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SPECIAL DOSSIER | (Super)Heroes in the 21st-Century American Imagination
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Introduction

Marica Orrù

Since their inception, superheroes have represented a fundamental element of the US American imaginary. When we go back and look at their history, we found their origin in comics publications of the early nineteenth century but we can easily notice how their impact on readers quickly brought them to other forms of media. Today, superheroes in general—but in particular US American superheroes and superheroes inspired by them—have conquered mainstream film productions, cartoons, video-games and much more. Other than being an exceptional tool of entertainment, superheroes have always been an expression of national identity, beliefs, and values. This is particularly evident if we think of some of the most famous heroes of the past who made it to more recent transpositions and adaptations. Superman is perceived as a champion of the oppressed always ready to sacrifice himself for his people, Captain America proudly wears the US American flag as his costume and risks his life fighting the Nazis, Batman uses his financial resources to protect the people of Gotham City, Wonder Woman deeply believes in peace and justice for the vulnerable strata of the population. At this point, they are cornerstones of the US American superhero range but, accompanied by a plethora of major and minor superheroic figures, they are still capable of engaging the public's attention and to embody most of the dominant US American values.

In fact, they are not the only ones capturing the scene anymore. New heroes and heroines are born every day, and thanks to the outburst of Hollywood movies about them in the 2000s they have reached an even wider diffusion. The Marvel Cinematic Universe has seen the release of more than twenty superhero movies and tv-series between 2008 and 2019, and DC has followed with a project of relaunch of some of its most loved characters, paving the way for a new superhero renaissance. Today, old values coexist with new popular culture topics and new social themes that need their own superheroes to be embodied and represented. These new heroes and heroines come with old and new medias, believe in equality, freely express their sexuality, fight for political correctness and defend diversity. This dossier aims to discuss the nostalgia of old narratives and the innovation of the new ones that help us deal with the struggle inherent of our current times.

In "Looking for the Arab Superheroine: Layla El-Faouly, Marvel's *Moon Knight*, and the Imperial Gaze," Zvonimir Prtenjača examines the stereotype of the Arab woman perpetrated by Hollywood and how in the past this resulted in a lack of interesting and well

developed Arab female characters in cinematic and tv productions. The article aims at showing how Arab women are starting to reject the western gaze by analyzing one of Marvel's most recent tv-series, *Moon Knight*, and its fierce female protagonist: Layla El-Faouly.

Troy Bordun in his article "Wonder Woman's Deleuzian Ethics in Grant Morrison and Yanick Paquette's Wonder Woman: Earth One" uses Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's claims about the limitations of the use of violence as the only form of problem solving in superhero narrations to analyze Wonder Woman's character. With particular reference to Grant Morrison and Yanick Paquette's *Wonder Woman: Earth One,* Volume 1 (2016), the article highlights Wonder Woman's alternative ways of communication which lead her to be a different kind of superheroine.

In "The Politics of Antihero Aesthetics: Andy Warhol's *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* at the 1964 World's Fair," Elena Sidorova studies the famous series of portraits made by Andy Warhol and the economic-political context in which the project was developed. The ambiguous theme of the antihero is explored together with the roles of Philip Johnson, architect of the pavilion in which the piece was exposed, and Ileana Sonnabend, art dealer and responsible of the international circulation of Warhol's work.

The article "WandaVision through the Sitcoms: A Study of the Series' Narrative Construction" by Ana Sánchez-Asenjo examines the Marvel tv-series *WandaVision* and its peculiar structure. Making the characters travel through several famous sitcoms of different ages, the series is an homage to the genre. This analysis deeply inspects every episode to find the connections between the sitcom genre development through the history and how it is used to enact the characters' story.

In her article "The Chivalric Romance in the Age of its Neoliberal Reproducibility," Alice Balestrino presents the hypothesis that the Avengers adventures and the ones of Iron Man in particular are a modern translation of chivalric romance and knights' quests. To prove this thesis, the article examines the Iron Man and the Avengers' movies in continuity with literary tradition.

Leonor Acosta Bustamante provides her reflections in "Twenty-First-Century Avengers: Exploration of War, Globalization, and Identity Politics," an analysis of how the Marvel Cinematic Universe has, with the four movies of The Avengers saga between 2012 and 2019, explored the topic of war and its implications. The article aims to give an analysis of the movies and how they succeed in offering to the public an interesting deconstruction of stereotypes and simplistic concepts such as good and evil.

"Feminist Quest Heroine: Female Superheroines and Deconstruction of Male Heroism" by Thanong Aupitak discusses how the concept of heroism evolved through time, leaving the stereotype of the white muscular male hero behind to enclose a more inclusive and wide range of possibilities. Grounded in gender studies, the text develops its

thesis through the analysis of past and present superhero popular products of entertainment.

The last article is "*V for Vendetta* (2005) and the Sociopolitical Impact of a Shakesperean Dystopian Avenger" by Xelo Forés Rossell and it is ananalysis of James McTeigue and the Wachowski sisters' film adaptation (2005) of Alan Moore and David Lloyd's cult graphic novel V for Vendetta (1982–1989). This examination is particularly focused on the representations of activism, political control, and the capacity of the film to draw on Shakespearean themes while concerning itself with contemporary issues.

Looking for the Arab Superheroine: Layla El-Faouly, Marvel's *Moon Knight*, and the Imperial Gaze

Zvonimir Prtenjača

Abstract

Seen through Hollywood's imperialist and masculinist lenses, the Arab woman is exoticized as a veiled, taunting belly dancer, eroticized as a licentious slave concubine confined to a harem, and monstrified as an alluring temptress or a conniving terrorist. Excluded from any possibility of a dialectical response, this Othered damsel in distress is reduced to a commodity first gazed upon and then (ab)used by the Western man. But what happens when the Arab woman returns the Westerner's voyeuristic and fetishistic gaze and evades the traps set by his gendered stereotypes? This paper pursues the answer to that question by scrutinizing Layla El-Faouly's depiction in the Marvel Cinematic Universe's sixth television series, *Moon Knight* (2022), wherein the Egyptian explorer, archaeologist adventurer, and superheroine engages in what E. Ann Kaplan terms "the looking *relation*" (1997, xviii, original emphasis) with the overzealous American leader of the Disciples of Ammit, Arthur Harrow. The paper traces Layla on her "complex intellectual/psychic journey" through Harrow's "objectifying imperialist gaze," concluding that she effects the "renewing process of inter-racial looking relations" (Kaplan 1997, 14) for the Arab woman by refusing to be rendered voiceless, passive, and foreign in the Westerner's eye.

Keywords: Arab women, gender stereotypes, imperial gaze, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, *Moon Knight*, superheroine.

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> One aspect of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is *viewed*. *Television*, the *films*, and all the *media's* ... *standardization* and *cultural stereotyping* have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative *demonology* of "the mysterious Orient."
>
> (Said 1978, 26, emphases mine)

1. Introduction

The above-quoted assertion, taken from the Palestinian American cultural theorist Edward Said's seminal postcolonial treatise, *Orientalism* (1978), is especially pertinent to US American film and television industries and the many ways in which they have been

misrepresenting the Arab[1] woman since their inceptive days. Gaelle Picherit-Duthler and Alia Yunis argue that, prior to television's development and popularization amid the twentieth century, Hollywood's germinal motion pictures "borrowed" the "prototype of the Arab female" from the imperialist narrative "of the Arabian Nights" (2011, 227-228), which was produced and partially lodged into Western minds by various French and British composers, artists, travelogue writers, and translators throughout the late eighteenth and the entire nineteenth century.

Transposed onto the highly in-demand cinematic reels at the turn of the century, this narrative soon reached an audience larger than its literary and performative counterparts. Two of the earliest films which defined the Arab woman for the American public exclusively as an exotic and overly sexualized, veiled belly dancer, or as a black magic-wielding man-eater, were James Henry White's *Fatima's Coochee-Coochee Dance* (1896) and James Gordon Edwards' blockbuster, *Cleopatra* (1917). In the former, the Syrian-born Fatima Djemille's version of *raqs sharqi*, a classical North African dance which she had previously performed under the moniker of "Little Egypt" at Chicago's 1893 World Columbian Exposition, is "stripped" of its "context" to fetishize the Arab woman "for a (mostly male) Western audience" (Wheeler 2023), her underwear encasing her voluptuous hips and protruding under a tight-fitting, bosom-emphasizing dress. In the latter, the White actress Theda Bara, publicized through Fox Studios' marketing ploy as the daughter of an Arab sheikh and a Frenchwoman from the Sahara, plays the half-naked Serpent queen of the Nile and the Siren of Egypt who seduces Julius Caesar and Mark Antony only to fulfill her own intentions.

These silent films imported the image of the Arab woman as "less a woman than a display of impressive but verbally inexpressive femininity" (Said 1978, 187) directly into the Western male spectators' minds. Both films were rigorously scrutinized and heavily blue-penciled by their censorship boards, but that did not prevent White American men to crowd the lounges "stocked with kinetoscopes" (Wheeler 2023) and line up the cinemas' entrances to feast their eyes on the under-clothed Arab and non-Arab woman promoted as carnal, foreign, untamed, and ravening. She, on the other hand, remained an unvoiced, passive object on display, one fully consumed by and contained within the men's acts of fervent ogling. In such a one-sided "looking relation," as E. Ann Kaplan calls it, the American's "male" and "imperial gaze" intensified his potency as "the male subject" and fortified his centrality as "the white western subject" (1997, 78-79). Him

[1] Throughout this paper, the term "Arab" is understood in its ethnolinguistic and culturohistorical nature. It refers to people whose first language is Arabic and who hail from the countries that make up the Arab world: "Algeria, Bahrain, Chad, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen" (Shaheen 2003, 193).

wantonly staring at the Arab woman and savoring only the surface level of her being as an erotic sensation consolidated the still prevalent "gaze structure" which refused to recognize that "non-American peoples have integral cultures and lives that work according to their own, albeit different, logic" (Kaplan 1997, 78). From the standpoint of Saidian thought—which, by proxy, entails the Foucauldian sense of surveillance and the Gramscian understanding of cultural hegemony—the White American man was the active participant in this process of looking, the Western (Occidental) "watcher" wholly possessing the Arab woman as the non-Western (Oriental) "*watched*" (Said 1978, 103, original emphasis). Excluded from any possibility of a dialectical response and relegated to the receiving end in such a dominance hierarchy, the female subaltern became a fixed axis around which the White observer's "two powerful objectifying gazes" (Kaplan 1997, 22), the colonialist and masculinist ones, started to persistently rotate.

Because this paramountcy or "the 'master' position" he assumed was fragile and ephemeral, the White American man had to regularly prevent the "threat of being toppled" (Kaplan 1997, 79) by denying the Arab woman the status of an engaged looker. His need to sustain himself at the behest of the Arab woman led to the previously described filmic discourse about the enfeebling Western man and the enfeebled non-Western woman sprouting too forcefully to be weeded out. During Hollywood's post-World War I Technicolor and the talkies period, which lasted roughly from the early 1920s to the mid-to-late 1940s, American films perpetuated the American man-Arab woman monologue in color and with sound, "its gender and racial corollaries" and "imaginative geography" (Bernstein 1997, 3) fully included. If she was not a semi-nude damsel in distress similar to the Princess in Douglas Fairbanks' *Thief of Baghdad* (1924), abducted from her exotic homeland as presented in George Melford's *The Sheik* (1921) and necessitating a rescue by the White Western male protagonist, the Arab woman was a vicious mantrap akin to Zaida in Clarence Badger's *She's a Sheik* (1927). These White filmmakers synthesized the "narrative and visual conventions" of the Arab woman and her country of origin, which were then repurposed by their peers who took credits for later "*Arabian Nights* films" and "romantic melodramas" (Bernstein 1997, 4). Pictures such as *Arabian Nights* (1942), *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1944), *Lost in a Harem* (1944), *Son of Ali Baba* (1952), *Land of the Pharaohs* (1955), and *Harum Scarum* (1965) confined the Arab woman to a harem and eroticized her as a licentious slave concubine. Features including, but not limited to *Samson and Delilah* (1949), *Saadia* (1953), *Solomon and Sheba* (1959), *Cleopatra* (1963), and *Beast of Morocco* (alternatively *The Hand of Night*, 1968) monstrified her as an alluring temptress. Disregarding the ramifications real-life Arab women were experiencing due to geopolitical and sociocultural shifts in their native countries during and after World War II, Hollywood turned them into the "object of spectacle for the Western" man's "voyeuristic gaze" (Shohat 1990, 40).

With the advancement of broadcasting technologies in the 1950s, television would replace the radio as the mass medium prevalent in American households, and smaller screens promptly followed the bigger ones' suit in Othering the Arab woman. The first production complicit in such Orientalist project was Sidney Shelton's fantasy sitcom *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–1970). Not only was Barbara Eden's Persian-speaking genie hopelessly subservient to Larry Hagman's Tony Nelson, the White United States Airforce captain who had found her in a bottle on a remote beach, but she was plainly transcribed from *Arabian Nights* and "connected in the audience's mind" to her gendered cinematic equivalent "through costume, plot, setting, or dialogue" (Bullock 2018, 13). When Eden's White skin, barely covered by the faux-Arabian garbs, became uninteresting to White American men, Shelton would appeal to their imperial and male gaze by allowing them to leer at the Iranian-born Tanya Lemani's belly dancer-turned-stripper, Sadelia. Continuing such trend of whitewashing and presenting non-Arab[2] women as Arab was Michael Mann's crime drama *Vega$* (1978–1981) which, according to Jack Shaheen's influential *The TV Arab*, devoted an entire episode to Robert Urich's Dan Tanna rushing in to save Kim Cattrall's Princess Zara "from fanatics" who kidnap her and plan to murder her as they seek to "overthrow the Arab government headed by her father" (1984, 47). Shaheen (1984, 48–49) notes that two popular detective dramas, *Rockford Files* (1974–1980) and *Scarecrow and Mrs. King* (1983–1987), further contributed to Western men perceiving Arab women as compliant housewives. The former introduced the American man to Maria Grimm's sexually stifled Khedra Azziz, the Arab woman whose desires can only be quenched by Sean, the friend of the titular detective Jim Rockford who "precipitated" the oncoming "Arab attack" by "having an affair with a married woman" (Shaheen 1984, 49). The latter, on the other hand, epitomized the Arab woman as a meek matron through Jane Kaczmarek's Princess Salana Sharese Khan who, in addition to being played by a White actress, at point apologetically declared that "Arab mothers don't do anything, especially talk or give opinions" (Shaheen 1984, 48).

All of these incarnations of the Arab woman stemmed from an Orientalist system of representation, but real-life diplomatic and economic incursions into the Western *status quo* would set the stage for a different, albeit equally problematic framework. Following on Shaheen (2003, 188–89) and Picherit-Dutler and Yunis (2011, 234–38), Evelyn Alsultany writes that American "news reporting" on Arab-Israeli conflicts (1948, 1967, 1973), Muammar Gaddafi's rise to power in Libya (1969–1977), the "Munich Olympics (1972)" massacre, "the Arab oil embargo (1973)," several "airplane hijackings in the 1970s and the 1980s," and principally "the Iran hostage crisis (1979–1980)" (2012, 8–9) resuscitated the Arab *femme fatale* as a conniving terrorist. The Oriental woman would not

[2] Despite the plenitude of their Orientalist portrayals, Iran and Turkey are not Arab countries and their citizens use Farsi and Turkish as their first languages, respectively.

vanish: she returned as a salacious courtesan in pictures such as *The Spy Who Loved Me* (1977), *The Man with Bogart's Face* (1980), and *Ishtar* (1987), but she would now be accompanied, on-screen and then in the American audience's minds, by the likes of Marthe Keller's villainous Dahlia Iyad from *Black Sunday* (1977), Persis Khambatta's Shakka Holland from *Nighthawks* (1981), and Barbara Carrera's Fatima Blush from *Never Say Never Again* (1983). American entertainment media had already amalgamated these non-Arab women's racial and ethnic identities with the Arab female ones, but now it began to push this confluence onward by priming its "viewers" to "equate Arabs" with "Muslims," "first with dissoluteness and patriarchy/misogyny and then with terrorism" (Alsultany 2012, 9). The Arab woman was noticeably absent from American television and appeared sporadically on silver screens in the 1990s, which were bestrode by *Aladdin*'s (1992) depiction of Jasmine as an objectified plaything and *The Mummy*'s (1999) of Anck-su-namun's as a hyper-exotic, Egyptian demoness.

After the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, however, the Arab woman would reappear in the form of the homogenized, mercilessly gunned down mass of Yemeni women in *Rules of Engagement* (2000). This was just one of many portrayals which sprung from a "neomedieval attitude of fear toward Arabs-Muslims" (Bullock 2018, 8) which American governmental discourses and news industries exploded into a generally accepted anti-Muslim rendering structure after the Twin Towers fell on September 11, 2001. Similar to how it "informed" its viewers that every Iranian is an Arab fanatic freedom fighter in the wake of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's followers holding fifty-two American citizens captive for over a year during the Iranian hostage crisis, American media communicated to its consumers that all Arabs are Muslims[3] and terrorists after the 9/11 attacks. The United States' various sources of power mobilized such "knowledge," or what Alsultany terms the "conflated Arab/Muslim 'look'," as an "effective" justification "tool" (Alsultany 2012, 9–10) for the "liberating" War on Terror they were waging throughout the Arab world and Southwest Asia. Unsurprisingly, "post-9/11 TV dramas" engaged in this xenophobic design without critical inquiry, reducing the Arab woman either to the role of "Arab/Muslim female terrorist," as embodied in *24*'s (2001–2014) Dina Araz, or the same series' "Arab/Muslim American patriotic government agent" (Alsultany 2012, 71), Nadia Yassir. Nowadays, if she is not a good Arab/Muslim, such as *Homeland*'s (2011–2020) CIA analyst Fara Sherazi, or a bad one like *Bodyguard*'s (2018-2024) bomber Nadia Ali, the Arab woman is a victim of anti-Arab and Islamophobic vitriol, as displayed through *7th Heaven*'s (1996–2007) Yasmine Halawi. Post-9/11 films do not stray too far, either, because women from Saudi Arabia are presented as oppressed in *The Kingdom* (2007),

[3] In reality, the Muslim majority is situated in Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India. Contrary to the popular belief disseminated and anchored in the public consciousness through the United States' post-9/11 smear campaign, then, most, though not all Arabs are Muslims, nor are all Muslims solely Arabs.

while the Iraqi women of *The American Sniper* (2014) function only as unidentifiable bundles of covert insurrectionists.

Regardless of when they were produced or the genres they belong to, all of these depictions of the Arab woman continue to serve as mutations of the gendered nineteenth-century construct Said helped reveal, deployed in different periods for different reasons. Tania Kamal-Eldin, the producer and director of a critical documentary survey of Oriental female caricatures in American cinema, *Hollywood Harems* (1999), argues that the Arab woman remains "hot," "exotic," and "lavish" to directly cater to "Western male fantasies" of affection, but also imbued with "intrigue," "treachery," and "beauty" (quoted in Abdo 2002, 234) to provide for their fantasies of protection. Put simply, the Arab woman is "the East" within these relations, the prostrated looked-at, the American man is "the West," the agential looker, and "the camera's lens the site of their heated" inter-racial looking "liaison" (Abdo 2002, 234). But what happens when these roles are subverted and positions reversed? What if the Arab woman returns the Westerner's voyeuristic and fetishistic gaze and evades the traps set by his gendered and ethnic stereotypes, as twins Nimah and Raina Amin do in *Quantico* (2015–2018), the titular Lebanese heroine does in *Marjoun and the Flying Headscarf* (2019), and Nadia Shanaa arguably does in *Elite* (2018–ongoing)? What if the gaze is not the one which "refuses," but allows for "mutual gazing" and "subject-to-subject recognition" (Kaplan 1997, 79), as it does with *Amreeka*'s (2009) Muna Farah, *May in the Summer*'s (2013) eponymous protagonist, *Ramy*'s (2019-ongoing) Dena Hassan, *The Search Party*'s (2016–2022) Dory Seif, and some of the women of *We Are Lady Parts* (2021-ongoing)?

This paper pursues the answer to that question by scrutinizing Layla El-Faouly's depiction in Marvel Cinematic Universe's sixth television series, *Moon Knight* (2022), wherein the Egyptian explorer, archaeologist adventurer, and superheroine gazes back at the overzealous American leader of the Disciples of Ammit, Arthur Harrow. To contextualize how the Marvel series makes this looking relation possible, the paper first compares and contrasts its initial portrayal of the Arab woman with those of its contemporaries in the American superhero imaginary. Because Marvel executives and the creatives involved in the making of *Moon Knight* have confirmed only Layla's position as the first "Arab superhero" on "the world's biggest stage: American TV" (Fahim 2022, n.p.), neither verifying nor denying her being a Muslimah,[4] the paper focuses only on how her ethnicity is related to subverting the dominating "Occidental" and masculine "gaze" (AlAwadhi

[4] For more on this topic, see Egyptian film critic Joseph Fahim's piece for *Middle East Eye* in which he sets Layla's depiction side by side with that of *Ms Marvel*'s (2022-ongoing) teenage Pakistani superheroine, Kamala Khan. He argues that, while *Moon Knight*'s Layla certainly stands as an empowering character for women throughout the Arab world, the show does not focus on her religious identity. "Only *Ms Marvel* tackles … the question of God," elevating Kamala to the status of the "very first Muslim superhero from South Asia to grace the American screen" (Fahim 2022).

2021) which *Young Justice: Outsiders* (2019) and *Black Adam* (2022) perpetuate. The paper then follows Layla on her "complex intellectual/psychic journey" through Harrow's "objectifying imperialist gaze" as she effects the "renewing process of inter-racial looking relations" (Kaplan 1997, 14). The series achieves this, purports the paper, by highlighting Layla as refusing to be rendered a voiceless, passive, and foreign damsel in distress in the Westerner's eye. *Moon Knight* thus avoids "the voyeuristic Hollywood camera," meaning "the colonialist (and male) gazes," ushering in "the processes" of correcting and "healing" (Kaplan 1997, 20) the Arab woman's fallacious representation and wounded image. Ultimately, the paper concludes that *Moon Knight* does not allow for the Western man's penetration and suppression of the Arab woman, but rather helps constitute her alternative ways of existing.

2. "Summon the Suit": Contemporary Superhero TV and Film and the Male Imperial Gaze

As the paper's introduction shows, "Hollywood's celluloid mythology" has been mechanically framing its distorted "renditions" of the Arab woman "in viewer's minds" (Shaheen 2003, 174) for over a century. Not unexpectedly, these crude stereotypes recur in vastly popular and box-office shattering films and television series centered on superheroes, as well. In fact, more often than not, these contemporary texts are "converted into a colonial fantasy," where the moviegoers and television watchers, "situated" in the "Occidental" perspective of the White savior, usually "gaze at and objectify the oriental body" (AlAwadhi 2021, n.p.). In such a scenario, women touted to be Arab are either rendered "stereotypical and tokenistic" or "exotified" and "even villainized" (AlAwadhi 2021, n.p.).

A classic post-9/11 case in point is *The Dark Knight Rises* (2012), a film in which Talia al Ghul, played by the White French actress Marion Cotillard, masquerades as the philanthropic Gothamite Miranda Tate to gain Bruce Wayne/Batman's favor. In the final act, however, she reveals herself as the heiress to the criminal League of Shadows, exacting vengeance for the killing of its leader and her father, Ra's al Ghul, as well as her mother, an unnamed warlord's daughter. Talia's identity is superficially coded as Arab in a flashback sequence via a language that sounds like Moroccan, but complicated through a sunbaked and jaundiced *mise-en-scène* whose actual shooting location was Mehrangarh Fort in Jodhpur, India. In any case, both Talia and her place of origin are presented as different and "ancient" to Batman's advanced Gotham, as are the Pakistani women to Colonel James Rhodes in *Iron Man 3* (2013). When the War Machine, recoated in the colors of the American flag and overhauled as the Iron Patriot, lands in an illegal sportswear factory in search of the Mandarin, the film's well-known Arab terrorist, he believes it his duty to "liberate" the female workers limned as Muslim through their black niqabs. And, as if advancing "the Arab/Muslim conflation" through the narrative of "the oppressed Muslim woman in Pakistan" (Alsultany 2012, 73) was not troublesome enough, *Iron Man 3* only becomes more controversial when the Iron Patriot faces off against one of the

women who unveils herself as an assassin. The filmic text here supports the homogenization and the anonymization of all Arab/Muslim women, but also their vilification as the traditional Islamic headwear is encumbered with a sense of risk and danger. A close textual and visual analysis of more contemporary entries in the American imaginary of the Arab woman, such as Brandon Vietti and Greg Weisman's *Young Justice: Outsiders* (2019) and Jaume Collet-Serra's *Black Adam* (2022), likewise reveals that even a publicly and critically well-accepted animated superhero show and live-action film can and do succumb to the male imperial gaze. These texts, intentionally set up and advertised as being reflective of the Arab experience, only reinforce the "self/other dichotomy" by allowing the "racialized" and gendered "stereotypes" (AlAwadhi 2021, n.p.) about Arab women to recur in their narratives.

The third season of *Young Justice* concretizes such Othering in the character of Gabrielle Daou, a refugee escaping from the invaded, war-torn, fictional Arab country of Qurac[5] displayed in the series' fourth episode, "Private Security" (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 13:56–14:11), and supposedly finding shelter in Markovia, a state in Eastern Europe. It is there, however, as the series' sixth and first episode, "Rescue Op" and "Princes All," show, that she is continuously belittled by Markovian citizens for being a dark-skinned migrant covered by a hijab (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 21:56–22:20) and positioned as an accomplice in the assassination of King Viktor and Queen Ilona Markov enacted by Jaculi, another Quraci refugee (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 16:52–17:09). "Antosocial Pathologies," the series' twenty-second episode, reveals that she was experimented on by Queen Ilona's brother, Baron Bedlam, the *de facto* leader of a meta-human trafficking syndicate and, having tested negative for the meta-gene, killed by Helga Jace, Bedlam's chief scientific researcher (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 17:33–18:13).

Suffering the effects of their gazes, the Arab girl is "humiliated, demonized" and "enslaved," all the while remaining "mute" (Shaheen 2003, 183). And, if the projection of such images was not demeaning enough, *Young Justice*'s creators deemed it appropriate to execute the Arab girl and "use her corpse" to create a new character whose "connections to Gabrielle's culture" (Salih 2019, n.p.) are cursory at best. Indeed, "inhabiting the body of the dead Quraci war refugee" is "the spirit of a New Genesis Mother Box" (Salih 2019, n.p.), a sentient piece of alien technology operated by the New God Metron. Tinkered with by the Markovian geneticist Simon Ecks, the machine reanimates Gabrielle into the nearly immortal Violet Harper/Halo in the series' second episode, "Royal We,"

[5] In 2012, while replying to a question whether Qurac and Bialya—initially appearing in "Image," the twenty-first episode of *Young Justice*'s first season—are meant to geographically resemble Syria and Iraq, Greg Weisman, the series' creator and showrunner, admitted that such correspondence was not deliberate. He did, however, specify, that the two fictional countries were consciously designed and deployed as "both" "Arabian" and "North African" (Weisman 2012).

draining her in the process of all of Gabrielle's Arab heritage save for her ethno-racial markers and early displacement memories (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 11:51–13:42). It does not even understand why it wears a hijab; in "Private Security," its only reasoning is because "it feels right" (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 06:11–06:19). Even when Halo accesses Gabrielle's memories and visits her family to offer them closure in the series' twentieth episode, "Quiet Conversations" (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 11:41–12:14), it is voiced by a Pakistani-American actress Zehra Fazal, conversing in Arabic with "a very bizarre accent" (Salih 2019, n.p.). In other words, that which is left of Gabrielle is not Arab, but an extension of Alsultany's notion of the Arab/Muslim melding. It only looks Muslim and sounds like an Arab, at least by the standards of the post-9/11 American imagination. What is more, in allowing several male antagonists to inflict violence upon Gabrielle's body, the effects of which serve only to stir the male heroes' powers and feelings, the animated series imparts, through a disturbingly "extreme" and gendered optics "fixated into" a sort of a "perversion" (Mulvey 1975, 9), images of the easily (ab)used and silent Arab woman. In the series' third episode titled "Eminent Threat," for example, Plasmus melts Gabrielle's face until Jefferson Pierce/Black Lightning decides to re-activate his powers (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 15:34–16:36). Similarly, its sixth and ninth episodes, "Rescue Op" and "Home Fires," see Gabrielle's neck being snapped by Sensei (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 15:53–17:40) and her torso penetrated by Lobo's harpoon, events which prompt Brion Markov/Geo-Force to express his fear of losing her and his love towards her (*Young Justice: Outsiders* 2019, 13:26–14:02). The sequences of Gabrielle dying over and over again only to immediately overcome such brutalities, herein in the service of further characterizing the men in her proximity, ingrain an image of the Arab woman divorced from her actuality. This, in turn, permits the Western "obsessive voyeurs and Peeping Toms" to derive "sexual" and other types of "satisfaction" simply by "watching, in an active controlling sense," the Arab woman as the "objectified other" (Mulvey 1975, 9).

Equally vexing depictions can be found in more recent blockbusters, as well. In addition to presenting its fictional country of Kahndaq, a stand-in for a real-world Arab one,[6] through a yellow filter (Collet-Serra 2022, 6:03–07:57), meaning "as unable to evolve, frozen in time, and continuously at war" with the militant organization called the Intergang, *Black Adam* very obviously shoehorns its Arab actors and actresses into "the secondary roles of the buffoon, the villain, and the damsel in distress" (Rebeiz 2022, n.p.). Marwan Kenzari, who is of Tunisian and Dutch descent, plays both the corrupt Intergang leader Ishmael Gregor and the monstrous Sabbac, all with his "dark features and thick

[6] In "A Visitor's Guide to Kahndaq," DC's official explanatory tie-in to both *Black Adam* comic books and the film, Alex Jaffe writes that Kahndaq is "a single nation in the Sinai Peninsula," situated "relatively closely to Egypt," whose inhabitants in "modern day" converse in "Arabic" (2022, n.p.).

black curly hair," while the Palestinian-American Mohammed Amer performs Karim, the embodiment of "fat" Arab "stigmatization" juxtaposed "with humor" (Rebeiz 2022, n.p.). It is the latter's sister, though, Adrianna Tomaz, carried out on-screen by the Iranian-American Sarah Shahi, who undergoes the process of gendered and colonial Othering. A former lecturer-archaeologist at Kahndaq's University and a self-proclaimed resistance fighter (Collet-Serra 2022, 8:27–8:40), Adrianna is equipped with enough knowledge and skill to locate Teth-Adam's tomb, recite an incantation to awaken him as she deems him the people's champion, and survive the Intergang's ambush (Collet-Serra 2022, 11:34–19:35). Yet as soon as the American government-sanctioned Justice Society, made up of Doctor Fate, Hawkman, Cyclone, and Atom Smasher, lands in Kahndaq and presents its version of Black Adam as a threat (Collet-Serra 2022, 50:58–53:16), the film's narrative objectifies her as she "quickly shifts from the educated and courageous woman" to "the oppressed" Arab "woman in need of saving by an outside force" (Rebeiz 2022, n.p.). Forbidden from assuming her comic book mantle of the powerful superheroine Isis, Adrianna Tomaz is ultimately curtailed to Black Adam's romantic foil (Collet-Serra 2022, 1:50:53–1:51:42), playing "no active role in liberating her own people" (Rebeiz 2022, n.p.). The film thus follows the trajectory delineated by the *Indiana Jones* and other films alike, reproducing "the colonial vision in which Western 'knowledge' of ancient civilizations 'rescues' the past from oblivion," with the masculine rescuers "denuding" the Arab woman through their gaze and "confining" her "within Western" thought (Shohat 1990, 42). And again, like many of their precursors, the studio's executives and the film's creatives fuel the Arab/Iranian fusing by casting a woman of Iranian descent to portray a female character obviously written and delineated as Arab.

Young Justice: Outsiders and *Black Adam*, therefore, ostensibly depict the facets of the Arab woman's cultural identity, only to immediately erase them and relay the message that, on big screens or small, she is not to perform any other narrative role except for the one construed for her under the male imperial gaze. But, whereas Gabrielle and Adrianna "are not constituted as subjects," meaning that "they cannot look (i.e., look *for* whites, satisfy openly their curiosity about whites), let alone gaze" (Kaplan 1997, 7), *Moon Knight*'s Layla El-Faouly is and can, as the Egyptian-Palestinian May Calamawy's portrayal in the show's second and all the ensuing episodes proves. Depicted as competent enough to track down her husband, Mark Spector, a mercenary and the dominant among the titular superhero's three dissociated personalities, after he had been missing for months (Moorhead and Benson 2022a, 13:27–14:53), Layla is also a fluent speaker of French, knowledgeable in Egyptian history and mythology, and literate in hieroglyphics (Moorhead and Benson 2022a, 16:10–17:03). Additionally, she not only safeguards the Scarab of Ammit, a powerful compass named after the Egyptian goddess (and the "swallower of the dead") who Arthur Harrow plans to locate and resurrect with the aim of unleashing chaos upon the world, but she also fends off the advances of his zealots

(Moorhead and Benson 2022a, 32:24–34:57) towards Steven Grant, Moon Knight's second personality and a mild-mannered Londoner who works in the British Museum's gift shop. A moment especially poignant for Layla's agency occurs in the episode when she shouts that she has the Scarab and returns Harrow's gaze, that is, his male and imperial "one-way subjective vision" whose "historical, cultural and psychoanalytic implications and effects" (Kaplan 1997, xvi) are summarized in his reprobation of the Egyptian woman holding a piece of her country's history and culture: "You couldn't possibly understand the value of what you're holding. Let me have that. I'll keep it safe" (Moorhead and Benson 2022a, 32:22–32:38). Aware of the relic's potency, however, Layla grips it tightly and again defends Steven, now from a jackal as one of the many creatures Harrow summons (Moorhead and Benson 2022a, 36:44–37:28) to extend his (and Ammit's, bearing in mind that he functions as her avatar) reach.

Therefore, even though Marc Spector, bound to the Egyptian moon god Khonshu as his avatar, assumes the control of his body from Steven and defeats the jackal, but loses the Scarab in the process, Layla does not allow herself to be subjugated by the White American man. She successfully evades Harrow's clutches and bars him from attaining the role of "an active, productive and creative" Westerner conquering what he believes to be "the feminine" Arab "wilderness" (Shohat 1990, 40). As she issues a determined counter-gaze, her previously described actions taking place in full effect, Layla disrupts the entrenched gendering of the Arab woman as a defenseless, simple-minded, and taciturn plaything easily re-educated and maneuvered by Western men. She does not desiderate Harrow's, that is, "the colonial patriarchal figure's … guidance and protection," nor does she permit him, as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) do with "the writer-soldier T. E. Lawrence or the scientist-archaeologist Dr Jones," to rescue "the Orient from its own obscurantism" (Shohat 1990, 40). These narrative decisions and representative incursions were intentional, confirms the show's Egyptian director and executive producer, Mohamed Diab, as Layla not conforming to the "tropes that Arab women are submissive" was "very important" to "portray" (Diab quoted in Kaye 2022) both for him and his collaborators. Her view of "the reality," which is that Arab "women," living "in harsh conditions" in "Third World countries," are and can be shown "stronger" (Diab quoted in Kaye 2022) than what the Western man's gaze portrays them to be, therefore merits closer inspection, to which this paper now turns.

3. "The Friendly Type": Empowering the Arab Explorer

Indeed, as the show's head writer Jeremy Slater corroborates in his tweet, "diversity was incredibly important" to the "writers' room" as much as the directors', with Layla entering the screenplay the "very first week, … although she was originally named Zayna Faoul" (Slater 2022, n.p.). It is no coincidence, then, that the opening sequence of *Moon Knight*'s third episode frames its and future events through her eyes. Aiming to secure a

passport for a safe passage to Cairo, Layla pays a visit to her late father's friend and a forger, Lagaro. Replying to the latter, who inquires whether her age-old accomplice's "little scarab" and daughter "burned too many bridges" while repatriating "stolen relics" and "cheeky antiques," Layla outright states that she does not purloin the artifacts which "have already been stolen," but rather takes "them off the black market" and returns "them to their rightful owners" (Diab 2022b, 2:00–3:52). Hence positioned as a scourge of colonial thieves, Layla is "actively trying to reclaim Egypt's cultural artifacts to repair centuries of imperialist damage" (Sopchockchai Bankard 2022, n.p.). Harrow and his Disciples exploring a desert in Cairo's vicinity, utilizing the Scarab to pinpoint Ammit's tomb, and digging through sand (Diab 2022b, 4:41–5:35), a segment which the show pans to immediately after Layla's proclamation, is likewise semantically coded as an elongation of the "First World cinema" and television not dissimilar to *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or *King Solomon's Mines* (1937, 1950, 1985), which narrate Western "penetration into the Third World through the figure of the discoverer" (Shohat 1997, 27).

As the show shifts its focalization from the American male viewpoint to that of the Arab woman, the camera zooming in on Layla's perception of the land divulges "the illusory and intrusive nature" of Harrow's "'discovery'" (Shohat 1997, 27). The interspersed shots of Layla enjoying a tamarind drink with Marc at Cairo's bazaar teeming with life and navigating the river Nile in a felucca, the modern R'n'B sounds of Hassan Shakosh and Wegz's "Salka" playing in the background (Diab 2022b, 20:50–21:45; 21:56–24:31), disrupt Harrow's and the spectator's truncated understanding of Egyptian culture and history as fossilized and unvarying. In other words, while Harrow hovers over an "*ancient* Egypt," Layla's "story takes place in *modern* Egypt" (Sopchockchai Bankard 2022, n.p.), a dichotomy further exacerbated when she and Marc, instructed in Giza's Chamber of the Gods by the avatar of goddess Hathor to seek Senfu's sarcophagus, reach Anton Mogart's privately owned Cairo estate. The French connoisseur of art and black-market dealer embeds his imperial gaze by renaming his thievery "a philanthropic effort at preservation" of history he takes "very seriously," which Layla sees through and contests by inquiring: "A self-appointed responsibility that you alone are able to enjoy, no?" (Diab 2022b, 26:44–27:04). Proceeding to Senfu's sarcophagus, Mogart queries the couple about their avid interest in the ancient medjay (a desert scout), interrupting Layla when she starts answering and requesting to "hear from" her "husband" (Diab 2022b, 27:08–27:17). The European "colonizer's act of appropriation" thus not only aims to secure his mastery of Egypt through his proprietorship of its riches and fortunes, but it likewise betrays its "gender overtones" (Shohat 1997, 27). For Mogart, regardless of his awareness of Layla's previous artifact-recovering exploits, the Egyptian woman is unworthy of conversing with as she could not possibly possess any worthy knowledge on the topic.

But when the camera hones in on Layla reading the *Studenwachen* texts about ancient Egyptian funeral rites, as well as successfully overcoming the hordes of Mogart's

men (Diab 2022b, 27:42–27:54; 32:30–32:43, 33:12–35:26) who are incited to attack by Harrow urging them not to "settle for a clue" when they can easily "have the treasure" (Diab 2022b, 30:17–30:23), she actively resists being relegated to the role of the vacuous and the pliant Arab woman. The camera herein does not relay the Western explorer's "dynamic movement across a passive, static space," as does the one in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, nor does it allow him to strip "the land of its enigma" inch by inch and win "visual access to Oriental treasures through the eyes of the discoverer-protagonist" (Shohat 1990, 40). Rather, it is the Arab woman, returning to Egypt after being absent because of personal trauma, who re-connects with her homeland and re-discovers its treasures to prevent the Westerner's forceful entry. In so doing, she is never in the "background shots" that traditionally portray the Arab women as "Beasts of Burden," nor is she among the "shapeless Bundles of Black, a homogeneous sea of covered women trekking silently behind their unshaven mates" (Shaheen 2003, 183). The "stereotypical idiosyncrasies" binding the Arab woman to such "several regularly repeated 'B' images" (Shaheen 2003, 183) hence destabilized, Layla "looks" and connotes "curiosity about the Other, a wanting to know," opposing both Mogart's and Harrow's gazes as attempts "*not* to know, to deny, in fact" (Kaplan 1997, xvii).

Even when Harrow ventures to victimize her by stating that she keeps "thinking that distance will prevent the wounds from" her "father's murder from reopening" (Diab 2022b, 30:38–30:52), she is not hesitant to return his gaze and promptly spring into action to secure the cartonnage from Senfu's sarcophagus (Diab 2022b, 32:50–35:26) as shreds of history and culture which can help her and Marc prevent Harrow's resurrection of Ammit. In denying the force of Harrow's "imperial eyes," Layla by the same token denies the "seeing-man's" ability to "look out" and "possess" (Pratt 1992, 7) her or her land. She directly stares at "the (lettered, male, European)" and Western "eye," not granting it the right to trace and "familiarize ('naturalize') new sites/sights" and "life forms" by drawing them out from "tangled threads" and weaving them into Western-based "patterns of global unity and order" (Pratt 1992, 31). What is more, after Steven assumes the body to aid Khonshu's re-organization of the celestial bodies (Diab 2022b, 43:23–43:32), it is Layla who triangulates the stars' position to zero in on the location of Ammit's tomb. Resolving the conundrums of inconclusive coordinates herein does not function as "a *rite de passage* allegorizing" Harrow's "achievement of virile," remarkable "stature" (Shohat 1997, 27). Layla looking back at his coerced intrusion into Egypt and her psyche rather attains the role of a "strategy for opening up space" within "the looking relation" (Kaplan 1997, xviii). Decompressing the "repressed subjectivity of the subaltern" Arab woman, the show sanctions her active role in the "looking structures" (Kaplan 1997, 7) from which she had historically been factored out.

4. "The Tomb": Excavating the Arab Archaeologist Adventurer

Layla's active "reversing" of the Western male gaze as "a model for resisting marginalizing and domination" (Kaplan 1997, 294) is further fleshed out in *Moon Knight*'s fourth episode, which again opens with her rescuing the unconscious Steven from the Disciples of Ammit (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 3:20–5:25) and then driving off to Siwa Oasis in search for an entrance to Ammit's tomb (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 5:56–6:49). And it is precisely in such arid zones, where the Arab women have historically and cinematically been proffered as easily wounded and "playing off the masculine fantasy of complete control," that "real dramatic conflicts take place" (Shohat 1990, 42). The show upends such topoi of gendered inferiority and submission as the "daring and assertive" Layla is the first to enter "the male domain of the Oriental desert" (Shohat 1990, 42), secured and restricted by Harrow and his Disciples' now abandoned campsite. Scouring the tents, the depowered Steven, devoid of Khonshu's powers after rearranging the celestial bodies the night before, lets Marc know that he is aware that he is "bloody not alone," as "Layla" has "got" his "back" (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 9:20–9:24). The scene then cuts to her packing flare sticks and belaying (harnessing) Steven for the descent into Ammit's and her final avatar, Alexander the Great's, tomb. Together with the shots of her plunging into the uncharted territory of the burial chamber, adorned in heavy work boots, camouflage trousers, armored vest, and yellow builder gloves (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 9:37–12:02), these sequences communicate Layla's gradual adoption of the "profession" and the "mastery of the desert land" through "technology" reserved for and operated by the white Western explorers of the Hollywood adventure films, such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *The Mummy*, and *Sahara* (1983). This, in turn, disarranges the Western "characatures" of the Arab women, carefully and diligently ordained on the "silver screen" as "bumbling subservients" and "belly dancers bouncing voluptuously in palaces and erotically oscillating in slave markets" (Shaheen 2000, 26).

Rather than being sequestered to these loci of gendered subjection, Layla fearlessly moves around to explore the Eye of Horus-shaped sepulcher (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 14:04–16:05), ushering in the imagery of the active, Arab female adventurer archaeologist. It is when she encounters the primordial guardians of the tomb, the Heka priests, though, that the show "explicitly genderizes the relation between the explorer and the topography" (Shohat 1997, 29). Separating from Steven to evade one of the sorcerer's lethal forays, Layla successfully traverses a dilapidating ledge, only to be captured and overcome. The silhouette of the ancient warlock silencing her with his palm and forcing himself on top of her (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 22:36–24:18) clearly beckons the spectators to "an orgiastic space" (Shohat 1990, 42). Yet "the camera's fetishization of her body," a staple of classical Hollywood cinema, is noticeably absent throughout this entire sequence, with the focus on Layla fighting back obstructing "the Western projection" of the Arab woman as a "commodity" (Shohat 1990, 42). Her resistance climaxes as she

inserts one of the previously packed flare sticks into the Heka priest's eye. Penetrating the sorcerer with a clearly phallic symbol and punting him into the never-ending depths of the tomb's pit thus signals Layla's ousting of the traditional gendered hierarchizations.

Additionally, the socially and culturally loaded skirmish between the Heka priest and Layla becomes even denser when the camera trails from the latter's perspective onto Arthur Harrow, whose eyes have been affixed on the Arab woman throughout the entire sequence. As he softly declares how she "handled that beautifully" (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 25:54–25:58), the show reveals the Westerner's "scopophilic" gaze, associated with "the female form displayed for his enjoyment (connoting male phantasy)," as well as with his "control and possession" of the Arab "woman within" and beyond the series' "diegesis" (Mulvey 1975, 13). Layla, however, does not acquiesce to Harrow's covetous masculine gaze that protuberates his fantasies of affection onto her physique. Engaging in a stare-off with Harrow (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 24:21–24:29), the erect and determined Layla surpasses the Arab woman's "traditional exhibitionist role," in which she is to be synchronously laid out and eyeballed, her "appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact" to "connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey 1975, 11, original emphasis). She does not passively bestow her body to be stared down, constructed, and maintained by the white American subject who is "not interested in" the Arab woman as "the object per se," but rather "consumed with" his "own anxieties, which are inevitably intermixed with desire" (Kaplan 1997, xviii). In retorting "Why do all men like you feel it necessary to be just so condescending?" (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 26:00–26:08), Layla not only rejects the status of the sexualized object of Harrow's prurient curiosity, but also stets Hollywood's historically elided inferiorization of Arab women by white Western men.

With his domineering gaze at Layla blocked, Harrow proceeds to possess her by exposing her to emotional and psychological violence. "My little scarab," he asks while peering at her, "isn't that what your father used to call you?" (Moorhead and Benson 2022b, 29:42–30:37). Belittling and coercing Layla into believing that her husband is responsible for her father's death, a fact later disproven by Marc himself as it was his partner, Raul Bushman, who executed the Egyptian archaeologist, the American cultist attempts to manipulate her, utilizing a term of endearment from her childhood as a discursive weapon of disparagement. However, Layla, insofar "the object" of these dominating looking relations, denies Harrow's unnerving and debilitating endeavors, amplifies his "anxieties," and closes off "the subject's autonomy and security," an act for which she "must be placed, rationalized and, by a circuitous route, denied" (Kaplan 1997, xviii) in the Westerner's eye. Such a denial, however, does not come about as Layla gazes back, inquires whether he is done talking, and turns her back, presently de-energizing his forceful gaze. Time and time again, Layla unveils her "soft strength" which is, according to her performer May Calamawy, typical of "women" in the "Middle East" (quoted in Flint

2022, n.p.). In so doing, her portrayal of a self-confident female adventurer archaeologist flirts with Angelina Jolie's in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001), but rather than "sit and copy what" she "would do," the Egyptian-Palestinian actress was intent to "bring" the Arab woman's strong-willed side to "her" (Calamawy quoted in Flint 2022, n.p.) character, which generally remains concealed in Hollywood productions. Therefore, even as she witnesses Harrow supposedly murdering her husband and confronts the vicissitudes of his belittling gaze at the end of the episode, she nonetheless surfaces from the tomb not as a "cultural 'Other,'" but as a skilled and formidable Arab woman single-handedly revealing "the bias of Western reporters and image-makers" and capsizing their "erroneous characterizations" (Shaheen 2000, 23).

5. "Gods and Monsters": Screening the Arab Superheroine

The telos of Layla's "desert odyssey" unfolds after Marc (and Steven's) presumed murder in *Moon Knight*'s sixth and closing episode, not as "the punishment of her fantasies of liberation," but rather as the depreciation of "the traditional sexual order" (Shohat 1990, 42). The finalization of the Arab woman's journey opens up with her depicted as hooded and infiltrating Harrow's convoy, en route to the Chamber of the Gods to release Ammit from her imprisonment (Diab 2022a, 6:32–7:56). Herein, the show toys with the maligned, but in Western cinema perennial image of the veiled Arab woman, whose "mysterious inaccessibility, mirroring that of the orient itself, requires Western unveiling to be understood" (Shohat and Stam 2014, 148–49). Yet it is not Harrow who unhoods Layla; she does so herself (Diab 2022a, 8:39–9:06) after the American cultist accesses the Giza pyramid complex and slaughters the avatars of the Egyptian Ennead, comprising Osiris, Hathor, Horus, Tefnut, and Isis (Diab 2022a, 8:13–9:10). Standing in the way of the Western penetration of Egypt is an Egyptian woman who cannot be owned by the Westerner's "systematic unearthing of the hidden" (Shohat and Stam 2014, 150). Rather than being relegated to a "sexualized" and "racialized" figure of "threatening darkness" through Harrow's "scientific gaze and the institutionalized power-laden modes of study" (Shohat and Stam 2014, 150), Layla acts as an agent of resistance, pointing to Harrow as being the violent oppressor. Her breaking the ushabti (Diab 2022a, 11:32–12:40), a funerary figurine in which Khonshu was detained, allows the moon god to confront Harrow by merging with her husband upon his return from the Duat, the Egyptian underworld.

However, even with the male superhero restored, Layla's narrative role is far from minimized. The Arab woman may seem endangered when Harrow collapses the Chamber of the Gods on her head, yet when she calls on Taweret, the Egyptian goddess of childbirth and fertility, and agrees to become her avatar, she emerges unscathed as Marvel's first Egyptian superheroine (Diab 2022a, 21:53–22:49; 24:13–24:27). Her curly hair and darker complexion dominating much of the frame, Layla unsheathes and spreads her golden swords and wings. Unlike the stagnant Arab women in Orientalist visual texts,

who under the male imperial gaze look away in silence and "expose more flesh than they conceal" (Shohat and Stam 2014, 149) as objects of desire, Layla looks directly into the camera, battle-ready and unconditionally engaged in the circumambient action. Her muscular body being protected by a red and flaxen armor and not a skin-tight, half-revealing spandex typically enveloping her superheroic counterparts, such as Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow in *Iron Man 2* (2010) and Wanda Maximoff/Scarlet Witch in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), denies rather than gives into "the oppressive *structure* of the objectifying gaze" which relies "on (superficial) exterior bodily signs" (Kaplan 1997, 299).[7] "Down to the curl," largely underrepresented on-screen, "down to her story, down to even her strength, these were all very important things that we wanted to instate in her character," verifies the consulting producer Sarah Goher (quoted in Paige 2022, n.p.). This is more than apparent in various scenes of Layla flying in to aid Steven (Diab 2022a, 25:53—26:23; 27:36), but the profound socio-cultural implications of her newly attained power come to the fore when she saves a family and a little girl on the streets of Cairo. Fixing her eyes onto the girl, who inquires whether she is an Egyptian superhero, Layla replies "I am" in Arabic, proceeding to direct the saved family to safety in her native language (Diab 2022a, 28:02–28:53). Not sidelined on the margins of these frames, but central to the clash with Harrow as a vigorous and tenacious participant, Layla dislodges the ensconced stereotypes of the powerless "reel Arab women" (Shaheen 2003, 184) who are rarely depicted as fully-fledged humans.

Furthermore, the decision to imbue the Egyptian woman with Taweret's power was deliberate, according to the latter's performer, Antonia Salib. Being "half-Egyptian" herself (Baruch 2022, 44:25–45:14), Salib, much like Calamawy who "realized quite early on" that the series "is a space" where her "voice was going to be heard" (quoted in Flint 2022, n.p.), literally and figuratively approached her behind-the-screen performance as an opportunity to amplify the already amplified voices of the Arab women on-screen. This, coupled with what the series' executive producer, Grant Curtis, has disclosed was a conscious gender-bending of Layla's superheroic alter-ego, the "traditionally male" (Baruch 2022, 57:03–59:45) Scarlet Scarab, points to the showrunners' concerted efforts to both dispel the myths surrounding the Arab woman and manipulate the "plasticity" of the filmic and televisual media, as well as their "aesthetic pleasures and possibilities" to produce "new 'subjectivities-in-between'" (Kaplan 1997, 20–21). Such cinematic malleability culminates with Marc and Layla incarcerating Ammit in Harrow's body (Diab 2022a,

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[7] In so doing, Layla's depiction joins the company of a handful of Marvel's superheroines whose protective coverings have, in the past couple of years, been endowed with a practical narrative purpose rather than a smutty one. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but some illustrative examples are *Thor: Ragnarok*'s (2017) Valkyrie, *Black Widow* and *Hawkeye*'s (2021) Yelena Belova, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*' (2021) Xialing, and the protagonists of the upcoming *The Marvels* (2023), Carol Danvers/Captain Marvel, Kamala Khan/Ms. Marvel, and Monica Rambeau.

31:05–32:20). Her chanting in ancient Egyptian as the Scarlet Scarab therein revokes images of Arab women as "Black magic vamps, or enchantresses 'possessed of devils'" and hell-bent on "killing Westerners" (Shaheen 2003, 184). The final gaze that Layla returns to Harrow is equally significant. When the camera focuses its attention on her perspective of the defeated American zealot, Layla's "looking" at the Westerner is "culturally determined" because it both repudiates his "ways of expressing domination" and "symbolizes" her new "ways of being" (Kaplan 1997, 299).

6. Conclusion

This paper has argued that *Moon Knight*'s Layla El-Faouly, an Egyptian explorer, adventurer archaeologist, and superheroine, looks back and is not merely looked at by overzealous American leader of the Disciples of Ammit, Arthur Harrow. An engaged participant of what E. Ann Kaplan has termed looking relations with the white Western man, Layla disrupts the many gendered stereotypes in which Arab women have historically and cinematically been trapped.

Far from a veiled belly dancer, a licentious harem concubine, or a seductive enchantress, she energetically prevents Harrow from both physically and mentally possessing her and her land through his imperial gaze, denying various overwhelming effects of his subjective vision. Not only does she refute his and, by proxy, Hollywood's imperialist constructions of Egypt masquerading as knowledge, but she also refuses the objectifying and demeaning fabrications of Egyptian women, playing out on-screen as something given, a fact. Additionally, the power bestowed upon her is a constructive, and not a destructive one. In allowing her to utilize it to preserve her culture and not let it be reserved solely for Western consumption, the Marvel series opens up a space where these Other can look, but also speak and act.

Finally, then, because this paper opened with an account of a mute and belittled Arab woman, perhaps the best way to close it is by letting an assertive and a self-confident one speak. "We did target some of those issues that pop up about men fetishizing Arab women," says May Calamawy of her role as *Ramy*'s Dena Hassan, but "we will only be able to get out of that when we see a large range of Arab women in Western cinema" (Calamawy quoted in Flint 2022). Her Layla El-Faouly, who is rumored to have a larger role in Marvel's upcoming films (Miller 2023), certainly broadens such a scope, actively fighting for the other Arab women to become non-stereotypical in their own and the public eyes.

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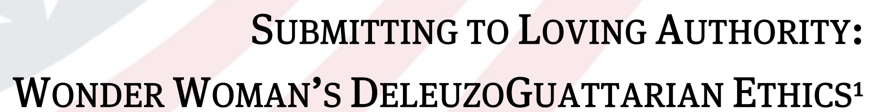

Submitting to Loving Authority: Wonder Woman's DeleuzoGuattarian Ethics[1]

Troy Michael Bordun

Abstract

In this article, I read Grant Morrison and Yanick Paquette's *Wonder Woman: Earth One, Volume 1* (2016) through Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's philosophy to challenge the superhero comics narrative convention of using violence as the sole means in a hero's transcendent pursuit of justice. Deleuze and Guattari critique goal-oriented sexuality as a call for different modes of thinking about ethics and interpersonal relations. I apply their insights to superhero comics wherein we find heroes' aggressive climaxes of physical power that set things right, i.e., back to the way things were. Most heroes are thus goal-oriented, hyperviolent, and conservative; they beat the villains into compliance to return the world to its previous order. Wonder Woman, on the contrary, turns towards what I call the ethics of the caress. She deploys intimate conversation and physical affection as well as espouses vulnerability to thereby transform her interlocutors—whether men or fellow Amazons—into submissive counterparts to *"change the world for the better"* (Morrison and Paquette 2016).

Keywords: affect, gender stereotypes, Deleuze, Wonder Woman, comics, superheroine.

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> The slightest caress may be as strong as an orgasm; orgasm is a mere fact, a rather deplorable one, in relation to desire in pursuit of its principle. Everything is allowed: all that counts is for pleasure to be the flow of desire itself, Immanence…
>
> (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 156)

Upon its publication, Michel Foucault (1977) pronounced that Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* is a book of ethics that helps combat "the fascism in us all" (xiii). In addition to its political dimensions, Foucault's definition of fascism appears at the level of the individual in their desire to oppress others and become enamored with power.

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Although set in fictional universes, it is worthwhile to consider Foucault's observation with superheroes in mind. When left unchecked and unchallenged, great strength often leads superpowered individuals toward this kind of fascism. An uncharitable glance at Batman could show him to be an exemplary fascist. For example, in Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), Batman enacts "conspicuous displays of power" paralleling "Reagan-era cold war politics" (Klock 45–46), and thereby becomes a symbol of 1980s US hegemony. In short, from petty crooks to mass-murdering terrorists, Batman leaves no criminal unpunished, regardless of their pasts or class, and he is hard and unyielding in his transcendent, aggressive, and physical pursuit of vigilante justice.

Conversely, Diana Prince, aka Wonder Woman, uses her muscles when combatants leave her no other recourse, but she does not neglect her strengths in conversation and affection. As many commentators note, she operates with love and mercy (Manning 2021, 345; Cocca 2021, 28) and plays a more involved game of dialogue and diplomacy, or what Francis Tobienne Jr. (2017) calls "passionate persuasion," often refusing to fall back on a climactic haymaker to save the day (133). This puts her at odds with vigilante superheroes such as Batman and she thus offers an alternative to an ethical system that is prescriptive in a top-down manner. Wonder Woman's ethics are lateral and formed in and through communication and communion.

Wonder Woman's early history is also erotically charged. In this article, I take sexuality and eroticism as a lens to unpack her ethics in Grant Morrison and Yanick Paquette's 2016 stand-alone graphic novel *Wonder Woman: Earth One*. To do this, I turn to Deleuze and Guattari's onto-ethics and interpret their system through their modest discussions of sexuality and immanence. I further link the authors' attempts to revolutionize the conception of desire to Ramzi Fawaz and Darieck Scott's (2021) formulations of comics' queerness. I aim to show that Wonder Woman is an exemplary superhero of what I am calling the ethics of the caress, and her affectionate heroism is held contrary to the fierce and violent vigilante. I begin in 1941 with Wonder Woman's creator William Moulton Marson and his theory of psycho-social interaction, however erroneous it may be, and note its implementation in the first major female superhero comics of the twentieth century. Then, I draw a line from Marston to Deleuze and Guattari and extend their insights to Morrison and Paquette. According to Carolyn Cocca (2021), for the Wonder Woman of the 2010s, "the major changes were the initial desexualization of her portrayal albeit still in her usual outfit, the rewriting of her origin story, and her increased use of violence" (14). While Cocca's general observation may be true for the early and mid-2010s comics, in my reading of Morrison and Paquette's work I find examples of the ethics of the caress in Wonder Woman's intimate communication, both physical and verbal. Cocca (2021) writes that the 2010s Wonder Woman comics penned by Greg Rucka, Shea Fontana, Steve Orlando, and G. Willow Wilson—and I would include Morrison as well—depict a hero who "promotes dialogue, empathy, subjectivity, and empowerment," resulting in a

feminist approach to security and, as I read it, ethics (28). Unlike the aforementioned authors, Morrison adopts Marston's Wonder Woman as a foundation for their story. They reformulates the original Amazons' world and their ethics for the twenty-first century. But Morrison is less interested in homage to Marston's theories; instead, they fashion a superhero comic that is almost without physical aggression and they utilize depictions of bondage as a clearer metaphor for ethical reflection than in the early series. I will explore three facets of Wonder Woman's ethical system, each of which requires language and physical touch: knowing the limits of one's strength, espousing vulnerability over invulnerability, and practicing affection over brutality. Her system is not tied to prescribed sets of behaviours but one grounded in ontology, embodiment, and recognition of others.

1. Wonder Woman's Kinky History

After taking inspiration from feminist utopia science fiction by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, among others (Lepore 2015, 241–42, 279–83), psychology professor William Moulton Marston fashioned Wonder Woman to promote his brand of feminism. As important for Marston's feminism was what he called DISC (Dominance, Inducement, Submission, and Compliance) theory, a psychological account of human behaviour he developed in the late 1920s. DISC theory has three governing principles: 1) *dominance* is the drive to subjugate a weaker force and *compliance* marks the reluctant position of giving into the stronger force; 2) *inducement* is the act of convincing, even rewarding, a weaker force into willing, loving *submission*; and 3) people are happiest when submitting to loving authority (Wood 2017, 27–40). According to it, men are prone to the more aggressive forms of dominance and compliance, while women operate with inducement and submission. Since women are allegedly prone to using inducement and people are happiest when submitting to a loving authority, Marston believed that women should be in power, ruling with peace and love (Chavez, Gavaler, and Goldberg 2017, 188–90). As Mara Wood (2017) clarifies, although Marston's theories are not used in contemporary psychology, his work remains a part of the history of the discipline and practice (28).

If DISC theory were accurate, Marston would proclaim that young boys need to learn to voluntarily submit to women in all aspects of life—women will then gain political power and control. That having been said, Marston developed his theory prior to the emergence of the sociology of gender in the latter half of the twentieth century. From the contemporary perspective, as Lewis Call (2012) notes, Marston's understanding of gender is essentialist (a trait, biological or otherwise, rooted in pre-social constructions of gender); however, while Marston may assign certain traits to specific genders before social construction, he did not believe in an essentialist notion of power, i.e., men could also adopt feminine approaches to leadership and ethics. Women do not need to have all the power, yet men do need to practice inducement and submission to loving authority to not only bring about equality among genders but at the height of World War II, to combat

fascism too (Call 2012, 29–30, 34). As Marston put it when talking about his comics series, "Frankly, Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who, I believe, should rule the world" (qtd. in Lepore 2015, 190–91). In the for-profit comics industry, however, feminist politics would not sell, thus the author included feminist insight into a superhero comic by way of covert and overt depictions of sexuality. For this latter reason, Call (2012) posits that Wonder Woman is a character whose beginnings marked a small turning point in the cultural imaginary when it comes to sexual politics and ethics (27).

According to Call (2012), "[i]n her best moments [of the Golden Age], Wonder Woman showed how power could be reconfigured, how the authoritarian power structures of militarism, fascism and sexism could be replaced by structures of ethical, erotic power" (35). Wonder Woman comics can thus be read as pedagogy for intimate communication and practice. In Marston's run (1941–1947), he literalizes this pedagogy in the characters' penchants for non-sexualized BDSM. By non-sexualized BDSM, I mean that for all ages DC Comics audiences, the editors would not have permitted direct representations of sexual acts. Nevertheless, according to Noah Berlatsky (2015), "Marston's comics … are supposed to initiate their audience into masochism and submission. But part of that initiation is precisely that the gender of the audience is not specified and, indeed, can be considered malleable" (114–15). Wonder Woman is tied, bound, gagged, chained, paddled, and abducted in most issues in those first years of publication. Moreover, it is often women who perform many of these instances of BDSM. Given Marston's research on sororities at Tufts University (Berlatsky 2015, 144), his writings about lesbian sex in *Emotions of Normal People* (1928) (Berlatsky 2015, 146–48), and his polyamorous relationship with Elizabeth Holloway and Olive Byrne (Berlatsky 2015, 149–52), it is impossible to not see the Wonder Woman author's depictions of "erotic female-female play … as anything but intentional" (145).

While Marston's psychological work and his Wonder Woman comics are steeped in gender essentialism and misandry (Berlatsky 2015, 173–75), the comics' narratives and visual representations are more complicated than this. I observe that Wonder Woman often willingly performs helplessness and is subsequently tied and bound to better understand the villains' plans or to receive transport to their secret hideouts (Fig. 1). When it comes to her role as the dominant, Wonder Woman bounds others with care (Call 2012, 36–37; Chavez, Gavaler, and Goldberg 2017, 194). She lets herself be captured and taken to the villains' lairs, only to defeat them with inducement, submission, and bondage rather than with her mighty fists (Brown 2020, 267–73). Submission and bondage, then, are both superhero tactics and a means of communication. Although her god-like status allows her to remain at a distance from personal harm and harming others, she nevertheless does not act as a god above mortals. For example, when she rescues her love interest Steve Trevor in *Sensation Comics* #2, he calls Diana his oft-used pet name, Angel, and she

coyly responds, “What’s an angel? I think I’d rather be a woman” (Marston and Peter 2016, 40–41). This remark puts Wonder Woman’s feet on the ground in the most literal sense.

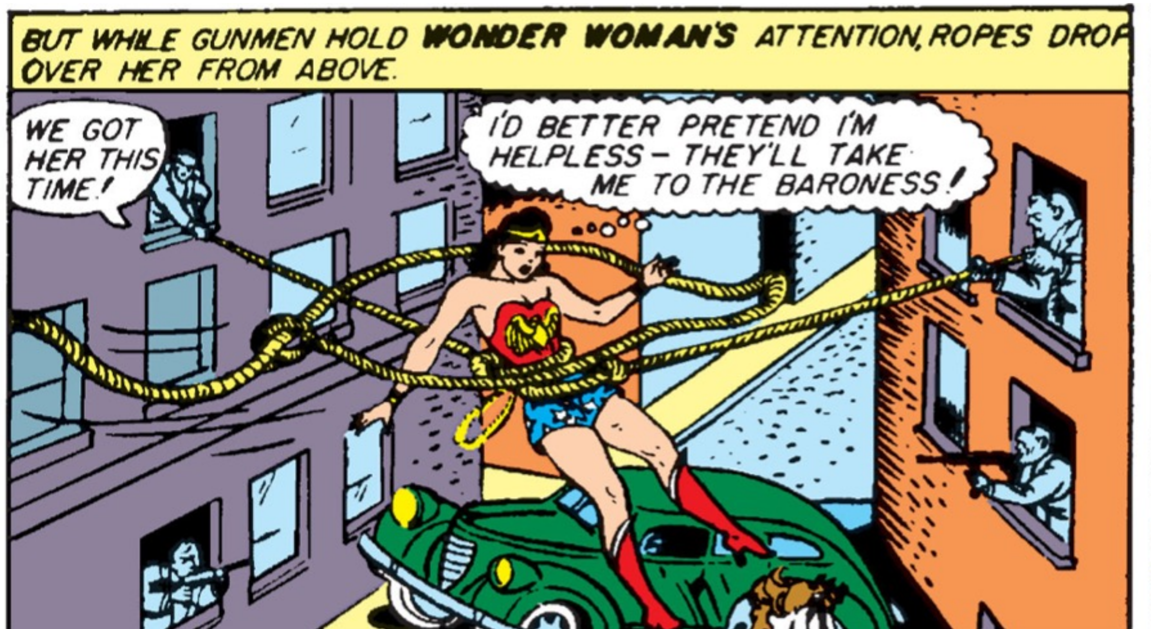

Figure 1 Wonder Woman feigns helplessness to outsmart the henchmen. *Sensation Comics* #7 in *Wonder Woman: The Golden Age, Volume 1*, William Moulton Marston and Harry G. Peter, 110 ©DC Comics, 2016.

Marston’s feminism thus proposes cunning and dialogue over brutality and aggression, and this applies to other characters in the comics as well as for the readers to incorporate into their everyday lives. Indeed, throughout the Golden Age, Wonder Woman suggests that “women can be as strong and independent as she is if they believe in themselves and have proper physical training” (Cocca 2016, 28). This positivity aside, there has been no shortage of critics and commentators pointing to a major problem of the comic: Marston and artist H. G. Peter objectify women for “male fantasies of sexual domination” (Reynolds qtd. in Berlatsky 2015, 18). After detailing the theoretical framework in the next section, I will demonstrate that Wonder Woman is more convincingly ethical in her twenty-first century configurations. The character is less bound to her creator’s essentialist views of gender and, at times, less constricted by the need to be sexualized (Cocca 2021, 5). Morrison and Paquette follow Marston’s vision much more than other recent iterations of the character but provide a less objectifying gaze, deepen the ethical significance of bondage, and forego excessive superhero violence. The creators pick up the common superhero theme of great power demanding great responsibility then stress how superhero comics have misunderstood this to mean wielding great physical strength to subdue enemies and dissenters. To forge those connections between herself and others, whether friends or foes, Wonder Woman extends a hand and caresses with language.

2. Intimacy and Violence, Caresses and Orgasms, Queerness in Comics

Given the remarks above about Wonder Woman's early history, a theory of sexuality, embodiment, and ethics is best suited to my purposes in the forthcoming analysis of *Earth One*. Deleuze and Guattari do not condemn goal-oriented sexuality, but in minor notes on sexuality across *Anti-Oedipus* and *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), they set the phallocentric orgasm against the prolonged caress, cuddle, and snuggle to show how insidious fascistic thinking is in everyday behaviour. Frida Beckman (2013) observes that Deleuze and Guattari's "idea of the orgasm as a release that brings the contentment of an endpoint is clearly coloured by Freudian ideas as well male experience," and for Elizabeth Grosz, their view is "based on a male model that has informed the idea of erotic pleasure" (qtd. in Beckman 2013, 3–4). While Beckman ponders whether Deleuze is curiously reproducing some of the same gendered takes on sexuality he aimed to dismantle, she counters the criticism by identifying the orgasm as part of the composition of sexual activities rather than as a universal end (2015, 5). The crucial claim is that a person's desire to reach a pre-defined endpoint prior to interactions with another person blocks myriad other forms of communication and cooperation. Thus, regarding sexuality and intimacy, Deleuze and Guattari suggest a prolonged communion of two or more bodies through touch—what they call immanence—rather than concluding sexual activity with an orgasm. What Deleuze and Guattari urge people to do is not set limits on sexuality; instead, if desires are left free to roam, individuals can find new and diverse pleasures apart from, or in addition to, genital-finality and animality. In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari call a line of flight a path in which desire can flow in innumerable directions with no premeditation or ends in sight. The orgasm is an end while the caress, which includes any language that fondles the senses, can go on indefinitely in any number of lines. The cuddle is no longer something one must do after sex—it is the sex or, it is better than the sex.

For this to happen, Deleuze and Guattari posit a reorientation of desire. Desire is a force or power that forms connections among machines, their term for organic and inorganic bodies and things. Desire is not the end point of fantasies, such as an object of affection. Desire invests itself in relations among machines. These connections are not wholes, as in the statement "I desire this person," but partial objects discovering one another. For instance, a hand placed upon someone's arm is, first, that connection between two separate bodies—desire is the force that brings the hand and arm together, much like a wasp and an orchid are mutual attractors that both benefit from the interaction. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) write, "the wasp is … deterritorialized, becoming a piece in the orchid's reproductive apparatus" (10). A force brings the wasp to the orchid, and it becomes a necessary component in the assemblage of the orchid's reproductive cycle and vice versa. Deleuze and Guattari call attention to this kind of assemblage as a "heterogeneous coupling" of two partial objects that are marked by their respective differences

(Flieger 2000, 55). Indeed, for Jerry Aline Flieger, neither wasp nor orchid conquer or lure one another, nor try to imitate or mime one another to bring about that coupling. Instead, they occupy states of mutual becoming, i.e., exhibit desire as a force for creating the new assemblage of wasp-orchid, or the becoming orchid of the wasp and the becoming-wasp of the orchid with their respective connections (2000, 53–55). Similarly, then, when hands connect, the two individuals form a new kind of assemblage: the hands may quickly pull back at the touch or they may hold one another for hours until the palms are sweaty. Thus, desire is never for a specific object or state and neither does it lack an object. According to philosophers from Plato to Sigmund Freud (Deleuze and Guattari 1987, 157), individuals may desire muscles, power, and lovers because they lack them. For Deleuze and Guattari (1977), desire is instead the name given to the spark that attaches to boundless creative outputs and productions. Relating to the above example, desire brings about touch because touch is immanently pleasurable. The output of desire is aptly named desiring-production. Desire creates with limited resources: "desire 'needs' very few things… and… what is missing is not things a subject feels the lack of somewhere deep down inside himself, but rather the objectivity of man [sic], the objective being of man [sic], for whom to desire is to produce, to produce within the realm of the real" (Deleuze and Guattari 1977, 47). There is no end to the flow, to the pleasure, and to the number of new connections that can be formed between body-machines (20, 36, 47; Colebrook 2002, 142). Desire is therefore revolutionary, capable of overturning social orders and, for my purposes in this chapter, the ethics of the orgasm.

First, as noted above, Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy is not without its problems. On the one hand, scholars have faulted them for introducing yet more male-created abstract conceptualizations at the expense of the material reality of bodies, particularly women's bodies. Rosi Braidotti (2011) writes, "by dissolving the subject in a flux of desire without negativity, Deleuze … does not recognize any priority to sexual difference, therefore attributing the same psychic and political gestures to men and women alike" (252-253). This leads to a spurious conclusion that there is "clear equivalence" of psychic, social, and political realities among different genders. Moreover, Deleuze seems to misunderstand feminism altogether (Braidotti 2011, 253–55). While neglecting the material reality of bodies and downplaying the importance of identity, Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy nevertheless allows for new approaches to sexuality such as in BDSM. With BDSM, Andrea Beckmann (2009) identifies the redeployment of the body: "consensual 'SM' often involves the use of the genital zones for other purposes than the reaching of orgasm and as it also eroticizes regions of the 'body' formerly not considered to be worth stimulating, [and] these 'bodily practices' symbolize also a 'remapping' of the individual 'body' and a redistribution of the sensations of the 'body'" (170). According to its practitioners, consensual sadomasochism does not exclude the orgasmic, nor the spiritual; rather, they divert their practices away from genital finality: "The reaching of an emotional,

psychological, or spiritual state of catharsis, ecstasy, or transcendence during an S/M scene without having a genital orgasm" (Califia qtd. in Beckmann 2009, 194).[2] Or, as one of Beckmann's (2009) interviewees puts it, they transform the pain from caning to the genitals to reach orgasm (217). In short, individuals reorient desire such that it does not find its endpoint in a climax but in continuous vibrations across various regions of the body and a variety of different assemblages and formations among the participants.

For this article, I understand Deleuze and Guattari's dualism—orgasm and caress—as metaphorical rather than literal. In my reading of two of DC Comics' biggest heroes, Batman and Wonder Woman stand as representatives of the two regimes of ethics. Batman's climaxes of power violence are not unlike the phallocentric orgasm Deleuze and Guattari may have had in mind. He looks for the right moves and opportune openings to reach his desired end state, and with one swift punch or kick, he can put bank robbers and supervillains to rest. In the *Batman: Arkham Knight* video game (2015), think of the slow-motion shots of the hero's finishing moves, punching or kicking opponents into unconsciousness. The hero's blows are a devastating climax that slows time to a crawl. Commenting on a scene in *The Batman* (2022), Fareed Ben-Youssef (2022) observes and asks as the hero pounds one of the Riddler's followers, "[t]he usually taciturn Batman screams as he punches downwards—is this what a Dark Knight orgasm looks like? Can he feel ecstasy only when bone breaks beneath him? Such staging reveals that [Batman uses] violence, it seems, as an outlet for sexual feeling." Whether in contemporary comics, video games, or films, in his encounters with villains, Batman offers little discussion, feeling, and intimacy: he prefers the ejaculative climax. Conversely, Wonder Woman often, though not always, exhibits compassion, mercy, and feeling towards her interlocutors (Johnson-Moxley 2017, 98). I use interlocutors here because her heroism is dialogue and caresses as much as it is fisticuffs and swordplay. Whether it is her fellow Amazons or her nemeses, she handles miscommunication, struggle, and agon with words and open arms.

Batman finds himself at odds with desiring-production. Batman seeks the end of desire, believed to be a lack of justice in the city, and to bring criminals, any criminals, to justice for the death of his parents. As I detail in the next sections, Wonder Woman's desiring-production is endless: rather than crush her enemies, she will forge connections through dialogue and intimacy. Using Deleuze and Guattari's (1977) language, Batman operates on a molar scale wherein justice is an abstraction yet is also quantifiable by the number of villains the hero can send to the hospital and then prison (283–90). One can imagine Batman keeping a running tally on the Bat-Computer, documenting how productive his avenging was in a given week, month, and year. The molar is in the realm of the orgasm while the molecular is like the caress. Wonder Woman seeks the molecular,

[2] For more on "sacred kink," see Mueller (2018).

forming intimate bonds with friends, family, lovers, and even villains. What I see instead of the pursuit of an abstract "justice," as per many heroes, is a character who fosters the flow of desire from one body to another. Diana is not (just) a pantheon of strength but knows her limits, espouses vulnerability over invulnerability, and practices affection over brutality. When desire flows, the result is something more akin to what is typically called love.

My analysis of a canonically queer superhero alongside Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy also connects to both queer theory and Fawaz and Scott's observations about queerness and comics studies. To start, contemporary queer theorists have picked up Deleuze's theories of the self as an alternative to the oft-cited theories of performativity articulated by Judith Butler (Colebrook 2009, 20). Deleuze recognizes the possibilities of going beyond the self, not as a transcendent capacity to perform against social norms and expectations, but as immanent expressions of desire. For Verena Andermatt Conley (2009), what is appealing about Deleuze's work is the rethinking of desire beyond stable identities; indeed, "[t]o become gay has to do first and foremost not with identity but with desire" (26). Andermatt Conley continues, noting that "desire … is not to long for something but to produce new ways of feeling, perceiving and conceiving. Gay people have to invent different ways of desiring that do not pre-exist" (26). This requires new utterances and new (writing) styles tailored to this alternative mode of existence. For Fawaz and Scott, comics are well suited to visually represent queerness.

Fawaz and Scott (2021) highlight three formal qualities of comics that render them queer. First, the "assumed immaturity of its audiences" fosters formal and narrative techniques that "elicit… attachments from perceived social delinquents, outcasts, and minorities" (173). Fans develop relationships with outsiders who are, perhaps, not unlike themselves. Second, comics are a "low-tech medium" (compared to Hollywood's CGI blockbusters, for example). The creator(s) can write or draw anything imaginable on a page with no requirements for verisimilitude—whatever is there in the panel is there for the reader to believe, thus rendering them appropriate for fantasy worlds such as those in Wonder Woman comics (174). Finally, Fawaz and Scott note that comics' seriality and sequential panels offer repetition with a difference:

> Each iteration of an image, an issue, a story line, or a world has the potential to disrupt, comment upon, or altogether alter the flow and direction of what has come before: … comics function … as queer orientation devices, productively directing readers towards deviant bodies that refuse to be fixed in one image or frame, toward new desires for fantasy worlds that rebel against the constraints of everyday life. (175)

Earth One uproots Diana from the fantasy island of Themyscira and makes her an outcast. Further, Morrison and Paquette disrupt superhero comics conventions that mistake vigilante justice and violence for ethical superheroism. In doing so, they present a new take on superhero desires which, in turn, offers a new kind of superhero ethics.

3. Submitting to Loving Authority

Since Wonder Woman possesses near physical invulnerability—a character trait that increased in the 2010s and brings her closer to figures like Superman and Thor (Cocca 2021, 27)—she cannot shed blood on the battlefield in the same way as other mortals and mutants and superpowered individuals (Bordun 2020, 351-352). Instead, she gifts her blood through emotional and physical vulnerability. In this section, I explore Wonder Woman's ethics in Morrison and Paquette's *Wonder Woman: Earth One* (2016). There, Diana deploys anecdotes about Man's World and exhibits submission to her mother to "*change the world for the better*."

Few comics authors rival Grant Morrison: they are "quite simply the most successful writer working in comics today" (Greene and Roddy 2015, 1).[3] For Darragh Greene and Kate Roddy (2015), "[s]ince the 1980s, Morrison's serialized superhero comics have defined and radically redefined the superhero archetype for our culture" (1). Morrison can accomplish such feats because of their "auteurist sensibility" and vast knowledge of superhero comics history (Singer 2012, 3; Greene and Roddy 2015, 1). Indeed, Morrison devotes a whole chapter to Wonder Woman's early years in their 2011 study of American superhero comics (90–106), which makes them the perfect candidate for the authorship of one of the longest-running American superheroes.

Initially, Morrison penned the character in a 2008 event series entitled *Final Crisis*. In 2009, Morrison stated that they "'always sensed something slightly bogus and troubling' at the heart of the Wonder Woman concept. … 'When I dug into the roots of the character I found an uneasy mélange of girl power, bondage and disturbed sexuality that has never been adequately dealt with or fully processed out to my mind'" (qtd. in Brake 2017, 72). In *Final Crisis*, Diana becomes the "patient zero" of supervillain Darkseid's Anti-Life Equation. Gone is her status as a feminist icon. Instead, she operates on the other side of Marston's suppressed vision, i.e., as a kink icon: Darkseid controls Diana and she dons a bondage-style mask and outfit. According to Matthew William Brake (2017), Morrison's portrayal of Wonder Woman here reflects their "negative feelings about the character" (72, 75).

By 2016, no doubt aided by the research and writing of their American superhero comics book published in 2011, Morrison changed their mind about Marston's Wonder Woman. They observe, "The warrior woman thing is not what … William Marston wanted, that's not what he wanted at all! [Their] original concept for Wonder Woman was an answer to comics that [they] thought were filled with images of blood-curdling masculinity. … Marston's Diana was a doctor, a healer, a scientist" (qtd. in Brake 2017, 79). With the publication of *Wonder Woman: Earth One*, Morrison and artist Yanick Paquette return to the roots of the superheroine. In *Earth One*, Marston's DISC theory is used as a trope for

[3] Grant Morrison announced that they identify as non-binary in a 2021 interview (Anon).

developing character relationships and worldbuilding: in no less than seven panels in the 120-page comic, characters refer to the Amazonian code of submission to loving authority. But it is not merely homage, and several contemporary updates prompt ethical readings. In the first of their three-volume *Wonder Woman* series, Morrison and Paquette reveal not just Marston's intentions, but the onto-ethics espoused by Deleuze and Guattari and a more robust awareness of BDSM, communication, queerness, and comics violence. In *Earth One*, Diana's caress is an honest and open testimony about her experiences in Man's World alongside ongoing renewals of the Amazon code. She accomplishes this in explicit and direct terms—Diana's language touches her listeners.

Morrison and Paquette develop the theme—submitting to loving authority has positive ethical outcomes—in this reimagining of the Wonder Woman origin and young adulthood. I leave aside the changes the two creators have made to Diana's birth and parentage in favour of a close analysis of her meeting with Steve Trevor and expedition to Man's World. In the present, Diana has returned from her first trip outside the haven of Paradise Island. She must face the charge of consorting with Man's World. For more than 3000 years Themyscira cut itself off from Man's World and it had flourished. As Holliday Girl Beth Candy summarizes, in those three millennia, the Amazons developed "a *paradise island* of *science fiction lesbians* ... with a side of *bondage.*" Upon her return to that secluded island, Wonder Woman submits to the will of her mother, Queen Hippolyta who, wounded by Diana's choice of exile from Paradise Island, will not so easily forgive her daughter. But as Diana knows, one does not restore bonds with anger and violence but through language that caresses. Thus, Diana does not reluctantly stand trial; rather, Nubia observes, she does so "as if it was *her own desire*." In the opening volume of *Earth One*, then, the narration is in flashback. In each act, characters tell a piece of the story of Diana's expedition, and the testimonies provide a better understanding of the hero's motivations to venture into Man's World.

First, Diana must submit to symbolic bondage. Since social and cultural understandings of BDSM changed dramatically between 1940 and 2015 (Scott 2015), Morrison and Paquette's depiction of Diana in bondage suggests more than a clever ploy on the part of the hero, as per Marston's comics. As Susanna Paasonen (2018) observes in representations of BDSM across twenty-first century media, trauma play or BDSM as a healing or therapeutic practice "has been rearticulated and circulated widely enough to be instantly recognizable, even if this connection is not something assumed by default" (106).[4] Diana thus accepts appearing at the trial in chains to further her cause and begin to repair her relationships with lovers, family, and homeland. Here, the symbolic gesture demonstrates her willingness to yield to her mother and the Amazons. Diana, not unlike

[4] Beckmann's (2009) interviewees also describe BDSM practices and the capacity for healing and transformation (218–22).

Superman in handcuffs in *Man of Steel* (2013), offers to be bound to allow the other to feel dominant. In this situation, then, Diana proclaims to her mother positioned high above on the palace mezzanine, "I come of my own free will, in submission to the *loving authority* of the Queen, my mother. I agreed to this *ordeal* because I know its outcome will *change the world for the better*." Todd Klein's lettering emphasizes Diana's submission to her *loving mother* as well as the *ordeal*—of arrest, trial, and possible severe outcomes (Fig. 2). Willing submission not only puts the individual in a state of vulnerability but brings forth her interlocutor's direct engagement with the ethical imperative of whether to act or not act. Morrison is echoing Marston's contention that "matriarchal feminine love would save the world" (Berlatsky 2015, 152). Marston believed this because he articulated, and perhaps witnessed in his relationship with Olive and Elizabeth, the supposed superiority of sapphic love. He argued that women who have sex with women become better mothers (Berlatsky 2015, 148). Diana thus calls upon Hippolyta to respond to her pleas. Regarding Diana's crimes and whether the Amazons should make efforts to improve women's plight in Man's World, Hippolyta must soon decide. Therefore, Diana submits: the utopia that is Themyscira must be extended to women everywhere.

Figure 2 Diana Prince pleads with her mother, with Todd Klein's lettering emphasizing the addressee (a "*loving authority*") and her experience (the "*ordeal*") n.p. © DC Comics, 2016.

Standing trial then, Diana details the reasons for leaving Paradise Island with Lieutenant Steve Trevor of the US Air Force. In line with Marston's original tale, except now the pilot is a Black man, Trevor's plane crash lands on the beaches of Paradise Island. Paquette

does not neglect the erotic charge of Diana's first encounter with a man. In a two-page spread to mark the moment's importance, the left side of the page depicts a wounded Trevor emerging from the surf in ripped clothing. In the center of this spread, in a phallic and testicle-shaped insert panel, he falls face-first into the sand, while the right panel features Diana's shocked expression. The phallus makes an additional appearance five pages later. To treat his wounds, marking what Morrison called Marston's vision of the character as a healer, Diana brings Trevor to a nearby cave. Prior to treatment, however, because of the male novelty and her curiosity, she sexually assaults him: Diana grabs his groin, desire activated in Deleuze and Guattari's sense, and asks about his gender. He kindly requests that she remove her hand. Once Trevor's genitals are certified, Diana attempts to use the healing purple ray on the injured man, a medical device she used earlier to treat a deer. To Diana's disappointment, the device cannot heal men; only doctors in Man's World can bring Trevor back to full health.

In this not-very meet-cute moment between Amazon and American, Morrison reveals one of Diana's key traits. Maria Chavez, Chris Gavaler, and Nathaniel Goldberg (2017) position Wonder Woman's ethics within the feminist paradigm of the ethics of care, i.e., to care for others is to also care for oneself by strengthening human bonds. In Marston's tale, replicated in *Earth One*, Diana enacts the ethics of care through her attentiveness to Trevor's needs and responsibility for his well-being. She also knows her level of medical competence and she immediately responds to his injuries (Chavez, Gavaler, and Goldberg 2017, 192). In *Earth One*, to respond to these needs and get Trevor off-island, Diana must beat the reigning Amazonian champion Mala, who is also her lover, in the yearly festival battle reenacting Hercules's defeat at Amazonian hands. Usually, Diana plays Hercules in the event and Mala is easily victorious. However, Diana now refuses to play her role because she has a plan to save Trevor. Diana's superior strength leads her to an effortless victory over Mala, the latter made furious at this turn of events. This victory earns her the crown of Wonder Woman of Amazon and the newly minted Wonder Woman then claims a prize of her choosing, Mala's Swan Plane. For Trevor, Diana forsakes her lover, mother, and community. The ethics of care thus align with what I have called the ethics of the caress in Wonder Woman's contemporary iterations. Her sacrifice of home, friends, lovers, and family is the product of her upbringing on the "*island of science fiction lesbians*," as Beth candidly remarked. Her eventual love for Steve is not morally superior to that of her homeland, lovers, or mother; instead, she realizes that to save the one who needs saving, she must transgress the established Amazonian customs. She rescues Steve precisely because he is in danger of perishing. The Amazons will continue to thrive without her and, knowing her society participates in this ethics of care, she may find herself reunited with family and friends rather than forever exiled. Her return to Themyscira is, of course, not without difficulty.

Concerning Steve, Diana does not immediately pursue vigilante justice, seeking out those who have wounded him and bringing down a storm of violence upon them. Indeed, in another retelling of the story, one could imagine a comic fridging Steve, i.e., he serves no purpose except to die so that Diana has reason to do violence to others (Simone 1999). In *Earth One*, she forgoes the abstraction "justice" so that first, she can ensure Steve's health, and second, so that she may create a bond with him. Indeed, in the DeleuzoGuattarian sense, Diana destabilizes her Amazonian identity, not believing in the either/or of sexual norms—she must be Mala's same-sex lover or Steve's opposite-sex lover—and she allows desire to flow from Mala to Steve (an entirely new and unknown experience for her), and then briefly to Artemis in volume three (Morrison and Paquette 2021). Back in volume one, as is the Amazonian custom, the hero tries to literalize her bond with Steve with a leather collar. Again, Morrison refers to Marston's theory but with an update, showing its limitations without consent and understanding. Diana informs Steve, "To save a life is to be tied to that life. Know that I will take care of you and keep you from harm. But first—you must be willing to submit to *loving authority*. *Kneel* for we are bound." Steve looks aghast at this collaring request— "a dominant gives a collar to a submissive to indicate that the submissive's wellbeing is now her responsibility" (Chavez, Gavaler, and Goldberg 2017, 195–96)—and meets it with disapproval. But through this intimate act, Steve better understands the Amazon's ethics of the caress.

This opening chapter of Diana's testimony, delivered to her mother and fellow Amazons, posits communication as the means through which one restores broken bonds. More witnesses are called upon to provide their testimonies and come to Diana's defense. The trial continues as Beth Candy and Steve tell the Amazons about Diana's rescues and kindnesses, with the former noting she does not need the lasso to assist her in truthfully telling the story. The imperative to be truthful suggests that Beth and Steve grasp the necessity of submitting to the Queen's loving authority. As they both detail, Wonder Woman consistently places diplomacy above violence during her brief stay in Man's World. Even as Hippolyta sends the gorgon Medusa and the Amazon warriors to bring Diana back home, the latter will not put up a fight. In her decisive moments in Man's World, surrounded by the Amazons tasked with the mission (including her lover Mala), Diana chooses to be bound and restrained outside of the hotel where she and Steve have taken up residence. Setting aside violence here parallels an earlier scene at the hospital where Diana had first brought the wounded man. There, the US Army bursts into the building to interrogate Steve about the discovery of Paradise Island (he denies knowledge about his exact whereabouts, worried that like his ancestors, Americans will harm peoples from other lands). Unimpressed with the Army men, Diana makes a mockery of their aggressive display, representative of Morrison's mockery of comics authors' overreliance on violent resolution: Diana lifts an Army jeep over her head as the frightened soldiers then stand down. She mutters to herself, "[in English:] Men. [in Themyscirian:] So easily

impressed by feats of *strength*. By things they can *measure* and weigh. Leading brief, ignorant lives of fear and conflict. In this grim theater of death and anger." Whether with the Army or the Amazons, Diana does not resort to violence or her muscles except when feats of strength will generate the conditions for diplomacy and communication.

While Diana's message is commendable, Morrison and Paquette succumb to gendered comic book representations. In most comics, superpowered men have large, muscular bodies. However, as Aaron Taylor (qtd. in Kustritz 2020, 320) observes, Superman and Wonder Woman are both some of the strongest characters, yet the latter is not typically drawn as a world-class weightlifter. In *Earth One* for instance, when Diana meets Steve, the man is shirtless and his muscles and abs bulge as the comparatively slim Diana tends to his injuries. Later, when Diana lifts that jeep over her head, a close-up panel features not a bulging bicep but a moderately engaged, fit but not muscular arm. Anne Kustritz (2020) points out such incommensurable representations of superhero bodies:

> female superheroes are not average women but rather literally superhuman women, representing the height of physical achievement. As such, … their strength should logically appear on their bodies as visible muscle. However, … even those female superheroes who are supposedly … stronger than their male compatriots are not allowed to make that strength visible as muscle. (320)

It is difficult, then, to articulate Diana's ethics without also discussing the material realities of the superheroes' bodies. Her fit, feminine body seems like a better image for a pro-peace figure than large, muscular dominants such as Batman.

While Wonder Woman's ethics means using violence only as a last resort, from Marston through to the present, one could argue that her ethics "could also be seen as embodying learned feminist values that anyone can practice" (Cocca 2021, 64). This is particularly strong in a key scene in *Earth One*. Diana laments the loss of so many women when she stumbles into the women's wing of the hospital. Distraught, she proclaims to a nurse that "sisters [are] *dying* [and t]heir lives, their wisdom -- *lost forever*, unrecorded." So many deaths could be avoided with the healing purple ray, she observes. At the side of an elderly woman, Diana offers a touch of condolence in this person's last moments (Fig. 3). "Condolence" means an expression of sympathy, especially when there is the death of a family member or close friend (Stevenson 2010). But the word "condolences" is often used to tautologically express condolences ("My condolences…"), leaving an ontological distance between the grieving person and the one expressing their sympathies. In the late 16th century, "condolence" emerged from the Christian Latin "*condole*." Here we are closer to a sentiment: *condolere*, *con*- meaning "with" and *dolere* meaning "grieve, suffer" (2010). Condole is therefore to grieve and suffer with another and true condolences are the expressions and gestures by which we grieve and suffer with another. Condolences are not empty but, etymologically, they house the possibility of intimate communication between and among individuals. This form of communication

requires recognition of mortality, an experience Diana shares with the elderly woman. When we anxiously sob over the facticity of a person's mortality, we communicate the morality of beings, and for Alphonso Lingis (1994), when we extend a hand to touch another person in their dying, their pain is no longer theirs alone (179). Indeed, Diana accompanies the dying woman into her eternal slumber. A few kind words and intimacy provide the dying woman with a peaceful end. She is no angel, however, and we can recall Diana's remark in Marston and Peter's 1942 *Sensation Comics* #2 noted above ("What's an angel? I think I'd rather be a woman" [2016, 40–41]) and here suggest it may be better to have Diana say, for this scene in *Earth One*, "I think I'd rather be a mortal." To be an ethical person, here in this hospital's women's wing, is to offer a caress and a touch of condolence.

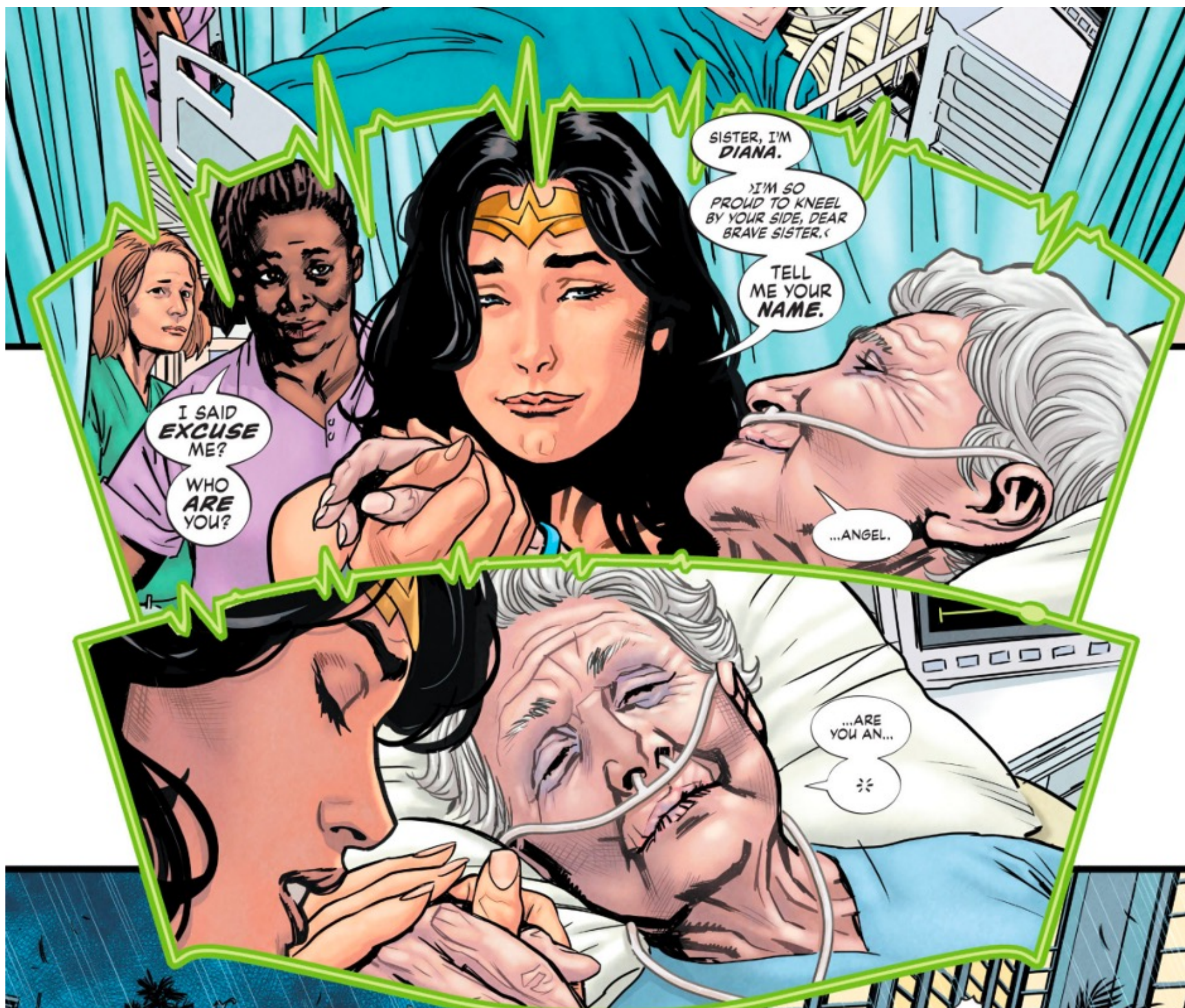

Figure 3 Diana's touch of condolence. *Wonder Woman: Earth One, Volume 1*, Grant Morrison and Yanick Paquette, n.p. © DC Comics, 2016.

Frustrated at the lack of care for the hospitalized women, Diana barges in on the Army officials' interrogation of Trevor and delivers a stern message: "Women are in pain,

enslaved, broken, and deformed in your mad world. But we [Amazons] can *lead* you out of the more. You men only have to *stop*—and to *kneel*. This broken *Man's World* must submit to the merciful authority of the *Wonder Women of Amazonia*. Then all will be well. Trust me." Just as she consents to be bound and to submit to her mother and community, Diana hopes others submit to her loving authority so that she may respond to the ethical imperative: men only need to kneel and ask for help because Amazonia has the spirit, morality, and technology to mend Man's broken world. Thus, Morrison and Paquette have rekindled the other side of Diana's superpowers, largely forgotten by authors after Marston's run. She impresses not by her strength alone. As Tobienne Jr. (2017) observes, "Wonder Woman more than any other superhero is as comfortable in negotiations as she is in combat. … Through her possession of wisdom and love, of *sophia* and *philia*, through her pathos, she is able to bring others to submit to her loving authority, not through force alone, but through persuasion" (138, 139). The person living by the ethics of the caress is a philosopher in the original sense.

"Submit to loving authority" firmly posits one party in a state of vulnerability such that the other party can enact the ethics of the caress. According to Diana, this is what Man's World needs, an acknowledgement of vulnerability and a little help from a superior society. What Morrison and Paquette's graphic novel articulates is that not only can the ethics of the caress be a literal touch, but it can also be a direct and intimate language. An ethics of the caress requires a form of communication that allows individuals to express themselves in words, but these words are dynamic: the Amazonian code of willing submission to loving authority must not be enacted in a top-down manner, as in a person demands compliance from a vulnerable individual; rather, it necessitates a willingness to yield and demonstrate vulnerability. This is Diana's goal when she returns to ask her mother for help: the world is a mess and only the Amazons can clean it up.

4. Conclusions

Diana not only exhibits a deep understanding of her strength, recognizes the power of vulnerability, and practices affection over brutality, but also sparks ethical behaviours in the people around her through her choices. Whether it is the US Army, fellow warriors, or her mother, Wonder Woman is committed to these ethical imperatives, and the ethics of the caress—in the form of the literal caress as well as through intimate communication—transforms superheroism from hyper-violence to compassionate acts. The Wonder Woman authors closest to Marston's vision reserve the term "superhero" not only for an exhibition of overpowering others with feats of strength but of forging new connections among what were once individuals in opposition. For desiring-machines and desire-production, no individuals are incompatible—they find that force, that caress, that kind word, to bring them together.

Second-wave liberal feminist Gloria Steinem (1995) points to Wonder Woman's real power: "The lesson [of Wonder Woman] was that each of us might have unknown powers within us, if we only believed and practiced them" (7). To bring together opposing parties or offer open arms for a hug, the DeleuzoGuattarian superhero takes a bold first step with a connection through language and touch; the attainment of a transcendent goal is out of Diana's hands—all she has is the immanence of literal and figurative touch. Verbal language may sometimes fall short. Instead, in our sobs, tears, and hugs, no words are needed to console, and in other contexts, laughter may bring individuals closer than any string of sentences can (Lingis 2000, 93, 95). Language is decentered. When two friends or lovers or villains are fused, limbs around limbs, they speak in a pattern, rhythm, and slang only they understand. Wonder Woman not only indicates her willing submission and suggests others do the same, but she also speaks with physical affection. For Diana, immanence, desire, and what I have called the ethics of the caress are shared. Only for individuals ready to lovingly submit to one another, "of loving without remembering, without phantasm and without interpretation" (Deleuze and Parnet 2007, 47), is it possible to cuddle and communicate with the intensity of an orgasm. Only for individuals ready to lovingly submit to one another without vigilantism is it possible to end the fascistic reign of the superhero as judge, jury, and executioner of a solipsistic justice. For Wonder Woman, love means attending to the other in their highs and lows, in their rages and sorrows, and as one ready to mutually cooperate in the ethics of the caress.

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The Politics of Antihero Aesthetics: Andy Warhol's *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* at the 1964 World's Fair

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Abstract

The current paper examines a series of portraits called *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* that the famous American Pop artist Andy Warhol created on the occasion of his participation in the World's Fair that took place in New York in 1964. The paper explores the economic-political context of the 1964 World's Fair and explains how and why Warhol's work got it to the façade of the New York State Pavilion designed by the prominent American architect Philip Johnson. The paper reveals the ambiguous nature of the antihero representation of *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* and studies the contribution of one of Warhol's art dealers Ileana Sonnabend to the international circulation of these paintings in the aftermath of the 1964 World's Fair.

Keywords: mugshot, antihero, Pop Art, Andy Warhol, Leo Catelli, Ileana Sonnabend.

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1. The Place of a Mugshot in American Cultural Politics

On April 4, 2023, the day of non-stop news alerts offering minute-by-minute coverage of the former US President Donald Trump's arraignment, subscribers to Trump's mailing list received one more breaking alert: "NEW ITEM, MUGSHOT." The email sent to Trump's supporters advertised a plain white T-shirt featuring a white-and-black photo of the former president getting booked, with a fake chart behind him giving his height as 6 feet and 5 inches. Underneath this photo were the words "NOT GUILTY" and the trial date (styled as "04-04-23"). The Trump store promised to send fans the mugshot T-shirt for free, in return for a $47 donation to his 2024 re-election campaign. In the end, the Manhattan criminal court decided not to photograph Trump at his arraignment as "there's no need for theatrics", so Trump's supporters went with a mock photo for sales, seeking to transform the spectacle of his arraignment "into a media circus" (Suebsaeng and Dickinson 2023, n.p.).

In fact, US police departments began taking photographs of suspects they arrested in the 1850s. They framed the white-and-black prints and hung them in rogues' galleries to entertain the public and inform about shady characters. In the 1880s, Alphonse

Bertillon, a French anthropologist who served as chief of France's Judicial Identification Services, developed what we know today as a standardized mugshot. He created the now familiar format of two tight shots of the suspect's head and upper body, one *en face* and the other in profile, accompanying it with additional information about the suspect's hair and eye color, scars, profession, family, address, arm span, foot length, and ear size. Bertillon called his mugshot a *portrait parlé*, or a speaking image that allowed the police to recognize a repeat offender even if he disguised his identity (Wexler 2023).

While being an official document, mugshots can also be considered as a work of art. They reflect "the power of the state to dictate and enforce the narrative of the criminal by deploying the tools of photographic representation against certain populations, largely the poor, dispossessed, migrant, indigenous, and racialized others" (Fleetwood 2020, 87). From the art theoretical perspective, mugshots are an intrinsic part of the so-called "carceral aesthetics" which stands for all "production of art under conditions of unfreedom" (Fleetwood 2020, 25). In this respect, mugshots can be considered as representations of carceral visuality whose primary function is to "maintain the category of the prisoner as a subject removed from civil society and one deserving of state-sanctioned punishment, confinement, and incapacitation" (Fleetwood 2020, 87–88). Indeed, photographs of imprisoned people largely shape society's perception of criminalized subjects and turn into visual stigmas that incarcerated people cannot escape. In addition, these images reflect "the punitive framings of the carceral state" (Fleetwood 2020, 88) and have a huge impact on how criminals get represented in mass media, scholarship, political discourse, and cultural productions.

Interestingly enough, mugshots entered the American art historical canon in the early twentieth century (Brilliant 1991). In 1923, Marcel Duchamp created his famous two-dimensional readymade *Wanted* that now belongs to the Louise Hellstrom Collection. Most recently, the silkscreen *Wanted* of a contemporary American artist Ester Hernandes entered the permanent collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. The current paper examines a series of portraits called *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* that the famous American Pop artist Andy Warhol created on the occasion of his participation in the World's Fair that took place in New York in 1964. The paper explores the economic-political context of the 1964 World's Fair and explains how and why Warhol's work got onto the façade of the New York State Pavilion designed by the prominent American architect Philip Johnson. The paper reveals the ambiguous nature of the antihero representation of *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* and examines the subsequent international circulation of these paintings in the aftermath of the 1964 World's Fair.

2. The Economic-Political Context of the 1964 World's Fair

The 1964 World's Fair took place from April 22 to 18 October 28, 1964 and from April 21 to October 17, 1965 in Flushing Meadows Park in Queens, New York City. The Fair, whose

motto was "Peace through Understanding", included over 140 pavilions for 25 nations, 24 US states, and over 45 corporations. It was classified by the BIE (Bureau International des Expositions), the intergovernmental organization responsible for overseeing and regulating World's Fairs, as an unrecognized exposition. Actually, the Fair did not receive the status of an international exposition because of its non-compliance with BIE's three regulations: it run for a period of more than six months, it charged rental fees from the exhibitors, and it was the second fair to be held in the US after the 1962 World's Fair in Seattle within a ten-year period. Due to the non-recognition of the 1964 World's Fair by the BIE, many BIE's countries-members, including Canada, Australia, the majority of European countries, China, and the Soviet Union, withdrew their participation.[1] It is worth pointing out that despite its unofficial status, the 1964 World's Fair still enjoyed high attendance numbers, with 24,148,000 visitors in 1964 and 24,459,000 visitors in 1965 (Kretschmer 1999, 302). One particular measure that stimulated the Fair's high attendance was the advance sale of tickets. By 4 March 1964, the number of tickets sold had tripled the goals the organizers "had aimed at", which per se was a "particularly remarkable achievement."[2]

From an economic perspective, the 1964 New York World's Fair was a unique moment in the history of World's Fairs due to its huge private funding. In fact, as the BIE did not recognize the Fair, the U.S. government refused to finance the event from the federal budget. Instead, the main fundraiser for the Fair was the New York World's Fair Corporation, a private entity financed by prominent American businessmen such as, among others, David Rockefeller from Chase Manhattan Corporation, George Moore from Citigroup, Frederic Brandi from American South African Gold Trust, and John Schiff from Kuhn, Loeb and Co. The responsibility of organizing the Fair lay in the hands of the Corporation's president Robert Moses. The choice of Moses as the designer of the Fair was not fortuitous. In fact, he had a reputation as a person who had transformed the economy of New York City. His name was associated with the city reforms "remarkable by every measure: the number of public works completed; the speed of their execution; their geographical scope across five boroughs; their exceptional quality; and, most especially, their range" (Ballon and Jackson 2007, 65).

We can judge about Moses's excellent organizational skills by reading the correspondence between him and Nathan Ostroff, Assistant General Counsel at the

[1] Kathy (Not Identified), Letter to Mr. Tupper, Undated, Record Group 40: General Records of the Department of Commerce, 1898–2000, Series: General Correspondence Relating to the New York World's Fair, 1963–1965, The National Archives, College Park.

[2] Robert Hickok, Memorandum, 4 March 1964, Record Group 40: General Records of the Department of Commerce, 1898-2000, Series: General Correspondence Relating to the New York World's Fair, 1963-1965, The National Archives, College Park.

Department of Commerce. On November 23, 1960, Ostroff wrote to Moses that he and his colleagues were highly impressed by the "state of readiness insofar as organization, construction plans, and site and other preparations are concerned."[3] Nevertheless, in the same letter, Ostroff raised concerns about Moses's attitude to the BIE that did not agree to "change or waive certain of its substantive requirements in regard to Governmental guarantees and the spacing and scheduling of fair enterprises."[4] Ostroff was concerned that the New York World's Fair Corporation did not respect many of BIE's rules, which could potentially result in low foreign country participation rates in the Fair. In the response letter of 29 November 1960, Moses assured Ostroff that despite the conflict with the BIE and lack of federal support from the U.S. government, the Fair would be "a memorable international event."[5] He proudly claimed that "the scale of the proposed Federal Exhibit should be in proportion to that of the Fair and that its content be commensurate in the importance of with the industrial exhibits now in prospect"[6].

Ostroff's concerns about Moses's disrespect of BIE's regulations were not unjustified. Foreign participation in the 1964 World's Fair was, indeed, much lower than originally expected. On July 6, 1961, the New York World's Fair Corporation issued a list of 47 countries that "signified their intention" to participate in the Fair.[7] The majority of European countries were not present on the list, which means that they were opposed to this fair from the very beginning under the influence of the BIE. The Soviet Union and China, on the contrary, had initial plans to participate in the Fair despite BIE's disapproval. However, both countries canceled their participation for the sake of keeping good relations with the BIE. As a result, the 1964 World's Fair attracted only limited foreign country participation. According to the official detailed map of the Fair, there were 35 nations coming to New York City[8]. By contrast, the 1962 World's Fair in Seattle, attracted 50 countries,

[3] Nathan Ostroff, Letter to Robert Moses, 23 Nov 1960, Record Group 40: General Records of the Department of Commerce, 1898–2000, Series: General Correspondence Relating to the New York World's Fair, 1963–1965, The National Archives, College Park.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Robert Moses, Letter to Nathan Ostroff, 29 Nov 1960, Record Group 40: General Records of the Department of Commerce, 1898–2000, Series: General Correspondence Relating to the New York World's Fair, 1963–1965, The National Archives, College Park.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Charles Poletti, List of Countries Which Have Signified Their Intention of Participating in the New York World's Fair, 6 Jul 1961, Record Group 40: General Records of the Department of Commerce, 1898–2000, Series: General Correspondence Relating to the New York World's Fair, 1963–1965, The National Archives, College Park.

[8] The International Area of the Fair included the pavilions of: Africa, Austria, Belgium, Berlin, Caribbean, Central America, Denmark, Paris and French Industry, Greece, Guinea, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia,

whereas the 1939–1940 Fair in New York City attracted 55 countries (Kretschmer 1999, 300–301).

Although the U.S. government institutions were not directly involved in the organization of the 1964 New York World's Fair, they still played a crucial role in its planning. The supervisory function was divided between three agencies—the Department of Commerce which ensured the participation of businesses in the Fair, the Department of State which was responsible for settling down the issue with foreign representation in the Fair, and the USIA (United States Information Agency) which was concerned with mediatizing the event at home and abroad.[9] As Ostroff noticed in his report to the Secretary of Commerce on February 6, 1961, "Commerce, State, and USIA are the major agencies concerned because there are involved mainly economic, political, and propaganda considerations."[10]

3. Philip Johnson and the Quest to Bring American Pop Art to the 1964 World's Fair

Amid its dense economic-political context, the 1964 New York World's Fair presented a rich palette of US and foreign art exhibits. Thus, the most popular non-U.S. artistic attraction at the Fair was the Vatican Pavilion, which displayed the original *Pieta* sculpture by Michelangelo for the first time in New York City. The U.S. National Pavilion, in turn, was entitled "Challenge to Greatness" and exhibited the artworks that echoed President Lyndon Johnson's proposals for "The Great Society" program. In particular, the US exhibit featured a 15-minute ride through a filmed presentation of American history and paid tribute to the late President John F. Kennedy, who had broken ground for the pavilion in December 1962 but had been assassinated a year later in November 1963 before the fair's opening.

Whereas the US National Pavilion attracted greater public attention as it represented the artistic achievements of the American nation hosting the event, the most novel, avant-garde trends of the 1960s American modern art were on display in the smaller New York State Pavilion of regional importance designed by the famous

Ireland, Japan, Jordan, Israel, Korea, Lebanon, Malaysia, Mexico, Morocco, Pakistan, Philippines, Polynesia, Republic of China, Sierra Leone, Spain, Sudan, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand, United Arab Republic, Vatican City, Venezuela. For more information, see: New York World's Fair Official Detailed Map, 1964-1965, Donald G. Larson Collection on International Expositions and Fairs, Special Collections Research Center, Henry Madden Library, California State University, Fresno.

[9] To be more precise, USIA's involvement in the Fair focused on three public diplomacy issues: harmonization of the activities of the New York World's Fair Corporation, coverage of the Fair in the USIA-controlled media, and approval of the contents of the US National Pavilion.

[10] Nathan Ostroff, Report to the Secretary of Commerce, 6 Feb 1961, Record Group 40: General Records of the Department of Commerce, 1898–2000, Series: General Correspondence Relating to the New York World's Fair, 1963–1965, The National Archives, College Park.

American architect Philip Johnson. Although it was Governor Nelson Rockefeller who commissioned the Pavilion design from Johnson, the real person who suggested Johnson's participation in the Fair was Mrs. Wrightsman, wife of the oil magnate Charles Wrightsman. It was her "who, in the culture whirl of Manhattan, discovered Philip, succumbed to his charms, and commended him to her husband" (Schulze 1994, 303). Johnson's Pavilion, a rounded piece of the modernist architecture, consisted of three separate elements, each with its own purpose: the "Tent of Tomorrow" intended for the display of the Texaco highway map of the New York State made up of 567 mosaic terrazzo panels; three Observation Towers installed with the observation platforms, and Theaterama, a circular theater, now home to the Queens Theater. This third part of the Pavilion became the location where Johnson placed the exhibition of 1960s American modern painters. Johnson selected all artworks for his pavilion on his own. By imposing the role of a curator on himself, Johnson wanted to emphasize the link between architecture and fine arts and to demonstrate his personal artistic taste.

It is interesting that Johnson decided to display paintings not inside the pavilion, but on its outer "public" side. The official documents called Johnson's engagement with the art not an exhibition but an "exterior decoration" whose aim was to fill the space "on the exterior of the Circarama Building at the New York State Exhibit at the World's Fair."[11] Johnson's unconventional decision to place the fine arts exhibit beyond the walls raises the issue of an uneasy relationship between fine arts, architecture, and the public sphere in general (Johnson 1979, 143–49). The very notion of the public sphere is contradictory. It consists of two quite different Latin words: "populous" (the people) and "pubes" (adult men). According to cultural theorist W.J.T. Mitchell, the term "public sphere" should be written with the "l" in parentheses "to remind us that for much of human history political and social authority has derived from a 'pubic' sphere, not a public one" (Mitchell 1992, 36). By placing the fine arts exhibit on the outer side of the New York State Pavilion, Johnson showcased that displaying art in public spaces could be considered as one of the contemporary forms of socio-cultural outreach. For him, public spaces seemed to be essential to the construction of socio-cultural identity, whereas art embedded into such public spaces played the vital role of an interface capable of "overcoming boundaries between outdoor and indoor exhibition space" (Lorente 2019, 188).

In total, Johnson selected eleven American artists to be displayed in his pavilion, namely, Peter Agostini, John Chamberlain, Robert Indiana, Ellsworth Kelly, Roy Lichtenstein, Alexander Liberman, Robert Mallary, Claes Oldenburg, Robert Rauschenberg,

[11] New York State Exhibit, New York World's Fair 1964–1965, Amendments to State Architect's Standard Specifications, Section 41: Exterior Decoration, 26 Dec 1962, Record Group 40: General Records of the Department of Commerce, 1898–2000, Series: General Correspondence Relating to the New York World's Fair, 1963–1965, The National Archives, College Park.

James Rosenquist, and Andy Warhol. The architect selected the young American Pop artists of the 1960s because he liked the idea of their conscious rejection of the artistic values of the well-established Abstract Expressionist painting that over the courses of the 1950s became associated with a "style with postwar themes such as existentialism, alienation, individuality, freedom, and universality" (Polcari 1991, xviii). Indeed, American Pop Art was rather radical in its nature because it challenged the aesthetics of 'highbrow' art in terms of "connotations of rarity and hierarchical excellence" (Crow 2014, viii). It was originally associated with the vernacular connoisseurship typical of folkloric genealogy. Under the influence of art critic Lawrence Alloway, who actually coined the term "Pop Art" in his famous article "The Arts and Mass Media" published in *Architectural Record* in February 1958, Pop Art became associated with "the mass-produced artifacts of daily life, no matter what their intrinsic aesthetic significance, might be transfigured on canvas and celebrated in galleries" (Crow 2014, viii).

The 1964 World's Fair was the only time when Johnson used "the works of the Pop School in planned association with his architecture" (Russell-Hitchcock 1966, 24). In this respect, the New York Fair was a unique case when Johnson's architectural genius came along with the achievements of American Pop artists. We tend to think that Johnson's fine arts taste was shaped under the influence of his lifetime partner David Whitney who was a New York art critic, dealer, collector, and curator. In terms of art preferences, Whitney was a great proponent of American Pop Art. He understood Pop artists' creative minds and appreciated their artistic expression, which contrasted a lot with the ideals of Abstract Expressionist painters (Guilbaut 1983). According to Whitney, through his professional engagements at the Green Gallery and later the Leo Castelli Gallery, he "became close to these people who are now all gods. But they weren't then" (The Glass House, n.d.). As Johnson would later recognize, it was through Whitney that he became acquainted with artists. He once noticed in an interview with another famous American architect Robert Stern: "… I never talked much to artists. They don't talk much. The better the artist, the less they are able to verbalize. So I prefer critics" (Johnson 2008, 171).

4. The Ambiguity of Antihero Representation: Andy Warhol's *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* on the Façade of the New York State Pavilion

Andy Warhol was among ten[12] American artists exhibited in the New York State Pavilion at the 1964 World's Fair[13]. Johnson approached Andy Warhol about his potential participation in the Fair in early 1962. The architect asked the artist to create some pieces of public art, especially for this event. Warhol agreed but was not sure about the topic of his

[12] Claes Oldenburg withdrew his participation from the Fair.

[13] The photos of *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* are available for consultation on *Warholsatrts.org* website. Web: https://www.warholstars.org/most-wanted-men-andy-warhol.html (Accessed March 22, 2023).

mural until the end of April 1963. According to poet John Giorno, it was painter Wynn Chamberlain who suggested the subject of the most wanted men to Warhol (Giorno 1994, 127–28). In the article published in the *Journal-American* on 15 April 1964, Warhol described his creating the mural for the 1964 World's Fair in the following terms:

> I was first contacted by Mr. Johnson about six months ago. The whole thing cost about 4000. That's all they gave me to do it. It took one day. I got the pictures from a book the police put out. It's called 'The 13 Most Wanted Men.' It just had something to do with New York, and I was paid to have it silkscreened. I didn't make any money on it. (Frei and Printz 2004, 25)

This quote suggests that Warhol was not passionate about Johnson's commission. It was not his first-hand priority at that moment. Indeed, at the time of working on the mural, the artist was simultaneously producing an enormous quantity of box sculptures (*Brillo Boxes* being the most famous of them) for his second one-man show in the New York-based Stable Gallery, which opened on April 21, 1964, just one day before the opening of the Fair. Lacking time and feeling pressure from several projects running in parallel, Warhol reproduced 22 images of thirteen criminals[14] exactly as they appeared in the New York Police Department Bulletin of February 1, 1962 given to him by Chamberlain. The overall size of the mural *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* silkscreened with ink on Masonite reached 20x20 feet. Opposing Warhol's serial reproduction technique, Johnson decided to put together the 22 images of thirteen criminals in a different order and arrangement. In particular, he suggested moving the full-face views of the criminals to the left and their profiles to the right (with the exception of the 13th criminal), leaving three panels at the bottom right of the mural completely blank. Warhol did not like Johnson's modification of his artwork, that's why the final images placement was partially ordered and partially random. On 18 April 1964, the *Journal-American* wrote that the artist "did not feel his work achieved the effect he had in mind, and asked that it be removed so he could replace it with another painting" (Frei and Printz 2004, 25).

Despite Warhol's objections, Johnson placed *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* on the façade of the New York State pavilion. The subject matter of Warhol's artwork was quite a radical artistic choice for such a high-profile international event as the World's Fair. With his mugshots, Warhol reconsidered the aesthetics of crime and the place of the outlaw in contemporary art. Officially, the Fair's main theme was the Space Age, the celebration of technological innovation and a man's achievements "on a shrinking globe in an expanding universe, his inventions, discoveries, art, skills, and aspirations" (Rosenblum 1989,

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[14] John M. (most wanted man no. 1), John Victor G. (most wanted man no. 2), Ellis Ruiz B. (most wanted man no. 3), Redmond C. (most wanted man no. 4), Arthur Alvin M. (most wanted man no. 5), Tomas Francis C. (most wanted man no. 6), Salvatore V. (most wanted man no. 7), Andrew F. (most wanted man no. 8), John S. (most wanted man no. 9), Louis Joseph M. (most wanted man no. 10), John Joseph H., Jr. (most wanted man no. 11), Frank B. (most wanted man no. 12), Joseph F (most wanted man no. 13).

57). In such a context devoted to the achievements of tomorrow, the figures of the most wanted men, far from celebrating the promise of America's future, stood as "a darkly sardonic commentary on its past" (Meyer 2002, 136).

On the most fundamental levels of the form (grainy back-and-white photographs) and content (criminal faces), Warhol's mural "offered a harsh counterpoint to the full-color displays and 'futuramas' on offer throughout the Fair" (Meyer 2002, 134). It implied that even a deviant form of American achievement could be embedded into the realm of beauty and taste and consequently become an aesthetic object. In art historian Sidra Stich's words, "America had long exalted the fictional heroism of the gun-toting cowboy, the golden-hearted outlaw, and the avenging superman, but during the post-war period crime and violence became a pervasive component of everyday urban life" (1987, 176). Indeed, in 1955 one crime was committed every fifteen seconds, whereas by 1966 the crime rate rose five times faster than the US population rate (Stich 1987, 176). By portraying criminals (the most wanted men as defined by the police) as iconic antiheroes (the least wanted men as defined by society), Warhol enunciated America's position as an international seat of crime and violence and established a particular link in the criminal-celebrity bond. For Warhol, criminals on the most-wanted list represented a "perverse fulfillment of the American dream": successful at their chosen "profession," often rich and sometimes famous, they took "full advantage of America's opportunities and resources", while enjoying secret admiration on the part of the U.S. media that effectively rewarded criminal masterminds by "paying so much attention to them" in news coverage, crime novels and films (Stich 1987, 177).

Furthermore, *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* encoded a hidden message of gay identity (Silver 1992) and "infamously blurred the line between erotic and juridical enthusiasm" (Grudin 2022, 83). It is not a coincidence that Warhol shot a silent film *Thirteen Most Beautiful Boys* a few months after completing the mural. For him, while Pop Art "was, among other things, a tactic for surviving in a homophobic world" (Flatley 1996, 102), the selected thirteen criminals revealed the second homoerotic sense: they conveyed the idea that "the prohibition of homosexuality may imbue same-sex desire with all the gritty allure of a mug shot" (Meyer 2002, 140). Indeed, the subtle link between criminality and homoeroticism implied the double entrendre (Sichel 2020) of *Thirteen Most Wanted Men*: it was not only that these men were sought after by the police but that the very act of wanting men may constitute a form of criminality if the "wanter" was also male, let's say Warhol himself (Hermann 2020).

Besides depicting men "as objects of both official surveillance and illicit desire" (Meyer 2002, 137), *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* also raised the issue of crime in the art world broadly speaking. Since World War II, art crime has evolved from being an almost unknown type of criminal activity into one of the world's biggest illicit industries (Tompkins 2016). Today, art crime potentially takes four forms: vandalism, forgery, theft, and

antiquities looting. The art trade is the largest victim of art crime. If in the past, art crime was associated with "a crime of passion", today it is seen as "a cold business" (Charney 2009, 107). Moreover, art crime sponsors and gets sponsored by other criminal enterprises that range from drugs and arms trade to terrorism. Warhol's *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* remind us of the fact that art, like all other domains of social activity, is not free from crime. According to recent statistics, around 10% of works in museums are fakes (Charney 2017), whereas more than 52,000 works are declared as stolen in Interpol's Stolen Works of Art Database.

It is curious that *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* were covered with aluminum house paint within a few days of its installation on the exterior façade of the Pavilion's Theaterama one week before the grand opening of the Fair, thereby hiding it behind a monochrome layer of silver. Warhol recalled:

> The World's Fair was out in Flushing Meadow that summer with my mural of the Ten [*sic*] Most Wanted Men on the outside of the building that Philip Johnson designed. Philip gave me the assignment, but because of some political thing I never understood, the officials had it whitewashed out. A bunch of us went out to Flushing Meadow to have a look at it, but by the time we got there, you could only see the images faintly coming through the paint they'd just put over them. In one way I was glad the mural was gone: now I wouldn't have to feel responsible if one of the criminals ever got turned in to the FBI because someone had recognized him from my pictures. So then I did a picture of Robert Moses instead, who was running the fair—a few dozen four-foot squares of Masonite panels—but that got rejected, too. But since I had the Ten [*sic*] Most Wanted screens already made up, I decided to go ahead and do paintings of them anyway. [...] The thing I most of all remember about the World's Fair was sitting in a car with the sound coming from speakers behind me. As I sat there hearing the words rush past me from behind, I got the same sensation I always got when I gave an interview—that the words weren't coming out of me, that they were coming from someplace else, someplace behind me. (Warhol and Hackett 1980)

Indeed, it was Governor Nelson Rockefeller who insisted on the mural's temporary removal due to legalistic difficulties. Whereas some criminals depicted had already received a fair trial and their mugshots from the search warrant could no longer be publicly displayed anymore, seven of the thirteen criminals depicted were of Italian origin and Governor Rockefeller needed the Italian vote for his electoral campaign (Harris 2014, 14). Forced to change the subject matter of his mural composition, Warhol suggested covering the mugshot depictions with twenty-five identical silkscreen portraits of Robert Moses, the president of the 1964 World's Fair. However, as the above-presented quote suggests, "the subversive humor of Warhol's reversal of representational hierarchies" (Buchloh 2001, 29) was not given momentum either. Commenting on his decision to reject Warhol's portraits of Robert Moses for display on the façade of his pavilion, Philip Johnson admitted:

> And then he proposed to show a portrait of Robert Moses instead of the *Thirteen Most Wanted Men*? Yes, that's right… since he was the boss of the World Fair, but I prohibited that… Andy and I had a quarrel at that time, even though he is one of my favorite artists. (Crone 1970, 30)

Warhol's work was restored only several months after the start of the Fair. For the opening ceremony, however, the mural was silenced into "abstract monochromy" (Buchloh 2001, 29), thus evoking the ambiguous nature of *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* as a "mass subject" represented through a compromise between "iconic celebrity and abstract anonymity", or through the "figure of *notoriety*" (Foster 2001, 80). Indeed, each of the most wanted men pictured in the mural "was a kind of low-level star, one whose image was reproduced across the nation, albeit in post offices and police stations rather than films and fan magazines" (Meyer 2002, 136). Moreover, the notoriety of *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* was "not so different from the notoriety of Warhol", as the artist "not only incarnated the mass subject as witness", but also "instantiated the mass object as icon" (Foster 2001, 80). Such a double pictorial status allowed both the artist and his work to keep an in-between position "between the iconicity of celebrity and the abstraction of anonymity" (Foster 2001, 80).

5. The Afterlife of *Thirteen Most Wanted Men*

Contrary to the generally positive reception of the Fair, *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* got rather negative coverage in the local New York press without getting significant attention from the foreign mass media. As Warhol noticed in the interview given to the *Journal-American* on April 15, 1965, his mural was something that dissented from the "programmatic display of cultural progress and social perfectibility offered by the World's Fair" (Frei and Printz 2004, 26). To mitigate the nationwide embarrassment of Warhol's mural, the New York media outlets tried to avoid mentioning Warhol's contribution to the Fair. Those few who touched upon *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* were very concise in their reporting and restrained in their opinions. Instead of talking about the significance of the subject matter of Warhol's mural for the Fair, the press, in turn, concentrated exclusively on the problem of the mural's provisional suppression.

Summarizing the media coverage of the temporary demolition of Warhol's mural at the beginning of the Fair, art historian Richard Meyer noticed that "apart from a brief mention of the voided mural in the *New York Times* some three months later, there was no other press coverage of this episode" (Meyer 2002, 130). Such modest public reception of Warhol's mural demonstrates, on the one hand, the absence of a censored subject of the most wanted men back in the 1960s public discourse and, on the other hand, the reluctance of the American press to freely talk about this subject and pass judgments about it. As Philip Johnson would later admit in the interview given to the German art historian Reiner Crone: "Most of these 'Thirteen Wanted' were Mafiosi. And the other thing was that they'd already been exonerated—it was an old list, and a lot of them had been proven

not guilty. And to label them, we would have been subject to lawsuits from here to the end of the world" (Crone 1970, 30). Johnson's testimony explains very well why Warhol's mural was not well covered in the press and was destroyed right after the end of the Fair.

Despite the mural's demolition after the Fair, Warhol decided to create separate portraits of each of the *Thirteen Most Wanted Men*. As the artist admitted himself, "since I had the Ten [*sic*] Most Wanted screen already made up, I decided to go ahead and do paintings of them anyway" (Warhol and Hackett 1980). Actually, portraits, as an artistic genre, represented an ideal opportunity for Warhol to "find yet another way to satisfy his compulsion to document the world around him (and get paid for it too!)" (Geldzahler and Rosenblum 1993, 33) In total, in April–July 1964 Warhol created twenty-two portraits of *Thirteen Most Wanted Men*, all of which entered the Leo Castelli Gallery registry in late September 1964 upon the artist's joining the gallery. For Warhol, Castelli's endorsement was of paramount importance. He admitted: "No matter how good you are, if you're not promoted right, you won't be one of those remembered names. But there was more than that involved in why I wanted Castelli to take me on; it wasn't only the business side of it. I was like a college kid wanting to get into a certain fraternity or a musician wanting to get on the same record label as his idol" (Warhol and Hackett 1980, n.p.).

Whereas Warhol's joining the Leo Castelli Gallery was a life-changing moment in Warhol's artistic career, a crucial role in the further dissemination of *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* should be attributed to Warhol's other art dealer Ileana Sonnabend, who exhibited a whole series of twenty-two *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* in her Parisian gallery at 12 rue Mazarine in 1967.[15] The catalogue published in conjunction with the exhibition reproduced the original New York City police department bulletin on which the series was based, with the texts printed in English with translation into French. Interestingly, the last names of all most wanted men were blacked out and the crimes committed by the infamous cast of thirteen were cited only in French. In addition, the catalogue opened with the extraordinarily eloquent introduction written by French critic Otto Hahn. Wittingly starting with Robert Delaunay's incisive phrase "Photography is a criminal art," Hahn's text credited Warhol with "making silence and solitude concrete in his compelling black-and-white masks" (Richardson and Richardson 2009, 32). Speaking about the uneasy subject matter of *Thirteen Most Wanted Men*, Hahn wrote:

> Warhol simply decides to be clear. He selects the lens of the microscope and the most appropriate process to distort the weft of reality … . Truth cannot escape. Everything is there, in front of you; nothing but stains, holes, the void: the debris of reality. … Far from simply being portraits of bad boys and criminals, the "Thirteen Most Wanted Men" speak of usury, of degradation, and of the funny way we have of playing with illusion. With the utmost coldness

[15] The catalogue of the exhibition is undated, but contemporary art critics tend to place it between February and May 1967.

> and austerity, and without comment, Andy Warhol speaks of the beauty of the world, and of its failure in black and white. (Richardson and Richardson 2009).

In Sonnabend's words, "*The Most Wanted Men* was a tough exhibit and not a single piece was sold. The sales are beginning to come in now however, and I'm in the process of selling two in Belgium and six more in Germany but have not yet been paid. This should come to $7200."[16] The French press likewise expressed mixed feelings about the 1967 *Andy Warhol* show at La Galerie Sonnabend. For instance, François Pluchart called Warhol in the May 22, 1967 issue of *Combat: Le Journal de Paris* "the revolutionary who instigated the plot against spontaneous emotion, soul reaching, and all the already academicized alibis of gestural painting" (Richardson and Richardson 2009). In contrast, Henry Chapier, another journalist of *Combat: Le Journal de Paris*, wrote on May 20, 1967 that the separation of *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* from the context of the New York World's Fair explained "the bemusement of the Galerie Sonnabend visitors, who were taken by surprise" (Richardson and Richardson 2009, n.p.). For Chapier, the 1967 *Andy Warhol* show was "a new source of misunderstandings and embarrassment" for the French public and "a new episode in the cold war" that "seethed between New York and Paris since Rauschenberg's consecration at the Venice Biennale" (Richardson and Richardson 2009, n.p.).

Despite mediocre financial success and ambiguous public reception in France, the *Andy Warhol: The Thirteen Most Wanted* show traveled to Galerie Rudolf Zwirner in Cologne, where it was on view in September–October 1967, and to Rowan Gallery in London, in March 1968. Europeans were curious about the "democratic aesthetics" (Sim 2023, 51) of Warhol's artwork because, contrary to the "introspective, abstract modes that dominated the art of the 1950s", Pop Art was "expansive, inclusive, and outward-looking" (Weitman 1999, 9). In addition, Europeans' interest in Warhol's artwork coincided with the dissemination of Pop Art "from founding hubs in New York and London to other parts of the world" (Morgan 2015, 15). In fact, from its inception, Pop Art was "transient, transferable from one location to another, and accessible to a new class of viewers" (Alexander 2015, 78). During the 1960s, many regional Pop movements emerged simultaneously, and "often imbued with an ambivalence, of not outright hostility, to the notion of American economic (and implicitly artistic) dominance" (Morgan 2015, 15). Developing in parallel with American Pop Art, European Pop Art was by itself "no art-immanent, formal and linear evolution" representing "the reaction of a young European generation of artists to the altered pictorial ecosystem of European life and culture, rather than a reaction to an American Pop Art whose influence became apparent from 1964 onwards" (Bezzola 2018, 112). While both employing commonplace mediated imagery, American and European Pop artists reflected upon different socio-cultural subject matters. Whereas burgeoning consumer culture "elicited a more ardent response from American Pop artists", "the

[16] Ileana Sonnabend, Letter to Andy Warhol, 15 Nov 1967, The Andy Warhol Museum Archives, Pittsburgh.

turbulent politics of the period" was more often mirrored in the work of their European counterparts (Weitman 1999, 9).

All in all, first exhibited on the occasion of the 1964 New York World's Fair, *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* are currently "scattered around the world, in collections and museums" (Scherman and Dalton 2009, 223). In the context of the 1964 World's Fair, the participation in which "was conditional on the political and commercial concerns of the organizers" and whose "real business" was the "economic status of the white middle class" and not the "racial and class conflicts" that were "coming to the surface in the America of the early '60s" (Berger 1989), *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* can be regarded as Warhol's response to the then-contemporary sociocultural and political discourses forming "an integral part of the rebellion of the 1960s counterculture" (Simmons 2008, 147). In the words of art historian Reva Wolf, "the mug shots of wanted men operated as stand-ins for the national heroes that we would expect to find in such a venue. Thus, they served to subvert–and to invert–the idea of the hero" (Wolf 1997, 114). In this respect, the "potent symbolic power" (Simmons 2008, 18) of *Thirteen Most Wanted Men* as antihero characters showcased both Warhol's critical reaction to the U.S. established national heroic ideas and Warhol's support of societal upheaval and changing cultural status quos of the era.

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WANDAVISION THROUGH THE SITCOMS: A STUDY OF THE PRODUCTION AND AMERICAN CULTURE IN THE SERIES' NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION

Ana Sánchez-Asenjo

ABSTRACT

Marvel series *WandaVision* has been acclaimed for its outstanding rendition of classical sitcoms. It has been considered a homage to this genre. More accurately, the references to certain sitcoms have been deemed Wanda Maximoff's trauma response to the loss of her partner, Vision. The present paper takes a step further by exploring the contribution of sitcoms to the series' storytelling. In order to contextualize the parallelisms of *WandaVision* to some classical sitcoms, it will be helpful to provide an outline of the characteristics of the genre and specific features that matched the preoccupations of American society through the decades. Subsequently, each episode of the show will be analyzed, paying attention to diegetic and non-diegetic elements, the plot, personnel, world-building, cinematography, and *mise en scène*. The different choices in each case recall the ideals behind particular sitcoms while accounting for the evolution of the genre and portraying the changes in the American culture. All these allusions and echoes are key for conveying Wanda's personal story.

Keywords: WandaVision, sitcom, MCU, television, family, American values.

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1. WELCOME TO WESTVIEW: AN INTRODUCTION TO *WANDAVISION*

WandaVision (2021) was the first show of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). As such, it drew a lot of attention from critics and fans alike. Most of them agreed on its successful recreation of renowned situational comedies. The internet thrived with comparisons between the series and some classical sitcoms (see Salem 2021; Sarkisian 2021; Walker-Werth 2021; Wang 2021). Users attributed these parallelisms to a well-deserved homage and Wanda's relationship with them. Nevertheless, it seems that none of these comparisons accounted for how the allusions shape *WandaVision* beyond simple references.

As can be retrieved from interviews with the creators and participants in the production of *WandaVision,* the sitcom aesthetic is fully intentional. Executive Producer Kevin Feige claims that he became fascinated with the idea of playing with that genre to subvert both what Marvel does and what those shows were (Feige 2021). The rest of the

team, including the cast, worked to imitate the sitcom ambiance, as Matt Shakman, the director of the show, explains:

> We recreated everything from vintage lenses, production and costume design, to the actors getting together with me and studying what those old shows looked like. … We worked with a dialect coach … on how they spoke in different eras, and how they walked, talked and moved. (Shakman 2021, n.p.)

Bearing in mind the background of the main characters, the use of sitcom conventions in the show turns out to be disrupting—as well as ingenious and appropriate. Wanda Maximoff (played by Elizabeth Olsen) is a superhuman with psychic special abilities who joined the Avengers after having lost her twin brother Pietro in a fight. Their parents were killed in the war when they were kids. As an Avenger, she uses her powers to ensure the peace and protect humans, but she sometimes fails and feels terribly guilty about it. Wanda starts a romantic relationship with Vision, but she is then forced to kill him in order to avoid Thanos's great threat. Thus, Wanda's life is marked by loss and trauma.

Vision (played by Paul Bethany) is a male synthezoid configured by some Avengers so that he could join their team and fight against their enemies. He is extremely powerful and able to process enormous amounts of data, but he initially lacks human reasoning and sentiments. Vision finally develops feelings for Wanda, but he is killed right when they are building their future together. All in all, this superhero is characterized by both his naiveté and great power.

The recreation of old sitcoms does not seem to match the usual storylines of these two characters, but it was actually crucial to complement *WandaVision*'s plot. To compensate for the death of her husband Vision, superhero Wanda Maximoff has created a fake normal life in Westview, an American suburban town, in which Vision is still alive. The place is set in a different decade in each episode, but time does not pass by for its inhabitants. That is, Wanda and Vision arrive as a newlywed couple in the 50s; then, they make their best to integrate into a 60s neighborhood; by the time Westview represents a 70s town, she gets pregnant and gives birth to twins, and so on and so forth, until reaching the present. As the plot unfolds, it is revealed that Westview is Maximoff's creation. It is inside the so-called Hex, isolated from the outside world, all thanks to her abilities to warp reality. Wanda controls everything from the scenarios to the actions of Westview's inhabitants. Through some flashbacks, we learn that she found solace in sitcoms in traumatic moments of her life: Wanda and her family used to watch them together, *The Dick Van Dyke Show* being one of her favorites; when she was tortured by the Nazi organization Hydra, she evaded with shows such as *The Brady Bunch;* and after the death of her brother Pietro, Wanda comforted herself watching TV, including the sitcom *Malcolm in the Middle.* In fact, she watched the latter with Vision, and that was one of the first moments when they had a meaningful connection. Therefore, she looks for the same kind of comfort she felt on those occasions when devising her oasis. Wanda seeks to live happily

ignoring her past, namely her involvement in the war against supervillain Thanos, which caused global chaos and Vision's death—as shown previously in the MCU. Meanwhile, the Sentient World Observation and Response Department (S.W.O.R.D.) works outside the Hex to dismantle Wanda's alteration. One of its agents, Monica Rambeau, enters Westview and becomes one of its neighbors.

Wanda's personal connection to some sitcoms explains why *WandaVision* is shaped after them. Nevertheless, how this genre—in terms of content and form—contributes to the plot is still to be explored. It could be argued that the narrative construction of Wanda's changing feelings and needs is reflected in the evolution of sitcoms, just as these shows mirrored and guided American society when they were released. Thus, the aim of the present article is not to merely point at parallelisms present in *WandaVision,* but to analyze how these are used to construct the narrative.

To this end, the first section will provide an overview of the history of American sitcoms through the years, focusing on the most prominent themes that governed each decade and especially looking at those shows from which *WandaVision* draws inspiration. Building on this theoretical framework, episodes 1 to 7 of *WandaVision*—those that have sitcom conventions, except the fourth one—will be examined by paying attention to the plot, the personnel, the world-building, the cinematography, and the mise-en-scène. In these installments, everything from general aesthetics to actors' modes of acting, including costumes, scenarios, music, and so forth, evokes different eras of television. Due to space restrictions, only those aspects that seem to significantly contribute to the narration of Wanda's story will be explored.

2. We Interrupt this Program: Film Theoretical Apparatus

In order to provide a comprehensive analysis of *WandaVision,* the article will operate with basic tools from Film Studies. Both diegetic and non-diegetic elements of the show will be observed. Regarding the cinematography, emphasis will be placed on the use of lenses, special effects, and camerawork, which includes camera placement—distance, angle, and height—and movement. As for the *mise en scène*, the examination of characters and settings will be pertinent. In particular, O'Sullivan's contributions to the study of serial narrative will be adopted. This scholar proposed a series of concepts that cut across the traditional terms of narrative analysis —time, space, plot, character, and perspective. Among Sullivan's elements, personnel and world-building will be relevant for the present article. According to this scholar, these terms "primarily address the *varieties of scope* that serials can create as their installments accumulate, changes that shape the world the serial is describing, [and] the agents in that world" [italics in the original] (O'Sullivan 2019, 52). When using "personnel"—in contrast to simply "characters"—, O'Sullivan aims at addressing a broader category concerned with the organization and distribution of characters across a series. The study of the deployment of characters

through the installments might reveal certain patterns. For instance, the number of characters in a specific episode might have narrative consequences (O'Sullivan 2019, 58). Regarding the study of scenery, O'Sullivan's ideas about "world-building" will be useful to understand how serial narratives expand the diegetic universe. From this viewpoint, the addition and exploration of new locations in a series create storytelling options (O'Sullivan 2019, 57). Bearing in mind how the arrangement of characters and locations contributes to the narrative will be key to understanding Wanda's changing world.

3. Previously on... A Brief History of American Sitcoms

Most episodes of *WandaVision* comply with the generic conventions of American sitcoms and feature specific attributes of programs of each decade. Consequently, an overview of the genre and its progression will be relevant to understand the Marvel series. Generally speaking, sitcoms are characterized by their portrayal of stability through humor "rooted in the mundane nature of the everyday" (Wells-Lassagne 2015, 74). Each installment "is a brief overturning of the established order of [the sitcom's] universe before returning, unblemished, to the precise spot from which it began" (Austerlitz 2014, 4). Sitcoms have an overarching "narrative problematic" that lasts across the serial. Each episode has "a specific conflict based on the series' problematic [which] is resolved during the course of the episode, while the sustaining problematic remains" (Butler 2020, chap. 1). It is important to note that characters tend to forget or disregard past events within the show, which purposely creates little sense of continuity and allows viewers to watch episodes at will (Mittell 2015, 296).

The sitcom universe is hardly ever expanded—it is mostly limited to the domestic sphere—and the small cast of characters exhibits little development. In other words, world-building and personnel do not usually present much variation. Their 30-minute episodes usually include a teaser or cold opening, the main titles, two acts, a commercial break, and the end credits (Butler 2020, Ch. 1). That is, both in content and form, sitcoms are highly iterative. As for their cinematography, shows can be either single-camera or multi-camera, and this—together with budgetary and technical restraints—determines the mise-en-scène and even the story. Multicam shows have "theatrical" aesthetics and usually contain two plots in each episode, while single-camera ones tend to be more "cinematic" and may include a higher number of narrative threads (Butler 2020, Ch. 1). The characteristics of each type of production can be summarized as follows:

MULTICAM	SINGLE-CAMERA
Mise-en-scène	
Small ensemble of characters	Variable number of characters
Interior settings (on a sound stage)	Interior and exterior settings (location shooting)
Cinematography	
Eye-level camera height (very few high- or low-angles)	Eye-level, plus high- and low-angles
Reliance on medium-shot framing (fewer close-ups and no extreme long shots)	Variable framing: extreme long shot to super close-up
No subjective shots	Subjective shots
Zoom shots to "move" closer (rather than dollying)	Zooms and camera movement (including handheld)

Table 1 Multicamera and single-camera production conventions (adapted from Butler 2020, Ch. 1).

While American sitcoms have approximately adhered to these conventions through the years, shows have presented specific characteristics as a result of the historical period in which they were produced. Initially, all series had a 4:3 aspect ratio and laugh tracks and were multicam productions. Early sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy* (1951–1957) and *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (1961–1966) were embedded in the postwar desire for peacefulness and stability. The former follows a middle-class housewife who wants to be a part of the show business. The latter portrays the daily life of a comedy show writer both at work and at home with his nuclear family and neighbors. These shows were not a reflection of life but, rather, a representation of what Americans should aspire for in the postwar era: the American Dream embodied in the happy normative family that inhabited white picket fence suburban areas (Austerlitz 2014, 8).

This saccharine trend continued through the 1960s, although some sitcoms "called into question the very notion of normality" (Buonomo 2012, 61). Programs such as *Bewitched* (1964–1972) and *I Dream of Jeannie* (1965–1970) added a supernatural component to suburban life. While family values remained unchanged, a witch and a genie, respectively, used their powers to solve domestic issues. This may have symbolized the evolving position of women in American society (Buonomo 2012, 62; Arnold, Tilton, and Berke 2019, 16). Nevertheless, other critics remark on the significance of characters as powerful as Samantha and Jeannie staying at home and devoting their supernatural abilities to house chores. This could be interpreted as these sitcoms' compliance with the dominant gender discourse of the time, which suggested that women's fulfillment lay in housewifery (see Humphreys 2014, 105–21).

The 1970s witnessed the coexistence of a great number of socially aware series with others that ignored the political agenda. The former were a response to the increasing amount of sociopolitical movements that spread in the US seeking equal rights for people of all races, gender, sexuality, and class (Foss 2008, 45). Hence, the protagonist of *The Mary Tyler More Show* (1970–1977), a strong and single working woman, embodies progressive views on gender expectations and female agency. Conversely, some sitcoms had an escapist approach. For instance, *The Brady Bunch* (1969–1974) —another depiction of a suburban family— is usually criticized for "its obliviousness to public life" and because it "masks, domesticates and sugarcoats anxieties about contemporary American life" (Jones 2019, 2).

After the wave of controversial themes of the preceding decade, the 1980s sitcoms showcased a return to traditional family values in line with Reagan's conservative agenda, ignoring political and social concerns (Foss 2008, 46). These shows usually portrayed nuclear families and their everyday anecdotes. They seemed to conform to the myth of the suburban stable family, while also showcasing their disagreements and disorganization, thus being seemingly more lenient with imperfect households (Feasy 2012, 41). Moral lessons related to domestic life were common, usually in the form of tender conversations between parents and children, like the ones that closed many episodes of *Full House* (1987–1995) (Leppert 2019, "Introduction"). Additionally, the image of the ideal working mother was boosted: a career woman capable of dealing with her job while being a flawless homemaker, as epitomized by the "supermoms" of *Family Ties* (1982–1989) and *Growing Pains* (1985–1992) (Feasey 2012, 40; Leppert 2019, "Introduction"). Conversely, these sitcoms left behind those father figures who held the authority in the house of earlier shows: classical "infallible" fathers were replaced by clueless counterparts (Reimers 2003, 114–15).

The 1990s were marked by the predominance of the so-called "yuppie sitcoms," which featured urban characters, usually racially diverse, of all sexual orientations and/or childless couples, thus aligning with the Clinton administration's endorsement of anti-discrimination attitudes. Shows about nuclear families lost popularity and became scarce. The few ones that centered on families revolved around single parents, mostly mothers (Foss 2008, 46–47). Instead of the idealized households previously portrayed, the struggles, bitterness, and frustrations of family members were addressed. Therefore, the 90s family sitcoms could be deemed the antithesis of their predecessors (Sedita 2014, Ch. 2).

In the sitcoms of the 2000s, subversion reached new heights. Many series featured unfiltered dysfunctional families, e.g., *Malcolm in the Middle* (2000–2006) (Sedita 2014, Ch. 2). In this show, a high-IQ kid gets constantly into trouble with his brothers, which causes their parents' exasperation. *Malcolm in the Middle* also presents a shift in the portrayal of parents: they were no longer flawless. Mothers gained authority even if they

tended to be chaotic and sometimes overwhelmed, whereas fathers showed more respect—if not fear—for their partners and seemed to be losing control of the household (Glenn 2012; Reimers 2003, 117). Innovations in the cinematography, such as the single-camera style, the fall of the fourth wall, and the absence of laugh tracks (Butler 2020, chap. 2) underscored their brash plots and characters (Sedita 2014, Ch. 2). Furthermore, the use of a single camera meant revolutionary possibilities for the sitcom genre in terms of cinematography and mise-en-scène*,* such as the inclusion of more exterior settings —even if recurring interiors still produced familiarity among the viewers (Butler 2020, Ch. 2).

During the 2010s, the mockumentary format gained popularity. It included fake interviews with the characters, adopting the formal features of documentaries, and "was used for ironic and humoristic purposes" (Butler 2020, Ch. 2). This formula is linked with the "comedy of discomfort," which is based in "the protagonist laughing at the pain they have caused at others" (Moore quoted in Nardi 2017, n.p.). The openness transmitted through direct address in shows such as *Modern Family* (2009–2020) was useful to tackle social issues that appealed to contemporary viewers, like mental health and anxieties about parenthood. In the case of *Modern Family,* the single-camera style allows a more dynamic use of space and cinematographic resources. For instance, a recurrent device is the cutaway gag, i.e., a replay that serves to illustrate characters' comments about their past and that has comedic intentions (Mittell 2015, 187).

4. On Tonight's Episode: Analysis

The episodes that occur in Westview seem to be part of a sitcom: they present unimportant domestic incidents of a small and recurring cast. Using Butler's terminology, the general narrative problematic of Wanda's sitcom is her constant effort to fit in the idealization of the American family together with her husband Vision. The specific conflicts of each installment present minor obstacles that they encounter when striving to live up to this stereotype: from trying to get a promotion to gaining the neighbors' sympathy. The episodes' length, title sequence, break for commercials,[1] and closing credits reinforce the sitcom-like structure. Specifically, each installment presents the characteristics of programs of a different decade. The show has nine episodes, but only six mirror the sitcom aesthetics, following the plot's demands. Each of these six episodes corresponds to a different decade, from the 1950s to the 2010s (only skipping the 1990s, as will be addressed

[1] The commercials do not advertise real products. Instead, the names of the made-up brands hint at Wanda's past, e.g., Stark Industries (that fabricated the bomb that killed her parents), Hydra (the Nazi organization that experimented on her), Lagos (the city in which she was not able to save some civilians in a previous MCU movie), and so on. In the same way that the commercial breaks suspend the fantasy of sitcoms, Wanda's painful past threatens to intrude on her tailor-made new life.

later). Other authors have conducted thorough examinations of the mode of production (see Higueras-Ruiz 2023 for a complete overview) or the themes (see Walker-Werth 2021) of the show. The following analysis aims at exploring how the latter are complemented by the former, with special attention to the reflection of American values.

Episode 1 is set in the 1950s and pays homage to iconic sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy* and *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. The plot—Vision tries to get a promotion with the help of his charming wife Wanda—evocates the picture-perfect life of these series, which matches Wanda's desires. Just as the US was recovering from the Second World War when those shows were broadcast, Maximoff is still grieving for the aftermath of the war that caused global mayhem and in which she lost Vision, as well as some friends. She craves for familial harmony, and the 1950s sitcoms seem the perfect scenario to achieve it. At some point, Agnes, a nosy neighbor, teaches Wanda how to be a faultless homemaker. While the emphasis on the good behavior of wives was part of the political agenda in early sitcoms, here it mirrors Wanda's anxieties about creating a perfect life for Vision, in which she must fulfill her role for them to preserve their happiness.

The cinematography of this installment is also a journey back in time. It is filmed in black and white, with a 4:3 aspect ratio and a multi-camera technique. Medium-shot frames predominate, mostly with eye-level camera height. Special lenses were used as well, "to replicate or reference this early film look," as explained by Jess Hall, the cinematographer of *WandaVision* (2021, n.p.). The action is complemented by some cheerful background music, exaggerated sound effects, and live public laughter—an important part of the production of this episode, as discussed in the documentary *Marvel Studios Assembled: The Making of WandaVision* (Baruh 2021). The mise-en-scène is exactly what could be expected from a multicam sitcom: a small ensemble of characters in a reduced number of interior settings—Vision's workplace and the family house. That is, both personnel and world-building are limited at first. Not only do these choices replicate a 50s sitcom, but they also cause an impression of artificiality. Even the laugh track seems to be imposing some manufactured happiness. Early shows represented such an idealized life that it turned out forced; similarly, these circumstances strike as unnatural for Wanda and Vision—who are known by viewers as modern-day superheroes. Moreover, just like the creators of the first sitcoms were exploring the medium with modest techniques and resources, Wanda is putting to use her powers in uncharted territories, and this is reflected in the old-fashioned and limited cinematography and mise-en-scène.

In episode 2, which takes place in the 1960s, Wanda's and Vision's special abilities become central. Nonetheless, instead of using them to save the world as is customary, they use them to solve domestic issues. This was the pattern of shows such as *Bewitched*—whose opening credits are emulated in this installment—and *I Dream of Jeannie*. Similarly, after the comical attempts to appear normal before Vision's boss in the first episode, Maximoff has come to terms with her powers. She realizes that complete

normality is not possible for her and her husband, and so she embraces the portrayals of supernatural yet proper American families of the aforementioned 1960s sitcoms. In the same way that Samantha and Jeannie—their female protagonists—made their best to hide their powers while using them to help the breadwinner of the family in everyday incidents, Wanda secretly uses her extraordinary skills to both overcome mundane anecdotes and, on a large scale, maintain the illusion of Westview.

Wanda's decision to limit the use of her power to house chores not only hints at her desire to maintain a low profile but aligns her with the powerful witches and genies of *Bewitched* and *I Dream of Jeannie* as homemakers. Characters such as Samantha chose to be typical housewives, even claiming: "All I want is a normal life of a normal wife" (quoted in Humphreys 2014, 112), a sentence that could have been uttered by Wanda herself. Maximoff seems tired of the superhero quests of her past, and so she looks for the unruffled regularity of housewifery. Nonetheless, she is simultaneously exploiting her abilities to their maximum potential. Wanda's reality-warping skills are thriving, as manifested in the expansion of personnel and world-building. Episode 2 features more characters with different power dynamics between them and who occupy new spaces within the neighborhood. As years went by, television perfected its techniques and increased its budget, and this extended the scope of the shows. Likewise, Wanda is honing her powers, so she is capable of amplifying the mirage further.

The cinematography of the second episode continues to echo early sitcoms, so the manufactured impression remains. This installment is filmed with a 4:3 aspect ratio, black and white format, multicamera style, and so forth. The special effects that represent Wanda's powers—mostly jump cuts and wires that move objects, as shown in *The Making of WandaVision* (Baruh 2021)—are glaringly obvious in episodes 1 and 2, thus reinforcing the artificiality. Besides, they are reminiscent of those used to recreate Samantha's and Jeannie's supernatural abilities in their respective shows.

Remarkably, the fantasy is suspended when the outside world enters Westview. At different points during the episode, S.W.O.R.D. interferes with Wanda's life: firstly, the organization sends a drone inside the Hex, and then tries to contact her through the radio. In those moments, color is added, and instead of several cameras, only one is used. The close-ups and subjective shots of these scenes contrast with the predominant medium shot framing, just as camera movement (including low- and canted-angle zoom-ins) substitutes the static shots that characterize the rest of the episode—and early sitcoms, for that matter. Hence, color and camerawork highlight the disruption of Westview's illusory life. In Paul Bethany's words, one can notice the difference when the sitcom style is not there anymore, when an angle or camera movement should not be there, and that is a great storytelling tool (in Baruh 2021, n.p.). Near the end of this installment, Wanda becomes pregnant, and just as a new stage of the family life begins, a new era of television is portrayed: the arrival of technicolor (probably another reference

to *Bewitched,* whose first two seasons aired in black and white, switching to color in the third one). All in all, either through transgressions of sitcom conventions or the reflection of technical advances, cinematography mirrors alterations in Wanda's attempt for stability and the consequent changes in the narrative.

The references of episode 3 to *The Brady Bunch* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* are univocal. The opening credits imitate the effects of these sitcoms and set the tone for what is to come: Wanda and Vision's preparation for parenthood. Other similarities with these 70s programs are the use of technicolor, canned laughter, the 4:3 aspect ratio, and the likeness of Wanda's house to the Bradys', among others. It seems remarkable that such different series converge in this new stage of Wanda's life. *The Brady Bunch* was naïve and escapist, while *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* was considered groundbreaking. It is plausible to think that Maximoff aims at recreating a family life like the one in *The Brady Bunch,* oblivious to the world's concerns, and seeks to distance herself as much as possible from her tragic past and the chaos after the war against Thanos. At the same time, some events challenge her wishes, e.g., S.W.O.R.D agent Monica Rambeau arrival in Westview. Agent Rambeau enters the Hex in order to put an end to the alteration that keeps a whole village hostage. When she crosses the border that separates Westville from the real world, Monica becomes Geraldine, another stereotypical suburban neighbor. She acts as such during her first scenes, for instance, talking about her success at work. Being a black woman, she epitomizes the progressive views of *The Mary Tyler More Show* and other sitcoms in the 1970s. Later on, Monica/Geraldine exhibits even more agency when mentioning the death of Pietro Maximoff since she acts of her own free will instead of under Wanda's mental control. Monica's stepping out of her role aligns with the premise of sitcoms such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, which advocated for the empowerment of the individual. Wanda is infuriated by this disruption, as she sees this meddling as a threat to her manufactured new life. Hence, "outside world" affairs affect Wanda's refuge, just as sociopolitical issues permeated some sitcoms of the decade.

Breaking with the pattern of previous installments, episode 4 does not follow the structure of a sitcom. This is so because it focuses on the concurrent events outside the Hex, specifically S.W.O.R.D.'s investigation. What is more, this episode presents the cinematographic conventions of contemporary movies of the MCU so as to portray the "real world." For instance, it was shot in a 2:40 ratio and with the same lenses that were used for filming the movies that chronologically precede the story taking place in *WandaVision* (Hall 2021). Other notable characteristics are the single-camera style, the elaborated camera movement, the changing frames, the variable lighting, and the increasing personnel and world-building—especially through the addition of exterior locations, among others. All of these features are reminiscent of the effort to mimic real life in MCU movies. The episode ends inside Westview again, namely with the confrontation between Monica and Wanda—which was omitted in the third episode. After attacking the intruder,

Maximoff expels her from the Hex. The final moments show Wanda, Vision, and their newborn twins in front of the TV, which hints at the return to their "normal," undisturbed life.

After the disruptions—both Monica/Geraldine's intrusion and the actual interruption of the showcasing of Wanda's sitcom-like life—Maximoff seeks to cordon off her family life from traumatic issues. The 1980s sitcoms did precisely that. Episode 5's opening credits are an amalgam of the title sequences of *Growing Pains, Family Ties,* and *Full House*. The setting recalls the households of these shows, too. This is the last installment in which special lenses are used to create a retro impression (Hall 2021). The laugh tracks and multicam style (with the aforementioned implications in cinematography and mise-en-scène*)* continue in this episode; only the aspect ratio changes to 16:9, a novelty with regard to previous sitcom-like installments. The most remarkable difference is the alternation of scenes inside and outside the Hex—the latter filmed in the same fashion as the fourth episode. Although the 16:9 aspect ratio did not gain popularity until the mid-1990s, the choice of using it here seems to reflect the show's approaching modernity while accommodating to technical needs, given that the changes between Westview's scenes and S.W.O.R.D's could be too abrupt had the 4:3 ratio been maintained.

The fifth episode follows Wanda and Vision's new routine now that there are two new members in the family. Their twins (who were born in episode 3), start displaying special abilities, too. They are capable of aging themselves up and they become adorable troublemakers in the span of a few scenes. Quick aging without any explanation other than the convenience of the plot was common in sitcoms. For example, five-year-old Chrissy suddenly became seven years old in *Growing Pains.* Some shows, including *Full House,* featured kids that grew up as seasons unfolded (Cerone 1995). Wanda's world seems to be drawing on this artistic license to accommodate the family's new situation. When the twins become a bit older, they adopt a puppy that dies shortly after, which lends itself to an ethical lesson in the form of a heart-to-heart talk with their mother. Both the adoption and the passing of the pet are common storylines in sitcoms (e.g., in *Full House*). This sitcom trope allows Wanda to ponder about the morality of her own deeds, i.e., tampering with reality, bringing the dead to life, and controlling innocent people to maintain Westview's farce.

As for the roles of the cast, they depart from their romanticized versions of previous installments. Like the "supermoms" who dealt with both work and domestic life in the 1980s sitcoms, Wanda must preserve Westview's illusion, a tiresome full-time job, while adapting to her recent motherhood. Some glitches in the fantasy—namely Agnes stepping out of character and asking whether she should repeat the scene—might indicate that Wanda is failing at balancing both facets of her life. Likewise, Vision seems to struggle. Early sitcoms normally presented faultless heads of the family. Accordingly, Vision had been perfectly performing the role Maximoff had assigned him. However, he starts

suspecting, so his performance of a flawless husband is affected. In fact, the couple ends up fighting. Vision confronts his wife about her manipulation of the people in the neighborhood and his lack of knowledge about what is happening or his own past. Wanda denies her implication in any of it at first, claiming that she did not start the anomaly, and then justifies it by saying she is doing it for them. This fracture in their domestic joy also impacts the non-diegetic elements. The closing credits appear before the quarrel begins as if no misunderstanding should be displayed, but the fight continues as the words roll over the screen, thus breaking both the fantasy of a blissful marriage and that of a sitcom scenario.

The new dramatic and dysfunctional situations emulate those family dynamics featured in some 1990s sitcoms, even if there seem to be no direct references to particular shows of that time in *WandaVision.* A possible explanation for skipping this decade could be the lack of idealized models from which Wanda's world could draw inspiration. Given that most shows of the end of the century did not portray typical nuclear families and even emphasized the possibility of single motherhood, it seems that Wanda might want to avoid this path entirely—especially after having argued with her husband. In fact, Wanda and Vision seem totally oblivious to the argument in the following episode, as if it had never occurred, which conforms to a typical behavior pattern of many sitcom characters. In the sixth installment, Westview moves on directly to the twenty-first aesthetics.

As the problems escalate, the scripts of the 2000s seem to fit better the chaos in Wanda's household. Episode 6 presents several similarities with *Malcolm in the Middle* —the epitome of messy yet normative TV families—including the opening sequence, the plot, the tone, and some cinematographic choices. In *WandaVision,* a new character joins the cast: Pietro Maximoff. He is Wanda's brother and, as far as she was aware, he died years ago (as showcased in a previous MCU movie). The unexpected arrival of Pietro brings not only sarcasm into the show but also instability to the family and Wanda's emotional state. He acts as an agitator while the twins discover the full potential of their superpowers, just like Malcolm finds out he has a high IQ, and he and his brothers are constantly misbehaving in *Malcolm in the Middle*.

Wanda's and Vision's roles evocate the flawed parents of the sitcoms of the turn of the century. In a conversation with her brother, Wanda acknowledges her morally dubious creation of Westview, thus exposing her faults. When she expands the Hex after feeling attacked by S.W.O.R.D. by the end of this episode, she demonstrates the extent of her powers, which replicates at a larger scale mothers' increasing control in the households. Meanwhile, Vision starts fearing Wanda's actions, just as other fathers did in the 2000s sitcoms, e.g., the one in *Malcolm in the Middle*. In short, their marriage is no longer perfect.

The cinematographic choices of this episode, which mimic those of *Malcolm in the Middle,* complement the increasingly chaotic situation in Westview. Accordingly, this

installment is shot with a single camera, which has several implications in the cinematography and mise-en-scène (see Table 1). The camera movement and frames are more dynamic, even including a handheld sequence in which one of the twins addresses the viewers, breaking the fourth wall in the same way that Malcolm does in his show. During that scene, he seems to hold the reins, momentarily replacing his mother. Furthermore, the single-cam style implies that more exterior settings can be used. All this matches Wanda's loss of control of the anomaly and its inhabitants, especially her husband. The single-cam technique allowed sitcoms to follow different characters into different spaces, and so Vision takes advantage of this liberty for exploring the neighborhood and finally discovering the farce Wanda has created. Additionally, the absence of laugh tracks goes hand in hand with the brasher themes of this installment, i.e., Wanda's moral dilemma and the frictions in the couple.

In order to showcase the conflicts in the marriage, episode 7 exploits the mockumentary format that prevailed in the 2010s sitcoms, such as *Modern Family*—which is the source of inspiration for part of the title sequence and the interior of the house. The fall of the fourth wall enables an unfiltered depiction of the characters. Wanda is suffering because her family life is no longer perfect. This is one of Claire's—one of the mothers in *Modern Family*—recurrent worries. Vision adopts an outspoken attitude regarding his doubts and concerns thanks to the direct address. Even if Wanda's and Vision's anxieties stem from bigger issues (namely, the threat of the outside world and the need for explanations about Westview, respectively), they resemble the parents of *Modern Family,* who confess to the camera their distress when facing domestic obstacles. The comedy of discomfort becomes central in this episode. To this end, some comedic devices typical of the 2010s are used, such as sarcasm and flashback replays that target the characters' own behaviors and thoughts, for instance, when Wanda bitterly recalls her fight against S.W.O.R.D in episode 6.

The mockumentary format is rarely acknowledged in most sitcoms. At first, characters in *WandaVision* act accordingly, but later in the installment, they draw attention to the conventions of this pseudo-documentary style. Wanda addresses the director, asking for their identity, and Vision stands up and leaves his fake interview. This raises questions about who is actually directing the show—i.e., who is controlling the anomaly—and leads to the end of the mirage. The sitcom conventions start being dismantled at the same time as Wanda's illusion vanishes. Remarkably, modern cinematographic techniques are used in the sitcom-like sequences because the TV era they represent is almost contemporary, which allows an organic blending of the characters and storylines outside and inside the Hex. By the end of the episode, the sitcom form disappears. S.W.O.R.D.'s attempts to enter Westview succeed and Wanda must face an unexpected new enemy, so her fantasy based on harmony is completely wrecked. Consequently, the sitcom genre no longer makes sense.

5. The End: Conclusions

The presence of sitcoms in *WandaVision* goes far beyond an homage or a coping mechanism for Wanda's traumatic past. Sitcoms are a resource to structure Wanda's development. Their prompt, i.e., the eternal return to the initial order, is what drives Maximoff to choose them as models for her new life. However, her desire for steadiness is endlessly threatened. The evolution of the sitcom genre matching the worries of American society through the years allows the portrayal of this conflict. Just as situational comedies initially featured propagandistic marriages and ended up revolving around faulty characters, Wanda and Vision's relationship becomes less idealized and more realistic. Accordingly, the tone of the programs changed over time. Similarly, *WandaVision* is lighthearted in the first episodes, angsty when the marriage faces disagreements, and finally turns bitter when the issues become more serious. All the parallelisms to the sitcom genre and to specific series are underscored by the use of their characteristic cinematic elements, which, in turn, proves to be an account of the technical progress of television.

Furthermore, innovation in both cinematography—from black and white to color, from multi-camera to single-camera style, laugh tracks (or their absence) and mise-en-scène, a greater number of characters and settings, which leads to an increasingly complex personnel and world-building—serves to reflect Wanda's growing powers. Every time her idyllic life is endangered, she has to exploit her abilities to find a new form of stability, and ironically this makes her world everchanging and unstable. The obstacles of the first episodes were salvable, like in any sitcom. As these escalate, the sitcom format is no longer suitable. In a nutshell, sitcoms are the framework for representing both the desired tranquility and the unavoidable alterations in *WandaVision.* The balance of episodic and serial storytelling enables the contradiction between sameness and evolution.

For all the aforementioned reasons and in the words of Elizabeth Olsen, "this is a story that can only be told in the medium of television" (Bruh 2021, n.p.).This idea that *WandaVision* offers an experience that cannot be achieved through a movie has been repeatedly underlined by the participants of the project, including Kevin Feige (in Webster, Leaver, and Sandry 2022), the public, and the critics (Walker-Werth 2021). This is true on various levels. As explored in this article, the evolution of television itself is reflected in the modes of production of each episode. Furthermore, the episodic and serial storytelling inherent to serials is key for the narrative. And, finally, the show draws on the public's sentimental connection to television. Wanda resorts to sitcoms to create a space where she can feel safe and cope with her trauma, and this is something to which the viewers can relate. On the one hand, sitcoms are great exponents of American society not only because of the themes they address, but also because the genre was born in the United States, where situation comedies are produced by the dozen every year and have a great reception among the public. Sitcoms are presented as epitomes of Americanness

even to Americans. Wanda, who has felt like an outsider ever since she lost her family, even among the Avengers, craves for her integration at all levels, including in her new country. On the other hand, it is common to look for a diversion in TV content. Incidentally, *WandaVision* is in itself a great example of evasion through fiction. The show was released during the COVID crisis, at a time when people were actually dealing with the loss of loved ones and the unexpected break with normalcy. Many people turned to entertainment to seek some relief, and even if unplanned, the core idea of *WandaVision* —the stability of family life— matched the longings of many of them. Scholars such as Webster, Leaver, and Sandy (2022) have explored the impact of the show in the content vacuum of the pandemic, and how its transmedia format and its close-to-home themes appealed to the viewers and favored their engagement.

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The Chivalric Romance in the Age of Its Neoliberal Reproducibility: The *Orlando Furioso* Transcodified in Marvel's *Iron Man* Saga

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Abstract

This article reads the literary genre of chivalric romance—those prose or verse narratives popular in the courts of Early Modern Europe recounting the heroic deeds of knights-errant—as a code: a model for communicating a set of cultural values and socio-political anxieties by using genre-specific topoi and modes of storytelling. Specifically, this analysis investigates the transcodification of this code from its original contextual specificity to the twenty-first century, with a particular focus on contemporary US neoliberal society. Indeed, this essay interprets Marvel's *Iron Man* saga, including the Avengers' chapters, as an instance of the latest stage of American exceptionalism, here understood as imbricated in the neoliberal society. This reading is built upon the hypothesis that the Avengers' adventures may be viewed as a twenty-first century adaptation of the chivalric romance as developed in Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*, both in narrative and ideological terms. The *Iron Man* saga is representative of and conducive to the American contemporary political set of values as the latest developments of the chivalric romance were of and to the Renaissance sensitivity in the courts of Northern Italy. A key facet of this interpretation lies in the realization that technological reproducibility is a crucial aspect of the story and the characterization of the *Orlando Furioso* as well as of the *Iron Man* saga and its neoliberal basis.

Keywords: superhero, MCU, Ludovico Ariosto, chivalric romance, Renaissance, Avengers.

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1. Exceptional (Super)Heroes

This article interprets Marvel's *Iron Man* saga, including the Avengers' chapters, as a particularly interesting instance of the latest stage of American exceptionalism, here understood as imbricated in the neoliberal society. This reading is built upon the hypothesis that the Avengers' adventures may be viewed as a twenty-first century adaptation of the chivalric romance and of the knights' quests, both in narrative and ideological terms. The *Iron Man* saga is representative of and conducive to the American contemporary political set of values as the latest developments of the chivalric romance were of and to the Renaissance sensitivity in the courts of Northern Italy. A key facet of this interpretation lies

in the realization that technological reproducibility is a crucial aspect of the story and the characterization of the *Orlando Furioso* as well as of the *Iron Man* saga and its neoliberal basis, as I will show in what follows. By neoliberalism, I refer to the "theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2005, 2)—an apparatus which may be applied to the *Iron Man* movies both in their form and content.[1]

Hence, this intervention considers the hermeneutic possibility of reading the literary genre of chivalric romance—those prose or verse narratives popular in the courts of Early Modern Europe recounting the heroic deeds of knights-errant—as a code: a model for communicating a set of cultural values and socio-political anxieties by using genre-specific topoi and modes of storytelling. Shifting the paradigm of chivalric romance from literary genre to code implies raising questions about its trans-historical trajectory and its present applicability, while also looking at the intercultural dynamics defining its transcodification from a contextual specificity to another. Specifically, my analysis investigates the transcodification of the code of the chivalric romance from its original contextual specificity, Early Modern Italy, to the twenty-first century, with a particular focus on contemporary US neoliberal society. I here argue that Marvel's *Iron Man* cinematic saga—with its epic battles between good and evil forces, the glorious deeds of national (super)heroes, the marvel-filled adventures taking spectators to fantastic places, and the quests validating or compensating for political and moral principles—presents a stylistic and narrative construction, as well as content and rhetorical modes, typical of the chivalric romance. I will draw upon some lessons from Ludovico Ariosto's classic *Orlando Furioso* (1532)[2] as the apex of the chivalric tradition, a text synthesizing the normative and post-normative drives inbred in this code (Zatti 2006, 13), in order to read the *Iron Man* cinematic saga (begun in 2008 with *Iron Man* and concluded in 2019 with *Avengers: Endgame*) as a chivalric narrative conveying political imaginaries and ethical conundrums pertinent to neoliberal societies.

Dating back to the eleventh century *chanson de geste*, the medieval chivalric romance grew more and more popular in France, England, Spain, and Italy. Adhering to the political and social values of the Early Middle Ages, it reached its apex in the sixteenth

[1] This article will take into consideration only the movies of the *Iron Man* saga, excluding from its analysis the original comics. Unfortunately, there is no space in this venue to address the transcodification from the original comics to the cinematic universe.

[2] The 1532 edition of the *Orlando Furioso* is the latest and the most complete (the first appeared in 1516, the second in 1521). Ariosto explicitly declared he was inspired by Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato* (1495), a further element of intertextuality of the text.

century in the Renaissance period with the *Orlando Furioso*.[3] The subsequent chivalric poems, such as Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata* (1581) and Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590) marked instead an important shift in structure and style, dismissing the confusion of the romance and its multiple plots, in favor of the Aristotelian unitary logic of the epic. Ariosto found himself heir to a vast literary corpus and a complex tradition that by his time was simultaneously at its climax and in crisis, an intertextual condition of in-betweenness that reflects the historical and political transformations of the European *Cinquecento* (Stoppino 2012, 20–21): the introduction of the movable type printing system in 1450 revolutionized literature and its circulation, the Reformation split Christianity into the English Church and the Roman Catholic Church, the subsequent Counter-Reformation exercised a strict control especially over Italian cultural products, the *Umanesimo* reinvigorated the study of the past expanding the understanding of time to comprehend the future as well. The general intellectual efflorescence of the Renaissance upturned medieval cultural codes and introduced modern models capable of addressing the transformed socio-political context and its new sensibilities. Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* accounts for this time of revolutions, expressing a self-conscious synthesis of ancient and modern narrative possibilities and shaping a distinct chivalric code, one uniting the stylistic plurality of the romance with the teleological scheme and the unifying drive of the epic—a poetics of "harmony and dissonance" interlacing a "poetry of crisis" (Ascoli 2016, 6). The *Orlando Furioso* assimilates the passage of the chivalric code from romance to epic as a symptom of the historical passage from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period: it is a narrative on and of the threshold.

Similarly, the *Iron Man* saga looks back on the long superhero tradition of American comics. Born in 1938 with the creation of Superman which inaugurated the Golden Age of Comics, it then went through a Silver and a Bronze Age, till the Modern Age also known as the Dark Age of Comic Books. While the latter phases challenged the one-dimensional construction of heroes and villains, problematizing the characters and the readers' understanding of the role of the superhero in contemporary societies, the late 1990s and the early 2000s saw also a decline in the sales of comic books and in the readers' interest in Marvel's superheroes.[4] Against this background, Marvel cinematic universe released *Iron Man* in 2008, inaugurating the record-breaking *Infinity Saga* (of which *Iron Man* is a

[3] Consider, for example, the publishing success of the *Orlando Furioso*, which became a best-seller in the sixteenth century. See Daniel Javitch, *Proclaiming a Classic: The Canonization of* Orlando Furioso, pp. 10-20.

[4] Marvel Entertainment Group, founded in 1989, lost many talented comic-book writers and artists, registered a decline in quality and the fans started boycotting their products. In 1996, the M.E.G. filed for bankruptcy (Schulman 2023).

segment).[5] As in the case of the *Orlando Furioso*, the *Iron Man* saga is framed within a generic repositioning and its culmination in a new form, on the threshold of a new cultural code. In terms of content, *Iron Man* mirrors the geopolitical and social transformations of our times, addressing themes such as post-9/11 US foreign policy, the security state, a rapidly changing world order after the end of the Cold War, international terrorism, and the ecological crisis.

Think, for instance, of the opening scene: Tony Stark flies to Afghanistan via Bagram Air Base—a site which is associated with the War on Terror, because it is "where the Bush administration incarcerated those they elected to describe as 'unlawful enemy combatants' rather than 'prisoners of war' in order to abrogate their rights" (McSweeney 2018, 47)—to demonstrate the Stark Industry "Freedom Line" and elaborate on the destructive potential of these weapons as crucial to defeating the "bad guys." By quoting President Bush's post-9/11 rhetoric of the good vs. the bad forces,[6] Tony Stark mobilizes a semantics which is ideologically charged and very familiar to the American as well as international spectatorship of the movie. As the plot unfolds this clear-cut distinction will become looser, introducing elements and actions which complicate the identification of the good and the evil sides, especially considering that the main antagonist of the film is Obadiah Stane, Stark's business partner. In the *Orlando furioso* too the fight between the heroes and the villains is problematized by the recurrent non-solution of the duels which enables indecisions and ambiguities within the ideological horizon of the narrative (Jossa 2000, 32). In this regard, the text accounts for the partial reconsideration of the contemporary set of political and moral principles, introducing a post-normative turn into the normative structure of the romance. The actions take place within the contemporary normative framework of the war between the Christians and the Saracens, yet its solution is never definite and leaves space for individual conversions and shared intents, in a way which post-normatively rewrites the relationship between the two parties. Similarly to the *Orlando furioso*, hence, *Iron Man* accounts for a kind of cultural crisis by resorting to a chivalric code that has changed both in form and content: the film adaptations of the

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[5] Marvel Studios was founded in 1996 and sold the rights to Spider-Man to Sony for seven million dollars. The first movie with Tobey Maguire was released in 2002 and was a great success, grossing more than eight hundred million dollars worldwide. Marvel's economic crisis was finally over through its repositioning into the cinema industry (WIPO 2012). Collectively, Marvel Cinematic Universe (including other movies besides the *Infinity Saga*) has "grossed more than twenty-nine billion dollars, making the franchise the most successful in entertainment history" (Schulman 2023).

[6] In his remarks at the National Prayer Service, held on September 14, 2001 and attended by former presidents and members of Congress, President Bush shifted the symbolic focus of the ceremony from the past of the attacks to the future of the US response: "Americans do not yet have the distance of history, but our responsibility to history is already clear: to answer these attacks and rid the world of *evil*" (Bush 2001, emphasis added).

stories from the comics are both pluralistic (as prescribed by the tradition of the romance) and teleologically determined as in epics, while the plot includes both normative and post-normative elements introducing modern models capable of addressing the post-9/11 socio-political context and neoliberal sensibilities.[7]

In this sense, in the twenty-first century the chivalric romance remains a popular and culturally relevant genre of which Marvel's *Iron Man* is a particularly convincing expression. In his ideological reading of romance, Fredric Jameson refers to it "as a particular type of literary discourse not bound to the conventions of a given age, … but as a mode of expression across a whole range of historical periods … and wholly altered historical circumstances" (1975, 142). Once established the persistence of romance as a mode, Jameson goes on raising questions about the narrative elements that would replace the constituents of the medieval romance that were linked to the contemporary socioeconomic environment, such as magic. It may be argued that, in the language of superhero comics, magic is called superpower and is still very much present, its purpose and scope being even more politicized, and, in some cases, taking the shape of highly developed technologies. Magic, transposed into sci-fi inventions, remains a fundamental mechanism in the narrative economy of the twenty-first century chivalric romance.

In his seminal *Anatomy of Criticism* (1953), Northrop Frye reflects on some key features of romance in terms that can be ascribed to Iron Man and his adventures as well: "the hero of romance is analogous to the mythical Messiah or deliverer who comes from an upper world and his enemy is analogous to the demonic powers of a lower world. The conflict, however, takes place in, or at any rate primarily concerns, our world" (1990, 187). As a kind of Messiah, the hero of the medieval romance is he who by his own deeds "is responsible for the regeneration and transfiguration of the fallen world" (Jameson 1975, 139)—this is comparable to what Iron Man, Captain America, and the other Avengers do when they fight off enemies who threaten or have endangered our world. The Avengers can be seen as belonging to an "upper world," be it US upper class as for Iron Man, a highly sophisticated scientific laboratory as in the case of Captain America, or planet Asgard for the god Thor. Although in the majority of cases their human counterparts come from lower-middle class backgrounds (with Tony Stark being quite an exception), in general, all superheroes originate from exceptional circumstances that make them distinct from and super-human, that is superior to other beings. Conversely, Thanos (the supervillain of *Avengers Infinity War* and *Endgame*) comes from Titan, an over-populated planet hit by a social cataclysm where he saw people starving to death. This recognition led him to his genocidal plan to wipe out half of the population of the universe to keep in

[7] In this article I will refer to the *Orlando Furioso* both as an epic and as chivalric romance. This is so because Ariosto's text lies in-between these two genres, as Sergio Zatti points out in the chapter "The Furioso between Epos and Romance," of his study *The Quest for Epic. From Ariosto to Tasso* (2006).

check its overall supply of natural resources and guarantee a decent quality of life to all living beings—a goal that he finally achieves in *Infinity War*. Thanos' origins, hence, are not exceptional in positive terms: it is the fact that poverty was the most common experience on his planet (as on other planets) that turns him into an exceptionally powerful villain. In an exchange in *Infinity War,* Thanos explains his reasons to one of the Avengers, Doctor Strange*:*

> "Titan was like most planets; too many mouths, not enough to go around. And when we faced extinction, I offered a solution."
> "Genocide."
> "But random. Dispassionate, fair to rich and poor alike. They called me a madman. And what I predicted came to pass." (*Infinity War*, 2018)

Titan would be subsequently devastated and rendered nearly inhabitable, leading to the extinction of its population. In-between the upper worlds of the Avengers and the lower world of Thanos, there is our world which serves as one of the stages of the epic conflict between good and evil forces. As noticed by Jameson, the conceptual opposition between good and evil is the most important organizational category informing the chivalric romance. In *Iron Man* this opposition becomes mythical in that ideological and moral dimensions meet the narrative necessities; the multiple story lines and different films of the Avengers converge on one quest, the one battle they all share: reconstituting the *status quo* of our universe after Thanos' success in wiping out half of all life in the universe.

The exceptional circumstances from which superheroes originate and against which they fight cannot but resonate with the rhetoric of the American exceptionalism. These exceptional beings, who feel entitled to (re)establish the *status quo* once it has been disrupted, operate within "the irreconcilable rifts within U.S. political culture that opened up during the lengthy period of transition from the termination of the cold war to the inauguration of the Global War on Terror, and with the disparate state fantasies that emerged to organize U.S. citizens' relations to these antagonisms" (Pease 2013, 300). According to Donald Pease, this is the site where a new phase of American exceptionalism emerged as "the dominant structure of desire out of which U.S. citizens imagined their national identity" (ibid). Crucially, this ideological construction of national identity is designed on the basis of violence, constantly denied and yet, in so doing, also unveiled: American exceptionalism "not only disavowed the violence intrinsic in its logic, but also, in so doing, exposed … the mechanism—intrinsic to the 'exceptionalism' of American exceptionalism—that justified that violence" (300). Since their progressive release starting from 2008, the *Infinity Saga* movies position themselves within "the dominant structure" of the US post-9/11 identity, referencing on more than one occasion the War on Terror and other crucial issues of this period, and also proposing an ideological transition to a more complex model. In light of these considerations, not only the superheroes' physical but also political capacities seem to be exceptional: their use of force is extraordinary and

exceptionally justified by the exceptionalist logic of protecting a community (humankind? The US? Neoliberal society? Half of the population of the universe?) by singling out and fighting evil groups (such as Thanos' Black Order) which pose actual threats and are representatives of opposite principles.

Along these lines, one may interpret the Avengers' exceptional and exceptionalist deeds as iterations of what David Quint, in his study of the intertwining between epic and empire, calls the "apologetic propaganda" transforming the recent past into occasions propelling "war[s] of foreign conquest," which is peculiar to the chivalric code (1989, 3). Ariosto's knights and the Avengers share the same expansionist ideology; the narrative of which they are protagonists projects a distinct and coherent world through a "plot that presents a whole with its linked beginning, middle, and end," and this form "speaks for the completeness of its vision of history: telling a full story, [it] claims to possess *the* full story" (14). Possessing the full story, a one-sided understanding of the world as divided in good and evil spheres is crucial to Ariosto's Christian paladins who oppose the Saracen army as it is to the Avengers fighting against Afghan terrorist groups, competing weapon manufacturers, or alien invasions. The dominant fantasy is the same for both groups of warriors: the protection of the "empire" they are an expression of.

And yet the ambiguous understanding and employment of violence is a key question in these chivalric narratives, both in the philosophical dimension and in the practical one. The plot of the *Orlando Furioso* is centered on the continuous deferral of duels and, in general, of violent acts (Stroppa 2021, 100); this narrative strategy de-centers and multiplies the focus of the story while also distancing it (in temporal as well as critical terms) from the representation of force. Consider, for instance, the first duel depicted, that between Rinaldo and Ferraù who fight against each other over Angelica's love only to subsequently abandon the battle and join forces to chase her—one violent iteration (their animosity) is resolved into another, more radically violent pursuit: taking Angelica against her will. In this sense, violence is deferred to be more broadly diffused over the poem, it is excepted only to be made exceptional, as exceptional is the (violent) quest of Angelica upon which the whole narrative is developed. The crucial point in their encounter turning duel turning joint venture is the promptness with which they put the romantic/sexual intent to physically conquer Angelica in the first place, while setting aside the political/religious motive which positions them on the two opposing sides of the narrative frame. The violence they represent and perform is, thus, doubly exceptional: on the one hand because it transcends the ideological premises of the story producing and inhabiting a rift within which the two factions upturn the dominant structure of the plot; on the other, because this new model reassesses the ethical contours of the idea of violence by suspending it (in the duel) and redirecting it toward a shared object of desire (Angelica).

> 19
>
> Disse al pagan:—Me sol creduto avrai,
> e pur avrai te meco ancora offeso:
> se questo avvien perché i fulgenti rai
> del nuovo sol t'abbino il petto acceso,
> di farmi qui tardar che guadagno hai?
> che quando ancor tu m'abbi morto o preso,
> non però tua la bella donna fia;
> che, mentre noi tardiam, se ne va via.
>
> [...]
>
> 21
>
> Al pagan la proposta non dispiacque:
> così fu differita la tenzone;
> e tal tregua tra lor subito nacque,
> sì l'odio e l'ira va in oblivione,
> che 'l pagano al partir da le fresche acque
> non lasciò a piedi il buon figliuol d'Amone:
> con preghi invita, ed al fin toglie in groppa,
> e per l'orme d'Angelica galoppa.
>
> (Ariosto 1964, *I,* 19; 21)

While the two knights fight, Angelica flees and the two agree on leaving their rancor aside and go after her together, riding the same horse. Crucially, this transition from one kind of violence to another is signaled and critiqued by the third person narrator who comments on it with ironic remarks:

> 22
>
> Oh gran bontà de' cavallieri antiqui!
> Eran rivali, eran di fé diversi,
> e si sentian degli aspri colpi iniqui
> per tutta la persona anco dolersi;
> e pur per selve oscure e calli obliqui
> insieme van senza sospetto aversi.
> Da quattro sproni il destrier punto arriva
> ove una strada in due si dipartiva.
>
> (*I*, 22)

The reference to the generosity of the nights of the ancient days ("Oh gran bontà de' cavallieri antiqui!") is obviously ironic, pointing out the deferral of the duel as a different iteration of a similar ideological/hierarchical subjugation (Christians against Muslims, men against women).[8] This suspension of the violence is not so generous, in the end, but

[8] For a thorough analysis of the importance of irony in the *Furioso*, see Zatti 2006, 14.

the very fact that it is, ultimately, only fictitious enables a self-aware critique of the use of force and of the concept of justice within the narrative, as it happens, in different terms, within the Avengers' team.

Since they physically fight against the villains, the Avengers too occasionally feel compelled to resort to ironic remarks to restate their position on the side of justice. For instance, in *Captain America, Winter Soldier* (2014) Falcon asks: "How do we know the good guys from the bad guys?" to which Captain America replies with nothing but self-evident terms: "If they're shooting at you, they're bad." In *Ant-Man* (2015) somebody who happens to be helping in a fight asks the Ant Man: "Hey we're the good guys, right?" "Yes, we're the good guys" he assures, "It feels kind of weird you know…" the man replies. Tony Stark describing the Avengers says: "That's what we call ourselves. We're sort of like a team. Earth's Mightiest Heroes-type thing"—but before joining the group he parodically described them as "a super-secret boy band." The clear-cut opposition between good guys and bad guys is continuously questioned and renewed by comments of this kind and would eventually cease to be so definite in *Captain American, Civil War* (2016) when the Avengers split into two teams over the necessity for a system of accountability for superheroes. In the *Infinity Saga*, hence, superheroes do stand by the chivalric romance code but, as in the *Orlando Furioso*, most knights lack the one-dimensional nature and absolute moral stature of the classical epic hero.[9] Tony Stark's remark about the "super-secret boy band" seems to play into the same ironic field as the comment about the generosity of the ancient knights: the exceptionality of the heroes is brought about in the form of self-conscious parody, yet it is exhibited nonetheless. Against this background, the use of irony in the chivalric code and its super heroic transcodification seems to be exceptional itself: it depicts the exceptional deeds of exceptional heroes while also accounting for their exceptional ideological positionality in a possibly critical tone. The ironic reconception of the knights' deeds through comic actions (the Christian knight and the Saracen riding the same horse, the Avengers trying and failing to lift Thor's hammer) and self-mocking remarks introduces a space of self-critique in the chivalric code, one which may raise questions about the knights' and superheroes' roles and their relationship to justice.

[9] Think of the Orlando of the title: he loses his mind when he falls in love with Angelica, a particularly unheroic accident. His mental de-evolution over the poem renegotiates the contours of his heroic figure, thus allowing Ariosto the possibility to explore dissonance in the narrative code he employs, and to integrate psychologically nuanced features into his chivalric heroes. Besides Orlando, also other heroes are presented as more developed and problematized, in brief, as more modern.

2. The Age of Neoliberal Reproducibility

As in the examples quoted above from the *Infinity Saga*, self-consciousness is often conveyed through irony, in Marvel cinematic universe as in the *Orlando Furioso*. In both cases ironic remarks serve also as metafictional reflections on the semantic codes the heroes and superheroes inhabit. This is so because irony showcases the maturity of the literary tradition and the crisis of some of its aspects, such as the representation of knights as flawless and infallible. In *Captain America 3, Civil War* (2016), over an argument Captain America tells Iron Man: "you're a big man in a suit armor, take that off who are you? … You're not the guy to make the sacrifice play … You may not be a threat, but you'd better stop pretending you're a hero." To which Iron Man replies "a hero? Like you? You're a laboratory experiment Rogers, everything special about you came out of a bottle." These remarks display the cognitive and moral difficulty of identifying what and who (super)heroes are in the twenty-first century: What makes a superhero? His laboratory-enhanced body? His futuristic and hyper-expensive armor? Both? None? Interestingly, in both the *Infinity Saga* and the *Orlando Furioso,* knights are presented at once as superhuman heroes and as human beings with their flaws. At the core of these reflections there lies an ontological and political question regarding the significance of being the guardians of a particular world order and the heirs of a literary genre in contemporary Western society. What does it take for the Avengers, and for Iron Man specifically, to be "defensori de la sua fede" ("guardians of the faith") and in what ways are they rewarded "deli affanni che habian per nostra sorte" ("for the troubles they face as this is in their destiny") (Ariosto 1934, *V*, I 26)?

In particular, the ways in which Iron Man positions himself and his super-heroic identity within the construction of US contemporary ideology and the peculiarities of his superpowers make him the most human but also the most (contemporary) American of the Avengers, the neoliberal superhero. Indeed, Iron Man reconfigures magic—a key element of the chivalric code—in explicitly economic terms, as he does with his super-heroic capabilities and his quests. Although he does not have superhuman qualities, he is a superhero because he has the expertise and enough money to build himself hyper-sophisticated armors and weapons. Therefore, Iron Man applies an economic logic to the chivalric code, in line with what neoliberalism prescribes. According to Wendy Brown, neoliberalism is "a normative order of reason … transmogrif[ying] every human domain and endeavor, along with humans themselves, according to a specific image of the economic" (2015, 9-10). With Iron Man, not only every human but also the super-human domain pertains to the economy and the super-heroic breadth becomes intertwined with it; in *Iron Man 2*, he states his neoliberal rationale very clearly: "I've successfully privatized world peace. What more do you want?" In this sense, with Michel Foucault one may define Iron Man as the super-*homo oeconomicus*, understood as "an intensely constructed and governed bit of [super] human capital" (10). In his study of the interconnectedness between

the Marvel Cinematic Universe and US post-9/11 militarization, Brett Pardy suggests that the rising success of the former over the 2000s and 2010s parallels a growing interest in neoliberal security, which he defines as a "new American hegemony," re-centering "the military as central to the identity of American exceptionalism," one supported by "the neoliberal turn and intensified by the War on Terror" (2019, 104). Pardy always sees Iron Man as the symbol of this phenomenon, a "previously less popular comic book hero" turned into "pop culture film icon" (103), representing the hegemony of the economic capital.

It is worth noticing that economic capital is essential in the *Orlando Furioso* as well: several times, both Christian and Saracen knights introduce themselves and try to conquer a woman by stressing their value, understood as social and economic prestige. Mandricardo, for instance, so addresses Doralice, with whom he has fallen in love: "Se per amar, l'uom debbe essere amato,/ merito il vostro amor; che v'ho amat'io:/ se per stirpe, di me chi meglio è nato?/ Che 'l possente Agrican fu il padre mio./ Se per ricchezza, chi ha di me più stato?/ Che di dominio io cedo solo a Dio:" (Ariosto 1934, XIV, 58). One may infer that wealth is a fundamental condition for the protagonists of the chivalric romance too (in line with the rapid mercantile development of the Italian *Cinquecento*), yet in its Iron Man's transcodification it becomes foundational and pervasive, following the neoliberal precepts.

Interestingly, Iron Man's neoliberal principles are transposed into a neoliberal applicability too. This means that the economic nature of his superheroic identity relies heavily on technology, a case which makes the once exceptional nature reproducible—and, indeed, the neoliberal logic encourages such an outcome. While other Avengers are unique because born in exceptional and hardly replicable circumstance, Iron Man's cypher negates such uniqueness: his very reproducibility makes him, time and again, Iron Man, the neoliberal superhero that can be always (re)produced and substituted by new, ever more sophisticated ones. This is so because, ultimately, Iron Man is identifiable with his armor and, in this sense, he/it is the "embodiment" of American neoliberal high-tech supremacy.

Iron Man is, hence, exceptional in the possibility of his continuous reproduction; following the "neoliberal circle," Iron Man "institutes the norms" of the neoliberal superheroism, but, in so doing (that is, by making it possible for everyone to become a superhero, provided that they have access to a super-expensive armor), he also "creates the conditions that render those norms obsolete," and encourages the multiplication of ever more and newer Iron "Men" (Huehls 2016, 4). This reproducibility is explicit and even magnified: in *Iron Man 3* (2013) and *Avengers, Age of Ultron* (2015) the Iron Legion appears (a group of Iron Man armors supporting the Avengers' team), while Iron Man suits are worn also by the Hulk, Pepper Potts, and James Rhodes, the last two becoming superheroes for the first time. This implication of the neoliberal super-heroism suggests a

transcodification of the chivalric code into the age of its hyper-technological reproducibility. In his famous analysis, Walter Benjamin stresses the significance of authenticity in the earliest artworks, those originated in the service of magical rituals. But when "technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual," not only the artworks' authenticity and "aura" fail, but also, "to an ever-increasing degree, the work reproduced becomes the reproduction of a work designed for reproducibility" (2008, 24). Crucially, "as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics" (25). If we substitute the term "artwork" with "chivalric code" the result is a renovated genre based on politics and accommodating the possibility of reproducing itself by producing ever more contemporary knights. One may see the theoretical extent to which Iron Man represents the contemporary knight, the superhero in the age of its neoliberal reproducibility: the movies showcase this trait by featuring other characters wearing the Iron Man armor, while his privatization of world peace denotes a quintessentially exceptionalist framework, one based on the economization of every aspect of American society and on the protection/expansion of this system. In this sense, Iron Man's *raison d'être* is based on neoliberal sociopolitics.

The crucial element which seems to distinguish the *Orlando Furioso* as classic chivalric romance from the *Iron Man* saga as neoliberal iteration of this code is their respective approach to technology. As discussed above, the artificial nature of Iron Man relies for his superpowers on hyper-sophisticated technology which is, ultimately, what makes Tony Stark (and Pepper Pots and others) Iron Man. In other words, technology creates the exceptional circumstances generating a superhero, substituting nature which used to do so by accident (for example with Spider Man or the Hulk) or by destiny (see Thor). For these reasons, technological advancement is key to the development and understanding of the neoliberal chivalric romance, allowing for the reproducibility of its content and form. Conversely, in the *Orlando Furioso* technology and, especially, its contemporary progress is framed within negative terms, often connected to the semantics of danger and black magic. Think, for instance, of Cimosco, a tyrant who "gains unfair advantage over his enemies by means of a new machine [...] that uses gunpowder to fire metal balls that kills and main from a distance;" Orlando defeats him using only the weapons of classic chivalry and has the diabolical engine taken out to sea (from which it would be eventually recovered) (Hanning 2010, 196). By taking the "diabolic engine" to the sea Orlando, the icon of the chivalric romance, wants to put an end to its infinitely reproducible destructive power, after defeating it by means of his own chivalric abilities (subject to natural decline, unlike the artificial *arcibuggio*). However, despite Orlando's attempts to repress the technological advancement represented by this *arcibuggio*, the latter comes back into the plot, thus indicating a complex dynamic of exclusion but

ultimate acceptance of technology on the part of the classic chivalric code—once again, a genre positioned within a rift.

3. Reproducing the *Status Quo*

It has been noted that Ariosto terminates both the *Orlando Furioso* and the preceding chivalric romances about Orlando by affirming the reality of death and the fundamental humanity of the heroes he portrays (Quint 1979, 82). Similarly, the end of *Avengers, Endgame* (2019), in which both the *Iron Man* and the *Infinity* sagas culminate, inscribes the super heroic sacrifice of Iron Man within his death as a human being. The renegotiation of the traditional hero figure in chivalric terms is explicit as early as the end of the first *Iron Man* (2008) movie, when after stating: "I'm just not the hero type, clearly" Tony Stark outs himself saying: "I am Iron Man." So, should we assume that Iron Man is just not a hero? Is it so because he has always been fundamentally human? However, this earlier scene can be linked to the decisive moment of *Avengers, Endgame*, when Iron Man successfully defeats Thanos sacrificing his own life and proving himself as the definitive superhero of the whole saga. On this occasion, to Thanos' words: "I'm inevitable," he replies: "And I am Iron Man"—a realization that makes the disputed and tense relation between the heroic code and Marvel's superheroes come full circle—and through a snap of his own hand, Iron Man restores the lives previously wiped out by Thanos. The crisis of the heroic figure is thus rectified, but only after problematizing its conventions as well as the spectators' expectations about it. By sacrificing himself as a human being, Tony Stark/Iron Man proves to be, maybe for the first time, indisputably super-human. However, the inevitability at the core of Thanos and Iron Man's exchange is worth reflecting upon. Thanos' genocidal solution to the problem of overpopulation and consequent starvation of some peoples is reversed but, with human lives also the previous detrimental conditions are restored. The neoliberal status quo which Iron Man and the Avengers defend while Thanos undermined is reestablished, but Tony Stark's death ends his life as a human being, not Iron Man's enterprise because his very technological reproducibility makes that end impossible. In the end, what proves to be inevitable is the neoliberalism which Iron Man protects at the cost of his own life; a sacrifice which potentially spurs the production of yet other Iron "People." Benjamin's "authenticity" is lost as Iron Man is praised for his gesture which claims simultaneously on his exceptionality and his reproducibility; accordingly, "neoliberalism champions [his] status as homogenized object (usually as part of a team [e.g., the Avengers]) just as readily as it flatters [his] unique individuality" (Huehls 2016, 10).

The topos of the quest is another cornerstone of the narrative economy of the *Orlando Furioso* and of the *Iron Man* saga, and it establishes another element of neoliberal reproducibility within the stories. The quest becomes evident in the Avengers chapters, when the superheroes leave aside their individual adventures and join forces to defeat

Thanos: they try to stop him from gathering all the six Infinity Stones by recuperating the stones themselves. The theme of the quest is thus a powerful unifying principle that functions like a centripetal force: the superheroes deviate from their personal quests and story lines to converge on one mission ideologically and morally charged. Similarly, in the *Furioso* the *aventure* typical of the knight errands of previous chivalric romances begins to fit into the framework of the unitary and ideologically oriented quest driving the plot towards a narrative closure (Zatti 2006, 16). A similar tension towards closure is sought by the Avengers too who, despite their parallel adventures, eventually adhere to the structural dynamic of the quest, thus subscribing to a teleological and exceptionalist understanding of history. In *Avengers, Endgame* Iron Man and Captain America argue over the ultimate purpose of the Avengers, and Iron Man says: "that would end the team. Isn't that the mission? Isn't that why we fight so that we can end the fight and go home?" Once again, reproducibility is presented as intrinsic yet problematic in the chivalric code: the centripetal tension towards the unity (and uniqueness) of the quest is always challenged by the centrifugal forces of the self-generating, ever-reproducible stories and by the individualities of the knights/avengers. This is another instance of the ideological and formal ways in which the neoliberal chivalric genre reproduces itself and the status quo it mirrors: it constantly creates the premises for and the necessity of a yet another adventure.

This logic typifies another aspect of the *Iron Man* saga, that is the movies' attitude towards the military complex, a theme which is dealt with in a similarly conservative fashion. Indeed, Iron Man seems to reject the military-industrial complex he has been part of by birth (the "Stark Industries") when he decides to give up weapons after returning from his traumatic kidnapping in Afghanistan, yet the outcome of that same experience, Iron Man, is presented "as a cyborg figure who has incorporated this military technology into his outfit and made it into an essential, even natural part of his physique" (Hassler-Forest 2011, 358). Eventually, the status quo depicted at the beginning is somehow restored, even though in different shape: the armor which Tony Stark engineers is the epitome of both the repudiation and consolidation of military technology as ideological and narrative foundation of the neoliberal chivalric code.

As discussed above, threats and, consequently, the Avengers' missions seem to keep coming one after the other. A battle produces a solution that produces more battles and more collateral damages to be mended and so on, in a potentially infinite logic or, rather, in a neoliberal circle. This auto-generative narrative strategy seems to reflect the intellectual and media necessities of a code on the threshold, with its constant tension towards renewal and self-legitimation. Against this multifaceted background, the quest functions as an ordering principle of the diverse storylines in the *Furioso* as of the ever-growing Marvel universe, so broad that has come to be defined as a "multiverse," meaning a set of different alternate universes that meet and intersect on specific occasions. The stylistic mode through which the multiverse expands and the story lines spill over

one into the other is the *entrelacement,* a foundational technique of chivalric romance that involves the multiplication of narrative threads through the interweaving of encounters and conflicts among various characters (Zatti 2006, 19). Besides the poetics of interlacing, classic chivalric code relies also on other literary techniques such as parallelism and chiasmus, through which "the poet constructs a system of compensatory symmetries through which he controls the expansion of his material, bringing his principles of stylistic and narrative organization to the foreground" (14). These stylistic modes control and organize Marvel's multiverse too, where every movie, even those centered on one individual superhero, features other superheroes and hints to the next narrative thread and the next adventures. Consider also the signature post-credits scenes after every Marvel movie: they both close and open up the story to other narrative chapters, effectively connecting one adventure to the next, a universe to another, in a kind of meta-interlacing fashion. Marvel's inter-textual *entrelacement* guarantees the economic profits of the company because it assures ever more new movies and, in this sense, it can be seen as a neoliberal meta-ramification of their cinematic universe.

In conclusion, interpreting Iron Man as a neoliberal superhero is a bijective hermeneutic move that investigates the persistent significance of the chivalric code in the twenty-first century as a stylistic mode to address current socio-political anxieties through solutions which preserve the political and economic *status quo*. On the other hand, the transcodification of the chivalric code in the *Iron Man* saga provides an interpretive angle for the analysis of these movies in light of their exceptionalist logic and their comprehension within a multilayered generic tradition (not only the comic tradition but also the chivalric romance) and a complex socio-political context (the neoliberal society). The centrality of the notion of reproducibility, moreover, seems to explain the success and the mass consumption of Marvel movies while, on the level of the content, it plays into the construction of Iron Man as a quintessentially American and neoliberal phenomenon.

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The Twenty-First-Century Avengers: Exploration of War, Globalization, and Identity Politics

Leonor Acosta Bustamante

Abstract

The economic and cultural impact of the four films forming the saga of The Avengers from 2012 to 2019 stands for the impressive accumulation of superhero fiction in the twenty-first century, with a remarkable resituation of the topic of war conflict into the popular imagination quite affected by the traumatic beginning of the era in the New York scenario on 9/11. This article intends to analyze the different plot elements in *The Avengers* (2012), *The Avengers. Age of Ultron* (2015), *The Avengers. Infinity War* (2018), and *The Avengers. Endgame* (2019) to find clues to explain how the Marvel Cinematic Universe accomplishes a complex exploration of the nature of war, and how the films offer new ways of deconstructing simplistic Manichean polarization between good vs. evil. With this objective in mind, the study pays attention to how this deconstruction also needs to concentrate on the decomposition of stereotypes related to identity politics.

Keywords: globalization, superhero, masculinity, identity politics, Avengers, Marvel.

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1. Introduction

When Marvel launched *The Avengers* in 2012, followed by *The Avengers. Age of Ultron* (2015), *The Avengers. Infinity War* (2018), and *The Avengers. Endgame* (2019), the company had a renowned tradition in the world of American superhero fiction, starting with comic books in the critical period of the 1960s and soon trespassing the two-dimension page to translate its superhero universe into films, TV series, and video games (Wiacek 2019, 18–19). The enterprise seemed an opportunity to cope with the historical times and to reflect the anxieties of a world turned into a complex and dangerous geopolitical network constantly deemed by the threat of war. As a fictionalization of the national anxieties generated by the attack on the World Trade Center Towers in September 2001, the superhero traditional landscape shifted from typical adventures about the defeat of evil creatures invading human civilization to a darker mood and more imperialistic versions of the individualistic American alter ego (Sterba 2015, 21).

On the day of the attacks, the President of the United States of America pronounced the speech that was going to condition the world's international politics. The speech

became a renewal of the old "manifest destiny" which established the American nation as the moral leader of the world in the first years of American national history. George W. Bush constructed an interpretation of the event as a lethal strike to the heart and the soul of the civilized world, asserting that the damaged soil of America actually stood for all the allies of democracy. Moreover, the conflict was soon related to an economic infrastructure that became a target of this war against Evil (with capital letters), and on October 7 Bush made clear the intimate connection between the territorial war and democratic idealism as an essential turn into the contemporary global economy and politics. The moral bias supporting the war on terror joined together the interests of social conservativism, military/industrial organizations, and the ideology of American global supremacy (Dolan 2004).

Given this historical context, it is easy to understand the boom in superhero films in the years after the attacks in terms of "a national wish-fulfilling fantasy of American resistance to foreign (and domestic) attacks" (Brown 2017, 90) while the nationalism of specific superheroes seems to negotiate and reconfigure their ideas about this resistance. Because of the malleability of these fictional characters, it was possible to explore in their plots ideas about war, power, and the consequences of war conflict (Hugley and Harrison 2014). Moreover, while Bush's administration proclaimed the policy of preventive war and unilateralism as fundamental for the management of foreign affairs, the twenty-first-century superhero films develop strategies of resilience and resistance by inventing fantastic scenarios at constant war with aliens, gods, goddesses, witches, and modified humans, whose commitment with official politics is not completely fixed. In this state of affairs, the superheroes' bravery turns into trespassing the principles of the leading forces of the State, normally situating their deeds in the limits of what is wrong and what is right.

The complexities of Marvel Multiverse, already created in comics as a mythical reconfiguration of the history of our universe, provided the ideal metaphor to deal with the idea of the war of civilizations as stated by The Bush Doctrine and extended by the administration's official spokesmen. One of them, writing his article on July 23, 2003, stated that "America does have *the* critical role to play in maintaining world order, both for its own interests and those of humanity" (Kegan 2003). As a war conflict, the doctrine proved the need to apply US military and political power to promote democracy in strategic areas, a phenomenon characterized diversely as national security liberalism, messianic universalism, or democratic realism (Monten 2005, 112).

The renewal of American exceptionalism became the *leitmotif* of the Marvel brand in the first years of the twenty-first century, which was inaugurated by the revival of the most nationalistic superheroes of the previous century. Before the release of *The Avengers* (Whedon 2012), the company had already produced five films which paved the way for the team's saga. With *Iron Man* (Favreau 2008) and *The Incredible Hulk* (Leterrier

2008), and with the sequel *Iron Man 2* (Favreau 2010)*,* the brand saw the opportunity of resurrecting the other two figures that were to form part of the 2012 cast of the team, just one year before. The Asgardian Thor (Branagh 2011) and the archetypical soldier named Captain America (Johnston 2011) came back to the screen in two film narratives which can be considered a prequel to the 2012 experimental initiative.

The centrality of war as its main topic pervades the saga evolution, which, with the first mention of the Afghanistan war in *Iron Man,* confirmed the link with the new century political atmosphere critically inaugurated by the terrorist attacks in New York. Though it is evident that war and conflict have taken the central issue in most superheroes' stories, the specific fictionalization of the Afghanistan war becomes the proper context to develop Tony Stark's transformation into Iron Man. Moreover, the depiction of this bad-mannered and sarcastic man as the inheritor of the family company involved in weapon manufacturing constitutes the perfect subtext to construct the conventional double identity characterizing the superhero (Gibson, Huxley, and Ormrod 2015, 6). From the morally detached businessman who leads a profitable and amoral enterprise, he embraces the ethics of an altruistic superhero shifting his company's object into a high-quality technological enterprise to provide him with the superpower he does not primarily have. That the Stark Tower in New York becomes later on the settlement of The Avengers is just evidence of the formation of the team in terms of a profitable private corporation at the service of the State to preserve USA hegemony in the first place.

When studying the stories of the four films in a continuum, it is possible to find some ideas naturalizing the necessity of being alert about any invasion of alien ideologies that could destabilize the very core of American exceptionalism. Yet, throughout the evolution of the team within the period between 2012 and 2019 when Marvel released the last film of the saga, there is a clear interest in translating the conflict to a wider arena beyond the USA. This is so, not only because the target of the attacks is no more New York or any recognizable American scenario, but also because the enemy takes the nature of metaphysical evil, embodied by the Titan Thanos, who seeks to extermination of one half of all life in the universe. As it happens many times in Marvel Multiverse, this villain recreates a complex reconfiguration of the mythological Thanatos, who was represented in Greek culture as death incarnate, and who recovers here some theoretical tenets of 19th-century Malthusianism (Kragsbjerg 2021).

In this sense, the war conflict takes a multi-layered dimension that transforms the plots into a philosophical arena to confront ideological discourses about the future of human life and the most suitable political regimes for the planet's resistance. Across the Multiverse, life is a struggle constituted by personal survival and the impulse to dominate the environment, which is connected to Social Darwinism and to the need for extraordinary individuals that are fitter than the rest to fight extraordinary battles against evil. The very extraordinariness of these individuals locates the struggle beyond the human and,

in some sense, abandons humanity to the status of the weak and powerless so that the centrality of war and peace turns to be an issue separated from governments or human laws. These human social structures prove their impotence when facing the armies of evil so that the very concept of a world war conveys an existential conflict between the barbarian absolutist regimes and the democratic neoliberal organization represented by The Avengers.

2. The Avengers: Geopolitics, Heteronormativity, and the Diversification of Identity Politics

The formation of the team, explained deeply in the introductory sequences of the first film of the saga (Whedon 2012), makes it clear that they are not gathered naturally as a group working together, since they all have their background as individual superheroes in the Marvel Universe. As unique protagonists of their plots, all of them accomplish the main elements of traditional superheroes:

> A heroic character with a selfless pro-social mission; with superpowers –extraordinary abilities, advanced technology, or highly developed physical, mental, or mystical skills; who has a superhero identity embodied in a codename and iconic costume, which typically express his biography, character, powers, or origin (transformation from ordinary person to superhero); and who is generally distinct, i.e. can be distinguished from characters of related genres (fantasy, science fiction, detective, etc.) by a preponderance of generic convention. Often superheroes have dual identities, the ordinary one of which is usually a closely guarded secret. (Coogan 2006, 30)

In this sense, there is a pre-history for all of them displayed in several movies before 2012 within plots sharing the narrative elements of formation novels that explain the different processes in becoming superheroes, so that the first film does not need to go deeply into their individual stories. This is the reason why the group presents itself as an artificial and problematic gathering since they have to build unknown relationships among themselves by overcoming their self-assertiveness to negotiate and organize themselves as a working team. In assuming the historical moment of the world turned upside down with terrorist attacks, Marvel Cinematic Universe aligns with the Bush Doctrine which established the need for a global army for which no individual credo could work alone, the “unification of purpose” as the tool for success (Sterba 2015, 146). As a consequence, individualism should be set apart in the fictional universe “by considering character not just through that character’s subjectivity, but also in terms of their place in a larger world, where problems worthy of a superhero’s intervention require more than what any single person can do” (Acu 2016, 201).

The recruiting scenes are meant to establish a certain connection with the government organization S.H.I.E.L.D. (Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division) as an international covert operations agency that could be read as a

fictional recreation of the CIA. On behalf of the agency, Nick Fury convinces the Executive Board to gather an army of superheroes for the world's defense to guarantee success in a war for which humans have no option to win. This element of the plot makes the superhero team be formed at the service of the (American) government in the same way that national armies are, by claiming a patriotic sense of justice that is not assumed to be individual but collective (Acu 2016, 196).

In this sense, the 2012 Avengers constitute a professional group that theoretically can provide the national government with an adequate planning strategy to fulfill the fundamental functions demanded by a conflict that is beyond human experience. The six members who finally accept the challenge distribute their special abilities depending on the fight strategy and meaningfully depending on the hierarchical distinctions between fully human (Black Widow and Hawkeye performing the role of infantry), mutant (Hulk as the brutal force derived from monstrous wrath), enhanced human (Iron Man and Captain America proving the capacity of technology and science to improve human power), and divine entity (Thor, the immortal Asgardian god). These power relations that inherently insert differential categories of being into the team produce also some cultural issues regarding hierarchies based on gender, birth origin, cultural context, and profession. In this sense, Marvel installs the hegemonic leadership in the enhanced humans without any questioning from the rest, surpassing the powerful Thor who adapts to Iron Man and Captain America's governance as the fittest to defend a world from which he is an alien. The other three are characterized by introducing an emotional network revolving around the female character, a Russian by birth and a trained spy, in the center of this triangle. By performing an unconventional *femme fatale*, she displays together with her killing expertise some feelings for Hawkeye and Hulk, whom she considers nearer than the other three. As a result, The Avengers' first appearance in the Marvel Cinematic Universe tends to portray social relations in a quite conventional way by concentrating the power of leadership and hegemony on the two characters that stand for strong, intelligent, and privileged masculinity, while presenting the mutant, the migrant and the humans as the weakest part. The feminized part of the team is identified with unstable feelings, lack of emotional control, and other aspects divorced from a sense of order, leadership, and scientific thinking.

This differentiating interest when depicting identity categories in terms of patriarchal and supremacist bases turns out to be also effective in reinforcing traditional social paradigms when analyzing the professions these six characters have when they do not act as superheroes. Hence, the hegemonic masculinity embodied by Tony Stark (Iron Man) and Steve Rogers (Captain America) provides the plot with the prominent role of the military-industrial complex, and of the extraordinary soldiers in war strategies. Consequent to this cultural hierarchy, the other side of the group stands for less exceptional professions: Clint Barton (Hawkeye) works as a S.H.I.E.L.D. official agent accepting

orders without any will of his own, Natasha Romanova works as a double agent for the American government and embodies the traditional role of a sexually-driven spy, Dr. Banner (Hulk) puts his scientific knowledge at the service of the poor with the objective of "doing no harm, staying free, and making amends" (Wiaceck 2019, 58), while Thor's reign is far away in the Galaxy. Given this reinforcement of traditionally gendered characterization in *The Avengers* (2012), it is easy to align the particular gathering of identities in the film with Terence McSweeney's statement about 21st-century superhero fiction in general:

> The superhero film has been an emphatically heteronormative space with only rare and fleeting allusions to sexualities other than what is regarded as 'the norm' even though they are produced in an era and by a culture that is said to be more diverse than at any time in its history. (McSweeney 2020, 16)

Nevertheless, as Gibson, Huxley, and Ormrod claim in the introduction of *Superheroes and Identities* (2015), the very fluidity of characterization at the basis of superhero sagas allows the representation of identities constantly in motion and makes the protagonists gradually explore the categories they stand for. In broad terms, there is an interest in problematizing conventional traits and making them afresh using the complex organization of characters embodying different and extreme identities, which "deviates from more traditional portrayals of America under siege that might otherwise be understood as a community of innocents rising against the barbaric other" (Hugley and Harrison 2014, 120). This aspect paves the way to an exploration of war and peace much more interwoven with identity politics than the Manichean good vs. evil of the previous superhero films.

This is evident in the evolution of The Avengers from the first film released in 2012 and its last appearance in 2020. Regarding the team as unstable and increasing in number, it is possible to observe the addition of superheroes as a project for the inclusion of many sides in identity politics that is simultaneous with the growing perception of historical geopolitics in terms of the threat posed by fundamentalist Taliban regimes and Al Qaeda terrorism. The Avengers saga seems to be a rich-in-meaning set of stories where the globalization of war transforms itself into a project of inclusion in the manner established by Bush Doctrine as "a foreign policy nationalism that regards the United States as an instrument of democratic change in the international system" (Monten 2005, 114). This is enriched by the MCU strategy of envisioning the potential of female superheroes interacting with their male counterparts, and by plots that encourage the intersection of non-American "racialized" or "marginalized" armies to work beside the original team.

The first scenes of *The Avengers. Age of Ultron* (2015) established a connection with the 2012 film, by returning to the so-called Battle of New York as a recent past which is seen as just one phase in a wider conflict constantly threatening the Earth. This battle which closed the first film of the saga conceived the defeat of Loki, Thor's evil brother,

and the Chitauri army in terms of an existential fight with the unknown enemies coming from beyond the planet. This second film now sets up the story in the fictional city of Eastern Europe Sokovia, which has been invaded by a well-known enemy inhabiting the Marvel Cinematic Universe called HYDRA, with the Nazi Warrior Baron Von Strucker as its commander. The birth of this organization as an alternative brand of Hitler's regime in 1943 is a detail that lurks throughout previous stories with the objective of identifying HYDRA with chaos, extermination, and cruelty. The film starts in *media res* introducing the nature of the conflict by means of brief dialogues among the six-member team consolidated at the end of *The Avengers* (2012).

The most important feature of this sequel is the expansion of the war towards areas of the planet which were conventionally divorced from superhero narratives. Selecting the East of Europe as a setting for any kind of political tension habitually introduces the idea of totalitarianism and/or primitivism in the plots of action films, and here this is a clue to interpreting the role of The Avengers in saving the city. Feeling like foreigners to the place as the agents of HYDRA, the six characters are allowed to have some time together outside the action sequences in order to include some conversations about their function as an army. In distributing the sequences in the film by the alternation of fighting and of thinking about the consequences of the fight, the script permits the characters to perform a critical position about the war as a political strategy, something that marks the moral message that Marvel selects for this film. Now that the group works together without the political framework of SHIELD, they are free from the mandates of the institution and they feel the need of justifying their deeds before the others, something that provokes problems among them and enables the plot to naturalize the instability of the project created by Nick Fury. Recreating the traditional heroes' necessity of situating themselves on the edge of the Law, all the members of the team produce a critical moral stance, since they normally are outside "both the legal and ethical norms that govern others" (Haglye and Harrison 2014, 121). However, this is nothing else than Marvel's strategy for adding or resting characters to the group, inserting the idea of The Avengers as an abstract concept truly connected with a "real" army, with its hierarchies and its missions but without the bureaucracies of any executive board from the State. With this turn of the screw, the Marvel Cinematic Universe transforms the saga into a fictionalization of the war as a phenomenon culturally linked to the idea of neoliberalism and democracy as the basic ideological supporters of war conflicts by constructing a geopolitical mission for the contemporary world (Hassler-Forest 2012).

As a matter of fact, *The Avengers. Age of Ultron* (2015) and *The Avengers. Infinity War* (2018) both are meant to establish the ongoing conflict between the translation of leadership from one superhero to another and the problematic management of a team in constant change, something that provokes the temporal retirement of such relevant figures as Thor, Iron Man, and Hulk, and the recruitment of some others as War Machine,

Falcon, Dr. Strange and the Scarlet Witch as full members of The Avengers. What is interesting enough is that with this changing structure of characterization, Marvel is able to extend the nature of the members' abilities and functions to be successfully facing each new conflict. This is why, from the materialistic version of the original team guided by technology, science, and soldiers, the new gatherings more a more introduce certain mysticism and mental capacities to enrich The Avengers' powers against the multifaceted war planned by the global enemy Thanos, the god of Death. Significantly, the complexity of an army such as the one that gathers for the third film of the saga affects the complicated set of identity categories which at first was rather conventional in terms of American masculinity and national exceptionalism. From now on, these abstract ideas are widened and the films start incorporating new forms of characterization which activate certain traces of female empowerment and self-assertion as well as generate new multidimensional forms of performing masculinities on both sides of the battle.

3. From the Battle of New York to the Infinite War: The Diversification of Masculinities for a Global Army

That war as a cultural concept is intimately connected with the main traits of hegemonic masculinity and its association with national power and national prowess provides a clue for the interpretation of superhero fiction under the light of 21st-century international politics. The inherent strategy of using traits of powerful masculine energy to build the foundation of some social institutions such as national security agencies and militarization is the object of Sandra E. Via in her contribution "Gender, Militarism, and Globalization: Soldiers for Hire and Hegemonic Masculinity":

> Militaristic behavior is a path by which men and masculine states can prove their masculinity. Idealized masculinities for soldiers throughout history have included characteristics associated with aggression, bravery, courage, service, precision, and protection. Idealized militarized masculinities are social, but they are also physical, where militaries emphasize the soldier's physical strength, particularly upper body strength, by means of training exercises and certain areas of specialization within militaries. (Via 2010, 44)

The iconic figure of the superhero clearly embodies this idea since the basic narratives he inhabits take conventionally the war as their *leitmotif.* (Parson and Schatz 2020, 2–6) Moreover, the formation of the character as a superhero is normally narrated by creating stories about their childhood and adolescence to produce plausible plots of individual transformation and metamorphosis that concentrate on bodily issues, such as genetic experimentations, forceful physical training, or technological enhancement. When this fundamental feature of the cultural icon is interpreted with the object of finding links with national identities there seems evident that the American superhero serves to the fictionalization of ideas about US foreign and domestic politics, being normally a huge success when the historical moment is characterized by war mobilization.

As seen in previous sections, The Avengers saga presents a quite complex use of superheroes, and, in the range of years passed from the first film to the last, the idea of a world conflict attacking the very core of American exceptionalism keeps taking the center of the plots with the objective of exploring the concept of a global war and the need of a successful army that can face it. In this sense, the Marvel Cinematic Universe counteracts as a critical response against simplistic views of the superhero as an unproblematic emblem of American nationalism. Moreover, in the evolution of the superhero's army, the company introduces some important issues as the difficulties of managing individual egos working for the same mission, and the complications of claiming unity for a global army when it conveys the abandonment of some autonomous strategies and beliefs. Not even the enemies invading the Earth point without a doubt to the traditional enemy with no psychological depth, nor is there an inevitability of male supremacist hegemony among the different communities in the armies.

In this sense, *The Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) represents the most challenging recreation of these ideas about the complexity of recruiting a global united army with the mission of defeating the totalitarian Thanos and his unbeatable monstrous militia. The essence of war as a social construction of humanity responding to a specific threat embodies in The Avengers saga, as in all superhero fiction, an exploration of contemporary anxieties about insecurity and panic of losing the ground of a welfare social status (Sterba 2012). With this in mind, studying the enemies' characterization and motives is a perfect strategy to envision the evolution of these anxieties along with the historical moments in which the different films belonging to the saga were released. That Marvel had planned the four films to compose such an idea brings about an interpretation that it can only be reaching complex results if all of them are analyzed as a network of plots working together. If this is so, then the spectator learns that all threats coming from outer space from the Battle of New York to the Infinite War fit into a total plan organized by Thanos in his mad mission to exterminate half of the life of the universe for the sake of environmental sustainability. This political ideology, which would be appraisable in some other circumstances, is here associated with the Malthusian claims of some problematic control of birth and population traditionally linked to totalitarian regimes. Furthermore, the very strategy posed by Thanos actually implies the extermination of human beings, with no filming devoted to other planets' devastation (Kragsbjerg 2021, 25). Thanos' status as a divine entity with no care about the Earth's natural environment proves his theory's failures as a proper interpretation of the world's overpopulation and positions his ideology radically against the neoliberal theory of individual freedom so basic for the American way of life.

This is the first absolutist statement pronounced by Loki, the first of a series of villains commanded by Thanos in *The Avengers* (Whedon 2012): his speech before the Battle of New York starts expresses the failure of human freedom as actually a sophisticated

form of prison and the felicity of turning submissive without the need of managing individual projects for the future. With the evolution of plots throughout the saga the spectator will learn that Loki is just as submissive to Thanos' plans as he intends to reject in this first speech, being precisely a male character that is normally trying to avoid his own deficient inheritance as Odin's adopted child. The critical masculinity which he embodies seems to participate in a process of destabilizing male power in the villains' characterization proposed by the Marvel Cinematic Universe from the beginning, which is not aligned with any process of masculinization on the part of The Avengers. The final battle with Loki's summoning the Chitauri army to reach New York by opening a fantastic hole in the sky becomes "an opportunity to rewrite 9/11" (Brown 2017, 75) for a revenge fantasy where superheroes are able to stop and defeat the overwhelming majority of attackers. This is possible because of the performance of national pride executed by the previously sarcastic and selfish Iron Man, who can cross the hole and take a lethal missile out from the planet. In this framework, the representative of the American military/industrial complex finally ends the work using precisely his flamboyant and sophisticated golden armor to be able to do it.

Tony Stark as Iron Man, as well as Steve Rogers as Captain American, stands for a certain reconfiguration of the hegemonic masculinity inherent in the military realm as mentioned at the beginning of this section. Both comply with many of the codes constructing this form of masculinity, but they express some traits of gender-crossing by assuming some emotional drives in their personalities, which divorced them from the perfect soldier.

This is too evident in the second film, where the war is presented in two phases, dealing with two important explorations about the exercise of war. The first one with HYDRA and Baron Von Strucker threatening the Sokovian population is used to insert a new humanitarian view on The Avengers' part to give way to the sequences in which they are more preoccupied with the inhabitants' salvation than with the enemies' defeat, assuring themselves about their moral mission that differentiates their identity from the monstrous enemy's. Masculinity is here at the center of this debate since the female protagonists, Black Widow, and Scarlet Witch are at first sight encapsulated in the traditional roles of carers and family relatives protecting their male counterparts. In the second phase within this plot, after a celebration of the victory in Sokovia, the team is again threatened by a new enemy, Ultron, an enemy originated by the failing experiments done by Tony Stark and Dr. Banner, that simultaneously represents another phase in the global war, one associated with the attack of a device using artificial intelligence to delete all data from The Avengers facility. Here it is possible to see that anxieties derived from the evil consequences of technology, a masculine realm in the films, do not come from the outer world, since Ultron is a machine resulting from Stark's and Banner's experimentations which becomes the very enemy of the team and the world's life. In Muñoz-

González's words: "The characters have become more self-conscious of their roles, even questioning the 'greater good' that they are trying to achieve" (2017, 66). Again the too-undomesticated ego of the military/industrial complex advocate provokes the threat and inserts in the plot the negative consequences of human technological improvements, creating another collision for the rest of the group, for whom unity should be accepted as the unique value to be successful. Being the most crucial moment for the future of the team, the final sequences of the film not only record Ultron's defeat but also the dissolution of The Avengers as primarily formed in 2012. Nevertheless, the film narrative generates some new expectations about the future of the protagonists by creating a new exceptional figure with the name of Vision, "a man-made hero with a hardwired desire to defend the helpless and cursed with a hunger to be human" (Wiaceck 2019, 150), the superhero assembling high-technological improvements and human goodness, in a sense, a positive reformulation of hegemonic masculinity. Vision, with his abhorrence of war and his desire to have a human body, finally builds an emotional tie with Wanda Maximoff, an enhanced female human born in the Balkans and the perpetrator of chaos when she is transformed into the Scarlet Witch. Together, as New Avengers, form at the end of the film the couple that distorts the patriarchal axis of the first team.

Four years after the release of *The Avengers. Age of Ultron,* Marvel continued the saga with *The Avengers. Infinity War* (Russo and Russo 2018), and had planned the strategy to gather The Avengers again by means of complicating the leading roles with the entrance of different armies to compensate for the team's difficulties. This is why the Marvel Cinematic Universe puts into motion several pre-existent groups of superheroes, which have almost nothing in common with The Avengers but can gather together against Thanos' ultimate menace. The infinity war actually refers to the central place of the Infinity Gems in the universe welfare, some precious stones with essential powers embodying concepts such as Reality, Space, Time, Soul, and Mind. Nevertheless, it is possible to interpret this conflict as a war that is beyond time and space, a fight for the very values of humanity and the world, which are at the point of being lost in Thanos' hands.

Evolving logically towards a representation of the problem as involving all the galaxy, the film extends the settings to incorporate some faraway planets with the intention of providing the plot with some allegorical interpretations, as well as of distributing the different teams' functions in a multiplied mission of recovery. The collaborative work again starts with the process of new recruitment when Dr. Strange convinces Tony Stark in New York to rejoin The Avengers again by showing him the dangers posed by Thanos and his objective of gathering the infinity gems. In an involuntary way, Iron Man gets to incorporate Spiderman into the group, to whom there is the addition of Captain American, Hulk, War Machine, Falcon, Vision, Black Widow, and the Scarlet Witch. Yet this new reconfiguration of The Avengers seems to be insufficient, and the film now

introduces a new component: a heterogeneous team that is proud of their identities as intergalactic outlaws, and a set of extraordinary individuals that lack any political commitment to war. This group, called The Guardians of the Galaxy, is evidence of the Marvel corporation's need to adapt the plot to non-heteronormative times, something that is achieved by the entrance of animals, plants, alien women, and other figures to introduce diversity in the more-standardized identity politics explored before this film. The Guardians display the gathering of six members who stand for different categories going through a process of recognition and understanding, complying with the idea of unity as the model of an army set in previous films. The leader is the modified animal called Rocket Racoon, whose principal goal in life is to get rich and protect his friends from any harm. He governs a spaceship with the other five members of the crew, pursuing the common objective of killing Thanos, each of them for different reasons. Actually, they do not fulfill the role of superheroes in the traditional way, but the plot development draws from them their ethics and they finally are committed to the general mission.

As the last complement of these two teams, the film seeks the implementation of some postcolonial ideas by making the African fictional setting of Wakanda have an important role in forming this global army. Ruled by Black Panther, the African superhero previously developed as the protagonist of the homonymous film released just a few months before *The Avengers. Infinity War,* Wakanda stands for African identity and their will of being divorced from the external world, something they achieved by building a defense shield that keeps them safe. Their power comes from the control of Vibranium and the unique computer technology they use to defend themselves from the rest of the world.

The process of globalizing the war conflict against the Almighty Thanos not only conveys the formation of this complex unity coming from diverse armies but also provides the film with a multiplicity of second characters that join the military force in order to find solutions for some structural problems, together with strange settings which expand the idea of a convoluted universe. This is the case of the Dwarf in Nivadellir, a planet devoted to forging iron weapons, who is in charge of creating a new hatch for Thor, or The Collector in Knowhere, a planet formed with the head of an antique divine entity holding the knowledge of the Galaxy, where the Reality Gem is kept, or Vormir, a barren planet where Thanos sacrifices his stepdaughter Gamora to get the Soul Gem.

With this complicated representation of the war, the characters, and the universe's nature, the mission of the Earth's global army is transformed into an existential phenomenon where the Galaxy is no more guided by any logical thinking, with the consequent impotence felt by the earthly power displayed by all of them. The mystic sciences dominated by Dr. Strange in his training in Tibet do not harm Thanos since he is from the beginning captured and disabled, so that the world is finally defeated and half exterminated when Thanos gets the six stones and puts them on his gauntlet. With an extremely

unconventional ending, the film seems to finish with the Earth's defeat, an aspect of the plot which seems to correspond with the failures of putting an end to wars in the American foreign politics scenario.

4. Conclusions

The Avengers. Endgame, directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo and released in 2019, seems to be an alternative (happy) ending to the three previous films in the saga. By using the science fiction topic of the time machine, the remaining set of characters that survived after Thanos' extermination at the end of *The Avengers. Infinite War* gets to build a sophisticated device to go back in time and recover the Infinite Gems to prevent Thanos' victory. In this process that distributes once more the superheroes into small teams to travel to several years of the past, there is one of them reaching 1970 after having no good results in 2012 with the recovery of the Space Gems. Throughout some intricacies of the plot, Tony Stark and Steve Rogers place themselves in the very historical time when Tony's father was experimenting with some subatomic particles to create supersoldiers in the line of Steve Rogers some years before.

The strategy of coming back to where it all began in order to change the future is a traditional manner of solving conflictive problems in fantasy, but here the historical setting is much more than a disengaged fictional place, since with this turn of the screw the whole saga provides an innovative interpretation about the source of the war that has become eternal. The fact that the facilities where Tony Stark's father and other scientists work are actually the site for SHIELD to secretly operate with dangerous experiments produces an enriching development of what the saga explored from the beginning: the hidden implications of America in the wars coming after the 1970s, and the negative consequences of experimenting with humanity and with human existential and spiritual values.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe's project when activating The Avengers plots has resulted in tremendous global success and has situated the company as the most profitable and most famous factory of superhero fiction in the contemporary world. Yet, this is not its only success: The four films of The Avengers together with the films that compose the universe in which they live have proven that even within the strict framework of superhero fiction there is the possibility of introducing alternative ideas about diversity and about the dangers of war.

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Feminist Quest Heroine: Female Superheroines and Deconstruction of Male Heroism

Thanong Aupitak

Abstract

Hero's narratives have long been significantly shaped by male heroism to construct a certain perception towards gender by imposing hegemonic masculinity onto a male hero and hegemonic femininity on a female in order to establish a perpetual linkage between masculinity and superiority, simultaneously marginalizing female characters and their values by limiting their roles into being damsels in distress waiting to be rescued by a male hero and later becoming a reward of his success. Nevertheless, it has become prominent that various materials, especially movies, in the twenty-first century American popular culture have adopted a different model to portray a narrative of heroism by infusing it with the concept of Feminist Quest Heroine, a theory foregrounded by Svenja Hohenstein that highlights the re-modification of male-dominated narrative of heroism into a feminist one. The narrative no longer cherishes the superiority of masculinity but now addresses the feminine aspects instead. In order to rework the narrative, the concept points out to four different but inter-related approaches: the empowerment of femininity, reworking gendered bodies, power of connections, and a critique of patriarchal power. The adoption of the approaches result in a more empowering heroine who is able to subvert traditional aspects embedded with a conventional narrative of heroism.

Keywords: hegemonic femininity, hegemonic masculinity, gender stereotypes, superhero, superheroine.

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1. Heroism and Why it Matters

In the contemporary world, considering the current proliferation of superhero narratives, it is important to consider that heroes are not born, but rather forged and constructed through repeated representations across various types of media. What is noteworthy is that, although the origin of heroes has primarily been fictional, the impact of heroism has never been any less factual. Due to its socially constructed foundation, heroism imposes hegemonic normative values and perceptions upon each hero, transferring them to those who consume the concept in an attempt to formulate predominant identities. As Sára Bigazzi et al. (2021) conclude, the role of heroes is adopted to reaffirm potential manners and values for individuals to imitate (4). Nevertheless, despite its reaffirmation of social

conventions, such a role is subject to change due to the evolving concept of heroism itself, thereby shifting the qualities people employ to justify a heroic act.

According to several scholars, heroism serves as a means of shaping people's behavior by legitimizing actions deemed heroic and right, while labeling others as unheroic or wrong. Kathy Blau et al. (2011) define heroism as "acting in a prosocial manner despite personal risk" (99), highlighting its power to influence people's actions towards what is considered conventionally virtuous, commendable, and in line with a specific sociocultural set of values and beliefs. Consequently, heroism offers guidance that regulates human behavior based on established standard notions of "right" and "wrong," thus molding the group members' actions accordingly. Notably, heroism not only holds appeal for humans but also stirs their emotions, compelling them to act in line with the perceived heroic ideal. Whether through skill or luck, individuals are motivated to achieve deeds worthy of heroic recognition.

Liubov Ben-Nun (2021) asserts that heroism is a societal construct, delineated by attributing specific actions to individuals that, to some extent, transcend "reasonable boundaries." This might involve legitimizing perilous or excessive undertakings, or associating values such as unwavering courage, honesty, and empathy with heroism (4). Within the context of a hero's narrative, these qualities often constitute the primary attributes embodied by the hero. Several of the enumerated aspects of heroism or heroic figures align with the characteristics of heroism commonly compiled by Philip Zimbardo (2020) who argues that heroism encompasses a voluntary commitment to actions performed in service to the greater good of society, often at the cost of "physical comfort, social standing, or quality of life" (1). Moreover, this voluntary engagement requires the absence of any expectation of personal gain. The social contribution inherent in heroism yields neither profit nor advantage, often resulting in either loss or equilibrium. This is precisely why such acts are deemed heroic, inspiring individuals to uphold similar principles.

In the words of Barbara Korte and Stefanie Lethbridge (2017), a hero is an individual, regardless of gender, whose remarkable acts of courage and nobility are held in high esteem. According to this definition, heroes are frequently portrayed as warriors, fighters, or soldiers (2). Furthermore, a hero, whether male or female, encompasses anyone whose exceptional achievements are widely recognized and celebrated. In this context, the role of heroes extends beyond the confines of soldiers and warriors, encompassing individuals possessing such commendable qualities. In any scenario, heroes embody significant social and cultural functions, capable of effecting profound and lasting impacts on a society. What emerges as thought-provoking in these studies is the malleable nature of hero conceptualizations. The notion of heroism is far from being fixed or rigid; instead, it remains dynamic and fluid. Various dimensions of heroism construct dominant

perceptions that influence people's actions accordingly, and gender stands as one such influential dimension.

2. Heroism and Gender Troubles

Spanning across folklores, tales, religious texts, poems, popular culture, and mainstream media, the notion of heroism undeniably bears a profound gender bias. Within each narrative, heroism distinctively shapes our understanding of masculinity and femininity. As Rachel Poe (2015) suggests, an examination of epic hero tales reveals that the concept of heroism is a construct of patriarchal societies, inherently entwining masculinity with heroism and amplifying its significance within the narrative (1). In a contrasting vein, the concept simultaneously employs the narrative to insinuate a sense of inferiority onto femininity, by interjecting hegemonic feminine traits into the portrayal. This dual approach serves to perpetuate the value of masculinity while concurrently diminishing the worth of femininity. In this context, the concept effectively creates a win-win situation for masculinity, affirming its prominence and functionality.

In the realm of gender studies, the concept of hegemonic masculinity wields significant power and influence over prevailing perceptions of gender and social hierarchies (Becker and Eagly 2004, 163). This configuration of masculinity underscores specific traits that individuals who identify as males are expected to embody in order to conform to the archetype of a "proper" man. These traits encompass qualities like strength, independence, authority, and dominance. The notion of hegemonic masculinity is intrinsically linked to "male-agentic" characteristics, which encompass attributes such as strength, intelligence, resilience, and proactivity (Ritchie, Igou, and Kinsella 2017, 2). Its scope is not limited solely to gender; it extends to intersect matters related to race, ethnicity, and (neo)colonialism as well. Scholarly exploration of the societal construction of heroism highlights that Whiteness has historically occupied a central role in asserting dominant influence within societal groups (Taylor 2018, 91). Consequently, taking all these aspects into account, heroism crystallizes into an image of a White muscular man embodying hegemonic power, a construct stemming from the emphasis on strength, independence, authority, and dominance. This figure often serves as the prototypical character from which an extensive array of renowned heroes, prevalent across generations, emerges.

Traditional hero narratives not only embed a particular conception of hegemonic masculinity within their textual fabric but also reveal a distinct perspective on femininity, introducing the idea of hegemonic femininity. This concept delineates the expected behavioral norms for women, setting forth a framework by which their actions are judged as socially acceptable or not. Within the realm of hegemonic femininity, narratives tend to emphasize traits such as passivity, helplessness, and dependence among women. In contrast to the "male-agentic" attributes, Timothy Ritchie et al. (2017) propose that

women are associated with more communal qualities, such as empathy, selflessness, and compassion (2). On one hand, this mode of representation serves the purpose of reinforcing these traits in women—casting them as passive, obedient domestic figures. On the other hand, it also serves to bolster the notion of masculine superiority by projecting a narrative where a man rescues a helpless, "damsel in distress" archetypical woman. This dynamic aids in perpetuating and celebrating traditional gender roles.

As a consequence of the embedding of gender-specific attributes into hero narratives, a particular stereotype has emerged: the hero is prominently portrayed as a White, heterosexual, muscular man who either embodies or prioritizes physical strength. Frequently, he is destined to embark on a solitary quest, accentuating his sense of independence. Throughout this journey, the narrative archetype often presents him overcoming every challenge, owing to his hegemonic masculine qualities. His physical prowess, well-built physique, power, and authority enable him to triumph over any adversaries that attempt to impede his progress. His autonomy reinforces the notion that his heroic stature increases with each successful step of the quest accomplished without external aid. In essence, this trope perpetuates a portrayal of "the physical sense of maleness", encompassing domains such as physical spaces, body image, size, power, and even sexuality (Aboim, Hearn, and Howson 2007, 4). Such heroes are frequently depicted as prince charming figures, warriors, demigod heroes, or similar archetypes. As these narratives culminate, consumers of these stories are presented with a heightened perception of masculinity that has been interwoven throughout. As Yuchen Yang (2020) proposes, this process of gendering engenders "internalized expectations, attitudes, and traits", ultimately contributing to a distortion of power dynamics and reinforcing "structural inequality" in gender perceptions (319).

An additional element frequently entwined within the narrative of a hegemonic masculine hero is the presence of a damsel in distress—an archetypal character meant to underscore the hierarchical relationship between femininity and masculinity. As posited by Alice Eagly and Lindsay Rankin (2008), the perception of men as more inclined to perform acts of heroism has led to the cultural linkage of heroism with masculinity (421). These hegemonic masculine heroes are not solely portrayed to demonstrate their masculine attributes; more often than not, they rely on other female characters who are imbued with hegemonic feminine traits. In accordance with Karen Dill et al. (2005), the "damsel in distress" archetype serves to cater to male desires, thereby catalyzing the display of male heroism by her male counterpart (117). These characters typically exhibit traits such as passivity, obedience, kindness, helplessness, and dependence. Their role within the narrative is to underscore the societal expectations imposed upon women. They are predetermined to embody gentleness, domesticity, and submission, thereby further marginalizing and disempowering themselves. Moreover, these characters are strategically depicted to accentuate masculine values, bolstering the representation of hegemonic

masculinity within the male characters. The "damsel in distress" often endures misfortune and remains incapable of resolving her predicament due to systemic passivity and helplessness, consequently paving the way for a heroic intervention. This portrayal often results in female characters resembling a princess awaiting rescue by a prince charming, ultimately constraining their potential association with heroism. In essence, this recurring pattern perpetuates a representation of women that reinforces their reliance on male saviors and limits their potential for heroism.

3. Feminist Quest Heroine: Subversion of American Male Heroism

Owing to the proliferation of feminist discourses in twenty-first-century materials, the narratives of heroism have undergone transformations over the years, leading to a reshaping of how the concept engages with the construction of gender through heroes and heroines. R. Connell and James Messerschmidt (2005) succinctly summarize that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is inherently flawed, projecting an artificial image onto a dynamic reality, thus leaving room for its own subversion (836). By reimagining this concept, it becomes evident that the feminist quest heroine has emerged to redefine both heroines and their male counterparts. Svenja Hohenstein (2019) contends that the feminist quest heroine frame offers an innovative narrative of heroism that not only challenges the glorification of traditional masculinity entrenched in narratives but also replaces it with feminist principles (14). This concept accentuates the reevaluation of femininity through female characters while subverting the perpetuation of masculine dominance through male characters. Hohenstein outlines three vital strategies that underpin the concept: empowerment of femininity, reconfiguration of gendered bodies, and emphasis on the potency of connections. Nevertheless, I observe the potential to incorporate an additional facet, a critique of patriarchy, which could further amplify the capability of the concept to challenge the established pattern of heroism. These attributes of the feminist quest heroine find tangible representation through a diverse array of superheroine characters depicted in twenty-first-century mainstream media. I argue that characters like Jean Grey from X-Men: Dark Phoenix (2019), Captain Marvel from Captain Marvel (2019), Natasha Romanoff from Black Widow (2021), She-Hulk from She-Hulk: Attorney at Law (2022), and Shuri from Black Panther: Wakanda Forever (2022) illustrate the tangible manifestation of this concept and serve as a lens through which they gauge the prevalence of the concept in the current era, signaling a transformative effort to challenge and reshape the conventional masculine paradigm of heroism.

3.1. Empowerment of Femininity

Svenja Hohenstein (2019) asserts that within the prevailing narrative of heroism, which predominantly exalts masculinity, femininity has consistently been perceived as feeble and lacking in power, consequently deemed unsuitable for heroic depictions and

relegated to passive roles (21). Narratives centered around heroism often mold femininity according to hegemonic feminine ideals, resulting in its portrayal as passive, vulnerable, emotionally fragile, and reliant on male assistance. However, the emergence of superheroine narratives in the twenty-first century disrupts this prevailing ideology. These narratives showcase heroines who embrace stereotypical feminine attributes, transforming them into sources of power, thereby embodying heroism through the empowerment of femininity. While heroism traditionally favors aspects associated with hegemonic masculinity, casting them as strong and potent, the concept simultaneously venerates traits of hegemonic femininity as weak and ineffectual. Consequently, those who embody and exercise masculine attributes are afforded the opportunity to become heroes, while individuals possessing hegemonic feminine qualities are often excluded. In essence, aspiring heroines either need to suppress their feminine attributes and adopt masculine traits or re-model their inherent feminine qualities in order to claim the mantle of heroism.

Among several attributes, one dimension of femininity that frequently finds itself depicted as a weakness pertains to the realm of emotions. Emotionality has often been exclusively associated with women, interpreted as a signal of vulnerability and an inability to carry out tasks with satisfactory outcomes. However, the feminist quest heroine paradigm shifts the narrative to revere emotions as a wellspring of strength rather than a source of disempowerment. An exemplar of this shift is seen in Jean Grey from X-MEN: Dark Phoenix (2019), who embraces this perspective to define her heroism. Empowered by the fusion of the Phoenix Force and Solar Flares, Jean Grey struggles to harness her newfound abilities, inadvertently endangering her companions and innocent individuals. Vuk, an alien aiming to absorb Jean’s powers, consistently attributes her inability to control her abilities to her emotional instability. A climactic moment occurs as Jean and Vuk confront each other, with Jean losing control and endangering her friends. In this intense exchange, Vuk taunts Jean, asserting, “Your emotions make you weak; if you kill me, you will kill them all” (Kinberg 2019, 1:39:00). Contrary to this claim, Jean firmly rebuffs, “No, you're wrong. My emotions make me strong” (Kinberg 2019, 1:40:07), enabling her to master her powers, defeat Vuk, and transcend into a cosmic entity.

This pivotal scene underscores the profound notion that, in a society where women’s emotions are frequently criticized and deemed feeble, there is no compulsion to conform. Rather than suppressing emotions to align with societal expectations, emotions can be harnessed as sources of empowerment. They facilitate a journey of self-discovery and awareness, enabling individuals to fathom their true selves and unlock their inherent potential. Within a male-dominated societal framework, women are often admonished to govern their emotions, an expectation that inadvertently obstructs their avenue toward self-realization and empowerment. In this light, feminist quest heroines exemplified by characters like Jean Grey reframe emotions as a reservoir of strength,

dispelling the myth of emotional frailty and reshaping the discourse around women's capabilities.

As Ayushee Arora (2019) suggests, male heroism traditionally suppresses emotional expression among heroes, urging them to maintain emotional stability to uphold their strength and resilience (7). Consequently, heroes are depicted as emotionally distant to avoid showing signs of weakness linked to emotions, which could undermine their heroic image. According to what Sebastian Peris (2021) writes, Jonathan Decker, a licensed therapist, analyzes the character development of Tony Stark (Iron Man) in the Marvel Cinematic Universe films and reveals that he likely experiences Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder due to the traumatic events he endures (n.p.). Despite this, he conceals his emotional vulnerability, fearing it might render him weak and incapable, given his ongoing emotional struggles. It is noteworthy that, in various instances, a hero who grapples with emotional vulnerability might not be immediately deemed "heroic" due to the association of this trait with femininity. However, such a perspective stems from the confines of limiting gender stereotypes. Had Jean Grey adhered to the traditional notion of heroism, she might have suppressed her emotions to gain better control over her power. However, this path would have reduced her emotional depth and portrayed her as a mere vessel for masculine attributes, reinforcing the stereotype that a heroine's power relies on the dismissal of emotions. This approach would have perpetuated the common trope of sidelining emotions in favor of power, aligning with traditional gender norms and undermining the nuanced portrayal of a powerful female character, thus repeating the same stereotypes and akin to the depiction of Tony Stark, an embodiment of male heroism.

Therefore, this heroine introduces a fresh perspective on comprehending the essence of heroism. Feminine attributes, including emotional depth, emerge as reservoirs of power and resilience. As a result, she does not find it imperative to adopt masculine traits or conform to gender norms to attain heroism; she embodies her agency authentically over her emotions. The prevailing notion that femininity is synonymous with weakness, or that female characters must embrace masculine attributes to qualify as heroic, is entrenched in restrictive stereotypes. The very essence of the feminist quest heroine is to disrupt and dismantle these stereotypes. It seeks to amplify the feminine qualities that these superheroines inherently possess, demonstrating that these attributes are not impediments but assets. By defying traditional gender expectations, the character illuminates a progressive pathway, encouraging a more inclusive and empowering understanding of heroism and its connection to emotions.

3.2. Reworking Gendered Bodies

Heroism not only delineates essential characteristics for achieving heroic status, but also prescribes a specific body type associated with it. Masculine attributes represent pivotal qualities an aspiring hero must embrace, including a masculine physical appearance. A

body type deemed congruent with heroism aligns closely with hegemonic masculine ideals—robust and conspicuously strong. In contrast, a body inconsistent with this prototype is often deemed incompatible with heroism. Consequently, female bodies, characterized as petite, slight, and delicate, are systematically juxtaposed against the traditional heroic narrative, precluding their depiction as heroes (Hohenstein 2019, 33). Certain feminine body types, such as blondness, slimness, and delicateness, have perennially been ascribed hyper-feminine and fragile connotations. As a result, such bodies frequently assume the role of a damsel in distress, serving to validate their societal standing. Moreover, within heroism narratives, the hyper-feminine body type is often harnessed to objectify, eroticize, and sexualize women, further reinforcing entrenched norms and justifications.

Briana Barnett et al. (2022) deduce from their study that superheroes, regardless of gender, are frequently depicted as assertive and hyper-muscular. This tendency is particularly pronounced among male heroes who often embody stereotypically masculine and unrealistic body forms, characterized by an excessively massive and muscular physique (354). This portrayal aims to link such hyper-masculine bodies with heroism while simultaneously distancing alternative figures, including those with stereotypically feminine physical traits. An exemplary illustration of this male-heroism-associated body can be found in the character of Captain America from the MCU movies. He possesses an exaggeratedly muscular physique, crucially tied to his heroic journey. As Chad Barbour (2015) suggests, Captain America's body portrayal serves as a symbol of his heroic masculinity, strongly aligned with hyper-masculine ideals and establishing a standard for heroic physiques (277–79). Conversely, for female characters, Jay Zagorsky (2015) highlights common tropes and stereotypes linked to traits such as Whiteness and blondness, inherently classified as hyper-feminine. These traits are often portrayed as beautiful yet weak and incompetent, consequently distancing the character from heroism and positioning them more as proper damsels in distress (402).

Nonetheless, contemporary superheroines prominently embody the hyper-feminine physique while effectively performing heroic deeds. Captain Marvel stands as a prime illustration, possessing a hyper-feminine form often associated with traditional ideals, yet unyieldingly portraying a powerful heroine (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 Captain Marvel's physical appearance © Marvel.

This depiction of a hyper-feminine physique intertwined with strength and potency challenges established gender stereotypes and the constructed nature of binary gender categories (Hohenstein 2019, 33). Notably, some narratives may seemingly demand a more masculine presentation for heroines to align with conventional gender roles. However, true heroism for women does not necessitate the abandonment of feminine attributes or the adoption of a more "masculine" physique. Captain Marvel exemplifies that women can fully embrace their feminine bodies, devoid of excessive muscle or size, and still exhibit remarkable strength. Much like male heroes with their conventionally masculine physiques, Captain Marvel effectively wields her power without compromising her feminine identity. Her heroism does not mandate a forced merger of masculine traits within a female form. She shatters the confines of her stereotypically feminine body, establishing an empowering connection between femininity and strength. As a White, blonde, and slender heroine, this perspective challenges the misconception of femininity as a victimizing instrument wielded by patriarchal constructs (Hohenstein 2019, 37). Through characters like Captain Marvel, conventional feminine attributes are brought back to align with the ideals of heroism.

She-Hulk, also known as Jennifer Walters, offers another compelling instance of a heroine who need not masculinize herself to embody heroism. Notably, there exists a distinction between the portrayal of She-Hulk's physical appearance in the Disney+ series and its rendition in the comics (Fig. 2).

Figure 2 A Comparison of She-Hulk's bodies between the comics and the series © Marvel Studios.

In *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* (2022), her physique is presented as slender and athletic, even while physically larger due to her mutation and green complexion. In contrast, the comics often frame her body through the lens of hegemonic masculinity, molding her into a more traditionally muscular and robust form to accentuate her superhuman strength and agility. The 2022 portrayal of She-Hulk may be perceived as a less masculinized rendition, potentially driven by a desire to shift emphasis away from her physical prowess and instead highlight her intellect and personal life. It is discernible that the depiction of She-Hulk's body in the comics tends to align with stereotypically masculine, manly, and less feminine or less womanly attributes, partly to mirror Bruce Banner's Hulk persona. This portrayal contrasts with a more relatable representation seen in She-Hulk's appearance, reflecting a physique akin to that of a woman engaged in regular bodybuilding training sessions.

It is intriguing to observe that this alteration in her physique appears deliberate and holds significance in shaping male heroism. According to what Alex Lue (2022) writes, there are allegations that Marvel Studio's executives instructed a special effects artist to reduce She-Hulk's size in the series (n.p.). This rumor led to confusion and outrage among Marvel fans, who expressed their views through comments, requesting a "more fitting" rendition of her body and asserting that she was "not nearly as much as she should be'' while posting her "actual" physical appearance from the comic version to support their claims. These fans are well-acquainted with the customary portrayal of She-Hulk from the comics, a rendition molded by male heroism that portrays her physique as hypermuscular to align with this dimension of heroism. Hence, in light of She-Hulk's updated physical depiction that diverges from the established norm, fans are disheartened, perceiving a departure from the traditionally crafted heroism they have come to associate with the character.

All in all, an erroneous pitfall when crafting a superheroine is the inclination to mold her in a manner that is more "masculine" in appearance. In numerous instances, the attempt to align a heroine with the archetype of heroism results in depicting her with a body evoking masculine traits. Succinctly, this perspective suggests that for a woman to qualify as a heroine, she must masculinize her physique, effectively obfuscating her innate feminine attributes—such as being slim, blonde, or slender. This perspective reflects a male-centric framework in heroism that perpetuates the exclusion of diverse body types from the narrative of heroism. However, contemporary superheroines challenge this paradigm by embracing their distinctive feminine physical attributes while admirably fulfilling their roles as heroines. They demonstrate that possessing traits like blondness, slenderness, and delicacy does not hinder their capacity to excel in their heroic endeavors.

3.3. Power of Connections

In traditional narratives of male heroism, autonomy is a recurring theme. Male heroes are frequently portrayed as independent and self-reliant, attributes that signify strength and resoluteness and are lauded as quintessentially masculine. This self-sufficiency has become a pivotal facet of heroism, symbolically encoding bravery and resilience within the construct of hegemonic masculinity as embodied by the hero. However, the concept of feminist quest heroine diverges from this convention by highlighting female heroines who prioritize connection, valuing it as "sisterhood". Within the realm of feminist discourse, sisterhood holds a central role, denoting the sense of camaraderie, solidarity, and mutual support that women extend to each other as a result of shared experiences of oppression and discrimination. As articulated by Bell Hooks (1989), sisterhood serves as a means for women to uplift one another, collaboratively surmount shared adversities, and attain collective objectives, thereby nurturing empowerment, fostering a sense of belonging, and effecting liberation (43–44). In contrast to the solitary male hero archetype, contemporary heroines of the twenty-first century choose to embrace teamwork, extending helping hands to navigate challenges collectively and ultimately attaining heroism side by side.

Mr. Incredible from *The Incredibles* (2004) provides a notable illustration of a character who internalizes the concept of independence, a facet that within the frame of male heroism is a pivotal element in order to qualify as a hero. Alongside his embodiment of other pertinent aspects of male heroism, such as a muscular build and strength, his constant expression of self-reliance is a recurring theme within the storyline. When accompanied by a fervent admirer who seeks to collaborate with him, Mr. Incredible firmly asserts his preference for working alone, underscoring his identity as a hero who can stand on his own without needing assistance. This is particularly emphasized if the support originates from sources deemed less "masculine", such as children or women. Likewise, when his wife becomes aware of his engagement in a perilous mission alone, she extends her offer to assist him. Not surprisingly, he declines, driven by his determination to shield his family from potential hazards. The deep-rooted adherence to male heroism drives him to place an emphasis on self-reliance, surpassing the immediate context that might actually necessitate external aid. This inclination serves to validate his identity as both a hero and a father capable of accomplishing his objectives unaided. The feminist quest heroine lens highlights the distinct approaches of male and female heroes. While male heroes often operate in isolation and independence to underscore their self-reliance, perpetuate this attribute as a hallmark of heroism, and sustain its ideals, female heroines, instead, champion the significance of connection. They regard it as a wellspring of collective strength that can be harnessed to attain their objectives, particularly when combating the shared oppressions they might confront.

A compelling illustration of the shift towards sisterhood within the narrative of heroism can be found in *Black Widow* (2021), where a potent sense of sisterhood is

interwoven among the female characters. Amid a historical backdrop where female spy narratives have long been overshadowed by male-centric heroism and the male gaze (Timmy Dean 2009, 874), Black Widow emerges as a remarkable departure, introducing a range of female characters united by shared experiences of disenfranchisement and oppression. Notably, Natasha Romanoff, Yelena Belova, Melina Vostokoff, Taskmaster, and their fellow Black Widows have all endured the same subjugation under the tyrannical grasp of Dreykov, the leader of Red Room—an insidious Soviet organization that ensnares marginalized women, coercing them into becoming ruthless assassins. Within the confines of the Red Room, these women are subjected to manipulative brainwashing, rendering them obedient pawns in Dreykov's grand design. Red Room stands as a glaring testament to the manner in which patriarchal systems strip women of their agency and individuality, reducing them to commodities to further the longevity and dominion of men (Agustina et al. 2022, 14). Condemned to exist within a brutal and unforgiving environment, they are ruthlessly exploited to sustain a system that devalues them as mere "trash" awaiting disposal. Each Black Widow is ensnared in the same cycle of oppression, enduring subjugation and abuse.

Throughout the course of the film, the narrative delves into the concept of sisterhood through the portrayal of connections and relationships among the female characters. The journey of liberation is epitomized by Natasha, Yelena, and Melina, who successfully break free from the chains of mind manipulation. However, their emancipation does not lead them to seek personal refuge; instead, they choose to return and extend their aid to their fellow Black Widows still ensnared by Dreykov's control. This collective solidarity and collaborative effort prove to be fundamental in dismantling the Red Room and ultimately eliminating the source of their prolonged oppression—Dreykov himself. Kyle Killian (2023) contends that *Black Widow* (2021) disrupts the male-dominated female spy narratives by presenting a cohort of mentally linked, less overtly sexualized spies who extends mutual support, enabling them to confront and surmount issues stemming from the patriarchal system and addressing real-world challenges faced by women, including sexism, child trafficking, mansplaining, and misogyny, both within the narrative and in actuality (107). Despite their diverse backgrounds, each woman shares a profound bond and unyielding solidarity, driving them towards their shared objective. Natasha, in particular, forges profound connections with these female allies, united by the mutual experience of being disempowered by the Red Room. Together, they pool their strengths to triumph over their shared harrowing memories, embodying the very essence of sisterhood.

All in all, Elizabeth Galway (2012) contends that a certain level of independence, considered a masculine trait in heroism, is vital for a hero to possess and practice in order to attain and uphold their heroic status (75). Consequently, this often yields a heroic figure who spurns assistance to emphasize self-reliance and resilience, while evading any

hint of vulnerability from seeking aid. In the twenty-first century, female superheroines draw from the feminist quest heroine concept, embracing the potency of sisterhood. The action that disregards the value of teamwork becomes what prevents them from being successful superheroines, challenging the prevailing heroism ideology by converting collaborative strength into a catalyst for the success of the mission at hand. This shift rejects the equation of heroism with independence and instead links heroism with cooperation, effectively detaching it from exclusively hegemonic masculine connotations.

3.4. Heroine as a Critique of Patriarchy

In recent times, the role of superheroines has evolved to convey a distinct purpose, diverging from the objectives associated with male heroes. Traditionally, the core aspiration of male heroes remains rooted in the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity. Succinctly put, male heroes engage in combat not only to signify the concept of hegemonic masculinity but also to reinforce it as the narrative concludes. Their battles are waged with the intention of ascending to roles of rulership, conquest, or leadership within a specific domain. Consequently, this perpetuates the ideals of control, power, strength, influence, and authority, often culminating in an ending that solidifies these notions, leaving little room for deviation. As Jeffrey Brown (2016) states, heroes are strong, always right, fight the villains, and get the girls at the end (131). In other words, they engage in combat to showcase masculine traits, legitimize them as appropriate behavior, and uphold the patriarchal dominance.

On the other hand, while the feminist quest heroine depiction revolves around heroines who engage in activities that reclaim the power of femininity, I argue that the concept also frame heroines with the purpose to scrutinize the patriarchal dominion over women. Unlike the role of superheroines in the past that was generally used to reinforce patriarchal ideas: as a sexualized object to satisfy the male gaze, superheroines, particularly in the modern era, assume a distinct function by serving as a commentary on the oppressive structures imposed by patriarchy upon women. Through their characters, they embody, communicate, and problematize the struggle of women who confront and confrontational against these societal adversities. While male heroes are relatable to men through shared traits of hegemonic masculinity, female heroines establish relatability based on their collective experience of patriarchal oppression, bridging a connection between genders.

She-Hulk (2022) stands out as a prominent example of narratives that appropriate the superhero genre not to exalt hegemonic masculine values but, rather, to critique and deviate from its conventional understanding, heavily molded by patriarchal influences. Through the character of She-Hulk, the narrative consistently conveys messages about her oppression within the systemic power structure. Unlike her cousin Bruce, who requires time to grapple with his dual identity, Jennifer Walters swiftly harmonizes her

powers. While this might initially appear as a positive portrayal, it underscores the societal oppression that women have historically endured, which could contribute to her adeptness at achieving this power equilibrium. The crux of controlling her Hulk persona lies in managing her emotions. As the character herself asserts, women like her are conditioned throughout their lives to regulate their emotional expressions in alignment with societal expectations.

To be able to reconcile both personalities, Jennifer Walter needs to well manage her emotions. Under the patriarchal society, women seem to be "well-prepared" to become a She-Hulk as they are constantly told to control anger and emotions to be well-practiced at seeming not to mean, not too much, and not too pageful when being catcalled in the street or when incompetent men trying to explain the women's area of expertise (Abad-Santos 2022, n.p.). Consequently, being part of the oppressed group, she effortlessly toggles between her two forms—unlike her cousin, who has never undergone such systemic oppression and, as a result, requires more time to achieve the same level of control. The path to successfully control the Hulk side that both superheroes have to navigate reflects different configurations of societal oppression that men and women experience under the patriarchal society.

Another salient critique presented by the feminist quest heroine frame through its portrayal of superheroines is the examination of how women, particularly those assuming the role of superheroines, might have flourished in the absence of the systemic oppression propagated by the Euro-American concept of patriarchy. This critical exploration finds its expression through a comparative analysis of the transformative journeys undertaken by Shuri, Captain Marvel, and She-Hulk. The trajectory of them unveils a poignant dichotomy in their respective paths to superheroism. Captain Marvel and She-Hulk, products of a society deeply entrenched in the norms of Euro-American patriarchy, grapple with formidable obstacles as they endeavor to carve out their heroic identities. Their narratives are intricately interwoven with the struggle to validate their capabilities and challenge the constraints of binary gender roles. Captain Marvel, in particular, grapples with the incessant demand to exert control over her powers and emotions, aimed at proving her worthiness even in the absence of her superhuman abilities. Similarly, She-Hulk contends with pervasive public misogyny that targets powerful women, exacerbating the challenges she faces as a heroine.

In contrast, Shuri's path unfolds within a distinct context. Hailing from Wakanda, a society relatively untouched by the tendrils of Westernized patriarchy, her journey to superheroism unfolds in the absence of these stifling influences. Wakanda is the Afrofuturistic imagination of a space that has never been colonized by Westernized concepts, thus setting it free not only from diseases and poverty but also patriarchy and sexism, making women in Wakanda "fully actualized people" (DeLuca 2022, n.p.). The freedom from such concepts leads to the depiction of how heroism could have been and how

women could have been a part of it. Liberated from the burden of refuting deeply ingrained gender biases, Shuri is empowered to channel her innate strengths and talents without the encumbrance of disproving gender-related presumptions. This comparative analysis prompts a contemplation of the transformative impact that the absence of patriarchal oppression could have on the trajectories of female superheroines. By juxtaposing the experiences of Shuri, Captain Marvel, and She-Hulk through the framework of Feminist Quest Heroine, it is possible to underscores how societal structures can significantly shape and reshape the paths of superheroines, either stifling their potential or fostering their empowerment.

In the case of Shuri, her ascension to the mantle of the new Black Panther, following the passing of her brother, is strikingly unburdened by the gender-related struggles faced by her counterparts. As a citizen of Wakanda—an insular nation unmarred by Western colonization or influence—Shuri's identity remains untainted by the pervasive Westernized perceptions of gender. In Wakanda, women are exempt from the yoke of patriarchal oppression, excelling across various domains that would typically pose challenges to women entrenched within the Westernized gender construct. For example, skills related to STEM fields and martial prowess—which represent typically male-dominated spheres—mark the depiction of women in Wakanda as they not only participate but even excel. Shuri's path to heroism is thus defined by a different set of obstacles, distinct from gender-related adversities, such as her personal journey of grieving her brother's demise. Consequently, the portrayal of heroism within this narrative serves as a powerful commentary on the potential of women unhindered by the binary gender constructs perpetuated by Western patriarchy. The movie presents an alternative society—one where women can wholeheartedly embrace the role of heroines, unrestricted by traditional gender norms reinforced by the patriarchy of the Western world, the type of heroism that women like Captain Marvel and She-Hulk who live in the patriarchal world are led to experience.

The roles of traditional male heroes and twenty-first century superheroines diverge remarkably. Male heroes reinforce the connection between heroism and masculinity, whereas modern superheroines critically challenge and subvert patriarchal power's impact on heroism, critiquing established gender norms and power dynamics. These superheroines illuminate their struggles against patriarchal constraints, revealing the oppressive grip on heroism's definition. They also offer an alternate view: heroism in a world untouched by Westernized patriarchy. Their narratives embody a potent critique, exposing patriarchy's influence and advocating for an empowered, unconstrained concept of heroism. Through their evolution, these superheroines boldly challenge systemic forces and advocate for women's resilience and potential, providing an inspiring counterpoint to entrenched patriarchal norms.

4. Conclusion

Traditionally, heroism's link with masculine traits has cemented it as a primarily "male heroism," perpetuated by historical gender norms. These norms prescribe masculine qualities for heroic acts, such as physical prowess and courage, emphasizing male heroes' strength and bravery. Independence and emotional restraint are expected, shaping male heroes as solitary figures who avoid emotional vulnerability. This traditional male heroism, however, fosters the denigration of femininity, rooted in historical patriarchal norms. This leads to damaging stereotypes and constraints for women within heroic narratives. The damsel in distress trope, emblematic of male heroism, portrays women as dependent and passive, requiring male rescue. Emotional dismissal undermines women's feelings and is dissociated from heroism. Furthermore, female characters often face objectification and sexualization, becoming rewards for male heroes. This analysis underscores how traditional heroism is deeply entwined with masculinity and reinforces gender inequalities.

In the modern era, superheroines at the center of twenty-first century hero narratives often embody the notion of the feminist quest heroine. This approach aims to reshape the conventional model of heroism by reclaiming and challenging the association of femininity with heroic traits. Unlike traditional heroism, which diminishes feminine attributes, the feminist quest heroine seeks to empower qualities traditionally deemed feminine. These women do not need to suppress their femininity or adopt more stereotypically "masculine" traits to be heroic. In fact, it is precisely these aspects of traditional femininity that elevate them to heroic status. Moreover, they are not required to masculinize their physical appearance to fit the heroic mold. Instead, they can embrace a form that is seen as "traditionally feminine", even if it is perceived as delicate or weak. In essence, within the feminist quest heroine framework, female superheroines can maintain a slim and slender physique and even have non-muscular or blonde attributes, challenging the notion that only certain masculine body types embody heroism. This approach subverts traditional gender norms and redefines heroism on their terms.

Feminist quest heroines challenge the emphasis on independence and individualism in male heroism. Instead, it presents female superheroines who value connection, transforming it into sisterhood—a source of collective female power for achieving goals. This subverts the notion of heroism as a solitary pursuit, emphasizing that it is about leveraging the strength found in meaningful relationships and collaborative efforts. Moreover, I add another layer to the concept of a feminist quest heroine criticizing and problematizing patriarchy through the portrayal of heroic women. It exposes how this male-oriented power dynamic creates obstacles for women seeking heroism, whereas such hindrances are not encountered by male heroes. This type of quest demonstrates that femininity can be linked to heroism without needing to reject or conceal it for the

sake of becoming a hero. In essence, it is a transformative approach that challenges traditional norms and offers an empowering perspective on heroism for women.

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V For Vendetta (2005) and the Sociopolitical Impact of a Shakespearean Dystopian Avenger

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Abstract

The use of science and technology as tools for political domination is a recurrent topic in dystopian films. James McTeigue and the Wachowski sisters´ film adaptation (2005) of Alan Moore and David Lloyd´s cult graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (1982-89) is a unique example of this kind, as the film has enhanced its impact on a wider audience and has spread its influence over the sociopolitical arena. After 18 years since its release, the film´s criticism is still in force and it may be applied to analyze recent political events in the United States. Far from being a work circumscribed to a specific time, nowadays the film highlights issues that are still relevant and problematic, such as resettlement camps, pandemics, manipulated information and massive surveillance. The film adaptation has become a global hit and V´s mask has been claimed and reproduced in all kinds of protests. Therefore, this masked avenger—inspired by Guy Fawkes and created forty years ago—has succeeded to become a tragic hero in the fashion of revenge tragedy characters, combining Shakespearean references with radical political ideas. Thus, people have identified with V through the years, bringing his mask to the streets in social and political struggles such as Anonymous or Occupy Wall Street.

Keywords: V for Vendetta, dystopian, Shakespeare, Anonymous, Occupy Wall Street.

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1. Introduction

James McTeigue and the Wachowski sisters´ film version of Alan Moore and David Lloyd´s cult graphic novel *V for Vendetta* is a unique case of adaptation and transposition to an audiovisual medium with an increasing impact on wider global audiences through the broadcast on digital platforms, thus enhancing its growing influence and extending it to the sociopolitical arena. Both the film and the graphic novel set the story in future dystopian Britain, but the graphic novel mirrored British society under Margaret Thatcher´s mandate (1979–1990), while the film version seems to reframe the widespread political criticism targeting the United States during the George W. Bush administration (2001–2009). As I will analyze in the next sections, the film focuses on violations of civil rights in the aftermath of 9/11 terrorist attacks and the changes that this has brought to American society.

The year 2022 has commemorated the 40th anniversary of *V for Vendetta* first publishing release as a serial comic (1982–1989), and 2023 is celebrating the 18th anniversary since the film version was first released in 2005. Notwithstanding, far from being a work circumscribed to a specific time, which may have brought as a result its own outdating, the film adaptation is still appealing for the audience as its message remains profoundly valid nowadays, and gives us the chance to apply its critical dystopian analysis to current circumstances, focusing on the present sociopolitical situations.

In fact, the masked avenger V created forty years ago, inspired by the Catholic conspirator Guy Fawkes in the Gunpowder Plot (1605), has gone beyond the framework of fictional characters, as people have identified with him and have brought his mask to the streets in social and political struggles. Therefore, V has succeeded to become a tragic hero in the fashion of revenge tragedy characters, exceeding the mere fiction to enter reality thanks to the combination of Shakespearean references and radical political ideas.

2. The Comic and the Film Adaptation

In 1982 Alan Moore and David Lloyd had the idea to draw a political graphic novel against Thatcher´s administration using as the main character a reincarnation of Guy Fawkes, officially considered a culprit in the attempt to blow up the Parliament in 1605 in what is known as the Gunpowder Plot. Moore was responsible for the script and Lloyd was in charge of drawings, so creating their protagonist called V, disguised with a mask, a cape and a hat, evoking the image of the British Catholic conspirator. This choice was especially provocative in the time as heavy IRA bombings were taking place, demanding freedom from the British domination over Northern Ireland Catholic population, and thus Moore thought the historical figure of Fawkes was the appropriate to build up his hero, someone that acted outside the boundaries of legality, but committed to a greater ideological cause.

Moore and Lloyd's *V for Vendetta* was first published by British magazine *Warrior* in black and white, as a serial comic from 1982 until the publication´s ending in 1985, when the magazine closed. In 1988 American publisher DC Comics acquired the rights to reprint and continue the series until 1989, and finally they collected and edited the whole series as a complete graphic novel in 2008. In the interesting foreword "Behind the Painted Smile", which accompanies the collected edition by DC Comics, Alan Moore acknowledges a long and varied list of influences. In this list there is a prominent role for classical dystopian references, as it was reflected in the graphic novel*,* which is indeed clearly a dystopian narrative itself, full of influences from the classical works of dystopian fiction, mainly from George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), among others.

The comic and its later film adaptation create a future imaginary world that is an evident parallel of a present reality, in an attempt to make people think about issues characterizing their own society and compel them to act in order to improve it. The film

adaptation was produced and written by the Wachowski sisters, Lily and Lana, for Warner Bros, and it was directed by James McTeigue. It was conceived as a Hollywood blockbuster based on Moore and Lloyd's original comic, with a big budget to create an action movie for the entertainment of young demographics.

The film has also proved to have a quite revolutionary political core, retaking the original content and reframing some scenes to infuse an extra-violent charge to the adaptation, conveniently exploited in the promotional campaign and the merchandising produced by Warner Bros. Although the film adaptation is quite respectful of the essence of the graphic novel, the film integrates crucial modifications, so contributing to highlight the critical aspects that were present in the graphic novel, through a deep political charge aimed to shake people´s consciousness, widening its impact and influence.

Certainly, the film version proves to be more radical than the original comic in several aspects, especially in the final apotheosis destroying the Parliament, which is central in the film plot while it was secondary in the graphic novel. Moreover, in the film there are real images taken from TV news which show riots, demonstrations, and police charges. Thus, the film resorts to documentary images taken from the news to give credibility to the story, but curiously, some years since its release, people deployed the film´s imagery and fictional elements to shape their claims and vindications.

Through its visual iconography, the film provides mainstream vocabulary of postmodern anarchism (Call 2008, 154), which has been appropriated by protesters as a way to give support to their causes. Furthermore, it seems that demonstrators have transposed the film´s last scene into reality, with a mass of masked citizens marching in the streets (Fig.1), imitating or replicating V´s acts as an inspiring revolutionary image which may be considered as a new icon of popular culture.

Figure 1 People marching towards the Parliament in the last scene of the film version © Warner Bros.

Thus, there are some changes in the plot and also in the characters, which contribute to update the story and to make it more powerful through audiovisual devices. Therefore, I could argue that the story and the characters of the original graphic novel are enhanced by the power of cinema as audiovisual media. As an example, the first scene of the film introduces V (Hugo Weaving) as an action hero using his fists and his characteristic daggers to rescue Evey (Natalie Portman), shown as a more independent and resolute young woman, from a group of corrupt policemen. On the other hand, the character of inspector Finch (Stephen Rea) becomes the main narrator in the film, and we the viewers discover V´s plans through his investigation, adding a thrilling noir mode to the story while he is unraveling the clues to pursue, thus unfolding the case and Finch´s pursuit of V´s trail.

The release of the film was met by polemics because it showed a violent hero fighting against the system, reviving the specter of the 9/11 radical Muslim terrorist attacks of 2001 in the United States; and also the London bombings of public transport of July 7, 2005. In fact, the film´s release was planned for November of that year, but it was first shown in the Butt-Numb-A-Thon film festival of Austin (Texas) in December 2005. Finally, the film´s world release was postponed until March 2006, even though Warner Bros studios official statement said that this had nothing to do with the recent world political climate.

3. V as a Shakespearean Avenger

I argue that *V for Vendetta* can be positioned between the dystopian contemporary fiction and the revenge tragedy, creating a modern hybrid form of narrative that is deeply indebted to Shakespeare´s tragedies, since the structures of the comic and especially the film adaptation are based upon them. The narrative framework of the story deploys the typical patterns of dystopian fiction, but it also combines the devices of revenge plays in the unfolding of the narration and the characterization of the hero which is defined according to Shakespearean traits, being *Hamlet* one of the main sources of inspiration to build up the story and the character of V. My contention is that the combination of radical political ideas with the critical use of Shakespearean references is one of the key elements for the success of *V for Vendetta,* especially in the film version which makes people identify with the masked avenger V.

In order to study this impact, I understand Shakespeare as cultural capital, in the sense Pierre Bourdieu coined the term in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (1979), and as Douglas Lanier has developed the concept in *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (2002), questioning the cultural politics involved in popular adaptations of Shakespeare. I also agree with Julie Sanders when she points out that Shakespearean revisions are "a cultural barometer for the practice and politics of adaptation and appropriation" (2015, 51). Therefore, these practices also give a record of the political and economic circumstances affecting these revisions, as it is the case of *V for Vendetta.*

The idea of Shakespeare as cultural capital connects directly with the theories of cultural materialism explained by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield in *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism* (1994), as they argue that "culture is not simply a reflection of the economic and political system, but nor can it be independent of it. Cultural materialism therefore studies the implication of literary texts in history" (1994, vii). Thus, culture is directly connected to the historical events, being not only a reflection of social and political circumstances of a concrete time, but also a creative product which can intervene on them.

In *Broadcast your Shakespeare: Continuity and Change Across Media* (2018)*,* Stephen O´Neill considers Shakespeare an ongoing cultural and ideological project, as his cultural capital is transformed through popular culture which redefines the idea of Shakespeare based on openness and difference. This idea fits well to current circumstances, taking into account that Shakespearean works may be used as a political weapon to voice a concrete ideology or make visible vindictive causes, as it has happened with *V for Vendetta*.

Through the construction of a hybrid non-canonical fiction product which blends dystopian fiction and revenge tragedies, the Shakespearean legacy is deployed to create a modern revenge tragedy, adapted to the present times, but keeping the essence of Shakespeare's tragedies. These Shakespearean references are shown in V´s quotations and are also reinforced by symbolical elements, such as the bust of Shakespeare in V´s den, to which he addresses as an ally. These references contribute to create a new narrative space where the Bard´s plays not only offer the essential key elements to shape the personality of V as an epic antihero, but also provide the raw material to support its ideological background. Therefore, he defends along the story of *V for Vendetta* the right to pursue the revenge until the last consequences in order to redress injustice.

The most remarkable feature of V, as the main character, is his subversive and dramatic potential, as he quotes repeatedly Shakespeare´s works as a recurrent justification for his activism. As McTeigue and the Wachowskis increase and widen the scope of their Shakespearean quotations beyond those included in the original graphic novel, they also rely on them to reinforce the narrative strength of the story. For example, instead of the more extended *Macbeth*´s lines that Moore had chosen, the initial fight scene in the film is marked by a quotation from *Hamlet* (3.1.52-55): "We are oft to blame in this: 'Tis too much prov'd, that with devotion's visage, and pious action we do sugar o´er the devil himself." These lines were originally spoken by Polonius to Ophelia, but here in the scene they clearly refer to the hypocrisy of government that abuses citizens instead of protecting them. As Michael D. Friedman (2010) argues, this reference also serves to compare V to Hamlet "as a revenger seeking retribution against an authority figure whose own crimes render him unfit for his office" (126). Thus, once more, the conscious reversing of Shakespeare´s words serves to structure V's character.

Increasing its dramatic effect, V always wears a Guy Fawkes mask to cover his face, disfigured by fire when escaping from a government´s resettlement camp. He is highly knowledgeable in the arts of combat and he is an expert in explosives, but he is also highly self-educated in literature, rhetoric, and politics, as the number of titles that are present on the shelves of his refuge suggest. First Moore and later the Wachowskis use V as a kind of reborn Guy Fawkes, an allegorical figure who demands justice and freedom at all costs, as it can be seen in picture 2 below from the film´s promotional campaign. What is really undeniable is the use of Shakespeare´s cultural authority to reinforce the position of the antihero and justify the use of violence as a means to reach a fair ending, as I will examine more in depth further on.

Figure 2 An image from the promotional campaign of the film *V for Vendetta* © Warner Bros.

4. The Dystopian Antihero's Impact on American Society

The hero of the story is an anarchist known as V, who fights against a fictional fascist state under the totalitarian rule of the Chancellor—originally a reflection of Thatcher´s government in the graphic novel and later reattributed to W. Bush administration in the film version. *V for Vendetta* depicts the rise of an imaginary fascist regime, describing the access to power of far-right Norsefire party, while V argues that common people were also responsible for the success of fascism because they exchanged individual freedom for security. In the original comic, the ultimate reason for this totalitarian rise was framed by a post-nuclear war scenario. Meanwhile, in the film version the rise of fascism was due to

panic and chaos after a biological terrorist attack and the fear of other epidemic outbreaks.

Dystopian fiction reflects a distorted vision of reality and projects nowadays society´s fears and nightmares into the future, exploring, and sometimes denouncing, possible or hypothetical dangerous developments in our society. As Estrella López Keller explains, it deduces a future nightmare world from the transposition of present realities (1991, 15). Therefore, the threatening future projection of our world in dystopian fiction is, in fact, a distorted reflection of our present menaces, as *V for Vendetta* shows in both formats. Thus, both the graphic novel in the 1980s and the film version adaptation produced at the beginning of the twenty-first century, reflect the threats of their present context.

Raffaella Baccolini (2004) thinks that the critical dystopias of recent decades are the product of our conflictive times which urge us to act (521). In this sense, although the graphic novel and the film version correspond to different times and countries, consequently addressing different political situations, both periods have many points in common as they represent historical moments of social confusion and political oppression. Even more interestingly, those kinds of historical periods tend to return more often than people wish, so cultural products such as the dystopian fiction represented in *V for Vendetta* serves to catalyze sensations, fears, and hopes which actually still have sociocultural whole validity nowadays.

The film tackles topics that are still current at the start of the 2020s, such as resettlement camps, experiment on humans, biological weapons, lethal pandemics, massive surveillance camera systems, government censorship, corruption among rulers and security corps, political manipulation of information, and use of repressive tactics to control people. *V for Vendetta* gives the opportunity to analyze through the dystopian perspective the abuse of power and the attack to civil rights, as real menaces in contemporary Western societies, including the United States. Moreover, it gives the chance to study which groups have appropriated V´s symbolism and ideology, and how these references have been applied into real contexts in all kinds of protests, as it has happened in the United States with the Anonymous hacktivist group or the Occupy Wall Street movement.

If the comic was a success, McTeigue and the Wachowskis' film version has increased its impact and influence until really unexpected scopes, especially after Time Warner decided to produce massively V's mask as part of the film's merchandising. From 2007 on, Anonymous has used these masks in its activist claims (Ortiz 2015), and since then demonstrators have also appropriated this popular iconography in all kind of public protests. In fact, V's mask has become a global symbol of the fight for freedom and equality since 2011, when the 15-O global mobilization widespread worldwide. After the 2008 financial crisis and the hardening of living conditions, this mobilization claimed for social justice, asking governments to take real political actions in order to improve their

citizens' standard of living. There were massive protest campaigns in more than thousand cities and about ninety countries around the world, such as Spain's 15-May movement, the Arab Spring riots in Egypt, and the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States.

In the context of those protests, participants wore Guy Fawkes mask in the streets as a symbol of their engagement and activism, while bringing V's political ideas into practice in different sociopolitical frameworks, as it happened in the United States especially during the last year of George W. Bush's mandate, with the hatching of phenomena such as Anonymous or Occupy Wall Street. Examining this widespread popularity, as Marjorie Garber (2017) explains, we can see how "a digital activist collective called Anonymous allied itself with the Occupy movement," and also how "many of the Occupy Wall Street protestors in New York Zuccotti Park wore the Guy Fawkes mask associated with Anonymous" (125). Therefore, the mask that was originally part of the capitalist merchandising of the film *V for Vendetta* has been appropriated by a diverse range of activists and has been transformed into a cultural symbol and weapon for political activism.

Anonymous was the first organized protest group which has used V's mask as part of their branding. The group originated in 2003 and it became well known in 2008 due to a series of actions against the Church of Scientology. During these protests, thousands of Anonymous followers joined around the world simultaneously and coordinately. That was the first public event where many of the protesters wore the Guy Fawkes masks popularized by the film *V for Vendetta,* so becoming a popular symbol for Anonymous. The organization has developed hacktivism and direct-action protests around the world since then, for example, it was an early supporter of the WikiLeaks, the Occupy movement, and the Arab Spring.

Anonymous describes itself as an international Internet gathering with a loose network of activist and hacktivist entities that follow some general common ideas. This group could be better described as a movement, without a clear leadership and with an open membership to anyone who wants to be part of the collective. During the first campaign launched by Anonymous, its members uploaded a series of videos on YouTube in which a masked person read a speech on behalf of the organization, which attracted hundreds of thousands of viewers. That release and the subsequent ones seem to be inspired by the aesthetic of V's speech interrupting public TV broadcast to send his own message to the nation, thus, creating a symbolical connection between the fiction character and the hacktivist organization.

In an interview for BBC, David Lloyd, the creator of the original image of the mask for the comic series, "compares its use by protesters to the way Alberto Korda's famous photograph of Argentine revolutionary Che Guevara became a fashionable symbol for young people across the world" (Waites 2011, n.p.). From this affirmation, it can be argued that V has equally been transformed by popular acclaim into a global icon of revolutionary activism in the 21st century, so replacing other popular older revolutionary

images from the past. Therefore, it is worth evidencing that in the twenty-first century, popular culture fictional heroes can replace real-life historical icons.

Reflecting about the causes why the idea of V has rooted on collective consciousness in the context of contemporary protests, it is obvious that there is a radical activist ideology inherent to the film which propels spectators to question themselves their role in society to counterbalance government's power. Notwithstanding, one of the most relevant traits of this film is the use of Shakespeare's cultural capital in order to reinforce V's actions and justify its ideology. Thus, Shakespeare's cultural power serves to support V's performance through the film and helps to project on the audience a message of superior ethical commitment that defies authoritarian politics.

That anti-authoritarian radical ideology is especially evident in the last scene of the film, which may be considered an "image of iconoclastic anarchism which recalls the punk values that were central to youth culture until they gave away to patriotic posturing after 9/11" (Call 2008, 169). Therefore, the rebel teen spirit which characterized young generations along the last decades of the 20th century, questioning rules, defying moral criteria, and ultimately confronting power, became secondary or just pointless. Those libertarian and revolutionary values associated to youth were overcome by more conservative attitudes related to patriotism and the perceived need of increased homeland security. *V for Vendetta* foreshadows the abuse of power in governmental institutions accompanied by repressive policies justified by the need of implementing increasing self-defense measures, with the use of technology and science through propaganda and surveillance in order to exert a totalitarian power.

In that sense, after the terrorist attacks of the 9/11, it is proved that George W. Bush's Administration started a secret national surveillance program to collect records on phone calls, text messages, and emails by millions of American citizens. In 2005 that information was revealed by the press and in 2006 the Constitutional Rights Foundation published a survey with the title "The National Security Agency´s Warrantless Wiretaps: Legal Terrorist Surveillance or Illegal Domestic Spying?" denouncing this abuse by Bush´s Administration. Moreover, professor Tracey Maclin from Boston University, in her article "The Bush Administration´s Terrorist Surveillance Program and the Fourth Amendment's Warrant Requirement: Lessons from Justice Powell and the Keith Case" (2008), refutes the claim that the President has the authority to order warrantless electronic surveillance of communications between American citizens, inside the US or abroad, under the suspicion of being related to terrorist groups.

In fact, hacktivism, surveillance, and manipulation of information have been increasingly present in American current political panorama since the beginning of the 21st century. There have been serious suspicions on attempts to manipulate 2016 US election with the intervention of Russian Internet "trolls" in the political and electoral processes, which have been proved by Kathleen Hall Jamieson in her book *Cyberwar: How Russian*

Hackers and Trolls Helped Elect a President – What We Don't, Can't, and Do Know (2018). Another study conducted by the professor Douglas Almond from the Columbia University, titled "Reduced Trolling on Russian Holidays and Daily U.S. Presidential Election Odds" (2022), also confirms that Russian "trolls" tried to manipulate popular opinion by creating fake American personas and disseminating false information to support Donald Trump's campaign, thus decreasing the chances of winning of candidate Hillary Clinton.

Finally, Trump won the election and, as a consequence of the increasingly radicalized political climate and the exploitation of media bias, America got divided, exacerbating the already existing bipartisan polarization and the leveraging populist discourses. From the beginning of his campaigns, with patriotic slogans, Trump's message has attracted all kind of conservative people from the most diverse ranks of society, appealing to their underlying discontent. Thus, the systematic manipulation of information, the use of fake news, and the radicalization of the political discourse, have deepened a social fracture in US society, which took an extreme turn on January 6, 2021, with the assault on the US Capitol by a mob of Trump supporters belonging to ultra-patriotic organizations and conspiracy movements such as QAnon. Events like this, fueled by the far-right sensationalist, populist discourses developed during Trump´s mandate to influence public opinion, in many aspects, are remindful of the Orwellian future depicted in the film *V for Vendetta.*

V for Vendetta's film adaptation shows a bleak future world close to the fictional society depicted in Orwell´s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, where people are controlled by cameras and the government gives the only "true" and acceptable information through the constant and pervasive emission of the Voice of Fate broadcast to the whole nation. In Orwell's book, Oceania is a country ruled by the Big Brother, who is the leader of the totalitarian government and the Party. He rules through ministries with euphemistic names such as the Ministry of Truth, the Ministry of Peace, and the Ministry of Love, which exert power and control in exactly the ways opposite to what they suggest. Furthermore, the use of propaganda and technology to control the population also creates slogans like "War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, and Ignorance is Strength" (Orwell 2007, 6), which are remarkably similar to those depicted in *V for Vendetta*, such as "Strength Through Unity, Unity Trough Faith," or "England prevails," but they are also remindful of Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again."

For scholars such as Brian L. Ott (2010), *V for Vendetta* represents an allegory of everyday life in George W. Bush's America, and a critique of his administration and its policies (40), as it is reflecting the abuse of power on and violation of citizens' rights under the pretext of providing national security. Besides, he argues that "*V for Vendetta* mobilizes viewers at a visceral level to reject political apathy and to enact a democratic politics of resistance and revolt against any state that would seek to silence dissent" (40). In this sense, the film seems to have caught the feeling of uneasiness that a great part of

American society has been experiencing since the beginning of the new millennium, after collectively traumatic events that have been documented across media and in real time as never before, as well as repeated financial crises and the subsequent recessions, and more recently the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic outbreak.

In the film, the Larkhill resettlement camp represents the most pervert employment of science and technology put to the service of the totalitarian regime to experiment with human subjects. According to Tony Williams (2006), "*V for Vendetta* is a film explicitly involving protest and revolution," and using popular culture to attack George W. Bush Regime for its crimes (17). Thus, for Williams, the film represents a dystopian version of contemporary US America, and he establishes clear parallelisms between Nazi Germany and American Bush Administration (18). He compares Larkhill to the Guantanamo Bay concentration camp established by Bush in 2002, in the aftermath of 9/11, where the US military has enforced extrajudicial measures of control and confinement similar to those shown in the film. This kind of extrajudicial abuse of power is not an isolated case in the recent history of US enforcement, as it can be observed even on national soil throughout the system of immigration facilities.

V, as a popular culture antihero, owes a big part of its success to the fact of being shaped under the influence of Shakespearean characters, appropriating their style, manners, and especially citing his works as a way of reinforcing his political discourse. In Marjorie Garber's (2017) words, "To cite a term made popular by the Occupy movement, Shakespeare whether produced or read or cited is a kind of human microphone repeated and repeating, voiced and revoiced, always rippling out to new audiences both global and local" (126). Therefore, the use of Shakespearean references in current diverse contexts serves to dignify and amplify any ideological causes that dare to reclaim a link to the playwright's legacy, thus benefiting from its cultural authority.

This proves the Shakespearean legacy is being newly appropriated in unprecedented sociopolitical contexts, while being claimed to support revolutionary causes, as it is the case of *V for Vendetta* and its influential effect on activist groups such as Anonymous. On its official web page, Anonymous shows quite dramatic slogans that follow the style of V's eloquent mottos: "We are Anonymous. We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us." Thus, they imitate some of V's famous taglines and reprise the film's merchandising, which also seem to be inspired by classical self-conscious tragic characters, with mottos such as "People shouldn't be afraid of governments, governments should be afraid of people," "Ideas are bulletproof," or "Freedom Forever" (Fig.3).

Figure 3 The mask from the film merchandising with one of V's popular visual elements © Warner Bros.

In fact, V acts all the time as a stage avenger, someone who is self-conscious of being performing all his scenes as a theatre character. He recites Shakespeare recurrently, "to signal the film's employment of the conventions of Renaissance revenge tragedy" (Friedman 2010, 118), while he is wearing his costume—a mask, a hat, a cape, a wig and a pair of gloves—as part of his role. Therefore, he appears as a revenger in the fashion of Shakespearean characters such as Hamlet, seeking retribution, but also pursuing justice at all costs.

Although V performs such a role of a revenger in a typical manner, the unfolding of the plot reveals that his ultimate cause is to claim freedom and equality, beyond revenge. In a wider sense, V applies a Shakespearean aesthetic and formality to social justice activism that is carried out partly through illicit actions. Moreover, V parallels the planning and actions developed by Hamlet in his own revenge, so accomplishing at the same time the liberation of the nation from the unfair ruler. Therefore, even pursued through not always licit actions, V´s mission is fair and has a universal appeal for diverse audiences, as universal are also the Bard´s references used as cultural capital to support his cause.

5. V, Activism, and Performance

This self-conscious Shakespearean theatrical effect which is characterizing V's performance also affects Anonymous and other protest groups that have adopted Guy Fawkes mask, as they incorporate a theatrical element that adds a dramatic twist to their own causes. For Moore, the use of V's mask turns protests into performances, because "The mask is very operatic; it creates a sense of romance and drama" (Lamont 2011, n.p.). Therefore, activists transform their protests into performances, and, to an extent, they become characters in a political representation – a shift that is quintessential to their actions. Thus, the fact of V's mask crossing the boundaries of fiction to enter into reality proves the true potential that popular culture has to influence its audience's thoughts and acts, stimulating action in real life imitating fictional heroes and replicating fictional acts.

L.M. Bogad (2005) claims that performance is a key element in the building of social movements activism (47). He considers that one of the motivations for public demonstrations "is to define collective identity for a group", serving countercultural objectives to maintain resistance, creating a "dramaturgy of the protest" with a specific use of the space and the body (2005, 51–52). Consequently, it might be argued that Anonymous and other activist groups that use V´s mask understand protest as a performance, including for the first time popular culture references as a political weapon for sociopolitical struggles in the new millennium. Moreover, as L.M. Bogad (2005), A. Boyd (1997), and S. Ducombe (2004) claim, protests that include performing creativity, with the use of symbolic elements, can more easily engage citizens to participate, and ultimately they can become mass movements.

Possibly the most striking event related to massive protests by masked demonstrators is the so called Million Mask March, in connection to the popular mythology which has been spontaneously generated since the film´s release. Thus, the mask of V gives symbolical power to people, keeping their individual identity while creating a compact uniform mass of performing protesters that is remindful of the last scene of the film. The protest has been organized by Anonymous to commemorate Guy Fawkes Night since 2011, but on November 5, 2013, these demonstrations acquired global relevance. The most important gatherings took place in London and Washington DC, but there were hundreds of events organized across the planet, usually outside of government buildings (Quinn 2013). In 2015, protests multiplied and widespread across more than 600 cities worldwide, showing how these marches have become a defiance phenomenon for authorities and policemen (Gayle 2016). It has proved to be a fast-growing movement that, in many cases, has caught the mainstream public's sympathies.

Anonymous has appropriated V's image and also the text from the film version to call people to join the annual Million Mask March around the world.[1] The marches have been coordinated mostly through social and digital media such as Facebook, Twitter or Youtube, to disseminate their message and summon the citizenship to participate in this kind of political performance. For Bogad, recent protests have emphasized creativity following the tactics of carnival, as "the events are often framed in terms of how spectators receive them, either on the streets or through the mass media" (57). Thus, the concept of protest as a performance has gained importance nowadays, as the Million Mask March has shown, thus becoming institutionalized as an annual protest occurring symbolically on November 5, celebrating the so-called Guy Fawkes Night, but also rendering tribute to the fiction character popularized in *V for Vendetta*.

In 2020, the comic book *A for Anonymous. How a Mysterious Hacker Collective Transformed the World* was published as a recount of the history of the Anonymous collective, written by David Kushner and illustrated by Koren Shadmi. Apart from the evident play of this book's title with the name of *V for Vendetta*, the aesthetics of this book reprises the visual style of Moore´s complete graphic novel, as it can be appreciated in Fig. 4 below. In *A for Anonymous* the members of the hacktivist collective are transformed into fiction characters, deploying the dramatic Shakespearean style of V, to recount the adventures of the group and its evolution from a small group of hackers until its role as a concrete global menace for governments and enterprises. This book shows how Anonymous has reached a great social impact with activist performances around the world, organizing and contributing to widespread protests such as the Arab Spring or Black Lives Matter, and finally reaching its peak in the Million Mask March.

[1] An extract from the social media text and the link to the video of Anonymous used in 2018 to call people to join the Million Mask March:

> If you see what we see, if you feel as we feel, and if you want what we want, then I ask you to stand beside us and march with us for Justice this November the 5th, and together we shall give them a fifth of November that shall never, ever be forgot...
>
> We Are Anonymous. We Do Not Forgive. We Do Not Forget. We Are the Voice of the voiceless. We Are the Eyes of the blind. This action was by the people for the people. Expect us.
>
> http://www.millionmaskmarch.com/map

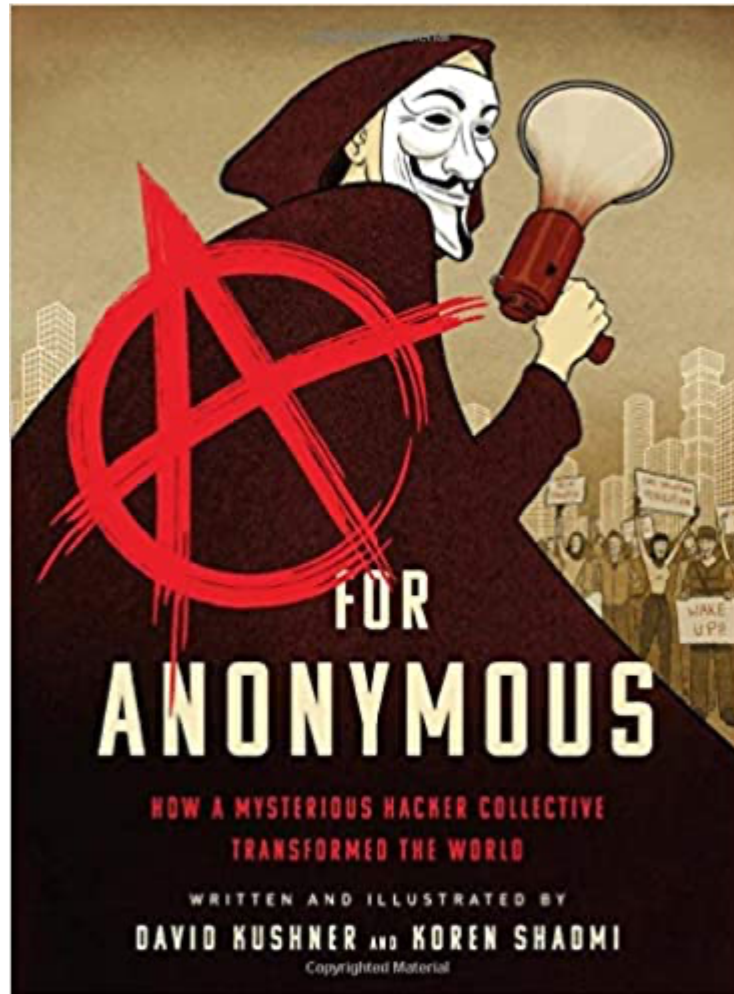

Figure 4 The history of Anonymous in a comic book imitating the *V for Vendetta*'s style.

In his dramatic appearances, and especially when addressing the bust of Shakespeare in the film version, V's soliloquies remind us those of Hamlet himself. V's eloquence and strange behavior may be easily misunderstood, as in the case of the Prince of Denmark, being taken for a mad person that vents his insane thoughts. Both characters are able to see the corrupted practices of rulers, and their acts will involve the achievement of a complete revenge as much as a change in power. The unfolding of the plot in both works, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and in *V for Vendetta*, will also bring the death of innocents as an unavoidable consequence of the fight for sociopolitical justice.

The government considers V's acts as national terrorism, but the use of violence will also eventually cause his own death, as the necessary ending to redeem him after so many innocent victims perished in the process of liberation of the nation. Likewise, Hamlet is meant to be also a tragic revenger forced by circumstances to accomplish his revenge, but eventually doomed by his acts. Shakespeare´s tragedy shares some basic political aspects with *V for Vendetta*'s dystopian franchise, as their protagonists resort to violent actions and justify violence as necessary to bring deep changes in society.

Both works, *Hamlet* and *V for Vendetta*, imply that sociopolitical conditions can be changed with the direct collective action, which necessarily will include the use of violence. The justification of the use of violence is a recurrent topic throughout the plot of the film version, but it is also brought up as a constant issue in *Hamlet.* Their protagonists repeatedly argumentations, V and Hamlet, defend violence arguing that it is the only possibly useful method to reach their ideological aims, which they consider as morally higher objectives.

Like most Hollywood films, as Williams (2006) argues, *V for Vendetta* is designed to appeal to a mainstream audience mostly composed by young adults, but it also contains features that may nurture further thought, stimulate a stance of protest and even action against the system (18). The above mentioned manifestations have proved this potential, bringing people to the streets, even assaulting official buildings as V himself plans in the film. As Lewis Call (2008), says, "Thanks to Moore and Lloyd, the face of Fawkes took over newsstands in Britain and the USA during the 80's; thanks to the Wachowskis and McTeigue, it took over billboards, cinema screens and televisions in the early twenty-first century" (156). Thus, after eighteen years since its release, the film´s influence has become global even in the political arena, and its effects are still pervading popular culture nowadays.

6. Conclusion

Eighteen years after its release in 2005, *V for Vendetta*'s symbols and messages are still referred to and used to denounce the loss of rights due to the abuse of power, through authoritarian practices that many times apply technology to subjugate the population. The film and its legacy are still compelling people to act and claim for their rights, with important precedents where it has exerted a great influence on sociopolitical protests such as those of the Occupy Wall Street movement or activist groups such as Anonymous.

Those protests have developed a dramaturgy which has been able to engage more people in its creative performance, based on the appeal of a popular culture hero. Especially the film version has been successful in this aspect, conferring the audience a popular reference to inspire them to act, and creating for the first time a powerful fictional character able to substitute real freedom fighters as leaders of protests. The Wachowskis and McTeigue have created a mirror for people to confront the political reality in which they live, showing them in the screens through a fictional character who they are and what their role can be in society and the power they can acquire, because as citizens they are the true origin of the real power.

Thus, I argue that the film in particular—due to its wider reach and the potential of audiovisual narration—has contributed, to an extent, to inspire people´s empowerment to act and fight for their rights, whenever they feel the authority is not respecting them and they do not listen to their claims. Therefore, the impact of the story and the character

of a Shakespearean dystopian avenger such as V have played a relevant role in sociopolitical protests in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

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MISCELLANEA

The Dollhouse and Mobility of the Southern Gothic Legacy in Sharp Objects[1]

Veronika Klusáková

Abstract

The text explores several issues connected to the relationship between the gothic house and its miniature double, a dollhouse, on the example of a Southern Gothic TV series *Sharp Objects*, an HBO production from 2018. It addresses their similar position as gendered spaces (the house being a profoundly feminine business, the dollhouse a field for girls to practice femininity), their gothicization (both host traumas and secrets of the past), and the work they perform in the perpetuation of their Gothic legacy. The foregrounding of mobility and agency in the treatment of the gothic dollhouse helps to question and reread one of the basic building blocks of Southern Gothic fiction: its reliance on the sense of place. In this view, the dollhouse operates as an interface between the world outside and inside and thus dissolves the boundaries set by the master house. It is not just its mirror image, propelling a mise-en-abîme project of perpetual proliferation, but, when properly noticed, provides a tool for the healing of past wounds and traumas via their contemporary embodiments, and sets new directions for the social relevance of Southern Gothic fiction.

Keywords: Southern Gothic, American Gothic, haunted house, gender studies, TV series, adaptations, plantation Gothic.

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This article will explore several issues connected to the relationship between the gothic house and its miniature double, a dollhouse, using the Southern Gothic TV series *Sharp Objects* (HBO, 2018) as case study. My analysis will address their similar position as gendered spaces (the house being a profoundly feminine business, the dollhouse a field for girls to practice femininity), their gothicization (both host traumas and secrets of the past), and their function in the perpetuation of their gothic legacy. The foregrounding of mobility and agency in the treatment of the gothic dollhouse helps to question and reread

[1] This paper was written at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague as part of the project "The Gothic Mise-en-scène of the American South in Contemporary Quality TV Series" with the support of the Institutional Endowment for the Long-Term Conceptual Development of Research Institutes, as provided by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports of the Czech Republic in the year 2022.

one of the basic building blocks of the Southern gothic fiction: its reliance on the sense of place. In this view, the dollhouse operates as an interface between the world outside and inside and thus dissolves the boundaries set by the master house. It is not just its mirror image, propelling a mise-en-abîme project of perpetual proliferation, but, when properly noticed, provides a tool for the healing of past wounds and traumas via their contemporary embodiments, and sets new directions for the social relevance of Southern gothic fiction.

1. The Legacy of the (Southern) Gothic House

The trope of the haunted house has been one of the defining characteristics of gothic fiction since the publication of Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* in 1764; Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" has transposed the trope into the American imaginary, where it has occupied a fixed place ever since. Fanny Lacôte sums up the various functions of the gothic house in a following manner:

> Whether it is a castle, a convent, a manor house or a mansion, Gothic fiction typically stages a paradoxical and ambiguous place, which plays the role both of an asylum and of a refuge, but which also provides a base for all kinds of far-fetched situations and excess: the most terrible secrets are revealed there. (Lacôte 2016, 200)

The role of the house is foregrounded in southern gothic narratives. In their essay on the Southern Gothic, Caroline Ruddell and Brigid Cherry (2012) emphasize the importance of a fixed place when arguing that "Southern Gothic has as much to do with location, and the nature of life, as determined by geography, as it does with the supernatural and the monstrous" (42).

The "sense of place," including the history specific to a region and thus a sense of time, is one of the few touchstones gothic criticism agrees on and it has been used to differentiate the gothic mode from the emotion-driven horror genre. As Maisha Wester and Xavier Aldana Reyes (2019) state in their introduction to *The Gothic in Twenty-First Century*, while the horror genre is built around affects—mostly fear and terror—the gothic revolves around geography:

> The specificity of setting … may ultimately prove invaluable in separating the Gothic – which we see as strongly marked by time, characters, and place – from horror, largely defined by the emotion it aims to generate. (3)

Contrary to the regular house, the gothic mansion is always somehow haunted, be it by its social history, personal traumas of its current users, or a combination of both. Eric Savoy goes so far as to dub the haunted house as "the most persistent site … of American Gothic's allegorical turn" (1998, 9).

The double-faced nature of the gothic house is also evident once the topic is approached from the perspective of women, for whom the domestic sphere offered the only

arena of agency for a long time. In his monograph *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives: The House as Subject*, Andrew Hock Soon Ng (2015) presents the long and varied history of feminist critical writing about haunted houses, strongly influenced by psychoanalysis and points to an intriguing paradox. As he outlines, while for some—such as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (1979)—the house is representative of domesticity and thus embodies a clear policing tool of patriarchy, intended "to protect [a woman's] innocence but … fundamentally meant to subordinate her to male dominance and control" (4), others—e.g. Elaine Showalter (1977)—approach the house "as a site of female empowerment" (ibid.). The gothic house in *Sharp Objects* embodies both aspects of this paradox. The master house is presented as a beautifully designed trap, but it is owned by a woman instead of an evil patriarch, which adds a twist to the narrative. While her house empowers the woman, the agency it provides her with is deeply flawed and traumatizing. Similarly, the dollhouse mirrors this dynamic, but in the end, it exposes the buried evils in both structures, leading to a space for healing.

2. *Sharp Objects* as Southern Gothic Storytelling

Sharp Objects, a miniseries released by HBO in 2018 and based on Gillian Flynn's 2006 novel of the same title, can be framed in the cartography outlined above. The narrative develops across several locations, yet the crucial locus around which it revolves is the mansion owned by socialite Adora Crellin—who is also the protagonist's mother and the main business owner of the town. The Victorian-style plantation house is located outside the urban center of Wind Gap, placed on a hill surrounded by woods and fields (Fig. 1).

Figure 1 Adora Crellin's family house © Netflix.

Here, the domestic drama between Adora and her two daughters unfolds. Teenage Amma aims to leave the small town and engages in reckless behaviors behind her mother's back, while adult Camille is an alcoholic reporter and returns home after several years to cover a case of two murdered girls. Within the walls of the mansion, Camille's past traumas begin to emerge in a series of flashback-cum-hallucination sequences featuring not only the current dead girls but also her younger sister Marian (who passed away when Camille was a teenager) and Alice, her roommate from rehab with whom she had developed a sisterly relationship and who dramatically committed suicide. Furthermore, she engages in self-harm and has cut herself from an early age: her body is covered in hateful writing through which she releases social and emotional pressure. The mechanics of Camille's complicated relationships with herself, her mother Adora, and her younger sister Amma soon reframe the murder investigation around the mansion and recalibrate it to focus on hidden past crimes. The collapse of the past into the present is backed by the series mise-en-scène, camera movement, editing, and music, which deliberately portray Wind Gap as a town in the present yet stuck in the past. Teenagers use SUVs as well as retro roller-skates, the walls are lined by 1950s murals as well as peeling posters from 1992 presidential elections, and songs in her earplugs transport Camille from St. Louis to Wind Gap and merge her childhood tomboyish self into her adult identity with nothing more than a jump cut.

The time-space liminality of the setting is further enhanced by its location. *Sharp Objects* take place in the fictional town of Wind Gap, allegedly situated in the bootheel of Missouri. While Missouri joined the Confederate Army in the Civil War, it is not necessarily what people imagine under the label of "South." Rather, the state is considered part of the Midwest and thus could be easily approached under the rubric of Midwest Gothic, characterized by "visual rhetoric, the repressed secrets of the archive, monomania, insanity and familial trauma framed through the lens of economy and national mythology", as Charlotte Louise Quinney argues (2005, 5). However, I will analyze *Sharp Objects* as a text inscribed in the Southern Gothic imaginary, as this lens helps me to underline the fictionalized, mass-medialized facet that the American South has acquired over many years of filmic and televisual representations. The streets of Wind Gap were shot in Barnesville, Georgia, whose inhabitants were mostly happy to join the TV-tourism map and even created the "Downtown Barnesville Walking Tour" in response to the show (see Czoka 2018).

A survey of *Sharp Objects* criticism reveals how reviewers and scholars undoubtedly project the show onto the coordinates of the American South. "[A]fter eight episodes of eerie, languid Southern Gothic storytelling, the HBO murder mystery 'Sharp Objects' reached its ugly conclusion," writes *New York Times* reviewer Judy Berman (2018, n.p.), while Philippe Corcuff describes Wind Gap as a "town defined by Southern traditions"

(2022, n.p.) and Adora Crellin is for nearly everyone a "wealthy aristocratic southern lady" (Jaber 2022, n.p.).

Writer Gillian Flynn herself addresses the issue of the southernness of her novel through metacommentary within the narrative. When Camille speaks with her boss Curry before publishing her first piece from Wind Gap, the two discuss the quirks of the locals: "Before we hit press, Curry made fun of all the middle initials. Good God, Southerners love their formalities. I pointed out Missouri was technically the Midwest and he snickered at me" (2018, 178). In an interview with Lacey Rose for the *Hollywood Reporter*, Flynn talks about her penchant for dark female characters and the way she thought readers may buy her message more easily:

> I tricked people into reading about women and violence and rage and what that looked like in three different generations of women. That's what I wanted to write about, and I figured out I could do it if I coated it in this yummy Southern Gothic mystery. (Rose 2018, n.p.)

The treatment of *Sharp Objects* is consistent with what Michael Kreyling dubbed as the "postsouthern South," borrowing the term from Lewis P. Simpson's *The Brazen Face of History* (1980), and what Jay Wilson develops in terms of "postsouthern cinema" (2011). The South, Kreyling (1998) writes, no longer holds any fixed meaning or core, it no longer has a foundation of cultural or social distinctiveness. Thus, "postsouthern" helps to point out that what is left is "an ever-proliferating series of representations and commodifications of 'southernness'" (154).

3. The Toxic Monstrosity of the Gothic House in *Sharp Objects*

As I have outlined above, the mansion in *Sharp Objects* carries many characteristics typical of gothic haunted houses. In this article, I will address two specific questions: how the house incorporates and manifests past traumas (social as well as personal), and how it meets the southern-gothic specific sense of place. I will approach these issues not only through narrative close-reading but also from the perspective of the series' mise-en-scène materialized in the production design. The guiding principle of *Sharp Objects*' layout, visual as well as thematic, is based on sets of contrasts—between the calm serenity of the small town and the gruesomeness of the murders of teenage girls, who have their teeth pulled out completely, between the elegance and polish of the upper class (especially of Adora, her husband and the circle of her female friends) and their misdeeds drowned in alcohol and silence, between the behavior of teenage girls inside their homes and outside.

In episode five the town celebrates a fictional Calhoun Day, based on real Civil War Commemoration celebrations, on the lawns surrounding Adora's mansion. At one point, Adora gives Richard Willis, the out-of-town detective who was called to help with the case, a tour of her house. She shows him two items that she is particularly proud of: a

special wallpaper and the floor of her bedroom. The wallpaper is hand-painted— "on silk, from Paris" as she proudly states ("Closer", ep. 5)—and decorates the walls of the downstairs hallway, the parlor, and her bedroom; it depicts flowers and birds on a sharply green background. John Paino, the production designer of the show, commented on the choice of the wallpaper talking about the way it characterizes Adora—in the catalogue, the color was called Arsenic (Paino 2019, 93). As the viewers gradually learn, Adora has been engaged in toxic relationships with her daughters and much of their trauma stems from her behaviors. She has masked her dominance as motherly care and, while being soft-spoken and delicate, she is also an expert poisoner and suffers from Munchhausen-by-proxy syndrome—a condition afflicting mothers who intentionally weaken their children to care for them as "good mothers" and thus be needed. In the past, Adora had already killed her middle daughter Marian in this way, and in the present imposes the same treatment on Amma. Towards the finale of the series, Adora tries to take care of Camille (episode 8), who has always refused "the blue," Adora's red mixture of various drugs and poisons served from a blue bottle. However, she finally succumbs to it to make Adora's attention focus on her so that Amma can leave the house and bring help. While giving Camille a bath, Adora talks about her own mother Joya's cruelty towards her, revealing a familial streak of motherly dysfunction:

> Once, Joya woke me in the… in the dead of night. I was seven, eight. She didn't say a word to me. Just shook me awake, walked me outside… barefoot in my nightgown. I knew better…than to open my mouth when Joya was punishing me. It was the same whether I'd done something wrong or not. She drove me to the woods, walked me deep, sat me down, and left me. Took me hours to get home. When I finally made it, I walked in the door, my mother said, "You're home." I believe, if you had asked her, she'd have said what she was doing was right. We all have bad childhoods. At some point, you have to forget it, move on. Anything else is just selfish. ("Milk," ep. 8)

The link between the green color and arsenic that Paino mentions has another layer of meaning. In the Victorian era, on which the house's décor is modeled, wallpapers from Europe were often made with arsenic-laced colors to make them stay vivid. As many current doctors reported, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman fictionalized in "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), the beauty of the wallpapers came with slow poisoning as the chemicals evaporated, especially in humid settings (see Hawksley 2016). When Adora is standing in front of the ornamental green wallpaper, the pattern on the wall outflows onto her light green dress as if she were a mere continuation of the wall design, a remediation of its toxic history.

The second item Adora shows to Richard Willis is similarly troublesome. The floor in Adora's bedroom is paved with ivory (Fig. 2). As she explains to Richard, it was "a wedding present for my great-great-granddaughter before anybody knew what endangered was. It was supposed to last forever, and it has" ("Closer", ep. 5).

Figure 2 The African American help cleaning Adora Crellin's ivory floor © Netflix.

The post-colonial angst that this fixture triggers in contemporary viewers is clearly not an issue in the diegesis of *Sharp Objects*; the floor is "culturally approved," as on one of her walls Adora proudly hung a framed *Southern Home* magazine cover photo of it as a cherished piece of the region's history, captioned "Legacy and Ivory: Together in Perfect Harmony" ("Closer", ep. 5). While the series does not delve much into the region's history indeed, presenting it as a timeless pastiche, the celebrated existence of animal bones in the most intimate part of the mansion—the matriarch's bedroom, where before entering shoes must be taken off—is a definite statement reminding the viewer of the cruelty hidden beneath southern luxury, as many similar mansions were built on the backs and bones of African American slaves.

Both the wallpaper and the ivory floor, and Adora's intimate relation to them, allow us to read the mansion as part of a global history. Yet, both Adora and locals from Wind Gap choose to ignore it—in their view, the house is a testimony to times when people knew how to appreciate beautiful and precious things when everybody knew their manners and elegance and soft-speak mattered in women, when gruesome things had no place in decent conversations. As Camille arrives to report on the murders, Adora sets a strict rule: "I just can't have that kind of talk around me. Hurt children. Just don't tell me what you're doing, what you know. While you're here, I'll just... pretend you're on summer break" ("Vanish", ep. 1). This is shown to be a general attitude towards problems in

the town. In episode 7, Jackie O'Neill—a former female friend of Adora and the town's voice-of-reason figure, long afflicted by genteel alcoholism—meets the town's sheriff and, when he avoids her probing questions about his extramarital romance with Adora, she says: "Well, we can do what we always do around here, and pretend it doesn't exist," to which the sheriff quickly responds with "I like that better" ("Cherry", ep. 7). This attitude, along with love for things past that Adora's house and manners represent best, strengthen the timeless atmosphere of the setting, and make it a perfect place to perpetuate its traumas in endless cycles, visualized by the ever-present fans dotting the show's mise-en-scène. Adora is molded by her personal history to the same extent as she is shaped by the history of her surroundings, making *Sharp Objects* a succinct demonstration of Southern Gothic focus on the place and its relevance. Moreover, the use of fans as a visual as well as aural metaphor for timelessness and circularity is a perfect example of *Sharp Objects*' work with Southern imaginary—fans were no longer prevalent in Southern households in the 21st century, and were long before replaced by air conditioning, as Raymond Arsenault points out (1984).

4. The Dollhouse and Gothic Mobility

Sharp Objects goes a step further in reflecting the (southern) gothic houses, as the series features the master house's exact miniature replica, a dollhouse, located under the same roof, which mirrors as well as distorts and uproots some of the features of its prototype. The dollhouse is the pride and property of Amma, the youngest daughter of Adora and Camille's teenage stepsister. Despite being a teenager, Amma cares excessively about her treasure, adamant that it matches its model in every detail. She even throws a fit when Adora orders the wrong hue of upholstery for her. The dollhouse is the first thing Amma shows to Camille in the first episode, describing it as "my fancy," while talking about herself as Adora's "little doll to dress up" in the same scene ("Vanish," ep.1). In this respect, both the dollhouse and Amma are passive, reflexive, and objectified. The dollhouse replicates the cyclical structure of trauma and its mise-en-abîme nature (to be perfect, it should logically also include a tiny dollhouse within its walls). Just as Adora perpetuates her mother's toxic style of upbringing, Amma (her name being an anagram of Mama) doubles its setting—just as Adora is a product of her past and surroundings, Amma performs as Adora's living doll when inside the house, wearing frilly dresses in pastel colors and having her hair neat and decorated with bows. The house and the dollhouse are extensions of their owners but, as the intricate play between history and personal trauma in relation to the wallpaper and the ivory floor showed, the owners are to an extent also shaped by the houses. The dollhouse is crucial in this respect, as it foregrounds gender as a quintessential lens—the house belongs to Adora's legacy and her husband has no private room in it, and dollhouses are usually played with by girls—as well as fabrication and masquerade. This aspect is a fundamental component of Amma's

identity. Inside Adora's house, she plays the role of her doll, to the extent that she lets Adora poison her slowly. Outside, "in her civvies," as she calls it ("Vanish," ep. 1), she wears shorts, her hair is loose, and she cruises the town on retro roller skates, often after curfew, intoxicated with alcohol or drugs, flirting with boys. Her masquerade is bestowing her with agency and a degree of independence of Adora.

Two details from the design of the dollhouse show that it is imbued with a similar autonomy vis-à-vis the master house. The walls are decorated in plain unadorned wallpapers approximating the colors of the original ones, yet without replicating their historic toxicity. The second relates to the ivory floor. Elephant tusks are hard to get in the 21st century and thus, to address this issue of reproducing the bedroom's floor, Amma devises a truly gothic solution. She targets girls deviating from the doll stereotype typical of her upbringing, who threaten her position of the master doll with Adora as she spends much of her time trying to "fix" these girls. Amma kills them and uses their teeth to build the precious floor in her dollhouse.

As long as the dollhouse is under its master's roof, Amma's crimes are not revealed and her dollhouse looks just normal, as if protected by a spell of its master model. This peculiar connection is evident in one detail of the meticulous production design and editing of the series—at the beginning of episode 2, we see the African American help entering Adora's bedroom to clean the floor there. With an abrupt cut, keeping the closeup framing, the viewers are transferred into the dollhouse, where Amma continues the help's circular movement in cleaning the floor of her creation as if to finish the job. This is one of the few moments the viewers are allowed to peek inside the dollhouse, but at this point, there are no human teeth, only a linoleum with a similar structure to Adora's floor. This moment is open to a myriad of interpretations. It can be seen as a slip in continuity on the part of the series production team, which I would argue is not likely, given the precision exerted everywhere else. It can be read as a subjectively motivated shot—it is a POV close-up taken over Amma's shoulder, so one can speculate it shows her perspective in which there is nothing wrong with teeth in her floor, just as there is nothing wrong for Adora in having her floor made of elephant tusks. At the same time, the sequence can be approached from a pragmatic angle (maybe Amma needed to have enough teeth to redo her floor at once, which is not the case when the viewers catch a glimpse of it in this episode).

I want to argue that Adora's house is not a regular house, but a gothic one, and as such, it materializes and updates past crimes and traumas in various forms. Camille experiences the house in a highly subjective manner—she regularly sees the ghost of her deceased sister Marian when at home, and flashes back to her younger self when she passes through various places in Wind Gap, which hints at the importance of her and her family's traumas for the investigation of the murders. At the beginning of episode 7, Camille is intuitively led to the dollhouse at night, and it lights up on its own as if giving her

a cue. But Camille ignores it; she tries to bury her past and wishes to be an objective reporter. To her as well as local authorities, it is unimaginable and too painful to see Adora's family as culpable, as it would uproot the whole community of Wind Gap, where Adora is the main employer and a cherished role model.

In the final episode, Camille succumbs to Adora's toxic care, hoping that she could use her own body as evidence against her mother. She is nearly killed but eventually, her boss Curry warns the local police, who break into the house, save Camille and Amma, and arrest Adora, who is then charged with the murder of Marian as well as the two local girls. Camille takes Amma to live with her in St. Louis and everything seems to fall on the right track. Yet one day, Amma's new friend goes missing and the dollhouse, which Amma took with her, reveals its grim secret to Camille, letting her see the teeth floor (fig. 6), and thus realize that it was Amma who killed the girls, not Adora.

Figure 3 The teeth floor in Amma's dollhouse © Netflix.

The dollhouse has been a crucial piece of evidence in the story, yet it went unnoticed, while it was protected by its surroundings, the master house as well as the setting of Wind Gap. Once its umbilical cord to its mother house is cut, it emancipates itself and finally sheds light on the horrors it has witnessed and contained over the years. Amma's gothic replica of the floor draws a contemporary metaphor for the pain associated with the ivory and legacy aura and makes past horrors understood in a very graphic manner. Moving the dollhouse helps the historical guilt associated with its model to be made visible and discontinued. In this way, the series performs a crucial social role beneath its suspense-crime veneer and falls well into the Southern gothic register in which contemporary

dramas often draw their depth from regional history, be it the Civil War, the Reconstruction era, or the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

The mobility of the dollhouse is crucial here. While the master house is a long-lasting construction that has accumulated much personal as well as social history, the dollhouse performs a more ambiguous role. On the one hand, it necessarily mirrors and perpetuates its model; on the other hand, it is movable. As an object that still looks like a house, the dollhouse can be invested with the burden of its archetype. Yet, it can be dislocated and reveal the horrors hidden behind the respectable façade of its master. In this way, the gothic dollhouse dynamizes and challenges one of the fundamental baselines of the gothic mode—its dependence on a specific setting.

Most stories about haunted houses end with the necessary destruction of the haunted building, along with people and/or ghosts within, sealing off the troubled times and removing the sick element from the layout of the community. The dollhouse in *Sharp Objects* is elusive in this respect and foregrounds an important issue in this debate—the role of the outside/inside binary in gothic stories. The outside/inside dichotomy, translatable as self/other, we/they, is particularly felt in Southern Gothic criticism as well as writing. In "Southern Gothic Film: An Overview," David Greven (2016) explores the image of the South in the national imagery and remarks that "if the South is always the 'Other' America, Southern Gothic works give this Other America a voice and a prominence" (474).

In many ways, the dollhouse in *Sharp Objects* challenges fixed binaries. Although it is positioned inside the big house and is shown to shelter ghosts in episode 7, as does the big model, it can be taken out and relocated, no longer dependent on its master. As the finale of the series shows, there are limits to the dependence and passivity of the dollhouse and its role goes beyond mere doubling. In this respect, the dollhouse can be approached as an interface, an interactive space endowed with its own agency (see Galloway 2012, vii). This agency, and agenda, have the power to subvert the dynamics of dependence between the dollhouse and the master house—in displaying the crimes of the present, the dollhouse unveils the roots of past traumas. In this way, it interacts both with its closest exterior (the master house) and the outside world, making the boundaries between them open in both directions and the exchange dynamic.

Andrew Hock Soon Ng (2015) phrases the protean nature of gothic houses through Freudian terms, stressing the liminality of the uncanny:

> It is unsurprising that stories of haunting are almost always about architecture, usually a house. It is also unsurprising that Freud's treatment of the uncanny is metaphorized as the home – a bounded space (place) where comfort effortlessly slides into terror. Within such a place it is never certain that the specter is "real" or ultimately a projection of the dweller's trauma. (92)

The threshold between the subjective and objective rendering of the house as the central location is much played with in gothic fiction, often leading to their collapse into each other.

Often, the reader/viewer is left puzzled about what came first—does the gothic house (with its past, location, and décor) trigger the traumas of its inhabitants, who then project them onto their surroundings, or is it vice versa? And most importantly, is it possible to tell for certain? My discussion of the mansion in *Sharp Objects* and its small replica so far has shown that it is an unresolvable dilemma until both the house and the dollhouse are approached as interfaces operating on the subjective-objective threshold. They are liminal spaces yet act only in mutual interaction with their inhabitants. It is precisely this cocktail of history, location, and individual psychology that sets the dynamic in motion, and it is exactly this agency allowed to nonhuman entities, even to objects, that makes the gothic so pertinent in current post-humanist and post-anthropocentric thinking.

5. The Skin as a Dollhouse and Gothic Interface

In the diegesis of *Sharp Objects*, danger comes knocking at the door, from outside. As Adora's mansion represents the whole community, outside means out-of-town. Therefore, Wind Gap is not shaken by the crimes themselves, graphic as they are, but by the publicizing of them beyond the county limits. The town has good coping mechanisms when it comes to strangers, as is evident in the investigation carried out by the Kansas City detective Richard Willis. The community members refuse to talk to him, mock him, and leave him lost in the cobweb of local habits. It is the liminal position of Camille that helps to solve the case. Her leaving the town made her an outsider with foreign views and manners, but her past clearly marks her as an insider. Adora sums up Camille's ambiguous status upon their first meeting, on the doorstep of the family house: "My house is not up to par for visitors, I'm afraid. … Your old room is the best for visitors" ("Vanish," ep. 1). Camille is let in and given permission to sleep in her old room but, at the same time, she is not treated as family but rather as a foreigner. This paradoxical and fluid shifting between the position of outsider and insider, used by the series' dramaturgy in developing the relationship between Camille and Richard, is reflected by the dollhouse itself. Just like the dollhouse, Camille is at once molded by the master house, caught by its spell, and independent of it. It is not just a stage for her childhood, but an active interface underlying her current actions.

Sharp Objects feature yet another dollhouse, a metaphorical interface between Wind Gap and the world beyond. Its connection to Amma's dollhouse is set from the very beginning. After Amma shows Camille her dollhouse in the first episode, the camera follows Camille to her room and into the bath. When she takes off her robe and submerges

in water with a glass of vodka in her hand and music in her earplugs, we see a close-up of her arm, with scars forming a glowing "Vanish" prompt.

Since her early adulthood, Camille has engaged in self-injury by cutting her skin. Her body is a canvas covered by painful words and becomes the walking and burning legacy of her southern home, her family house in proxy, created carefully over the years, yet hated at the same time.[2] There is hardly a more explicit articulation of the futility in the running away than the words covering Camille's body, which become the titles of individual episodes forming a map of the southern imaginary and an oddly poetic haiku at the same time—"Vanish," "Dirt," "Fix," "Ripe," "Closer," "Cherry," "Falling" and "Milk."

Camille's scarred skin may be seen as an active interface between her southern legacy and her new life outside her native town, dissolving them into one spectral presence through the series' meticulous editing, connecting seamlessly the past, present, and imagination, its sound design, highlighting subjective perception using diegetic sound bridges between diverse temporal and spatial settings, and the mise-en-scène, realistic yet highly symbolic at the same time. In the opening of the title sequence of each episode, we see a closeup of a gramophone stylus descending on a record and hear a tune start. The reproduction of music is only possible through the contact of engrained grooves on the record and the spiral movement performed by the stylus. The vinyl and the stylus can be separated and exist independently of each other, but in this way, they are useless. Without a turntable, the vinyl is just a whim, and vice versa.

Camille's skin works similarly—the cutting, while penetrating the skin's surface and thus disrupting its integrity, defines her body, it makes her skin her own projection screen, an amalgam of her present and history, and forms Camille into who she has been. There is no way Camille can escape her own skin. It is part of the body she was born with, it has grown with her, but it is also her own making, her diary. Often, in scenes when she is upset, she sees the inscriptions on her skin leave their surface and float around the whole setting, materializing on her car, on the walls of Amma's dollhouse, replacing street signs. At the very beginning of the series, in episode 1 when Camille is leaving St. Louis on her assignment, the dust on her trunk reshapes into "DIRT" written in the same style as the scars on her body. At the end of episode 3, "St. Louis" on a street sign transforms into "SPITEFUL," as Camille struggles with a painful memory of the suicide of her roommate from rehab to which she reacted by a relapse to self-injury, the close-up of her forearm dripping with blood and outlining the word "FIX," intercut with flashes from her past interactions with her sisters Amma and Marian. As Mihaela P. Harper (2020) notices, Camille's "vocabulary" does not only extend beyond her body, but the words also morph:

[2] For the complex relationship of people who suffer from self-injury of this kind to their bodies, see Hart (2007).

> Many of these words transform before the viewer's eyes: from caterpillar to catfight, billiards to belittle, open to omen, scared to sacred. The blurring itself constitutes a way of querying into the dynamic between internal and external modalities, the material surfaces of objects as an extension of one's skin and one's skin as an extension of ideology-driven cultural practices to which the relentless struggle between past, present, and imaginary serves as a fitting correlative. (146)

Camille hides her skin beneath layers of dark, un-ladylike clothes, interpreted by her mother as her attempt at rebellion against the codes of southern femininity, but at the same time, their existence extends the toxicity of her birthplace well beyond the county limits, making her nomadic lifestyle a postponement instead of a solution to her problems.

6. Conclusions

Camille's skin and Amma's dollhouse both operate as protective shelters for them. They are also supplements of the big house in a Derridean sense. They support the argument that the southern gothic house is not just a horrid place where the living are haunted by ghosts that need to be exorcised, but that the house is our own doing, our own shell from which we can hardly ever disconnect. At the same time, just as the décor of Adora's house, "elegant, with a whiff of decay" (Paino 2019, 92), exposes her gentleness and forms of femininity—inherited from her foremothers and approved by her community—as profoundly toxic, blurring the boundaries between care and poison. Amma's dollhouse and Camille's scars foreground the manufactured, and thus malleable, nature of reactions to familial as well as social traumas.

The position of the dollhouse in the outline of the series, as well as the femininity-as-masquerade agency of Amma—the dollhouse operator—joins the two, supposedly oppositional reactions to local toxicity, stay-and-control vs. escape, acted out by Adora and Camille. It is also through Amma's operations around the dollhouse, that the colonization wounds upon which the whole house is built, are open, articulated as gothic, and brought into the open to heal in the future.

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