The Black Panther's Aesthetic

An Exploration of the Importance of Visual Elements as Part of an

Afrofuturistic Multimedia Narrative

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Abstract

This thesis aims to explore the ways in which visual elements of the 2018 Marvel film *Black Panther* affects its narrative, and how it reinforces the themes regarding identity, heritage, and Afrofuturism. By putting an emphasis on its aesthetics within the context of important aspects of the current political and cultural climate, this paper encourages a reconsideration of the power superhero narratives can have, and its capability to unite and educate. It is particularly interesting to investigate how an Afrofuturistic work like this can inspire change in the real world, and how we see ourselves in the film's characters.

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Introduction

Superheroes are undeniably an integral part of contemporary pop culture. It seems like every

year, there is at least one, usually more, big budget film being released, on top of tv-series, video games,

and of course, comic books. Arguably, much of the appeal surrounding superheroes, is their

predictability; we know that in the end, it is always the "good" guys who win, and the enemies are

destined to fall at the hands of the heroes. From dark knights to supermen and reimagined gods of old,

superheroes offer a variety of adventures, filled with action, magic, futuristic technology, and a clever

use of aesthetics, which allows their audience to dream about alternate realities, full of wonder. At their

core, most forms of superhero media utilize multimediality, and it is the combination of word and image

that captivates readers of all ages, ethnicity, and backgrounds.

It might be easy to dismiss comic books as a "lesser" form of literature, precisely *because* of its

reliance on image to "carry" the text, but that could not be farther from the truth. The same goes for the

adaptations of these comic books. While it is true that not all superhero films provide deep and complex

narratives, they still maintain a degree of complexity, and this thesis aims to explore how and why these

narratives can work, and why they are worth exploring further. By investigating the various visual

elements found within *Black Panther* (2018), written and directed by Ryan Coogler with Joe Robert Cole

as co-writer, I aim to explore how the visual identity of the characters and their surroundings are an

important aspect of the narrative itself, and how it adds to the themes of the film. Every artistic choice

has its purpose, and in order to create a convincing story, these visual elements are able to reinforce

and emphasise aspects of the narrative. The costumes in particular are able to reveal additional

information about the characters; to quote Adilifu Nama, associate professor of African American

Studies at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, California, and author of several books on blackness and pop culture, "what their clothes suggested, their actions, adventures, and abilities confirmed." (p. 38). In addition to the all-important costumes of the film, the thesis will explore the world building itself, and how Wakanda serves as its own "character", built on a foundation of Afrofuturistic wonder. By putting these elements together, the film is able to forge an unapologetically Black narrative, that celebrates Black visuals, Black identity, and Black culture.

The aesthetics of the characters and of Wakanda itself create a strong, powerful visual identity that makes *Black Panther* stand out from previous Marvel films. It is worth investigating how and why this is, and what it is about the cultural moment in which it was released, that may have affected its narrative, and ultimately, its reception. To aid in the discussion, an in-depth analysis of the usage of colour as part of the character's design will be emphasised, along with how the concept of Afrofuturism is reflected in the characters themselves, and their surroundings. In addition, some passages from the relevant comics will be used to further emphasise the points made, in regards to how and why the visual elements work. By providing an analysis of relevant passages and how the text and visual elements work together in presenting the narrative of the film, it is my goal to provide a justification for the reading of superhero narratives within academia, and explain how the multimediality allows for richer, more complex narratives.

Chapter One: *Background and Context* provides a summary of the evolution and appeal of superhero narratives over the last few decades, and discusses the commercial success of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This section is grounded in the various reasons behind superheroes' appeal and charm, and their function as a "modern mythology". Further, it aims to clarify how one should approach superhero narratives, and how to view the aesthetics of comics and comic adaptations, and what function superhero narratives can serve.

Chapter two, *Creating Black Panther* offers some insight into the character's evolution from his first appearance in the 1960s *Fantastic Four* comics, and how he has changed over time under various writers, and the characters appearance in the MCU. Since Ryan Coogler's adaptation is loosely based on Ta -Nehisi Coates' *Black Panther* run from 2016, specific excerpts from these comics will be used as needed, to discuss how the visuals of the comics aid the narrative in comparison to the film. The chapter then shifts its focus to the main section, centred around the 2018 movie, where I will be providing an in-depth analysis of key aspects of the character design, focusing primarily on its usage of colour, and how this influences our interpretation of the characters, and its ability to foreshadow certain parts of the narrative. Often, the colours used indicate something about a character's temper, relationships, and their roles within the narrative. As such, these visuals elements are able to offer hints and insight to the audience, that creates additional layers and nuance. At the same time, some designs have the ability to reinforce certain stereotypes, for example in the use of the colour purple, which is associated with magic, spirituality, and the afterlife, and is used as the main colour scheme for Wakanda's lead shaman, Zuri. After analysing the characters, the chapter will explore various elements of Wakanda itself, and in

what ways the aesthetic of the film's settings might add to the narrative, focusing primarily on its

Afrofuturistic traits, and how the setting affects the characters.

While Chapter Two aims to decode the ways the visual elements of the film work in

collaboration with the textual elements in order to advance and add to the narrative, Chapter Three,

Black Heroes and Representation attempts to investigate how the Afrofuturistic aesthetic and themes of

the film play an important part in the discussions surrounding identity, belonging, and contemporary

politics in pop culture. By discussing the ways in which *Black Panther* fits within a wider context, this

chapter attempts to explain how the Afrofuturistic aesthetics work within the narrative, and to discuss

some of the criticism the film received for reinforcing certain stereotypes in regard to Africa, due to its,

ultimately American perspective.

Finally, the thesis ends with a summary about the on-going trends post-*Black Panther*, and a

brief conclusion about the project's findings.

Chapter One: Background and Context

Superheroes and Pop Culture

The superheroes of the 21st century come in a myriad of different shapes, sizes, and colours, and today, most forms of superhero media feature a fairly diverse and varied cast of characters. This diversity extends to the "traditional" sidekicks and supporting characters, to the villains, and to the heroes themselves. This has, however, not always been the case. While people of colour and other minorities have been present in superhero narratives for a long time, their roles were reduced to that of supportive characters, where they shared the spotlight with the white main characters. Thankfully, this has changed, and characters such as the Black Panther, Storm/Ororo, the Falcon, Miles Morals/Spiderman, and many more, have become fan favourites, showing that there is an engaged and passionate audience that wishes to see stories about these characters, and they want to see them in the spotlight.

According to Cristopher Knowles in *Our Gods Wear Spandex: The Secret History of Comic Book Heroes*, heroes have a tendency of popping up in times of need. Much like the heroes of myth and legend, *super*heroes serve as a reassurance that evil can be defeated. Heroes, both real and fictional, are people to whom we turn to for inspiration, and as moral guides, they serve as strong role models, reminding us of what makes someone "good". Superheroes are very much modern mythology, reinventing the epics and legends of the past, as noted by both Christopher Knowles, and George Faithful in "Dark of the World, Shine on Us". Similarly, Adilifu Nama explains that "the superhero archetype is heavily steeped in affirming a division between right and wrong, thus superheroes operate

within a moral framework" (p.4). It therefore makes perfect sense that we see ourselves in the heroes we idolise, or rather, we see *idealised* versions of ourselves, and the potential that each individual has.

Since contemporary superhero media serves a similar function as legends of old, it makes sense that they are closely tied to our identity, on a cultural and individual level. Certain heroes might be more realistic than others in terms of the foes they fight, and their capabilities, but I believe that we see ourselves in the heroes on-screen, which is why we enjoy such a great variety of superhero media. As such, heroes are a part of our cultural consciousness and we allow ourselves to be captivated and intrigued by their world, in all their different shapes and forms. The heroes of the stories we consume are, to various extents, directly affected by the challenges and struggles we face today. As Christopher Knowles claims, we see that superheroes provide support in times of uncertainty. Knowles argues that the reason for the hero's lasting success and popularity in contemporary popular culture is largely due to the instability and fear caused by the aftermath of 9/11, which rocked not only the US, but also the rest of the world. As such, it is natural for them to take on different roles in different times and reflect the concerns and worries of society in these times. As such, it is worth investigating how exactly some of these struggles are portrayed in modern superhero media. Since most narratives centred around superheroes rely heavily on visuals, the idea of aesthetic and visual representation, is also at the core of this discussion. The various suits and costumes that the heroes (and villains!) wear, often tell us something about the characters and their motivations. The superhero genre is so dependent on its visuals, that it is hard to imagine what these stories would look like, if budgets and use of special effects were different, along with a different vision and idea of how a modern, contemporary superhero should be portrayed.

Most of the mainstream superhero films and shows we see today, have a similar aesthetic, and it is evident that, regardless of which studio produces the films, they borrow from the same handbook. Textures, skin-tight body suits with all kinds of panelling, and often, less vibrant than their comic book counterparts, the heroes on-screen today have still come a long way from the undergarments-over-spandex look of the early comic book days, with bright, garish colour combinations, such as the ones found in the 1960s *Batman* tv-show, starring Adam West in its titular role. Costumes aside, this gem from the 60s was nevertheless quite progressive in some areas, particularly in its casting of Eartha Kitt as catwoman, if only for two episodes. Adilifu Nama explains that "Eartha Kitt's portrayal of Catwoman stands as an important testament to the cultural leeway superheroes can marshal, and the subversive power they sometimes enjoy" (p. 127). Julie Newmar and Lee Meriwether portrayed the feline femme fatale in season one and two, and the spin-off movie of 1966 respectively, but it was Kitt's portrayal in season three that truly made its mark on the catwomen to come. Kitt's Catwoman made its mark on subsequent iterations of the character, such as the ones played by Michelle Pfeiffer (*Batman Returns,* 1992), and Halle Berry (*Catwoman*, 2004). Nama continues, explaining that "Without Eartha Kitt sashaying her way across the small screen as a black Catwoman, the image of Halle Berry wielding a cat-o'-ninetails as a black superhero in a major motion picture would be unimaginable. […] having a black woman as the main protagonist of a major Hollywood superhero film was trailblazing in nature if not execution." (p.128). The choice to recast a character previously played by white women, with a black actress, was a brave, and controversial choice, but it permanently influenced our view of the character, and her aesthetic.

Compared to the 1960's Batman, Tim Burton's vision for *Batman* (1989) and *Batman Returns* (1992) brought with them edge, darkness, and a whole lot of latex, before Burton was replaced as

director with Joel Schumacher, for *Batman Forever* (1995), which attempted to make the Dark Knight more family friendly. This might be the reason why the spandex returned, at least for Jim Carrey's version of The Riddler, and this time, it was a bright and campy green bodysuit, adorned with question marks. "Camp" and superheroes go hand in hand, and the at times garish and overly exaggerated costumes, might certainly have affected the reputation of superhero media as something childish, and a "lesser" form of entertainment. However, even in its "lesser" forms, comics have always appealed to a wide range of people, and eventually, became mainstream. The casting of Jack Nicholson as *Batman's* (1989) Joker, who had previously starred in Stanley Kubrick's adaptation of Stephen King's *The Shining* (1980), indicated to people that this was a new era for superhero media, and that the studio wanted to take Batman more seriously than before (Kuiper, 2023).

The Marvel Cinematic Universe, more commonly referred to as the MCU, is the highest grossing movie franchise in existence, receiving $27.98 billion in revenue as of March 2023 (Anderson). This obviously indicates that there is a significant interest in this type of movie. However, some films do better than others. Compared to the MCU in terms of total profit, the DC Extended Universe (DCEU; starting with *Man of Steel* (2013), and does not include any of the stand-alone Batman films) is far behind, having earned "only" $6.21 Billion. Still, this puts them at ninth place on *Comic Book Reader*'s (CBR) list of highest earning film franchises. *CBR* also places *Batman* at seventh place, with a total revenue of $6.84 Billion, spread out across 17 films featuring Gotham's Dark Knight,. Compared to the MCU, with its 31 films, the DCEU currently only has 11 films, 28 if one counts the *Batman* films as well. DC has often received criticism for their lack of ability to create a proper "cinematic universe" in the same vein that the MCU has. The MCU was able to create a fairly cohesive vision for their narrative. While many thought of a cinematic universe like the MCU to be an ambitious project, ultimately, as

there is an obvious connection between each film. Each film fits comfortably within the Marvel

Cinematic Universe timeline, each "arc" of the story becoming their own "phase", with Phase One

beginning with the release of the first *Iron Man* film (2008), and ending with *The Avengers* (2012). As of

Spring 2023, the MCU has entered its fifth phase, with the release of *Ant-Man and the Wasp:*

Quantumania. This is the second part of the *Multiverse Saga*, which ends with phase Six, and *Avengers:*

Secret Wars, expected to be released in 2026 (Geisinger, 2023).

Prior to the release of *Iron Man* and the official launch of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, there

had already been made several movies using the Marvel IP[1], including *Fantastic Four* (2005), Sam Raimi's

Spider Man trilogy (2002-2007), and the 13 *X-Men* films (2000-2020). Compared to these previous films,

the Marvel Cinematic Universe sought to create an intricate story, all set within the same universe, as

the name entails. Because of this, every movie is filled with connections, references, plotlines, and with

frequent cameos, to other MCU entries. Since *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), Marvel has slowly but

surely regained some permission to use characters such as Spiderman, within their MCU-project, even

though the movie rights for these particular characters belonged to Sony. This has made it possible for

even more crossovers, especially with the current phase marking the beginning of the multiverse-

storylines.

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[1] List of non-MCU Marvel films; https://www.imdb.com/list/ls034422754/

In 2012, *Avengers*, directed by Joss Whedon, was released, and this is the film where we are

formally introduced to the superhero team that the film is named after. The initial character roster

featured Iron Man, Captain America, The Hulk, Thor, Hawkeye, and Black Widow. At this time, none of

the Avengers were people of colour, and Black Widow was the only female character to formally be a

part of the Avengers. The leader of S.H.I.E.L.D., Nick Fury (played by Samuel L. Jackson) is the only

character of colour with any considerable screen time[2]. In/after *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), the line-

up underwent some significant changes; in addition to the original cast, Wanda Maximoff, Vision, War

Machine, and Falcon join the team. Wanda Maximoff, a character originally of Jewish-Romani descent in

the comics, had her entire backstory whitewashed in the adaptation from comic to film. War Machine

and Falcon (James Rhodes and Sam Wilson) both began as sidekicks, to Iron Man and Captain America

respectively. The Falcon has become one of the most significant characters of the post-Infinity Saga

Avengers, as he was given Steve Roger's shield, and with it the title of Captain America. This is a rather

significant change, as not only did they take a black character who began as a sidekick and turn him into

a full-fledged hero; he also became Captain *America*, a hero supposed to symbolise all things great

about the United States. It says a lot about Marvel's current mindset, and while there has been plenty of

discourse and backlash concerning their seemingly "woke" attitudes coming from both critics and

average movie goers alike, it is worth viewing this criticism within the context of the rest of these

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[2] Worth noting that Nick Fury was originally Caucasian in the comics, see *Sgt. Fury* Vol. 11;

https://marvel.fandom.com/wiki/Sgt._Fury_Vol_1_1

narratives. The MCU of the late 2010s and onwards, have become much more inclusive and diverse,

showing that people of all kinds can be heroes, and that their stories are worthy and deserving of being

told.

In the early days of superhero comics, well-rounded and complex black characters were far and

few between. "In the 1940s, the only black character to appear in Marvel's line was literally named

"White-Wash" and looked more like a young white boy in black face rather than an actual African

American character", explains W. Scott Poole in an article for Popmatters.[3] Renée T. White writes in

Afrofuturism in Black Panther that "Visual culture and popular entertainment have been used as vehicles

for the reproduction of circumscribed and reductionist notions of Blackness. This sort of racial

propaganda is intended to deny readers the agency to imagine beyond the possible." (p. 2). This is exactly

why the 2018 film and the modern reinvention of the Black Panther is so important, along with many of

the other characters of colour that make up the gallery of heroes in Marvel's comics, and their film and tv

adaptations.

Marvel Comics has come a long way since "White-Wash", and their current gallery of heroes

have a much larger degree of diversity and is less reliant on stereotypical representations of their non-

white characters, and they are now full-fledged characters that do not need to rely on their white

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[3] Avengers; https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0848228/

counterparts to carry the plot for them. When the Black Panther was first introduced in the comics, he served as more of a sidekick and anti-hero, and was arguably Marvel's attempt at creating a more Batman-esque character, with similar characteristics. Over time, he has become an increasingly popular figure within Marvel's character gallery and serves as a unique protagonist that perfectly balances the science fiction/fantasy elements of superhero stories. In addition to this, the Black Panther is one of the few characters from Marvel whose storylines allow for a deeper exploration about relevant issues of today's socio-political climate, and what it means to be black. These themes deserve to be investigated in-depth, and they deserve a portrayal that do them justice. The superhero of today has changed and adapted to today's themes and socio-political climate. While superheroes have always had traces of politics and real-life issues as part of their stories., *Black Panther* embraces it and is unafraid to show its political foundation. Many of the superheroes were previously leaning towards being more one-dimensional, functioning as idealistic symbols of power, who fights for good by doing good. However, there was a shift in the 80s, that led to darker, more complex narratives where heroes were portrayed in more ambiguous manners.

Graphic novels became increasingly popular in the 80s, with writers like Alan Moore and Frank Miller at the centre of the "dark renaissance" of the superhero. The same shift is seen in Tim Burton's *Batman* films, which was inspired by Moore and Miller's portrayal of Batman, as a darker hero figure. The Comics Magazine Association of America, founded in 1954, and their "Comics Code Authority" (CCA) might have directly contributed to the campy storytelling and media of the 60s, having been created as a response to allegations regarding comics as a bad influence on younger readers, as mentioned by Stephen Weiner in Chapter One of *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts* (p. 3). The CCA claimed that comics were a terrible influence on children and young readers, and according to Dr. Fredric Wertham, one of the many healthcare professionals that joined the CCA's campaign,

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children were at risk of imitating the actions of the comic book characters, and that the content should therefore be sanitised. According to the *Comic Book Legal Defense Fund* (CBLDF), some of the things the CCA objected to, is ""immoral" content such as scantily clad women in jungle comics and the glorification of villains in crime comics". There is, in other words, no doubt a valid reason for why comics were seen as childish, for quite a long time. By sanitising the content and ensuring that it is "child-friendly" at all times, it makes perfect sense that only children end up reading it. In an article for *Bookriot.com,* Julia Rittenberg explains that the Comics Code Authority became less and less relevant over time, until it was permanently scrapped in 2011. She poses the idea that a large reason behind the CCA's downfall, was simply because comic book readers grew up. They wanted more complex narratives that explored deeper and more mature topics, and as society's view on obscenity and moral policing of media developed, the CCA were forced to change, and with them, the stories told in comics.

Following the CCA, there had previously been a common misconception that adult readers took no interest in superhero comics, something Marvel disproved by giving their superheroes (Spiderman in particular) personal problems "as daunting as the supervillains they fought" (p. 5). However, the strict censorship had led to a blossoming market for "underground" comics, comics that refused to abide by the rules and restrictions set by the CCA. Soon, this would also seep into the more mainstream comic book market, which allowed for grittier and darker narratives to be created. As mentioned previously, it was particularly the writing of Alan Moore and Frank Miller that drove the "dark" comic forward, especially in Moore's Swamp Thing, and their respective iterations of Batman.

Alan Moore's run of the comic series, *Saga of the Swamp Thing,* from 1984, sought to reinvent the Swamp Thing, after the series had suffered from low sales. Moore started a trend of creating a type of "mythos" based off of minor, supernatural characters in DC. This particular trend was later continued by Neil Gaiman (and others), and led to the creation of Vertigo, DCs own "adult" line of comics. Not only

was *Saga of the Swamp Thing* the first mainstream comic series to completely reject the CCA's strict censorship, but it also paved the way for *adult* comics to enter the mainstream. Perhaps more importantly, it allowed for darker, more mature themes to be explored within the universes of characters we were already familiar with.

Frank Miller's 1986 mini-series, *The Dark Knight Returns* was arguably what triggered the transformation of Batman into the character we're familiar with today. This story, featured an older, grittier Batman, who had initially sworn off his hero-alias, due to the death of his protégée (Jason Todd, one of the Robins). His "retirement" lasted ten years, but, due to an increase in crime in Gotham, he returned to the hero-mantle, like heroes often do. This time, however, he is almost *killed* while fighting a criminal gang ("the Mutants"), and for the first time, we see Batman as a hero, *and* mortal. He is badly hurt in his fights, and at the end, he even "dies" (it is, of course, revealed that he fakes his passing.)

In 1986, Moore's own *Batman*-comic was published, namely his graphic novel *A Killing Joke*, illustrated by Brian Bolland. In this story, Batman is forced to rescue Commissioner Gordon and Barbara Gordon (Batgirl, and the commissioner's daughter), the latter whom is shot and paralysed, by the Joker. Joker's entire reasoning for kidnapping the two of them, is to prove to Batman that even a man as good and lawful as Gordon, not to mention Batman himself, could be corrupted and fall to the dark, if only they were pushed far enough. When it comes to *The Killing Joke*, the subplot of Joker's origins (told in flashbacks, parallel to the main plot, set in the present), is important to note. The Joker, one of Batman's strongest adversaries, is shown before he became the villain most of us are familiar with. Throughout the story, the idea that "all it takes, is one bad day" is reiterated, and highlights not only the similarities between himself and Batman, but also that a *good* man can fall and succumb to evil, if the circumstances are bad enough.

In his 1989 adaptation, Tim Burton's *Batman* draws inspiration from both *The Killing Joke*, and Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns*, especially when it comes to the backstory of Jack Nicholson's Joker. In the book *Burton on Burton*, the director states that "[...] luckily comic books had gone through a phase where they had become much more acceptable. They had made things darker. They had taken Batman into the psychological domain." (p. 95). Burton's film had made quite the transformation since the show in the 1960s, and the comics had paved the way for this "new" Batman. Similarly, Christopher Nolan took inspiration from Moore and Miller for his own Batman movies, particularly *The Dark Knight Returns* (2008), starring the late Heath Ledger as the Joker. While Tim Burton's films had done quite well, he only ever directed two movies. While Burton's films had been cited by critics as being "too dark", it still did surprisingly well in the box office, and Anton Furst, designer on Batman, won an Oscar for his design work. In addition to the criticism about the films "darkness", many critics also felt that Burton was "more interested in The Joker than in the title character." (p. 103). This brings us back to Christopher Nolan's films, and the "new" superhero of the 21st century. Christopher Nolan's first Batman movie, *Batman Begins*, was released in 2005, four years after the attack on the Twin Towers, September 11th, 2001. With a nation shaken to its very core, the need for symbols of peace and *justice* grew, as Knowles notes in *Our Gods Wear Spandex.* We needed symbols, and *healing*. Sam Raimi's 2002 *Spiderman*, being released so shortly after the attack, had a very specific effect on its audience; "the trauma of 9/11 explains why the film packed the visceral punch it did. As we watch Spider-Man triumph over the forces of chaos and evil, in some sense the psychic damage done on that day is repaired" (Knowles, p. 27).

In the United States, the 2010s were filled with more and more serious instances of police brutality, and an increase in political polarity, and the rise of the Alt-Right movement. It was also a time of more consciousness and awareness regarding these issues, many taking to protesting and

demonstrating against these brutal acts, in hopes of bringing change for those who still face prosecution and oppression, and justice to those lost. When Donald J. Trump was elected as the 45th president of the United States in 2016, for many, this came as a shock, and his victory marked a turning point in modern politics, where lies, "fake news", and attacks on minorities, all coming from the head of state, became "acceptable" to a large part of the population, both in and outside of the US. It is, in other words, not at all surprising that a film like *Black Panther* was released at this particular time, with growing tensions between the different political wings, and where people are finally being heard when they speak out against the racism and injustice that is ingrained in our society.

This is a film that not only celebrates *blackness*, but also asks hard questions about dealing with a world filled with racism and oppression, and whether or not standing idly by while others are suffering, is justified. *Black Panther* celebrates blackness, and highlights black identity, instead of reducing black characters to *just* sidekicks, villains, or *love interests. T'Challa is *king* of an uncolonized African nation; his sister Shuri is a tech-genius, competing against the likes of Tony Stark (Iron Man), and the Queen Mother, Queen Ramonda, is a powerful matriarch and leader. In addition, Okoye, the leader of the Dora Milaje, is also another example of a character that deviates from the norm. Instead of being sexualised or reduced to stereotypes, she's allowed to be full of strength and determination, a great sense of principle, and even engages in banter, at the expense of her king. This reinforces the message within the narrative, that one doesn't *need* superpowers, to be able to be a hero (although it certainly helps). The characters are *human* and are not afraid to show it, and they are prone to making mistakes. *Black Panther* introduces characters that are heroes, not only through magical or supernatural forces, but also through their humanity, and their black identity is never questioned, belittled, or dismissed. It is instead, celebrated, and treated with the respect it deserves.

As Marvel Studios realised that there *is* an interest in this kind of character, and more politically aware narratives, many viewers seem to believe that they were, and still are, disrupting the status quo, and pandering to a minority of people of colour, or women, because the typical cis white male protagonist, is no longer at the centre of all of their films. As explained in a 2022 article, released shortly after the premiere of *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, Lacina et al. explain in *The Washington Post* that "one strand of MCU doomsaying predicts downturns because of increasingly diverse MCU storytelling. White men played every title hero during Phase 1 of the franchise (2008 to 2012). In subsequent phases, however, Marvel Studios increased diversity in its stories and its production teams. In the MCU's Phase 4 (2021 to 2022), only half the films feature White male leads." This perfectly demonstrates the change in the MCU, and perhaps, the greatest irony of the "anti-woke" criticism. While the MCU's films were dominated by white, male protagonists for the longest time, it is unimaginable for some that we in 2021 and onwards are able to see half as many white male protagonists, even though this would be a more accurate representation of what the real world looks like, from a demographics perspective. This is a complex issue, and arguably a result of Hollywood's lack of willingness to take risks and feature stories by and about minorities. Many of the higher-budget films with mainstream appeal, that focus on telling stories about minorities, do so with an emphasis on suffering and trauma, instead of celebrating diversity, endurance, and the *potential* of all kinds of people. Ultimately, it is the emphasis on telling a story of and about people of colour, of *black* people, that makes *Black Panther* such a significant movie, and moment, for the MCU. It taps into relevant discourse surrounding existence as a Black person, and the various challenges African countries might face, when engaging with the rest of the world. The film's various characters represent different sides of these discussions, and their ethnicity and socio-political background play into how they approach their different roles.

As mentioned previously, Adilifu Nama defines the superhero archetype as "heavily steeped in affirming a division between right and wrong, thus [...] operat[ing] within a moral framework" (p. 4). They therefore reflect and reinforce the ideals and moral values of their time, and when it comes to heroes of colour, it is even more evident, as they function as symbols for contemporary race relations. In addition, Nama stresses that the heroes are practically always the victors, *because* of their morality and sense of justice, and compassion for others. This is seen in heroes like Superman, it is seen in heroes like Captain America, and it is seen in heroes like the Black Panther. As such, it is worthwhile to discuss the kind of characters we are dealing with in this film, and how they relate to various pre-established archetypes, and whether or not this is reinforced through the character design.

In the article "Beowulf to Batman: The Epic Hero and Pop Culture", Roger B. Rollin draws on three of the five hero-types that the literary critic Northrop Frye defined, in the book *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957). Here, Rollin uses Frye's definitions to illustrate the different characterizations that heroes in epics and pop culture tend to have, emphasising the different degrees of power, and the flaws that heroes might have. Type 1, the hero who is "superior in *kind* both to other men and to the environment of other men, the hero is a divine being and the story about him will be a *myth* in the common sense of a story about a god" (p. 434). Rollin uses Superman as an example of the Type 1 hero, explaining that he is "absolute in his power, his glory, and his goodness". Superman is perfect (or rather, *divine*), and by taking on the alias of Clark Kent, he takes on the "imperfect". When it comes to type 2, Frye describes him as the hero who is "superior in *degree* to other men and to his environment, the hero is the typical hero of *romance*, whose actions are marvellous but who is himself identified as a human being. The hero of romance moves in a world in which the ordinary laws of nature are slightly suspended." (p. 435). Rollin highlights Batman as a typical example of the type 2 hero and explains that

while he might possess a "semi-divine aura", he is prone to be flawed, and capable of error (though "seldom crime and serious sin" (p. 435)). The final type that Rollin discusses in his article, type 3, is described as "superior in *degree* to other men but not to his natural environment, the hero is a leader he has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than ours but … is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature". Rollin describes this type as "vulnerable, not only physically, but also intellectually and psychologically, and he is capable of, though not prone to, error" (p. 435).

I would argue that the characters of the *Black Panther* are more likely to fit into this third category, both in terms of the film's titular figure himself, but this type also extends to the film's antagonist, Killmonger. Both are first and foremost *human*, and though they both receive some superhuman ability, they are still very much mortal men, both passionate, and, as Rollin describes, subject to social criticism, and to order of nature. These are both inherently *flawed* characters, but with potential to grow and learn, or succumb, to their mistakes. At the same time, the film plays with our perceptions of stereotypes, and subverts our expectations, with characters like Ross and Zuri perhaps being the two most central examples. Killmonger as the "villain" of the film also fits into this particular type, and the tragedy of his character is how he falls for the allure of vengeance and violence, rather than finding a way to heal and move forward. Killmonger's motivations come from a place of progressive ideals, but ultimately, his thirst for revenge overpowers the heroic side of his goals, which turns him from anti-hero, to villain. Similarly, Black Panther needs to learn to manoeuvre the various roles he is given, as king, son, lover, and hero, and find a way to balance these different directions, and what each direction ultimately demands of him. The Black Panther is a figure that is moulded and shaped by the context of his time, and he, like anyone else, is learning what it means to navigate life in a world that is constantly changing.

To summarise this section, different times demand different heroes, and as mentioned previously, we know that the rise of the superhero into mainstream pop-culture, is closely tied to the socio-political climate of our current times. The different heroes of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, or the DC Cinematic Universe for that matter, all show different types of heroes, dealing with different kinds of enemies. As mentioned previously, the first (and arguably second) Iron Man movie, along with Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight* trilogy, all came at a time in US and international history, still heavily impacted by the aftermath of 9/11, and the war on terror. The heroes at the centre of these films play into (White) American ideals, and while this is nothing new for the entertainment industry, it does not mean that we must continue with the same pattern. As we learn to be more conscious and aware of this bias, and the lack of stories about the "others", it opens for new types of narratives, and portrayals that dare to break with old tropes and stereotypes, in order to show characters that are richer and more complex.

Visual Narratives and Marvel's New Aesthetic

In order to provide some context and background about the visual aspects of superhero films, it is important to clarify how this paper defines "aesthetics", and its function as a literary device in multimedia narratives. Britannica defines aesthetics as the "the philosophical study of beauty and taste" (Scruton). As is often the case when dealing with art of any kind, its value and beauty tends to depend

on whom it is seen by. It is hard to create a specific set of rules that is able to capture the essence of art, and what makes for "high" culture. Traditionally, the definitions of art and culture have been heavily connected to the upper class, and the monetary value of artworks. With modernism and postmodernism, came a much more forgiving view on art and aesthetics, and experimenting with convention and breaking tradition, was encouraged. Still, "popular culture" as a phrase, has often been used with somewhat negative connotations, indicating that since it appeals to the masses, it somehow cheapens the product itself. Even texts such as the work of Shakespeare, or Herman Melville, could once be argued to have been "popular culture" (Carrier and Oliker), and their texts being considered "classics" today, has depended on their cultural and educational value. David Carrier aims to prove that even comics, may one day come to be considered classics, thanks to their aesthetic and educational value.

For the sake of this thesis, I would argue that even superhero movies, are able to provide an educational and aesthetic significance, and as such, are worth studying closer. Even though the genre is not without its issues, and much of the criticism is fair, I believe that it still holds a certain value, and the idea of "high" and "low" culture is worth challenging. Martin Scorsese was interviewed by *Empire* magazine in 2019, where he says, in response to a question regarding his view on Marvel movies "'I don't see them. I tried, you know? But that's not cinema,'" (Sharf). While Scorsese, an incredible force within the movie industry, is right, to some extent, this mindset is reinforcing views that "some art is better than other art". Lacina et al writes for *The Washington Post that* "MCU films and shows are criticized as being formulaic, status-quo affirming, juvenile, not diverse enough, too numerous and — as Martin Scorsese memorably wrote — "not cinema."". While probably true for some of their films, it does not always have to be the case.

If the Superhero genre itself was inherently bad and low quality, it would never have amassed the traction and engagement that it has received; as mentioned above, superheroes, be they from Marvel or DC, are some of the highest grossing franchises of all time. And, with good reason. Somehow, people find heroes relatable, and by following Christopher Knowles parallel between myths of old, and superheroes as their modern equivalent, it is without a doubt a *type* of story that people relate to, and have related to, for centuries.

Another issue with the notion of "high" culture, and what society deems "beautiful/visually appealing", is that the standard is often set and defined by the "ruling class", and or majority. The idea of Western beauty standards and ideals has permeated so many industries and fields, in and outside of the western world. This creates a standard skewed in favour of "white" and western aesthetics, where anything that fails to meet said standards, is deemed "lesser", and incomplete. This causes several challenges when attempting to tell stories that fail to meet the "accepted" requirements, and the stories that do get told, are held to a higher standard. A good example of "lesser" media succeeding, is the indie film industry; while mainstream Hollywood, with their million-dollar budgets, dominate the market, they have struggled to regain their footing after the pandemic, while the indie film industry have reached their highest revenue in a decade, in particular thanks to indie horror, as noted by Jack Brindelli for *Indy Film Library*, citing Jordan Peele's *Nope* (2022), a neo-Western, sci-fi horror blend, starring *Black Panther's* Daniel Kaluuya as one of its main characters, as an example. The indie scene have the freedom and ability to experiment with the industry conventions, and as such, it is not a surprise that someone like Jordan Peele has had great success in the last few years, with films like *Nope*, *Us* (2019), and *Get Out* (2017), all starring Black actors in the lead roles.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe has, in the later years, experimented more with diverse

narratives, but this has not come without backlash. The 2019 film *Captain Marvel* was subject to an

intense amount of criticism, largely due to its lead actress Brie Larson's outspokenness, and refusal to

coddle those who were somehow offended by a superhero film, with a female protagonist. "Fans" were

offended even more so because Marvel Studios confirmed that Captain Marvel would be the MCU's

most powerful hero, disrupting their image of Thor, or the Hulk, or any of the other male characters, as

the most powerful hero (Rajput, 2023). By attempting to disrupt the status quo, *Black Panther's*

commercial success ultimately paves the way for new narratives, and new aesthetics.

Still, it is true that superheroes and comics as whole have a certain connotation, and our

preconceived notions about comics, does influence to some degree the ways in which we choose to

"read" these narratives, whether on film, or as comic books. While we certainly do view them as

entertainment, oftentimes, this is where it ends. Superhero stories are seen as "simple" forms of

literature, which might cause issues, when they try to deal with themes and subject matters that fail to

fit within the narrow constraints placed on the genre by some readers. It is therefore important to

establish what value comics and superhero narratives might have, and whether or not they have any

form of aesthetic value.

David Carrier discusses the aesthetic value of comics, and their role and function within the

context of art and literature, in his book *The Aesthetics of Comics* (2000). While providing a more

philosophical approach, this book still highlights many of the misconceptions and considerations one

must take when working with comics in an academic context. According to Carrier, reading,

understanding, and interpreting comics has often been done through the lens of "classical" art theory,

and this particular approach does the medium a great disservice. Instead of thinking about what the

artist had in mind when creating the artwork on hand, comics are a much more reader-oriented

medium; "such mass culture images should be interpreted differently from old-master art. The meaning

of the comic is determined not by the artist, but by the audience; to interpret a comic, we need to

identify the ways in which it reflects the fantasies of its public" (p.7). Scott McCloud, in *Understanding*

Comics, arguably agrees with this sentiment, in his description of "gutters" (the space *between* the

panels), in which the reader must imagine what happens between one image and the next, in order to

"fill out" the blanks (p. 73). This gives the reader a great deal of agency in terms of interpretation and

the story being read, perhaps more so than in other mediums. This sense of agency and personal

interpretation sis what makes the process of reading and consuming stories worthwhile, and adds to the

immersion we feel when reading these narratives.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe has taken several different stories from the comic books, and

combined them into something new, which, in many cases, fills in the gaps and creates a bridge

between the different comic book runs, in order to create a more cohesive storyline. This transition

from comic to film, has caused several significant changes in terms of characterisation, and many of the

preestablished relationships and dynamics between characters in the comics, differ in the MCU. These

changes add new layers and complexities to the world, and considering the cinematic continuity, make

more sense, than forcing every detail of the comics to work on-screen.

In addition to the characters themselves, there is also the matter of translating drawn designs

into the world of 3D, which is also a significant challenge. The costumes in the MCU vary in terms of

complexity, detail, and whether or not they are made in real life or are added via CGI. Not all comic book

art is as detailed either, and it is not uncommon for more simplistic designs to become more detailed

and complex when recreating them in the real world. Wanda Maximoff's Scarlet Witch costume in

WandaVision (2021) is an excellent example, as they introduce us to the classic leotard and cape outfit

from the early comics, and a significantly more detailed and complex "MCU" version, with plenty of

texture, interesting panelling, and all kinds of little details. These changes are obviously rooted in

practicality, and what is actually feasible to create in real life, but luckily, many of the characters in the

comics have costumes that have easily been adapted into something real. *Black Panther* does stand out

compared to most of the other MCU films, as its dedication to the aesthetics of the characters' apparel

is heavily influenced by the cultural context of the film, and the costumes add a substantial amount of

complexity and personality, to the various characters.   In the case of *Black Panther*, the visual impact of

the narrative is largely tied to how the character design supports their stories and backgrounds, and the

design of Wakanda, which is a stark contrast to what the "real" world tends to think and associate with

African countries. Not only does it portray the country as rich, technologically advanced, and vibrant; it

also highlights cultural differences *within* Wakanda. The MCU "formula" is predictable, and to a large

extent, I believe that the audience knows what to expect from the studio. *Black Panther* is different in its

attention to detail, even though the story itself might not be overly revolutionary in and of itself. The

aesthetic and visual quality of the film is so distinct in its emphasis on utilising the garb worn by actual

African tribes, as a basis for (afro)futuristic designs. This fuels the idea of Afrofuturistic works as an

inherent act of reclamation, in that it envisions an African nation, untouched by colonisation and

western interference. On the flipside, we have Killmonger, who grows up in a poor neighbourhood in

Oakland, and whose casual wear is highly influenced by urban streetwear, which reinforces the idea of

him as "Westernised" in the eyes of the audience, and later, when his combat gear creates a distance between him, and the Wakandans.

Instead of reiterating the misconception of Africa as one, singular country, with one particular culture and people, the MCU's Wakanda manages to portray the aesthetic, cultural and ethnic differences within one (fictional) African country. Each tribe has a distinct style of clothing, way of living, and combat techniques. This is an incredibly clever move, and an *important* one. Portraying Wakanda as a *thriving* and complete nation, with a rich culture and history, in a superhero flick of all things, has a significant political and cultural impact. It forces audiences to rethink and reimagine what they think they know about African nations, and while Wakanda is a science fiction/fantasy haven, there is still merit in the way the fictional country is presented. There is even a designated character, that acts as the "western" voice in this narrative, Agent Everett Ross (portrayed in the film by Martin Freeman). Ross is a great example of the American mindset, as he often comes across as someone who knows "better" than the Wakandans, at least early on. He doubts their technology, scoffs at the idea of Wakanda as anything more than a country of farmers, when the film's secondary antagonist tells him about the presence of Vibranium, and is stunned when he sees the *real* Wakanda, later on. His role is that of the "outsider", and instead of having a white guy be the hero, he is reduced to a sidekick, and at times, is even dumbed down, or used for the sake of comic relief.

Chapter two: Creating Black Panther

The Comic Origins of Black Panther

In the process of reinventing the Black Panther for the silver screen, many changes and

adjustments had to be made to the character, and the relevant story lines. Ryan Coogler's *Black Panther*,

and any of the other MCU entries, are an amalgamation of various storylines, and in the case of *Black*

Panther, it is most notably inspired by the comic runs by Christopher Priest, and Reginald Hudlin's

version of the hero, who in turn inspired Ta-Nehisi Coates' 2016 comic run. The MCU's Black Panther

sought to maintain the emphasis on T'Challa as an *African* hero, and a king, and how he manoeuvres life

between his royal duties, and his role as superhero. Marvel Studios fully embraces the Afrofuturistic

themes and elements of both the character, and his nation, highlighting the potential and creativity of a

world where an African nation is allowed to exist and create its own heroes, without Western

interference.

While visually, the Black Panther might mirror the likes of Batman, the Black Panther is a symbol

of a different kind, embracing the themes related to Black identity, African heritage, and black ingenuity.

The hero's name itself mirrors that of the Black Panther Party (BPP) of the 1960s, a party that was

founded in Oakland, California, where the film's antagonist, Killmonger, grows up. There have been

many misconceptions and confusion among fans in regards to whether or not the Black Panther was

inspired by the Black Panther Party, and they both came to be within the same political and cultural

backdrop, in the same year. While the BPP was founded in late October, 1966, the comic book character

of the same name made his first appearance in *The Fantastic Four*, #52, published in June of 1966. While

the character has no real connection to the Black Panther Party itself, it is naïve to think that he has no

connection to the political movement that created it. At his conception, the Black Panther was a blend

between anti-hero and sidekick tricking the Fantastic Four into entering Wakanda, where he laid out

traps that would allow him to test his strengths, before going head to head against his real enemy,

Ulysses Klaw. He has changed much since then, embodying the politics and ideology of the various writers that have had their go at his stories, moulding him into a rich and interesting character. The degree of political influence in the comics has varied, but the character is without a doubt an important symbol in pop-culture, and a great example of the potential of Black heroes in mainstream popular culture.

The Black Panther is by many considered to be the first *real* Black superhero, created by Marvel Comics' Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1966. Prior to his creation, the most notable black figures in comics were limited to the roles of bystanders, sidekicks, or villains, with few ever becoming full-fledged heroes by themselves. The Black Panther originally served as a supporting character to the Fantastic Four, and later, for Captain America, in *Tales of Suspense*, as Todd S. Burroughs explains in the article "Black Panther, Black Writers, White Audience" (p. 56). From his creation in 1966 up until 1998, the black Panther character was written by white writers, who were all notable names in the industry, such as Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Roy Thomas, and Don McGregor. All of them took the Black Panther in different directions, ranging from a supporting character, a super-scientist like Fantastic Four's Reed Richards/Mr Fantastic, and, an "everyman warrior, a philosopher-king", as Burroughs calls him. It was not until Christopher Priest took over in 1998, that the Black Panther began this transformation into the unapologetically and intrinsically *Black* superhero that most Marvel fans are familiar with today. Christopher Priest chose to build upon Don McGregor's foundation, particularly in terms of the Black Panther's supporting cast, and McGregor's lore surrounding Wakanda, and also attempted to transform the title character into a more ambiguous hero-figure, combining Frank Miller's Batman (*The Dark Knight*), and real life figures such as Nelson Mandela (p. 64).

Christopher Priest was, as Burroughs explains, a "Black liberal comic book writer by trade", and during his Black Panther run, worked hard to avoid alienating his White audience. Whereas the focus of Priest's Black Panther was obviously on T'Challa and Wakanda, and ultimately, a black narrative, "Priest tried to accommodate White readers by comparing the Panther to Batman, and also, as previously stated, by adding White main characters to his story" (p. 65). On the character of Killmonger, Priest says that he "wanted to explore a Wakandan native who'd been corrupted by Western values [...] He is Black Panther without those pesky ethics. But he does, however, know all the tribal rules and knows how to use Parliamentary technicalities against the monarch." (p. 67). In other words, Killmonger became a character who is not bound by the laws and moral framework that most heroes operate under, and his knowledge of the rules and customs of Wakandan royalty is used to his advantage. This is seen in the 2018 adaptation as well, when he first enters Wakanda, and challenges T'Challa to ritual combat in order to seize control of their weapons. Priest's *Black Panther* was an interesting approach to the character, but Reginald Hudlin took it all a step further.

Reginald Hudlin's Black Panther placed an even greater emphasis on the racial relations of America, and Black Panther as part of the urban milieu of contemporary black America, as Adilifu Nama notes in *Super Black* (p. 51). Burroughs continues, stating that "while Priest tries to make T'Challa a racially transcendent figure, Hudlin worked to emphasize the 'black' in the Black Panther". Hudlin explains that "[What] Malcolm X, Miles Davis, and Muhammad Ali, all have in common, is the knowledge that the act of being a Black man in white America is an inherent act of rebellion. They are WILLING to be bad@$$es." (Burroughs, p. 75). This sentiment is important in understanding Black Panther as a character, along with understanding the motivations of Killmonger, in the film; them being black is intrinsically tied to their motivations, goals, and place in the world, and had the adaptation and comics

chosen to *not* explore their identity as black individuals, they would do the characters and their stories a great disservice.

While the Black Panther is not the first black hero to appear in mainstream pop culture, he is the first unapologetically Black, *African* hero to lead an entire movie on his own, and whose story is centred primarily around what life is like as an African king, of an imaginary, futuristic African nation untouched by colonisation and western interference. In addition, these different writers made the character more independent, by turning him into his own character, instead of someone who had previously been seen as a sidekick. The character of Black Panther is an important symbol and represents the *potential* of a hero that is unapologetically black, and whose blackness and African heritage is front and centre for his character, his motivations, and his view of the world around him. T'Challa is a powerful hero, with integrity, compassion, and courage, and on top of it all, he is a king, attempting to do what is best for his people, and find his and his country's place in the world.

Ryan Coogler's 2018 movie adaptation follows the vein of both Priest and Hudlin's *Black Panther* runs, although perhaps more along the lines of Hudlin's, than Priests, though this might be a matter of interpretation. Priest and Hudlin reimagined the Black Panther, and "infused [him] with an African-centred, self-determining ethos" (Nama, p. 57), and the film follows this precedent. Similarly, Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Black Panther* plays into this same idea of the character, and we see his influence in the film as well. By building on the Wakanda and the Black Panther that we know from the comics, Coogler and fellow writer Joe Robert Cole, created a rich and exciting combination of Afrofuturism, African mythology, that explores a post-colonial narrative, and African American culture. For the superhero genre and mainstream pop culture, this can be considered outright revolutionary. The world of *Black Panther* and the character's evolution (thanks to the presence of Black writers) certainly reflects a shift

in our appreciation of Black culture and Black narratives, and more importantly, it encourages a shift in our collective consciousness in regard to heroes of colour. The most significant aspect of this film is perhaps that while it is yet another superhero movie, the superheroes are not necessarily the most important aspect of the film, or what makes it revolutionary in any way. Rather, it is the celebration of black culture, and its celebration of black identity that makes *Black Panther* stand out.

Comic Art and Ta-Nehisi Coates

The 2018 film focuses more on establishing a specific colour scheme for the various factions and characters, than Ta-Nehisi Coates' run does, and as such, the sub-chapter *Character Design as Narrative in Black Panther (2018)* will prioritise the function of colour in its analysis of the character's designs. The comics use composition and colour somewhat differently than the film; often, entire panels are coloured in a particular hue, in order to further emphasise and convey a specific mood or invoke the sense of being in a specific place. There are many examples of this in the comics, but there are a couple instances that illustrate the above best and demonstrate the contrast between the comics and the film. While the film utilises scenery and character design in a similar fashion as the comics, in order to convey a particular mood and atmosphere, the comic book medium generally allows for a bit more creativity and exaggeration than is possible on film, which in turn means there is more versatility in how the visual elements are used for the sake of storytelling. In addition, the relationship between the story and the

reader differs, as the comics forces us to work *with* the narrative, and actively fill in the gaps in order to make sense of the drawings on each page. Instead of placing too much emphasis on the character design of the comics, this section will attempt to focus on more general traits of the art in the comics, and instead focus on a selection of relevant excerpts from Coates' story, that properly convey not only the difference in how the medium approaches composition, lighting, and colour, but also, how the reader is involved. This latter part is mainly based on Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1994), which provides great theoretical insight into the various components that creates a comic, and the book is arguably one of the most important texts when working with comic books, whether creating them, or researching them.

Perhaps most relevant, is McCloud's example of the "gutters", aka the "gap" between each panel, that is relevant when comparing the visuals in film to comics. In *Black Panther Annual #1* (2016)*, we see Agent Ross being interrogated by a fellow CIA officer. The room is dark, apart from the bright overhead lamp illuminating Ross, the other officer, and the table he is seated at. The colours are muted and almost washed out, and it is not until a bit further out in this particular issue, that Black Panther suddenly appears out of the shadows. To have a similar effect on screen, the shadows would have to be pitch black, which is hard to recreate, while still maintaining the "readability" of the rest of scene. In film, it might be easier to cut back and forth, and while the comic book panels *technically* work the same way through the gutters, the comic is able to maintain the same framing and composition, giving the *illusion* of the character appearing out of nowhere. Scott McCloud describes how the gutters forces the reader to read between the lines in a way you would not do when consuming other types of media; the comic panels contain a fraction of the action in the narrative. Everything else happens in this area "between the lines", and the reader is therefore given the opportunity to connect the dots, and supply

their own "filler", to bridge one scene with the next, the reader consciously needs to imagine what happens within this gap (p. 68). The relationship between reader and creator therefore manifests itself in a mutual understanding that the reader is supposed to add to the narrative. Like film, comics use sequences of images to convey its story, but while film is continuously displaying images, comics rely on the spaces between the panels, and by proxy, the reader, to do a lot of the heavy lifting in order to tell the story. Both comics and cinema provide excellent opportunities for storytelling, and the combination of text and image can often create complex and interesting stories, where the reader must utilise more than one mode of thinking, and process multiple forms of input at once. While it might be easy to dismiss the superhero genre as something childish and simple, the amount of thought and consideration that is put into each aspect, be it character design, world building, or even the way a particular scene is composed, it all aids in creating a rich and immersive narrative. Both the art of the comics and the 2018 film draws heavily upon real life visual elements, and the aesthetic created by the film has, in my opinion, made enough of an impact that people who otherwise might not care about the subject, become more conscious of the cultures and aesthetics of the real world.

In *The Blacker The Ink*¸ an anthology edited by Francis Gateward and John Jennings, Consuela Francis explains in the chapter "American Truths", race and blackness tie into the superhero genre, and comic book medium. On McCloud's theories about the format, Francis explains that "while closure in electronic media is 'continuous, largely involuntary, and virtually imperceptible,' closure in comics is 'far from continuous and anything but involuntary'" (p. 139). This marks the main difference between comics and film, as comics *demand* a readers' attention and willingness to, essentially, collaborate on the story. Francis continues, and explains further how the dynamic between reader and creator functions.

"McCloud goes on, "Closure in comics fosters an intimacy surpassed by the written word, a silent, secret contract between creator and audience. How the creator honours that contract is a matter of both art and craft" (69). This idea of a "contract" is crucial to beginning to understand how race can be so disruptive to the superhero narrative. If readers have expectations of the comics form, then they certainly also have expectations of the superhero genre. These expectations are driven, at least in part, by this "contract" between creator(s) and readers." (p. 140)

Expectations come naturally for any form of medium, and our expectations create a foundation that we use when consuming and understanding a narrative. With *Black Panther*, the larger, mainstream audience might simply expect yet another superhero story, and base further expectations on the previous entries of the MCU. For those who are more familiar with the comics, these expectations might vary yet again, as the expectations are based off of the comic book narratives themselves. Ultimately, our expectations affect that way we approach a narrative, and the medium itself. Then, when a narrative fails to meet said expectations, it might alter the way we choose to see it; it might be a bad superhero story, while excelling at portraying a complex aspect of real life, or it might be an *excellent* superhero story, but fall flat when seen through alternate lenses. This does, to some extent, tie into the introductory chapter of this thesis, where the question of aesthetics and cultural value of comics is discussed. As David Carries explained, if judging comic books through the lens of fine art, then the resulting verdict will inevitably be coloured by the sheer baggage of the concept itself. Fine art, similarly, cannot be judged through the lens of comic book art, and trying to approach a children's book through the same lens one would use when approaching *The Iliad,* ultimately, would lead to a biased verdict,

that neglects the nuance and meaning of each respective text. The context in which one chooses to judge a narrative, will end up affecting the way we read it.

Ta-Nehisi Coates' 2016 *Black Panther* run tells the story of a Wakanda experiencing political turmoil, and is at the brink of civil war, and as the story progresses, more and more nefarious forces appear. In addition to Priest and Hudlin, Coogler cites Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Black Panther* as one of his sources for inspiration when writing the script for the film, and Coates and Coogler both participated in an interview, featured in *Black Panther #*170, where they discuss their different approaches to the character, and the world of Wakanda. This interview explains the various elements they wished to focus on in their respective iterations of the Black Panther. One thing they both agree with, is that they wanted to give the women of Wakanda the spotlight they deserve. Coates' portrayal of the Dora Milaje, and their *Midnight Angels,* were a great inspiration to Coogler, both explaining that the *Black Panther* serves as an opportunity to explore the world of black women and the issues that comes with that territory.

Coates' comics include Shuri as an entirely different character than Coogler's film does. Having been in a coma for an extended period of time, Shuri is forced to confront the past by traversing through "the Djalia", Wakanda's collective memory, accompanied by a spirit guide that takes the shape of her mother. When she awakens from her coma, in *Black Panther* #8, she is wearing a new costume, consisting of shades of blue, purple, and white, adorned with golden jewellery and accents. Shuri becomes a type of lore-keeper, and the blue and purple hues of her costume, and her powers, underline her connection to the realm of memories, and the authority that follows with her title as Aja-Adanna, or Griot – both meaning "Keeper of the Lore" (Black Panther #7-9). She can fly and manifest through a cloud of black birds, which serves as a nice contrast to the feline imagery of her Black Panther brother.

They add a mythological atmosphere to her, almost implying that by being reborn in this new form, with new powers and knowledge, she has become a kind of demi-goddess.

Another important female character that appears in Coates' run, is T'Challa's former lover, Ororo, also known as Storm from X-Men. While Shuri is a "new-born" demi-goddess, Ororo has been worshipped in and beyond Wakanda as a goddess of weather and storms. One of her appearances during their battle against the originals, highlights how composition and colouring of an entire comic page can add to the narrative. Halfway through *Black Panther* #172, Ororo, N'Kano (Vibraxas) and Asha, as the heroes struggle against Sefako, the Twice-Risen God (also known as The Adversary, or The Great Trickster), who traps them underneath rubble and sand. Asha's powers illuminates the space they reside in, and the panels on the page transition from high-contrast drawings, with a heavy, black background, to brighter, as Asha and N'Kano attempt to get Storm to snap out of her panic. The blue, while being the colour of Asha's light-based powers, also create a cool atmosphere, and as mentioned in the context of Killmonger's costumes in the film, the blue reinforces the sense of helplessness that Storm is experiencing, with the return of her old enemy. The fight against the Adversary continues, and he uses his powers against Shuri. His powers are red, which contrasts with the purplish and white powers of Shuri and Storm. As Storm receives the encouragement and confidence she needs, with T'Challa telling her that she has the faith of all Wakanda at her back, she snaps out of it, and emerges from the rubble, her stormy powers coloured in purple, which as previously discussed, is an important colour in the *Black Panther* film, and in the comics. Here, Storm mirrors T'Challa, and it emphasises their connection to each other, and to the magic of their respective powers. The way these panels are illustrated, help to evoke the sense of regaining power and confidence, with the dark, cramped space getting brighter, until

she emerges, and the cool lights of Asha's powers is contrasted with the warmth of the Wakandan desert.

The 25 issues include a large variety of scenes and examples of how to use colour, composition and character design in ways that adds to the narrative. Some panels, and even entire pages can have an overlay in a particular colour that affects our perception of the time of day, or if we are in captivity, in the wilderness, surrounded by magic or darkness. Film *can* do similar things, but in order to ensure clarity and visibility, there are more restrictions. As such, more effort and time might be spent on other details, such as the characters' costumes. Lighting and other tools of cinematography mimics the ways the composition of the comic panels, but it is my belief that it is the translation of costumes from paper to the screen that adds a lot of substance to the characters, and that special effects, lighting and music only adds to the way the characters are portrayed.

Character Design as Narrative in *Black Panther* (2018)

When it comes to media surrounding superheroes, most of us recognise that costumes play an essential role in most stories that fit within the superhero genre. Whether it is the mask that conceals their true identity, a cape that flows in the wind, spandex, armour, or elaborate props, these various elements all make up the visual identity of our heroes. The visual elements are what creates the iconography of the respective heroes, and we are able to recognise the most famous ones in an instant, by simply glancing at their outfits, knowing that a particular colour, a sigil, or silhouette is synonymous with a particular hero. – the "S" on Superman's chest, Batman's intimidating silhouette, or Tony Stark's arc reactor, no matter which hero we look at, there are always elements that make them instantly recognisable, and tell us something about the respective character. Superman's "S" is not *only* his own

initial, but rather, it is the Kryptonian sigil for "hope" (*Superman: Birthright,* 2003), reinforcing the image

of Superman himself as a symbol of hope. In an early iteration of his origin story, Bruce Wayne decides

to use bat imagery as he sees a bat outside his window, which reminds him of a costume worn by his

father, Thomas Wayne (*Detective Comics #235*, 1956), while modern retellings, and adaptations such as

Christopher Nolan's *Batman Begins* (2005), base the bat suit on Bruce Wayne's fear of bats, and how he

in order to become the hero Gotham deserves, must confront his own fears, while simultaneously

becoming the symbol that his enemies will fear. Tony's arc reactor, located in the middle of his chest,

not only keeps *him* alive, but it also powers his Iron Man Suit, and as such, practically serves as a visual

metaphor for his heart.

Costumes and character design are an important aspect of any and all visual mediums that

feature people and creatures, and they have the ability to convey important aspects of the characters,

beyond what is shown through their actions and dialogue. Whether defined within the narrative itself,

or left open to interpretation, there are *very* rarely coincidental choices behind a character's looks.

Every element is carefully planned and executed, in order to best convey a particular image, and sell an

idea of who they are, on a more subtle level. We see characters, not only in the way that the writers

might have intended, but also, how the characters would present themselves, and as such, we are able

to learn much about them through these visual elements, ranging from their stylistic preferences, what

background they come from, and it can allude to connections to other characters. If considered as a

literary device, character design has the potential to foreshadow or imply certain parts of the plot,

through its details and components. In *Black Panther* (2018), many of the costumes borrow from real-

life cultures and trends, and are important when trying to understand each character's identity and

place in the world. Each character's outfit is as such, capable of telling us their own story, complimenting action, dialogue, and the narrative as a whole.

Ruth E. Carter, *Black Panther's* costume designer, is at the heart of the rich and vibrant characters we see on screen. Not only did she manage to secure the film an Oscar win for best costume design in 2019, she also managed to become the first African American woman to win the award (Ritzenhoff and White, p. 28). On top of this, she won the same award *again* in 2023, for her work on the film's sequel, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*. It is therefore without a doubt true that the costumes are important for the film, on several levels. They bridge the gap between the real world and the Afrofuturistic science-fiction world of Marvel's superheroes and help visualise and reinforce the themes and conflicts of the narrative.

In creating the designs for the cast, main characters, and side characters alike, Carter sought inspiration from actual indigenous groups across the African continent, while also staying true to the aesthetics of the comic books, with their blend of traditional wear and modern, more "western" designs. The result is a unique and memorable blend of impressions, both traditional, and futuristic. The blend between typical superhero/comic book outfits, with spandex and sleek silhouettes, contrasted with the rich textures, shapes, and fabrics of *real* cultural garb, immediately stands out from other Marvel films; these designs are relatable and recognisable because they are rooted in real life, and the rich history behind them is clearly visible in the final designs. By considering how the outfits themselves tell a story, and hints at certain aspects of the characters, the visuals of the costumes play an important, but subtle role in our reading and understanding of the narrative. Not only are the costumes meant to catch our attention and have a visual appeal; they are integral in telling us who the wearer is. In order to further

establish a visual identity for each character, Carter worked with a particular colour scheme, to signify

and emphasise their characterisation, in collaboration with the film's director, Ryan Coogler.

"There was a strict color palette, drafted by Mr. Coogler: Chadwick Boseman,

who plays T'Challa, the Wakanda royal who is also the Black Panther, wears black; Danai

Gurira, as the warrior Okoye, and her band of female fighters, the Dora Milaje, are in

vibrant red; and Lupita Nyong'o, as the spy Nakia, part of the river tribe, is in shades of

green. (Black, red and green are also the colors of the Pan-African flag.) For Mr. Coogler,

blue "represented the police and authority." She dressed Michael B. Jordan, as Black

Panther's rival, Erik Killmonger, in it." (Ryzik, 2018)

By giving each character a dominating colour, it not only makes it easier to distinguish

between them on-screen; it actively aids the narrative, in telling us who the characters are. Each

element and component of their costumes end up revealing a lot about the characters themselves. The

clothing carefully mirrors their identity and heritage, and in some cases, mirror other characters, adding

subtle nods to their relationships and dynamics. Even more importantly, is the use of colour, and how

each character's colour palette adds hints and additional context that emphasises the characters'

motivations, behaviours, origins, and in some cases, foreshadows important aspects of the plot itself.

Style and fashion have always been important for superheroes and supervillains alike, and this film is no

different. The stylistic choices immediately tell us who the characters are, and convey a certain image

that strengthens the narrative through more subtle means. As such, the visual elements of the film are

important, and this chapter seeks to investigate how costumes and other relevant elements of a

character's design aids in our understanding of the particular character and their place and function

within the story. Colour is probably the most significant aspect that will be explored, and this is largely

due to how colour has the ability to affect the mood of a scene, in addition to the general "language" of

colours, and how various hues have different meanings and connotations. By primarily focusing on the

various colours assigned to each character, in combination with other relevant elements of their

designs, the following chapter aims to investigate how the dialogue and narrative is supported by the

visual elements, and what the design choices can reveal about the characters. As such, this creates the

basis for the following analysis and reading of the film's characters, and will later tie into questions

about representation and diversity.

When first appearing in the MCU in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), T'Challa is introduced

wearing a standard, navy coloured suit. His back is turned to us, and he is deep in thought (00:35:22).

The scene is set in Vienna, as the United Nations are set to ratify the Sokovia Accords (a consequence of

the event of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), where the fictional country Sokovia, is largely destroyed

because of the Avengers' fight with Ultron (one of Stark Enterprises failed projects). The Sokovia

Accords, in short, aimed to heavily regulate heroes' ability to operate without government approval.

Also present as Wakanda's UN representative, is his father, the king T'Chaka (played by John Kani) who

is wearing a black suit. The black colour not only indicates a higher degree of formality, but also nods at

his status as king of Wakanda, and as the Black Panther. After Helmut Zemo's (played by Daniel Brühl)

bomb is set off (*CA: Civil War*, 00:37:50), killing T'Chaka, the look of T'Challa's suit changes; instead of

navy, it is now covered in ash and debris from the explosion, which mutes the initial blue tint, a choice

that I would argue visualises the transition from prince and protégé, to king, and him becoming the new

Black Panther as his father passes.

The next time we meet T'Challa, is in Romania, as he chases after Bucky Barnes/The Winter

Soldier (played by Sebastian Stan) (00:47:43). He is wearing the Black Panther suit, which is similar to the

one used in the 2018 film in terms of silhouette, with a few of the details changing between *Civil War*

and *Black Panther*. T'Challa's main colour is black, but the 2016 Panther suit is a notably cooler tone,

looking almost grey, whereas the suit from 2018 is deeper, with purple used as an accent colour. The

panelling of the 2016 suit, along with the arm bracers poking out, a quite reminiscent of Christopher

Nolan's *Dark Knight*, and as already mentioned, when the Black Panther debuted his catlike costume in

the comics, he bore resemblance to DC's Batman. The "ears" on the 2016 cowl are also much more

Batman-like, than the 2018 version. But, the Black Panther maintains his catlike silhouette, rejecting the

cloak of the Dark Knight, instead opting for claws of Vibranium, and heightened senses and agility.

Aside from a change in panelling, proportions of details, and texture, the shift in colour is

arguably the most significant. The Black Panther suit goes from being black, grey, and silver, to black,

silver, and *purple.* An important aspect of the plot in the 2018 film, is T'Challa's coronation, and the

official transition of power, and part of this ceremony, is ritual combat, where the current Panther is

stripped of his powers, an important aspect of the ritual that ensures the fight is fair, and to even the

odds between the current Panther and their challenger. In order to regain the Panther powers, he drinks

a potion made out of a *purple*, heart-shaped flower.

The colour purple is used several times in the *Black Panther*¸ and sets the tone from a thematic

perspective. In addition to being used in the opening animation, and one of the primary colours of the

end credits, it serves an important purpose as a literary device. It is the dominant colour of the ancestral

realm (where T'Challa communicates with his late father, and the Panthers that came before them),

and, as stated, it is the colour of the flower that grants them their superpower. Purple is a colour that is

often associated with royalty, but perhaps even more so to magic, death, and spirituality. It is therefore

not a matter of coincidence that Zuri, T'Challa's mentor and Wakanda's shaman, wears a purple robe.

Patti Bellantoni's book *If It's Purple, Someone's Gonna Die* (2012) explores the significance of colour in

visual narratives, and the "language" of colour, and how they affect our perceptions. On purple,

Bellantoni explains that the colour "hold[s] a powerful sway in the realm of the noncorporal, the

mystical, and even the paranormal." (p. 190). These aspects are all an integral part of the Wakandan

belief in the Black Panther mythos; the heart-shaped herb was given to the first Panther by the panther

god Bast, in order to unite the different tribes into one nation. It allows for the user to communicate

with the ancestors in the ancestral realm, and lifts the veil between the corporeal, "real" world of the

living, with the non-corporeal, spiritual world of those who have passed. The Black Panther functions as

the link between the past, present, and future. In addition, Bellantoni explains that the colour purple,

signals an impending transformation. In the case of *Black Panther* (2018), this transformation is that of

T'Challa from prince to king, from human to superhuman, and, on a larger scale, the later

transformation of Wakanda, and the way they approach the rest of the world.

Zuri is also a particularly interesting character, as he actively subverts the western stereotype of

the "magical negro", as noted by Daugaard et al. in "The Colour Purple as a Signifier of Shamanism in

Black Panther". The article explains how there is a "visual tradition" in equating the colour purple with

the colour of magic, and that characters that are in possession of magical powers, often use said powers

for their own gain, or, for the gain and benefit of a white protagonist, in the case of the Magical Negro

(p. 104). Instead of repeating this particular trope and being another example of a person of colour

serving a White master, Zuri is an essential part of Wakanda, both in his role as spy, and in his role as a

spiritual leader and mentor to T'Challa. Zuri is not what the article describes as a "magical Other" (p.

105). The article continues, explaining that the colour purple, while "clearly underlining his magical abilities and associating him with the Ancestral Plane, does not codify him as different, ambivalent or dangerous […] by re-codifying the shaman's identity and intrinsically linking it to the colour purple, the film appropriates enduring discourses on magic and colour and allows the objects of these discourses to become subjects and regain power over their own representation." By rewriting the magical Other as someone who is *not* an Other, but rather, someone with agency of their own, and who belongs *next* to the protagonist instead of beneath him, it subverts our expectations, and challenges past tropes. As such, the colour purple not only symbolises magic and the spiritual aspects of Wakandan society and culture, but also, something that unifies the "Other" with the rest of his community. Similarly, the Black Panther himself is both an "outsider" in his responsibilities and powers, while simultaneously functioning as the symbol and figure that unifies the nation and keeps the various tribes together as one, much like the Heart-Shaped herb, that made this dichotomy possible in the first place.

It is worth noting that the heart-shaped herb in the film adaptation, is *not* the one seen in the latest iteration of the comics. In the comics, the herb is most often pictured as a green plant with green, heart-shaped leaves, and looks quite unassuming, aside from a subtle glow in some instances ("Panther's Heart" from *Black Panther Annual 1*, 2016). In the films, however, it is given a much more alluring, and magical appearance, where the leaves themselves are green, and a dark purple, trumpet-shaped flower, that contains the glowing core, and the source of the Black Panther's powers. From a purely visual perspective, the glowing heart of the mysterious flower is interesting, and is meant to catch out attention as viewers. From a narrative perspective though, this change does affect our reading of the plant, and its qualities. In the film, the plant is quite obviously a piece of fantasy, as there is no bioluminescent plant that glows that brightly in the real world. It seems foreign, alien, and, as

mentioned previously, magical. Since the plant grants magical powers to anyone who consumes its core, it makes sense. Still, the unassuming, green plant from the comics has a certain charm, and there is arguable something to be said about something so mundane, granting such incredible powers. It plays into some of the themes of the film, and in superhero stories on a more general level; anyone can create change, and anyone has the potential to be a hero, under the right circumstances.

A character whose circumstances did *not* make him a hero, is Erik Stevens, primarily referred to as Killmonger. Killmonger's colour palette is also one that reflects his character, and the change between his first and final appearance, showcases how he as a character views himself at the beginning, versus the end, where he himself wields the Panther powers. At the beginning of the film, blue quickly stands out as his main colour, but as we'll later see, it shifts into gold as he reaches Wakanda, and makes his claim to the throne. Killmonger is a complex character, driven by a desire to eradicate injustice against "his people", referring to any black man or woman, who has faced violence, persecution, and discrimination on the basis of the colour of their skin. While fighting oppression is a more than admirable goal, Killmonger approaches his cause through primarily violent means, and as is explained by CIA agent Ross, he had no qualms working for the US government as part of their attempt to destabilise and overthrow the countries they viewed as the enemy, which is the main method he uses in order to seize power in Wakanda. Killmonger is a character who will use any means at his disposal in order to succeed, even if it means burning down anything and everyone who stands in his way.

Set in Oakland, California, in 1992, the film's intro immediately establishes a contrast between the Wakandans, and the Americans. The very first thing we see, is an animated sequence, as a father tells the story of the origins of Wakanda and the Panther to his child. As the sequence ends, the camera shows a scene set outside of an apartment complex, there are kids playing, wearing typical streetwear

consisting of sneakers, sweatpants, and various sports merch. N'Jobu, T'Chaka's brother, and his friend

James (whom it is later revealed is Zuri, sent to spy on N'Jobu) both wear oversized black t-shirts, golden

chains around their necks, and sweatpants. When the Dora Milaje enter, clad in red, with a patterned

fabric tied around their waists, and gilded jewellery, it emphasises the gap between N'Jobu and the

Wakandans. T'Chaka's Black Panther suit is very similar to T'Challa's, but instead of the silver and purple

accents, T'Chaka's suit has gilded details, and he wears a sash across his torso, made of a similar

patterned fabric as his Dora Milaje. Their interaction is brief, but we come to learn that N'Jobu betrayed

his king and country and will therefore face the consequences. Outside, we see a young Erik Stevens, in

a blue hoodie with white stripes, gazing up towards the Wakandan aircraft as it leaves their apartment.

The blue hoodie of Stevens' first appearance does, as mentioned, carry over into his other

costumes. Our first introduction to *Killmonger*, is in London, at the Museum of Great Britain. He is

standing with his back against us, in front of a display case that contains various artefacts of African

origin. Killmonger is wearing loose black trousers, a ripped denim jacket (lined with white fur), and a

long white tee underneath. His hair is braided, and tied into a ponytail, and as he turns, we see that he is

also sporting a pair of gold-rimmed glasses. All in all, he comes across as any other style conscious

youth, inspired by urban streetwear and contemporary trends. He is fashionable and gives the

impression that he is someone who cares about image and looks. The blue denim and white shirt mirror

the blue hoodie with white stripes from his youth and reinforces his preestablished colour palette.

Bellantoni describes blue as the "quintessential color for powerlessness." (p. 82). The colour is cold and

has different associations, and depending on its hue, Bellantoni explains that it can be tied to

melancholy, dependability, and intellect, depending on its context, and its viewer. For Ryan Coogler,

"blue represented police and authority", as mentioned previously. The ambiguity of the shade is

therefore a good parallel to Killmonger, who in one moment can be seen as almost a hero, and in the other, reminds us of his role as villain. The complexities of Killmonger, paired with the ambiguity of blue as his dominant colour, reinforces the uncertainty in how we might view Killmonger. After all, his goal and *intentions* are not inherently nefarious.

In the museum scene, Killmonger is quizzing a staff member, whom he states must be the "expert", about their collection of African artefacts. He acts excited and impressed as she responds with details about century, tribe, and origin of the items, until he lands on an axe, which she claims is from Benin. Killmonger's mask fades, and he responds with a simple "nah." The museum worker is confused by his response, and he continues, explaining that this particular item was looted by the British in Benin, but that the item is from Wakanda, and, made of Vibranium (00:16:33). The following exchange, where he says he'll take the item off their hands, and to which she responds, "these items are not for sale", reflects a discussion and sentiment that has been going on for a long time, in regards to the role of western museums, and their refusal to return certain artefacts and items to the countries where they rightfully belong. Killmonger points out the museum's hypocrisy, by asking her how she thought her ancestors acquired the items in the first place. The sentiment he conveys is something we come to learn is a large part of the character's motive, yet, we also see that he is willing to compromise his principles to reach his goals.

The commotion that follows, reveals that Killmonger is working with Ulysses Klaue (played by Andy Serkis). Klaue is a smuggler, arms-dealer, and terrorist, and was first introduced in the MCU in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), where he supplied the Vibranium needed to create Ultron's new body. In *Black Panther*, it is revealed that Klaue stole this Vibranium from Wakanda thirty years prior, and that he had taken the lives of several Wakandans, including the parents of W'Kabi, T'Challa's close friend,

and Okoye's husband. Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Black Panther* dedicates an entire issue (#166) to retelling

Klaue's backstory (who goes by *Klaw* in the comics; Klaue will be used to refer to the MCU iteration of

the character, and Klaw for the comic book character), and there are some significant changes worth

noting. In the comics, both his original appearance in *Fantastic Four Vol. 1 #53* and Coates' retelling,

Klaw was the one responsible for T'Chaka's death. In the MCU, as mentioned above, it is Zemo who

causes the Wakandan king's death. In the comics, Klaue is also T'Challa's main foe, and a superhuman.

Klaw loses his hand in a fight with T'Challa, and as his lair lies in ruins, he climbs through a sound device

that converts his body into sound. Compared to the MCU, the Klaw of the comics is a different type of

character entirely.

Klaw's costume is red, and occasionally features purple accents (*Superior Carnage,* vol.1, 2013),

the latter of which makes him look similar to Magneto. Red is commonly known as the colour of passion,

aggression, and danger, something Bellantoni also repeats; it is a colour that provokes, and the power

that red holds, "doesn't come with a moral imperative. Depending on the story's needs, red can give

power to a good guy or a bad guy." (p. 2). Contrary to the Klaw of the comics, it is the Dora Milaje that

wears red; the MCU's Ulysses Klaue, instead wears a rather simple outfit, in shades of blue and white.

His trousers are a dark navy, he wears a white dress shirt, rolled up at the sleeves, and a dark navy vest.

Arguably, the simplistic and *realistic* costume might be due to his role as a secondary antagonist, rather

than the film's main threat. While they had every opportunity to turn him into the sci-fi villain of the

comics, he instead takes on a more realistic, human appearance, aside from his high-tech prosthetic

arm. By not giving Klaue the main spotlight as the film's antagonist, it instead redirects the focus to the

characters of colour, reminding us that Klaue and Agent Ross, are meant to be *supporting* characters, in

a story centred around and highlighting the Wakandans. Renee T. White and Karen A. Ritzenhoff both

note in the introduction to *Afrofuturism in Black Panther*, that what makes *Black Panther* stand out, is

that «the cast features only few and not plot carrying White actors.» (p. 29); This is important, as black

characters often end up being the side characters, as seen previously with for example Sam

Wilson/Falcon, in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, or, even the role of Samuel L. Jackson's Nick

Fury. In *Black Panther*, it is the white characters that take a step to the side, and allowing the black

characters to shine.

The blue of Klaue's outfit also mirrors that of Killmonger, and, it also puts them within the same

colour range as the Wakandan Border tribe. Led by W'Kabi, the Border Tribe ends up siding with

Killmonger against T'Challa and the Dora Milaje. Killmonger's main costume, is his actual Killmonger

outfit, which features various combat gear, with camo trousers, an armoured vest, and a blue shirt,

which once again mirrors his previous appearances. He wears it when confronting Klaue, and it is the

outfit he wears when approaching the Border Tribe as he enters Wakanda, and the one he wears, when

facing the royal family and council. Furthermore, the Border Tribe themselves are identified by their

blue blankets, inspired heavily by the *Basotho* blankets (worn in real life by the Sotho people of Lesotho

and South Africa), as explained by Carter in the interview with Ryzik. By associating the Border Tribe

with the colour blue, it not only signifies their geographical position at the outskirts of Wakanda, but

also foreshadows how they choose to side with Killmonger against T'Challa. The colour blue is also that

given to the Queen Mother Ramonda and Agent Ross as they flee after Killmonger's coup, and they seek

refuge in the Jabari lands, while Shuri and Nakia wear blankets in red and green, respectively, (1:32:00).

Ramonda and Agent Ross are in this instance, powerless, whereas Shuri and Nakia both have some

influence and power, carrying the Heart-Shaped Herb, and the Vibranium claw necklace that contains

T'Challa's suit. Ramonda and Ross' blue also arguably foreshadows their role in the final battle, where

neither character is directly part of the conflict, although Ross is able to provide support later on, aiding them from Shuri's lab.

The transition from blue as Killmonger's colour, to the darker and more golden palette, begins during his fight with T'Challa, where he has taken off and cast aside the blue sweater and his vest, that, arguably, serves as an image that symbolises his CIA past, and with it, the powerlessness forced upon him by the environment in which he grew up. Afterwards, when Killmonger undergoes the ritual that grants him the Panther powers (1:25:15), and awakens in the ancestral realm, he is transported back into the apartment of his childhood, instead of the Savannah that T'Challa sees. Here, he relives the moment where he discovered his dead father, before re-entering the room, as his present self, wearing that very same blue hoodie from his youth. Not only is he reliving he loss of his father, and confronting that part of him; he relives the powerlessness and uncertainty he must've felt in that very moment. Through the windows we see the same purplish sky full of stars and other celestial bodies that appears in T'Challa's visions, reassuring us that this is the very same Ancestral realm, that has manifested into a different space, to accommodate for Killmonger's meeting with his ancestors.

Killmonger picks up his father's book and a necklace with a ring on it, and the shot turns to N'Jobu, clad in white, a colour that to the Wakandans, represents the dead (this is seen during T'Challa's funeral in *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* (2022), and while it is not clear, it is not unlikely to assume that Ramonda's white dress in her first appearance in *Black Panther*, is worn by her as she is now a widow). When the camera returns to Killmonger, he is a child again. The dialogue between N'Jobu and Killmonger is powerful, and emphasises a lot about Killmonger's worldview, and further explains how his mindset and motivations came to be.

N'Jobu: I fear you still may not be welcome.

Killmonger: why?

N'Jobu: They will say you are lost.

Killmonger: But I'm right here?

N'Jobu: (sighs) no tears for me?

Killmonger: Everybody dies. It's just life around here.

N'Jobu: Well look at what I've done [the camera switches between the younger

Killmonger, N'Jobu, and back to present day Killmonger] I should've taken you back a

long time ago. Instead, we are both abandoned here.

Killmonger: Well, maybe your home is the one that's lost. That's why they can't find us.

(1:26:11)

"Everybody dies. It's just life around here" and "Well look at what I've done" so succinctly

illustrates how Killmonger's perspective was affected by them living in the US, and how N'Jobu deviated

from his War Dog mission, and instead began questioning Wakanda's isolationism, which led to him

actively plotting an armed revolution in order to liberate black people outside of Wakanda, at any cost.

Killmonger is, in other words, actively attempting to fulfil his father's mission, and, as is evident by the

following scene, is willing to do so, regardless of cost. After he wakes up, he shakes off the red sand, and

orders that all the remaining heart-shaped herbs are burnt. As the plants burn, Killmonger stands in the

middle of the chamber, with two panther statues on either side. Here, we also have an excellent

example of how the soundtrack adds to the narrative itself; the song playing ay this point in the film tells us a lot about who Killmonger is, and as the scene transitions from one to the other, the music builds up, going from vocalisation and classic instruments, into a track with an obvious hip hop influence (the track is *Burn it All* by composer Ludwig Göransson, who composed most of the film's soundtrack). The next scene has Killmonger entering the throne room. The camera is positioned so that we view his entrance upside down, as it slowly rotates into place. Arguably, this emphasises how Killmonger has turned Wakanda and Wakandan tradition on its head and intends to do the same with the rest of the world.

Apart from his dark, teal trousers, the blue is gone from his colour palette, and has been exchanged with something darker. He is wearing a black robe, and the golden panther tooth necklace from Shuri's lab. It is flashy, golden, and exudes power, just the way Killmonger wishes to be seen by the world. Similarly, his Panther suit itself amplifies this. Much like T'Challa's, Killmonger's Panther suit consists of a black base, but instead of the silver details, it has a faint leopard print and golden accents, making it flashier than that of the protagonist (1:43:54). As we saw earlier, the suit was one of the two (three, if one counts the *Civil War* suit on display next to it) Shuri offered to T'Challa (00:40:05), but, for whatever reason, it was not the one he ended up wearing. For T'Challa, this suit was likely too much, and would convey a different image than the one he wished to present to his people. For Killmonger? The gold suits him just right. The heavy gold pattern on his helmet mimics a crown, and while T'Challa's more muted Panther suit allows for him to blend in with the shadows, Killmonger stands out, in an active effort be seen, and feared, and it is precisely in this manner that Bellantoni describes the colour yellow. It is a colour associated with warnings, and she chooses to describe it as "visually aggressive" (p. 42). As such, Killmonger's powerless blue, is replaced with gold, marking not only his new, self-

proclaimed role as king, but also as a warning of what is to come, and the aggression and violence of his ambitions, should he succeed.

Two other characters that stand out in the film, is Nakia, and Okoye. Nakia is not only T'Challa's love interest, but also a spy, and we meet her out in the field, on a mission that gets interrupted by T'Challa and Okoye, as the king-to-be wishes that she attends his coronation. Nakia comes from the River Tribe, whose colour palette consists of various shades of green, with accents in earthy browns. This is something that is prevalent in Nakia's design, and is consistent throughout the whole film, aside from the final battle against Killmonger, where she dons the red armour of the Dora Milaje, together with Shuri. Green, like purple, is often a colour used in film and illustration to denote less positive qualities, often linked to poison, sorcery, treachery, and jealousy. Bellantoni's book describes green as yet another highly ambiguous colour, both symbolising life (plants), and decay (rot). It is vibrant, lush, and full of vitality, while simultaneously associated with poison, demons, and envy (p. 161). Disney's animated films have long since established green and purple as the dominating colour of their villains, including but not limited to Maleficent from *Sleeping Beauty* (1959), Ursula from *The Little Mermaid* (1989), and Scar from *The Lion King* (1994). This visual tradition continues to some extent in the Marvel movies.

After all, the MCU has already made their audience associate green as the main colour for Loki, the God of Mischief, who frequently betrays and manipulates those around him (see *Thor (*2011), *Avengers* (2012) *Thor: The Dark World* (2013)*, and *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017)), or how the Hulk is often viewed as an aggressive, violent brute, compared to the more mellow, careful Bruce Banner, who in

Avengers (2012) wears purple. Mantis, who was introduced in *Guardians of the Galaxy, Vol. 2* (2017), is another character who is defined in the MCU by her green attire, and her powers consists of the ability to sense and *alter* people's emotions. As such, while these "green" characters vary from villains to heroes, green already has a questionable track record within the film. Nakia's role as spy plays into the scheming and suspicious nature of the colour, but at the same time, Nakia "redeems" the colour green. She is loyal to a fault, and she uses her cleverness to sneak into the sanctum where the Heart-Shaped Herb is stored and manages to steal exactly enough to ensure that they can give someone else the Panther powers and ensure that Killmonger is stopped. The green hues follow her throughout the film, even as she, T'Challa, and Okoye go undercover, and when they seek out M'Baku in the Jabari lands. It is not until they prepare to face Killmonger that her palette changes, as she puts on the red armour of the Dora.

As general and leader of the Dora Milaje, Okoye is one of the most powerful characters in the film. The Dora Milaje, or the "adored ones", serve as the regent's personal guard, and ceremonial wives-in-training. They are loyal to the Black Panther, and put king and country above all. The Dora all wear a similar uniform, consisting of a red tunic, pieces of armour, and various details like brown leather belts and straps, silver jewellery, and beadwork. Okoye stands out, as her accessories are more detailed than that of her subordinates, and her jewellery are made in gold. She is also one of the few main characters in the film that sports tattoos, as her head is inked with a geometric design. The Dora Milaje are not sexualised in any way, and the audience never once doubts their power or merit. The consistent usage of red for Okoye's costumes, and that of her warrior sisters, exudes power, confidence, regality and fierceness, and for Nakia to wear their armour, the audience too is reminded that she is a warrior, just

like them. In the MCU, red is the colour associated with Iron Man, Thor's cape, the Scarlet Witch, Doctor

Strange, and Spiderman; the same goes for the comics, and there are countless other characters who

are also portrayed in shades of red, both in and outside of Marvel's stories. By using the "heroic" red for

the Dora Milaje, it creates a connection between the Dora and other heroes, and serves as a visual

reminder that they are heroes in their own right, even though they are not the Black Panther, or

otherwise superpowered in any way.

The characters say a lot about the setting, and for the Wakandans, they reflect their land, in

terms of resources available, their culture, and the various hierarchies found within. From the various

tribes that make up the different regions, to the monarchy and their Dora Milaje, the characters are all

designed in a way that says something. In addition, the way they appear together on screen also carries

significance for the plot and the themes it conveys. A recurring one is the trio that consists of T'Challa,

Okoye and Nakia, whose colour schemes (black, red, green) make up the colours of the pan-Afrikan flag,

and it is the colours they consistently wear throughout the film, in the scenes they are introduced,

during the ritual combat, during their mission to retrieve the Vibranium and Klaue in Korea, and so on.

Olísa Yaa Tolókun and Aynda Mariama Kanyama-Jackson writes in the chapter "Wakanda, Pan-

Afrikanism, and the Afrikana Worldview" of *Why Wakanda Matters*, that this is a nod to Pan Afrikanist

philosophy, particularly the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), who explained the

significance of the colours.

«It is a repetitive pattern that occurs in almost every scene of the movie. [...] It

says that red is the color of the blood that men must shed for their redemption and

liberty, black is the color of the noble and distinguished race to which we belong, and

green is the color of the luxuriant vegetation of our Motherland.» (Howard, p. 72)

This meaning carries over into the characters respective designs, and together, they stand in as

a symbol of what a united, futuristic Africa might look like. As mentioned, T'Challa's palette being

primarily black, makes sense, as he is the new king of Wakanda, and also, in many ways, the face of

Africa, at least within the MCU. For Okoye, the colour of blood makes sense as she is the leader of the

Dora Milaje, a warrior, and arguably, a symbol of liberty for black women, in terms of position, power,

and aesthetics. For Nakia, the green connects her to the land and her tribe, and while she leaves

Wakanda in the 2022 sequel, she is still deeply connected to the Motherland, perhaps even more so as

she raises the son of T'Challa, and the future king of Wakanda.

Creating Wakanda

What differentiates *Black Panther* from most of the previous films from the Marvel Cinematic

Universe, is its genuine dedication to its setting, and the characters within. Most of the films take place

on American soil, or, in space; settings we are very familiar with, or ones that are entirely imaginary, and

as such, free of real-world constraints. With Wakanda, however, Marvel Studios are actively attempting

to rewrite the history that we know, in order to create an alternate reality, where an African nation is allowed to grow and prosper, and develop an advanced technology, without Western interference. This lack of outside disruption allows them to grow and advance well into the future, but, it comes at the cost of being forced to stay hidden, in order to protect themselves from those who would want to steal their resources and technology. The Vibranium is what gave the Wakandans the ability to advance and create the technological utopia that it is, and the material's rarity meant that people would be willing to do anything to get their hands on it. As such, the country is closed off to outsiders, and this is strictly enforced. The outskirts of the country seem like any other poor country, where farmlands and wilderness is the first thing that greets you, and this is the image that the rest of the world is shown, tricking them into thinking that Wakanda is yet another impoverished, "third world" African country; as the UN representative says at the end of the movie, before T'Challa reveals their secrets to the world; "With all due respect, T'Challa… what can a nation of *farmers* offer the rest of the world?" (02:06:32). Get past that, however, and we find a futuristic utopia, of technological advancements, self-governance, and freedom. The Wakanda we are introduced to, is very much a reclamation project, and it empowers black audiences, and creates a utopian "what if", that celebrates black culture, and black history.

As the camera pans over the Wakanda, and the pass through the shields surrounding the capital for the first time (00:13:23), we are greeted by a city with a myriad of buildings and structures in different shapes and sizes, high speed trains likely powered by the same magnetised levitation that powers the trains within the Vibranium mines, water separating the rest of the city from the platform where the castle is located, all surrounded by trees and hills. We quickly come to realise that the Wakanda we *thought* we knew, is anything but another nation of farmers. Later again after the initial round of ritual combat, when we see Nakia and T'Challa discussing ways to help non-Wakandans while

strolling through the busy streets of the capital (00:33:42), we get a closer look at what everyday life is

like in Wakanda, with public transport, various items for sale, street art and other embellishments, and

of course, a touch of sci-fi with various strangers using holographic phones, and other high-tech

structures scattered about. The people wear a combination of cultural garbs and urban streetwear, in all

colours and textures and patterns, highlighting the great diversity of the people.

Wakanda consists of multiple tribes, each having a designated territory within the country. They

each have a distinct visual identity, that corresponds with their respective ways of living, and where they

are located within the country. Within Wakanda, there are five tribes; the Merchant Tribe (great variety

in colours and textures), the Border Tribe as previously mentioned (primarily blue), the River Tribe

(green), the Mining Tribe (red), and the Jabari Tribe, the latter of which choose to live separate from the

rest of Wakanda. Pearls, beads, metals, and intricate fabrics in all kinds of textures adorn the members

of the crowd, and while each tribe has its own aesthetic and look, they merge together as one giant

tapestry, showcasing how rich and varied Wakanda truly is.

The Jabari, or the Mountain Tribe, who chose to stay independent when Wakanda was formed,

uses darker colours, and material like furs and leather in their attire. In addition, there is a lot of ape

imagery, to emphasise their connection to Hanuman, and other gorilla gods, which further separates

them from the Black Panther-centred Wakanda. The Jabari tribe being hidden away in the mountains,

and using darker aesthetics, also mirrors how M'Baku, their leader, is the only one to challenge T'Challa

in the initial ritual combat. First appearing *The Avengers* #62 (1969), M'Baku is another one of the Black

Panther's comic book antagonists, who goes by the moniker "Man-Ape". The producers of the 2018 film

deemed this alter-ego to be too problematic, and as such, he is not referred to by his comic book

identity in the film. Instead of being yet another antagonist too, the at times prickly Jabari-leader, turns

out to be one of T'Challa's greatest allies. While unwilling to risk the lives of his tribe, he saves T'Challa

when they find him in a nearby river, and he grants the Queen Mother protection, while the others fight

Killmonger.

The scenes set in the Jabari lands are darker, and gloomier than elsewhere, minus perhaps the

forest where T'Challa and Okoye reunite with Nakia, early on. The similarity in mood and atmosphere

reinforces the idea of the Jabari Tribe as a foe, rather than an ally, but as we enter M'Baku's throne

room, the lighting shifts, and the warmer tones and M'Baku's banter eases us into a sense of safety, and

convinces us that he *is* an ally, on his own terms. This scene is able to convey how surroundings and

characterization work in tandem with the narrative, affecting our impressions and expectations. As soon

as the colours on-screen get warmer, so too does the character towards one another, and we know we

are safe.

The fictional country of Wakanda, is perhaps one of the most interesting spaces within the MCU,

at least within the context of real life colonial and post-colonial history, and the idea of an African

country untouched by colonialism and imperialism. Wakanda is not "just" another location for the

superheroes to do what superheroes do best; the location is in and of itself a semiotic device,

symbolising an alternate Africa, that is celebrated, and given the opportunity to flourish and prosper. At

the same time, and this is evident by the plot in most of the movies that feature the Black Panther,

Wakanda does not exist in a vacuum, and while they at first attempt to stay hidden in order to protect

their existence, it is ultimately inevitable that they will have to communicate with the world outside.

This is what causes the majority of T'Challa's concerns, in regard to how best lead his country, and

ensure that the safety of his people. The task of creating an African country that can convince the film's

audience into believing that the combination of "rich, prosperous and technologically" and "Africa" are

not mutually exclusive, is no small feat, and they have no doubt succeeded. Allison Rank and Heather Pool's chapter "Building Worlds" featured in *The Politics of the Marvel Cinematic Universe*, explains the following:

"Ryan Coogler's BP provides us with an opportunity to imagine a Black nation that entirely avoided the violence of colonial conquest and the economic domination of neo-colonialism by remaining separate from the world and hiding its vast wealth and technological prowess. Because Wakanda as never colonized or colonizer, it gives us a normatively desirable way to imagine an "Africa" that must determine for itself how to engage with a world where white supremacist violence is pervasive and should - in the name of the universal justice and dignity that the social contract asserts but has failed to provide - be challenged" (Rank and Pool, p. 23)

Coogler's vision for Wakanda echoes throughout the movie at every level, and the movie successfully creates a dynamic, rich, vibrant, and powerful Wakanda, where the country itself is a symbol of black, *African* excellence, that exists, grows, and evolves on its own terms, without worry of the outside world's interference and disruption. At the same time, they have war dogs and other contacts spread across the globe, and are therefore hiding, in plain sight.

The Wakanda of the movie has one big change from Ta-Nehisi Coates' comics, however, and that lies in Coogler's idea of a Wakanda that was never colonized, nor colonizer. A significant part of the

storyline in volume two of Coates' run, is the discovery that the Wakanda of Earth-616[4] settled on the

land of others, called the Originators, a collection of various pre-human species. When the humans

began abusing the land's resources, the Originators attempted to stop them, but, the Wakandan people

created their own heroes, that transcended into godhood, becoming the Orisha. The Originators were

banished and confined to the Nether-Realms, before being freed by Sefako, the Great Trickster, also

more commonly referred to as the Adversary (*Black Panther* #167-#172).

The reason this part is so important, is that even T'Challa was ignorant to this aspect of

Wakandan history (#167). Of course, he was familiar with the stories, but thought of them as myths.

Because after all, how could *Wakanda*, that was supposed to be *above* all of this, ever be the coloniser

and abuser? This creates a big internal conflict for T'Challa, as he is forced to confront the actions of his

ancestors and realise that Wakanda's history may not have been as great, nor as innocent, as he had

previously been taught. While this particular part of Wakandan history is not included in the film

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[4]The version of Earth where most current stories in the Marvel Comics universe happen; the

various earths represent various universes, with storylines and characters that differ. For reference, the

MCU originally began on Earth-199999, but many of the later movies have been retconned into the

Earth-616 continuity. In addition, Doctor Strange and America Chavez explore Earth-838 in the 2022 film

Doctor Strange: Multiverse of Madness.

adaptation, a similar conflict arises during T'Challa's realisation that his father abandoned the young

Killmonger, and essentially, punished him for the sins of his father.

On top of this, it points to the larger issue in regards to how T'Challa should proceed in terms of

Wakanda's foreign policies, and how best to govern his country, while also not standing idly by and

allowing the oppression of others. Nakia believes that Wakanda has a responsibility to provide aid and

share their resources. W'Kabi is fine helping, but only if they help people where they already are W'Kabi

is an example of another view on Wakanda's involvement with the rest of the world, and how they

should provide aid: "You let the refugees in, you let in all their problems. And then Wakanda is like

everywhere else. Now if you said you wanted me and my men to go out there and clean up the world,

then I'll be all for it." (00:34:40). The relationship between W'Kabi and T'Challa is strained, and W'Kabi is

disillusioned and disappointed in T'Challa and his failure to capture Klaue. As the head of security and a

key figure among the Border Tribe, he convinces the rest of his men to side with Killmonger when the

latter first enters Wakanda, and again, after T'Challa reappears, alive and well, after surviving the ritual

combat earlier. W'Kabi chooses to defy his friend and king, and against his wife and the rest of the Dora,

in order to support Killmonger's cause. W'Kabi's struggle lies in his loyalty to his country, but first and

foremost, the fact that he is driven by a need to avenge the death of his parents at the hands of Klaue.

He also believes that Wakanda should focus on *Wakanda*, and that if anything, their support of others,

should not compromise the safety and security of his own nation. This is what causes him to abandon

his king, in favour of someone new, who is unafraid to break tradition, and willing to act first, think later.

The question of responsibility and whether or not to act, occurs in all kinds of situations. In the

case of *Black Panther*, Wakanda has every resource needed to act, and attempt to provide a better

future for the rest of the world. However, this comes at a great cost, and for T'Challa, his responsibilities

lie first and foremost with his people, and in order to ensure the safety of Wakanda, they must tread carefully. What makes it difficult for T'Challa, is that on one hand, he would be honouring his father and the monarchs before them, by remaining secluded, and preserving the Vibranium and riches of Wakanda, for themselves. On the other hand, as *hero* and human, he is unable to let go, knowing that he could potentially cause a shift that would mean positive change for people like him, who are less fortunate. Ultimately, T'Challa finds a middle ground, and chooses to open up about Wakanda's true nature, and in addition, create outreach centres in places like Killmonger's old neighbourhood in Oakland, California. Not only is T'Challa's internal conflict going on, but there is also pressure coming from his friends and allies in regard to which decision to make. The resources Wakanda holds, would have devastating consequences, if they were to fall into the wrong hands, and as such, he must tread carefully, and weigh every option.

Another important part of Wakanda, is as already hinted at, its Vibranium. Within the Marvel universe, it is established that Vibranium is the rarest and most powerful material on earth, with the ability to absorb vibrations, hence the name. The material is first introduced in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), where Howard Stark used the only known quantity of the rare metal to produce Steve Rogers' iconic round shield (1:18:02). Agent Ross is in complete disbelief when he first wakes up in Shuri's lab and sees the technology around him. He has just awakened, and wonders how much time has passed since Korea, and is shocked at Shuri responding "yesterday". With a touch of American arrogance and suspicion, he exclaims that "bullet wounds don't heal magically overnight". Shuri responds, "they do here, but not by magic, by technology". David Carried explains that "something might be learned by our culture, by learning how it is seen by an outsider" (Carrier, p. 72), and it is this role Ross fulfils within the film, allowing white viewers to experience Wakanda through a white lens, and thus, the lens of the

white other. He does not necessarily understand how Wakanda functions, but he is open-minded, and shows a willingness to learn. Where the shaman Zuri subverts our expectation of a "magical negro", the Mikhail Lyubansky and Erinn Nicholson in "The Black Panther is Black" explains that instead, it is Agent Ross who takes on the role of this archetype, posing as what they essentially call a "reverse 'magical negro". In addition to aiding the black lead, they describe him as the following:

> "he [Ross] is an avatar, an audience surrogate who represents the way the Black
>
> Panther is perceived by well-meaning white men (and women). In the words of Ross's
>
> creator, Christopher Priest, "Comics are traditionally created by white males for white
>
> males. I figured, and I believe rightly, that for Black Panther to succeed, it needed a
>
> white male at the center, and that white male had to give voice to the audience' s
>
> misgivings or apprehensions or assumptions about this character" (Smith, 2018)."
>
> (Howard, p. 98).

Ross is therefore a character that serves as a bridge between white viewers and the *Black Panther*, and becomes an outlet for their perspective. Ross' reaction to the Vibranium and his initial reluctance to accept that Wakanda might be more advanced than the United States, forces western viewers to confront our own prejudice and doubts in regards to the capability of non-western countries. He comments on the trains that transport the rare metal back and forth, questioning the technology used, and when given an explanation about their function, he asks in surprise "There's Vibranium on those trains?", to which Shuri responds "There's Vibranium all around us – it's how I healed you" (1:10:30).

When T'Challa and Killmonger take their fight deep within the Great Mound, where the Vibranium mines are located, the tone of the fight shifts, and we see more of Wakanda's hidden depths. As they plunge into the darkness, their surroundings turn a cool blue, and Killmonger's previous colour scheme returns (1:49:28). The Vibranium itself has a blue glow, and if one considers Coogler's reasoning for dressing Killmonger in blue, a similar parallel might be drawn to Vibranium, and how the resource represents authority and power, to those who wield it.

Killmonger and T'Challa's fight within the Great Mound mirrors their fight when Killmonger challenges him for the throne, and instead of Killmonger delivering a fatal blow to T'Challa, it is the latter who is able to overpower the antagonist, stabbing him in the back. Killmonger reflects upon something his father said, when Killmonger was still a child; "Wakanda was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. You believe that? Kid from Oakland growing up believing in fairy tales." This implies that even Killmonger had not truly *seen* Wakanda. Quietly, T'Challa picks up his wounded cousin, and they get on a lift that takes them to a vantage point that shows Wakanda in all its glory. Killmonger, despite his injuries, takes it all in, uttering "it's beautiful."

Bathed in warmth, and a reddish, golden light from the Wakandan sunset, the final scene between Killmonger and T'Challa sets the tone for the future to come (1:57:15). Compared to the prior fight sequence, this scene is calm, introspective, and solemn, and the two cousins are finally able to just *talk*. With Wakanda as the backdrop, the Vibranium behind them, and presumably the capital in front of them, surrounded by lush forest and vibrant nature, they sit there, and T'Challa offers his cousin the chance to go back, take responsibility for his actions, and more importantly, a chance to live. In one of Marvel Studios' most memorable moments, Killmonger scoffs, responding with a "Why? So you can just look me up?" followed by a simple "nah". Killmonger has a different fate in mind. "Just bury me in the

70

ocean, with my ancestors who jumped from the ships. 'Cause they knew death was better than bondage." (1:58:15). As he utters the last words, he removes the spearhead that impales him, and as the camera creates some distance between them and the audience, we see Killmonger collapse, and T'Challa standing silently beside him.

B*lack Panther*'s costumes and visuals are based on a variety of real-world cultures, and blends traditional attire with urban and futuristic designs. At the centre of the story, is a king who needs to guide his country into the future, and whether or not Wakanda should open its borders in order to aid the world around them, or continue isolating, knowing about the injustice and turmoil that goes on outside its borders. On the other side is Erik Stevens, a young man, born to a Wakandan expatriate, and an American woman, who has not only seen first-hand the systemic oppression, but experienced it too, and as such, is determined to use the resources of his ancestral home to change the world. Being mixed too, it is highly likely that he feels a sense of displacement, never belonging fully in American society, and knowing that Wakanda too does not welcome him with open arms. This is part of the conflict that drives Killmonger to violence, and arguably, his choice to reject T'Challa's offer for help at the end of the film. By choosing to die by his own hand, he retains some of the power and agency that he sought through violent means, and it allows him to die with dignity, and above all, with freedom, in the home that is rightfully his.

Chapter three: Black Heroes and Representation
Afrofuturism and Representation

The power of pop culture lies in its "pop". The fact that popular media is able to unite audiences of all ages, genders, and ethnicity, means that it has a significant amount of influence and impact. While the Black Panther is not the first black hero to appear in mainstream pop culture, he is the first unapologetically Black, *African* hero to lead an entire movie, and whose story is centred primarily around an imaginary, futuristic African nation untouched by colonisation and western interference. In addition, they made the character more independent, by turning him into his own character, instead of someone who had previously been seen as a sidekick. The character of Black Panther is an important symbol, and represents the *potential* of a hero that is unapologetically black, and whose blackness and African heritage is front and centre for his character, his motivations, and his view of the world around him.

T'Challa is a powerful hero, with integrity, compassion, and courage, and on top of it all, he is a king, attempting to do what is best for his people, and find his and his country's place in the world. The Black Panther is not just concerned with bringing justice, fighting crime, and solving mysteries. On top of being a superhero, Black Panther has the responsibilities of a king, in addition to facing the world as a black man, and the various expectations and struggles that follows. The political stance of Wakanda is a frequent plot point in the comics, and similar issues appear in the film. While several of the Marvel movies have political undertones to various degrees, *Black Panther* goes beyond just having a plot with a political theme – the film in and on itself functions as a statement. Adilifu Nama explains in the chapter "Birth of the Cool" that the Black Panther series is significant and compelling as one of the most mainstream yet radical representations of blackness in American pop culture" (p. 44), because it is a place where writers and artists are truly allowed to engage with blackness on all fronts, exploring their past, present, and future.

Black Panther proves to a mainstream audience, that films by and about black people are worth telling, and that black culture and identity is worth celebrating. The 2018 Vox article "Black Panther is a gorgeous, ground-breaking celebration of black culture", written by Tre Johnson, discusses the impact and importance this film has on "the culture", something that will be discussed further in the chapter centred around representation and Black Panther's impact. Johnson explains how "*Black Panther*'s greatest legacy may not be what it's done for Marvel, Hollywood, or box office records, but what it's done for the culture." By showing its audience an Africa that is sophisticated, rich, diverse, and powerful, and full of potential, it celebrates the opportunity and potential of the *real* Africa too. Its aesthetic is unique, and unapologetically black. From costumes to hair, to story itself, it explores various aspects of African identity, and it offers viewers an escape from Hollywood's typical approach to black narratives, centred around slavery, or the fight for civil rights. Instead of being yet another film that romanticises suffering, *Black Panther* celebrates the beauty and future of black individuals. Previously, Hollywood has been dominated by biopics and and historical dramas, centred around black trauma, with a white saviour. Examples include *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *Lincoln* (2012), or *The Help* (2011). While they might be objectively good movies, they have a tendency of retelling the same stories over and over again, equating black narratives to narratives that exclusively stem from the past. *Black Panther* however, dares to look beyond the conventional "black" narratives Hollywood has previously produced.

As observed by Renée T. White in "I Dream a World: Black Panther and the Re-Making of Blackness", the mainstream Hollywood view, is that "Black" films are viewed as a financial risk. Furthermore, the idea of "black" films, often conflates *blackness* and genre. By dismissing films by and with black producers and casts as "*black*" films, instead of viewing them in a broader context, it only adds to the misconception that such films belong to a "niche" category, not worthy of mainstream

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appeal. This means that films centred around black identity, black history, or other typically "black"

forms of expression, has a harder time appealing to a wider audience. Marvel's *Black Panther* though, is

able to bypass some of this; by being part of a pre-established franchise, and being the 18th film in their

cinematic universe, Marvel already has a rather significant audience, that spans over a decade.

Before *Black Panther*, there had already been several black-led superhero movies, for example

Wesley Snipes as Blade, in *Blade* (1998) and Halle Berry as the titular character in *Catwoman* (2004).

However, the reception of these films were not great, with *Blade* receiving a score of 57% on Rotten

Tomatoes, and *Catwoman* receiving 8%, and subsequently hailed as one of the worst movies ever made.

Halle Berry also made the return as a superheroine in *X-Men* (2000), where she played the mutant

Storm. However, as Nama notes in *Super Black,* due to its ensemble cast, she serves as little more than a

side character, standing in the shadow of fan favourites such as Hugh Jackman's Wolverine (p.145). It is

this issue that *Black Panther* is able to avoid; while the Black Panther as a character had already been

introduced in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), two years prior, he gets his own film, that tells *his*

story.

By introducing him as part of the ensemble that makes up the Avengers, audiences already have

an established relationship with the titular character, and since the plot of *Captain America: Civil War* is

a direct set-up for the events of *Black Panther*¸ audiences are able to see the connection between the

two films, and how Black Panther as a character fits within the rest of the hero roster of the MCU. By

being able to play off of previously established connections and plotlines, is a benefit that might have

played into the reception of the film in 2018, but even with the connection to the rest of the MCU, it is

hard to know for certain whether or not the film would have received the same acclaim had it been

released earlier.

As mentioned previously, many of the early MCU movies were lacking in terms of

representation, and stories that dare to explore some of the more complex issues that exist in real life.

While questions about identity, abandonment, and loss are frequent themes in the Marvel films, found

in films like *Thor* (2011), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), or *Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (2021), *Black*

Panther faces its politics head on. Whether or not it successfully tackles these issues, is up for debate,

and the film has received both positive and negative feedback about this subject. Still, it is without a

doubt a film that has made an impact, and resonated with a significant part of the population, on a

global level. Black superheroes are different to their white counterparts, in that they are never "just"

superheroes. Adilifu Nama writes that;

> "Their presence remains symbolically significant. These figures challenge the
>
> immediate experience of race in America by providing images of futuristic and fantastic
>
> black men and women that are beyond the mundane, everyday, and familiar notions of
>
> blackness associated with entertainment or sports. Most importantly, because
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> superheroes are the embodiment of American morality and the national ethos, black
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> superheroes become that much more captivating as symbolic figures—they signify a
>
> type of racial utopia where whites can accept blacks as superhuman, intellectually and
>
> physically superior, and benevolent protectors of all humanity." (p. 153)

It is exactly this potential of black heroes that *Black Panther*'s titular character is able to present.

Wakanda and its Panther symbolise a futuristic utopia, and an alternate reality where black heroes and

black *culture* is allowed to excel, and that for once, it is their voice that speaks clearest. On top of telling

a story that puts Africa first, *Black Panther* does something that Marvel had failed to do up until this

point. It embraces its political foundation. Alex Abad-Santos writes for *Vox* that what differentiates this film, compared to the previous Marvel movies, is that it does not shy away from its political core.

"Whenever a superhero movie comes out, part of the cultural reaction is to find the politics in its bones. Last year's Thor: Ragnarok wasn't just about the god of thunder and lightning fighting with the goddess of death — it was also about refugees, immigrants, the pitfalls of imperialism, and Donald Trump's vision for America. Meanwhile, Wonder Woman was, depending on whom you ask, either propaganda about American exceptionalism or a subversive piece of feminism designed to sabotage tired Hollywood conventions." (2018)

While the political themes of the above films are kept subtle, and left open to interpretation, *Black* Panther confronts them head on, which in turn, is the reason why it works. It does not hide from its themes, nor does it hide from its characters, and it voices sentiments and opinions in regards to the country's foreign politics, sovereignty, and their passivity. Coogler and Coates' interview in *Black Panther #170* mentioned previously, includes their perspectives in regards to the film and comics' reception, and what it is that makes the stories centred around the Black Panther so appealing. Coogler states that;

"in the case of the film I think that it always would have connected […] when he [Ta-Nehisi Coates] wrote *Between the World and Me*, when that book was released, he operated in a cultural space that was very unique. And for him to transition to comics at that time, after the release of *Between the World and Me*, and to do it with this specific comic book, which has a history of being almost like the exclusive comic book where you

could address some of these issues of colonization and African heritage head-on -- it was a zeitgeist thing, man." (*Black Panther #170,* 2018)

It is without a doubt a unique time in US history, Damian Garside writes in his review of the film, that *Black Panther* is a film that uses "the cultural richness of the black experience to present an alternate image to the world and to human beings currently making such a mess of it and of their relationships with each other. As the film makes abundantly clear: Africa is no "dark" place, it has a deep and essential connection to humanity and the history of our species." (p. 108). By pointing out the cultural space in which Coates published his book *Between the World and Me* (2015)*,* a book written as a letter to his son about the history and ideals of American society, and his experiences as a black individual, Coogler implies that Coates' particular background and timing is a seminal aspect of his work on *Black Panther*. *Black Panther* has always been one of those comic book stories that lends itself well to exploring topics such as black identity, culture, and questions regarding colonisation and its consequences, and there is no doubt that it was the perfect moment for this particular author to take the lead in writing about T'Challa, and the world of Wakanda. On the topic of the titular character himself, Coogler muses that the character has always been interesting, and that for the MCU, the audience craved something different;

"As far as the film goes, T'Challa is such an interesting character and there's this dynamic where we've got audiences who have seen several different types of superhero movies at this point, it's become a thing that's commonplace. I think the audiences have kind of grown tired of seeing the same old thing, and the idea of a superhero movie where you can still see things blow up and explode but you get it with a different flavour, you get it with something that feels unique, that feels special, feels of a moment

-- that makes Black Panther very special in the audience's eyes. […] I think it's the cultural space as well with the internet and social media, these forms of communication, seeing the impact that people of color" (*Black Panther #170,* 2018)

Marvel's movies have always been political, something that is not just limited to films about superheroes. *Most*, if not all, narratives borrow from the real world, and have plots and characters that are affected by the very real issues we face every day, in our real lives. Sometimes, this is subtle, and easy to dismiss or explain away, but other times, we get narratives that refuse to shy away from the realities of life today. While *Black Panther* has received some criticism from casual viewers and critics in regards to whether or not it is able to convey its political themes in a way that matters, it is without a doubt an important film, especially due to the context of its time. The film released on February 14th, 2018, during Black History month, and two years into the Trump-presidency.

As mentioned preciously, *Black Panther* began its production two years prior, in 2016, the year of Trump's election. In addition to this, the *Black Lives Matter* (BLM) movement began increasing its engagement and activity levels through 2018, before it peaked in 2020, with the death of George Floyd and the following protests, seeking justice for his murder at the hands of the then police officer Derek Chauvin (*New York Times*, 2020). While the movie had little to nothing to do with the movement itself, it *did* still inspire political activity, in the form of a campaign aimed to urge the black community to register to vote.

Launched in October 2017, Kayla Reed, Jessica Byrd and Rukia Lumumba created the "Electoral Justice Project" (ELJ), and leading up to the film's release, they carried out the #WakandaTheVote

campaign, that sought to mobilize and ensure that black individuals were registered to vote, and that

they would meet up for the 2018 midterm elections (*Blavity,* 2018). Explaining their motivation for

starting this campaign, Byrd and Reed state that "the Movement for Black Lives is an ecosystem of black

leaders and organizations fighting every single day for the healthy and happy lives of Black folks [...] We

are effective because we meet our communities where they are, whether that's in the streets, at the city

council meeting, or in the movie theater. We know that for some it's a superhero world, but we know

that the world we deserve is still waitin to be built - and we want to build it!" (*Blavity*, 2018). The last

part in particular, regarding the "superhero world" versus the world they deserve, is important. The

people being #WakandaTheVote, use the film as an ideal, showing potential voters that Wakanda is the

future, or at least a *potential* future, if the black community organises, and engages with politics. The

article claims that over 1,000 individuals joined their launch call,

According to CNN, there was a decrease from 66.2% to 59.4% African-Americans who voted

during the 2016 presidential election, arguing that Russian trolls played part in the lower turnout, along

with the absence of Barack Obama, who led to record high numbers (CNN, 2018). Pew Research Center

explains that in 2018, during the midterm elections, there was a higher voter turnout across all

demographics, with the number of black voters increasing from 40.6% in 2014, to 51.4% in 2018

(Krogstad et al, 2019). While this article does not provide any theories about the potential reasons

behind the increase in voter turnout, it is not hard to imagine that the disillusionment with the Trump-

administration, and the increasing tensions between police and people of colour played a role.

Bloomberg states in a 2018 article that "Lots of factors can weigh on whether someone votes, but the

biggest reason for high turnout in 2018 likely has more to do with the national political climate than

local races and candidates," explaining that Trump in particular, sparked an interest in politics, and their desire to make their voices heard, whether for, or against him (Rojanasakul et al., 2018).

While it is naïve to give *Black Panther* any and all credit, it is arguably still important to discuss whether or not it created a shift, and if so, how. Kayla Reed from the previously mentioned ELJ project, states in an interview with *Vox* that "We need to step into the idea that we can all be superheroes and we can all be change agents in our communities" (Lockhart, 2018). Superheroes are, as already established, often characters that we relate to, and view as role models; it therefore makes perfect sense to use these characters to encourage people to participate in an attempt to create a change in real life, with the powers we do have.

If a simple superhero film can encourage and rally voters, and make politics more accessible to people, does it not then mean that superheroes has the potential to be *more* than flashy costumes and action-based entertainment? As Adilifu Nama states in the introduction of *Super Black:* « black superheroes are not merely figures that defeat costumed supervillains: they symbolize American racial morality and ethics. They overtly represent or implicitly signify social discourse and accepted wisdom concerning notions of racial reciprocity, racial equality, racial forgiveness, and, ultimately, racial justice» (p. 4). What *Black Panther* symbolises, is a potential future, presented by an alternative timeline, where black culture is allowed to shine, from hair and fashion, to technology and spiritual belief. The Black Panther is not "just" another superhero, nor "just" a black superhero. He is a symbol, that represents potential, opportunity, and change, and serves as a reminder of what could be. The conflict between Killmonger and T'Challa represents current discourse between

Similarly, Wakanda itself is a symbol of opportunity and a future where black people are not just equal to the white population, but perhaps even *superior*. The Africa explored in *Black Panther* is a stark

contrast to the Africa visited in *Captain America: Civil War*, where they briefly visit Lagos, Nigeria, where the Avengers team up to stop the theft of a biological weapon (00:03:50). Here, Lagos is portrayed similarly to any "third world country" in Hollywood, washed out and unassuming, and to top it off, there is a chase sequence through a market, followed by a fight that leaves produce and other items broken and scattered about. The only thing missing, is the typical yellow/sepia filter, often used in western media to portray the global south, making it seem impoverished, dirty, and hostile, something Maureen Heydt makes note of in an article for *Medium*, titled "Yellow Filter and Representations of Global South". The author continues, adding that the use of these coloured overlays "posits false dichotomies such as 'us' and 'them', 'here' and 'out there,' contributing to a mistaken sense of awareness of what life is actually like in countries outside of the US and the Global North." By breaking with this established pattern, *Black Panther* forces viewers to confront their understanding and preconceptions about non-western countries, and reconsider our view on Africa. Heydt adds that

> "This deliberate act of misunderstanding, akin to misdirection, is particularly
> perilous as the world faces crises that require greater global understanding and
> cooperation, including a reckoning of how Black people are treated in the United States
> and elsewhere, the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change and the recent retreat of
> democratic principles and liberties in countries around the world."

This highlights the power that cinema can have, because what we see, is what we believe. When all we see on screen, is non-western countries, bathed in a grimy, unappealing sepia, it alters our perception, to the point we assume that this is what Africa, South-America, or South-East Asia might look like, which in turn, inadvertently might cause us to equate the same, poor and dirty countries, to the people that reside within them. By confronting this preconceived notion of Africa as portrayed in

Hollywood, *Black Panther* creates a new visual identity for the country and shows us an alternative to the grime and dirt that we might previously have grown accustomed to. The film's ability to encourage viewers to reconsider what they knew about Africa, Black culture, and Black heroes, is something worth celebrating, and something that the movie industry should strive to replicate.

Criticism of Black Panther

While this thesis has attempted to paint *Black Panther* in a primarily positive light, it is only fair to also discuss the criticism the film has received. While everything mentioned up until now is true, some of the concerns regarding the film is rooted in whether or not it has been able to do its subject matter justice, and whether or not it has made any political impact whatsoever. At the same time, it is worth asking whether or not change on a political level was ever the intention of the film. Shortly after the film's release, Vox wrote an article about this subject, where the author argues that it is not so much what *Black Panther* does for the *politics*, but rather, what *Black Panther* does for the *culture*, that matters. The topic of diversity and representation is highly relevant among moviegoers today, and as mentioned previously, partially because some feel that it has gone "too far", and that instead of creating original, interesting narratives, the entertainment industry instead panders to certain demographics by "reimagining" classic narratives and characters, as more diverse. It is easy to agree and say that one should be able to make new characters and stories, instead of borrowing from the popularity of already

established characters and narratives, the way the discussion tends to go in online spaces, leaves little room for nuance and more balanced answers. However, Renée T. White notes that

> "Black Panther offers the audience representations of black people [that] are presented from a wholly black cultural perspective instead of through the racist frame imposed by studios on many mainstream films .... [and] relief from studio films that rely primarily on an inversion of racial codes—a structural feature that positions black spectators to view themselves from a mainstream perspective" (p. 22)

Patrick Gathara writes in an article for *The Washington Post* that the film's ending is inherently neo-colonial, and that the story itself offers a regressive vision of Africa. "At heart, it is a movie about a divided, tribalized continent, discovered by a white man who wants nothing more than to take its mineral resources, a continent run by a wealthy, power-hungry, feuding and feudalist elite, where a nation with the most advanced tech and weapons in the world nonetheless has no thinkers to develop systems of transitioning rulership that do not involve lethal combat or coup d'etat."

Gathara also points out that the film is centred purely on the warriors and the royalty, instead ignoring the people, who are usually present in other Marvel movies, which reinforces the image of *Black Panther* as a story aimed at westerners, rather than a story for Africans. He continues, explaining that "The Afrofuturism of black America, it seems, has little to offer the people of Africa." Knowing that Marvel is an American company, producing films in America, with Americans in mind, this particular piece of criticism is perfectly justified, and does perhaps point out a more general issue with Hollywood's monopoly of media and entertainment. As an American-produced film, featuring for the

most part Americans, it is evident that the end result will be a story that appeals to the American audience first.

However, I do think it is a pity to dismiss what the film does, and its impact on moviegoers. *Black Panther*, while telling its story from an American background, does attempt to tell its audience what it means to be black in America and in Africa, and in the world. Jamal Smith writes for *Time*, explaining that for non-white moviegoers, finding representation that is able to properly convey their humanity as something complex, and multifaceted, is a big challenge. He continues, stating that "relating to characters onscreen is necessary not merely for us to feel seen and understood, but also for others who need to see and understand us. When it doesn't happen, we are all the poorer for it.", which reiterates David Carriers point earlier, about understanding culture through the eyes of the outsiders. If the film is able to make a *White* audience understand what it means to be black on a national and international level, and give insight to the complex struggles that colour the lives of African-Americans, African immigrants, and Africans, then it arguably serves a function. And more importantly, if it gives people of colour a break from narratives centred around their trauma, and instead highlights their potential and beauty, then that too, must be enough. *Black Panther* does not have to change the whole world in an instant. Rather, it should be seen as a step in the right direction, that encourages more diverse narratives that break with Hollywood's traditions. It should be seen as a window into discovering African and African-American culture and aesthetics, and the beginning of challenging mainstream, conventional beauty standards and rules about conformity, coming from a predominantly white, Western perspective.

In an interview from 2021 with *Variety*'s Daveed Diggs, Anthony Mackie, who plays the Falcon in the MCU, and as of the end of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), the new Captain America, points out what is an issue in Hollywood, and the media industry as a whole. He points out Marvel had no issue "[hiring] the black people for the black movie", which signals that "they're not good enough when you have a mostly white cast." By exclusively hiring all these black creators to be part of the studios only Black film, it *does* send a certain message, as Mackie is quick to point out; "We've had one black producer; his name was Nate Moore. He produced Black Panther. But then when you do Black Panther, you have a black director, black producer, a black costume designer, a black stunt choreographer. And I'm like, that's more racist than anything else". By not allowing for the same degree of diversity among the studios other films, it creates an environment where it is heavily implied that black creators are unable to tell anything other than black narratives, and that they are only given the opportunity to tell their stories if there is a demand for a grandiose socio-political message. However, in doing so, they are at risk of missing out on true talent, and attempts at challenging conventions, beauty standards, and other societal norms. Art is meant to cause reactions, and in order to maintain a level of creativity and innovation, it is important to look beyond their comfort zones, and dare to take a gamble on narratives that try to do something new.

Conclusion

A world post-*Black Panther*

As mentioned previously, Marvel has received criticism in regards to how their later phases seem to have gone "woke". Even with the massive commercial success of *Black Panther,* it has not stopped people from spreading vitriol online in regards to films led by people of colour, or by women. Chloé Zhao's *Eternals* (2020), is one of the lowest rated films from Marvel Studios, according to a 2022 article from *Variety*, written by Zack Sharf. The film features a diverse cast and themes regarding existentialism and the Eternals' role in mortal matters, while simultaneously attempting to "[shake up] the visual language of the MCU". The Disney+ series *Ms Marvel*, featuring the young, Muslim, Pakistani American heroine of the same name, is the lowest rated series created by Marvel, as noted by NBC News, with critics calling it "woke", and claiming that it panders to a very small minority of Marvel's fans. While there are more examples of Marvel films and series receiving unfavourable reviews, post-*Black Panther*, due to their diverse cast and "woke" storylines, it does not mean that it has all gone downhill since the 2018 blockbuster made its mark on Marvel history.

With the passing of its lead star, Chadwick Boseman, in 2020, there was much uncertainty in regards to how the franchise would proceed, without T'Challa. *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* picks up after T'Challa's death, and offers a story that explores the consequences of opening Wakanda's borders at the end of *Black Panther,* and how a nation recovers from loss. The sequel's aesthetic and visuals are just as strong and powerful as the first one, and as mentioned, Carter once again won an Oscar for her

costume design. On top of this, Angela Basset won an Oscar for Best Supporting Actress, for her performance as a grieving mother, struggling to pick up the pieces of her home and family.

The sequel mirrors many of the themes and conflicts from the first film, and while some, such as *The Guardian* gave it a three-star review, the Afrofuturist land of Wakanda still captivates audiences. Jason Parham writes for *Wired* that compared to *Wakanda Forever*, "*Black Panther* had teeth, and it was smart enough to skirt the easy trap of representation in an industry starved for color and meaning." Shrouded in the heavy atmosphere of the loss of Chadwick Boseman, Parham explains that while *Wakanda Forever* is not a brand new take on superhero films, or a revolutionary tale, it makes a valiant effort, and shows us a different side of the superhero world, that takes the time it needs to grieve; "Coogler has equipped his sequel with a changed vocabulary: It speaks equally from a place of loss as it does triumph. Grief is its mother tongue."

While it is hard to say exactly what the sequel might have looked like had it not been for the loss of Boseman, one thing can be said for certain; the MCU misses its king. In his place, is Shuri, who struggles to deal with the loss of her brother, and the subsequent loss of her mother. It is Killmonger who greets her in the Ancestral Realm, and lights a fire within that allows her to confront Namor and the Atlanteans when they threaten the safety of Wakanda and everything she holds dear. All the while, the film embraces the aesthetic and visual identity of its precursor, with even more time devoted to exploring the Afrofuturistic elements of Wakanda. By 3D-printing a synthetic version of the Heart-Shaped Herb that Killmonger burned in the first film, and undergoing the ritual in the same way, *Wakanda Forever* reinforces *Black Panther*'s theme about embracing the past, as they reach for the future.

Final thoughts

What *Black* Panther has managed to do, regardless of whether or not its political themes are perfect, is embrace Black aesthetics, and the different facets of Black identity. It blends tradition and futurism in a way that crafts a unique visual identity, that represents a new kind of hero, and the potential for the future. The film is able to appeal to people with a vibrant and exciting blend of new and old, highlighting relevant discussions about what it means to be Black, and the different perspectives that come from the many different lived experiences of the characters within.

Ultimately, the film provides an outlet, and it celebrates the creativity, passion, dedication and beauty of Blackness, and reminds its viewers that in order to go forward into the future, it is important to remember the past, and to learn from it. At its heart, Afrofuturism offers a chance to dream, and to imagine a future without constraints and restrictions. It offers an alternative path without restrictions, and urges us to see beyond what we know. Superheroes embrace the known, while also confronting the unknown, and ultimately, creates a bridge between past, present, and future. After all, one of the defining tenets of most superheroes, is the ability to persist through trials and tribulations, and to never lose hope.

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