** I am.
> **Maria Hill:** Why?
> **Nick Fury:** Because we'll need them to.

Whether 9/11 and the War on Terror continue to influence the MCU or these events give way to an as yet unforeseen future crisis remains to be seen, but it is almost certain that Marvel heroes and villains will battle each other on film and television screens for many years to come. As long as there is an audience for the genre and the franchise, the Avengers will return to fight another day.

Notes

[1] Page 18.

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[3] "Remarks by the President at the National Defense University." May 23, 2013. Accessed April 19, 2015. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/05/23/remarks-president-national-defense-university>.

[4] Roger Simon. "Altering the 'Inner Life of the Culture': Monstrous Memory and the Persistence of 9/11," 354.

[5] Robert Kolker. *A Cinema of Loneliness,* 11.

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[9] Derek Johnson. "Stasis, Change, and Televisual Comic Book Film Franchising." *Flow*. March 1, 2015. Accessed April 24, 2015.

[10] Darren Franich. "*Avengers: Infinity War*, the Russo Brothers, and Marvel's Pivoting Director Strategy." *Entertainment Weekly*. April 7, 2015. Accessed April 24, 2015.

[11] Giovanna Borradori. *Philosophy in a Time of Terror*, 43.

[12] Elizabeth Anker. "Villains, Victims and Heroes: Melodrama, Media, and September 11," 25.

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