

Kutztown University

Research Commons at Kutztown University

Kutztown University Masters Theses

Spring 5-10-2020

SUPER HEROES V SCORSESE: A MARXIST READING OF ALIENATION AND THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS IN BLOCKBUSTER SUPERHERO FILM

David Eltz
deltz025@live.kutztown.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/masterstheses>



Part of the [Film Production Commons](#), [Literature in English, North America Commons](#), and the [Screenwriting Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Eltz, David, "SUPER HEROES V SCORSESE: A MARXIST READING OF ALIENATION AND THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS IN BLOCKBUSTER SUPERHERO FILM" (2020). *Kutztown University Masters Theses*. 1. <https://research.library.kutztown.edu/masterstheses/1>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Research Commons at Kutztown University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Kutztown University Masters Theses by an authorized administrator of Research Commons at Kutztown University. For more information, please contact czerny@kutztown.edu.

SUPER HEROES V SCORSESE:
A MARXIST READING OF ALIENATION AND THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS
IN BLOCKBUSTER SUPERHERO FILM

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of
the Department of English
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania
Kutztown, Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in English

by

David J. Eltz

October, 2020

Approved:

(Date)

(Adviser)

(Date)

(Chair, Department of English)

(Date)

(Dean, Graduate Studies)

Abstract

As superhero blockbusters continue to dominate the theatrical landscape, critical detractors of the genre have grown in number and authority. The most influential among them, Martin Scorsese, has been quoted as referring to Marvel films as “theme parks” rather than “cinema” (his own term for auteur film). Despite this, these films often possess considerably challenging views in regards to social justice, and continue to interface with the pervading theme of alienation in increasingly abstract and progressive ways.

This thesis considers four films (1978’s *Superman*, 2000’s *X-Men*, 2013’s *Captain America: Winter Soldier*, and 2018’s *Black Panther*) from a Marxist perspective, viewing the films as especially disruptive to the established superhero blockbuster formula (presented as a variation of Hegel’s dialectic to structurally parallel Marxist criticism), and the ways in which the genre interfaces with alienation. This analysis is further justified by Fredric Jameson’s critique of Postmodernism (*Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*), in which he perceives a collision of high and low art, and guided primarily by his *Political Unconscious* (with additional reference to Baudry’s “Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus,” Lacan’s “The Mirror Stage,” Levi-Strauss’ “The Structural Study of Myth”, and Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*). Each film is considered in regards to its historical context, portrayal of alienation, and challenge to established filmmaking methodologies.

Finally, this thesis argues that, though these films are far flung from traditional definitions of auteur cinema, they are not devoid of its central facet of risk—if not in terms of finance, then the risk of being misinterpreted and written off as juvenile media. Contrary to some interpretations of the genre, it remains revolutionary in its ability to blatantly challenge real social problems with abstract solutions, and possesses the potential for considerable social change.

Acknowledgments

This thesis, written in bursts that can only adequately be described as manic fits of wild theorizing, owes perhaps as much of its existence to my peers as to myself. Their comments on each chapter have been invaluable, and their frequent words of encouragement—and, on the none-too-rare occasions of my own procrastination, of beratement—equally so. As such, I find myself indebted to Dave Campbell, Eric Gibson, Megan Rutter, Rachel-Joy Seifrit, and Laura Turner, among many others whose eyes have glazed over after so many dozens of pages, and whose patience I have no doubt tested with frequent requests for reviews and revisions.

In addition, familial thanks and dedications are in order. My aunt encouraged me to pursue the thesis, my sister wants to turn it into a comic, and my best friend demands it be turned into a series of video essays. I am grateful for the support of all of them.

Finally, the viability of this thesis must be attributed to the brilliant and disruptive artists, writers, and directors that have challenged the status quo in order to make cinema out of theme parks and provide the grounds for my analysis.

Table of Contents

SUPER HEROES V SCORSESE: A MARXIST READING OF ALIENATION AND THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS IN BLOCKBUSTER SUPERHERO FILM	0
Approval Page	1
Abstract	2
Acknowledgments	4
Table of Contents	5
Disclaimer: The Intent of this Thesis	6
Introduction: Foundational Theory and Methodology	7
Chapter 1: Superman and the Making of a Myth	19
Establishing the Blockbuster	20
Historical Context	24
Demystifying Social Justice	32
Chapter 2: X-Men and Evolution through Allegory	37
Historical Context	40
Superhero Blockbuster Dialectic	50
Analysis and Conclusion	54
Chapter 3: Captain America, the Post-9/11 Avenger	58
Historical Context	60
Modes of Production	66
Analysis	70
Chapter 4: Black Panther and Novel Depictions of Colonialism and Alienation	75
Historical Context	79
Black Panther as Postmodern	86
Superhero Blockbuster Dialectic	91
Conclusion	95
Works Cited	100

Disclaimer: The Intent of this Thesis

Though comics studies has long ago found its academic niche and currently engages with deeply critical and analytical (translation: jargon-riddled) discourse, much of this thesis, including its subject matter and potentially conversational tone, does not immediately come off as staunchly academic. In lieu of tightly-integrated critical theory throughout, much of the theoretical discussion is limited to the introductory chapter, which should be taken as essential for academic reviewers, and supplementary for casual readers. Accessibility has been the driving factor behind this departure from some of the more formal academic writing practices and terminologies. It is my goal to share this thesis (or, more likely, the ideas contained within) with an audience broader than that of traditional academia via blogs and video essays in the hopes that more students will see and take interest in formal analysis of informal media. With luck, this thesis, and papers like it, will cast further light on cultural artifacts' potential for social change, and enlighten future directors to additional tools at their disposal. The entirety of this thesis was drafted between Fall 2019 and Spring 2020, prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, nationwide lockdown (resulting in much of the film industry's grinding to a halt), Black Lives Matter protests, the untimely passing of Chadwick Boseman, and other monumental events. As this thesis is intently focused on both sociohistorical flashpoints and social justice, some minor updates reflecting the tumultuous past year have been necessary. Despite this, as events continue to change, it is entirely possible that some aspects will be outdated faster than they can be revised.

Introduction: Foundational Theory and Methodology

Despite various delays resulting from the Coronavirus pandemic, eight films have been either announced or scheduled for release this year that squarely fit within the genre of “Blockbuster Superhero Movie.” They are being offered by three different massive production houses—namely Walt Disney Studios¹, Warner Brothers, and Sony Pictures—all of which aim to bring in billions of box office dollars. Additionally, these studios are beginning to offer tie-in small-screen content with which viewers may bide their time until the next major theatrical opening or digital release (with the additional benefit of keeping fans engaged in the franchise and therefore primed to pay for its next installment). In no small way, superhero films have taken over the popular cinematic landscape. For over a decade, the superhero genre has exhibited dominance within market trends, and with the genre’s rampant success comes the desire of filmmakers of all stripes to join an ongoing franchise and secure some degree of financial and critical promise.

In spite of its variety of directorial voices, Marvel Studios’ offerings in particular have served as a model for the “universe” approach to franchise content, in which a successful entry often leads not only to direct sequels, but to further stories told within the same canonical universe (other examples of this capital-driven approach include *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, the *Fast and Furious* franchise, and the contemporary *MonsterVerse*, home to the likes of *Godzilla* and *King Kong*, among others). While Marvel and Disney are in no way the first to envision a shared universe (the oldest film franchise to use this

¹ Which, it must be acknowledged, has acquired 20th Century Fox, which is responsible for the entire *X-Men* film franchise.

model might be the original Monsters Universe, featuring the likes of *Dracula*, *Frankenstein*, *The Invisible Man* and *The Wolf Man* between 1931 and 1951), they are likely the driving factors behind its adoption as the de facto franchise formula since the wild success of 2008's *Iron Man*². Research by Darren Filson and James Havlicek, who performed a quantitative analysis of franchise films as of 2014, corroborates this. They mark a clear trend in attempted new film franchises in the mid-1990s, and then a second surge starting in 2008 (448). Superhero movies appear in no rush to leave theaters, and continue to provide ample content for analysis at the macroscopic level.

To some, the ubiquity of the genre necessitates finding new avenues for creativity, with transmedia and cross-genre content becoming increasingly viable and tantalizingly profitable. To others, there is great irony in the omnipresence of superhero media, in that the creative landscape grows bleaker and more dystopian as screens more frequently are filled up by the brightly-colored moral warriors. Though tonally agnostic, Filson and Havlicek's statistical approach offers some revelation about the franchise filmmaking process, including the potentially-distressing trend "that changing the lead actor in installment 2 is associated with statistically significant and economically important reductions in revenue and [Return On Investment]," while "changes in the director (a key input) are not as important" (458). One such statistically-marginalized director, Martin Scorsese, is perhaps the most outspoken detractor of franchise film. Established from a long career as an auteur filmmaker, and witness to the rise of the superhero genre, he provides a crucially accessible text regarding the franchise film in an opinion editorial to

² Even *Star Wars*, which long predates the Marvel Cinematic Universe, only began to tell cinematic stories beyond the numbered saga entries in 2016 with *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*.

the New York Times. The article, “I Said Marvel Movies Aren’t Cinema. Let Me Explain.”, serves as an elaboration upon earlier remarks the director had made in interviews, referring to the Marvel Cinematic Universe films as theme parks, and incompatible with his concept of *cinema*.

Scorsese, upon being asked to comment on the supposed “decline of Cinema”, remarked that he did not enjoy them, and frankly considered them “closer to theme parks than cinema.” Admittedly, his metaphor is apt: where independent filmmakers can produce inspiring and unique pieces of cinema with shockingly few resources, studio films (and franchise films especially) rely on teams of hundreds to bring characters to life. Individuals and their teams are charged with nearly every minute aspect, with every actor, costumer, operator, and VFX artist striving to bring a unified (or, given the context of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, uniform) vision to the screen. Theme parks operate in much the same way: dozens of architects, engineers, operators, mascots, and custodial staff tend to the illusion of a seamless world unlike reality. Naturally, Scorsese does not preclude *any* film with considerable effects or a large staff from being cinema, but rather points to the increasing distance between a director’s authentic vision and the final, test-screened, re-shot, and shareholder-approved product.

The crux of Scorsese’s argument draws heavily from auteur theory and its related texts, constructed from thinkers like Walter Benjamin, Jean-Louis Baudry, and François Truffaut. Director Francois Truffaut’s “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema” admonishes the French “Tradition of Quality” that had then referred to the “mere ten to twelve [films] that deserve to attract the attention of critics and cinephiles” (1). This

laurel was laid upon directors who Truffaut considered to be undeserving, not out of any lack of merit or skill, but for lack of an authorial voice. Most of the films considered within the Tradition were literary adaptations, and therefore already carried an authorial voice separate from that of the director. Truffaut goes on to describe what would later be termed as auteur cinema, filmmakers crafting works of art that were intensely personal and oftentimes a risk to produce³. Truffaut's words are echoed by the birth of the French New Wave, one of the largest paradigm shifts in cinematic history. The films produced during that era would serve to better define auteur cinema, and provide future generations of film students and critics with prime examples of intensely-crafted, deeply personal cinema.

Perhaps even better represented within Scorsese's essay is the notion of the cinematographic apparatus, as defined by Jean-Louis Baudry. Baudry's seminal work, "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematic Apparatus," incorporates elements of Truffaut's definition of auteur cinema, but positions the reader to look more closely at the literal construction of the film as the site of meaning-making, or as he puts it, "the site of inscription" (Baudry 40). In effect, he summarizes the filmmaking process down to a series of abstractions and injections of meaning. He argues that the only objective truth in the process—the physical ongoing in front of the camera—is abstracted by the conscious decisions of the camera operator, and that further modifications of that once-objective truth arrive through the process of editing, all of which ideally serves as a realization of the director's vision. This ideological vision is, in turn, projected onto viewers,

³ Another quote from Filson and Havlicek may be pertinent here: "Offsetting deteriorating performance, **risk** falls as installments progress: revenue and ROI become more predictable" (464).

essentially captive by the theatre's design, forcibly creating a secondary "mirror stage"⁴ in which the audience is made to identify with the depicted character. As such, Baudry's essay decidedly follows the process of *auteur* filmmaking, and is incapable of fully addressing the differences that arise in the *franchise* filmmaking process, where revisions, reshoots, and edits are frequent, and nearly all of which are determined by focus groups and shareholders, rather than the actual director. The entire franchise filmmaking process adds a considerable sequence of events to Baudry's sparse depiction, and muddles (perhaps damages) the meaning-making process with the inclusion of numerous new voices. To quote Scorsese: "That's the nature of modern film franchises: market-researched, audience-tested, vetted, modified, revetted and remodified until they're ready for consumption."

Finally, Scorsese's *cinema* pulls from Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," which offers a scathing look at cinema as a whole. Per Benjamin, every work of art has a specific aura, a piece of the artist's soul which is transferred into the work during its production (a process that strongly echoes Truffaut's early concept of *auteur* film). However, Benjamin posits that aura is non-reproducible, and therefore works that are created en masse, or made to be witnessed en masse (such as franchise film), are irrevocably tainted by the reproduction process. Here, Scorsese might stand at odds with Benjamin, but the inexplicable power of personal filmmaking, that which he refers to as true cinema, bears remarkable similarity to Benjamin's concept of

⁴ The term "mirror stage" was coined and examined by Jacques Lacan, and refers to a moment of sudden self-awareness wherein a child first recognizes its reflection as an extension of itself. Lacan is further explored in the first two chapters of the thesis, in relation to Levi-Strauss' "Structure of Myth," addressed later in this introduction.

aura. In reconciling the two, it may be the case that auteur cinema, produced by smaller studios and more personally, functions in much the same way as an independently-crafted work of art, and that franchise film (inherently more populist in intent), a theory of which Scorsese appears to be developing in his essay, lacks a similar injection and therefore possesses no aura.

In light of all of this critical discussion regarding the franchise film and its inability to contribute to the legacy of auteur cinema, an influx of critical analysis would seem antithetical to Scorsese and his predecessors. If not for thinkers like Fredric Jameson, best known for his critique of postmodernism and elucidation of the political unconscious, this might be the case. In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson makes a claim that might nowadays seem commonsensical, but is crucial to an understanding of the factors at play in franchise film, and superhero film specifically. He argues that below the literal reading of any text lies a secondary, political meaning. This political meaning is never explicitly stated, but can be revealed and understood as a direct response to political and social issues contemporary to the work or the period of its construction.

Per Jameson, the social argument within the political unconscious of a particular work can only be revealed by the combination of three levels of analysis. First, though, he argues that the work must be considered as an allegorical object, capable of speaking to a matter of political discourse beyond its direct subject matter. From there, Jameson refers to the three levels of analysis (in his own terminology, concentric frameworks) from which its political standpoint can be determined:

“[S]uch semantic enrichment and enlargement of the inert givens and materials of a particular text must take place within three concentric frameworks, which mark a widening out of the sense of the social ground of a text through the notions, first, of political history, in the narrow sense of punctual event and a chroniclelike sequence of happenings in time; then of society, in the now already less diachronic and time-bound sense of a constitutive tension and struggle between social classes; and, ultimately, of history now conceived in its vastest sense of the sequence of modes of production and the succession and destiny of the various human social formations, from prehistoric life to whatever far future history has in store for us” (60).

Jameson also points out that the political meaning of a text is inherently repressed, as is an individual's political nature. This he takes to be evident, as the purpose of such analysis and reading is to reveal a meaning deeper than that of the literal text. In effect, Jameson argues that a multilevel approach to analysis of the text and its arguments grant readers lease to diagnose the text's deeper dialogical contributions; in other words, the three-step analysis proposed by Jameson allows readers to extrapolate a text's political unconscious from its literal meaning.

This thesis opts to mirror Jameson's three-framework method of analysis, condensing his frameworks into considerations of historical contexts and demystifications of social justice rhetoric prior to introducing a novel third framework. Focusing on the literal construction methodology (per Baudry), aspects of each film read through this third

framework will be elucidated through the notion of a genre-specific blockbuster dialectic in the style of Hegel. This new third framework will examine each film's influence on the medium itself, taking into consideration the disruptive moves it makes in narrative or construction. This results in three stages of analysis: first, each work is to be considered within its particular political moment, followed by its social moment, and finally its effect on the superhero blockbuster production process.

In his own writing, Jameson additionally opts to explore Levi-Strauss' "The Structural Study of Myth," coming to the conclusion that works being read as allegorical must respond to social issues. That is, Levi-Strauss and Jameson introduce a framework of analysis of narrative that views it as an imaginary resolution to a real social conflict. This is particularly pertinent to the analysis of superhero media, as both the films and their adaptive origins are understood to be unabashedly political and often targeted at social issues pressing at the time of their publication. In this regard, superhero media is especially pliable, with its entries being highly contemporary and, by nature of focusing on godlike figures with the power to enact real change, quite literally providing an imaginary conclusion to real problems.

Finally, this reliance on Levi-Strauss' writing necessitates a lens through which to view superhero media—or more specifically, a mirror. To this end, Lacan's "The Mirror Stage" is critical to an understanding of the underlying psychology of superhero film. Jean-Louis Baudry considers the final stage of film, its display in a theater, to be a series of forced connections with viewers. As viewers are effectively captive, held in a dark room with stimuli presented on only one surface blown to proportions nearly as large as a

spectator's field of vision, he or she is forced to relate to the characters on screen. Baudry does not go deeply into the implications of these forced connections, but "The Mirror Stage" may provide more insight. As Lacan illustrates, the mirror stage is the point at which an individual begins to recognize themselves as such (in his example, an infant recognizes his reflection as his own physical form, challenging and replacing his worldview of being a sentient force around which objects exist and interact), as well as developing a sense of others' selves. Additionally, the individual comes to recognize "big others," societal forces and figures, and "little others," other individuals. In the case of superhero media, the hero exists as a collection of ideals and identity elements reflecting the Political Unconscious, the manifestation of a "big other" in the form of a "little other." Spectators are made to relate to the main character; however, he or she is understood to be a "self" that is unattainable, which in turn allows for the medium to explore societal wish-fulfillment (as Jameson describes in *The Political Unconscious*, fictional solutions to real problems) by imbuing individual figures with powers and capacities for mass change that are impossible for real individuals.

Bearing this in mind, the thesis' methodology is composed as such: each of four chapters will investigate one piece of blockbuster superhero film, covering multiple studios, varying directorial visions and degrees of control, and nearly half a century's worth of political dialogue. The films have been selected such that each represents a markedly different era of social justice while also illustrating differing trends of the depiction of superhero media's pervading theme of alienation. Each film, as it embodies a particular moment in history, exists as part of what Jameson describes as a cultural canon

and can therefore be inspected via a political history, and read as a symbolic act in response to some historic (and political) stimuli. Accordingly, each film must be viewed as a response to particular political pressures of its time, and its messages must be interpreted as symbolic acts that combine to make a statement about those political pressures. This thesis further aims to examine not only the ways in which superhero blockbusters adhere to the franchise process, but also how they have reformed and modified it. The so-called “Marvel Formula,” for instance, was not crafted for 2008’s *Iron Man* and merely maintained for the decade following it; rather, individual films have altered and transformed a process that is now employed to great success. The films selected for closer inspection here all exhibit the most drastic changes to the franchise filmmaking formula. They are as follows:

Richard Donner’s *Superman*, released in 1978, bears a power that is twofold, simultaneously setting the potential for a socially-conscious superhero film, and further refining the fledgling blockbuster formula. Its universal approach to “truth, justice, and the American Way” provides ample grounds for both historical and social analysis. Coming after the fall of the American myth of superiority, it interfaces amply with the theme of alienation, addressing both its literal alien protagonist, and the alienation felt by an American public suddenly uncertain of its nation’s morality.

Two decades later, Fox and Bryan Singer would release *X-Men*. Benefiting from the refinement of the genre between 1978 and 2000, the film engages directly with alienation in the form of xenophobia, and as such offers a prime example of the allegorical work as proposed by Jameson. Loosely allegorizing racial and queer rights

movements and their leaders, the film draws much of its currents from growing tensions between the driving forces of American politics and the shifting identity of American people. .

Captain America: The Winter Soldier, directed by the Russo Brothers and released in 2014, represents the beginning of a radical expansion within the genre. As both a superhero film and a political thriller, it can be read the most directly, and additionally offers the most transparent criticism of contemporary government. Its exploration of alienation, further increased in specificity from the previous films, comes via the inspection of contemporary life in a surveillance-capable world. Additionally, it offers a clear blueprint for the transition between blockbuster film's characters from the traditional hero's cycle (often depicted in its entirety in their first outing) to broader, multipicture character arcs.

Most recently, 2018's *Black Panther*, directed by Ryan Coogler is notable in its social justice moves behind the camera as much as in front of it. Being helmed by and starring a predominantly black cast is an undeniable move towards authentic representation in franchise media, but begs for further analysis and contextualization as a product of the occasionally unethical and morally dubious Walt Disney Corporation. As such, *Black Panther's* themes and commentary on colonialism may be ironic, given the moves its parent company have made to essentially colonize the film and streaming landscapes. Its moves towards authenticity in an effort to combat audience alienation and promote positive representation, however, cannot be ignored.

Each film has been selected on account of its thematic application of alienation and social change, as well as its tangible effect on the process of blockbuster filmmaking. Viewing the evolution of superhero franchise filmmaking as a Hegelian dialectic, increasing in complexity, each film offers an antithesis to the established filmmaking formula. It is the intention of this thesis to investigate these four disruptive films, examine the relationship between their political unconscious and effect on the franchise filmmaking model, and glean some insight as to the future of the monolithic “superhero” film genre.

Chapter 1: *Superman* and the Making of a Myth

Superman may well be the most iconic comic book character to have ever graced newstands with pulpy pages and cheap ink. As such, it might seem logical that he should be the character to introduce comic book heroes to their new (and now dominant) medium of film. Formulated over the course of several years and finally brought to the public in 1978, *Superman: The Movie* quickly became the stuff of legend. Marketed with the tagline “you’ll believe a man can fly,” the film delivered on that and more, marking a milestone in visual effects work, and is celebrated to this day for its innovation. Even more importantly, it validated the superhero genre as viable for Hollywood and inseparably linked the genre to franchise filmmaking techniques.

Superman: The Movie’s plot is deceptively straightforward: Kal-El was jettisoned by his father from their dying planet to find a new home on Earth. Adopted by a couple in Kansas, Kal-El became Clark Kent and lived much of his life normally in rural Smallville, before discovering his heritage and the history of his home planet, Krypton. After years of Kryptonian education (courtesy of a holographic version of his father), Kal-El moves to Metropolis, becoming a journalist, meeting love interest Lois Lane, and eventually adopting the moniker of Superman. As he establishes himself in grand fashion, playing up the difference between the blandly heroic Superman and the bumbling Clark Kent, the villainous Lex Luthor hatches a plot to destroy the West Coast and get away with the “biggest real estate crime in history.” On its surface, *Superman* appears to borrow little from historical events and political undercurrents, but upon further

inspection, impressive influence from the upheavals of the 1970s drive the film to become one of the first entries into an emerging new American mythology.

Establishing the Blockbuster

Before delving into *Superman's* role in the political unconscious, the main argument of this thesis necessitates the positioning of it (and even more essentially, its process of production) as a blockbuster film. More specifically, it demands that a blockbuster formula be established (using *Superman* as its prototype) in order to set a starting point for the blockbuster dialectic considered by this thesis. Recent franchise ventures, such as various entries within the Marvel Cinematic Universe and *X-Men* series, can be immediately understood as franchise films, given both the context of their overarching narratives and their position in a solidly (late) capitalist, profit-driven media market. But as far back as *Superman's* production—the mid to late 1970s—the landscape differed wildly. While predecessors to the current franchise model (namely the likes of *The Godfather* and *Rocky*, among others) had already proven their prominence at the box office, the biggest names in cinema were hardly attached to anything as sensational or juvenile as a superhero film, and thrillers, musicals, and dramas still dominated the box office. As such, consideration of *Superman's* historic and cultural contexts must be coupled with an examination of the film's literal production in order to illustrate how *Superman* was poised not only to change the Hollywood dynamic, but to prove superhero films and franchise films viable.

Superman had the unenviable task of establishing superheroes as not only viable for adaptation, but feasible as blockbuster films in their own right. The film industry of

the 1970s seems a far cry from the uniformly franchise-driven, studio-monopolized cinema of the twenty-first century, a quality that may largely be attributed to the recency of the franchise filmmaking model. As a matter of fact, the blockbuster concept itself was rather new at the start of its production; the first use of the term as it is now commonly understood has largely been attributed to 1975's *Jaws*, which was released during pre production of *Superman*. To quell any speculation as to the legitimacy of *Superman* as a blockbuster, however, one need only look into the cursory details of its early production.

Superman was in every way formulated to be a blockbuster, with each pivotal position taken into careful consideration, and its success in establishing the blockbuster superhero genre ensured that its formula would be the basis upon which future films would be constructed. Every name attached was another star to promote the film with, and therefore the writer, director, stars, and producers all had to possess immediate name recognition. In the case of *Superman*, the saga starts in New York in 1973. Ilya Salkind, the film's producer, alleges that a billboard for the French *Zorro* (another pulp character) planted the idea for a *Superman* adaptation in his head. Wishing to further prove his worth as a producer, after a mixed early career, he yearned for a culturally impactful, "hefty" film. Winning over his father on the idea of a flying savior, then investors, and finally his business partner, negotiations between Salkind and Detective Comics (better known as simply "DC") were set. When DC's skepticism regarding the film's potential to be dismissed as juvenile by mature moviegoers threatened to put an end to the deal, Salkind's father went over the heads of DC executives and straight to Warner Publishing

to strike the final deal, a move that, in a matter of minutes, produced more results than weeks of negotiations with the publishing house.

It is clear that Salkind had franchise filmmaking in mind, even before the production of the first bona fide superhero blockbuster, as he explains in an interview.

Salkind had access to Superman's supporting cast.... Beyond the characters typically associated with Superman, however, the contract was so open-ended that Salkind believed it gave them the right to include any character that had appeared in any Superman comic book including team books like *Justice League of America* and *World's Finest*. (Freiman, "Interview with Ilya Salkind")

Per Salkind, the contract that was struck with Warner Publishing (who, he remarks, were as pessimistic about the film's initial prospects as DC had been) was so open-ended that it might have warranted the use of additional DC-published superheroes like Batman, Wonder Woman, or the Flash, so long as they shared a handful of comic frames with the Man of Steel.

DC, anxious about a large-scale production of one of its core characters, demanded a list of potential stars and directors before allowing the adaptation to proceed. Pleased with the list of potential stars (containing the likes of Clint Eastwood, Al Pacino, and Muhammad Ali, among others), the comics company felt comfortable with the potential name recognition power of the film, and allowed production to continue. Scriptwriting duties were handed from Alfred Bester to Mario Puzo, on account of Puzo's massive surge in popularity following *The Godfather*. Puzo would account for potential

sequels—another move that would become commonplace in franchise filmmaking—by providing Salkind and company with a 500-page monolith of a treatment, ultimately intended for multiple films. But most importantly, the director’s chair remained empty. Initially offered to established names such as Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, and William Friedkin, none were favored as highly as Steven Spielberg. Naturally, Spielberg was watched closely by financiers, and following the rampant success of *Jaws*, was offered the position. Spielberg turned it down due to other commitments, and the film eventually found its director in Richard Donner, hot off of record-breaking box office numbers for *The Omen*. Undoubtedly, the film was primed to be a blockbuster.

Superman presented filmmakers—and the genre as a whole—with a means of breaking from the stigma of immaturity brought on by years of superhero-themed cartoons, television, and radio serials enjoyed by children across the country as they munched down sugar cereals. Jesse Hassenger of the A.V. Club remarks that the inclusion of Marlon Brando and Gene Hackman might well have been an attempt to “class up” the film in an attempt to make it more accessible to adult audiences (The A.V. Club). Undeniably, however, the film contains copious instances of camp⁵, and despite Salkind’s insistence to the contrary, these instances are likely vestiges of the titular character’s comic book and serial heritage. The villains are squarely that—an evil mastermind and his bumbling goons—and the heroes are bright and quippy, but *Superman*’s most essential contribution to the superhero genre might just be that very simplicity.

⁵ Per Merriam Webster Online, an aesthetic style described by Webster as “absurdly exaggerated, artificial, or affected in a usually humorous way”

Superman is the perfect embodiment of American ideals (or, to be more precise, white, middle-class, and male American ideals), wrapped up in an utterly godlike package. Superman is not human, unlike the many big-screen heroes that preceded him, and the reason is twofold. The character, Kal-El, is a literal alien, a survivor of his planet's utter destruction. But beyond that, Superman is flawless in physicality and character; he merely affects typical human flaws when performing the role of Clark Kent. Later films might go on to humanize Kal-El, but the Swiss-army superhero, with his arsenal of unexpected superpowers including strength, flight, laser vision, super breath, and the apparent ability to negate the laws of physics⁶, existed as a total embodiment of superhuman goodness in his first outing—down to the archetypical rescue of a cat from a tree.

Historical Context

Understanding *Superman's* context as a blockbuster film, and its role in cementing the genre and its style for future films, it becomes necessary to examine the film through its historical context. The film, released in 1978, arrives at the end of one of the most politically-charged decades of the twentieth century. Thomas Borstelmann, writing in *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*, remarks:

In the broadest sweep of world history, the 1970s can be seen as the most important turning point on the journey from 1945, a Left-leaning moment in world history... to 1989, a Right-leaning moment around the globe

⁶ In addition to his ability to fly, Superman is capable of completely ignoring the laws of physics in his day-to-day masquerading. He is capable of flying around the world against its rotation at such a speed that it reverses the flow of time, and (until later iterations of the character) is inexplicably capable of applying uniform force across an object regardless of his position relative to its center of mass.

when Communism collapsed and capitalism stood triumphant as the only credible economic system. In the United States, the political traumas of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal served as additional tributary streams into the rising river of disillusionment with government. (123)

All of this political trauma, subconscious but undoubtedly fresh in the minds of writer Mario Puzo, director Richard Donner, and star Christopher Reeve, stands to have an incredible impact on the subconscious political tone of alienation present in *Superman*.

The early 1970s saw a slow end to the brutal Vietnam War after nearly two decades of conflict. The war had proven intensely divisive amongst multiple generations of Americans, resulting in younger, college-age men and women frequently protesting the violence across the country. Protests that had begun in small scales on college campuses in 1967 had grown to massive and heavily-policed gatherings, and with that escalation came rising tensions between the government and its people. It should come as little surprise that these protests set the tone for a retrospective look at the decade, considering the magnitude of events like the 1970 Kent State shooting, in which the Ohio National Guard opened fire on a campus protest, killing four students and injuring nine others.

Perhaps more than anything else, America's involvement in the Vietnam War played a massive role in shattering what Wilder Caldwell refers to as the "Myth of Superiority." Caldwell claims that "[d]espite the obvious tragedy of Vietnam, many Americans were still unable to face the fact that America, the nation of revolutionary destiny, fought a counter- revolutionary war against a major part of the population of a small Asia country bent on self-determination. America still clung to the notion that her

lofty, benevolent ideological fervor made her immune to wrongdoing” (124). The Vietnam War had, on all counts, made the United States appear weak. Three Presidents (John F. Kennedy, Lyndon B. Johnson, and Richard Nixon) failed to elucidate any reason for the country’s interference in a foreign revolutionary war that was plagued down to its final battle with ill-informed tactical decisions and countless casualties. Simply called the Mayaguez incident, the final battle of the Vietnam War would be remembered for costing forty-one American lives in an attempt to free forty Vietnamese hostages, who were, in fact, never in any danger. Punctuating the Vietnam War, this incident serves as a single, brutal summation of American civilians’ reasons for dissenting. With the country’s objectives never having been made clear in the first place, with no clear declaration of war abroad, and with militant responses to peaceful (if large) protests at home, Americans’ disillusionment with their country’s mythos of moral superiority was already at a tipping point. The Watergate scandal would serve to double down on this disillusionment and alienation.

From his reelection in 1972 until his resignation two years later, former President Richard Nixon would display a tremendous paranoia, leading to ill-fated decisions that would ultimately have landed him in a Senate impeachment trial. The scandal, a prolonged and heavily-publicized account of political espionage done on Nixon’s behalf (and with his eventual complicity) managed to drive an incumbent with the largest margin of victory since 1936 to resignation in the span of just half of a presidential term. Resultantly, America still harbors immense mistrust in regards to the tactics of its potential commanders-in-chief, a point made evident in both reality and film. By the

midpoint of the decade, America's faith in its own moral superiority had been damaged beyond all repair.

The mythos of superiority in regards to both tactical, violent prowess and morality had been shattered in the wake of war and scandal, and a number of movies attempted to either restore or replace it. Some, as in the case of films like *Deer Hunter* (recipient of the 1978 Academy Award for best picture), *Coming Home*, and *Apocalypse Now*, attempted to do so explicitly, pictorially restoring the country to its place of superiority with nuanced dramatic, validating, and heroizing narratives of Vietnam soldiers. On the other hand, *Superman* and other blockbuster films of its day offered a new narrative to replace the old. The myth of superiority, rather being implicit within the country's identity, would be abstracted onto fictionalized characters to represent ideals to strive towards rather than obligatory traits.

Superman and various other fantastical heroes represent an ideal opportunity to release a culture from the shackles of its own ideology. By employing characters that are essentially unattainable to a normal human (especially in the early days of superhero narratives, when no significant attempt was made to humanize the hero in film), no human is obligated to live up to that character's standards. Effectively, the existence of Superman as an American icon takes the burden of obligation off of actual citizens. When considered in the context of the Man of Steel, it would seem unreasonable to expect a similar degree of benevolence and brilliance from the likes of Richard Nixon or the generals commanding the Vietnam War. After all, the abstraction argues, none of them could be Superman.

By 1978, most states had passed the Equal Rights Amendment, typifying a decade filled with important civil rights movements. Though not necessarily a direct factor, the recent history of the decade undoubtedly factored into Lois Lane's portrayal in *Superman* as headstrong, confident, and competent. In an early encounter with crime, Lois and Clark are held up at gunpoint by a would-be mugger. While Clark (perhaps overzealously in character) is content to wilt under the gunman's glare, Lane holds her ground, kicking his arm as he bends down to pick up her purse. While the confrontation is ultimately moot, given Superman's subtle stopping of the mugger's bullet, the scene further establishes Lois as a major player in the film, rather than a human mcguffin for the sake of plot advancement. Even before that, in her introductory scene, Lane is presented as at least equal to the chief of the Daily Planet. As photographer Jimmy Olsen spell-checks her work, he questions her penchant for getting "the best stories." As Lois responds, "A good reporter doesn't get great stories, Jimmy," she bursts into Perry White's office, and with the editor apparently already halfway through the same utterance, the two finish in unison with, "a good reporter makes them great." This, aside from a glib transition, establishes that Lane is the referenced good reporter, better than Jimmy Olsen, and at least as good as Perry White. The trend of establishing Lois' equality (or dominance) continues as she opens a bottle that both Perry and Clark (fully immersing himself in his bumbling character) struggle with, as well as her general dominance over Clark within the Daily Planet offices. Any woman with the courage to outright look through Superman has established herself as a force to be reckoned with.

Superman additionally interfaces with various struggles for equality and rights that had taken place throughout most of the previous decade. Both the incorporation of the Equal Rights Amendment and various protests and occupations by Indigenous peoples made headlines throughout the 1970s, though the film's treatment of these oppressed populations is dubious at best. A feminist reading of *Superman* would likely conclude that, for any points it earns itself through the confident portrayal of Lois Lane, it suffers for diminishing her intelligence with incessant jabs at an inability to spell (ironic for a journalist) and constant *overconfidence*, resulting in peril more than once. Even looking beyond Lois Lane, the film harshly mistreats Eve Teschmacher, Lex Luthor's girlfriend-turned-goon, treating her as a paragon of vanity and stupidity throughout the film, and only offering her brief glimpses of competence in the sequence in which she corrects Otis' mistake while sabotaging an army missile. Teschmacher, though portrayed as the more competent of Luthor's accomplices, concerns herself solely with the worlds of fashion and glamor, and often plays the stooge in conversations with Lex.

Likewise, further vestiges of 1970s rights crusades can be found in a minor character only featured in the film's closing act. A number of references are made to the corruption or dishonesty of political figures throughout *Superman*, and explicit reference is even made to the mistreatment of Indigenous peoples in the film. As the film races towards its climax, Lois Lane can be seen interviewing an Indigenous leader, who—as per her interview—has recently sold some of his land to a “nameless figure” (later revealed to be Luthor, expecting the land to become a new West Coast once the San Andreas fault is destroyed). The chief, explaining his decision to sell much of his own

land, remarks, "...no oil, no uranium, no coal, no precious minerals, hell, no water anymore. Not since the government dammed it all up..." and upon Lois' inquiry of "But why sell out to some faceless person you've never met?" the unnamed chief responds "At the stupid high price he offered for this worthless piece of desert, I only hope it's Custer." (Puzo, *Superman: The Movie*). While this exchange could easily have just been a bit of creative writing from Puzo, it stands to reason that the American Indian Movement, which had reached full establishment by 1970 with the occupation of Alcatraz Island, painting of Plymouth Rock, and various other land seizures throughout the decade (Borstelmann 99), was still deeply rooted in the public consciousness.

While *Superman* does not directly interface with class conflict (aside from Lois' discussion with the indigenous Chief, whose sale of massive swathes of land clearly recalls the initial theft of land that would form America), a critical reading of its prime characters may be in order. Kal-El, the last surviving Kryptonian, appears to defy his own context. It is established in the film's opening sequence that Jor-El, patriarch of Kal's family, sits in a privileged position among the Kryptonian society and government. He sits on, and possesses a power such that he feels comfortably disagreeing with, the governing council. From this, it may be understood that the El family are part of the social elite of this planet. Additionally, Jor-El is a scientist of considerable education, as well as an historian, capable of both completing the work necessary to prove imminent global devastation to a surprising degree of specificity (he reports in the film's opening that Krypton would be destroyed within thirty days, and the film's loose flow of time between the council's display of ignorance and the launch of Kal-El moments before the

planet's destruction), and of collecting and storing vast amounts of knowledge for later instruction of his son.

Accordingly, there is immense importance placed on heritage and history within the Kryptonian culture, as evident in the aforementioned sequences. As Jor-El prepares to send his son—soon to be the “only survivor of the planet Krypton” in his own grandiose words—he spends considerably more time tending to the curation of the planet's history and knowledge than that of his only son, preparing a holographic recreation of himself, “the total accumulation of knowledge from 28 galaxies,” and twelve years' worth of education for an eighteen-year-old Kal-El. While Kal-El would respect and revere both sets of his parents, it is never apparent in this first film that heritage is one of his driving factors.

Kal-El, removed both physically and temperamentally from his Kryptonian parents, lives most of his young life in no lap of luxury. Though a privileged background allowed for his escape from the doomed Krypton, he finds himself in the rural town of Smallville, Kansas, adoptee of a middle-aged farming couple, and much of his life plays out as scenes of pure Americana. He works on Kent Farm, attends school while playing the role of a shy nobody, and appears content to remain unpopular but well-liked. Not once does he consider himself entitled to anything beyond a normal life.

The biggest clash between classes—in one sense of the term—comes from Kal-El's arrival in Metropolis, signaling the start of the film's third leg. In the role of Clark Kent, he is an even further exaggerated form of the klutzy character, only made more noticeable by the apparent culture shock of a small-town man arriving in a

fast-paced metropolitan area. It may be Lois Lane that best summarizes the difference between the wealthier city life and Clark's rural upbringing. When Clark requests that half of his salary be sent to a specific address, Lane assumes that he is sending his money off to a bookkeeper to pay off gambling debt, and cites the cliched excuse of a "grey-haired old mother." Clark's response, accompanied with the stage direction of "total sincerity," is to correct her in that she is silver-haired, to Lois' astonishment. Further instances of Clark being alien to his environment serve to strengthen the distance between rural and urban America, though not to such an extent that they remark upon class differences.

Demystifying Social Justice

Bearing all of the above in mind, *Superman's* socially-inclined intent becomes more apparent. First and foremost, it is a film that deals in absolutes: absolute heroes, absolute villains, and an ultimately simple plot arises from this. Superman, warrior for Truth, Justice, and the American Way, has but a simple message to put forth and it is to be one's best. Just as Superman himself is human in appearance and godlike in nature, the film emboldens its audience to act the same, behaving as the American-but-better. This, in effect, is the film's attempt at creating a new mythology for the American people, after the shattering of the "Myth of Superiority." Superman's duality is suggested in his very name—both super (in reality) and mundane (in performance). In the film, he juggles between the identity of Clark Kent—bumbling and naive, but wholesome—and Superman, a character positively lacking in personality. As Roger Ebert points out in his "Great Movies" review series, "[a]s Superman, [Reeve] goes to some pains to have no

personality at all. It would be fatal to play Superman as a hero, and Reeve and Donner understand that. He had no personality in the comic books and has none here. He exists as a fact” (Ebert 1).

It is established that Superman fights for Truth, Justice, and the American Way, but that last element is unclear, and wanting definition. Through closer inspection of Clark Kent, that might just reveal itself. Kent is described, time and time again, as mild-mannered. From the privileged perspective of an audience member, who knows perfectly well that Kent is a god among men, and more than capable of bending others to his will, this contrast provides the central part of the “American Way,” humility. Kal-El takes great lengths to obscure his powers, and to keep the identities of Superman and Clark Kent separate, even when the film introduces no motive for him to do so. In the film, then, it can be argued that the character of Superman is an evolution of the 1950s era notion of ethical superiority that preceded his film. Replacing the outdated ideology of heteronormative, white, upper-middle class men (assumed to be the de facto American ideology) was the beginning of America’s crusade for freedom, painting the nation not as morally and ethically superior, but as a necessary force of enlightenment for other nations.

Clark Kent the man, native of Smallville, Kansas, is the embodiment of humility. It is upon him that American ideology is enacted, and from the behavior of the adult Clark, one may extract Puzo’s interpretation of American ideals. Superman the hero is a product of Kryptonian education, in sharp contrast to Kal-El’s American upbringing. The character, as witnessed in *Superman*, is almost devoid of personality, a fact only

reinforced in the interview scene with Lois Lane. Despite scheduling the meeting himself, Superman does not respond to her interrogations coyly or creatively, just with straightforward, wholesome responses. The closest he comes in this scene to a personality is the mildly humorous (and infamous) “pink underwear” exchange, in which Lois asks Superman if he can tell what color undergarments she’s wearing, and the Man of Steel obliges with a slight grin. He is still obedient, and all-powerful, but modest.

Superman, as with the medium of film in general, acts as a variation of the “Mirror Stage” as elucidated by Jacques Lacan. Concerned primarily with the formation of identity in psychoanalysis, Lacan theorized that the subject and its identity are two separate objects. Best exemplified by the image of a child first recognizing its own reflection in a mirror by noting the symmetrical motions between itself (as per its perception, initially disembodied) and the fully-formed figure that appears in the mirror (Lacan 1). From this point, the infant develops a sense of individual identity (the “I,” or the conscious self termed by Freud as the Ego), and is then split between their actual self and the identity they present to others. Jameson and Althusser both subscribe to Lacan’s theory, and use it to further examine the creation of one’s own ideology. In the case of *Superman*, the titular character serves as one such mirror for the American people. He is meant to be the embodiment of all American ideals amplified to their maximum potential; however, he is not an attainable reflection. Lacan describes two “others” in his essay, attempting to differentiate between large-scale cultural identities and personal ones. In this instance, Superman is transitioned from a “small other,” an individual (and therefore completely imitable), to a “large other,” a cultural ideal that, rather than being

obtainable, becomes a force acting upon individuals. Like a funhouse mirror too tall for the child looking to see himself in the shoes of a superhero or soldier, and catching only the top of his head in the process, Superman is above any human potential. It may be possible for an individual to see actions he or she commits in the reflection offered by the monolithic hero, but it would be wholly impossible for them to fully mimic Superman.

Much of the beauty of the Superman character, as alleged by Tom De Haven, is his persistence within American media and role as a perpetual “work in progress, changing... in ways that have kept him popular, to greater or lesser degrees, for several generations” (4). Finding expression in nearly every form, and being the first of his kind, the Superman mythos is imbued with a certain malleability that has allowed it to last over eighty years since its inception. *Superman: The Movie* embodies a similar niche within the American consciousness. Per box office analytics site *The Numbers*, the film, raking in \$300 million in its day (a respectable \$1.2 billion when adjusted for inflation) earned far beyond its budget and expenditures, and became the third highest-grossing film of its year, following *Grease* and *Animal House*, respectively. Further, the film launched a franchise of three sequels (prior to multiple reboots), and primed viewers for further ventures into the genre, including the late 80’s *Batman* quartet.

In the arc of social justice, *Superman: The Movie* represents a new mythos rising to satisfy an increasingly-disillusioned American people. Where the myth of American superiority came with an assumed obligation on the part of all Americans, this new mythos, ostensibly a myth of external superiority, no longer demanded that every man, woman, and child live up to a set of uniform American values. Instead, it offered

Superman as a template of perfection from which viewers could pick and choose their own heroism, while simultaneously offering him as a scapegoat for the harder-achieved facets of that ideal. Naturally, this new mythos would evolve (and, come the era of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, reverse itself) along with the genre *Superman* had created. Within the more abstract sequence of superhero blockbuster production, the film begins the dialectic conversation. Following *Jaws*' realization of the blockbuster filmmaking style, and further revisions of its formula through genre explorations like *Star Wars*, *Superman: The Movie* introduces the notion of a new genre (featuring larger-than-life characters tackling real societal issues and making tangible change), and synthesizes the new superhero blockbuster format. This format would later be expanded upon, refined, and challenged with later films, like *X-Men* and various entries in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, but all subsequent superhero films owe some credit to Superman for doing what was thought impossible, even for a superhero: making audiences *believe*.

Chapter 2: X-Men and Evolution through Allegory

On March 20, 2019, the Walt Disney Corporation acquired 20th Century Fox and its associated film rights and intellectual properties. Concerned parties decried the acquisition as the formation of an entertainment media monopoly, and pundits predicted the added brand heft would go towards bolstering Disney's up-and-coming streaming platform with a massive wealth of content. Along with blockbuster films like *Avatar* and *Titanic*, Disney had gained streaming rights to series like *The Simpsons* and Fox Searchlight's impressive catalog of independent films. Comic book fans, as has come to be expected of them, were divided on the prospects of two other Fox properties: *Fantastic Four* and *X-Men*, and hotly debated the prospect of future films in either franchise.

Fantastic Four, having never seen much success on the big screen, was seen as no considerable loss, and fans largely supported the transition to a company with proven superhero success. As for the *X-Men* franchise, Motley Fool's "Industry Focus" revealed that 20th Century Fox had purchased the film rights to Marvel's comic series for a paltry \$2.6 million in 1993 (*Industry Focus*, "Deadpool"), and turned the comic book universe into a respectable money-making machine of a franchise with its thirteenth entry then on the way. Despite the considerable financial success of the *X-Men* franchise, it was not without its stumbling blocks. Films were inconsistent in both continuity and quality, much to the chagrin of some fans, leading some to look optimistically to how Disney's Marvel Studios, with its remarkable consistency, might handle the franchise. Others,

citing the rampant success of Fox's R-rated outings like *Logan* (the series' highest-rated entry) and the *Deadpool* films, expressed concern that the family-focused company would quash more mature offerings. Generally, however, the merger provided fans the opportunity to reflect on the original *X-Men*'s success, and consider its role in ushering the new evolution of comic book adaptations.

Bryan Singer's *X-Men*, released in the summer of 2000, follows a plot that would later become commonplace in superhero media: in the wake of the emergence of superpowered beings—in the film's case, mutants—politicians begin to lobby for legislation holding these beings accountable for their (often counter-apocalyptic) actions. Senator Robert Kelly, deeply prejudiced and thoroughly misguided, begins to champion the "Mutant Registration Act" to the horror of mutants everywhere, including Charles Xavier and Erik Lehnsherr, de facto leaders in the mutant world. From the perspective of the jaded Lehnsherr (Magneto), the bill is a straightforward act of oppression and a declaration of war. Even from Xavier's optimistic, integrationist perspective, the act threatens to oust and make vulnerable all of the volatile young mutant men and women, many of whom are under his care and tutelage. In a scene that echoes the famous photograph of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X at a Senate hearing on the Civil Rights Act⁷, the two briefly express their opposite viewpoints before parting ways—the last time they would be anything more than adversaries.

The film's second thread follows Marie (better known by her mutant moniker, Rogue), a mutant girl with the power to absorb another's life essence (and, in the case of

⁷ For reasons that will become apparent in the next section, this photograph is the only known instance of the two Civil Rights leaders having met.

fellow mutants, their powers) through physical contact. When her first kiss goes horribly awry, she flees, eventually crossing paths with Logan (Wolverine) and coming to an uneasy pact shortly before being ambushed by agents of Magneto. The pair is rescued by two of Xavier's teachers, and are brought to Xavier's School for Gifted Children. Marie adapts aptly to her new environment, quickly developing a fledgling relationship with fellow student Bobby Drake (Iceman), and embracing the culture of acceptance fostered by Professor Xavier. Logan and Xavier meanwhile discuss the motivation behind Magneto's attack on the wandering mutants.

Meanwhile, Magneto and his agents capture Senator Kelly and expose him to massive amounts of radiation, turning him into a mutant capable of transmuting his body into liquid form. Kelly escapes and makes his way to Xavier's school for help, being shown the error of his ways as his own breed of racism keeps him from engaging with official medical sources for fear of discrimination. As Kelly grows less stable and eventually dissolves away (a result of his body rejecting the gelatinous mutation), the X-Men realize that it is Magneto's plan to unleash his unknowingly fatal mutation-inducing machine on the United Nations leaders discussing the Mutant Registration Act on Ellis Island. A climactic battle ensues, resulting in the thwarting of Magneto's plan, his arrest, and the presumed death of his accomplice, Mystique (eventually revealed to be impersonating Kelly full-time).

X-Men, produced at the very end of the 1990s and released in 2000, is often considered the first contemporary superhero film, both in regards to its individual critical and financial success, and that of the franchise it served to launch. Much of that success,

in turn, may be attributed to its timeless subject matter. *X-Men* deals first and foremost with the notion of othering, and by pulling struggles associated with multiple othered groups (particularly the discrimination experienced by black Americans during the civil rights movement and the LGBT+ community through the end of the twentieth century) explores the devastating potential of discrimination. In line with the comics it was adapted from, *X-Men* deals extensively and exclusively with the notion of othering in various forms, and considers its ramifications at both the societal and political levels.

Historical Context

More explicitly political than 1978's *Superman* (yet not so blatantly political as the Marvel films discussed in chapters three and four, which explicitly state the political biases that inform their construction), 2000's *X-Men* offers a more nuanced look at a super-powered world, one in which mutants are second-class citizens, and the regulation of superpowers—political action derived from normal humans' fear of inferiority and seemingly indicative of contemporary racially-based policies—is a hot topic in political circles. Where the world of *Superman* was willing to accept the all-powerful alien with open arms, *X-Men* dismisses the possibility of such blind faith. Accordingly, *X-Men*'s identity, fascinatingly, lies not within its contemporary political context (that is to say, the year 2000), but in that of its comics. This largely stems from those comics' engagement with general otherness rather than specific political events, yielding in visual-textual artifacts that act as emblems.

Sarah Briest, in a paper for the *Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* journal, attempts to come to terms with the X-Men comics' potential as emblematic texts through their extensive use of allegory. Per her paper,

[E]mblem books⁸ and comic books share a number of relevant features: an inherently hybrid nature, not only—but most significantly—with respect to the interaction of text and image, immense popularity at the cost of academic disdain, as well as more recent scholarly neglect resulting partly from classificatory problems... To further explore the allegorical potential of text/image hybrid genres, below I will examine some of the notably allegorical content of the X-Men comics... Storytelling in the X-Men comics is certainly not completely and exclusively allegorical but allegory is an integral part of the narrative. (10-11)

In other words, the role of X-Men comics is understood to be allegorical to issues of otherness and identity, to such an extent that Chris Claremont (quoted by Briest), frequent writer for the series, even remarked that Mutants in the Marvel Universe have always stood as a metaphor for the underclass, the outsiders; they represent the ultimate minority” (2). As such, rather than examining particular political moments of the mid-to-late 1990s, *X-Men* must be positioned alongside its adaptive roots, and taken as allegorical for ongoing identity issues for the better part of the twentieth century⁹. *X-Men*

⁸ As Briest explains, emblem books were historical collections of allegorical illustrations. Similar in format to comics, with their combination of artistic and textual information that plays off one another, emblem books were intended to share moral lessons with children. Emblems featured an image, a motto, and brief explanatory text linking the two.

⁹ This is not to imply that issues of identity do not pervade the twenty first century; rather, given the position of Singer's *X-Men* as a film released in the year 2000, more recent issues of identity and acceptance - many of which are merely continuations and permutations on earlier conflicts - are beyond the scope of this analysis.

relies more heavily on its comic book origin's context than the other films analyzed in this thesis, and as a result, it must be considered within the context of multiple lengthy political moments. Primarily, *X-Men* as a franchise deals with issues of identity, most specifically those regarding race and sexuality.

At this point, it is necessary to temper various claims about *X-Men*'s allegorical nature with the understanding that it does not perfectly allegorize any marginalized groups, and in fact borrows aspects from each to create a new sort of other. Along similar lines, Martin Lund (writing for the *European Journal of American Studies*) aims to highlight confirmation bias and the imperfection of *X-Men*'s approach to identity. Part of this, per Lund's own admission, is due to the chronology of the comics' and films' release (2). For instance, Singer's *X-Men* appears to have arrived unfortunately early in regards to the character of Bobby Drake, or Iceman¹⁰. Throughout Fox's *X-Men* saga, Bobby Drake is depicted as a primary love interest for the female leads of the first several films (namely Marie's "Rogue" and Kitty Pryde's "Shadowcat"). Drake, in 2015's *All New X-Men #40*, would come out as gay, a trait which is now intrinsically linked with the character.

Given the series' extensive travels across timelines and alternate dimensions, progressive retcons like Drake's are rampant, and as such, this chapter will avoid demonizing the films' inability to present greater diversity, as these films are ultimately adaptations and nothing of the sort had been done in the source material to that point. In

¹⁰ The evolution or revision of *X-Men* characters to incorporate queer elements is not unique to Bobby Drake. Others, like Mystique and Colossus, have been prominently featured as queer characters in the comics with no such reflection in adaptation. Drake, however, is the most popular and high-profile instance of this taking place, with even his actor expressed interest in the character being adapted as queer.

other words, the context of the comics must be considered diachronically (up until the release of Singer's adaptation). This is done, however, with some caution. As Martin Lund points out in the introduction to a treatise on confirmation bias within *X-Men* study, "while a series like *X-Men*, with over fifty years of backstory, contains elements that allow for nearly endless interpretive variety, no character is static, no characterization eternal, and no series or theme timeless" (2). In an attempt to avoid what Lund refers to as "antihistorical readings," this chapter will only consider the content of the comic series insofar as it relates back to Singer's *X-Men*. Regardless, various elements of queerness are present in *X-Men*'s consideration of otherness, and if no characters explicitly fit queer archetypes, several of their struggles are congruent.

The primary allegory presented in *X-Men* media pertains to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Though championed by dozens of influential speakers and ideological viewpoints, the necessity of brevity allows for historical context here to be condensed to a binary. The two most prominent voices of the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, both sought an end to segregation, albeit through nearly inverse means. James H. Cone, having written an extensive text on the lives and influences of both men, states simply of the two that "Martin and Malcolm illuminate the two roads to freedom that meet in the African-Americans' search for identity in the land of their birth," (ix) and spends twelve chapters elaborating to that effect.

Per Cone, Martin Luther King, Jr., a southern preacher and community leader, aimed to end the discrimination through peaceful protest and integration, ideals that culminated in his famous "I Have a Dream" extemporaneous speech. Delivered on

August 28, 1963 at the Nation's capitol, King declared, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal'" (King, "I Have a Dream"). His message was clear: he envisioned a country of total equality and integration, of freedom for all men and women. Cone points out that "[d]espite similarities with the views of other integrationists, King's idea of the American dream was distinctive in its content, its complexity, and the compelling way in which he advocated it" (60). It was this view of the American Dream that informed King's peaceful and optimistic philosophy.

Malcolm X, then, initially stood diametrically opposite King. In contextualizing Malcolm's ideology, Cone insists that "Malcolm was a gifted thinker and leader whose perspective was defined by his uncompromising solidarity with the victims of history. He saw America as "the little people in the street" saw it: oppressive and insensitive to the basic needs of weak and helpless people, especially the black poor in the ghetto" (93). The hardships faced by Malcolm in his youth left him firmly rooted in and speaker for the Nation of Islam, where he took a much more militant approach to segregation. Malcolm argued that "You don't have a revolution in which you love your enemy. And you don't have a revolution in which you are begging the system of exploitation to integrate you into it. Revolutions overturn systems. Revolutions destroy systems" ("The Ballot or the Bullet"). Just as informed by his religion as King was (and fervently pledging himself a follower of Elijah Muhammad, then leader of the Nation of Islam), Malcolm positioned himself as a believer in black superiority over white, and opposed peaceable integration¹¹.

¹¹ It is worth noting here that, in the latter half of the civil rights movement, both Malcolm and King shifted their stances considerably. Malcolm, after bitterly breaking with Muhammad, came to some agreement with King's position of hope, and in turn, King grew bitter having witnessed the atrocities of the

Admittedly, some comparisons between the civil rights leaders and the fictional mutants are apt. The civil rights leaders, as Cone argues, were a duality. It would be impossible to fully understand one without the other: “They complemented and corrected each other; each spoke a truth about America that cannot be fully comprehended without the insights of the other. Indeed, if Americans of all races intend to create a just and peaceful future, then they must listen to both Martin and Malcolm” (246). This duality exists even within the fictional pages of the X-Men comics. Historically, Malcolm X publicly criticized King’s nonviolent approach, equating it to defenselessness “in the face of one of the most cruel beasts that has ever taken a people into captivity... the American white man” (Malcolm X, PBS interview). King, in accordance with his approach to advocacy, never publicly responded to Malcolm X’s requests for debate, and in turn, Xavier employed his mutant heroes as quietly as possible as agents dissembling Magneto’s various attempts at domination.

Ultimately, however, the comparison is imperfect at best. Most essentially, it must be noted that the comparison, as with others that have considered the comic saga through this lens, applies only to a particularly specific moment in the X/King dialogue. It must be noted that, over time, the two increasingly wavered from their initial stances, with King becoming thoroughly disillusioned with the capitalistic society he sought integration with, and X being reshaped into a far more tolerant figure through his experiences at Mecca (a considerable factor in his falling out with Muhammad). The comics and subsequent films, however, do very little to shake the stances of either

Vietnam War and its effect on black men and women. For the purposes of assessing *X-Men’s* allegory, however, this chapter will consider King and Malcolm at their most influential and iconic.

potentially-allegorical figure. The comparison between the mutant faction leaders and the speakers of the civil rights movement is further problematized when the militancy and antagonistic behavior of The Brotherhood of Mutants is taken into account. If Charles Xavier is meant to be an analogue of Martin Luther King, Jr., then Magneto is a caricature of Malcolm X. Ultimately, the leaders of the civil rights movement sought the same thing: an end to segregation. Though Malcolm X preached the superiority of black men over white, he did not advocate for all-out war and subjugation of white society, but rather a resignification of segregation, one that put black men and women in higher positions. Though *X-Men* has the honor of hosting perhaps Marvel's most diverse lineup of characters, insofar as the *X-Men* film and its sequels are concerned, the issue of race is never directly interfaced with, and straight white characters are predominantly portrayed throughout various storylines.

As such, the race allegory present in *X-Men* can only attest to borrowing specific elements from the civil rights movement. By its nature as superhero media, the notion of superiority encroaches disquietingly upon the political argument of the narrative. Much of the crux of its conflict (including the plot of 2000's *X-Men*) relies upon a fear of *homo superior*, as Lund terms it. This contrasts actual matters of identity, in which superiority is initially leveraged by the oppressor as fictitious, hateful rhetoric in a situation where neither race is indeed superior. Conversely, in such a world as the one inhabited by the X-Men, it is blatantly apparent that mutants possess abilities far beyond normal men and women.

Per “Making Gay Sense of the X-Men” by William Earnest, “the premise of “mutation” is *best* understood as a metaphor for non-mainstream sexualities, for doing so unlocks a wide variety of critical (and, one hopes, meaningful) observations” (217). Bearing this in mind, some elements of queer othering seem even more applicable to *X-Men* than race. Insofar as the blatant type of discrimination depicted in the film is concerned, the othering factor must be visibly apparent to the oppressor. Such is the case with most issues of race, in which visual signifiers like pigmentation and facial structure allow for immediate (if frequently incorrect) classification of individuals. The young men and women in *X-Men*, however, are very rarely outwardly recognizable as mutants. In the case of Marie, her mutation is only apparent through physical contact. Similarly, Logan and Bobby Drake appear completely human until activating their powers. Mystique, naturally a blue-skinned, red-haired humanoid, often dons the guise of ordinary humans, with the only visible indicator of her power being a flash of catlike yellow eyes. Though mutants like Beast (a werewolf-esque, blue-furred scientist) and Angel (self-explanatory) have clear visual distinctions from the expected humanoid norm, these characters are often kept in seclusion. In most cases, the only visual signifier of *homo superior* is their choice of costume.

As a result of the hidden nature of many mutants’ powers, it would be apt to consider the otherness allegory as it pertains to queerness. Unfortunately, no characters are explicitly portrayed as queer in the film, but their struggles do offer some intriguing parallels. First, as previously mentioned, it appears that mutant genes, much like the personality traits that determine sexuality, are invisible to the human eye. In this regard,

mutants must likewise be “outed,” revealing their nature either through their actions (as with Marie kissing her ill-fated boyfriend or Wolverine unsheathing his claws), or through declaration by someone aware of their abilities. Magneto, after transforming Senator Kelly, explicitly threatens to out him among his political peers if he does not accept his fate as a mutant and oppose the registration bill. This would, in turn, sow greater dissent among humans and mutants, and allow the Brotherhood of Mutants to rise up.

Beyond this, there is the notion of intimacy between mutants and partners. While the film leaves uncertain whether or not the mutant gene is congenital¹², it does make readily apparent that intimacy of nearly any form is impossible between mutants and humans, for various reasons. Marie is incapable of touching humans or mutants, with the only notable exception being Logan, whose healing factor allows him to take the brunt of her power. Likewise, Scott Summers (Cyclops) can never make uninhibited eye contact with another being, as his red lenses are the only shield preventing deadly lasers from emanating from his gaze. Wolverine, on account of his amnesia-riddled agelessness, apparent post-traumatic stress disorder, and other factors, remains closed-off from any sort of connection, though this is more psychological than physical. Even mutants like Ororo Munroe (Storm) and Jean Grey, while immensely powerful, are slaves to their emotional state for fear of wreaking havoc on the world around them (as has happened with Grey, Munroe, and even Xavier in the comics). The mutants not hindered by

¹² Its sequel, *X2*, does not. In a scene that, ironically, depicts Bobby Drake “coming out” to his parents and revealing his mutancy, a fellow member of his entourage reveals that the mutant gene is inherited from male carriers.

physical or psychological means are halted by society, as outwardly-different mutants are shunned by the human world.

X-Men's queer allegory contains as much historical precedent - potentially even more specific parallels - than its racial one. The senate hearings throughout the film feature fiery words from Senator Kelly, who speaks as though preaching to a Baptist congregation. Kelly's various attacks on mutant-kind include baseless assumptions as to their danger to society, their prevalence, and the potential effect they might have when placed in positions of power over impressionable young Americans. As Earnest points out, Kelly's argument regarding keeping mutants away from educational positions eerily echoes that of 1978's Briggs Initiative, which attempted to allow schools the right to discriminate against gay teachers. Kelly's additional McCarthy-esque monologue additionally appears to draw inspiration from Senator Jesse Helms, who argued in favor of mandatory HIV testing and the quarantine of any known homosexual men (221). These historical allusions, coupled with the potential for a queer reading of the film in various other scenes (including Magneto's orgasmic conversion of Kelly to the "other" he most deeply fears, the hypersexualized portrayal of Mystique, or the parallels between HIV/AIDS and mutancy), offer considerable credence to the queer allegory.

Even the queer allegory is tempered by imperfect parallels, however. In taking the film as a metaphor for homosexuality, there is the general dearth of other sexualities presented. The film depicts mutancy as a binary in the sense that one either is or is not a mutant. This leaves no room for an allegory for bisexuality - even the potentially allegorical character of Mystique fails to fill this role, as her ability to pass as a normal

human being is undermined by her default state as a blue-skinned humanoid. Asexuality and pansexuality are similarly disregarded in such a reading, and the notion of gender dysphoria or fluidity have no footholds, either. Ultimately, there is no single allegorical position to be found in *X-Men*, in comic or filmic form. Rather, the thesis of the story revolves around the concept of otherness, down to the core statement of the heroes themselves: Protecting a world that hates and fears them. Cycles of fear, hatred, and acceptance permeate the past half century and beyond in American culture, and *X-Men* apparently strives to reflect that.

Superhero Blockbuster Dialectic

X-Men, when considered within the grander arc of superhero blockbuster films, may be credited with a handful of advances in storytelling methodologies. It had no Marvel-based franchise off of which to base itself. Though various Marvel properties had made their way to screens six times before (as early as 1944's serial *Captain America* and with a number of missteps along the way¹³), none had the degree of success necessary to warrant service as a franchise prototype. As a result, much of *X-Men*'s style is its own, a product of innovation on contemporary filmmaking styles, and likely informed that of the later Marvel Cinematic Universe. In ways unlike superhero films prior to it, *X-Men* took a more grounded approach to the world around its heroes, and allowed brief moments of humor to exist without challenging the tone of the film.

¹³ Though not strictly relevant to this thesis, one would be remiss to not reaffirm that one of Marvel's first runs at film-licensing came in the 1980s in an effort to recoup failing sales. Among the questionably lineup of films was 1986's *Howard the Duck*, followed by a marginally-more successful *The Punisher* and the disastrous 1990 *Captain America*, which garnered an impressively-low 3.2/10, a brand-low challenged only by 1994's unreleased *Fantastic Four* (at 3.8/10 for its only known showing). With this established track record, it should come as no surprise that Fox wished to distance itself from other studios' Marvel offerings.

X-Men's greatest contribution to the methods of producing superhero blockbusters is likely its use of multiple superpowered heroes. Previously, the only super team-up of any theatrical magnitude was the unreleased and maligned 1994 *Fantastic Four*, or perhaps the harshly negative *Batman Forever's* inclusion of the Bat-Family of superheroes. To the credit of Fox and Singer, *X-Men* stands to be the first large-scale, theatrical adaptation of a story with multiple super powered individuals with vastly different abilities.

There is a degree of authenticity in the othering presented in *X-Men*. The film's director, Bryan Singer, is both Jewish and openly bisexual, two factors that undoubtedly factor into the projects he produces. Additionally, the film employs actors capable of drawing from real-world experiences and othering to portray their roles, as is evident in the cases of Sir Ian McKellen and Sir Patrick Stewart. The two, by then very close friends, drew upon their friendship to portray two once-close individuals that have been split by differing ideologies. Even more fascinating, however, were McKellen's remarks on taking on the role in the first place. Per McKellen,

"I was sold it by Bryan who said, 'Mutants are like gays. They're cast out by society for no good reason,'" he recalled. "And, as in all civil rights movements, they have to decide: Are they going to take the Xavier [Stewart's character] line — which is to somehow assimilate and stand up for yourself and be proud of what you are, but get on with everybody — or are you going to take the alternative view — which is, if necessary, use violence to stand up for your own rights. And

that's true. I've come across that division within the gay rights movement."

(McKellen, "Buzzfeed Interview")

In his summary of events, McKellen additionally remarks upon the racial and religious othering addressed by the film, and even remarked on another *X-Men* actress, Ellen Page, deciding to come out. Though not evidence of film methodology at work, McKellen's comments do serve to illustrate the universality of themes at play within the *X-Men* franchise, as do the real experience he was able to draw upon and the potential influence it has had on others.

Finally, the film undoubtedly deserves recognition for beginning the first long-term contemporary superhero film franchise. *Superman* and *Batman* before it are undoubtedly franchise films, but neither had any semblance of consistent quality across their films, and ultimately were unable to maintain a franchise beyond the original and its sequel. Though third and fourth films would follow in both cases, they would further continue a trend in sinking critical and box office returns, and the increasingly low-budget, campy, or otherwise ill-advised productions would ultimately kill off their respective franchises. *X-Men*, though by no means unfamiliar with critical and commercial failure, has proven to possess the longevity necessary for franchise success, and despite various missteps and setbacks, is on its way to producing its thirteenth film, twenty years after the series' inception.

X-Men additionally deserves some credit for changing the superhero blockbuster formula, shifting - for the first time in the genre - from solo-driven films and franchises to more collaborative, conglomerate efforts. Even before the Marvel Cinematic Universe

would arrive to dominate the blockbuster filmmaking scene, Singer's fledgling *X-Men* saga was making a name for itself among multi sequeled blockbuster epics. Though frequently mired with less critical success and smaller budgets, Fox's take on the superpowered world managed to garner

Upon closer inspection, Hugh Jackman's Wolverine and Robert Downey Jr.'s Iron Man bear some striking similarities, both in terms of characterization and role within the metanarrative of their respective comic franchises. Within the films, neither character embodies the typical heroic ideals, with Logan's gruffness and Stark's debauchery painting the two more akin to antiheroes than protagonists. Both characters, unofficially the central figures of their respective franchises, begin opposed to the philosophy of the super-teams that eventually form under them. Both have several solo outings before joining forces with the central franchise team, shortly thereafter taking less and less central roles in the saga, until finally being sent off in a blaze of glory via a sacrifice with lasting ramifications on their universe.

The characters' deaths are similarly parallel. Both Fox's *Logan* and Marvel's *Avengers: Endgame* deal with the near-extinction of superpowered beings, if through different means, and in both cases, it is explicit sacrifices by these franchise leaders that allow for future generations of super powered individuals. In *Logan*, set in a bleak future wherein anti-mutagenic corn syrup additives and psychic accidents have resulted in the decimation of the mutant population, the titular character is tasked with transporting X-23, one of a small group of new mutant children, to the Mexican border in order to ensure the safety of the next generation of mutant heroes. Throughout the film, which

plays like a fever dream combination of the X-Men franchise and *Children of Men*, Logan and Xavier face insurmountable odds in transporting the young girl, and Logan (finally losing the battle of age, and losing his healing factor in the process) pays the ultimate price.

Endgame, similarly, follows the cliffhanger ending of *Avengers: Infinity War*, in which the Mad Titan Thanos collected the Infinity Stones and snapped his fingers, decimating exactly half of the world's population, including many of its "mightiest heroes." Tony Stark, now with a child of his own, is called back into the fray to develop a time travel solution to the bleak timeline. In doing so, Tony (as acknowledged by himself) accepts the potential of sacrificing a future with a family of his own. As time travel shenanigans (and the constant need for superhero films to one-up their predecessors) result in a climactic battle between the assembled entirety of the Marvel Cinematic Universe's heroes and a massive army helmed by an alternate timeline's Thanos, Stark finds himself with the infinity stones, and makes a snap of his own, sacrificing himself to execute Thanos and his forces.

Analysis and Conclusion

Given the dialectical evolution of the superhero blockbuster genre, it seems likely that some of *X-Men's* franchise-building strategies informed the later Marvel Cinematic Universe as it grew to dominate the film industry. The application of its "main" character, so thoroughly enmeshed with a far larger cast than superhero films prior, undoubtedly allowed audiences to latch on to the "universe" style of storytelling for the first time, further enabling the studios to explore and experiment. This contribution, along with the

inclusion of a broader collection of characters and a wider array of source material to draw upon, would appear to have primed the superhero blockbuster formula for the entry of the Marvel Cinematic Universe several years later.

As the film's opening credits soar across the screen, the voice of Charles Xavier monologues: "Mutation: It is the key to our evolution. It has enabled us to evolve into the dominant species on the planet. This process normally takes thousands and thousands of years, but every few hundred millennia, evolution leaps forward." This introduction, however subtly, appeals to an audience broader than the film purports to. In immediately comparing the plight of mutants to the progression of humanity as a whole, the film primes itself to explore less personal human conflicts. In regards to *X-Men*, the Mirror Stage finds its application in a role rather similar to that of *Superman*. If, in the earlier film, the titular hero was to be a broad allegory for Americans' responsibilities (in that the character provided viewers with a scapegoat in the form of an impossible standard), *X-Men* allegorizes Americans' visceral reactions. Mutants, like most minorities in America, are othered, outed, and discriminated against. *X-Men* makes use of this in order to highlight flaws in human nature, and attempts to come to terms with those flaws through the eyes of Charles Xavier and Erik Lehnsherr.

By applying a mode of othering more general than those used through race or sexuality, Singer partially befores the mirror while greatly expanding it. In avoiding othering strategies employed specifically against either type of minority, the threat of cognitive dissonance is lessened, allowing for essentially anyone who has experienced othering in any form to connect to the heroes on screen. Additionally, the general nature

of the evil in the film allows for even greater abstraction and correlation to real, societal evils. This is an exceptionally powerful move, because (as Jameson indicated in *The Political Unconscious*) the more general the problem, the further it can be abstracted, and in turn, the more broadly it can be applied to real, societal issues. Given *X-Men*'s clear attempt to tackle othering as a whole, it is rational to say that Bryan Singer, after Stan Lee, Chris Clarendon, and various others that have written for the comic or its adaptation, argue for the societal integration and acceptance of all othered minorities on the grounds of mutual benefit. Earnest hints at the magnitude of *X-Men*'s metaphor, arguing that its abstraction and combination of various forms of othering allows for a multitude of readings, and “[b]y concentrating on the simple critical equation of mutant = gay, we can pay homage to form while getting as much mileage as possible out of one particular metaphor” (217).

As has been discussed extensively, the film draws heavily upon the comics' roots in coalition politics. With a plot fairly explicitly informed by the Civil Rights movement and other instances of mass othering, it positions itself as politically relevant beyond its immediate historical moment. Other superhero films, such as Nolan's *Dark Knight Trilogy*, Marvel's *Captain America: Civil War*, and even Pixar's *The Incredibles* would deal with this same otherness by exploring the potential of superhero registration and accountability, with the aforementioned live-action offerings opting to portray various senate hearings and put the political wheels in motion onscreen. In this regard, *X-Men* may be applauded for being among the first films in its genre to bring such political subtext to the foreground.

Ultimately, *X-Men* is an exercise in the evolution of superhero blockbusters. It does not explicitly oppose any of the films that preceded it, but rather takes many of their concepts to the next reasonable level. Political subtext, hinted at in *Superman* and various other films, is made more explicit, and its abstraction of social issues is more generally applicable to society. Where earlier films might go so far as to establish superhero partnerships (or “families”) with properties like *Batman*, Singer’s film employs a variety of different superheroes, anchored against a core cast. The film’s treatment of both its internal tone and its external role in developing a franchise undoubtedly exist as evidence of the superhero blockbuster dialectic expanding towards the model that has become commonplace today.

Chapter 3: *Captain America*, the Post-9/11 Avenger

When *Captain America: the Winter Soldier* released in 2014, it redefined the potential of a contemporary superhero blockbuster. Marvel Studios' decision to bring on directors Anthony and Joe Russo, at that point only known for their work on sitcoms like *Community* and *Arrested Development*, brought with it considerable concern for the tone of the film. Prior to the first trailer, which set *Winter Soldier* very firmly as an action thriller of a superhero film, fans speculated that Cap's second outing would be more comedic in tone, despite the *Manchurian Candidate*-esque "Winter Soldier" storyline suggested by the film's subtitle. When it arrived, however, the film took Marvel's poster boy (as brightly iconographic as the "big blue boy scout" from DC), replaced his mazarine getup with a stealthy midnight blue, painted his iconic shield to match, and in all other regards thoroughly modernized the World War II supersoldier. In accordance, his ethics were challenged as much as his patriotism, as the villain he would be pitted against was not Nazi Germany or the invading alien Chitauri, but a more subversive foe operating from within SHIELD.

The plot of *Winter Soldier* follows Steve Rogers, adapting to contemporary life, acting as a daily operative for SHIELD's counter-terrorism team. Rather than the guns-blazing commando portrayed in *The First Avenger* and the leader-tactician of *The Avengers*, the new Captain America, more frequently referred to as simply "Cap," was stealthy and lethal in hand-to-hand combat. It becomes apparent through the film's early sequence aboard the Lemurian Star (a captured SHIELD ship) that he has evolved to be

effective in more covert operations, and has updated his fighting style in kind. STRIKE, including Captain America and Black Widow, clear out the Lumerian Star of hostiles, and as Cap deals with the pirates' leader, Widow slyly begins copying files off of the ship's computer (presumably including sensitive SHIELD secrets) in a move later revealed to have been higher prioritized than saving the human captives on board.

Following his debriefing, Cap is let in on SHIELD's next major move against terrorism, Project Insight. Three massive helicarriers, lethally armed, are being prepared for launch, where they will locate and neutralize local threats. As Cap bears witness to Project Insight, his view of SHIELD as a moral absolute is challenged for the first time. Much like the country itself in the wake of events like the Vietnam War and the War on Terror, moral superiority had been called into question. Cap's conflicted nature is even subtly suggested by the light in the sequence, equally dividing his face into light and shadow. Fury, dressed all in black and immersed in shadow, is far less so. Consistent with his paranoid characterization hinted at in earlier films, it appears as though Project Insight, which would effectively murder thousands of U.S. Citizens on grounds of a potential for terrorism, aligns with his worldview.

In a whirlwind second act, Nick Fury is ambushed by the Winter Soldier, an agent for Hydra, and narrowly escapes with his life before hiding in Steve Rogers' apartment, handing off a flash drive supposedly confirming the corruption of SHIELD, and being gunned down. With Fury presumed dead, Cap is called back to headquarters by Alexander Pierce, second in command. Sensing the obvious, Cap fights off his own assailants and escapes the compound, racing to meet Romanoff and decipher the flash

drive. The two discover a secret bunker, home to the digitized mind of Arnim Zola¹⁴, who reveals the extent to which Hydra has infiltrated SHIELD, and the potential for devastation that comes with the launching of the helicarriers of Project Insight. Following the self-destruction of the bunker, the two enlist the help of Sam Wilson (a fellow veteran and pilot for the experimental Falcon wingsuit) and manage to interrogate a Hydra mole shortly before another attack from STRIKE and the Winter Soldier (now recognized by Steve as brainwashed old friend Bucky Barnes) drive them to a safe house.

In the film's conclusion, the trio, along with Agent Hill and Nick Fury (revealed to have faked his own death) plan to sabotage the helicarriers as they launch, leading to a climactic battle between Cap and Bucky, and the successful infiltration of SHIELD headquarters and exposure of Hydra's existence. Fury returns in dramatic fashion, and mortally wounds Pierce, who can only watch on as Hydra's helicarriers come online and immediately target one another, blasting each other to pieces and crashing into the Potomac River (along with Cap himself). Romanoff ensures that all of Hydra's—and SHIELD's—secrets are uploaded to the internet, sacrificing her own identities and security in the process. As the film closes, Bucky, perhaps regaining some semblance of his own identity, pulls Cap out of the river, saving his life.

Historical Context

Winter Soldier is an unabashed political thriller, and in openly admitting its genre, is able to take advantage of historio-political elements not traditionally found (or at least

¹⁴ Zola was a major antagonist of the first *Captain America* film, *The First Avenger*, where he played a critical role in Hydra's attempts to control the Tesseract as a power source and weapon. His portrayal in *Winter Soldier* - as a face on a computer screen - is a bit closer to the comics, in which the character is often depicted as a digitized human face on a robot body.

not often explicitly depicted) in superhero media. Namely, the film calls back considerable Cold War paranoia to contextualize the existence of the Winter Soldier, relies on a post-9/11 worldview to partially justify the logic behind Project Insight, and draws upon then-contemporary matters like the massive NSA leak by Edward Snowden and the growing tension around the use of military drones. As such, it becomes necessary to examine these historical and political moments in order to properly contextualize the film.

Winter Soldier calls upon political fears dating as far back to the Cold War, a period of immense tension between the world's two nuclear-capable superpowers, the United States and the USSR. Naturally, the prime concern during the era was sudden and devastating atomic destruction, but this was supplemented by a fear of subtler, even more sinister devices. Serge Kernbach, offering a short overview of Russia's "unconventional research," notes its final stage included considerable research on psychology, citing Kiev as a hotbed of research into "instrumental psychotronics," as well as government-sanctioned studies on physical fields that "stimulated the development of a 'psychic line' of Soviet parapsychology" (12). Though few matters of fact have surfaced regarding the USSR's attempts at mind control during and after the second World War, considerable information is available about the United States' response to such programs, MKULTRA.

The aim of MKULTRA was, quite simply, to develop mind control. For many, the revelation of the project's existence, and the 20,000 documents released (though heavily redacted) via a 2004 Freedom of Information Act request felt like something out of a

1950s science fiction novel (in this case, one very specific science fiction novel, Richard Condon's *The Manchurian Candidate*, which features post-hypnotic control, memory modification, and a dangerous political agenda). MKULTRA, and its associated subprojects, employed scientific approaches as questionable as subjecting unwitting prisoners to psychedelic drugs and other hallucinatory procedures over a period of decades (United States Senate, Appendix C). Despite the inconclusive results of the ethically-gray project, the very revelation of its existence, coupled with the innumerable pertinent documents that had been destroyed or redacted before being released, appeared to lend credence to the fears that gave life to the Winter Soldier.

Myths of brainwashing spread across the United States, from fictionalized urban legends like the Polybius video game (allegedly a vector-drawn shooter with psychedelic imagery that would entrance and modify the behavior of its players) to the terror that one's own neighbor or coworker might be a sleeper agent. Bucky Barnes' Winter Soldier persona is the literal embodiment of these fears, as the highly-trained assassin is not only brainwashed, but additionally rendered unconscious between covert missions (and, as such, not appearing significantly older in 2014 than he had been in 1945). A far cry from the garish and clearly-telegraphed villain of the first film in the trilogy, *Winter Soldier* presents viewers with a determined rogue agent capable of bringing the world's super-powered defenders to the brink of self-destruction.

Winter Soldier spends much of its time reconciling the existence of a World War II man transplanted into a post-9/11 world. Despite the fact that the film's (sub)titular character stems from pre-2000s fears, it would be impossible to tell the story of the film

anywhere other than in a post-9/11 world. The terror attacks of September 11, 2001, which claimed the lives of nearly three thousand citizens and injured another six thousand, changed everything from airport security to social affairs to media, and their effects are still felt in full force, especially in film. Among the adjustments that Steve Rogers (along with the rest of America) is forced to make to participate in such a world are heightened security, political paranoia, and a shift in warfare that granted success not to the force with the greatest manpower, but to the one capable of accruing the most (and most accurate) knowledge. Beyond this, the driving mission of the film's latter half—that is, the halting of Project Insight—relies on a society that lives in fear of terror attacks both abroad and homegrown. Tom Pollard, in *Hollywood 9/11*, argues that paranoia is the defining feature of post-9/11 cinema, stating “If fear helps define pre-9/11 emotions, paranoia better expresses post-9/11 emotions. Viewers awoke on September 11, 2001, to witness the death of their feelings of insularity and invulnerability and the birth of new fears, anxieties, and uncertainty about the future” (158). *Winter Soldier*, much like Pollard's reading of various “Demonized Politicians” in post-9/11 cinema, explicitly features a government seeking to retain power rather than protect citizens (163), even if that power is disguised as public safety.

Fears regarding security are not merely physical, as the film's reliance on post-9/11 ideology suggests; additionally, the twenty-first century has brought with it the notion of cybersecurity. Such issues, as demonstrated by Edward Snowden's NSA leaks, can render a world superpower embarrassingly vulnerable. Michael Gurnow, in *The Edward Snowden Affair*, recounts that during the late spring and early summer of 2013,

Snowden began leaking records of global surveillance programs, including numerous instances of the United States government spying on its own citizens (4). Initially hired by the CIA and later transferred to the NSA, his work had always been somewhere within the realm of cybersecurity. After years of bringing concerns, both regarding the government's own security and the rights of its citizens, to his superiors, Snowden saw his only course of action to bring real change: leaking information. He leaked countless documents—NSA estimates put that number in the millions (166)—revealing multinational surveillance programs and other questionable activity to various news outlets, and becoming one of the most divisive household names in the country. As early as the film's opening action sequence aboard the Lumerian Star, it becomes apparent that Natasha Romanoff, the Black Widow, is playing a whistleblowing role not unlike that of Edward Snowden in 2013. Throughout the film, her role in the plot is the extraction, decryption, and eventual dissemination of sealed documents. Romanoff plays the role of whistleblower for the rest of her tenure in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, being lambasted by the United Nations and giving up her various secret identities, in much the same way Snowden gave up his liberties to reveal the truth.

The film even manages to inject a bit of the mid-2010s obsession with media portrayal and perceived brutality. As Captain America is arrested by a strike team of SHIELD agents, their leader, Rumlow, notices a local news helicopter. Wanting to spare SHIELD the media circus that could come from a botched arrest (leading to the murder of Captain America), he orders his men to lower their guns as he makes the arrest. This sequence seems to be directly inspired by the media fervor surrounding the use of

military drones in the late 2000s. There were numerous concerns expressed in the media regarding drones, and at the forefront was the ethical dilemma brought up by the potential for (and reality of) civilian casualties in drone attacks. As drones became more and more lethal, their use was further scrutinized. This led to fears in the US of home-based drone strikes, and a level of state fear that reads like a piece of dystopian fiction. Project Insight, then, directly stems from this fear.

It is immediately apparent (as scenes on the Lemurian Star reveal) that *Winter Soldier* is positioned in an era of cyber-espionage. The film draws much of its political context, and of Black Widow's character motivations, from the then-recent work of Edward Snowden. Snowden, initially hired as a contractor for the CIA and then a cybersecurity expert for the NSA, would become a household name after leaking thousands or even millions of sealed NSA documents to the internet, detailing the extent to which the United States government was spying on its own citizens. This internal espionage stems from the "Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001," which, despite possessing a backronym less believable than that of Marvel's S.H.I.E.L.D., fired numerous political debates in the two decades since its enactment.

The Patriot Act, split into three major categories, purported to enhance domestic counterterrorism efforts, improve surveillance methods, and crack down on the funding of terrorism through money-laundering. Most pertinent, however, were the details pertaining to the privacy of American citizens. The Patriot Act allowed for the "Authority to intercept wire, oral, and electronic communications," implementation of a "Roving

surveillance authority,” delayed notice of warrants, and the seizure of personal documents ranging from voicemails and electronic communications to physical records¹⁵ (USA PATRIOT ACT). The Patriot Act was not revised to protect Americans’ constitutional rights until its reauthorization in 2015, which required investigators to properly elucidate their reasons for specific surveillance, among other modifications.

Modes of Production

At this point, it seems likely that investigating *The Winter Soldier*’s political unconscious by examining its very conscious political stances would be less than fruitful. Rather, demanding of further inspection is its unique methodology, combining the Superhero film genre - considered to that point to have been its own exclusive genre - with that of a political thriller allows the film to more explicitly examine its political bias and, in following in the trend established by the earlier analyses of *Superman* and *X-Men*, trailblaze within the mode of superhero media production.

One of the first challenges *The Winter Soldier* made to the traditional formula is its lack of traditional action directors. Anthony and Joe Russo, initially reported as part of the studios’ shortlist to direct a *Captain America* sequel (as reported by ScreenRant’s Sandy Schaeffer), were unlike any of the showrunners previously hired by Marvel. Whedon, Favreau, and even Branaugh were well-established and at least familiar with the action and thriller mindsets demanded by superhero films, while the Russos were best

¹⁵ In order, these provisions allowed for more liberal use of wiretapping, extended surveillance of a particular individual, a lack of notification regarding the application and approval of search and arrest warrants (so as to prevent a suspect from learning that he or she is as much), and authority for the Government to demand access to individuals’ private records and communications at will. These liberties were initially requested under the presidency of Bill Clinton in 1996, during the signing of the “Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996,” but were denied on grounds of impeding Americans’ constitutional rights (Clinton 629).

known for comedies like *Community* and *Arrested Development*. Concerns about tone were broached early on, during an interview between Anthony Russo and NBC New York's Scott Huver. Responding to the remark that an action-packed, effects extravaganza was not yet "on their resume," Anthony defended their appointment as directors:

[W]e've spent a lot of years now researching that craft, and the other side of that equation is that Marvel is just this incredible machine that has all these amazing people that work there... That's part of their confidence in why they can go outside the box and choose directors, because they have people there that know everything. They said to us early on in the interview process, actually, 'We don't expect you to know everything about this stuff' – about what you're asking about, special FX – 'because we're here for that. We're here as resources for that.' (Russo, quoted by Huver).

In another interview, Markus and McFeely responded to Captain America's role as a man out of time in a contemporary political environment. The writers stressed that, rather than focus on the character's displacement from a humorous standpoint, his confusion was a dramatizing factor.

In addition to their purported preparation, the Russos benefit from the fact that *The Winter Soldier* also has a unique position within the canon of superhero media in that it follows 2012's *The Avengers*. When colorful team-ups had hitherto been restricted to physical comic books, saturday morning cartoons, and the highly-restrained *X-Men* saga, Marvel Studios chose to bring its biggest characters from across the franchise together for a monolithic crossover event—setting a new standard in the process. *Winter Soldier*,

though not the first film to follow the massive teamup, is perhaps the first film bold enough to not simply be affected by it, but to outright affect *it*. At the conclusion of the film, SHIELD, the group responsible for gathering the Avengers in the first place, is defamed and destroyed. Its leader (and a significant force in the first *Avengers* film), Nick Fury, is presumed dead in the chaos. Captain America himself, though pardoned in having executed the espionage mission, has begun a path that might turn him away from the interests of the government. *The Winter Soldier*, in retrospect, serves as a pivotal point in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's canon.

Just as *Winter Soldier* would be recognized as a pivotal change in the character arcs of its included cast, so too would it be responsible for a tonal shift in the tenor of superhero movies as a whole (at least in regards to Marvel's offerings¹⁶) towards further genre-infused offerings. Following the release of *Winter Soldier*, which was first and foremost a political thriller featuring superheroes, Marvel's directors began taking further liberties with superhero movies, most visibly in the third entry in the *Thor* trilogy took on a far more comedic tone and in *Ant-Man*, which opted for a heist-film format. As a whole, Marvel's "Phase Two" battled seemingly- imminent superhero fatigue (in which the saturation of theaters with the genre would drive viewers away from it) with more imaginative structures, starting with *The Winter Soldier*'s genre-bending narrative.

Compared to Marvel's other duologies at the time, those of *Thor* and *Iron Man*, it becomes immediately apparent that *The Winter Soldier* understands how to set up a

¹⁶ It would undoubtedly be worthwhile to consider Christopher Nolan's wildly successful *Dark Knight* trilogy of films; however, they seem beyond the scope of this thesis. Much like *Winter Soldier*, Nolan's films very openly project a Marxist dialogue, and further provided viability for more grounded superhero media, but were not singularly responsible for the same seismic shifts in Superhero media production as the films discussed here.

second character arc. *Iron Man* had the advantage of ending its first film with an imperfect hero (thereby allowing a straightforward continuation of Tony Stark's arc from brilliant narcissist to bona fide hero), and *Thor: The Dark World* took the luxury of reverting its titular character back to the beginning of his arc, but the writers of *Winter Soldier* would have to be more creative. Unlike Stark, Steve Rogers' arc to hero was complete, and there was no reasonable way for the writers to revert him back. After all, Steve had started his first film as a hero, and was held back only by physical limitations. His character had been one of stalwart loyalty, so the writers

The arc of *Captain America* is largely the traditional hero's journey: Steve Rogers, recently orphaned by two parents (both killed in the line of duty themselves), hears the call to adventure, but is physically incapable of answering it. Given the chance to partake in an experimental procedure to create the ultimate soldier (and notably selected for his heart, rather than his eagerness to kill), Rogers is transformed into Captain America and promptly turned into a propaganda icon, eventually abandoning his poster boy position in order to lead a team of commandos behind enemy lines. This culminates in a climactic battle in which Captain America must sacrifice himself (and, as the audience is very heavily reminded) his future by dropping atomic bombs targeted for major American cities into the ocean. Even upon being freed from his tomb of ice, it is apparent that Captain America as a character has nowhere to go, except perhaps a humorous fish-out-of-water romp through New York.

While the Russos may be slightly precluded from the title of "auteur" for their collaboration in a massively consistent and heavily controlled series of films, their

consistency and quality of action set them apart. Consistently, their heroes are put in a situation of tension, handicap, and escape. In *Fury*'s case, making eye contact with the cop, followed by being surrounded by cops with machine guns and immobilized, *Winter Soldier* arrives in the middle of Marvel's "Phase Two," in part a victory lap following their monumental success with *The Avengers*, and a concerted effort in raising the dramatic tension in time for the arrival of the entire saga's main villain, Thanos. At this point, there is no question as to *Captain America*'s position as a blockbuster, and it follows many of the trends established by the films previously discussed in this thesis. As per the blockbuster formula, it employs a superstar production crew (with the added Marvel twist of unlikely directors), aims to follow traditional plot progressions, and budgets nine figures in the hopes of earning back even more. In the film, even the museum narrator is played by an actor of some relevant repute (Gary Sinise, outspoken advocate for veterans, and among other roles the face of CSI:NY and the voice of several Army recruiting ads in 2008).

Analysis

A return to Lacan's "Mirror Stage" might be beneficial, in order to investigate the purpose of *Winter Soldier*'s political subtext. One realization of the Mirror Stage may be witnessed explicitly earlier in the *Captain America* trilogy, in which Steve, at the Stark Expo, stands in front of an enlistment mirror featuring a tall, broad-chested soldier with a cutout mirror for a face. Steve, unlike the numerous more able-bodied men around him, is unable to see more than the top of his forehead in the mirror. This, like the original mirror stage, acts as a separation, but this time does not come in the form of a split between the

subconscious and conscious selves, but between the conscious self and the idealized image of the American soldier. The soldier, as Lacan would put it, is situated as a “big other,” part of the forces of culture, media, and society acting upon “small others,” or individual identities. Superhero films as a whole operate upon this impossible mirror stage by presenting viewers with ideological totalities, utterly unattainable for the common man or woman. *The Winter Soldier* works similarly; however, it shifts the purpose of that original sequence. Though Captain America would later find himself more than able-bodied enough to see his reflection in that recruitment mirror, the film endeavors to question the purpose of that identification.

In *Winter Soldier*, as well as *The First Avenger*, Captain America himself represents more than an updated projection of American ideology. Throughout his solo trilogy, Captain America behaves rebelliously, sometimes erratically, but unwaveringly from his core beliefs, and this can be seen most explicitly in *Winter Soldier* and *Civil War*, in which he directly opposes his government and his team (respectively). Where the Marvel Cinematic Universe’s Tony Stark represents the country’s greedy, narcissistic capitalism, Captain America is an ideal to strive towards. Captain America’s title as “a man out of time” is especially apt in *Winter Soldier*, his first solo outing in the contemporary world. At that point, over the course of three films, he had been transplanted from 1945 to 2011, and the change was abrupt. *The Winter Soldier* challenges Rogers to re-identify himself (effectively forcing him to repeat his own mirror stage). Throughout the film, it becomes critical that he divorce himself from the “big others,” namely fierce patriotism to the United States government, that he had absorbed

into his identity. The philosophy of Steve Rogers was closely linked to a loyalty to his nation's authorities. The ethical and moral superiority of the nation was without challenge, and loyalty and morality went hand in hand. Post-World War, post-Vietnam, and post-9/11, the balance was drastically shifted.

Within the greater arc of Captain America's character, *The Winter Soldier* represents him at his most malleable. Captain America undergoes two critical story arcs in his Marvel Cinematic Universe run. In the initial *Captain America*, he traverses the standard hero's journey, being transformed from scrawny Brooklyn teenager to big, buff, freedom fighter. But in *Marvel's The Avengers*, and even more so *The Winter Soldier*, he is forced on a new arc of identity discovery. The audience, at that point, understands Captain America, but in order to transplant a soldier from the 1940s, when the "Myth of Superiority" (the notion that America was tactically and ethically superior to her enemies) was in full swing, to the 2010s, an era far more suspicious of the government that Cap single-mindedly served. Captain America, come *Civil War*, has rejected any sort of loyal, patriotic character in favor of a deontological approach, and the hero eschews any sense of governmental loyalty to act on his own loyalties.

By the time *Avengers: Endgame* arrives, his true power is perfectly elucidated in one critical moment: as hope begins to seem lost, with Thanos pushing Stormbreaker (Thor's axe, similarly enchanted only to those deemed worthy) towards the God of Thunder's chest, the purple titan is struck by a flying Mjolnir, which returns not to its original owner, but into the hands of Captain America himself. This completes an arc that was set up in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, in which Cap was able to budge (but not lift) the

hammer. While explanations for this vary, and the prevailing theory features Cap feigning an inability to lift Mjolnir out of respect for Thor (or rather, Thor's ego), it seems more likely that the sequence pertains to his new arc. Through the events of *Civil War*, his character was too close to his shield, an icon for his nationalism, being loyal first and moral second. When he went into the ice at the end of *The First Avenger*, the two were synonymous. When he came out, they were anything but. Come the start of Infinity War, he has separated his loyalty from his morals, and is prepared to act wholly on them, in spite of what the government - or other heroes, like Tony - might have told him to do. In other words, though Steve Rogers possessed the qualities that made him worthy of Mjolnir, he was still unworthy in Ultron because his virtues were coming from a place of extrinsic nationalism, rather than intrinsic values.

Despite the rampant changes in the world around him (beyond the advances in technology and culture, the philosophical fiber of the country had evolved into a completely different beast), Captain America's moral code remains unchanged. He views his role as one of "standing up" to bullies, wherever they may be. In the 1940s, this meant standing up to an enemy force that appeared bent on domination and the eradication of an entire religion's practitioners. Fighting the Nazis was a move clearly in the moral right. In the far more complicated post-9/11, in which the spectrum of morality became increasingly more gray, the moral right might not lie with America's forces. One of the most prominent criticisms presented within *Winter Soldier* is that of the use of remote weaponry, specifically drones. With SHIELD threatening to launch what amounts to three

massive drones with a killing capacity of thousands every minute, the line between terrorism and counterterrorism is even further blurred.

Captain America, as with the filmic superheroes that preceded him, behaves differently from a traditional character. As is the case with Donner's *Superman: The Movie*, he is positioned curiously when considered in the context of Lacan's "Mirror Stage." As with the first big-screen superhero, Cap is indeed a "little other" in form, possessing a unique identity and more-or-less rounded character, but his actions resound with the force of Lacan's "big other," in that they carry tangible social and political consequences. Cap, acting as an allegory for the average citizen (albeit with extraordinary power), is taking a stance against the current trends in cyberespionage, and suggesting that actions must be taken to prevent the rampant application of increasingly-technological warfare, especially within the United States.

In terms of Jameson's theory, specifically pertaining to the notion that films allow filmgoers to come to terms with real problems via imaginary solutions, *The Winter Soldier* comes off a bit more muddled. There is no implication that Cap's actions are intended to be taken as literal suggestions (to any degree); however, when viewed as a general demand for further transparency and decreased paranoia, the film begins to echo contemporary political voices. Ultimately, *The Winter Soldier* challenges superhero films that precede it in this regard. By challenging viewership with immediate political actions, and by incorporating elements beyond those typically seen in a "superhero" film, it simultaneously distances itself from more abstract entries in the dialectic, and demands further credibility and flexibility for the genre moving forward.

Chapter 4: *Black Panther* and Novel Depictions of Colonialism and Alienation

2018's *Black Panther* took the world by storm when it was announced, immediately smashing records for presale tickets and, shortly thereafter, box office takes. The film, largely bolstered by the established credibility of the Marvel Cinematic Universe, was anticipated to interface with blackness in its colonized and uncolonized forms as its comics had, and was poised to be a massive step forward for progressive superhero media. The film's authenticity has been hotly debated since months before its release, but its cultural impact can not be ignored. While it may not have been the first superhero film to win an Oscar (that honor goes to 1978's *Superman*, albeit in the non-competitive "Special Achievement" category), it did set a record for most nominations with seven (including one for "Best Picture," the first time a superhero movie had received the honor), and managed to take home three of them. Though the film did not manage to win the coveted Best Picture award or Best Adapted Screenplay, it did take home Oscars for Production Design, Costume Design, and Soundtrack, three elements that had been designed from the outset to authentically portray African life. The plot of the film, though inextricably linked to the original penmanship of two white men, was constructed by Ryan Coogler and Joe Robert Cole to do the same.

Black Panther opens on an expository montage, detailing the ancient history of Wakanda. The site of a vibranium meteor landing some centuries prior, the mineral-rich land was inhabited by five tribes and given its name. Shortly thereafter, the panther

goddess Bast would reveal to a warrior-shaman of the Panther Tribe the mysterious purple heart-shaped plants that grant those of royal blood the power of the Black Panther—and the mantle of king¹⁷. Witnessing the subjugation of their neighboring countries, Wakanda opted to cloak itself and live separate from the chaotic, imperial world around them. It is made clear through the next sequence, set in Oakland, California in 1992, that this secluded lifestyle could only last so long. James and N’Jobu (brother to the Wakandan King), from within their dingy apartment, organize weapons and prepare for an upcoming heist. They are interrupted by King T’Chaka, who accuses N’Jobu of helping Ulysses Klaue trespass on Wakandan soil and steal vibranium. James is revealed to be a Wakandan agent, and N’Jobu is killed by T’Chaka in the ensuing skirmish. His son, Erik, is left an orphan.

In the present day, T’Challa returns to Wakanda to ascend the throne, following the untimely demise of T’Chaka in *Captain America: Civil War*. He engages briefly with other Wakandan citizens, including his mother, Queen Ramonda, and sister Shuri, who doubles as the technology genius and comedic heart of the film. T’Challa attends the Challenge ceremony, in which the five tribes convene to offer challengers for the throne, and is nearly bested by M’Baku (a warrior from the rarely-seen Jabari tribe) before being formally named the king of Wakanda. In London, Ulysses Klaue and a grown Erik

¹⁷ The writings of Frantz Fanon feature considerably in the analysis of this film, and one particular passage, in which Fanon explains the use of the indigenous religion as an oppressive tool, though not strictly relevant to this thesis, might here be of interest. Fanon suggests that oppressed people are made to weigh their fears against one another, and ultimately behave in favor of the colonizer out of a greater fear of their own mythologies’ retribution (18). *Black Panther*, in line with its uncolonized state, exhibits the inverse of this with the Panther goddess Bast. Rather than terrify the Wakandan people into subjugation, it is their mythology that emboldens them and grants them the invaluable tool of the Black Panther as a weapon against colonial forces.

“Killmonger” Stevens steal a Wakandan artifact from a museum, shortly thereafter fleeing to South Korea, where Klaue intends to sell the artifact to CIA agent Everett Ross. Their deal is interrupted by T’Challa and his warriors, and Klaue is captured and turned over to Ross.

Following a brief interrogation, Klaue is rescued by Killmonger, and Ross is gravely wounded. T’Challa abandons the chase to bring Ross to Wakanda to be healed, allowing Killmonger to turn on Klaue, kill him, and bring his body to Wakanda where he is revealed to be the son of N’Jobu. With what appears to be a legitimate claim to the throne, Killmonger is allowed to challenge T’Challa, and defeats him, tossing him over a waterfall and killing the shaman for good measure. Killmonger begins enacting a plan to liberate African descendents of the world while loyalists of T’Challa seek help to depose their new king. After reaching out to the Jabari, Nakia, Shuri, Ramonda, and Ross find that they have rescued T’Challa’s body and begin resurrecting him. Bolstered by the Jabari tribe’s forces, T’Challa and his loyalists attack Killmonger, preventing him from enacting his plan. In a final climactic battle between the two kings, Killmonger is mortally wounded. T’Challa carries him up to see the sun set over Wakanda, where Killmonger refuses his aid, preferring to die and be buried “like [his] ancestors that jumped from the ships, ‘cause they knew death was better than bondage” (Coogler 117). Shortly thereafter, T’Challa returns to Oakland to begin the construction of the first Wakandan Outreach Center and enters Wakanda into the United Nations.

Perhaps even more notable than *Black Panther*’s financial success is its openly political metanarrative. While the film unabashedly examines the ravages of colonialism

and Pan-African diversity, it is all the more effective for its authenticity. Written, directed, designed, and costumed by black men and women, *Black Panther* earned much of its media buzz by making every effort to portray an authentic Pan-African narrative. As will be examined in the following chapter, it does not manage to do so perfectly, and the film leaves itself dangerously open to harsh readings. Ultimately, however, the film portrays complex characters and equally nuanced perspectives on American and African blackness. *Black Panther* takes the universal superhero theme of alienation and folds meaning in on itself in a postmodern fashion, using the theme to examine metanarrative authenticity and grapple with black oppression and colonialism, ultimately providing a highly politicized (and somewhat problematic) vision.

The film decidedly interfaces with Frantz Fanon's notions of colonial violence, depicting a colonized black man's rash attempt to use an uncolonized society to decolonize the world in one fell swoop. Killmonger's ambitions are every bit as bold as Fanon's initial definition of Decolonization:

Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world, is clearly an agenda for total disorder. But it cannot be accomplished by the wave of a magic wand, a natural cataclysm, or a gentleman's agreement.

Decolonization, we know, is an historical process: In other words, it can only be understood, it can only find its significance and become self coherent insofar as we can discern the history-making movement which gives it form and substance (Fanon 2).

Fanon's definition additionally parallels the framing method of analysis through which this thesis is formed, demanding an understanding of the historical forces at play (in this case, the forces of slavery and oppression of black bodies) in addition to critical analysis.

Historical Context

Similarly to 2000's *X-Men* before it, *Black Panther* responds to both specific and impossibly far-reaching cultural conditions, pertaining in this case to the oppression and subjugation of African peoples. On a broad level, it comes to terms with the ravages of colonization and slavery on native Africans. Its opening montage depicts Africans being forced onto explorers' ships, suggesting that the period of rampant colonization—later named “the Scramble for Africa”—is the impetus for Wakanda's isolationist policy. In 1992, Thomas Pakenham described the events (in his aptly named *The Scramble for Africa: The White Man's Conquest of the Dark Continent from 1876 to 1912*) as follows:

Europeans pictured most of the continent as ‘vacant’: legally *res nullius*, a no-man's-land... Suddenly, in half a generation, the Scramble gave Europe virtually the whole continent: including thirty new colonies and protectorates, 10 million square miles of new territory and 110 million dazed new subjects, acquired by one method or another. Africa was sliced up like a cake” (1).

Pakenham stresses that the impetus for this rampant imperialism—beyond greed, that is—remains unclear. What began as a period of cautious trade with the new nation (Pakenham estimates European control of Africa prior to 1870 to be nearly nonexistent, despite a growing trade market) quickly reached a fever pitch amongst slave trading (both legal and not) and the introduction of the “3 Cs:” commerce, civilization, and Christianity

(231). Amidst politics on the “new” continent and in Europe, the Scramble peaked with the Berlin Conference of 1884, which introduced regulations for the trade and colonization of Africa for Europe.

Naturally, *Black Panther* shies away from depicting more than a cursory glimpse of the—to use the terminology of the film’s prologue—chaos. Its depiction is nearly as cursory as Fanon’s initial explanation of colonial processes, summarized to a vague but incredibly powerful application of violence and malicious psychological manipulation. A knowledge of the thirty-some year expansion provides context for the isolationist policies of Wakanda, but even more significant is the rhetorical treatment of African peoples. As Pakenham implies, the indigenous people of the continent were treated as an afterthought, and as the slave trade ground to halt in Europe, Africans were either fodder to be removed from the path of conquest or dazed citizens suddenly subjected to a foreign way of life. Even Pakenham’s historiography of the period spends the vast majority of its time in the heads of European explorers, considering political ramifications before personal impact. *Black Panther* relies on the mainstream lack of attention to firmly ground itself as a fictionalized but deeply African narrative.

The theme of colonialism pervades *Black Panther*, setting many of the film’s events into motion. Wakanda’s reservations about the imperial societies encroaching on their continent led to their cloaking of the country. It is counter-colonialism and Fanon-esque colonial violence that drives the film’s villain, Erik “Killmonger” Stevens. In terms of far more specificity than thirty-three years of imperial conquest, the allegorical arguments of *Black Panther*’s antagonist channels the complex violence

enumerated in Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*. Killmonger's philosophy most closely matches the first section of Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*, a lengthy chapter simply titled "On Violence." He seeks the bloody emancipation of oppressed black peoples around the world through the proliferation of Wakandan superweapons. He reads as a hyper-realized version of Frantz Fanon's "On Violence," not simply pushing for decolonization, but aiming to subjugate white people through reversed colonialism.

Conversely, T'Challa, seeking the best for his people in an unprecedented age (the age of the Avengers, their collateral-damage, and their equally-apocalyptic nemeses), appears willing in multiple instances to forego his policies of isolationism in favor of public outreach and peaceable integration with the United Nations. These political moves, from the perspective of Killmonger, recall the deceptive notion of nonviolence as a malicious tool of the colonizer in Fanon's work. In brief, the colonizer introduces the notion of nonviolence to the colonized, promotes it as the peak of sensibility, and encourages compromise over violence before any serious decolonizing work can be done. Killmonger must believe that T'Challa, now attending United Nations councils and acting as an international politician in addition to his Black Panther duties, has fallen victim to the same ruse.

Yet another point of similarity between Killmonger and Fanon is the oppressive power of superior weaponry. Fanon posits that considerable power lies in the mere possession of superior armaments, by virtue of sheer intimidation. Killmonger, similarly, is aware of the superiority of Wakandan weaponry over anything possessed by colonial forces. Wakanda's wealth of vibranium, as is immediately explained in the film, has

allowed it to develop the most technologically-advanced society and weaponry, an effect doubled by cunning minds like Shuri (the teenage response to Batman's Lucius Fox or James Bond's Q). Killmonger, after Fanon, sees the proliferation of Wakandan weaponry amongst oppressed black people as the key to ultimate liberation for the Pan-African diaspora.

This blindly ambitious, domineering characterization of Killmonger is problematic in that it oversimplifies the villain, who has an unrealistic means of battling a real, systemic issue. Or, as Dikeledi A. Mokoena explains in *Africology's* issue dedicated to the film: "Moving back to the concept of unacceptable Black people, the demonization of Erik, evident with him being named Killmonger, is also reminiscent of how Black revolutionaries are portrayed" (Mokoena 17). As such, it should come as no surprise that one place that *Black Panther* struggles is in terms of its villain. That is not to say that Killmonger is a weak villain—on the contrary, he is frequently regarded as one of the MCU's best and most nuanced—but rather that his role *as* a villain can be read as troublesome. Killmonger's motives are deligitimized by his role as the villain and depiction as a single-minded potential tyrant. As Delice Williams puts it in *Africology*, "The film succumbs to the stereotypes. Killmonger's tragedy—his traumatic loss of his entire family, his sense of moral obligation to a larger Black diasporic community of suffering—all morph into violent, shortsighted egotism and hyper-masculine megalomaniacal aggression" (29). Killmonger has the misfortune of being a villain whose reasonable and righteous anger is undermined by stereotype and heavily-ingrained anti-radicalism.

Further problematizing the depiction, Killmonger's motivations in the museum scene, the audience's first exposure to the character, are devoid of reparative justice as Jonathan Ward hints at in "Wakanda Liberation is This?" (18). Despite his reference to imperialistic acquisitions and the false legitimization of them through academic presentation, Killmonger does not desire to return the Wakandan artifacts to their native land (nor does he wish to return any of the other African weapons to their rightful owners and in fact steals another African mask for his own purposes). Instead, it is a step towards further financial security in his mission to take control of Wakanda and arms the oppressed black people of the world. Ward does not mention the fact that this purpose aligns with Killmonger's chaotic philosophy of counter-colonialism by any means necessary, and highlights both his disconnect from his heritage and his willingness to sacrifice some of his homeland's culture in order to fulfill his mission.

Jonathan Ward, writing in *Africology*, remarks that "[a]ny potential credibility of Killmonger's racial politics is further undermined through his constant association with violence, particularly when this violence is implicitly and explicitly directed towards other people of colour," referring to Killmonger's role as a paramilitary agent and strike operative and destabilizing element in the Middle East. He continues, arguing that "[t]he desire to raise up all 'oppressed people all over the world' rapidly descends into a new form of hierarchical domination through strengthening Wakanda's imperial power, rather than an actual desire for genuine egalitarianism and liberation" (24). These attributes of Killmonger's character, echoed in various sequences throughout the film, paint him either as the sort of militant oppressor his father was violently opposing, or as a victim of the

cycle of oppression, forcing him into brutal behavior.

Additionally (and of dubious effect in regards to the representation of American blackness) the film references by name the 1992 Los Angeles riots, a violent public response to the acquittal of four white Los Angeles officers accused of police brutality. In March of 1991, following a lengthy high-speed chase, Rodney King and his passengers were arrested. While the two passengers were handcuffed in a squad car, and with approximately twenty LAPD officers standing by, King was hogtied, tased, and savagely beaten by at least four white officers wielding side-handled batons. The entire incident, recorded by a civilian, resulted in a highly-publicized trial of four LAPD officers. The verdict, rendered by an all-white jury, sparked intense outrage in the local community, and riots began that continued for five days. Over fifty people were killed, thousands arrested, and nearly a billion dollars in damage had been done (Linder, “The Rodney King Beating Trials”). A news report of the riots sets the backdrop for the first live-action sequence in *Black Panther*: the felonious preparations of James and N’Jobu.

Bolstered by its juxtaposition with the thriving portrait of Wakanda, the film’s first live-action sequence reveals its perspective on black urban life in America. In stark contrast to the unpressured lifestyles of the Wakandan people, America’s black people are still confined to suboptimal conditions and, if James and N’Jobu are to be taken as representative, are occasionally forced to rely on means beyond the legal to support

themselves¹⁸. This is punctuated by the report, one of the few explicit references made to the real-world oppression of black people.

In order to properly evaluate just how progressive the black characters in *Black Panther* are, it becomes essential to consider the differences between the film's representation of American and African blackness. Naturally, the film exalts Wakandan blackness, celebrating it as an alternate-history version of Africa that was never subject to colonization. This, however, opens up the unfortunate potential for dangerous misreadings. One reading of the black Americans in *Black Panther* would suggest that it depicts American black people as helpless victims of oppression. Ward aptly points out that the only black Americans depicted in the film are criminals and would-be tyrants (with the exception of the children in Oakland that bookend the film¹⁹). Linda, Killmonger's lover, is especially underdeveloped in the film, being "reduced to disposable sexualized prop... We see her kissing Killmonger as they make their escape, fulfilling the traditional role of heteronormative love interest for a male character who has far more depth... She remains almost completely passive in the film, with no value or name seemingly attached" (Ward 21). The end of the film show that little has changed in that same neighborhood: the same kids are playing the same game with the same escape from the ghetto on their mind. It is implied that Oakland's first step towards a better life

¹⁸ Further establishing the theme of pessimistic views of American blackness, Ward additionally comments that the film's initial focus on the children playing basketball might reference the glorification of the sport as a "socially legitimized form of employment and thus route out of the racialized 'ghetto'" (17), though this opens up further avenues beyond the scope of this thesis.

¹⁹ Ward hones in especially on the emphasis placed on basketball in the children's lives, claiming that it is a glorification of African American athleticism that perpetuates the notion of sports scholarships (rather than academic ones) being one of the only ways out of the ghetto. It could just as easily be argued, however, that the emphasis on team sports indicates an inherent aptitude for cooperation and coordination, and arguably reflects little on the film's depiction of American blackness.

comes directly through T'Challa's first Wakandan Outreach Center. Compare this to Wakanda, whose internal governance is progressive and pays honor to Pan-African heritages, and the roles and authority of the women in the film—most notably the Dora Milaje (Okoye and the rest of the Royal Guard), Shuri, and Queen Ramonda—depict a more-or-less equal stance on gender. American blackness, insofar as it is presented and discussed in the film, is another issue altogether.

Black Panther as Postmodern

Given the potential for misreadings and misinterpretations of *Black Panther*, further examination of its metanarrative is warranted. For such an inspection, it might be most fruitful to consider the film as an explicitly postmodern object, per Fredric Jameson's definition. He describes, in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, what amounts to four key tenets of postmodernism. In parallel to Jameson's Marxist critique of Postmodernism, it may prove most useful to examine *Black Panther* as a postmodern artifact, but through the same Marxist lens that has been applied throughout this thesis²⁰. Per Jameson, a postmodern artifact must first reject prior schools of thought, an attribute clearly indicated by the film's metanarrative moves that challenge both the presentation and production of largely white superhero media.

Second, Jameson expresses a collision of high and low art, or more specifically, "...erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture" (2). *Black Panther*, undeniably political in its intent but produced as a product of

²⁰ It cannot be stressed enough that Jameson is a Marxist thinker, not a Postmodernist, and his text does not embrace Postmodernism so much as it examines it through a Marxist lens. In critiquing the school of thought, however, Jameson attempts to distill Postmodernism into its core ideals in an unbiased fashion, proving effective for contextualizing *Black Panther*'s cultural pastiche, financial motivation, and occasional muddying of substance in favor of style.

the Marvel Cinematic Universe and as part of Disney's ever-growing media empire²¹, aptly fills the role, conflating consumerism and artistry. Dikeledi A. Mokoena, perhaps best describes the conflation between *Black Panther*'s ideological and financial goals: “[O]ut of the hundreds of millions that were made in one week by Marvel, the Black community will not materially benefit. On the other hand, what we cannot measure monetarily are the long-term by-product benefits of the role of the *Black Panther* movie in the struggle against the inferiority complex that many Black people globally experience” (13).

Third is an element of pastiche, “like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style... without the satirical impulse,” (3) which immediately calls to mind the film's application of various African cultures and styles. For instance, Ruth Carter, the film's costume designer, weaves both vibranium and narrative into the costumes of the Wakandan tribes. Most evident of this are the Border Tribe, clad in blankets (which double as shields, courtesy of the inwoven supermetal) and tending to the country's livestock. These tribespeople exist as metaphorical for the nation as a whole, appearing outwardly primitive but concealing incredible technology and knowledge. As Wynter illustrates, the Dora Milaje have an especially effective blend of positive pastiche, incorporating authentic costuming (such as the Ethiopian-inspired silver cuffs and Dahomey warriors' red dresses, adorned with beaded breastplates and necklaces) with a rejection of the traditional male gaze. Like Kenya's Massai women, the Dora Milaje are

²¹ The use of the word “empire” here is intentionally pointed, as Disney effectively operates as colonizer of the modern mediascape. Their acquisition of Lucasfilm, the Marvel imprint, and most recently 20th-Century Fox are all indicative of an imperial nature. It should come as no surprise that each of Disney's successive acquisitions trigger more critical probes into their potential to become a media monopoly.

bald and skilled with hand and spear, “sheathed in the dignity and strength of warriors, offering a positive example for girls today” (93). Coogler, in his “Notes on a Scene,” admits to making extensive use of the Pan-African flag’s colors, often dressing characters like T’Challa, Nadiya, and Okoye in blacks, greens, and reds.

The frequent instances of black combat may be read as a fetishization of physical black power, but the lack of a white gaze seems to mitigate this. The purpose for fighting, a reliance on ritual and historical precedent, is not so much a savage ceremony undertaken by opposing tribes as much as it is a war dance (as Wynters describes it). Its stylistic approach to tribal traditions, costumes, and cultures, all contribute towards a Pan-African ethos that clearly exhibits extensive research. Wynters perhaps most aptly summarizes it with the assertion that “*Black Panther* is an oasis in a diasporic media desert. It is inspiration, an infusion of a new image. And although it boasts little in the way of African drums... the beat goes on” (94).

This use of cultural pastiche is not perfect, however. As illustrated by Jonathan Ward in “Wakanda Liberation is This?,” the film’s approach to issues of colonization and diverse blackness can lead to problematic readings of the film. One such problem, as explored by Ward, is its inability to convey Wakanda’s success as resulting from intrinsic factors. Rather, while benefiting from not having been colonized, much of Wakanda’s advancement is directly attributed to the extrinsic factor of available resources. As the film’s prologue explains, Wakanda was fortunate enough to have a meteorite made of vibranium crash and merge with local plantlife. This ultimately extrinsic event led to the nation’s technological advancement and, by extension, its cultural advancement, as

vibranium is both essential to the technological superiority of the nation and its cultural identity. Effectively, it is not an inherent African trait that, when left unravaged by colonial forces, allowed for the rapid development of the country, and *Black Panther* here does some disservice to viewers that ought to be forced to confront colonization as an inherent evil. This, coupled with the lack of explicit reference to colonization, slavery, and imperial forces, allows the film to be enjoyed without what Ward calls “intellectual engagement with these legacies, and their impact on US culture” (15).

An additional potential shortcoming to *Black Panther*'s black diversity is hinted at by Mokoena. The role of technology in the Wakandans' lives does not adequately depict any equalization among urban and rural lifestyles. Wakandan social status appears to be a binary: one is either of royal blood, or not. This does not inherently suggest that the technology touted by the Panther Tribe (and shunned by the Jabari) creates or even fails to mitigate social disparity, but rather highlights the surprising lack of diversity in the utopian civilization. The glorification of urbanization, as Mokoena points out, can be dangerous, given the context of Africa's real-world rural nature (15).

Many of Ward's remarks, which have thus far been heavily cited, are liable to come as misinterpretations of the film, rather than oversight or nonchalance on the part of Coogler and his crew. For instance, Ward cynically investigates the role of Everett Ross in Wakanda. Aside from Klaue, who is removed from specific political affiliation by his anarchic capitalist actions and south-African birth, Ross is very noticeably the only white person prominently featured in the film. Ross' arrival in Wakanda plays a more significant role than the character's typically comedic antics lead on. Per Ward, “Not

only does Ross represent white (US) identity, but also, as a CIA agent, he symbolizes US institutional power: this compounds the supremacy of white US identity” (20). As such, the fact that he is specifically brought to Wakanda to be saved is read by Ward as a priority of white lives over black ones in the film, despite his admission that Ross is read as an individual, and warranted healing on account of his deeds, rather than being representative of an entire culture. Ward implies that a precedent is established in this action. He misreads Shuri’s exclamation of “Great! Another broken white boy for us to fix” as the implication that the savior of specific white lives is a common occurrence (20), when it is far more likely that Shuri is actually referring to Bucky Barnes (far detached from contemporary racial politics on account of his role as a brainwashed Hydra agent out of time), who is revealed at the end of the film to be recovering from his brainwashing under Wakandan care.

Ward additionally operates under the assumption that *Black Panther* views Wakandans as part of the African diaspora, a collective whose narrative is constructed by the dissemination of African people. *Black Panther*’s focus on an uncolonized, isolated African country precludes it from making any uniform assessments of black people. Delice Williams in, *Africology: The Journal for Pan-African Studies*, posits (perhaps dangerously) the following: “ If Blackness is a diasporic consciousness, forged and forced into existence by long histories of violence, resistance, and renegotiation, then the Wakandans, who have shielded themselves from that history in the interest of preserving their way of life, are effectively cut off from Blackness.” (27) Though her reading of Wakandan blackness is far more radical than that of the other writers considered in this

chapter, there is a solid logic in her argument. Wakanda as depicted in *Black Panther* has actively opted to *not* participate in the African Diaspora by secluding itself, refusing to be dispersed across continents. This is potentially redeemed given T'Challa's eventual decision to end his country's long isolation and offer outreach—standing in stark, nonviolent opposition to Killmonger's radical approach—to black people of the world.

Finally, and most simply, is intertextuality, a trait that all comic movies have in spades. *Black Panther*, by its nature as a comic adaptation, has decades of comic content to draw upon, plus another ten years' worth of Marvel Cinematic Universe content. This intertextuality not only grants the film's writers, Coogler and Cole, considerable freedom with a wealth of content to draw inspiration from, it also allows the film to draw from its predecessors' credibility. *Black Panther*'s arrival late in the Marvel Cinematic Universe mitigates the risk posed by a non-white superhero film by establishing itself as existing within the same universe that white audiences have been enjoying for years already.

Superhero Blockbuster Dialectic

Black Panther is a film that, though presented as yet another entry into an intentionally-samey cinematic series, is unprecedented. Granted, it is not the first black superhero blockbuster—that award might most appropriately be given to 1998's *Blade*²². It is, however, the first to win multiple competitive Oscars (and vie for Best Picture), one of the first in a wave of authentic portrayals of non-white (and in multiple cases, non-male *and* non-American) lives within the superhero blockbuster genre, and crafted with immense care to respectfully coexist with real Pan-African nations. *Black Panther*

²² Which, for the record, was written, directed by, and produced by an impressively white collection of executives.

interfaces with the doubly-destructive combination of alienation (the pervading theme of nearly all superhero media) and subjugation.

Black Panther is a film deeply set in the tradition of Afrofuturism, which envisions black people in fantastical settings, imagining worlds that had never been colonized, and dealing with black matters in these settings. This, as illustrated in the previous section, is not without its problems, but given that no prior attempts had been made to explore alienation and colonialism in regards to the African diaspora, some of the film's mistakes can be forgiven. Even more so, beyond *Black Panther's* narrative construction (or, more specifically, its filmmaking construction and the methodology behind it) exists as antithetical not just to earlier superhero media, but to much of Hollywood as a whole. Coogler stands opposed to previous directors for his blackness, his refusal to play into the Africa that had been created by Hollywood over some hundred years of misrepresentation.

The film addresses femininity—specifically black femininity, as per director Ryan Coogler—through various depictions of black women's natural styles. The director himself makes a point to mention that the hairstyles worn throughout the film are natural, with one very intentional exception. During the buildup to the casino fight sequence, Okoye (traditionally bald, as part of the honor guard of Wakanda) is shown wearing a short wig. She complains about it constantly, and eventually is offered the chance to (tactically) remove it, flinging it into the face of an assailant as the fight begins. Some subtle symbolism can be read into the action, as her removal of a fake garment (one that is designed after colonizers' standards of beauty in order to better blend in with them)

allows her to fully engage with her warrior prowess (Coogler, “Notes on a Scene”). This sequence is mirrored when Nakiya removes one of her heels (another artifact of western beauty standards that contrasts the traditionally barefoot culture of Wakanda), making clear the scene’s intent to portray femininity as a weapon.

In the film’s metanarrative, the authenticity continues. As Coogler points out in his interview with *Vanity Fair*, wherever possible, the actors themselves would perform stunts, rather than their doubles. Scenes were planned as practically as possible, with 3D-printed dioramas of locations being used to plot out choreography. Coogler and Carter make extensive use of pan-African colors (red, green, and black) in robing their characters, and a considerable amount of the film’s production crew are black. Compared to the vast majority of blockbuster films, *Black Panther* nails Pan-Africanism. Where, oftentimes, the mere existence of a black character satisfies a need for diversity, resulting in stereotypical and under-representative figures, *Black Panther* depicts a colorful and varied nation of diverse black people.

Despite an unclear message on radicalism or decolonization, it nevertheless appears as though *Black Panther* is one of the first in a series of films that attempt to authentically illustrate the lives of superheroes that are non-white, non-male, queer, or any combination of the above. *Wonder Woman*, which preceded Coogler’s offering by a year, is potentially the first in this trend, though its attempts to authentically portray female life during World War I do little to compete with the film’s need to recreate its historic atmosphere. *Captain Marvel*, technically another period piece, is able to more firmly integrate gender commentary into a depiction of the 1990s. Most recently, *Birds of*

Prey, the first all-female superhero blockbuster, examined gender and trauma to moderate critical and financial success. With more *Wonder Woman*, *Captain Marvel*, and *Black Panther* sequels (sequels that, following the surprising passing of Chadwick Boseman, are likely to now be led by Letitia Wright's Shuri, potentially offering future films led by a non-white, non-male, and non-colonial figure) and new non-white superhero films like *Shang-Chi* and another *Blade* film on the way, it appears that the political unconscious, manifesting in issues of alienation, has made its way beyond the explicit in *Winter Soldier* and into the metanarrative, demanding authenticity in a film's production. With this trend just beginning in superhero blockbuster media, it remains enticing to see where the thread of alienation will go next.

Conclusion

The theme of alienation pervades superhero media, from comics to screen. After all, what other feeling could be elicited by the revelation that godlike creatures exist among us, more perfect than us, and more good? Blockbuster superhero media, as has been examined in previous chapters, uses this theme to great effect, either as an estranging tool to help audiences cope with the realities of their own world or to add incredible potency to the political message that directors and writers of these films are attempting to portray.

It remains astounding that these superhero films do not alienate their audiences with depictions of such non-human entities. Perhaps it is through various attempts to humanize the inhuman or the abstraction of superheroes into embodiments of prescribed goals rather than believable characters that allows for audiences to cling so firmly onto super heroes, as they have done consistently now for decades. Audiences find reflected in the godlike beings their own ideals, perspectives, and politics, seeking all of the attributes described by Jacques Lacan as the “big other” in the form of a “little other.” Viewing these heroes as abstractions of our own identities effectively dismisses the feelings of alienation that may be expected. But, to many of the franchises’ detractors, this alienation does indeed come in the form of distancing the viewer from the art.

Martin Scorsese argues for a traditional view of cinema, one in which individualistic exploits are to be lauded for their risks while more popular media simply exists to threaten the auteur with a dystopic landscape. He brings forth considerable

challenges regarding the nature of superhero blockbuster media, validly pointing out its capital-driven variant of the cinematographic apparatus, and the multitude of non-directorial voices that contribute to a populist product. His argument, however, hinges upon that notion of risk. Positing that “the individual artist is the riskiest factor of all,” Scorsese illustrates the origins of his view on auteur cinema. As he elucidates, he finds great value in the personal aura (to apply Benjamin’s terminology) that is transmitted into a product when it is crafted by as well as of an auteur.

Scorsese argues of franchise films that “[n]othing is at risk. The pictures are made to satisfy a specific set of demands, and they are designed as variations on a finite number of themes.” While there exists a library of archetypes that have been reserved for comics-based media, pictures like *Winter Soldier* and *X-Men* have hopefully challenged the notion that little is at risk in these productions. Bolstered by studio support, the Russo brothers were still untested in the waters of action franchise filmmaking, and their idea to incorporate elements traditionally not found in superhero media into *Winter Soldier* could have easily yielded critical scorn and far more reserved behavior from Walt Disney Studios. Instead (and much of this must be attributed to the film’s financial success), the film blazed the trail for Marvel’s Stage Three, featuring its most adventurous films to date, including the second *Guardians of the Galaxy*, *Thor Ragnarok*, *Black Panther*, and the wildly successful conclusion to the Infinity Saga. Likewise, *X-Men* could have easily killed the contemporary superhero genre, had it foregone its political undercurrents and lost fans by failing to incorporate a proper examination of otherness.

Finally, the director wistfully explains that, when watching auteur filmmakers like Spike Lee and Wes Anderson, he expects his “sense of what is possible in telling stories with moving images and sounds is going to be expanded.” This is rightfully so; however, as has hopefully been illustrated in the previous chapters, Superhero media is just as capable of doing so. In a world that exists after the monolithic production that was the *Infinity War/Endgame* duology, the landscape continues to change. Whether attributable to the franchises’ needs to continually up the ante or a desire to push the boundaries of franchise filmmaking, it is hard to argue that these films do not challenge the previously established storytelling formulas, if only within their genre.

It is not the purpose of this thesis to antagonize Scorsese or any of the like-minded critics of franchise media. If anything, his fears of the art form’s barrier to entry growing too high for eager amateurs continue to be realized (at least as far as the formal Hollywood structure is concerned—online platforms like YouTube remain another conversation entirely). Rather, using his credible arguments as a basis for discourse, it aims to broaden perspectives on traditionally overlooked cultural artifacts (insofar as academic circles are concerned).

The heavy utilization of Jameson, then, stems from an acceptance of Scorsese’s definition of auteur cinema as valid, though it is an attempted refutation (or at least a resignification) of certain aspects of it. From a postmodern perspective, auteur cinema and populist media are equally worthy of critical study, and Marxist criticism (through *The Political Unconscious*) further provides the perfect vehicle with which to do so. Extensive historicizing becomes necessary for the revelation of artifacts’ political

context, a detail that Jameson found so crucial, he deemed it appropriate for the first lines of his book's preface:

Always historicize! This slogan—the one absolute and we may even say "transhistorical" imperative of all dialectical thought will unsurprisingly turn out to be the moral of *The Political Unconscious* as well. (ix)

By accepting superhero franchise films as significant cultural artifacts relying on additional historical context, their basis for analysis is effectively doubled. This allows for a deeply nuanced perspective on their politically unconscious messages, taking into context all three of the frameworks elucidated by Jameson.

Lastly, and in direct response to the events of the past year, Superhero blockbusters find themselves at a curious crossroads. As a result of various precautionary lockdowns, a number of blockbusters features have been delayed or reworked to maximize profit and accessibility. As theaters find themselves increasingly at risk of bankruptcy, the reliance upon superhero blockbusters' practically-guaranteed financial success becomes even stronger, putting ever more focus on the genre. Despite the fact that these films are likely to be the safe bet for the near future, politically-conscious films will be expected by fans and critics alike (especially *Black Panther*, which must now contend with an increased awareness of American racial injustice and cope with the tragic loss of its star).

The acknowledgment of a late capitalist world incurs the need to find critical meaning in populist products. While this may be viewed as a degradation of the art of analysis, it could just as easily be read as the relocation of power within an art form.

Considering these films as this thesis does, they are imbued with incredible potential for social change while contributing to a greater overarching discourse of social justice. As we now stand on the cusp of the next generation of superhero blockbuster media, it remains infinitely enticing to see what disruptive challenges the new era of these films brings.

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, Schocken Books, 1968, pp. 217-252.
- Black Panther*. Directed by Ryan Coogler, performances by Chadwick Boseman, Michael B. Jordan, Lupita Nyong'o, Danai Gurira, Martin Freeman, Daniel Kaluuya, and Letitia Wright, Marvel Studios, 2018.
- Borstelmann, Thomas. *The 1970s : A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*. Princeton University Press, 2012.
- Briest, Sarah. "The Allegorical X-Men: Emblems, Comics, and the Allegorical Potential of Text/Image Hybrid Genres." *ImageText*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2017.
- Caldwell, Wilber W. *American Narcissism : The Myth of National Superiority*. Algora Publishing, 2006.
- Captain America: The Winter Soldier*. Directed by Anthony and Joe Russo, performances by Chris Evans, Scarlett Johansson, Sebastian Stan, Anthony Mackie, Cobie Smulders, and Samuel L. Jackson, Marvel Studios, 2014.
- Carter, Ruth. "Black Panther's Costume Designer Breaks Down T'Challa's Entrance Scene." *Vanity Fair Magazine*, May 8, 2018.
- Cone, James H. *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare*. Orbis Books, 1991.

- Coogler, Ryan. "Black Panther's Director Breaks Down a Fight Scene." *Vanity Fair*, February 17, 2018.
- De Haven, Tom. *Our Hero: Superman on Earth*. Yale University Press, 2010.
- Dowling, William C. *Jameson, Althusser, Marx: An Introduction to The Political Unconscious*. Cornell University Press, 1984.
- Earnest, William. "Making Gay Sense of the X-Men." *Uncovering Hidden Rhetorics: Social Issues in Disguise*, ed. Barry Brummett. SAGE Publications, 2007, pp. 215-232.
- Ebert, Roger. "Superman Review." *rogerebert.com*, December 15, 1978.
- Fanon, Frantz. "On Violence." *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 1963, pp. 1-63.
- Filson, Darren, and James H. Havlicek. "The Performance of Global Film Franchises: Installment Effects and Extension Decisions." *Journal of Cultural Economics: Published in Cooperation with The Association for Cultural Economics International*, vol. 42, no. 3, 2018, p. 447.
- Freiman, Barry M. "One-on-One Interview with Producer Ilya Salkind." *supermanhomepage.com*, June 30, 2006.
- Gurnow, Michael. *Edward Snowden Affair: Exposing the Politics and Media Behind the NSA Scandal*. Blue River Press, 2014.
- Hassenger, Jesse. "The Superman Movies Paved the Way for Comic-Book Blockbusters." *The A.V. Club*, January 29, 2015.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Political Unconscious, The Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Cornell University Press, 1981.

- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke University Press, 1991.
- Jean-Louis Baudry. "Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus." *Film Quarterly*, vol. 28, no. 2, 1974, p. 39. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.2307/1211632.
- Kernbach, Serge. "Unconventional Research in USSR and Russia: A Short Overview." *ArXiv.org*, December 5, 2013.
- Lacan, Jacques. "The Mirror Stage." *Écrits : A Selection*. Norton, 1977, pp. 1-7.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. "The Structural Study of Myth." *American Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 68, no. 270, Winter 1955, pp. 428-444.
- Linder, Douglas. "The Rodney King Beating Trials." *JURIST*, December 2001.
- Lund, Martin. "The Mutant Problem: X-Men, Confirmation Bias, and the Methodology of Comics and Identity." *European Journal of American studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2015.
- McKellen, Ian. "Buzzfeed Interview." *Buzzfeed.com*, February 21, 2014.
- Mokoena, Dikeledi A. "*Black Panther* and the Problem of the Black Radical." *Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 11, no. 9, August 2018.
- Motley Fool Editorial Staff. "Deadpool and Autonomous Cars Revisited." *Industry Focus Podcast*, February 23, 2016.
- Orlando Bagwell. "Malcolm X: Make it Plain." *PBS' American Experience*, aired January 26, 1994.
- Pakenham, Thomas. *The Scramble for Africa, 1876-1912*. 1st US ed., Random House, 1991.

- Pollard, Tom. *Hollywood 9/11: Superheroes, Supervillains, and Super Disasters*. Paradigm Publishers, 2011.
- “Project MKULTRA, The CIA’S Program of Research in Behavioral Modification.” *Joint Hearing before the Select Committee on Intelligence*, August 3, 1977.
- Russo, Anthony and Huver, Scott. “Interview with NBC New York.” *NBC New York*, August 7, 2012.
- Superman*. Directed by Richard Donner, performances by Christopher Reeve, Margot Kidder, Gene Hackman, and Marlon Brando, Warner Bros. Pictures, 1978.
- Scorsese, Martin. “I Said Marvel Movies Aren’t Cinema. Let Me Explain.” *The New York Times*, Nov. 4, 2019.
- Truffaut, Francois. “A Certain Tendency of the French Cinema.” *Cahiers du Cinema*, 1954.
- “Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT ACT) Act of 2001.” *Congress.gov*, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/107th-congress/house-bill/3162>, 107th Congress, House Resolution 3162, Passed October 26, 2001.
- Ward, Thomas. “Wakanda Liberation is this? Interrogating Black Panther’s Relationship with Colonialism.” *Slavery & Abolition*, vol. 41, no. 1, January 2020.
- Williams, Delice. “Three Theses about *Black Panther*.” *Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 11, no. 9, August 2018.
- Wynter, D. E. “Combat, Couture, and Caribbeana; Cultural Process in Coogler’s *Black Panther*.” *Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 11, no. 9, August 2018.

X, Malcom. "The Ballot or the Bullet." *The Ballot or the Bullet: Malcolm X (1925–1965)*. Dorling Kindersley Ltd, 2013, pp. 308-309.

X-Men. Directed by Bryan Singer, performances by Patrick Stewart, Hugh Jackman, Ian McKellen, Halle Berry, Famke Janssen, and James Marsden, 20th Century Fox, 2000.