“To Fight the Battles We Never Could”: The Militarization of Marvel’s Cinematic Superheroes

by

Brett Pardy

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Approval

Name: Brett Pardy
Degree: Master of Arts
Title: “To Fight the Battles We Never Could”: The Militarization of Marvel’s Cinematic Superheroes

Examinining Committee:

Chair: Frederik Lesage
Assistant Professor

Zoë Druick
Senior Supervisor
Associate Professor

Adel Iskander
Supervisor
Assistant Professor

Michael Ma
External Examiner
Faculty Member
Department of Criminology
Kwantlen Polytechnic University

Date Defended/Approved: June 16, 2016
Abstract

The Marvel comics film adaptations have been some of the most successful Hollywood products of the post 9/11 period, bringing formerly obscure cultural texts into the mainstream. Through an analysis of the adaptation process of Marvel Entertainment’s superhero franchise from comics to film, I argue that a hegemonic American model of militarization has been used by Hollywood as a discursive formation with which to transform niche properties into mass market products. I consider the locations of narrative ambiguities in two key comics texts, *The Ultimates* (2002-2007) and *The New Avengers* (2005-2012), as well as in the film *The Avengers* (2012), and demonstrate the significant reorientation of the film franchise towards the American military’s “War on Terror”. While Marvel had attempted to produce film adaptations for decades, only under the new “militainment” discursive formation was it finally successful. Using a framework of genre, myth, and intertextuality I argue that superheroes are malleable icons, known largely by the public by their image and perhaps general character traits rather than their narratives. Militainment is introduced through a discourse of realism provided by Marvel Studios as an indicator that the property is not just for children. Ultimately, this results in shifting superhero ethics towards the goals of the American military and a concomitant militarization of mainstream popular culture.

*Keywords*: hegemony; Marvel; militainment; superheroes; Hollywood
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Introduction

Nick Fury, head of the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division (S.H.I.E.L.D) tells his team of assembled superheroes:

There was an idea… called the Avengers Initiative. The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people, see if they could become something more. See if they could work together when we needed them to, to fight the battles that we [the military organization of S.H.I.E.L.D] never could.

This speech, heard in The Avengers (Joss Whedon, 2012) brings together the various heroes of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) to be the eponymous team. The Avengers was the most successful of the many superhero films since 2000, grossing $1.52 billion, the third highest total of all time. This level of financial success is a significant leap from the characters’ origins in comic books, a medium where even the most popular series’ sales are around 100,000 copies (Johnson, 2007) and a medium with a reputation of low cultural value, for children or adults who refuse to “grow up” (Faludi, 2007; Wright, 2001). How did superheroes go from niche to mainstream popular culture? And what does this indicate about the state of (North) American popular culture? Even more significantly, the film diverges from its comic source to explicitly present the American superhero team as a part of a military apparatus. I believe that this is key in understanding the film’s (and genre’s) success.

Why has the superhero genre, of both Disney’s Marvel franchise and Warner Brother’s DC Comics\(^2\) franchise, emerged as a prevalent blockbuster genre? Liam Burke’s (2015) study of the comic book adaptation summarizes reasons provided by scholars and film critics that commonly align along three common themes: 1) cultural trauma and

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\(^1\) By “popular culture”, I will be referring to mass market entertainment.

\(^2\) “DC” is a former acronym for “Detective Comics”, but the company only refers to itself by the acronym.
celebration of the hero in the context of post 9/11 America; 2) digital technology now allows the original source material to be replicated on film; and 3) the attractiveness of pre-packaged franchises for adaptation. To these, Burke adds a fourth, that studio executives no longer see comics as children’s media, but one that can reach all ages (p. 23-24). While these reasons are all valid and potentially all necessary for the emergence of the genre, this discussion will focus on elements of the first reason in order to examine how Hollywood’s response to militarized “post 9/11” America affects the content of the films. Sidestepping the issue of cultural trauma, which has been well covered elsewhere, here I focus instead on how these films participate in the construction of a new 9/11 hegemony. This, unlike Burke’s other three reasons, provides a compelling argument as to why the military has been added in in the process of adaptation. My approach does not imply that this is exclusively why the genre has emerged, but I will argue that the articulation of superheroes into the new formation of action blockbusters has been an important reason for their success and provides insights into the role of the military in American popular culture.

This thesis aims to unite two branches of academic discussion on superheroes that are often separate: comics (eg: Costello, 2009; Darowski, 2014; Johnson, J.K., 2012) and films (McSweeney, 2014; Spanakos, 2012). These analyses often concentrate on only one version of a character even though superheroes appear in multiple iterations. The work that has focused on multiple versions tends to discuss heroes outside the Marvel Cinematic Universe, such as Batman (Brooker, 2012), Spider-Man, the X-Men, Superman, and The Fantastic Four (DiPaolo, 2011). Despite being the most financially successful of the superhero films, The Avengers remains underdiscussed, with McDowell (2014) and McSweeney (2014) providing the best analyses of it, albeit focused on the film and not the larger intertextual web of the Marvel “universe”. In this thesis, I will address this web and help to fill a crucial gap in mapping out the changes that have been made in the adaptation process across media. Perhaps even more importantly, I will consider what these changes indicate about the nature of audiences and medium specific business practices.

While this research has ramifications for comic studies and adaptation studies, it is primarily aimed at the study of discourses that shape Hollywood production. Analyzing the flow of stories across different mediums has been a popular trend in film studies,
sparked by what Jenkins (2006) defines as convergence, “the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between the multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want” (p. 2). Convergence then provides an opportunity for “transmedia storytelling”, which Jenkins (2006) defines as “stories that unfold across multiple media platforms… a more integrated approach to franchise development than models based on urtexts and ancillary products” (p. 293). However, transmedia analysis of the superhero genre, such as Burke (2015) and Gilmore & Stork (2014), has focused on the aesthetic and narrative concerns of transmedia adaptation, of how film technologies alter comic book storytelling. In what follows, I focus on the political implications of the way Hollywood changes texts to fit its needs. This suggests that it is not just limitations of technology and form that change the content, but also that the mainstreaming requires significant political alterations, achieved through particular discursive formations that will be outlined in this chapter.

I focus my textual reading on how the conversation between Marvel’s comics and Marvel’s films changes with regard to the military. It is the locating this difference that constitutes my original contribution. This approach echoes Barthes’ (1977) proposition in “Death of the Author” that “to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well… the text is ‘explained’ – victory to the critic” (p. 147). I am not searching for victory. With the impossibility of any reading being definitive, instead rather I explore the texts from my position, and take them in certain directions to explore a particular issue. The search for the difference may be similar to concerns over fidelity of adaptation, what Stam (2005) calls moralistic criticism “that the cinema has somehow done a disservice to literature” (p. 3), but the results are different. The interest here is not in arguing for the superiority of a particular text or of creating a hierarchy of forms, but rather determining the significance of alterations and discussing their implications. The issue of fidelity of adaptation from comic to film, while prevalent in mainstream discussions of films, is insubstantial to my argument.

To explore the militarization of the superhero and consider the impact this has had upon popular culture, I have divided this thesis into three chapters. The analysis to be
undertaken requires contextualization and specification as to the approach taken to address texts and what they possibly indicate about the culture in which they are successful. The first chapter looks at two key concepts that inform this thesis, genre and hegemony. The discussion of genre first examines how texts are grouped into genre and what constitutes the features of a genre. I end with a discussion of the social and political functions of genre.

Following the discussion of genre, which concludes it is socially produced, I turn to hegemony theory in order to posit why these particular genres are produced. As a significant aspect of hegemony theory is to situate texts in their social context, I provide an overview of the relationship between the American military and American society, with specific attention to their ties with the entertainment industry, in the context of what is often termed the “War on Terror” or “post 9/11” America (Bacevich, 2013; McSweeney, 2014; Prince, 2009; Stahl, 2010). This contextual overview suggests that along with the conventional genre of the superhero, militarization itself may be best examined as the result of a militainment discursive formation. I conclude Chapter One by tying together discursive formations with hegemony theory through a discussion of Sinfield’s (1992) theory of textual faultlines.

Chapter Two provides the textual analysis focusing on depictions of the military as read through the lens of Chapter One’s framing. My sample of texts compares the three major iterations of The Avengers team in 2012, which includes The Avengers (2012) film, but also relevant parts of the preceding films in what Marvel dubs “stage I” of the “Marvel cinematic universe” (MCU): Iron Man (Jon Favreau, 2008), The Incredible Hulk (Louis Leterrier, 2008), Iron Man 2 (Jon Favreau, 2010), Thor (Kenneth Branagh, 2011), and Captain America: The First Avenger (Joe Johnston, 2011). In order t compare the film to its comic sources, I briefly discuss the history of Avengers comics (1963 - ) before focusing particularly on the 2002 reimagining of the concept, The Ultimates by writer Mark Millar and artist Bryan Hitch, a reimagining that was cited by Marvel’s President of Production, Kevin Feige, as inspiration for the film (Douglas, 2012). The third version I examine in

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3 Comic citations are difficult due the various forms in which comics are reprinted which often provide poor pagination. I will refer to specific issue numbers as, for example: (Millar & Hitch, 2002, The Ultimates #1).
detail is the *New Avengers* series by writer Brian Michael Bendis and numerous artists, which ran from 2004 to 2012, coinciding with the development and release of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. This reading demonstrates that the films provide a much more explicit depiction of the military superhero.

Chapter Three concludes this thesis with two discussions. The first concerns how militarization has occurred, largely through a discourse on “realism” that opens the films up to the militarization discursive formation. I argue that superheroes are malleable properties that easily shift between discursive formations, but that through paratexts, Marvel masks the malleability through a narrow definition of fidelity. The second argues that the militarization of superheroes is a problem by comparing the ethical approaches of the non-militarized heroes with their militarized cinematic counterparts. The militarized films provide a frame for audiences to see the military, which in turn contributes to the hegemonic support of the American military.
Chapter 1. Genre, Hegemony, and the Post 9/11 Superhero

1.1. Introduction

This chapter aims to define two interconnecting concepts, genre and hegemony, and use them to examine how stories are situated in their specific historical circumstances and why they emerge. America has undergone a cultural shift towards an increasingly militarized culture in the wake of the 9/11 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington and subsequent “War on Terror”\(^4\). One of the most prominent new genres that has emerged in this shift is the superhero.

1.2. Genre

At its most basic, Derrida (1980) defines genres as forming when a text follows the parameters set forward by other texts. This intertextual participation creates thematic groupings that embody cultural myths. Genres are not static, but rise and fall against their historical circumstances, which makes genre a productive way of examining groups of texts. Cawelti (1978/1992), writing at the end of a decade during which Hollywood underwent substantial upheaval, argued the shift of genres occurred when “not only the traditional genres, but the cultural myths they once embodied, are no longer fully adequate to the imaginative needs of our time” (p. 511).

Although the rise of superhero movies is based on superhero comics, the comics themselves have struggled to find a genre identity for the past four decades. Cawelti (1978/1992) notes that genres have a lifespan. Audiences have a historical awareness and eventually genre fiction develops self-awareness to engage in a reflexive critique of itself which often takes one of four primary forms: “humorous burlesque, evocation of

\(^4\) A term coined by President George W. Bush in a September 20, 2001 speech outlining the United States’ intended response to the 9/11 attacks. This includes all military and security operations by the United States and their allies against entities labeled by them as “terrorists”. This has primarily focused on Iraq and Afghanistan, but is not limited to specific geographic boundaries.
nostalgia, demythologization of generic myth, and the affirmation of myth as myth” (p. 510). The superhero comics since the mid-1980s have engaged with all of these forms. This breakdown of genre hints that genre, despite originating out of support for a society’s dominant narratives, has the subversive function of eventually undermining these narratives. When genre self-awareness occurs, it is a signal that the hegemony the genre originally supported is becoming less secured.

Through an examination of the superhero genre, I propose that the cinematic versions of the superhero are not simply a direct translation of the genre across mediums, but have rather coupled a superhero genre to an additional new discursive formation, militainment, created to reflect a specific historical American circumstance. To outline this, I first define the superhero genre. Next, I will provide an overview of how genre has been theorized to have a social impact and discuss how social factors create genres. Finally, the chapter ends with a discussion of the militainment discursive formation.

1.2.1. Defining the Superhero Genre

Like other genres, the boundaries of the superhero genre are fluid. Schumaker (2011) defines the genre as stories about costumed individuals with extraordinary abilities, either through training or genetics. This explains why the characters of The Avengers are superheroes while another invincible character with perfect abilities, such as James Bond, is not a superhero, due to the lack of a costume. Coogan (2012) goes further by outlining that superheroes have both semantic genre conventions, such as heroes, villains, costumes, fantastic technology, and syntactic conventions, such as physical confrontation. The sources I analyzed contain all of these elements. While this genre has long been the dominant genre of American comic books, its emergence as a mainstream genre in American film is relatively new.

In Neale’s (2000) exploration of Hollywood film genres, the superhero film is not included among the 14 he analyzes. Indeed, the superhero film only partially fits under Neale’s definition of the science fiction genre, where “science, fictional or otherwise, always functions as motivation for the nature of the fictional world, its inhabitants, and the events that happen within it, whether or not science itself is a topic or theme” (p. 100). Yet
genres are infinitely divisible and have porous divisions. For example, just as it is close to science fiction, the superhero genre is in many ways the urbanized version of the Western as both are often about a particularly rugged, individualistic brand of masculinity which brings order to lawless city. For example, Batman’s Gotham City is the 21st century Tombstone, Arizona (*My Darling Clementine*, John Ford, 1946). However, arguably the quantity of superhero films today points to a market receptive to the repetition of specifically superhero stories rather than have a superhero story be a variation of science fiction. The notion of the superhero film as genre has become a feature in popular and Hollywood discourse. For example, director and producer Steven Spielberg in an interview with the *Associated Press* predicted “there will be a time when the superhero movie goes the way of the Western” (Coyle, 2015).

While formerly not numerous enough to be considered a significant genre, the superhero movie is not new. It dates back to 1940s serials, which featured low budget adventures of Fawcett Comics’ *Captain Marvel* (John English & William Witney, 1941), DC’s *Batman* (Lambert Hillyer, 1943 & Spencer Gordon Bennet, 1949), and Timely’s *Captain America* (Elmer Clifton & John English, 1944) as well as the first feature, *Superman and the Mole Men* (Lee Sholem, 1951). However, these were not studio “tent-poles”,5 movies expected to carry the financial performance of an entire studio as the modern superhero film is, but cinema B-Movie second features. The first large budget superhero film was *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978). This led to three sequels (1980-1987) and DC also had a four film *Batman* franchise from 1989 to 1997, but neither inspired a sustained run on the genre. As an example of scope, only three films based on DC properties were released in the 1990s while there are two films based on DC properties planned every year from 2016 to 2020 (Doran 2016)

While DC has been under the corporate umbrella of Warner Brothers since 1989, allowing for easy integration into the film industry, Marvel licensed out its properties individually to different studios. A major Marvel Comics property was not adapted to theatrical film until *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000), with the only prior adaptations as low budget TV movies, such as *Spider-Man* (E.W. Swackhamer, 1977) and *Captain America*

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5 The “tent-pole” film was coined by industry trade magazine *Variety*, to refer to the film a studio expected to be its most profitable (“slanguage,” 2015).
(Rod Holcomb, 1979) or Roger Corman produced direct-to-video films like *Captain America* (Albert Pyun, 1990). Marvel eventually used the profits from their licensed properties to fund their own film studio, initially under a distribution deal with Paramount, but later purchased by Disney in 2009 (D. Johnson, 2012).

1.3. Social Theories of Genre

Now that the superhero genre in particular is defined, I explore how genre has been theorized to have social impact. Genre theory can be a rather simplistic structuralist analysis of texts grouped together by similarity. Neale (2000), a leading genre theorist, prioritizes “a commitment to detailed empirical analysis and thorough industrial and historical research” (p. 1). Neale traces how Hollywood industrial discourse shaped genre as a system of managing publicity, promotion, and reception. He groups films into genres by identifying commonly shared structures, before concluding by arguing that the diversity of genres in the same historical instances would mean that socio-cultural theories of genre are undermined by oppositional genres existing at the same time, such as the simultaneous popularity of the cynical film-noirs and optimistic musicals of the 1940s. He suggests that the diverse and often contradictory visions on screen present images too fractured to be meaningful in understanding social currents. This seems reductive to understanding these currents, as it actually is consistent with the divisive and contradictory nature of larger cultural discourses. If anything, the co-existence of contradictory views supports the idea of film as reflection that captures the complexity of society. Just as there is no one culture, there can also not be just one vision produced by Hollywood. Additionally, Neale fails to answer the important questions of why certain genres emerge and others do not or why genres change over time.

Altman (1987) attempts to answer the question of historical emergence by dividing theories of genre into the ritual and the ideological. The first, the ritual approach, is similar to Carey’s (1985/2009) notion of ritual communication, communication aimed at ensuring “the maintenance of society in time; not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs” (p. 13). Schatz (1981) argues genre is a form of cultural expression that explores ideas important to the audience and Cawelti (1976) sees this function of genre as allowing members to share the same fantasies. Ritual approaches
tend towards the explanation for desire of repetition that allows for audiences to be aware of the sameness of their entertainment. It is this approach that suggests superhero films are escapist wish fulfilment. As Wood (2003) emphasizes “the old tendency to dismiss the Hollywood cinema as escapist always defined escape merely negatively as escape from, but escape logically must also be escape to” (p. 70). This statement leads to particular questions. What is it about society that dictates the desire for escapism? What are the fantasies that are being wished for? This approach does not see films as being productive of any aspect of society, only as reflective. Neale (2000) takes issue with the idea that audience viewership correlates with audience endorsement, emphasizing that there are multiple reasons as to why audiences may attend and/or enjoy a film. He also cautions that the audience for films is not necessarily representative of an entire society. While this is true, the size of audiences still seems indicative of substantial social trends

However, the ritual approach is easily waylaid into cultural elitism towards the audience, such as Wood’s own judgements of the audience for the Star Wars franchise as “the success of the films is only comprehensible when one assumes a widespread desire for regression to infantilism… Crucial here, no doubt, is the urge to evade responsibility” (2003, p.145). It also provides routes for totalizing normative psychological statements about the audience, a line of thinking exemplified by Faludi’s opinion that

Superheroes are fantasies for a particular type of reader: someone, typically a prepubescent boy, who feels weak in the world and insufficient to the demands of the day and who needs a Walter Mitty bellows to pump up his self worth. Was the same now true for the national audience, the American people…? (2007, p. 51)

Like Wood, Faludi imagines the audience as childlike, but takes this even further, imaging them as “weak” children. This line of thought seems to imagine that audiences consume either “high” or “low” cultures, as if it were impossible to enjoy both. It also doesn’t grasp the compartmentalization of audiences’ lives. The fan of the escapist may seek to evade responsibility at all times, but is equally as likely to simply wish for a short reprieve. The analysis too often diverts attention away from social analysis to condemnation of an audience needing to demonstrate more intellectual curiosity.
The second approach, the ideological, follows the Culture Industry theory introduced by Adorno and Horkheimer (1947/1997) in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which combines Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis to argue that capitalism produces standardized entertainment goods to ensure the political passivity of consumers. This approach argued that genre removes productive power away from the audience and instead, as Wright (1974) extrapolated, “genre films produce satisfaction rather than action… They serve the interests of the ruling class by assisting in the maintenance of the status quo” (p.41). While Hollywood has its own interests aside from only giving the audience directly what it wants, as their close relationship with the Pentagon illustrates (Stahl, 2009), there is little evidence of concerted effort to deliver a unified strategy. While the ritual approach removes studio agency, ideology theory removes the audience from having an active role in the production of genre. As Neale (1990) argues, this is “open to the charges of reductivism, economics, and cultural pessimism” (p. 65). The theory condemns any product, regardless of its content, because of its form of production. It also depends upon an audience having fairly uniform reactions to products.⁶

Altman (1984) offers a compromise to the debate on genre with his semantic/syntactic theory. He explains:

The structure of Hollywood cinema, like those of American popular mythology as a whole, serve to mask the very distinction between the ritual and ideological functions. Hollywood does not simply lend its voice to the public’s desires, nor does it simply manipulate the audience. On the contrary, most genres go through a period of accommodation during which the public’s desires are fitted to Hollywood’s priorities (and vice-versa)… Whenever a lasting fit is obtained – which it is whenever a semantic genre becomes a syntactic one – it is because a common ground has been found, a region where the audience’s ritual values coincide with Hollywood’s ideological ones. (p. 14)

This formation offers power to both audiences and producers, although it is Hollywood’s ideological values that initiate a film’s production and are then presented to the audience.

⁶ It is for this reason that I avoid a discussion of psychoanalytic theories in my textual analysis. Although a young field, the results of audience reception studies (Brooker & Jermyn, 2003) indicate that audience response to films are more complex than the narratives put forward by psychoanalytic discourse. I am comfortable theorizing what is available for audiences to make sense of, but not comfortable with how they are going about it, especially not by extrapolating a totalizing narrative of how audiences are affected.
The audience’s financial support of the genre presumably indicates that what Hollywood is offering is acceptable and if so, Hollywood continues making films that are similar, yet different enough from each other to be both re-assuring and novel to audiences. This is reminiscent of Siegfried Kracauer, a film theorist and journalist associated with the Frankfurt School, who produced a more complex view of film’s relation to culture, usefully proposing that

Films are the mirror of the prevailing society. They are financed by corporations, which must pinpoint the tastes of the audience at all costs in order to make a profit. Since the audience is composed largely of workers and ordinary people who gripe about the conditions in the upper circles, business considerations require the producer to satisfy the need for social critique among consumers. A producer, however, will never allow himself to be driven to present material that in any way attacks the foundations of society, for to do so would destroy his own existence as a capitalist entrepreneur. (1927/1995, p. 291)

This theory gives agency to both audience and studio, with the studio having the larger influence, as some material is off limits, but ultimately guessing as to what audiences will respond positively to. Audiences thus have some power in choosing what they support, but ultimately the producers have the ability to limit options. Altman (1999) later revised his view to note there are multiple conflicting audiences and Hollywood possesses many divergent interests. Desires of “audience” and “Hollywood” may have useful boundaries, but neither term provides a locked down narrative. Altman instead presents genre as multi-discursive, that each genre simultaneously has multiple codes that belong to each of the multiple groups who define the genre, a concept to which I will return.

1.4. Adaptation Theory

As this research focuses not just on genre changes across time, but also across mediums, a brief discussion of adaptation theory is necessary. Adaptation is a form of what Kristeva (1986) defines as intertextuality as “any text is constructed as a mosaic of
quotations, any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (p. 37). This intertextuality functions, in Kristeva’s (1986) terms, vertically and horizontally. Vertical intertextuality refers to how the text is influenced by, contextualized within, and compared to other texts and how it makes implicit and explicit reference to them. Horizontal intertextuality is the connection of the texts the reader has prior knowledge of and brings to the reading of the text. Genette (1982/1997) locates intertextuality as one of several types of transtextualities, along with additional useful terms including paratextuality, metatextuality, and hypotextuality. Paratextuality refers to materials related to the text that frame the reader’s experience. Genette specifically discusses elements of books that surround the main text such as prefaces or the dust jacket synopsis, but Gray (2010) helpfully expands the paratexts of popular culture to include the numerous advertising and merchandise tie-ins for Hollywood franchises. Metatextuality is the explicit or implicit criticism of a pre-existing text. Hypertextuality refers to the modification of one text, the hypotext, in some way by another text, the hypertext. All adaptation is hypertext, but a particular form of hypertextuality is parody, where the traits of a hypotext are exaggerated for comedy. As Genette (1982/1997) cautions, “one must not view the five types of transtextuality as separate and absolute categories without any reciprocal contact” (p. 7). Discussion using one of these terms does not mean that another may not also adequately apply.

Intertextuality inspired Stam (2005) to propose that the meaning of any original text is produced only through “ever-shifting grids of interpretation” (p.15) and thus adaptations are dialogical responses to a text, new ways of readings placed in the intertextual web. The adaptation process of comics is more complicated than the traditional literature to film adaptation. Brooker (2012) discusses major differences from the conventional accounts of literature to film that are posed by comic adaptation. The first is that the cultural hierarchy of mediums are reversed. While film has traditionally been seen as inferior to literature, comics have been positioned as inferior to film. Comic books have a reputation as a children’s medium, a way of reading for individuals who have not yet learned (or, in

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7 Intertextuality is based upon Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of “dialogism”, that that meaning is created through both the relationship between author and reader, and between the text and other texts, that “the living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a social specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads” (p. 276).
the case of adults, never learned) to appreciate literary text. This comes from, as Sousanis (2015) outlines, a history where “words have been privileged as the proper mode of explanation, as the tool of thought. Images have, on the other hand, long been sequestered to the realm of spectacle and aesthetic, sidelined in serious discussions as mere illustration to support the text – never as equal partner” (p. 54), a privilege Sousanis roots in rationalist Western philosophical thought typified by Plato and Descartes (p. 54). This privilege also demonstrates a class bias, as described by Bourdieu (1979/2010) who argues that cultural capital, the symbolic elements of class such as food, clothing, manners, activities, and aesthetic interests create a hierarchy of tastes, forcing the middle and working classes to either conform to the system, or, as in the case of comics be judged as “vulgar”. Somigli (1998) provides an example of this in the pitch for Superman (Richard Donner, 1978), which he argues tried to distance itself from the disreputable medium of comics. Producers tried to elevate the cultural capital of comics in the 1980s by marketing “graphic novels”, but this had only limited effect. Burke (2015) suggests this reputation is less applicable to current studio executives who no longer look down upon comics. However, the form still lacks even the cultural capital of Hollywood film.

Given that even the bestselling comics sell only approximately 100,000 issues. Johnson (2007) questions how “popular” the narratives of the medium are in comparison to the characters’ images. Indeed, merchandise profits for superhero characters have exceeded comic profits since the late 1960s, a gap that has only widened since (Burke, 2015). For example, in 2000, even before the rise of the superhero film, Marvel made slightly over $45 million in profits from comics, but over $180 million in merchandise and toy sales (Marvel Enterprises, 2003). Rogers (2012) argues that the shift to the post-Fordist economy represented a move of comics from mass medium to niche product. The traditional comic distribution system was as a low-cost item with small profit margins for newsstands and independently owned corner and grocery stores. Additionally, comics were not sold by title, but in bundles by company and unsold comics were returnable. The mega-chain supermarkets that began to replace independent stores in the 1970s had little interest in selling comics. This ultimately led to a comic market collapse in 1978, with circulation of popular titles falling by half (Costello, 2009).
In response to this, a comic convention organizer, Phil Seuling, approached DC to serve as a middleman to specialty dealers, who would buy comics directly and then resell them to dealers. He received a higher discount in exchange for the books being unreturnable. The consequence of this was comics left mainstream stores for stores catering to fans, making comics a more predictable, stable industry, but also a much smaller one. It changed the content of comics by enabling companies to imagine their audience not as casual readers, but dedicated fans familiar with the history of the book and allowed for more complex stories to be told, although this insular niche culture quickly became exclusionary and opaque. The readers also tended to be older, and as a result the stories became more complex, but also often far more violent (Costello, 2009).

The second issue Brooker (2012) calls attention to is that for comic book superheroes, there exists no urtext. The Avengers have appeared in thousands of comics and while fans may point to certain storylines as high points for the series, these storylines themselves are products of existing within the complex intertextual universe of Marvel Comics. Marvel comics introduced intertextuality in the 1960s. While DC’s superhero titles tended to exist separate from each other, Marvel editor and writer Stan Lee made it clear that all of Marvel’s titles occurred in the same universe, that events from one title had ramifications in the company’s other titles, making intertextuality a marketing device. The direct market greatly increased a reliance upon intertextual stories in the forms of crossover where a reader may need to buy numerous titles to complete a storyline.

Not only do superhero comics depend heavily upon intertextuality, but also, given that series run for decades and undergo numerous changes in writers, the genre has encouraged an inherent metatextuality. DiPaolo (2011) outlines that superhero comics in the 1980s focused on dismantling the conventions, reveling in the violence implicit in the heroes’ “tendency towards fascism” and “satirizing the more ludicrous conventions of the superhero” (p. 31). However, this dismantling had a finite lifespan and comics since the 1990s have worked at producing a complete version of the superhero, trying to work the entire character’s publication history into a coherent serialized narrative. Darius (2011) outlines this process as creators “appropriate past stories, expanding upon them according to the standards of the times, often improving them, and filling in gaps or accounting for retroactive additions to the mythos” (p. 6).
The Ultimates was an example of adaptation within comics. Rather than re-writing to stay contemporary, it restarted the narrative again, firmly planted in a contemporary world. However, the series remained firmly inter- and metatextual, involving the inclusion of past iconic elements from the prior decades, like a trial for how to start a film narrative, given that the majority of a film audience would be unfamiliar with decades of comics and want to start at some semblance of beginning. The film adaptation process followed the approach of The Ultimates, but not its narrative. While Marvel could have chosen one popular storyline, perhaps The Ultimates, from which to do a direct adaptation, they instead started the narrative again from the beginning while incorporating iconic semantic elements. Because of this, comparison cannot be direct, but involves analysis of the differences in arrangements of shared elements.

This metatextuality has taken the form of the four modes of “generic transformation” Cawelti identifies, “humorous burlesque, evocation of nostalgia, demythologization of generic myth, and the affirmation of myth of as myth” (1978/1992, p. 510). Arguably, superhero comics have been perpetually in the cycle since the mid 1980s, self-aware of their genre’s patterns, but unable to move beyond them. Rather superhero comics have turned a transitory stage into a permanent style. Perhaps this is why superhero film adaptations differ from their comic sources as the films do not have a classical stage for these transformations to work against. Instead of classical superhero comics, the Hollywood superhero film is arguably transforming a different genre, the Hollywood action film. However, before I discuss aspects of this other genre, I will outline why the pre-existing “cultural myths… are no longer fully adequate to the imaginative needs of our time” (Cawelti, 1978/1992, p. 511).

1.5. Hegemony

Gramsci (1971) presented hegemony as not about the unknown oppression of people’s thoughts, but instead a process in which people are educated into agreeing with

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8 For example, The Ultimates is a combination of burlesque and demythologization while New Avengers is a combination of demythologization and affirmation of myth as myth.
dominant forms of power. Following Gramsci’s work, Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, and Roberts (1975) argue:

Hegemony works through ideology, but it does not consist of false ideas, perceptions, definitions. It works primarily by inserting the subordinate class into the key institutions and structures which support the power and social authority of the dominant order… Hegemony is not simple “class rule”. It requires to some degree the “consent” of the subordinate class, which has, in turn, to be won and secured; thus an ascendency of social authority, not only in the state but in civil society as well, in culture and ideology. (p. 39)

This formulation still acknowledges the power discrepancy and exploitation present in society, without relying on the simple notion of “false consciousness”. Culture is a much more complex site of analysis because no longer is the question how the dominant productive relations produce compliance, but rather how elements of both production and content work to produce consent for the dominant ideology. Additionally, Hall’s (1980) simplistic encoding/decoding model argues audiences can interpret messages through the hegemonic preferred meaning, but may also interpret content to have an oppositional meaning or a negotiated position which accepts some elements but rejects others.

Hall’s hegemony approach was prefigured by French literary critic Roland Barthes’ bi-monthly semiotic analysis of cultural products, which he deemed “myths”, for the magazines Les Lettres Nouvelles from 1954 to 1956. These essays were collected in Mythologies (1957/2012) along with a theoretical chapter, “Myth Today”, which discussed how images and language are used to naturalize certain power structures. A strong example of popular culture analysis using hegemony theory is Bennett and Woollacott’s (1987) analysis of James Bond, which suggests

that the periods of… innovation in popular fiction often coincide with those in which the ideological articulations through which hegemony was previously secured are no longer working to produce popular consent. In such moments, popular fictional forms may often prove more mobile and adaptable than more ‘organic’ deeply implanted and institutionally solidified political ideologies. (p 281)

Following this argument, as hegemony is produced through numerous social institutions, popular fiction must not be overly privileged, but by tracing it through a time of social turmoil, it can serve as an indicator of the contested aspect of a new emerging hegemony.
Their conception is that “popular fiction… acts, in effect, as a touchstone for the entire field of ideological representations, sounding out where, ideologically speaking, ‘the people’ have to be moved to” (p. 282).

It is necessary to outline why American culture after 9/11 has been a period in which, as Bennett and Woollacott (1987) phrase, the tactics of the previous hegemony are no longer working to secure consent. “Post 9/11” has become a way of defining American political culture after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. The response to the attacks rather than the attacks themselves are responsible for creating this era. The actual event that motivated the acceptance of the reactionary politics that followed, has been, Prince (2009) argues, sacralized, where discussing the attack had to be done only in serious, hushed, reverent tones. McSweeney (2014) identifies a “master narrative” (p. 10) formed around the event, that it was a “heinous and unprovoked attack on a virtuous and blameless nation, an attack that was impossible to anticipate and that brought about a reluctant ‘end of innocence’ for the United States” (p. 10).

President George W. Bush’s address to the nation on September 20, 2011 offers a valuable summary of the foreign policy outlook that would define the War on Terror.

Our war on terror begins with Al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated. Americans are asking “Why do they hate us?” They hate what they see right here in this chamber: a democratically elected government. Their leaders are self-appointed. They hate our freedoms: our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other…. These terrorists kill not merely to end lives, but to disrupt and end a way of life… We have seen their kind before. They’re the heirs of all the murderous ideologies of the 20th century. By sacrificing human life to serve their radical visions, by abandoning every value except the will to power, they follow in the path of fascism, Nazism and totalitarianism. And they will follow that path all the way to where it ends in history’s unmarked grave of discarded lies. (Bush, Sept 21, 2001)

By discursively creating a clear villainous “Other” in Islamic extremism, America positioned itself as the unquestioned hero, in which even the significant negatives of its power systems were framed as ideal. Bush presents “freedom”, which in an American context tends to mean freedom of the wealthy, as the ideal way of life. Harvey (2005) argues “it has been part of the genius of neoliberal theory to provide a benevolent mask full of
wonderful sounding words like freedom, liberty... to hide the grim realities of the restoration or reconstitution of naked class power” (p. 72). After Bush presents America as the ideal, he then embraces a logic that would not be out of place in superhero comics to discuss terrorists. The villains have no motivations grounded in history, no values beyond the absolute pursuit of power of controlling lives. However, these villains will be inevitably defeated due to genre convention, and in Bush’s speech, due to the inevitability of history. Yet this defeat is inevitable only if the hero, or in Bush’s speech, America, is up to the challenge of defeating the enemy. This is war with limited risk as victory is assured as long as it is attempted. Bush’s speech also positions anything America does as in the name of “freedom” and anything the “terrorists” do as in the name of totalitarianism.

The last 15 years have not gone according to Bush’s inevitable view of history. It resulted in what McSweeney (2014) describes as a “great missed opportunity in US history” (p. 205), where America chose a path that led it to even more aggressive military conflicts that at least partially alienated many of its allies. Because of this, there are two periods of post 9/11 America. The first, corresponding to Bush’s speech, was a time of intense patriotism. Yet as “victory” was not easy and assured, the second period of post 9/11 America featured a much more cynical approach. Stahl (2010) identifies 2007 as the turning point of military fatigue in American media, noting that as the Iraq invasion dragged on with no end in sight and public support fell into the 30% range (ABC News/Washington Post Poll). The war was a deeply polarizing issue, not, as was originally imagined, a national unifier. Stahl is unsure if numerous controversies, such as the understanding America had been misled into the war after the non-existence of promised Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction” and the Abu Ghraib torture photos led to this, or if this was simply fatigue with the same war and the desire for new entertainments.

However, the results of the military actions, while they may have dampened public support, are largely irrelevant to the change in American culture. The 9/11 attacks paved the way to what Klein (2007) terms “disaster capitalism”, the “the orchestrated raids on the public sphere in the wake of catastrophic events, combined with the treatment of disasters as exciting market opportunities” (p. 6). Hardt & Negri (2004) identified a concomitant shift in the American military, that “there is no way to conceive of the US military at this point as ‘the people in arms.’ It seems rather that in postmodern warfare, as in ancient Roman
times, mercenary armies tend to become the primary forces” (p. 47). Under the George Bush Sr. administration, the military became increasingly privatized, funnelling government money to a for-profit war machine of “private contractors” such as Lockheed Martin and Haliburton. Klein (2007) outlines how this process intensified post 9/11,

The White House used the omnipresent sense of peril in the aftermath of 9/11 to dramatically increase the policing, surveillance, detention and war-waging powers of the executive branch… Then those newly enhanced and richly funded functions of security, invasion, occupation, and reconstruction were immediately outsourced, handed over to the private sector to perform at profit. (p 358)

This involved the creation of an entirely new Department of Homeland Security”, with a starting budget of over $36 billion (Shenon, 2003), in addition to the over $400 billion already budgeted for the Department of Defence. In 2003, these departments spent a combined $327 billion on private contractors (Klein, 2007, p. 362). By 2006, the “homeland security” business was generating $59 billion in revenue per year, eclipsing the approximately $40 billion dollar film industry (Stoller, 2006). Bacevich (2013) argues that at the same time the military had become less representative of the people, “Americans have come to define the nation’s strength and well-being in terms of military preparedness, military action, and the fostering of (or nostalgia for) military ideals” (p. 2).

The War on Terror has served as an event bringing the neoliberalization of the military into focus. Bacevich (2013) states “9/11 deserves to be seen as an event that gave added impetus to already existing tendencies rather than as a turning point” (p. 5). This transformation seems almost inevitable given Klein’s analysis, as the atmosphere of tension and threat cultivated after 9/11 and the importance of the military to the American economy provide a rich set of materials for discussion. Shifts towards support for this climate are what Enloe (2000) defines as militarization:

a process by which a person or thing gradually comes to be controlled by the military or comes to depend for its well-being on militaristic ideas. The more militarization transforms an individual or society, the more the individual or society comes to imagine military needs and militaristic presumptions to be not only valuable, but normal. (p. 3)
This trend has the subject of recent inquiry across many areas of American life, from schools (e.g., Saltman & Gabbard, 2011), to police (e.g., Balko, 2013), and to sports (e.g., Jenkins, 2013).

The new American hegemony, initiated by the neoliberal turn and intensified by the War on Terror, places the military as central to the identity of American exceptionalism. A 2010 Gallup Poll found that 80% of Americans agreed that “because of its history and Constitution… the United States has a unique character that makes it the greatest country in the world” (Page, 2010). While in the Cold War, this had been framed as a conflict between freedom and the totalitarianism of communism and in the 1990s as the triumph of democracy, the 9/11 terror attacks cracked this narrative of American invincibility. Additionally, as Bacevich (2013) argues in the context of the ever growing income inequality in America these are hard, uncomfortable truths, for which the existing political system does not provide an easily available remedy. So Americans concoct stories to make such truths more palatable… One result has been to contrive a sentimentalized version of the American military experience and an idealized image of the American soldier… They enable us to sustain the belief that [America is] bringing peace and light to troubled corners of the earth. (p. 97-98)

If America cannot demonstrate its superiority domestically, it can attempt to mask this behind displays of force internationally. While the use of the military to defend “freedom” has been a near constant for the country since the end of World War II, the increasing privatization of war corresponds with how Stahl (2009) identifies a shift around “Operation Desert Storm” in 1991, where war became an interactive object of consumption. However, Desert Storm lasted only a few years while the War on Terror is midway through its second decade. War as consumption was only fully realized during the 2003 invasion of Iraq, with media coverage that mirrored spectator sports. This inspired the term “militainment”, defined by Stahl (2009) as “state violence translated into an object of pleasurable consumption” (p. 6). Militainment extends far beyond the realm of film, enveloping sports, toys, video games, and reality TV shows. Stahl identifies the shift from the traditional approach American media took in prior wars to the militainment as moving “from an event that must be sold (legitimated by propaganda) to an event that could be
sold (integrated into the economy of commercial entertainment, leisure time, and pleasure)” (p.14).

This shift follows Bacevich’s (2013) theory of the “new aesthetic” (p. 23) of war, where the mass armies of prior wars were replaced by soldiers to be seen as talented specialists who represent idealized American morals using high end technology, creating a gap between the soldier and citizen that had not existed in prior conceptions of the military. This conception is so engrained that even self-identified progressives within the United States often see the military establishment “not as an obstacle to social change but as a venue in which to promote it, pointing the way for the rest of society on matters such as race, gender, and sexual orientation” (Bacevich, 2013, p. 25). The military-industrial complex by the War on Terror had become driven by a private sector, to whom war was lucrative, especially when run on cheap labour provided by military recruits. Militainment then is not propaganda, which works to deactivate the questioning citizen, but works instead to integrate the citizen into a military-entertainment complex (Stahl, 2009).

1.6. Militainment as Discursive Formation

The emergence of “militainment” has been a response to the cultural shift of militarization during the War on Terror era, a shift that needed to be secured in stories that would affirm militarized myths. I propose that the superhero film is participating in two discursive formations. The first is the conventional superhero genre, which dictates its surface, but how these surface elements are deployed is determined as much in an alternative, more hidden Hollywood discourse, militainment.

Hegemony’s influence on genre still leaves several difficult questions unanswered. Where do Hollywood’s ideological values start from? As Williams (1989) formulates “freedom in our society amounts to the freedom to say anything you wish, provided you can say it profitably” (p. 88). Studios look at past successes and try to pinpoint what was responsible for their success, guesses that may be inaccurate. As Grant & Wood (2004) argue, releasing films is a gamble in terms of profit, so studios need to release numerous films, with the successful ones making up for the failures. However, the more invested into a film, the more control the studio has over it. These formulas are seen as ensuring
profitability. It is possible a new formation would be even more profitable, but the risk is far greater. For example, this has resulted in Hollywood’s disproportionate focus on narratives by and about white men. These structures do change over time, as studios look toward social trends, especially during social shifts, such as after 9/11, in which old formations may seem to be failing. Yet this conception does not explain where audience desires are produced, but it seems likely this is through a near unmappable intertextual web.

The formulas Hollywood creates to replicate profitability function as discursive formations, which Foucault (1969/2010) identifies:

whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statements, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functioning, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that were are dealing with a discursive formation. (pg. 38)

Foucault (1976/1990) later emphasized the need to “explore not only these discourses but also the will that sustains them and the strategic intent that supports them” (p. 8). Foucault’s work takes issue with hegemony in that it presumes a world beyond ideology and hegemony, while he argues we are “always in the strategic field of power relations” (1976/1990, p. 96). Laclau and Mouffe (2001) outline a conception of hegemony that joins with discursive formations. They modify the concept of hegemony to be not a totalizing descriptor of society, but rather “a political type of relation, a form, if one so wishes, of politics; but not a determinable location within a topography of the social” (p. 139). This alteration makes hegemony the product of overlapping discursive formations that must be challenged individually and at multiple sites rather than a clear conflict between totalities. The challenge is not to exist outside of discursive formations, but to replace them with alternatives.

Mittell (2004) explicitly links genre with discursive formation, arguing “our goal in analyzing generic discourses is not to arrive at a genre’s ‘proper’ definition, interpretation, or evaluation, but to explore the material ways in which they are culturally operative” (p. 13). Mittel takes this in a direction of analyzing both the texts and the paratexts that make up the genre discourse. I propose that the formation I am examining is not a genre, but
rather a composite of two discursive formations, the superhero genre, which fits the common notions of genre, but also an additional discursive formation of “militainment”, a formation that will be made clear by following Mittel in looking at the way discourse shapes the hegemony around superhero films.

What is the link between the post 9/11 superhero genre and a militainment discursive formation? As discussed above 9/11 represented a shift, where the old hegemony had been unsecured and new formations were created. The cultural shift of 9/11 led to Hollywood studios updating their operational discursive formations, as staying socially relevant is profitable. Burke (2012) argues that 9/11 provided another catalyst by how it problematized the traditional Hollywood action film, which often featured hyper-masculine heroes disposing of vaguely foreign threats with extreme violence, were initially too directly evocative of 9/11. Instead, post 9/11 cinema sought to erase and sanitize the 'monstrous dose of reality' that was September 11th 2001 to use it to provide America with justification for the excesses of the war on terror in an endorsement of subjective hierarchies, uncritical victimization, dehumanization of foreign enemies and legitimation of intrusion on foreign soil that characterized the majority of American cinema in the post 9/11 decade. (McSweeney, 2014, p. 155)

This also provided, as Prince (2009) outlines, American films’ new subtexts and semantic elements to apply to the traditional syntactic genre plot structures. While evoking 9/11 has not been avoided, becoming a constant in superhero films, they are more allegorical than films directly about terrorism, such as Collateral Damage (Andrew Davis, delayed to 2002), which gives Hollywood plausible deniability. Additionally, the evocations of 9/11 have increased as the event recedes from memory to myth.

1.7. Militainment as “Realism”

Hollywood uses the military in genre films to ground the movie in some semblance of reality. Disturbingly, something is not seen as “realistic” enough for an adult audience without the presence of the military, as if it is the inevitable solution to problems. Comic writer Grant Morrison summarizes an issue with superhero “realism”: 

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A child can accept all kinds of weird-looking creatures and bizarre occurrences in a story because the child understands the stories have different rules that allow for pretty much anything to happen. Adults, on the other hand, struggle desperately with fiction, demanding constantly that it conform to the rules of everyday life. Adults foolishly demand to know how Superman can possibly fly, or how Batman can possibly run a multi-billion dollar business empire during the day and fight crime at night, when the answer is obvious to the smallest child: because it’s not real. (2011, p. 56)

The point at which the audience is asked to suspend its disbelief shifts, and the perception is that adult audiences are less willing to do so than children. Imaginativeness is equated with childishness. The result is what Barthes’ (1957/2012) analyzes, that narratives that seek to naturalize the arbitrary “immobilize the world: they must suggest and mimic a universal order which has fixated once and for all” (p. 270). An adult audience may then be more likely to reject a depiction of the world as it is in comics, along the division between fantasy and reality. The military is a way to “mimic a universal order”. Notably, popular fantasy franchises such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* exist in an entirely fictional world rather than the fictional world of superhero comics, which mixes in reality with fantasy.

Superhero comic writers struggled with having to appease adult readers’ apparent demand for greater realism. For a misguided period in the 1980s, comics had a juvenile belief that overt vigilante violence would emphasise their maturity. The solution to maintaining adult readers was to keep the illogical, subversive plots, perhaps for nostalgia, but with more psychologically complicated characters (J. K. Johnson, 2012; Costello, 2009). However, this only appealed to a small number of adults, insufficient for an expensive film. Branding superheroes for adults has been difficult, as even the sequels to the initially successful *Batman* (1989) were quickly branded as “cartoons”, with the implications of childish entertainment (Brooker, 2012).

The militarized superhero moved the genre closer to the core of action films and gave it a “seriousness” that could attract older audiences in addition to children. The military grounds the “unrealistic” elements in a recognizable world. The superhero film becomes an action movie like any other, with Iron Man or Batman replacing John McLain or Rambo, making it ideal for mass consumption. *The Ultimates*, despite the supposed satire, envisioned a superhero that perfectly fit this formation. Marvel Studios was created
after decades of attempts to create superhero movies, when success had only come to
the most popular of characters. The militarization formation was the opening Marvel
needed to cash in on not just the top characters, but its less popular ones, through The
Ultimates. The Avengers evolved differently because rather than make films out of the
most iconic characters, Marvel made a blockbuster out of its secondary characters.

1.8. Faultlines

The unanswered question in hegemony theory is what degree of agency
audiences and producers each have. Hegemony theory portrays the social field as a highly
complex set of interactions, so determining the influence of any one aspect is murky. Film
narratives become frames through which viewers can make sense of these relations.
Framing is defined by Entman (1993) as the process of “select[ing] some aspects of a
perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as
to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or
treatment recommendation” (p. 52). While often used in context of news media’s impact
on audience, any text can function as a frame through which viewers can structure their
interpretation of events. Butler (2009) describes the process by which images of war are
framed to viewers as “an occasion in which we implicitly consent or dissent to war or where
our ambivalent relation is formulated, where we also are able to pose questions about
what and how war is presented, and what absence structures and limns this visual field”
(p. xvii). Similarly, Markert (2011) suggests amending Kracauer’s theory of film as a
reflection of society to one in which it “refracts”. “Refraction theory suggests that recurring
exposure to a film’s message may not just reinforce existing attitudes and beliefs, but
shape” (p. xx). To suggest films do not have any effect would make their contemporary
study meaningless and if they only reflect society, it would make film study useful only as
a historical document. Refraction parallels with intertextuality, that the accumulation of
texts produces ways of understanding each subsequent text, and subsequently as a
means of understanding the world. My approach will be that it is the audience who produce
meanings out of the concepts provided by films. The producer’s power is to provide
limitations on the concepts and the audiences’ power is to assemble these concepts. In
the case of large budget films, the studio limits the concepts based on a belief of what will best engage the audience.

In particular, genres function as discursive formations for social refraction, with popular genres themselves emerging from the struggle of defining social hegemony. The work of Sinfield (1992) in defining faultline stories offers a form of analysis drawing from both of these approaches. Sinfield defines “faultline stories as those which require the most assiduous and continuous reworking; they address the awkward, unresolved issues, the ones in which the conditions of plausibility are in dispute” (p. 48). That when a part of our worldview threatens disruption by manifestly failing to cohere with the rest, then we reorganise and retell its story, trying to get into shape – back into the old shape if we are conservative minded or into a new shape if we are more adventurous. (p.46)

Sinfield’s idea echoes Bennett and Woollacott (1987) as both are concerned with points at which ideology cracks and must be put back together. The difference is that Bennett and Woollacott primarily locate the struggle against the historical backdrop that produces the text, emphasizing the hegemony element while Sinfield locates this as the audience producing struggle out of the text. Sinfield embraces a hegemonic view of history, but includes a post-structuralist move in engaging with how audiences interpret the texts. Sinfield follows Foucault’s (1978/1990) complication of resistance, arguing that there are a “multiplicity of points of resistance… present everywhere in the power network. Hence there is no single locus of great Refusal” (p. 95-96). For Foucault, “hegemony” is not a simple matter of consent or refusal. Instead, “it is doubtless the strategic codification of… points of resistance that makes a revolution possible” (1978/1990, p. 96). Textual analysis is therefore a process that involves looking both at how the text presents contemporary issues, but also where the faults are within the text to provide alternative interpretations.

Evans (2014) has exemplified this process in dealing with comics in his essay on Superman, which used faultline theory to argue various iterations of Superman have contained both subversive and conservative elements. Evans argues that stories have the “potential to demonstrate more clearly than other forms of analysis the battleground nature of culture: a single site can be occupied simultaneously, or at least consecutively by numerous opposing readings and rewritings of a narrative and its attendant ideological
formation” (p. 123). Following Evans’ argument, in the next chapter I will examine three different narratives worked to reorganize and reshape a story. The differences between the three are telling about the imagined worldview of the intended audience of the creators. Popular fiction offers choices within a limited range of options, but by audiences selecting either a more progressive or more conservative option, the range of choice slowly may shift in a particular direction. This range of choices is also not determined just by the previously popular fictions, but is likely determined to a greater extent by the entire social context within which fiction is created. The text may be reworked to fit into the dominant narrative or it may unveil the contradictions within, contributing in a way that may produce a cultural shift. To follow this, in my textual analysis, I aim to identify where the most prominent faults lines are within the narrative. By contrasting these faultlines, I will demonstrate how the discourse of militarization has been merged with the superhero genre in Marvel’s adaptation of their superheroes to reach a wider audience.

1.9. Conclusion

There were a multitude of directions possible for depicting the relationships between superheroes, catastrophic violence, and the military, the most likely of which should have been something like Christopher Nolan’s Batman series, displaying a deep ambivalence towards militarization, offering something to audiences on both sides of the deeply divisive military culture. Instead, Marvel’s militarized version became the most popular superhero film of all time. The next chapter will examine the faultlines in each iteration of The Avengers. Working off the assumption that the military will be present, the question is how does the location of faultlines regarding the military and superheroes differ between the comics and the film adaptation? The third chapter will examine what the differences in militarization indicate and how militarization has a significant impact on the elements within superhero stories presented to the audience.
Chapter 2. The Re-Tellings of the Avengers

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter I argue that Marvel's adaptation of *The Avengers* from comic to film has emphasized the role of the military in superhero narratives. To accomplish this, the chapter is divided into two parts. The first provides a historical overview of superhero comics' past relationship with the military, discusses the creation of Marvel Publishing, and examines the process behind their adaptation to film through the formation of Marvel Studios. This history also emphasizes why the turn to militainment represents a shift in the company's primary storytelling practices. The second part of the chapter examines the differences in how the military is depicted in three Avengers iterations, 1) the main Marvel comic series, 2) *The Ultimates* comic series, and 3) the 2012 film.

2.2. Historical Background

2.2.1. The Superhero Genre

The superhero genre began with Superman in National Allied Publication's (later renamed DC) *Action Comics #1* (Siegel & Shuster, 1938). Set in fictional Metropolis, an idyllic city with features of every major American city, the populist Superman fought both traditional criminals, such as organized crime, but also corrupt politicians and lobbyists who had contributed to the disparity of the Great Depression. The following year, National Allied launched the urban vigilante Batman, who combated crime in fictional Gotham City, a much darker city than Metropolis that government institutions could no longer keep safe from being overrun by crime. These two characters served as models from which slight variations were produced, by both National Allied (The Sandman [Christman & Fox, 1939, *Adventure Comics #40*], Hawkman [Fox & Neville, 140], *Flash Comics #1*], Hourman [Fox & Bailey, 1940, *Adventure Comics #48*) and competitors (Fox Publication's Wonder Man [Eisner, 1939, *Wonder Comics #1*]; and Fawcett Comics' Captain Marvel [Parker & Beck, 1940, *Whiz Comics #2*], no relation to Marvel comics). The first explicitly American nationalist character was Captain America, debuting with a cover of the Captain punching
Hitler (Simon & Kirby, 1941, Captain America Comics #1). Published by Timely Comics, it appeared on newsstands in December 1940, a year before the attack on Pearl Harbour. It was intended by Jewish American creators, writer Joe Simon and artist Jack Kirby, to encourage the United States to enter the war against Nazi Germany.

When the United States entered World War II, other superhero characters were quickly co-opted explicitly for military purposes. As J. K. Johnson (2012) outlines, this created an abrupt bizarre turn as characters who had only months earlier been attempting to fix a broken America now held it up as a perfect state that had to be a model for the world against the Axis threat. This explicit patriotism sold well during the war, but its end created a crisis for the future of superheroes. Heroes could not return to criticizing America for two reasons. First as it would seem hypocritical after spending years defending America as the paragon of freedom. Second, because of the growing association of critique of America with communist. The hegemonic social order promoted by white middle class Americans whose children were the imagined audience of superhero comics (although the readership was much wider) left superheroes as what J. K. Johnson (2012) terms an “agent of social order” (p. 83). Johnson further argues that the superhero no longer fit the 1950s image of respectable masculinity, no longer the rugged individual but the loyal and dutiful company man. Comics conformed to the larger cultural project Gilman (2003) describes to present an idealized portrait of America as rational, industrial, and scientific. Many titles, including Captain America, were cancelled by the end of 1949 due to falling sales. Without the war, allegory seemed to fade as the military side of the comics was continued, but now explicitly in such non-superhero titles as Fightin’ Army (Charlton), Our Fighting Forces (DC), and Frontline Combat (Entertaining Comics). Captain America was brought back briefly in 1954 as a “commie smasher” (Romita, 1954, #76-78), but public interest declined, perhaps in parallel to that year’s Army-McCarthy hearings. Murray (2011) describes superheroes as “presenting rather tired mythic heroes to a country floundering under its own myths” (p. 244). Rather, comic heroes\(^9\) were either cowboys,

\(^9\) Not all comics were heroic at this time. Entertaining Comics (EC) published crime, war, science fiction, and horror (including the famous Tales from the Crypt) comics and the humour magazine Mad, all of which were intensely critical of commonly held American values. EC was the company most affected by the Comic Code (Wright, 2001).
celebrating the mythical past that produced American greatness or explicitly the American military.

The diversity of comic book genres was ended by a substantial cultural concern, initially expressed by librarians and school teachers concerned about the erosion of high literary culture by comics (Beaty, 2005). These concerns intensified into a moral panic when child psychologist Frederic Wertham claimed in The Seduction of the Innocent (1954) that, based upon interviews with over 500 children, comics were major contributors to “juvenile delinquency”. Pretensions of concern for high culture now backed themselves up with empirical evidence. Comic publishers formed the Comics Code Authority, enforcing strict rules against realistic portrayals of crime, violence, and gore. It also required “in every instance good shall triumph over evil” and stories should never “create disrespect for established authority” (Comics Magazine Association of America, 1959). While the code did not appease Wertham, many in the popular press who had been critical of comics were satisfied that it demonstrated the comic industry was taking serious steps to address its supposed problems (Beaty, 2005). This ended the popular genres of crime and horror, but its strict rules could be adopted well to the structures of the superhero. Coupled with the late 1950s interest in science, the superhero genre was re-invigorated.

2.2.2. Marvel Comics

In 1960, DC put all of its heroes into one comic, the Justice League of America (Fox & Sekowsky, #1). Martin Goodman, the publisher of Magazine Management Company, had his creative team from science fiction and monster comics, writer Stan Lee and artist (and Captain America co-creator Jack Kirby), launch a competitor to DC’s surprise hit. The result was The Fantastic Four (1961, #1), but it was hardly a copy of the Justice League, instead it introduced a new approach to superheroes, where conflict came as much from interpersonal drama amongst the team’s members as it did from external

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10 Wertham’s purported empiricism was majorly flawed. Looking through his transcripts, Tilley (2012) exposed that Wertham routinely altered the meaning of his interviewees’ statement. As well, Wertham’s sampling only included children who had already been identified by various institutions as juvenile delinquents. While he noted that a common factor amongst all of them was they read comics, this was hardly a surprise given that 90% of American children were comic book readers at the time (Tilley, 2012)
threats. Magazine Management Comic line rebranded as Marvel Comics and Stan Lee, working with Kirby and artist Steve Ditko, quickly launched an entire line of new titles to follow in the wake of *Fantastic Four*'s success, such as *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Ditko & Lee, 1963, #1), *Daredevil* (Lee & Everett, 1964, #1), and *The X-Men* (Lee & Kirby, 1963, #1) in addition to a resurrected *Captain America* (Lee & Kirby, 1964, *Tales of Suspense* #59).

*The Avengers* (Lee & Kirby, #1) launched in 1963 to group together characters from anthology titles who were not selling well enough to justify their own title: Thor, Iron Man, Ant-Man/Giant-Man, and The Wasp. In the narrative, the heroes organized themselves to combat threats they could not handle alone, rather than being put together by a larger institution. They were joined by Captain America (Lee & Kirby, 1964, *Avengers* #4) and expanded to include former minor villains given a chance at redemption, Hawkeye, Quicksilver, and the Scarlet Witch (Lee & Kirby, 1965, *Avengers* #16). The series ran continuously for 503 issues, until January 2005, when it was relaunched as *New Avengers* (Bendis & Finch, 2005). Over 45 new characters would spend time as part of the Avengers team at various times.

Marvel offered significant differences to conventional DC comics. Their characters often had as many troubles in their personal life as they did in their superhero persona. Despite their angst and outsider status, Costello (2009) argues that Marvel’s characters from the 1960s have “Cold War rhetoric and ideals ingrained in [their] four-colour DNA” (p. 61). Radiation, not magic (although its effects are used magically) was the source of powers. In the spirit of the early 1960s American Dream, any characters, such as Iron Man (Lee, Lieber & Heck, 1963, *Tales of Suspense* #39), Ant-Man (Lee & Kirby, 1962, *Tales to Astonish* #35), and Mr. Fantastic (Lee & Kirby, 1961, *Fantastic Four* #1) were, science entrepreneurs, not tethered to the institutions of the university or the army. The exception to this is the Hulk (Lee & Kirby, 1962, *The Incredible Hulk* #1), who worked for the establishment and suffers his monstrous transformation because of the military’s poor handling of an experiment. The individualism exhibited by these free market scientists is representative of Costello’s (2009) analysis of the 1960s Marvel universe which indicates the notion of “freedom”, while seen as an inclusive value for all, is centred around the importance of individualism. The Communist villains have no ideology beyond imposing
totalitarianism on the world, often in league with former Nazis like Baron von Strucker (Lee & Kirby, 1964, *Avengers* #6) or the Red Skull (Lee & Kirby, 1965, *Tales of Suspense* #66). Communism was framed as a continuation of Nazism. The communist enemies appear as a clear endorsement of American foreign policy, with America’s new enemies simply conflated with their old ones. Communism as progression of Nazism indicates that the World War II roots of the superhero still weighed heavily upon the 1960s comics, which Murray (2011) argues was fed by a nostalgia for the clear morality of that period, a clarity that was slowly fading as the decade progressed. This moral nostalgia was occasionally articulated in ways that seemed progressive, such as when a thinly veiled Ku Klux Klan reference, Sons of the Serpent (Lee & Heck, 1966, *Avengers* #32), were presented as a secret communist plan designed to weaken America by provoking racial tensions.

Marvel managed to cement its popularity by appealing to elements of the “counter-culture”. A 1965 poll of university students by *Esquire* magazine ranked Spider-Man and the Incredible Hulk alongside Bob Dylan and Che Guevara as revolutionary icons (Wright, 2001, p. 321). A 1966 *Esquire* article featured several university students explaining why they enjoyed Marvel comics. Two white male students responded “Spider-Man, my favourite, exemplifies the poor college student, beset by woes, money problems, and the question of existence. In short, he is one of us” and “My favourite is the Hulk, I identify with him, he’s the outcast against the institution” (“As Barry Jenkins”, p. 116-117). Overall, these remain on the level of existential rather than social crises, but in the media environment of early 1960s America, the comics at least suggested that American society was not necessarily working to the benefit of everyone. However, Marvel’s other characters, like wealth weapons manufacturer turned privatized human weapon, Iron Man, appealed to a different audience, as can be seen in a 1966 editorial in the *New Guard*, the journal of the conservative Young Americans for Freedom, which praised Marvel for its strong support of capitalists as being on the right side of the clear divide of good and evil (Nolan, 1966). This editorial may reflect a more accurate reading than the *Esquire* students, as J. K. Johnson (2012) concludes that Marvel essentially “borrowed liberal cultural aesthetics to appeal to young readers but remained solidly conservative in theme and story” (p. 98). Fawaz (2016) provides a compelling counter-argument as to why superheroes were subversive storytelling, arguing that
the egalitarian image of the superhero team as an intergalactic peacekeeping force provided readers with a popular fantasy for imagining alternative social and political responses to the cold war, including international cooperation and cross-cultural alliance, rather than unilateral military power. (p. 5)

Fawaz sees superhero comics as a space for radical inclusion, that even if the heroes’ differences were allegorical rather than literal depictions of racial or sexual identity, in a time of American conformity, they celebrated diversity.

2.2.3. “War on Terror” Superheroes

Lewis (2012) notes that the war comic had disappeared by the late 1980s, slowly replaced by superheroes taking on the combat role. Marvel began publishing “event” comics, which centred on conflict involving multiple characters with higher stakes than the monthly comic book story. The first event was Secret Wars (Shooter, Zeck, & Layton, 1984-1985) which served largely as a toy commercial, featuring all of the major Marvel heroes and villains clashing with each other in an effort to sell action figures. The title came from a focus group that found Reagan-era children responded most positively to the words “secret” and “war” (Howe, 2013). In addition to selling toys, it was financially lucrative for comic sales, and “events” became a way of having readers buy more comics, both by promoting new characters and by making the complete story only available through buying multiple titles.

This second approach became the dominant marketing of comics, as marketing to children soon ended entirely, replaced by the rise of the adult direct reader market in the mid-1980s. Comic writer Grant Morrison (2012) aptly describes this period as “realism … confused with a particularly adolescent kind of pessimism and angry sexuality” (p. 233). After a decade of this being the dominant form of storytelling, the novelty of these types of comics wore off, and superhero comics turned to nostalgia for the comics the current writers had grown up reading in the 1960s and 1970s, but this time with formal experimentations in metatextuality. The stories self-consciously comment on the tropes the titles had developed a generation before. The Avengers avoided the direction of “gritty”, instead following a path Darowski (2014) describes as turning to previous norms to maintain narrative stability (p. 101). The series was restarted in 1996 for a one year run
designed to boost sales where popular independent comic artists would re-envision Marvel properties in a marketing event dubbed *Heroes Reborn* (Liefeld, Valentino, & Yaep, 1996, *Avengers vol. 2*, #1). This failed and instead of trying to copy the contemporary popular style, Marvel looked to the past for inspiration, renumbering the series again in 1998 (Busiek & Pérez, *Avengers vol. 3*, #1) with writer Kurt Busiek attempting to return *The Avengers* to its 1960s roots. This iteration focused on classic aesthetics, like thought balloons, and narrative clichés, like villain monologues. This led to the series being perhaps comforting for longtime readers, but it lacked a connection to a world outside of comic books.

*The Avengers* lack of connection to a world outside comics was brief. 9/11 did the same for comics as Prince (2009) argues it did for Hollywood: breathed new life into old formulas. Costello (2009) and J.K. Johnson (2012) outline that a response to the War on Terror climate focused on heroes making morally questionable choices and a sense of terminal insecurity. The 9/11 attack was integrated in the Marvel world in October 2001 (Straczynski & Romita Jr, 2001, *Amazing Spider-Man Vol 2* #36). The issue had a solid black cover and featured the heroes and villains of the Marvel universe working together to clean up the damage. The maniacal Dr. Doom, a villain bent on conquering the world, is depicted with tears welling up behind his iron mask to the caption “even the worst of us, however, scarred, are still human. Still feel. Still mourn the random death of innocents”, discursively positioning the perpetrators of 9/11 as less than human. This strong reaction is indicative of its actual occurrence, as devastation of this scale is not uncommon in the Marvel universe, but such reactions are unusual. One of the World Trade Towers had been destroyed earlier in *X-Force* #3 (Liefeld & Nicieza, 1991), but since it was clearly fictional, the heroes, including Spider-Man carry on while the villain laughs at the destruction he caused. This is in stark contrast to the Spider-Man overwhelmed with grief in #36. However, Spider-Man doesn’t mention 9/11 in issue #37 (Straczynski & Romita Jr, 2001) and after the initial acknowledgment, the Marvel universe oddly seemed to go on as if the event never occurred. The only other appearance of 9/11 was in *Captain America* v4 #1 (2002), by writer John Ney Rieber and artist John Cassaday, where Captain America kills terrorist leader Faisal Al-Tariq. This is a departure from his usual characterization, which Marvel had established in *Captain America* #323 (Gruenwald & Neary, 1986) that he had not killed anyone during World War II. This series was notable for covers that used
the style of World War II propaganda posters to link the contemporary American patriotism to the unproblematized heroic America of World War II.

However, while in-universe the event could be ignored, its ramifications were slowly felt throughout Marvel’s line. *The Avengers* series continued Busiek’s nostalgia-fueled effort to return the franchise tonally to the 1960s comics until the end of the 2002. At this time, Marvel was making “post 9/11” fiction the norm, with *New X-Men* writer Grant Morrison recalling that Marvel editorial encouraged stories to be “about ‘real’ things. As a result, more and more Marvel, including some of my own, had scenes set in the Middle East or on board hijacked aircraft” (2012, p. 355, referencing Morrison & van Scriver, 2002, *New X-Men* #133).

Costello (2009) neatly sums up the overall political picture of Marvel comics as a tendency to pursue “liberalism with a fascist aesthetic” (p. 215). Sontag (1975/2002) defines the fascist aesthetic as “a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behavior, and extravagant effort; they exalt two seemingly opposite states, egomania and servitude... grouping of people/things around an all-powerful, hypnotic leader figure or force” (p. 91). This fits the superhero universe of strong individuals in dramatic costumes who have extraordinary abilities they must use to protect the largely defenceless masses. But the political idea they strive for is a society where everyone is free from coercion by oppressive entities. The correct use of power is for the individual to use this power to protect the right to freedom for others. The wrong use of power is to use it for your own gain and decrease the freedom of others. While Marvel Comics has characters who are poor (Spider-Man) or face discrimination (the X-Men), the solutions to structural problems are centred on the individual (very rarely is the power ingrained in structures also examined) and government only plays a peripheral role. With aesthetic concerns, as Dyer (1997) emphasizes in his study of Italian strongman or peplum films, which like superhero comics and films have strong individuals fighting against authoritarian societies and never becoming a ruler themselves. Dyer (1997) concludes that:

> the peplum’s contradictory relations to fascism (which, I want to stress, does not mean that the peplum is ‘really’ fascist but that it is, precisely, contradictory) is embodied in the hero... Hercules is opposed to this fascist regime but [actor] Reg Park’s muscles embody its very ideals. (p. 176)
This conflict between form and content also applies to the superhero, that to read something as fascist purely on surface aesthetics disregards the full picture of the text. However, it is a riskier form of storytelling because, as I will suggest with *The Ultimates*, the liberal element that restrains the inherent fascism can slip away so that the genre embraces a fascist viewpoint.

### 2.2.4. Marvel’s Ultimate Universe: The Link Between Comics and Film

Marvel barely survived bankruptcy in 1996. New President Bill Jemas and Editor-in-Chief Joe Quesada believed that the weight of continuity was a reason for lagging sales, and decided Marvel needed to return to the company’s roots of youthful characters to attract primarily a market of teenage boys. Quesada and Jemas approached popular independent writer Brian Michael Bendis to re-imagine Marvel’s universe, beginning with their most popular character, Spider-Man, in a project dubbed “Ground Zero”. The second writer hired was Mark Millar, who left rival DC comics after editorial continually demanded changes to his hyper-gory, hyper-sexualized scripts. These comics ran parallel to the continuation of Marvel’s existing comics, in a move designed to avoid alienating existing readers and so that if it failed, they had existing content to fall back on. Additionally, this was a backdoor exploration of movie concepts, with Jemas emphasizing that he wanted writers to script comics “more the way movies are written” (Riesman, 2015) as film licensing was appearing to be lucrative source of revenue. The initial title of the line, which was renamed “The Ultimate” universe, was *Ultimate Spider-Man* (Bendis, Jemas, & Bagley, 2000) followed in 2001 by *Ultimate X-Men* (Millar & Kubert, 2001) relaunches of what were by far Marvel’s most popular titles. The third title, *The Ultimates* (Millar & Hitch, 2002), was conceived as a way to introduce iconic Marvel characters like Captain America, Iron Man, and The Hulk, but whose titles did not necessarily sell well, to the universe, in a move similar to the original origin in *The Avengers* title.

The imprint's own success was eventually doomed. Both Bendis and Millar were hired to re-invigorate Marvel’s long running, but not necessarily popular, titles like *The Fantastic Four* (Millar & Hitch, 2008, #554) and *The Avengers* (Bendis & Finch, 2004, #500). Both writers also served as consultants on the first Marvel Studio’s film, *Iron Man*. 
The consequences of this collaboration was that the ideas experimented with in the Ultimate Universe, such as a darker visual aesthetic with muddled colouring, decompressed storytelling with plots running over the course of multiple issues, and more interaction between political organizations and superheroes, began to shape the main Marvel universe. This undermined what made Ultimate unique. In addition, the Ultimate line ceased to be aimed at new readers, because as the line aged, it became just as continuity dense as the mainstream universe was. The line fizzled to an end in December 2015 (Bendis & Bagley, *Ultimate End #5*), with its concepts becoming the defining feature of the original Marvel universe.

### 2.2.5. Marvel Studios

The third of Marvel’s iterations of the Avengers comes from their film production. As covered in chapter one, for several reasons superhero films became very popular in the early 2000s, including films that Marvel had already successfully licenced out of its most popular properties to Sony (*Spider-Man*) and 20th Century Fox (*The X-Men* and *The Fantastic Four*). The success of this cycle and related merchandise increased Marvel’s licensing revenue from $19 million in 2000 to $189 million in 2003 (Zuckerman, Peers, & Song, 2004). Marvel used these profits to finance their own, in-house film studio, which gave it more control over its properties. Marvel was purchased by Disney in 2009, after they launched Marvel Studios, but remained a semi-autonomous unit within the conglomerate.

Before forming the studio, Marvel had licenced out its most traditionally profitable comic characters, leaving the characters from *The Ultimates* as the highest-profile characters left to mine for films, largely because they had appeared in *The Ultimates* as a way to combine lesser characters into one A-List property. As Rauscher (2014, p. 237) outlines, crossovers traditionally were “a threat of insolvency before the franchise gets rebooted”. The Hollywood crossover formerly was an attempt to revive a fading cycle exemplified by the end of Universal Studio’s monster franchise (*House of Dracula*, Erle C. Kenton, 1945) or 2000’s features like *Freddy vs. Jason* (Ronny Yu, 2003) and *Alien vs Predator* (Paul W. S. Anderson, 2004).
Inspired by comics’ combinations of lesser characters into a dependable franchise, as was the original goal of both *The Avengers* and *The Ultimates*, Marvel Studios reframed the crossover, which Matthias Stork (2014) defines as changing “the aesthetic, economic, and industrial dynamics of the superhero genre” (p. 79). The project began in 2006, designed to combine four separate superhero films: *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008), *The Incredible Hulk* (Louis Leterrier, 2008), *Captain America* (Joe Johnston, 2011), and *Thor* (Kenneth Branagh, 2011), into one film, which would offer a spectacle of scale exceeding other superhero films. *The Avengers* was always the end goal of the preceding films, with Marvel being confident their popularity would build. In a post credits sequence to the first entry, *Iron Man*, Nick Fury, played by Samuel L. Jackson, bringing to life the character drawn to resemble him in *The Ultimates*, appears to tell Iron Man he is now “part of a bigger universe” and welcomes him into the “Avengers Initiative.” The subsequent films were all essentially prequels to this promised film, introducing characters, hinting at plot points, and each containing small references to the other films. To get to this never before seen spectacle, fans would have to support the initial instalments, which in turn on each of their DVD/Blu-ray releases included features with titles like “The Assembly Begins” or “The Road to the Avengers” selling the spectacle’s future promise. President of Production Kevin Feige used interviews to sell *The Avengers* project, hyping that “people like grand experiments and things that haven’t been done before, the unexpected” (Weintraub, 2012) to slightly reframe how to keep superhero films interesting. By using interviews and other promotional materials such as short web videos, Marvel framed their crossover as being a unique undertaking that redefined genre, even if each of the individual films were standard examples of that genre. These, along with advertisements, merchandise, reviews, and other texts are paratexts which Gray (2010) suggests “provide the all-important early frames through which we will examine, react to, and evaluate textual consumption" and play a vital, if often under examined, role in solidifying popular interpretation (p. 26).

These paratexts help to frame the scale of storytelling Marvel Studios attempted. Marvel Studio’s focus is across the multiple media platforms, although unlike the *Star Wars* franchise, the films’ narratives exist apart from the narratives in Marvel’s other media ventures in comics, video games, or animated series. Only after *The Avengers* did Marvel branch out into television. As Eric Rollman, President of Marvel Studio’s animation division
told the USA Today, their productions were to “create synergy with the brand by having a continual awareness of different interpretations of the characters in the marketplace” (Keveney, 2008). Despite the possibility of controlling all interpretations of their characters, Marvel instead has chosen to market their characters slightly differently across different platforms. However, this is not the narrative Marvel Studios usually presents in media paratexts.

Despite each film being by different directors and writers, Marvel Studios created a unified aesthetic consistent from film to film. This differed from Warner Brothers’ approach of promoting the director as auteur with Christopher Nolan’s *Batman* franchise. Feige oversees all stages from script approval to marketing. This level of control has caused several directors to leave Marvel Studios projects, most notably cult film director Edgar Wright on *Ant-Man* (Peyton Reed, 2015) because he disagreed with the level of interconnectivity to other Marvel films being forced into the film (Child, 2014). As D. Johnson (2012) argues, Marvel Studios presents itself in paratexts as being the most capable of managing their own narratives against villainous Hollywood studios like Columbia or Fox, which had damaged Marvel properties by not “respecting” Marvel’s narrative traditions. However, D. Johnson (2012) emphasizes that

> while these claims drew on common sense understandings of licensing as a culturally illegitimate and inauthentic mode of production, they did not simply defer to the authority of creators. Removed from the discursive field of parental rights were both original Iron Man comics writers and artists Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Larry Lieber, and Don Heck, as well as film industry talent who might claim moral ownership or creative authority over their work. (p. 18)

Ultimately, this narrative authenticity is a cover for the increased profits corporate control over the film properties allowed. Their first film in the new model, *Iron Man*, profited Marvel more than their previous 16 licensed-out films combined (Schuker, 2008).

### 2.3. Militarization and The Avengers

The most notable difference across platforms is the discursive militarization of superheroes: *The Ultimates*, the traditional Marvel universe, and the Cinematic universe.
These were the three main iterations of the Avengers occupying a significant role in an intertextual web at the film’s release in May 2012. There is a core difference in motivations and representations within the texts, even though control remains within the same corporate structure and there are creative personnel crossover between the films and their comic properties. The three iterations allow for substantive comparison as all feature an alien invasion. Aliens have become one of popular fiction’s most common evocations of 9/11, providing a safely Othered antagonist, an unambiguous evil and inhuman force that does not require reflection upon historical circumstances. This view is hardly empathetic as it suggests other cultures are both inherently monolithic and incomprehensible. This has been the common portrayal of alien invasion going back to films like *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956), where alien invasion poses a threat to human individuality. McDowell (2014) suggests that this depiction of incomprehensible aliens “potentially politically validates a Manichean sensibility that colours the current politico-cultural fear of the racially stereotyped Middle Eastern Muslim other” (p. 55). The alien threat across iterations is not quite the same, but similar enough that a comparison of how the military deals with it will be fruitful. To examine the three iterations, I discuss how the military is presented in handling this alien threat.

2.3.1. **The Ultimates: Satire and/or Militainment?**

Comic book writing for corporate, rather than creator, owned properties sees character’s narratives continually published, but with ever-changing groups of writers and artists. While there is a core corporate concept of a character, this process inevitably leads to a constant “re-writing”, emphasizing certain aspects and events from the past and ignoring others, while still tethered to the idea of one continuous narrative. *The Ultimates* is comic re-writing untethered from the past, an adaptation within the same medium, having to follow only publisher Bill Jemas’ goal to return each property to “its central metaphor” (Howe, 2013, p. 405). The central metaphor in Millar’s reimagining of *The Avengers* seems to be little other than superheroes teaming up to fight as *The Ultimates* featured a significant departure in the heroes’ ethics. No longer are they self-motivated individuals, but selfish individuals with abilities which must be managed and persuaded by the military to act. While this was a new approach to Marvel’s characters, the idea of modern superheroes as explicit paramilitary was first explored in *The Authority* (Ellis &
Hitch, 1999-2000), a comic published by Wildstorm Publications. Wildstorm was owned by DC but maintaining editorial autonomy, that specialized in comics more cynical and violent than usually produced by DC, aimed at even more niche market. When Ellis left the series to pursue other projects with DC, Millar replaced him on the series until January 2001, when disputes with DC’s editorial over content led him to leave for Marvel. In addition to military themes, Hitch’s art popularized the use of widescreen comic panels to mirror a Hollywood action film aesthetic. Hitch would join Millar for two 13 issue mini-series, The Ultimates from March 2002 to April 2004 and The Ultimates 2, published from February 2005 to February 2007.

The aliens of The Ultimates continue Marvel’s tradition of tying threats to a Nazi past, although here Nazism is re-written to have been a facade for the invasion of the Chitauri, a one-dimensional group of shape-shifters bent on fascist conquest of the galaxy. The series opens with Captain America’s last battle of World War II, where he stops a Nazi superweapon, at the cost of being frozen in the North Atlantic. The re-writing of Nazis has significant ethical dimensions as it absolves humanity of its worst actions, of suggesting that only under external control could humans act in such a way. It also follows Murray’s (2011) argument that Nazis channeled through the lens of myth to reduce them to nothing more than signifiers of evil, devoid of an ideological basis.

In all three iterations examined, the military is represented through the umbrella organization of S.H.I.E.L.D, a shared acronym of different meanings. S.H.I.E.L.D’s origins are tied deeply to its chief, Sergeant Nick Fury, a personification of rugged American masculinity. Fury was originally created in 1963 for Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos (Lee & Kirby, #1), Marvel’s effort to join the popular war comic genre. The series was unusual in its portrayal of a group of soldiers from diverse ethnic backgrounds, creating the myth of an integrated American army, which would inform Marvel’s portrayal of World War II across media, including Captain America (2012). This furthers the idea of America as the moral good of the war, erasing its racist past. Fury was reconfigured in 1965 to meet another fad, James Bond-style espionage (Lee & Kirby, 1965, Strange Tales #135). Fury became a spy who used anti-aging drugs and inhabited a psychedelic art-infused world of robot duplicates, flying aircraft carriers, brain washing plots, and a vast secret fascist terrorist organization, Hydra (Steranko, 1968, Nick Fury, Agent of
Fury worked for the Supreme Headquarters, International Espionage, Law-Enforcement Division (S.H.I.E.L.D.), playing on the 1960s trend of forced acronyms, such as the James Bond franchises’ Special Executive for Counter-Intelligence, Terrorism, Revenge, and Extortion (SPECTRE).

This initial acronym does not have a clear identity. Is it international? American? Which laws is it enforcing? The comic is never clear on this, although the group is made up primarily of American and British operatives in addition to one Italian character. Payne and Spaeth (2012) compellingly argue that having Fury and two of his Howling commandos, Dum Dum Dugan and Gabriel Jones, be core members of S.H.I.E.L.D. continues the “Good War” narrative of World War II into the Cold War. However, this fad drifted to an end and the organization no longer had its own title as Marvel moved away from international threats in the 1970s. However, they remained in the background of the Marvel Universe, occasionally aiding heroes, but existing largely separate from them.

*The Ultimates* put S.H.I.E.L.D. at the centre of their universe. It follows the 1991 Marvel Universe redefinition of S.H.I.E.L.D. to Strategic Hazard Intervention Espionage Logistics Directorate. This acronym is a bit clearer as to the organization’s function, removing indications that it is an international group while retaining the espionage function, which suggests its ability to use force to “intervene” in hazardous situations. *The Ultimates* examines both of these functions. Espionage is no longer about swashbuckling spy action, but a surveillance state, with S.H.I.E.L.D. having cameras and microphones monitoring both public and private spaces.

S.H.I.E.L.D.’s ability to “intervene” in hazards is through the use of super-powered force. Fury meets with then President George W. Bush to discuss how the “real problem” America is facing is super terrorism and should invest billions on developing a new super soldier serum (like the original, now lost, formula which gave Captain America his power). Bush and Fury agree that a conventional army is impractical for facing terrorism and instead create a “small, superhuman army for 21st century problems” (Millar & Hitch, 2002, *Ultimates* #2), terrorism being discursively constructed by the American powers as inevitable. In another instance, a fictional Larry King asks Iron Man if S.H.I.E.L.D. can “seriously justify a fifty billion dollar headquarters... When there’s been only one notable
supervillain attack in American history”. Iron Man responds that not having that would be like not having health insurance, with S.H.I.E.L.D. using terrorism as an excuse for excessive military spending (Ultimates #4).

This brings about the most significant change to Marvel’s franchise, as the military is now the organizing force of superheroes, rather than individuals banding together out of a sense of practical need, and later out of a sense of community, as only other superheroes can understand their personal issues. As Millar explained “the idea behind The Avengers is that the Marvel Universe’s biggest players all get together and fight all the biggest supervillains they can't find individually whereas Ultimates is an exploration of what happens when a bunch of ordinary people are turned into super-soldiers and being groomed to fight the real-life war on terror” (Estrella, 2004). The heroes put together are similar to the initial 1960s Avengers: Captain America, Iron Man, The Hulk, Giant-Man, The Wasp, Thor, Hawkeye, Black Widow, The Scarlet Witch, and Quicksilver (Millar & Hitch, 2002, Ultimates #2-3). However, the characters’ worst traits established during decades of continuity in the traditional universe became their defining features. For example, Iron-Man is an alcoholic (Ultimates #2). Giant-Man is a domestic abuser (Ultimates #6). The Hulk is so out of control that he must be contained and, when this fails, he rampages through New York, killing hundreds of civilians (Ultimates #5). As Dittmer (2013) notes in his study of Captain America, The Ultimates Captain is 1940s military propaganda thrust into neo-conservative 2000s America as opposed to the Marvel universe character, whom McDowell (2014) describes as someone who understands “America as a developing and politically ambiguous project” (p. 59).

Comic artist and writer Jim Lee suggests “that in some ways, the government is our new version of radiation. Radiation used to be the reasons why people got superpowers. Now the government is” (DeFalco, 2005, p. 41). This observation suggests the government is a similar tension to radiation, capable of both innovation and destruction. The government relationship to the superhero takes on shades of Foucault’s (1977/1990) definition of the first form of bio-power; the “body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls” (p. 139). In The Ultimates, it is no longer the self-driven search for
improvement, but the military as the efficient system which provides heroes with the optimization of their capabilities. This also introduces the idea of compensation into the superhero universe. *Avengers* comics typically had vague references that billionaire Iron Man paid for the expenses of the other members (for example, Busiek & Paquette, 2002, *Avengers* vol 3, #56), but the idea was that heroes were motivated by duty rather than profit. Here, individuals with special abilities agree to fight as government soldiers in exchange for the ability to maintain a celebrity lifestyle (Millar & Hitch, 2002, *Ultimates* #4).

Unlike in the original Marvel universe, the Ultimates make no attempt to hide their public identity, instead reveling in their celebrity, encouraging the public to celebrate their abilities. The team announces its formation at a launch party (*Ultimates* #3). They have their own publicist, who emphasizes their abilities and connections to American patriotism and books them as guests on Larry King (*Ultimates* #4), Oprah, and Howard Stern (*Ultimates* #6). They sell DVDs of their fights (*Ultimates* #7). In a notable scene hinting as the comic’s film aspirations, the heroes sit around fantasizing about who would play them in a movie (*Ultimates* #4). This is a neoconservative model of the military, as Morgan O’Rourke (2014) compelling argues, in which the celebrity plays into the militainment complex itself, with the soldier as celebrity intimidating other nations. This desire for fame comes at the cost of openness and S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Ultimates PR are constantly lying to the public about their true actions, perhaps the clearest critique on the Bush administration in the series (*Ultimates* #7, 13). The military must subdue the celebrities to force them into action, yet also promote celebrity for public support. O’Rourke (2014) posits that readers enjoyed the celebrity aspect, a superhero version of a reality show, suggesting that it was this, perhaps more than the militarization, that had a significant role in the series’ popularity. Yet this aspect of *The Ultimates* was hardly adapted at all into *The Avengers*.

*The Ultimates* also features a tie to World War II that constantly links superhero morality to a present threat, with the final conflict a repeat of the end of the Ultimate universe version of World War II, Captain America once again facing the Chitauri leader (Millar & Hitch, 2002, *Ultimates* #1). The conflict is military, as S.H.I.E.L.D. suffers major destruction after falling for a Chitauri trap in Micronesia, and briefly have their New York Hudson Bay island headquarters taken over by the Chitauri. However, the battle goes on
without significant civilian death, confined to S.H.I.E.L.D.’s island and the desert outskirts of Phoenix, Arizona. This battle is also a celebration of unbridled American masculinity as Captain America defeats the Chitauri in a brutal fist fight and even the out of control rage of the Hulk is framed as a positive when channelled through the military (*Ultimates* #10-13).

However, Millar’s post-*Ultimates* interviews suggests the series was supposedly satirical. As he explained in 2008: “It’s amazing how many people seem to think this [*War Heroes*] is a neo-con comic. Same thing happened on [Marvel’s] *Ultimates*, when it was clearly anti-war through and through. I feel like [director Paul] Verhoeven must have felt after *Starship Troopers*, in the sense that many people are missing the political satire” (Gopalan, 2008). Millar further elaborated in 2013 “People would say, ‘I joined the army after reading *The Ultimates* because I wanted to make a difference in the Middle East,’ and I was like, ‘Well, I kind of meant the opposite of that’” (Reisman, 2013). DiPaolo (2011) asserts that “the comic, which I had read as a paean to the Bush Administration, was, in actual fact, a savage satire of it” (p. 33). The misreading has various possibilities. Barthes (1977) outlines “a text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures, and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where the multiplicity is focused and that place is the reader, not as was hitherto said, the author” (p. 148). Millar’s intentions, while a surprising paratextual frame, were obscured by both the political climate and other paratexts, primarily Marvel’s advertising and the series’ visual style.

The series was released during the patriotic stage immediately following 9/11. Murray (2011) saw the book as existing in a time when “9/11 reawakened American patriotism, which had been deeply problematized since Vietnam... Once again, superheroes had something to fight for” (p. 253). Captain America yelling at an opponent “What do you think this letter on my head stands for? France?” may seem absurd, but it occurred in the same year Republican Chairman of the House Committee on House Administration Bob Ney renamed “French Fries” “Freedom Fries” at the Congressional cafeteria to protest France’s refusal to join the invasion of Iraq. The second series perhaps made its criticism of foreign policy more explicit, as the Ultimates’ incursion into Azerbaijan leads a team of the “Liberators”, from Syria, North Korea, China, Russia (although Vladimir
Putin appears in the comic to deny involvement, as does an unspecified Chinese leader), and Azerbaijan to seek retribution against America (Millar & Hitch, 2005-2007, *The Ultimates 2*). However, this still plays into deeply conservative views as their plan is to behead Captain America on television (*The Ultimates 2*, #12). Here, while America may have overstepped its powers, the retaliation is still framed as being cruel and shows that these countries are dangerous and threats to America, even if they have legitimate grievances. Additionally, even when the Ultimates go independent, Iron Man implies it is as private contractors and that the military is happy to pass the costs off to Iron Man, confident their goals are aligned. Stark even asks his assistant “Who knows? Perhaps with a little careful management we can even make a profit while we’re saving the world?” (*Ultimates 2* #13).

The promotion of the *The Ultimates* played it as an action, rather than satire series. In the solicitation to retailers for #1, Millar is quoted as

> What we have to do here is re-think everything we’ve ever taken for granted about superhero comics and throw away all of the cliches and formulas. This series (as well as the Ultimate line in general) has to feel as different from traditional comic books as Stan Lee’s vision was to Golden Age DC. (Marvel Comics, Oct 2001)

The emphasis is on a different, new form of superhero action, not a satire of it. Solicitations for #2 emphasized the “edginess” and violence of the book, with Millar quoted saying “I mean, wouldn’t it be interesting to see some people chicken out and call in sick when there’s somebody they know can kick the sh-- out of them?” (Marvel Comics, Dec 2001). The solicitations for the 4th issue makes it a bit more clearly comedy, although only verging on satire. “Billions have been spent on Nick Fury’s global security force, but the public is starting to complain because there’s no huge threat for them to battle! Meanwhile, friction breaks out between the members when *The Ultimates* movie is optioned!” (Marvel Comics, Feb 2002). This tone disappeared in remaining solicitations, which quickly returned to an emphasis on violence, such as #7’s “Mark Millar sets the tone for a grand, cinematic war epic” (Marvel Comics, May 2002); #10’s “the greatest threat ever to face the planet!” (Marvel Comics, Feb 2003); or #12’s “It’s all-out action as The Ultimates take the battle to the alien infiltrators - the deadly Chitauri! And in this struggle against overwhelming odds, there WILL be casualties” (Marvel Comics, June 2003).
Compare the above solicitations to Marvel's comedy series *Nextwave* (2006-2007), written by Warren Ellis as a satire of his series *Authority*, which introduced the militarized superhero. *Nextwave* features heroes working for the Highest Anti-Terrorism Effort (H.A.T.E), a pointed satire of S.H.I.E.L.D. and racism imbedded in anti-terrorist groups. Issue #1’s promised “RRRAAAAAGGGGGHHHHH!! Action! Excitement!” and “If you like anything, you will LOVE NEXTWAVE!!! BOOM!!” (Marvel Comics, Oct 2005) number #5’s proclaimed “four out of five dentists prefer Nextwave to soap. In fact, they were so emphatic in their preference, they beat up the fifth dentist and he fell in line (Marvel Solicits, Feb 2006), or #12’s “Do not miss this pulse-pounding conclusion to the greatest work of western literature EVER! Hamlet? Horrible” (Marvel Solicits, Oct 2006). Clearly, these paratexts encourage the reader to expect a series significantly different from *The Ultimates*. Regardless of the book’s contents, the reader now potentially has preconceived ideas as to what to expect: read *The Ultimates* for epic action and *Nextwave* for humour.

The aesthetics of *The Ultimates* also coded the book as serious in comparison to other comics. Mainstream superhero comics usually make a pretense of being serious, to be read at surface value, regardless of the absurdity of plot. The rare mainstream comic book that is overtly satirical or parodic has art tending towards caricature as signifier of its intentions. The art for *Nextwave*, by Stuart Immonen has exaggerated, cartoonish lines and is coloured in bright colours, a stark contrast to Hitch’s wide panel compositions and detailed pencils complemented by muted colours, which became the standard for Marvel art. The only visual indicator may have been the resemblance of characters to Hollywood stars, but this could just as easily be framed as trying to have the reader imagine the film version.

The lesson of *The Ultimates* demonstrates the thin line in satirizing militainment culture in that militainment, especially in the first stage of post 9/11 American culture, had reached a level of absurdity that made reality and satire nearly indistinguishable. *The Ultimates* appeared on the surface as featuring aesthetics suitable to the superhero comic, having events typical of the genre, and was presented to readers not as critical of the genre, but as doing the genre better than had been previously done. The liberalism easily slipped away from the tradition of “liberalism with a fascist aesthetic”. The text presented possibilities of subversion, but also provided the elements, previously unimagined, that
could be read as celebrating militarization. The satire became unrecognizable when it veered too close to larger discursive patterns.

2.3.2. The New Avengers: Secrets and Lies

While producing strong sales, *The Ultimates* title had a long production time and featured many delays. Scheduled to be released monthly, there was a four month delay between issues #8 and #9, at which point it moved to a bi-monthly schedule for the remaining four issues. The second mini-series faced similar delays, most notably six months between issues #12 and #13. For a more reliable title to serve as building *The Avengers* brand in advance of the movies, Bendis was hired to relaunch the Avengers to become one of Marvel’s main titles. The series features what Burke (2015) defines as the “fidelity flux”, where “serialized ‘source texts’ such as comic books can be effectively reverse-engineered to tally more neatly with their adaptations” (p. 20). The main fidelity flux with regard to the Ultimate universe upon the main Marvel universe was to make S.H.I.E.L.D. central (Bendis et al., 2005-2007, *New Avengers* #1-#31). This was perhaps because the surveillance state/military apparatus resonates with contemporary audiences, because, as J.K. Johnson (2012) argues, the monthly publishing schedule leads to basing stories off contemporary concerns and, as Morrison (2012) mentions, Marvel encouraged writers to incorporate current events into their stories. The connection to contemporary concerns had its limits though, as while frequently discussing political themes, the series was never explicit about Afghanistan and Iraq, instead keeping conflicts on an allegorical level.

The new series, initially entitled *New Avengers*, featured a roster differing significantly from *The Ultimates*. Captain America, Iron Man, and Hawkeye appear in both, but the *New Avengers* also included Marvel’s two most popular characters Spider-Man and Wolverine (from the X-Men) in effort to boost sales. The characters formed a team initially as a response to a prison break (Bendis & Finch, 2005, *New Avengers* #1-3), later inviting superhero friends like Spider-Woman (*New Avengers* #4) to join the team, reminiscent of the original Avengers rather than the institution created Ultimates. Over the next few years, Bendis launched several additional Avengers titles, such as *Mighty Avengers* (Bendis & Cho, 2007) and *Dark Avengers* (Bendis & Deodato Jr, 2009). This
series is more complicated to discuss than the other iterations given that while *The Ultimates* was only two 13 issue mini-series and *The Avengers* a film, Bendis wrote at least one issue of the *Avengers* monthly for over eight years, providing for significantly more space for plot and nuance. There are three major storylines to his work. The first, *Secret Invasion* (Bendis & Yu, 2008-2009, *Secret Invasion* & Bendis et al., 2005-2009 *New Avengers* #1-47), focused on an alien invasion. The second, *Dark Reign* (Bendis et al., 2009-2010 *New Avengers* #48-64), had villain Norman Osborne take over S.H.I.E.L.D. The third, *The Heroic Age* (Bendis et al., 2010-2013, *New Avengers* vol 2, #1-34 & *Avengers* vol 4, #1-34), released after the film, lifted the Avengers out of the dark cycle it had been in in exchange for the revisionist nostalgic approach that had been resurgent in the late 1990s. For ease of comparison around the issues of alien invasion, I next focus on the issues leading up to *Secret Invasion*.

To relaunch the series, Bendis and Marvel made three main changes. The first was to have the Avengers lose their United Nations mandate to operate and become unaffiliated agents (Bendis & Finch, 2005, *Avengers* #503). S.H.I.E.L.D. appears as an organization designed to handle super-powered individuals when they overstep national interests, which sets up a tense relationship between it and the Avengers (*Avengers* #502). The second change of the status quo was to remove Nick Fury from S.H.I.E.L.D. after the *Secret War* (Bendis & Dell’otto, 2004-2005) miniseries, where he led a disastrous assassination attempt on Latveria’s president, whom he believed was funneling super technology to supervillains. This concern reconfigures supervillains as super terrorists, as Lewis (2012) argues “terrorism is the word that makes any situation instantly dire” (pg. 232). The portrayal of Latveria in *Secret War* (#2, #3) was very different from Marvel’s usual depiction of an Eastern European country populated largely by 19th century peasants, instead now designed to look the way American media often imagines a Middle Eastern country, with Black Widow wearing a niqab as part of her disguise (*Secret War* #2).

The third change was to have Iron Man become the leader of S.H.I.E.L.D. after a Mark Millar written event series *Civil War*. The series has a façade of political relevance over its core purpose to have heroes fight each other. A superhero team with a reality show confronts a supervillain who, in his attempt to escape, blows up an elementary
school (Millar & McNiven, 2006, *Civil War* #1). This event becomes a turning point in the Marvel universe, their 9/11 which forces substantial policy change. The public demands American superheroes become accountable to the government and make public their secret identities. The President, drawn to look vaguely like Bush, S.H.I.E.L.D., and Iron Man advocate accountability while, notably, Captain America opposes the plan, arguing that making their identities public renders their families vulnerable to attack and that the government has not always operated in accordance with the heroes’ ethics (*Civil War* #1). The rich, white scientists of the Marvel universe, Iron Man, Ant-Man, and Mr. Fantastic, are the biggest supporters of the registration act (*Civil War* #2-3), which as Edlitz (2014) remarks, corresponds to the interests historically best served by the government while the working class heroes like Luke Cage, Hawkeye, and The Falcon oppose it (*Civil War* #2-3; Bendis & Yu, 2006, *New Avengers* #22). These heroes are hunted down because, as S.H.I.E.L.D. agent Maria Hill declares, “I thought supervillains were guys in masks who refused to obey the law” (*Civil War* #1). *The New Avengers* seeks to show how this traditional superhero morality is necessarily complicated in the face of the suspension of civil rights in the name of protection, mirroring the Patriot Act, which enabled the United States government to suspend due process and allow for various forms of surveillance without warrant. To enforce this policy, S.H.I.E.L.D. threatens torture and maintains a secret prison where individuals are detained indefinitely without trial (*Civil War* #4). S.H.I.E.L.D. seems to replicate American policy, perhaps finally dropping the international façade. This is similar to the American break with the United Nations over the invasion of Iraq, which indicated the lack of power the UN could actually have over a security council member state. The in-universe focus is on the US as in *Astonishing X-Men* #3 (2004), written by future Avengers director Joss Whedon, it is clear that S.H.I.E.L.D. is America, explaining why the organization didn’t try to stop the destruction of the fictional country of Genosha because it was not on American soil.

The concluding battle sees Captain America arrested and assassinated on the steps of the courthouse during his trial. Edlitz (2014) suggested that the result of this is shattering the Avengers as being at the centre of the moral universe because while both sides have a moral claim, even if some of their actions are clearly non-heroic. Kaveney (2008) reads Civil War as demonstrating “that quite ordinary and admirable people like Carol Danvers [Ms. Marvel] and Peter Parker [Spider-man] can become for a while the
accomplices of atrocity without turning into red-eyed monsters” (p. 200). By not clearly taking a stance, this reproduces the divisive American political landscape, giving each side a hero to endorse. Fascinatingly, it was also in 2007 that the US Army, through their public relations firm McCann Erickson, began buying advertising space in comic books, which suggests a belief the texts belong in a group of other entertainments such as video games and professional sports as spaces where audiences may be receptive to enlisting.

With these changes, the series features tensions between S.H.I.E.L.D. and independent heroes over the morality of world defence and leads to two separate Avengers teams. The New Avengers are the traditional Marvel model of independent loners who overcome their personal problems to stand up for a greater good while S.H.I.E.L.D. takes its inspiration from the Bush era foreign policy and the Ultimates, with its own team of heroes, the Mighty Avengers (Bendis & Cho, 2007), who use force to solve problems. This team is the first time the Avengers of the main Marvel universe is presented explicitly as a military force. However, as the New Avengers team are largely the pre-registration team, they can be read as implicitly the true Avengers as it continues the narrative Bendis began with his relaunch while Mighty Avengers starts new stories. This is contested by Lecker (2013), who reads the New Avengers as being portrayed as less effective due to their continual arguments about principles while the Mighty Avengers are favored by the narrative because they continue an unambiguous stance of continuing to defend the nation.

While The Ultimates went with a 20th century concern, totalitarianism, New Avengers coded their alien threat as the concern of the 21st century, Islamic extremism. The Skrulls, also a group of shape shifting totalitarians, are one of the oldest villains in the Marvel canon, introduced in January 1962’s Fantastic Four #2. They had tried to invade Earth before with force in Avengers #89–97 (Thomas, S. Buscema, Adams, & J. Buscema), but were obviously defeated by the heroes. They are depicted in New Avengers as infiltrating rather than using force, using their shapeshifting powers to kidnap individuals in power and replace them (Bendis et al., 2007-2009, New Avengers #31-47), creating an atmosphere of distrust and casting suspicion that heroes are not actually who they claim to be, which Costello (2009) and J.K. Johnson (2012) suggest reflect the murkiness of the post-Iraq invasion American politics.
Bendis was the first writer to explore a Skrull culture, and his approach is not only the most regressive moment of his series but also of the three iterations under comparison. They are guided in their quest for invasion by a holy book (New Avengers #40). They use suicide bombers who shout “He loves you” before they detonate (Bendis & Yu, 2008, Secret Invasion #7). As Jones (2014) notes, one of the few Israeli superheroes, Sabra, is depicted as possibly being killed by a Skrull (Secret Invasion #6), a suspicious selection of nation as the only other countries featured are the fictional Marvel locations of Wakanda and the Savage Land. When the Skrulls make their presence known and launch a full scale invasion, it is once again New York that is at the centre of the conflict, the first strike destroying the top floors of the Fantastic Four’s skyscraper headquarters. The Skrulls morphed from their old depiction of a totalitarian state to a religious extremist one. The paratexts for Secret Invasion also carry odd connotations, as the full page ads released in September 2008 in other Marvel comic books and on social media sites featured Americana scenes with Skrulls replacing humans, like a Skrull child playing baseball. Change in the paratexts is seen as a negative, a return to 1950s comic as outlined by J. K. Johnson (2012) where villains attempted to change society while heroes realized it has already achieved perfection. These ads coincided with Barack Obama’s presidential campaign use of the slogan “change we can believe in”. Marvel’s Vice President of Marketing Mike Pasciullo claimed this was simply a coincidence (McMillan, 2008).

When the Skrulls infiltrate, it is S.H.I.E.L.D. that is destabilized, with the aliens being behind the removal of Fury and of setting S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Avengers against each other (revealed in Bendis & Yu, 2008, Secret Invasion #3). This is similar to The Ultimates’ depiction of Nazis being aliens as it excuses the worst actions of an organization due to the inherently “evil” beings who co-opt its power structure. However, at the same time it exposes the military structure as not being a trustworthy source of authority, but an organization ripe for corruption, even if it is through extravagant allegorical depiction.

The solution to defeating the Skrulls is not moving the heroes forward, but looking backwards, again invoking a moral nostalgia for past certainty. The battle against the Skrulls is won by heroes from the past. Thor returns after an absence of several years. Captain America’s former sidekick becomes the new Captain America (Secret Invasion #6). Finally, Nick Fury emerges from hiding, having suspected a Skrull invasion since
Secret War, with a team trained specifically to combat the Skrulls (Secret Invasion #3). This storyline muddles its politics, which follows Jones (2014) argument this storyline “retreated into a xenophobia and paranoia that is more in keeping with the jingoism of the late Golden Age [1930s-1950s] of comics” (p. 176), a lapse from their usual norm of tolerant liberalism. Just because it is more questioning of military power, it does not mean it avoids conservatism, nor does it mean that the storyline is not aligning with dominant American myths. But the conclusion of the arc is that former “super-villain”, The Green Goblin is named head of S.H.I.E.L.D. after he kills the Skrull queen (Secret Invasion #8). He renames the organization H.A.M.M.E.R, an acronym that stands for nothing, as when questioned by his assistant about its meaning, Osborne tells her to “get back to him on that” (Bendis & Deodato Jr, 2009, Dark Avengers #1). This arc continues the tensions throughout the series. While I agree with Jones that the enemies of the series were regressive depictions, the narrative’s support of turning to the past as a solution ultimately created more problems. To defeat the religious extremists, the military embraced its own form of authoritarianism, which would go on to have substantial negative consequences.

2.3.3. The Avengers: Military Blockbuster

Just as The Ultimates influenced the New Avengers, it was also at the core of Marvel Studio’s iteration of The Avengers. The Ultimates is cited by Feige as inspiration for the film; “The Ultimates was an amazing reinvention of The Avengers. Mark Millar and Joe Quesada sat down more than ten years ago and said, ‘If we had to reinvent The Avengers universe today what would we do? How would we change it?’ so they were asking and answering the same questions we always do when we have to start to make a movie.” (Douglas, 2012). However, they were not asking the same questions. Millar was considering how to reinvent The Avengers in a way that could also serve as his form of critique of American foreign policy while Feige was considering it in terms of how to create a Hollywood blockbuster, apparently devoid of satire. To Feige, The Ultimates is now, disturbingly, a reflection of the contemporary world.

S.H.I.E.L.D. in the films receives yet another redefinition, the most explicitly militaristic yet: Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division. Its espionage roots have been completely removed, replaced with the aggressive use of
enforcement. It is also clearly not international, now focusing on “homeland” intervention. While the most explicitly American based in name, it makes pretenses at being international, with S.H.I.E.L.D reporting to a “world security council”, vaguely similar to the United Nations Security Council, it reports to, consisting of American (Powers Boothe), British (Jenny Agutter), and presumably, although not necessarily, Chinese (Donald Li) and unspecified, possibly Russian (Arthur Darbinyan) representatives. However, the international presence is relatively insignificant, serving mainly as bureaucrats trying to stand in the way of Nick Fury taking the decisive action the film frames as necessary for American safety. The international politics are shown as holding back the use of force from doing the right thing. The Avengers themselves have superficial nods to an international force, but at the core the characters are five Americans, a Norse god, and a Russian who seemingly immigrated to the U.S. years ago. While this is true of both comic universe iterations as well, there is no denial that they are anything but Americans. Theses heroes are labelled in the paratexts as “Earth’s mightiest heroes”, even though the only non-American in the group is not from Earth. The film has early scenes in Russia, India, and Germany to set up the plot, but the final conflict occurs in New York, as superficial internationalism gives way to American patriotism.

In this iteration, S.H.I.E.L.D. has an uneasy relationship with the American military and is a separate organization. During the Avengers’ battle against the Chitauri in New York, Fury must hold off the World Security Council from approving the military plan to drop a nuclear bomb on New York, creating a ticking clock plot point. Spanakos (2011) reads the early Marvel films, Iron Man, Iron Man 2, and The Incredible Hulk, as being opposed to the military industrial complex. The Hulk was created by a military experiment gone wrong and the film focuses on him as a fugitive from the obsessive General Ross. Iron Man is created after weapons designer Tony Stark visits Afghanistan to see his weapons in action. While held prisoner in a cave, he is horrified to learn his weapons are falling into the hands of both Americans and terrorist groups. He escapes with the help of the Iron Man suit. Once he returns to the US, he spends part of the film arguing that he should control his intellectual property and not hand it over the military. Spanakos (2011) argues that

Stark is the fly in the ointment that shakes the viewer out of the idea that the events of September 11 created an ongoing condition of lawlessness
in which the US state could act as sovereign without regard to the fundamental liberties and rights that constitute the authentic legitimacy of the state. (p. 22)

This is complicated when Iron Man tells an American senator “I’ve successfully privatized world peace” as his idea of world peace appears to have the same goals as American foreign policy. The first international action he takes is in Afghanistan. While perhaps an explicit denial of the military, the actions arrive at the same result. Iron Man is the ultimate in fetishization of military technology, a man without special abilities who becomes a superhero merely by wearing a weaponized suit, which, as Hassler-Forest (2011) discusses, bears similarities to the US Army’s 2001 recruitment ad of a lone solder in amour juxtaposed with the phrase “army of one”. Here, human and weapon merge into one autonomous being. As Chambliss (2013) outlines, in “every version of Iron Man, the core themes of corporatism, nationalism, individualism, and technological innovation linked to free market practice remain central to Tony Stark’s motivation… [which] reflects a popular understanding that political circumstances are guided by values central to the US experience” (p. 177). Chambliss further argues that this message ingrains the American military industrial complex as how the US relates to the global community. Iron Man received co-operation from the military, providing the film production access to fighter jets and other weaponry. Additionally, the military hired Legacy Effects, the company that designed the Iron Man suit for the film, to work on the designs for their Tactical Assault Light Operator Suit (TELOS) (Nissembaum, 2014): the fidelity flux of militainment and military reality.

Even if Spanakos’ reading was not complicated by the films, his view of the military is undermined by S.H.I.E.L.D.’s place in The Avengers narrative. As in The Ultimates, the heroes must be controlled and the militaristic organization S.H.I.E.L.D. is the one presented as capable. Barthes (1957) defines the myth of “the inoculation”, as “admitting the accidental evil of a class-bound institution the better to conceal its principal evil” (p. 264). One of his prime examples of this is James Jones’ novel, From Here to Eternity, of which he writes:

take an army: manifest plainly the militarism of its leaders, the narrow, unjust character of its discipline, and into this stupid tyranny thrust an average being… and then at the last moment, reverse the magic helmet,
and out of it draw the image of a triumphant army, flags flying. (Barthes, 1957, p. 41)

This description fits the military of the Marvel universe as well, initially portrayed as holding back individuals from achieving their successes before later being the conduit through which they are their most effective. S.H.I.E.L.D. is a kind of liberal ideal of the military, internationally co-operative and effective. Even the development of weapons from alien technology or the military’s plan to bomb New York in The Avengers is less an attack on the military, but, as McDowell (2014) argues “does not contest America's leadership as such but only the motives and poor judgement of particular persons in power” (p. 45). This is part of the inoculation, that the institution is good, even if it has bad people within in.

As in The Ultimates, the military is shown as the necessary organizing force. When brought together, the heroes initially engage in a masculinity contest of verbal and physical bouts that focus on surface level character traits and abilities rather than their ethical approaches. Without the organizing structure of the military, they would pettily bicker while the world burned. The military is even more successful here than in The Ultimates at containing the Hulk. While in The Ultimates, Hulk is uncontrollable and is locked away for use only at certain times, in The Avengers the military structure allows him to control his rage, something the character is incapable of in either comic universe.

Fury has to use the apparent death of their recruiter, Coulson (Clark Gregg), as a tool to unite them. He lies to them that Coulson had 1940s Captain America trading cards on him when he was killed and shows the Avengers the bloodied cards. Fury faked this, implying that is sometimes necessary to lie to achieve military ends, a parallel to the false claims of Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction.” This is the rare moment in the narrative where the viewer is asked to question the ethics of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s action. Echoing Fury’s return in Secret Invasion, the appeal to the trading cards engages again in moral nostalgia, for the patriotism and uncomplicated “good war” of World War II, which must be recreated in the present to deal sufficiently with the threat. This was foreshadowed earlier in the film when Captain America asks if his American flag inspired costume is “a little old fashioned” only to be told by Coulson “with everything that is happening and things coming to light people just might need a little old fashioned”. Yet it is not just Captain America who is the link to World War II, but also Iron Man. The film franchise adds to Iron Man’s story that his
father dedicated his life to inventing technological solutions during World War II. Iron Man, after his capture by terrorists, feels compelled to follow this legacy.

The alien threat of *The Avengers* are also called the Chitauri, although they have nothing in common with *The Ultimates* version. While still large, grey-skinned reptilians, they are no longer shapeshifters, but part of a hive mind controlled by a mother ship. They lack even the uniform culture of the Ultimate Chitauri or the Skrulls, instead being faceless, completely Othered video-game aesthetic disposable enemies. Their lack of any sort of recognizable humanity allows the heroes to kill them as if insects rather than the equivalent of humans. The Chitauri here have no plans, but function as a mercenary army at the command of Thor’s brother, Loki, invading Earth in order to acquire a powerful object capable of producing unlimited energy. Once Iron Man destroys their command ship, every combatant in New York falls dead immediately, severed from their one mind. The Chitauri are only slightly linked to the Nazis in the narrative, with their leader Loki appearing before a crowd in Germany to demand they kneel before him. Only an old man, who presumably lived through Nazi Germany, refuses. Captain America quickly arrives to confront Loki, “the last time I was in Germany and saw a man standing above everyone else, we ended up disagreeing.”

While the S.H.I.E.L.D. of *The Ultimates* played with the patriotism of the first stage of post 9/11, *The Avengers* recognizes that the long running wars have made patriotism divisive. The film demonstrated not only a moral nostalgia for World War II, but also for the immediate aftermath of the towers’ fall, as evidenced by Feige’s dedication of the film to New York firefighters, police officers, paramedics, and other heroes of 9/11. The film’s final conflict itself harkens back to 9/11 with its New York setting. Yet protection of civilian lives is on the minds of the heroes amidst the conflict. McSweeney (2014) suggests *The Avengers* “symbolically recreates and rewrites 9/11 and the war on terror in an attempt to perform some sort of closure by reconciling America with the divisive events of its recent past” (p.129). Here, the trauma of 9/11 is largely averted. Although there is significant property damage, there is not the significant number of lives lost and the use of American force is globally uniting. America suffers only potential tragedy and their handling of it increases their international reputation rather than suffering real tragedy and then pursuing a course of action which alienated it from the international community. This result is
complicated by being achieved through manipulation and pursuit of a massively
destructive alternative, but this is kept secret, allowing for a globally unproblematized
appreciation of American heroes in the diegesis and a faultline text of inoculation for the
film’s audience.

However, the Pentagon did not see S.H.I.E.L.D. as clearly pro-American enough
to support. The US Defence Department’s Hollywood Liaison, Phil Strubb, explained “we
couldn’t reconcile the unreality of this international organization and our place in it. To
whom did S.H.I.E.L.D. answer? Did we work for S.H.I.E.L.D.? We hit that roadblock and
decided we couldn’t do anything” (Ackerman, 2012). This is a revealing quote about the
American military’s lack of desire to imagine themselves as part of a global community as
even an international organization clearly in line with American values and led by
Americans is not sufficient celebration of American power for it to endorse. This did not
deter the production team from using actual military jet designs but they had to be digitally
created rather than having on location access to physical planes. The fact that these are
digital copies of the “Lockheed-Martin F-35B Lightning II” rather than a generic fighter jet
suggests that the technofetishism of military technology is now something the military
doesn’t even need to pay for, so ingrained is it in the production culture.

Unlike the popular and concurrent Christopher Nolan Batman trilogy, The
Avengers does not even make a surface discussion about the inherent fascism of
superheroics or the possible breach of civil liberties. It is unambiguous, uncomplicated
heroism, a reference to the original Marvel comics of the 1960s and a retreat from the
dominant discourse of deconstructing the superhero that had often defined the comics
and non-Marvel studios superhero films since the mid-1980s. As McDowell (2014) notes,
the Avengers are publically celebrated, in contrast to how the Spider-Man, Batman, and
X-Men films have portrayed the heroes as at best suspicious and at worst a threat to
society.

2.4. Faultlines

The politics of Bendis’ Avengers lacked coherency, providing the ability to be
simultaneously read as either pro-military or anti-military. At times it questioned the post
9/11 security state in the fallibility of S.H.I.E.L.D., while at other times endorsing torture (Bendis et. al., 2008, *Mighty Avengers* #18) and playing upon fears of religious extremist terrorism. These contradictions mirror Brooker’s (2012) analysis of the political position seen by various critics who read *The Dark Knight*, as either definitively anti- or pro-Bush era anti-terror tactics. Brooker, using Derrida’s (1967/1976) deconstruction theory, argues a coherency in a political position can be found only by misrepresenting the fluidity of the narrative to confirm views rather than recognizing the film’s blurring of boundaries.

Each of the iterations presents faultlines, but their magnitude of questioning militarization differs considerably. *The Ultimates* tone serves as a faultline. The plot is unambiguous as to the heroism, but it is up to the reader to interpret if this tone is serious and particularly conservative or if the tone is satirical and to see the comic as a metatextual critique of both the Avengers concept and contemporary American foreign policy. *New Avengers* is not ambiguous in tone, but offers a plot that veers between celebration and critique of contemporary American policy, seeking to address complex issues while not alienating readers holding a particular political position. While it is not difficult to show the faultlines of these two versions, to demonstrate *The Avengers* has less significant faultlines is a more difficult task. I see the potential faultlines in the film as being around S.H.I.E.L.D. manipulating the Avengers into action. However, this is a faultline about refining the institution, not questioning the point of its existence. *The Avengers*, as McDowell (2014) argues, “rides roughshod over proper political self-reflection and reasoned scepticism, by offering a morally simplistic and unambiguous universe” (p. 65). This follows the pattern identified by Cartmell (1999) that adaptations tend to remove “unpleasant” elements from the hypotext to fulfil a “nostalgic yearning for a sanitized version” (p. 26). The next chapter will address likely possibilities as to why the film adaptation offers less significant faultlines.

To clarify, in celebrating readings critical of S.H.I.E.L.D., I want to avoid playing in libertarian ideals of limited government. The state is defined in Marvel’s properties exclusively along the lines of Weber’s (1919/2009) definition “the modern state is a compulsory association which organizes domination… successful in seeking to monopolize the legitimate use of physical force as a means of domination” (p. 82-83). While criticism of this aspect of the state is essential, a potential concern is that this
criticism equates government with only its biopolitical military and security function, ignoring the potentially pro-social roles it could play, working to cultivate a stance that is purely anti-government rather than simply anti-authoritarian. The definition of the state centred around force fits into the logic of neoliberalism, where the state’s role, as described by Harvey (2005) is to “set up those military, defence, police, and legal structures and functions required to secure private property rights and to guarantee, by force if need be, the proper functioning of markets” (p. 2).

2.5. Conclusion

Discussing made-for-television movies that directly address issues around the War on Terror, Prince (2009) notes the main themes: 1) “everyone should feel that their lives are directly threatened”; 2) “that there would be no end to this threat”; and 3) “that the government can be trusted to do the right thing and in a timely fashion” (p. 279). I believe these themes apply to a larger selection of texts than just films directly about the War on Terror. The first two of these themes are universal to the superhero genre, dependent as it is upon conflict, which must be continual in order to further the franchise. All iterations of the Avengers stop the alien invasion, but two of the three narratives hint the worst is yet to come. The Ultimates is the only one with a conclusive ending, although there was a sequel series that continually posed new threats to the team. Secret Invasion ends with a former supervillain ascending to power within S.H.I.E.L.D, obviously the source of new problems. The Avengers has a scene after the end credits where the alien Thanos sees the failure of the Chitauri as a mere setback. The narrative is of continual threat, an endangerment necessary to continue a military culture, a theme that will be picked up in the next chapter. The iterations diverge as to whether the government kept the population safe. Both The Ultimates and The Avengers depict S.H.I.E.L.D. as, despite various mistakes, ultimately keeping the population safe. In contrast, The New Avengers shows the government as being complicit in its endangerment. The obsession with surveillance and control blinded it to its own infiltration by the Skrulls, who then utilized the existing military structure to further their own goals.

In terms of militainment, the three traits emphasized by Stahl (2009) are all present to various degrees across iterations. The amount of destruction in urban areas caused by
invading aliens in *New Avengers* and *The Avengers* possibly killed civilians, although if lives were lost, they are not shown in any detail. *The Ultimates* depicts lives lost during The Hulk’s rampage in New York, but not in the Chitauri attack. The alien lives, presented as thoroughly evil, are not meant to be grieved. In fact, in *The Avengers*, they may not even be lives. However, there is a censorship function at play that affects these forms of media. The depiction of realistic deaths and human cost leads comics to be labelled as for “mature readers” and films to be classified with a restricted rating, limited to viewers over 18 years of age. Yet, absurdly, clean violence is considered appropriate for nearly all viewers. As this genre is aimed at children and teenagers as much as adults, superhero stories must meet these requirements. Some comics responsibly work within these confines and avoid stories of actual mass destruction. Instead, the conflict is about stopping mass death before it occurs. However, many, including the ones examined in this thesis, engage in the idea of clean war, playing to the larger entertainment construction of a consumer who enjoys violence, but not its results. Fetishism of military technology is, on the surface, the same across all three iterations, each one focusing on the same S.H.I.E.L.D. technologies, its flying aircraft carrier base and complement of jet fighters. This is showcased in the comics by a panel taking up the full two pages and in the film by wide shots capturing the scale meant to impress. Additionally, all three iterations celebrate the capabilities of Iron Man’s armour. The “support our troops” message is never explicit, but the public adoration of the superhero fits this category.

Returning to Costello (2009)’s concept of “liberalism with a fascist aesthetic”, the comic iterations demonstrate that the traits of militainment are intrinsic to the superhero genre, regardless as to whether the superhero is tethered to the military. But these traits alone, while contributing to a militarized climate, do not necessarily indicate the directions taken by the plot in supporting or critiquing a military climate. Nor, as will be explored in the next chapter, are superheroes who act like the idealized military the same as superheroes who are textually presented as part of the military. In that case, it is up to the reader to equate the two.

As this analysis emphasizes, the three iterations provide different philosophies of militarization. *The Ultimates* offers a surface celebration of strong American military action, but its depiction is complicated by its supposed satire. *The New Avengers* is the most
fractured of the iterations, opening up space for either pro- or anti- military readings. This may be because it was the longest running of the iterations, providing more story space to examine and depict issues, at times even running parallel series depicting two sides at odds with each other as equally heroic. The Avengers took The Ultimates' concept of S.H.I.E.L.D. controlling superheroes as its core, but toned down the hyperbolic characterization that gave the series a satiric edge. This is the core finding of this chapter, that the film versions present the least problematized depiction of superheroes as members of a military organization. The next chapter will explore further why the differences occur, how Marvel Studio frames the differences, and why these differences have significant social ramifications.
Chapter 3. The Significance of Militarization

3.1. Introduction

Now that the differences of where the faultiness regarding the military lie in three iterations of *The Avengers* have been outlined, this chapter aims to answer two questions about the militarization of superheroes. The first is to explore why the film adaptations have increased militarization over that used in the comic hypotexts. In order to theorize this, I return to the definitions provided in Chapter One about Hollywood’s use of discursive formations as to why Marvel Studios decided to implement a militainment framework around their heroes to mainstream their property. The second question is why does this matter? After all, the superhero genre is tacitly about solving problems through violent conflict. However, I suggest that there is a qualitative difference in this alteration of the superhero, from personally to militarily motivated, that represents a significant and troubling shift in popular culture depictions of ethical uses of violence.

3.2. Hollywood Militarization

The military is very popular with and ingrained in the American public. A 2007 Pew Research Poll found that even though support for the Iraq war was in decline, 84% of Americans still viewed the military favourably (Allen, Samaranayake, & Albrittain Jr, 2007). While Hollywood participates in cultivating this attitude, it also includes the military as an element certain audiences respond favourably to, which in turn maintains its popularity. The military is very accommodating to Hollywood’s needs. At the end of World War II, during which film had been an “official wartime industry”, the Pentagon established the Hollywood Liaison Office for collaborations between the military and Hollywood (Stahl, 2009). Through this, the military controlled access to vehicles and other props, but were only available to films with positive depictions of the military. With the difficulty of acquiring these materials from other sources, this left Hollywood studios largely unwilling to criticize the military. It was not until 1953 that a war film, *From Here to Eternity* (Fred Zinnemann), was released without the military’s support. The support works as a form of soft censorship, where the military is unwilling to even include Barthes’ (1957/2012) notion of
the inoculation, to admit any element may be a problem. Even if, as in the case of *The Avengers*, funding is not offered, scripts are written around the military’s preferences in expectation that Marvel’s relationship with the military would continue. Russell Coons, director of the Navy Office of Information West, explains “We’re not going to support a program that disgraces a uniform or presents us in a compromising way.” For example, “We were never contacted for *World War Z* [Marc Forster, 2013] and I can tell you the portrayal of the captain kicking the family off the ship to the zombies — that would never happen” (Tarabay, 2014). To participate with the military requires Hollywood to cut down the faultlines in their scripts in order to access the military technology.

As discussed in Chapter One, the War on Terror’s intensified militarization represents a dramatic cultural shift. The militainment discursive framework represents “a new touchstone as to where ‘the people’ have to be moved to” (Bennett and Woollacott, 1981, p. 282). Building off of Prince (2009) and McSweeney’s (2014) surveys of the post 9/11 Hollywood landscape, the formation of militainment is roughly as follows: The protagonist/America suffered unprovoked attacks from an unseen and unexpected enemy (McSweeney, 2014, p. 10). This enemy is dehumanized or literally not human (McSweeney, 2014, p. 34, p.134). This enemy will strike again unless the protagonist (America) responds with unlimited force (Prince, 2009, p. 278). Nearly any means are justifiable to achieve the protagonist’s goal, particularly manipulating or torturing others (Prince, 2009, p. 239; McSweeney, 2014, p. 86). Finally, the (usually male, white) protagonist reasserts himself after an emasculating experience, often with the aid of military training, technology, or aid, to protect the “home”, but with the knowledge that his “home” is forever vulnerable in a dangerous world (McSweeney, 2014, p. 32, p. 85; Prince, 2009, p. 278).

This formation provides key differences from pre-9/11 action films. In post-Cold War, pre-9/11 Hollywood, enemies tended to be from one of two categories (Prince 2009). The first were “renegade figures from the security services… that had turned against Americans or their government” (p. 35), as in *The Rock* (Michael Bay, 2006) or *Die Hard 2* (Renny Harlin, 1992). This makes the military rather suspect as it is responsible for the production of dangerous men unsuited to living in a world without an external threat. Here, American paranoia is not only not justified, but at fault. The second is the “mad bomber”,
where the threat has no motivation tied to history or codes of morality. This was the model for antagonists of prior superhero adaptations, such as *Batman Forever* (Joel Schumacher, 1995). Another notable change is that pre-9/11, torture was generally reserved for antagonists where after 9/11 it was performed by the protagonist (McSweeney, 2014), following the use of torture by the American military.

These reoccurring patterns are the result of Hollywood’s participation in the militainment discursive formation that governs the principles and strategies that frame and mediate the public interaction with the military (Bacevich, 2013; Butler, 2004; Stahl, 2009). The above structures are examples of what this formation produces, while Coons’ comment on *World War Z* suggests what cannot be said within the formation.

### 3.3. Militainment as Discursive Formation

This pro-military discursive formation has become a dominant discursive formation in action-based Hollywood film after 9/11. This formation is not universally applied, but has, rather, became the default for movies dealing with violence in contemporary settings in ways meant to be entertaining, such as action and contemporary set-science fiction film, rather than horrific as in certain dramas. The framework functions as a safety net, as something that will reliably contribute to a profitable film. Militarized films like *The Avengers* both play into and sustain the system of military fervour within the United States, but the roots of militarization run deep and its historical formation is a complex entity. Burke (2015) outlined that special effects and pre-packaged franchises were appealing to Hollywood, but the effects are prohibitively expensive. The budget for *Iron Man* was $140 million, and for *The Avengers* over $220 million. Hollywood, being risk-adverse, seeks a dependable formation. However, even this formation is not a guarantee, as DC’s *Green Lantern* (Martin Campbell, 2011), about a military jet pilot who becomes a superhero, barely turned a profit.

The militainment genre is not limited to superheroes. It was solidified by *Transformers* (Michael Bay, 2007), a blockbuster adaptation of an even more niche property than comics, a children’s toy series and cartoon from the 1980s. The film was the highest grossing non-sequel of the year. Rather than focus on the cartoon’s conflict
between two warring groups of robots, the film’s conception was to feature the American military team up with the heroic robots. The military provided extensive support to the film, with every one of the numerous military roles played by military personnel, providing the most recent weaponry, offering military bases for filming, and being the first film post-9/11 to shoot on the Pentagon grounds (Cochran, 2007). Bryon McGarry, the deputy director of the Air Force’s public affairs office admitted that “Recruiting and deterrence are secondary goals, but they’re certainly there” (Debruge, 2009). The enthusiastic response to the film seems to have created a niche where pop culture combined with military technology is seen as a path to popularity by Hollywood, an industry that replicates successes until they are exhausted. Again, this is not indicating it was necessarily the military that drew in audiences, but Hollywood studios interpreted it this way, and there has been no decline in box office sales to suggest they were wrong.

This is not to say that a film diverging from this formation would not be profitable, only to say that not following it presents a greater risk of not being profitable. As Grant & Wood (2004) emphasize, every film is a gamble, but studios realize certain patterns are more reliable. Given the amount of money studios expend and the large return expected upon their investment, breaking the formation is unlikely. As discussed in Chapter One, the superhero genre bears similarity to the Western. However, its adoption by Hollywood has been significantly altered due to studio dependency on the content. In Classical Hollywood, the Western, because of its low cost and safe return status, could be a space for exploration for both formal techniques and questions of violence. Instead, the modern superhero movie is the “tent pole” of the studio and must be micromanaged and finessed to be as safe as possible. The more money expected, the less divergence from what has been established as a dependable norm occurs.

The success of this militainment discursive formation allowed for the rise of the superhero film. To test this, I return to Burke’s (2015) analysis of the various reasons put forward for the superhero boom: 1) the post 9/11 trauma; 2) the advancement of digital film techniques; 3) Hollywood’s attraction to pre-packaged franchise; and 4) and

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11 Although films like *Johnny Guitar* (Nicholas Ray, 1954), *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), and *Man of the West* (Anthony Mann, 1958) were outliers. Most Westerns dutifully replicated the generic conventions without challenge.
Hollywood creative personnel more receptive to comic books as a form, and examine each of them and explain why the militarization narrative is a key reason for the emergence of the genre in films. The first relates to the larger issues of American politics, that post-9/11 culture, as Klein (2007), Bacevich (2013), and Prince (2009) argue, is used to intensify and justify the privatization of military interests. It is in the military’s interests to encourage films that depict a dangerous world where they are the only hope for protection.

Superheroes as a vehicle for special effects is a favoured argument put forth by critics like Bordwell (2008) who wish to avoid discussions about film politics. However, nothing inherent in special effects demands superhero stories as opposed to another type of visual effects heavy genre, like space opera. The expectation of the military’s presence in special effect films is generated by militainment’s technofetishism. The desire for a pre-packaged franchise seems more compelling for characters with a long history of popularity like Batman, Superman, or Spider-Man, all of whom had film franchises pre-9/11. What is unusual is that Marvel has demonstrated the ability to make popular films out of lesser characters with much smaller pre-existing fan bases like Iron Man or Thor. The production personnel being more open to comic books argument is compelling, but needs to be connected to something else. As comics moved away from their position as disposable children’s entertainment to legitimate, if niche, subculture in the 1980s, it is understandable that Hollywood would look to this source for easy film ideas. However, this does not explain why studio producers would think this material would connect with an audience outside the niche. Additionally, none of these factors call for superhero stories of the type Marvel produces, where the military becomes a core element.

While the above explanations cover why superhero films tend to revolve around safe storytelling, they do not answer why this safety is framed by militarization. Militarization enters the films because it sits at the core of post 9/11 action Hollywood’s discursive formation. It mediates the transition from niche to mainstream. It mitigates risk. The military, like Hollywood, thrives on the same spectacle as special effects, but with real technology that must be demonstrated to intimidate. The built-in character recognition is appealing to Hollywood, but at the same time, there is an obvious desire to brand the characters for adults in addition to children. It is these final reasons that emphasize the adoption of the militainment discursive formation by the superhero genre.
3.3.1. Militainment: Superheroes’ Path to “Realism”

The military discursive formation is not usually applied to fantasy films that take place outside of a recognizable reality, such as a fantasy world or an imagined future. For example, *Avatar* (James Cameron, 2009) takes a critical stance against privatized military, although this criticism is tempered by the protagonist being a former Marine. However, given its box office dominance, *Avatar* demonstrates that a pro-military stance may not be necessary for financial success. As I argued in Chapter Two, superhero comics have engaged in allegorical real world issues while comfortably being outside any measure of realism. This can be subversive, as Said (1996) praised comics because as a child he found “they violated conventional norms – norms of behavior, thought, accepted social forms. Comics played havoc with the logic of a+b+c+d and they certainly encouraged one not to think in terms the teacher expected” (p. ii). Comics are bizarrely overwrought, complicated, and non-linear.

Returning to the argument raised in Chapter One, studios believe imaginative concepts will struggle to attract viewers of all ages rather than mainly children. Marvel sought a way to demonstrate their films were for a general audience. Marvel has been attempting to adapt its properties to films since 1970, but had difficulty securing the high production budgets due to the imagined limited audience (Howe, 2012). Superheroes are malleable properties, meaning they can simultaneously operate within multiple discursive formations. The continual re-writing of comics goes further once they cross mediums. The general awareness of the character in popular culture far exceeds the relatively small readership of comics. Most characters have a few essential, recognizable traits such as a costume and super powers, and perhaps a personality type. Merchandise has outsold comics since the late 1960s, a gap that has grown progressively wider (Burke, 2015, p. 58). The character’s image is more valuable than their narrative. While limited, there is still a wide range of possibilities for how to reimagine characters to fit a specific formation. The military formation was a way to demonstrate the seriousness of the characters to market
them beyond children\textsuperscript{12}, to gain an audience on a scale where high budgets could still be profitable.

The result is that studios have turned to a discourse of “realism”, intensified by the success of Christopher Nolan’s \textit{Batman} films. This communicates to potential audiences that the genre is not just for children or stereotypical comic book “nerds”, but that it can be enjoyed like other mainstream action films. Examples of this discourse include director Anthony Russo discussing fitting Spider-Man into the MCU: “It’s a very specific tonal world. It’s a little more grounded and a little more hard-core contemporary [than the previous Spider-Man franchises]” (Gallagher, 2016). Marvel “Chief Creative Officer” Joe Quesada described \textit{Thor} and \textit{Captain America} as “grounded very much in the real world” (Anderton, 2011). The idea is the superhero and their villains are unrealistic, but that both exist in a world that is approximately the same as reality. “Realism” is an excuse as to why changes need to be made from one medium to another. The notion of “realism” is absurd as there is nothing realistic or grounded about superheroes battling back alien invasions led by a figure from Norse mythology. “Grounded” instead is a mask for a particular notion of “realism”, which in this case is the alignment with militarization.

Brooker (2012) argues that in the context of the \textit{Batman} films, realism took on the meaning of an angry, violent masculinity and an emphasis on technology. Batman’s equipment is presented as real military technology, with his designer telling him, for example, the suit is “Nomex survival suit for advanced infantry. Kevlar bi-weave”. This emphasis reflects both Barry’s (2011) concept of militarized masculinity and the technological fetishism emphasized by Stahl (2009). It is largely the same in the Marvel universe, with a military bureaucracy largely replacing the brooding masculinity (implied as part of militarization) of Nolan’s \textit{Batman}, although technology is a constant across both. Grounded is not a connection to reality, but a connection to the militarized discursive formation. The military’s presence has become so normalized that is has become the grounding factor. Because of this, \textit{The Ultimates} struggled as satire because its satire of

\textsuperscript{12} Since the success of Marvel’s “Phase One”, the studio has produced the series \textit{Daredevil} (2015-2016) and \textit{Jessica Jones} (2015) on Netflix, both of which were rated TV-MA, with Marvel marketing to only an adult audience.
the military was too similar to serious portrayal. Under militainment, militarization is naturalized and invisible.

Following militarization, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is positivist and technologically determinist. While the roots of the Marvel comic universe lay in the Cold War interest in science, the comics science functioned largely as a *deus ex machina* for the plot. This science coexists in a world of inexplicable magic phenomenon and powerful cosmic beings, and does not require explanation. The MCU instead attempts to explain magic, something they are much more hesitant to use than in the comics, as science humans do not yet understand. Crowes (2011) compellingly argues the issue with “realist” superhero films is that it suggests that militarized technology is the solution to our problems. If only we continue to fund the military’s research and development, eventually they will produce a weapon or tool, perhaps something like the Iron Man armour for soldiers, that will finally end conflict. The notion of being “grounded in reality” means that the world of superheroes is perhaps not a complete fantasy, but with the right breakthroughs in (military) technology, it is a glimpse of our future.

3.4. The Fidelity Discourse Mask

In contrast to the malleability of their properties, Marvel paratextually emphasizes the fidelity of their adaptations. Each character’s ethical orientation is not seen as anywhere near as important as his other physical and psychological traits. As Marvel Studio founder Avi Arad said “this time [as opposed to licenced films] we’ll make it the Marvel way. Once you license something to a studio, you’ll have to watch them like a hawk. These are our children, not theirs” (Bond, 2006). Arad also said “unless you buy into the gestalt of what is Marvel and understand the characters and metaphors and treat them as living people, we are not interested. This is material that has withstood the test of history, and the director and writer have to have a sense of history” (Kit, 2006). This introduces a paternalistic approach that the corporate side of Marvel has over their content, as if any decision made is the best and truest reflection of their content. Arad even frames the Studio as putting story before profit, as putting trust that what comic readers enjoy would be enjoyed by larger audiences.
Head of production, Kevin Feige, depicts himself as if he is purely a fan of the property rather than concerned with Marvel’s corporate interests. A profile in the USA Today described Feige as “enthusiastic at the mere prospect of something he loves being brought to the screen, but he’s cynical until he sees the goods. He’s been burned the past 20 years with movies that aren’t faithful to the source material he loves” (Bowles, 2007). Feige is paratextually presented as the ultimate fan, upset that all prior superhero films were inaccurate representations of his beloved texts and that he is going to create the most “faithful” versions from comic to screen, as if adaptation is the simple process of filming the page. Considering his interpretation of The Ultimates as not being satirical, this is questionable. In the press kit for Captain America, Feige explains “we count ourselves among fans, so we can see everything as one and the same. If we’re servicing what they want to see, it’s because we want to see it, too. We know that the cardinal sin is to think that we know better than material that has been around for 70 years.” (Stork, 2014, p 90). There is a conception of objectivity here, as if the material is simply passing through the production team unaltered.

This discourse is fascinating as it is clear that they are not particularly concerned with fidelity and even contradict this by their discourse of realism. Why emphasize fidelity, especially when the majority of your audience has little familiarity with the hypertext? As Derek Johnson (2005) argues, there is a financial motive, “Marvel's respect for comic readers in performing fanboy identity…came as much from the discursive value it offered the company in carving out a niche identity within film production cultures as it did from any concern that failing to serve fans would result in poor box-office performance” (p. 20). Due to the small number of actual comic readers, there is no real reason to value their opinions over a larger audience. There is value in being thought of as the most authentic producer within the superhero genre. There is also value in positioning yourself as concerned with fans, potentially re-assuring viewers who enjoyed one Marvel film that the studio was specifically concerned with replicating their enjoyment in future films. Additionally, in Burke’s (2015) survey of comic book movie audiences, he found that viewers who did not read comics still valued fidelity, which Burke suggests mixes “altruism with a growing recognition of fan power” (p. 140). The reason for concerns about fidelity from non-readers was largely that they had prior experiences of having stories they enjoyed changed and hoped fans of the comics would not have the same experience. This
is in-line with a cultural discourse that tends to value the promise of fidelity as the key element of adaptation (Brooker, 2012).

And, indeed, outside the militarization of the Avengers, the comics and films have many similarities. This amounts largely to characters’ costumes looking similar on film as they do in the comic. There are also references only comic readers would understand, although these are never fundamental to the plot, such as a sign for the Roxxon Corporation or the suit of 1940s character The Human Torch in the background. Finally, minor characters have names from the comics, such as reporter Christine Everhart. The most direct, but also least common in the Marvel Studios film, is what Burke relates to Gunning’s (2011) concept of “peak moments” in the early film adaptations of Shakespeare, where the entire play was not adapted, just the well-known scenes. In this way, iconic comic book images end up on screen, such as Captain American punching Hitler, recreating the cover of Captain America #1. However, these key scenes from the hypotexts are just scenes and may fit into the larger story in a completely different manner than they did in their original context.

Valuing this type of superficial fidelity only increases the conservative view within the films. The fidelity that Marvel does value, the parallel between comic and cinematic appearance, gives the films a racial and gendered conservativism. By demanding fidelity to a comic created in the 1960s, the company ends up replicating early 1960s ideas of representation, of a group of five white men and one white women being the “Earth’s mightiest heroes.” Putting aside the American focus of the group, it ends up regressively coded, positing the ideal citizen as a white male. A masculine norm is largely tacit in The Avengers. While the heroes engage in activities traditionally associated with masculinity, like using violence to solve problems or viewing rage as one of the healthiest emotions, the characters do not explicitly draw attention to it through their language and the only woman on the team, Black Widow, is accepted by her fellow Avengers and depicted as equally capable. McGrath (2016) argues that The Avengers is a rather progressive depiction of masculinity, that the characters’ challenge conventions.

Male characters appear as more flawed, subject to bouts of self-doubt and assuming roles as nurturers to their peers regardless of gender; female characters appear as more combative, taking roles as leaders and questioning the authority of their peers. By the time of the final battle, each
Avenger plays their individual position, based on their unique talents – as Captain America says “as a team.” (p. 138)

Despite its other faults, *The Avengers* accepts men’s emotions and goes against the lone strong man tradition of the action film, whose relationship to others at best is feeling a need to protect. This is, however, easily integrated into militarization. While *The Avengers* may be conservative in its depiction of race, gender, or sexual orientation, it does allow for inclusion of men who can experience emotions beyond rage. After all, the idealized image of the military is one of comradery, of soldiers within a unit becoming like a family.

These depictions of masculinity, outside of the militarized attitude towards violence, are in line with the hypotexts, and indeed an improvement on *The Ultimates*. The film’s issue with representation lies not in presence, but absence of diverse representation. These issues of representation have also burdened Marvel’s comics, weighed down by fidelity to the past. However, the comics are beginning to focus on more diverse heroes. In 2014, Marvel introduced an African-American Captain America (Remender, Pacecho, & Immonen, *Captain America* vol. 7, #25) and a female Thor (Aaron & Dauterman, *Thor* vol. 4, #1). Marvel had the opportunity to cast actors of different background than their comic counterparts, but this violated their notions of “fidelity.” For example, the terms for casting Spider-Man included that he must be “Caucasian and heterosexual” (McNary, 2015), even though in the Ultimate universe Spider-Man was African-American. In 2012, Nick Fury Jr, who looks like Samuel L. Jackson in *The Avengers*, was introduced into the Marvel Universe (Yost, Bunn, Fraction, & Eaton, *Battle Scars* #1), which began to phase out the white Nick Fury, an example that could have been followed by one or more of the actual Avengers. The re-creation of Fury is an example of the alternative tactic used by Marvel to justify its film adaptation, what Burke (2015) termed the fidelity flux, which moves material from the films back into their comic hypotexts. The most prominent example of this from Marvel Studios to Marvel comics is S.H.I.E.L.D.’s centrality to the plot. While this originated out of the Ultimate universe, the film’s popularity has increased the presence of S.H.I.E.L.D across nearly all of Marvel’s titles, with even an on-going title, *S.H.I.E.L.D* (Waid & Pacecho) launched in 2015.¹³

¹³ S.H.I.E.L.D’s popularity is further demonstrated by the ABC TV series *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D* (2013-), which shares continuity with the Marvel Cinematic Universe.
However, representation within a militarized model has problems. Fawaz (2016) emphasizes that diversity is not just about an image. Captain American being white or African-American is inconsequential if the character acts in the same way. He argues “creators now promise audiences the pleasure of seeing their own diverse identities… represented in their favourite superhero comic, but no sense that the heterogeneity of those identities could and should change the world” (p. 279). This parallels Bacevich’s (2013) argument that the American progressive view of the military is “not as an obstacle to social change but as a venue in which to promote it, pointing the way for the rest of society on matters such as race, gender, and sexual orientation” (p. 25). Individuals of all identities can be assimilated. Likely it is the adherence to the fidelity of characters created in the 1960s that has led to the regressive ideas of representation. But even if this had been addressed, as it was in the comics, the outcome would have been the liberal vision of the world of violence being opened up to everyone, that heroic violent masculinity is not necessarily only the domain of heterosexual white men.

Fidelity is ultimately a marketing tool to create audience faith in the capabilities of the corporation to consistently deliver reliable productions. Brooker (2012) argues that superhero comics follow Williams’ (1961/2011) concept of the “selective tradition”, where the entirety of texts is reduced to a representative sample meant to be “the best and most relevant,” choices which represent a certain idea (p. 67). For superheroes like Batman, this meant being compared to the most commonly stocked graphic novels in bookstores, like *Batman: Year One* (Miller & Mazzucchelli, 1987) and *The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller, 1986) (Brooker, 2012). Outside of perhaps *Civil War*, despite their long history, *The Avengers*, lack this form of definitive interpretation. What Marvel means by fidelity is largely an empty term. Is the fidelity to the Marvel or the Ultimate Universe? Is it to the late 1970s space opera Avengers or the 2000s fugitives? This does not, however, free them from the selective tradition. Instead, this allows the creators to present their own tradition, drawing out select elements, and then appealing to those comics as their selective tradition. For example, Feige can state *The Ultimates* “is certainly one of the best comics of the last few decades” (Douglas, 2012), working to canonize it as the definitive version of *The Avengers*, which is, of course, given its uncertain tone, a bizarre choice, but one that mirrors Hollywood’s discursive formation rather than that of the comics.
3.5. The Implications of Militarization

Following Foucault’s call (1976/1990) to “explore not only these discourses but also the will that sustains them and the strategic intent that supports them” (p. 8), I believe that the militainment formation is sustained by the need to justify the actions of the American military in the newly emerging hegemony. This militarization most drastically results in the devaluing of lives. In the context of journalism framing the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Butler (2009) questions what is considered a “grievable life”, to “draw attention to the epistemological problem raised by this issue of framing: the frames through which we apprehend, or indeed, fail to apprehend the lives of others as lost or injured… are politically saturated” (p. 1). Butler does not examine Hollywood films in this context, but, while the framing of responses to fictional lives may not carry the same weight as responses to real lives, it still contributes to a climate in which certain lives are framed as ungrievable.

Superhero films operate following two different approaches to dehumanization, as outlined by Butler (2004). “One operates through producing a symbolic identification of the face with the inhuman, foreclosing our apprehension of the human in the scene; the other works through radical effacement, so that there never was a human, there never was a life, and no murder has, therefore, ever taken place” (p. 146). The first is seen in the way that death is often presented in Marvel films as the best solution to ending a threat (although in The Avengers, Loki is actually imprisoned). Iron Man and Captain America’s battles with their antagonists Iron Monger, The Red Skull, and Whiplash results in their deaths. The second type is the casual killing by the Avengers. In Iron Man, the suit’s targeting computer, which can conveniently identify “targets” from “civilians”, kills numerous Afghani terrorists. Captain America, who the comics had established in their fantasy world as never actually killing during World War II, is depicted in the film slaughtering Nazi soldiers. Both Iron Man and Captain America throw attacking mercenaries to their death from S.H.I.E.L.D.’s helicarrier. With the fast moving camera sweeping through New York streets, it is difficult to tell how many Chitauri are dead rather than simply rendered unconscious, but given they are pushed from buildings, hit by missiles, lighting, and arrows, it is more than reasonable to assume dozens are killed. The nameless enemy does not have a life worthy of protecting and the named enemy is so
dangerous that only in their death can they be stopped. This is the logic of the ungrievable life.

3.5.1. Superhero Violence

How then is the violence of superheroes different from that of the military? On the surface, a medium where strong individuals use violence to achieve ends would appear to have potential to be nothing but deeply conservative, bordering on fascist. In 1951, McLuhan (2008) wrote about the Superman as encouraging a militarist view. But Costello’s (2009) wonderful summation “liberalism with a fascist aesthetic” (p. 215) explains that the values are more complex than they may appear on the surface. DiPaolo (2011) believes that superhero stories have a “subversive storytelling approach – in which liberal writers co-opt conservative adventure narratives to promote moderate-to-progressive politics” (p. 23). The deniability of allegory becomes a space to ask questions about the ethics of power. Violence is a constant, but who orders the violence, how lethal the violence is, and if the motive for the violence is to further the ends of the powerful or to aid the less powerful can alter the meaning. As Chapter Two demonstrated, Marvel’s films have moved heroic motivation away from the individual’s responsibility to others and towards the individual’s responsibility to the military organization that provides for them. It is different to act out of analysis of society’s problems rather than to act from your duty as a soldier. While it may not be ideal, it is preferable to militarization. Rather than working to increase the grievability of lives in superhero stories, the films have gone in the opposite direction.

The key difference of superhero violence is that it is rarely lethal. Hughes (2006) argues that superheroes’ “absolute power and freedom from the law make [them] both an asset and a liability to the RSA [repressive state apparatuses]” (p. 547). A key liability is that the moral code of the hero is not necessarily the same as the government’s, a theme regularly explicitly explored in superhero comics, including in Millar’s Civil War and Bendis’ New Avengers. Often, the goals of the military and superhero do overlap and sometimes, the heroes may be more vengeful than even the military. By putting the heroes under the umbrella of the military this liability is minimized. However, the counterargument to this runs close to the neoliberal ideal of privatization. Yet, while individualistic, vigilantism fails
to meet the neoliberal idea, as superheroism is never textually framed as profitable. Some heroes are wealthy and represent private philanthrocapitalism. But others, such as Spider-Man or Hawkeye, discuss their financial struggles.

The downside of superhero individuality is that it lacks accountability. However, given the narrow choice of unaccountable and accountable to the dehumanizing military structure, this may be preferable. The strong individual does play into the vigilante power fantasy, but it also demonstrates self-sacrificial dedication to community, which counters neoliberalism. McDowell (2014) suggests that values of heroism and self-sacrifice for the protection of others could actually be potentially morally radical. McDowell is also aware that through militarization, this is "muted by the way heroism is presented and coopted within a larger and deeply determinative politically significant mythology" (p. 66). The military thus actually offers the integration of the superhero into neoliberalism, where their powers are harnessed to productive ends and can be compensated as a soldier in the role of order.

It is possible to display violent conflict and not view lives as expendable. The superhero comic often does both. There are two reasons behind this; its history as a children’s medium and the indefinite on-going nature of publication. The very earliest superheroes were willing to kill. However, after receiving numerous complaints from parents concerned about this depiction, DC editor Frederick Ellsworth mandated that heroes should never kill in the company’s books (Brooker, 2000). As DC was the only superhero publisher through the 1950s until Marvel started, their stories set the standard for superhero actions. Despite its formal and narrative inventions, Marvel could not have changed the superhero standard, largely due to the Comics Code Authority (Howe, 2013). The 1980s push to demonstrate that comics were for adults, spurred by a specialized market, re-introduced the idea of killer superheroes. However, the tradition of not killing is so ingrained in the history of the superhero comic that this element is part of the foundations that writers keep returning to, part of the core of who their identity has been. While non-lethal violence may be rooted in children’s media, it should not follow that it is childish to grieve life and adult to be uncaring.
A good example of how comics handled killing was when Captain America killed for the first time in *Captain America* #322 (Gruenwald & Neary, 1986), the next issue featured the character undergoing a personal crisis, questioning if he is still fit to be Captain America. This is hardly the nonchalant Captain who throws someone off an airplane in the films. Killing by heroes is usually not glossed over in comics, but rather a hero has some level of emotional fallout where they question their core values, although this is, given the large number of comics and writers, not always the case. In regards to the nameless “henchmen”, the plot rarely focuses on what happens when a hero knocks one unconscious, but they never appear to be killed. The reasons for heroes not killing are rarely deep. *Dark Reign: The List – Avengers* (Bendis & Djurdevic, 2009) provides typical reasons given by heroes as to why they do not kill. In this issue, Hawkeye advocates killing Norman Osborne. Ms. Marvel dismisses this plan immediately as being “wrong. Obviously.” Spider Woman suggests that it will not solve problems on a larger scale. Captain America argues that if they kill someone in a case of mistaken guilt, they can never correct their mistake. Spider-Man says it’s easy to be a good guy when everything is going well, but “it’s another thing when your resolve is being tested,” suggesting that killing is just an easy solution and that there is always a better path to be followed. These reasons may be simplistic and idealistic, but it must be remembered that the superhero is a fantasy genre about idealism. Why should readers fantasize about militaristic heroes rather than idealistic ones?

The rule against killing has begun to slip away from the discursive flux from the hyper-violent “satire” of *The Ultimates* and the effects of military violence upon the Hollywood action film have also been felt on the American action comic, although with pushback from the comic character’s historical aversion to killing. However, killing is not seen as a solution. Killing by the heroes occurs from anger, in the midst of conflict, and is not premeditated. This may be reflective of a damaging brand of masculinity that normalizes rage, but this is not going as far as the goal of military action, to kill lives already ungrievable. Even the killing that has occurred is not glorious, it does not result in people chanting “USA! USA!” in the streets of New York as happened after the assassination of Osama bin Laden was announced (Ariosto, 2011). The life taken is still grieved, although its end is framed as necessary.
The second reason for superheroes not killing is comics’ open-ended serial form. Superhero violence in mainstream superhero comics, with some exceptions due to how many comics are published, is a postponement, not a solution. With narratives running for decades and publishers intending them to run indefinitely into the future, leaving villains alive to return later is easier than the continual creation of new adversaries. In the diegesis, this creates a potentially hopeless vision of the future, where the only response to a threat is through use of force but with the awareness that this use of force is ultimately a failure. This harkens back to George W. Bush’s speech quoted in Chapter One, which linked extremist terrorism to Nazi totalitarianism, which both must necessarily be fought against, and is also inevitably doomed by a teleological history. The only way out would be through changing the very structure of the genre in the same way that the very structure of society would have to be altered to achieve a true solution to end conflict. Even death is never a solution in comics as even when a character is killed, it is usually only temporary as the ongoing story nature frequently depends upon resurrection. Rather than recycle threats, each Marvel movie tends to introduce a new villain, as it would take numerous films to exhaust the comic’s supply. These continual threats emerge though because the world is in a constant state of danger, not created through the very efforts to end them, as Derrida (2003) argued the US created 9/11, that repression “ends up producing, reproducing, and regenerating the very thing it seeks to disarm” (p. 99).

3.5.2. Military Violence

Superheroes with their strength, clear cut morality, and effectiveness are clearly something the military would want to be associated with. Even if conflict was just about the killing of “supervillains” Osama bin Laden or Saddam Hussein, the American military’s tactics would never be used by superheroes. However, militainment could align the notions of pop culture heroism with the image that the military outwardly presents. S.H.I.E.L.D. and the Avengers, along with most of Hollywood’s militainment products, present a liberal fantasy of the military. They are effective and disciplined, but not to the point of being dehumanized. They can be lethal, but only to those who “deserve it”. The technology used is advanced, functional, and accurate. In very exceptional circumstances, torture may be necessary, although it is effective and revealing of information, unlike in reality (O’Mara, 2015). These traits allow for the perception of a “clean war,” framing it in
a way that makes it easier to obtain public support. The Marvel films have reversed Costello’s (2009) summation of superhero comics, becoming instead fascism with a liberal aesthetic.

However, even the militarized superhero, despite a harsher violence, is masking the reality of the military. This is why the explicit ties to the military have more significant implications than when the military and superhero’s goals simply implicitly converge. The superhero’s endorsement of the military depicts the military as an institution that has the ability to bring out the best of the recruits’ abilities, as they do in *The Avengers*. This is reminiscent of a scene in *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, 2004) where recruiters promote the military to youth in impoverished Flint, Michigan by talking to them about their interests and then telling them that they can pursue them, be it basketball or music, in the military. This effaces the goal of military training, to break down the recruit’s former identity and reshape it, through constant humiliations, into unquestioned loyalty to the military, sympathy extending only as far as your unit, and the ability to kill without remorse (Barry, 2011). Rather than working to enhance the best of the recruit, the military reconfigures the recruit for its own ends.

While this training devalues the life of the soldier, the life of the “enemy” is worth even less. A 2007 Pentagon survey of American troops in Iraq found less than half believed that non-combatants should be treated with dignity and respect (Ricks & Tyson, 2007), indicating this belief is so engrained in a culture that this response was not embarrassing to record. One veteran recalls “I was explicitly told by my chain of command that I could shoot anyone who came closer to me than I felt comfortable with… My chain of command’s general attitude was ‘better them than us’” (Glantz, p.17). Another recalls being encouraged to carry “drop weapons” because “if we accidently shot a civilian, we could just toss the weapon on the body, and make them look like an insurgent” (Glantz, p. 22). The military is uninterested, that “the definitions ‘hostile intent’ and ‘hostile actions’ are so broad that virtually any activity by an Iraqi can be used to justify force” (Glantz, p. 15). This activity is difficult to reconcile with any depiction of any hero, too unpalatable if made explicit.
There is one Marvel protagonist who has always reflected military values towards life: The Punisher. He was created to be a Spider-Man villain with a sympathetic backstory, seeking revenge on organized crime for killing his family, but whose need for vengeance is never satisfied (Conway & Andru, 1974, Amazing Spider-Man #129). His justification is that only through killing can crime be ended. However, as DiPaolo emphasizes “characters like Spider-Man and Daredevil are arguably just as effective at fighting crime while still being merciful” (p. 127). Nor, as DiPaolo notes, have the Punisher’s beliefs ever been challenged in the text by him murdering someone in a case of mistaken identity or false accusation. “Like Santa Claus, the Punisher knows if you’ve been bad or good” (p. 132). Marvel has not figured out how to integrate this character into their larger universe because of how out of line it is with the rest of their properties. On the rare occasions the Punisher appears in a larger Marvel event, he is viewed by the heroes as dangerous and immoral (Millar & McNiven, 2007, Civil War #6). There have been three film adaptations of the Punisher, none of them connected to each other nor to a larger universe. One of the Punisher’s critics was The Avengers director Joss Whedon (Jensen, 2004), who said “I miss the idea of... heroes who stop that kind of thing from happening. If I was [running Marvel], I would kill the Punisher. I don't believe in what he does... and if you're telling me he's never hit an innocent, then I'm telling you, that's fascist crap” (p. 48). This was an interesting stance from the future director of the film that helped move superhero morality not just back into the past he misses, but arguably also towards that of the Punisher.

Often in new media, the soldiers of the American military are referred to in general as the “real heroes.” But occasionally a specific soldier is framed as hero, for example Chris Kyle, subject of the most explicit examples of Hollywood militainment, American Sniper (Clint Eastwood, 2014), at the time of its release the highest grossing restricted-rated film. Kyle is celebrated as the deadliest sniper in American military history, with a 160 “confirmed kills”, a morbid metric of success, especially when the separation between combatant and civilian was nearly non-existent. Yet Kyle never seemed to question that the people he was killing were deserving (Schmidle, 2013). Kyle associated himself with the Punisher, spray painting the character’s logo on his flak jacket and helmet. Kyle also told stories of murdering two carjackers or sniping looters in the streets of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina. As journalist Nicholas Schmidle (2013) suggests “both narratives... portray Kyle as if he really were the Punisher, dispensing justice by his own rules. It
was possible to see these stories as evidence of vainglory; it was also possible to see them as attempts by a struggling man to maintain an invincible persona” (para. 41). Kyle was a troubled person, but his stories resonated with a segment of the American public, the segment that made his biography a bestseller. Dallas journalist Michael J. Mooney (2013) referred to him as “an incredible, real-life action hero” (para. 1) and “true American badass” (para. 17), and his funeral was held in the Dallas Cowboys’ Stadium. This is not suggesting the Punisher was a direct influence, but it is suggesting that the Punisher and Kyle operated along the same code of ethics. If the Punisher is the moral outcast of the Marvel universe, why is the real life military hero the one with his ethics?

Barry (2011) takes the analysis of the military devaluing lives further, arguing that in a militarized society, men’s lives have to be expendable, that “violent masculinity is modeled, socialized, and taught to boys until it becomes an unconscious reaction to being expendable” (p. 10). Militainment is a major contributor to this model. This troubling theory suggests that even though only a small percentage of men are actually members of the military, the “support our troops” mentality and media framing suggests them as the ideal model male citizen. Barry argues that this leads to a masculine norm that devalues empathy, that “distancing and disengagement may well be survival mechanisms that kick in when one is made expendable for war or is expected to risk one’s life to protect others. But they also drive the machines of war.” (p. 192). While disengagement may be the best way to cope with the trauma of war, it is also the line of thinking that leads to conflict. Through this, Barry (2011) argues that problems of violence throughout society are intrinsically linked to a militarized culture, but that this masculinity is a social construct, not biological, for if it were “male aggression would just happen on its own. Society would not have to mount the powerful social pressure of core masculinity it imposes on boys and expects from men” (p. 13).

In addition to modeling the forms of behaviour needed for new recruits, the militainment formation is also heavily dependent upon privatization. The acceptance of the disposable life fits well with neoliberalism, a regime under which Harvey (2011) suggests “the rest of humanity [who are not wealthy] shall be deemed disposable” (para. 2). Viewing lives as not expendable threatens this order which means under neoliberalism, as Olson (2013) argues, valuing lives must be minimized, that “empathic motivations come to be
seen as irrational, self-defeating, and existing beyond a neutral, immutable market logic" (p. 48). This follows Bauman’s (2003) argument that for the modern economy to function, it inevitably produces “superfluous” populations that must be viewed as waste. Part of attaining hegemony, then, must be convincing the population that indeed many lives are not grievable. With this, the ungrievable life allows not just the perpetuation of military violence, but also creates a climate that allows the harsh neoliberal economic order to function.

3.6. Limitations

As the MCU is an ongoing franchise, with films planned into the next decade, there is time for alterations to the depiction of the military. The organization has already been complicated by the reveal in Captain America: The Winter Solider (Joe Russo & Anthony Russo, 2014) that the terrorist organization Hydra had infiltrated S.H.I.E.L.D. This remains an inoculation, a good military that will eventually overcome its evil elements. Additionally, an adaptation of Civil War will be released in 2016 and it will be interesting to see how the politics shifts in the film. However, the future alterations are not as revealing as the films I considered in this study because they are aimed at an audience largely already associating Marvel films with dependable entertainment. The military aspect was the formation the films created to first win this audience.

The discussion has also focused heavily upon the American context. These films do tend to gross less internationally, about 47% compared to approximately 61% for fantasy films like Lord of the Rings (Burke, 2015, p. 25). Despite the fact that box office is not an ideal measure of international success or popularity, as it fails to take into account various ways films can be viewed, it is the most measure primarily utilized by Hollywood studios (Grant & Wood, 2004). Burke (2015) also noted that the specific Americanness of the superhero film is at odds with the larger trend to de-emphasize national content. Further research is necessary to determine why the films are at odds with this trend.
3.7. Conclusion

Post-9/11 America saw a shattering of what Bennett and Woollacott (1987) term the previously secured hegemony. This functioned to return an external enemy to the United States, to emphasize that the world’s danger that could only be defeated by the American military. This military had already begun a transformation into being highly corporatized, but the external “threat” of the War on Terror intensified this. While the fallout from 9/11 could have resulted in serious doubt about the ability of the American government to protect its citizens, it instead was framed as a case of the military being insufficiently funded to protect America. The result was an intensifying of both foreign military actions and the invention of homeland security. While a more detailed analysis of how this was created is beyond the scope of this thesis, the militainment discursive formation has had a role in securing a new militarized hegemony. I have argued that militainment provides both a reflection of larger trends in American culture and has some role in sustaining the system it displays. I believe this provides a plausible answer as to why the military is added in the adaptation process. Superheroes are malleable characters, but ones with a stigma of being childish. The military, through the militarization of American society, is seen as serious rather than fantastical heroism that can be marketed to a larger segment of the population than comics.

Bennett and Woollacott (1987) argue that popular fiction suggests where “ideologically speaking, ‘the people’ have to be moved to” (p. 282). While it is important to clarify that is not “the people”, but just a significant segment of the population, the popularity of the militarized superhero suggests two aspects. The first is that the adaptation of the superhero movies indicates that militarization is both popularly supported. The second is that given that militarization is a nearly unremarked upon component of the adaptation, that it has been normalized. These two aspects indicate how a new hegemony has been at least partially secured. Returning to Cawelti (1978/1992), the superhero, through militainment, has been a way to inject new life into action films that were suffering from being “no longer fully adequate to the imaginative needs of our time” (p. 511). However, following Cawelti’s other argument that generic self-awareness indicates that a genre is slipping away from meeting cultural myths, there is little indication
from the texts examined here that militarization is nearing this point. Instead a project over a decade old continues to be in agreement with “the people”.

To understand how the military hegemony emerges from the texts, I examined intertextuality and faultlines. First, following Barthes’ (1976) and Derrida’s (1967/1976) arguments that there is no stable meaning to be found within the text, tying down texts’ meanings relies upon intertextuality. I then outlined the texts that have informed the reading of the three compared iterations of the Avengers and drew out plausible readings to emphasize what was different between the different versions. Rather than finding meaning within one text, the political meaning emerges, I argued, most clearly from these comparisons. By locating the aspects within the film that were not in the two comic iterations, a clearer picture emerges of what Hollywood has specifically added to mainstream these stories. My analysis of the three iterations demonstrates that the film is the most militarized version of the Avengers. Second, by examining the faultlines of the three iterations, the film is shown clearly to present the least problematized version of the military in the Avengers, offering fewer avenues of interpretation to critique rather than celebrate military authority.

Following Chapter Two’s demonstration, this final chapter has attempted to accomplish three objectives. First, to provide a plausible reason for superhero militarization, to show that the military offers a normalized formation to signify the seriousness of a genre. Second, to examine how Marvel reconciles this change with a notion of their authenticity as producers. Third, and most significant, to outline why the discursive militarization of the genre is potentially damaging to the already violent superhero genre.

It is this third point that is the most important of my findings and the reason the militarization of superheroes is insidious. The superhero in comics is untethered to the military, a space that allows for implicit support of military goals, but also potential subversion of militarized narratives. Marvel’s film universe instead embraces a model of “heroism” that mirrors how the military frames itself for the public. Here, the militarized team is a liberal ideal of the military, an inclusive, supportive pseudo-family that brings out the best in each individual and uses precise, unerring violence only because it is
necessary. This helps extend a myth that masks the dehumanizing reality of the military, where soldiers are broken down and remade into compliant killers of a vaguely defined “enemy.” The limited existing pro-social aspects of the genre slip away under the militainment formation, which contributes to a climate where the military is seen as the unquestionable hero, allowing the organization to slip further away from accountability.

The impact of this formation is yet to be determined. The analysis in this thesis has worked mainly to demonstrate that militarized films reflect a society where linkage to the military-industrial complex is seen as a viable strategy to mainstream a niche property. A safe approach in mainstreaming a property is that the larger the imagined audience is, the more conventional the story becomes. What it indicates is that the militainment genre is amongst the safest Hollywood has to draw upon. A next step would be to consider the meaning of this refraction of society and to consider ways to break down popularity of the militarization formation. As Barry (2013) suggests “the first step in unmaking war is resisting military recruitment” (p. 13) and by calling attention to a formation so normalized as to be unremarkable. I hope this thesis contributes, in however modest a way, to that end.
References


“As Barry Jenkins, Ohio ’69, says: ‘A person has to have intelligence to read them.’” (1966, Sep). Esquire, p. 117-120.


Comics


Filmography

Alien vs Predator (Paul W. S. Anderson, 2004)
American Sniper (Clint Eastwood, 2014)
Ant-Man (Peyton Reed, 2015)
Avatar (James Cameron, 2009)
The Avengers (Joss Whedon, 2012)
Batman (Lambert Hillyer, 1943)
Batman Forever (Joel Schumacher, 1995)
Batman and Robin (Spencer Gordon Bennet, 1949)
Captain America (Elmer Clifton & John English, 1944)
Captain America (Rod Holcomb, 1979)
Captain America (Albert Pyun, 1990)
Captain America: The First Avenger (Joe Johnston, 2011)
Captain America: The Winter Soldier (Joe Russo & Anthony Russo, 2014)
Captain Marvel (John English & William Witney, 1941)
Collateral Damage (Andrew Davis, 2002)
The Dark Knight (Christopher Nolan, 2008)
Die Hard 2 (Renny Harlin, 1992)
Fahrenheit 9/11 (Michael Moore, 2004)
Freddie vs. Jason (Ronni Yu, 2003)
From Here to Eternity (Fred Zinnemann, 1953)
Green Lantern (Martin Campbell, 2011)
House of Dracula (Erle C. Kenton, 1945)
The Incredible Hulk (Louis Leterrier, 2008)
Invasion of the Body Snatchers (Don Siegel, 1956)
Iron Man (Jon Favreau, 2008)
Iron Man 2 (Jon Favreau, 2010)
Johnny Guitar (Nicholas Ray, 1954)
The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring (Peter Jackson, 2001).
Man of the West (Anthony Mann, 1958)
My Darling Clementine (John Ford, 1946)
The Rock (Michael Bay, 2006)
The Searchers (John Ford, 1956)
Spider-Man (E.W. Swackhamer, 1977)
Superman and the Mole Men (Lee Sholem, 1951)
Superman (Richard Donner, 1978)
Thor (Kenneth Branagh (2011)
Transformers (Michael Bay, 2007)
World War Z (Marc Forster, 2013)
X-Men (Bryan Singer, 2000)