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War is for American (super)men

Narratives of conflict and gender in the *Captain America* franchise

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ABSTRACT

The way conflict and gender are discursively constructed is influenced, in part, by media representations. An influential entertainment complex like the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) can, therefore, play a major role in the way conflict, gender, and their intersection are understood. This thesis explores Marvel's representations of those topics in the Captain America franchise by analyzing the three movies and two TV shows in it using the methods of narratology and neoformalism with the aim of understanding not just which meanings are assigned to conflict and gender but also in what way those meanings are constructed. The results reveal that the Captain America franchise can be used to manufacture consent for American foreign policy and interventionism and justify oppressive gender relations, thus participating in the perpetuation of American hegemony and performing a form of cultural violence.

Keywords: Captain America, gender, conflict, manufacturing consent, cultural violence

1. INTRODUCTION

For most people, fiction is a part of everyday life. Whether by telling small lies or writing long novels, people use fiction to express themselves, entertain, educate, criticize, and more. Technological advancements have made it possible for some works of fiction to reach an increasingly wide audience and leave a long lasting impression not just on individuals but on entire populations. However, not every fictionalized message is equally likely to gain such influence. Globalization, mass media, and social media have all opened doors to easier exchange of culture across borders but the political and social conditions of the global hegemony of the United States (US) combined with the relatively recent Hollywood boom have ensured that US cultural products will have an edge over national and local productions. On the other hand, creating for the global market has often resulted in diluting any meaningful messages in works of fiction in an attempt to appeal to an international and intercultural audience. As a result, Hollywood films in particular are typically seen as low pop culture and consumed uncritically as simple entertainment. The messages created by these movies, intentionally or not, are thus disseminated across the globe and have the potential to influence the discourses on a variety of topics.

1.1 Problem statement and research questions

Given that discourses are what gives social reality meaning, influencing them is tantamount to influencing social reality. Objective reality cannot be understood without the influence of mental constructs that serve to make sense of it so the meanings assigned to what is perceived are as close to reality as one can get. These meanings are always contingent and can change over time, but this change does not come quickly or easily; discourses have a tendency toward inertia as they limit the scope of what is imaginable and acceptable which makes acting against the constraints of a particular discourse difficult. Challenging deeply established discourses is one of the things that becomes more unimaginable the longer that discourse is dominant and the longer it is taken as objective fact. These sedimented discourses then influence any new discourses that may come up. To change a discourse so prevalent as that of gender or conflict would, therefore, require a continuous and far-reaching challenge which could be achieved by an entertainment giant such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) is the biggest cinematic franchise in history thus far, spanning over 20 movies and a dozen TV shows. Its continuous success at the box office indicates that millions of people see the works produced by it every year. This gives the MCU the power to influence discourses regarding any topic it takes up, including conflict and the gendering of it. It stands to reason that the Captain America franchise, which centers a character who represents the personification of the US, will be especially influential in shaping public opinion on the US and its involvement in conflict.

To better understand how the Captain America franchise either helps sediment discourses surrounding the US, conflict, and gender that maintain unequal power structures or challenges them, this thesis asks the following questions:

1.   What narrative of the United States and its involvement in conflict does the Captain America franchise present, how, and why?

2.   What is the role of gender in conflict according to the Captain America franchise, how is it presented, and why?

     a.   Which masculinities and femininities does the Captain America franchise propagate?

     b.   Does the Captain America franchise challenge current discourses on gender in relation to conflict in any way?

1.2 Relevance to peace and conflict studies

There has long been a difference between the way conflict and peace are understood in peace studies and the meaning they have in common parlance. To an average person, conflict typically has a negative connotation while peace is simply the absence of conflict. Understanding conflict and peace in this way is very limiting. When conflict is seen as inherently negative, positive transformation strategies are excluded from the realm of possibility. Similarly, when peace is only seen as an absence of violent conflict, the need for work toward positive peace is not recognized. The influence of academia on these common (mis)perceptions is limited to an academic setting. Media and pop culture, however, can reach a much broader audience. It is therefore important to see how conflict is represented in works such as Captain America as the representations in these movies will influence common understanding of conflict and peace through their narratives. Given that the character of

Captain America very clearly represents the US, his involvement in conflict can easily be understood as symbolic of US involvement in conflict. With Captain America being the hero of the franchise and well beloved too, this can serve to manufacture consent for American actions in conflict. Finally, conflict has long been seen as a male domain; even though peace is more closely associated with femininity, women's participation in peace building has not been equal either. The gendering of conflict in media can serve to justify or challenge that.

Gender inequality is furthermore in and of itself a form of structural violence, an indirect type of violence without an observable actor where the repression and exploitation come from the social, political, and economic systems in place and prevent individuals from fully realizing their potential. It can be legitimized by cultural aspects such as religion, ideology, and art which justify them. Those aspects of culture are in themselves violent and make up an indirect and invisible form of violence - cultural violence. Violence is, therefore, committed through social processes such as education, the establishment of institutions, and even the creation and consumption of entertainment such as film. As an element of culture, film can be used as a tool of cultural violence or as a way to challenge violent systems. It is, therefore, important to understand which role popular movies play in the dissemination of messages about violence.

1.3 Research objectives and motivation

The Captain America franchise participates in discursive meaning making by predisposing its audiences to a certain understanding of conflict, US involvement in conflict, and the gendering of conflict. The goal of this study is to show which meanings specifically the franchise propagates and how those meanings are cued by the narrative and formal characteristics of the material. Viewers are, of course, not passive receivers of a film's message; their interpretation of the film is a step in the meaning making process. This interpretation may match up with the message encoded in the film fully, partially, or not at all. The fact that it is *possible* to interpret a film in a different way from the intended does not mean that the meaning embedded in the film is not worth exploring. Not only is the cued meaning more likely to be (at least in part) accepted, but it is also reflective of the attitudes of the industry that produced it. Capitalist film production has the goal of increasing profits by selling more tickets; to sell tickets, the film must appeal to the majority of its target audience. It stands to reason, then, that the film will also be made to reflect common attitudes of the audience it is marketed to.

In addition to personal interest, the choice of the Captain America franchise for analysis was inspired by its influence and symbolism. No other Marvel character or series so blatantly represents the national identity and negotiates what it means (or should mean) to be American. The popularity of the franchise only makes it more relevant as it is able to reach millions of people not just in America but also worldwide. For this reason, the messages about conflict, gender, and the intersection of the two that the franchise propagates are worth investigating further in order to see the influence they may have on broader discourse.

1.4 Limitations and concerns

The entirety of the MCU is far too vast to be explored in a single master's thesis. Instead, this research focuses on the Captain America franchise which consists of three movies (Captain America: The First Avenger, Captain America: The Winter Soldier, and Captain America: Civil War) and two TV shows (Agent Cart and The Falcon and The Winter Soldier). The movies and TV shows were analyzed using a combination of a narratological approach and formal film analysis. The aim is to show how the narratives and movie devices used predispose audiences to certain understandings of US involvement in conflict and the role of gender in it. However, even the most straightforward encoding of these meanings does not necessarily predetermine their decoding. There will always be alternative interpretations. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore which meanings specifically were adopted and to which degree; this lack of focus on reception is a common issue in media studies that this thesis admittedly falls prey to. Further studies that focus more on audience reception are needed. The view adopted here is that the meanings which are cued by the representation in the movie are the most likely to be read and therefore accepted by the majority of the audience and especially the majority of casual viewers. Even if this proves false in later research, showing which meanings are propagated by the franchise and in what ways contributes to a better understanding of how knowledge is constructed and the role of the entertainment industry in that construction.

This thesis does not attempt to imply that movies like Captain America should not be made or seen. It is true that films can be and sometimes are a tool of cultural violence but to censor them would also be a violent act. This thesis stresses instead the importance of watching films critically, being able to identify the messages in them, and deciding whether those messages are worth accepting or not.

1.5 Thesis outline

The thesis is structured in the following way:

Chapter 1 introduces the research through its questions, relevance, objectives, and limitations as well as outlining how the remainder of the thesis is organized.

Chapter 2 will establish the theoretical and conceptual framework within which the research operates. The specific version of discourse theory employed here will be described first, followed by the definitions of the relevant concepts of gender, conflict, violence, and peace.

Chapter 3 will present the methods used for the analysis. First, the epistemological position of the thesis will be clarified. Narratological analysis will be defined next. Finally, formalism in film studies will be outlined. The final portion of the chapter will describe the analysis process.

Chapter 4 will present the material analyzed in this research. First, a brief history of Marvel and Captain America within it is provided. Then, the MCU is defined more closely and Captain America's role in the movie franchise is better explained. Finally, a summary is provided for all five works that the thesis explores. Then, a review of the existing literature on the topic of Captain America and the role of conflict and gender in the franchise is provided. In addition to reporting the findings of previous studies, the chapter will identify a research gap that this thesis can fill.

Chapter 5 will present the analysis of the material. The research questions and subquestions will be answered one by one by analyzing each installment of the Captain America franchise individually in order of release. Concluding the chapter is a summary of findings which presents the overall narratives of conflict and gender across the entire franchise.

The thesis concludes in chapter 6 by summarizing the totality of the research, restating the findings of the analysis, and providing final comments on the work.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Discourse analysis is a broad and diverse field that encompasses many different variations of both theories and methods for understanding the social world. It is, therefore, well beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a detailed overview of the entire study of discourse, its history, or all its nuances. Instead, a brief introduction to the field in general will be given to be followed by an account of the form of discourse theory used in this work, the definition of concepts related to discourse theory which are relevant to this particular study - that of gender and that of conflict and peace - and a preemptive response to some of the criticisms often lobbied at the elements of this framework.

2.1 Discourse theory

The emergence of discourse theory as a field can be traced back to the 1970s although it only really gained traction in the 1990s. It started as a criticism of positivism, structuralism and Marxism (Howarth & Torfing, 2005). Positivism is an epistemological position that is typically associated with natural sciences today; it holds that scientists, through gathering evidence, generating hypotheses and testing out theories, can arrive at objective knowledge about reality which can be used to understand the laws by which it operates. This premise was rejected already by early discourse theorists as not applicable to the social world which they were concerned with (Bryman, 2016). Structuralism is a school of thought in linguistics developed in large part by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure who pioneered the idea of language as a structure. In his view, every sign consists of form or *signifier* (that which is used to communicate meaning - in language, typically words) and content or *signified* (that which is meant when a specific signifier is used); the connection between the two is arbitrary and a product of social convention. This means that the connection between language and reality is also arbitrary and a product of social convention which, in turn, means that it can change over time. However, it remains relatively stable because all signs derive their meaning from their distance from other signs; that is to say, a sign has the meaning it does because it is *not* other signs. This puts all signs in a structure defined by the relations between them (hence the term *structuralism*). While individual uses of certain signs may fall outside this structure, the structure itself is fixed and should therefore be the object of study in the view of structuralism. Unlike positivism, structuralism is partially accepted in discourse theory with some key changes - the idea of signs gaining meaning through relations with other signs rather than a relation to reality is shared by discourse theory but the fixity of language and a

sharp division between language as a structure and language in use are rejected (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Marxism, the philosophy that sees society, economy and politics through the lens of historical materialism, was similarly criticized by discourse theorists for its dogmatism and determinism. The belief that the economy ultimately dictates the development of society and social relations is rejected while the idea that class belonging determines one's identity is seen as reductivist (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). In fact, many variants of discourse theory are critical of the entire concept of a unified identity and consider the subject instead to be fractured and divided by multiple identities that it holds at the same time (Gill, 2000).

These criticisms were developed simultaneously by a multitude of authors in various fields which inevitably led to different versions of the theoretical and analytical tools developed as well. Broadly, these can be classified into three different traditions: the first belonging to critical linguistics, the second influenced by conversation analysis, and the third falling under poststructuralism. Poststructuralist discourse theory which provides the basis for this thesis is often associated with the works of French philosopher Michel Foucault and focuses more on tracking discourses, their development through history, and the way they shape the social reality; what most separates it from other traditions is the strong disassociation from realism and the idea of a unified subject (Gill, 2000).

Regardless of the philosophical tradition that helped develop it, all variants of discourse analysis have some characteristics in common. To start with, discourse analysis is necessarily *a constructivist approach to reality*. Reality is not seen as something objective that exists independent of human understanding; instead reality is, at least in part, constructed by society itself and the actions of social actors which in this case refers more specifically to discourse. To which degree discourse is constitutive of reality and which parts of reality, if any, exist outside of discourse is a point of contention between discourse theorists. For some, all aspects of the social world are discursive and nothing exists outside of discourse. Others adopt a stance closer to the tradition of critical realism where only parts of the social world are discursively constructed but they affect and are in turn affected by objective reality or where objective reality exists but access to it is obscured by discursive practices in which case the goal of science and academia is sometimes seen as uncovering the real truth that hides behind the discourse (Bryman, 2016).

This leads to the second commonality between different approaches to discourse analysis - discourse analysis takes *a critical approach to knowledge itself*. Like reality,

knowledge is understood as constructed; it is not something that exists outside of the human conception but rather something that is created and maintained through social action and interaction. It is, therefore, necessarily dependent on the historical and cultural context in which it is produced; in a different context, it could have a different meaning. This means that all knowledge, even knowledge arrived at through the scientific method, is contingent - it is not an objective truth about an external reality but rather one of the many possible interpretations of it. For this reason, even knowledge that has been accepted as true and objective for a long time and is now taken for granted needs to be questioned (Gill, 2000).

Finally, discourse theory sees *a link between knowledge and social practice*. It is social practice that produces and reproduces certain ways of understanding the world and therefore certain types of knowledge. However, knowledge also puts constraints on social practice by making some actions appear logical and acceptable while others become unthinkable (Burr, 1995).

Discourse theory as conceptualized in this thesis is largely based on Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's poststructuralist discourse theory with some input from Norman Fairclough's critical discourse analysis (CDA) and Stuart Hall's work on representation. Discourse will be seen as *wholly constructive of the social world*; all social practice is discursive and no part of social reality exists outside of discourse. This does not, however, automatically mean that material reality does not exist at all; material reality exists, but it is only given meaning through discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). There is, however, never just one meaning that is *a priori* assigned to any event, action, object or person. Every meaning assigned to a phenomenon could have been different. This plurality of potential meanings causes all meanings to be contingent - possible but not necessary. Even those meanings which appear to be self-evident, unchanging, and are taken for granted are, in fact, contingent; no meaning is ever permanently fixed (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). In any given social process, however, meaning is created *as if* it were a part of a fixed structure - with a stable and permanent meaning understood by all actors (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). It is these attempts to fix meanings within a specific field by making them appear natural and given while excluding all other possibilities that are called discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001).

Because all social processes are discursive, discourse does not necessarily have to be linguistic. Interpersonal interactions, laws, cultural rituals, art, and more can and do

participate in meaning making. Discourses are themselves organized into orders of discourse; an order of discourse contains all the discourses related to a specific social field (Fairclough, 2010). Orders of discourse can further be seen in tiers so that broader orders of discourse encompass narrower ones. The discursive elements that do not belong to a specific (order of) discourse belong to the field of discursivity. The field of discursivity contains all the additional meanings that are excluded from a given discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001); what belongs to the field of discursivity will depend on what it stands in opposition to.

Like everything else in discourse theory, identities are created discursively. This means that all identities are relational - as with all other signs, their meaning is defined in opposition to that which they are not. The subject gains an identity from its position in a specific discourse; the position a subject takes in discourse affects the actions available to them and their position is juxtaposed to other possible positions in the same discourse. Various related meanings are assigned to an identity, creating a chain of equivalence - a series of meanings linked together against a shared opposition (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001): in gender discourse, for example, a man is one who is strong, rational, active. But these characteristics only gain meaning from their distance from other signs, which is to say that a strong, rational, active man only exists as an identity because he is not a weak, emotional, passive woman. However, multiple different chains of equivalence that define a single identity may exist. This is possible because identities are also contingent. Any identity that a subject adopts is possible but not necessary and it can change over time (whether strength is or is not a link in the chain of equivalence that defines the identity of a man will depend, in part, on whether this identity is being constructed in the 1950s or the 2020s because the discourse surrounding gender has changed in the decades in-between) or depending on the context (because a subject can take a position in multiple discourses, it is possible for one to be a man in the gender discourse, a father in the family discourse, a Muslim in religious discourse, an architect in professional discourse, etc). The multitude of possible identities that coexist in a single subject cause it to become overdetermined; that is to say, a subject simultaneously takes a position in multiple discourses which can be in conflict. Because total fixation of meaning is not possible and there is always a struggle between discourses, the subject is always overdetermined - it always has multiple possible identities (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). The conception of identity as created in relation to and more specifically in contrast to another, outside of the self, is not unique to discourse theory - already in Hegel's philosophical works from the early 1800s, the self is seen as created in distinction to another.

This implies that constructing a self always necessarily creates an Other as well and thus any self-identification is simultaneously an othering as well (Brons, 2015). Authors such as Simone de Beauvoir, Edward Said, Judith Butler, and Julia Kristeva among others have since further developed this idea of Othering to its modern use in which it refers to the construction of the Other as inherently inferior due to its differences. This type of Othering then leads to viewing those different from the self as inferior because of their gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity and other characteristics which are contentious subjects of identity discourse (Jensen, 2011). The self and the Other(s) are typically presented as binary oppositions - man/woman, white/black, straight/gay, the difference between the two giving meaning to both. The reduction of the Other to such simple terms is also called stereotyping. Stereotyping exaggerates the difference of the Other, essentializes that difference and makes it appear natural (and therefore inherent, constant, and unchangeable - in other words, stereotyping sediments identity discourse) (Hall, 1997a). Conversely, Othering does not always directly lead to ostracization - it can also have the opposite effect in which one instead becomes fascinated by and even attracted to the Other while simultaneously undervaluing them, thus creating an ambivalent relationship with the Other (Cohen, 1996).

The organization of discourse is not as rigid as it may appear from this explanation. Because meaning can never be truly fixed, different discourses can and do continue to struggle over which one gets to create what closure of meaning at the expense of others. It is often the points where discursive struggles are concentrated that discourse analysis focuses on. They reveal the contingency of meaning, help map out the fields covered by different discourses, and can be used to uncover how different actors favor certain meanings over others (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). These struggles are a necessary and constant part of discourse. However, they are not always antagonistic. Two discourses that are competing with each other can co-exist if they are not mutually exclusive; it is only when the meaning propagated by one discourse precludes the meaning propagated by a competing discourse that antagonisms form (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). When two or more discourses cannot coexist, one will ultimately win out and become more dominant. A discourse that wins out in a discursive struggle to the point where it becomes so naturalized that it appears to exist without contestation is referred to as sedimented discourse. Sedimented discourses form the field of objectivity - meaning that is taken for granted and whose contingency is forgotten because the discourse they belong to has suppressed all other possibilities so far that they appear impossible (Laclau, 1990). The goal of discourse analysis is often to unmask the

contingency of sedimented discourses and in so doing, question the established status quo by revealing how discursive practices establish specific constructions of the world and how those constructions of the world benefit certain groups over others, thus maintaining unequal power relations in society (Fairclough, 2010).

Power is here understood not as something an individual or group possesses and wields over others but rather as a constructive force in which all can take part - but to different degrees based on their positions in society and the way society views them (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Because of this, it is not possible for one group within society to simply dominate another. Instead, unequal relations in society are better described as hegemony - the process through which the upper echelons maintain their position not through subjugation but through persuasion and consent as well as force. This means that the social groups who are oppressed participate in maintaining their oppression by consenting to it (often because they are led to believe this is in their best interest or simply are not aware of another options) but it also opens up the possibility for oppressed groups to withdraw that consent and in so doing challenge the power relations in society (Gledhill, 1997). The discourses that serve to establish and maintain unequal relations of power are referred to as hegemonic discourses.

In everyday social processes, it is necessary to accept some meanings as objective facts; otherwise, it would be impossible to perform any kind of social action or interaction while questioning the meaning of every social phenomenon. This does not mean that sedimented discourses are actually fully fixed and without competition. Their meaning is still contingent, no matter how sedimented they may be at a given point in time. They simply operate *as if* this contingency did not exist until such a time when a challenge is presented by another discourse. The objectivity created by sedimented discourse is, therefore, just an illusion that masks the true contingency of meaning (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Because there is a connection between one's understanding of the world and the actions they perceive as acceptable, however, this illusion limits the possibilities for resistance. Social actors draw on existing discourses and in particular on sedimented discourses which they do not question. This leads them to maintain those discourses through their actions. For this reason, the contingency of all meaning does not automatically lead to that meaning constantly, quickly, and easily changing. In fact, discourses are relatively stable and have a tendency towards continuity that is hard to break (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Discourses are, therefore, not only

constitutive of the social world but are themselves constituted, at least in part, by other already existing, established, and sedimented discourses.

Discourses are formed and established through articulations which are communicative acts. Because it is not possible to communicate with objects or ideas themselves, one must use *signs* which stand for, symbolize, or represent that which one is referring to. Each sign consists of a signifier - the form that is used for communication - and the signified - the meaning it carries. The sign as a whole can itself become a signifier and gain a secondary meaning, thus creating two levels of signification: denotation and connotation. The level of denotation is then a basic, descriptive level where most people can agree on the meaning of a given sign while the level of connotation where the sign becomes myth is one of implied meanings that tie into the broader cultural discourses (Hall, 1997b). Although this theory comes from linguistics, a sign is not necessarily a word; it can also be a sound, an image, a gesture, or other symbol used to express a concept. A concept is in itself a symbol, the mental representation of a part of observed or experienced reality. There are, thus, two systems of representation: the representation of the world as mental concepts and the representation of those concepts as signs used to communicate with others. But for any form of communication, whether an interpersonal conversation between individuals or the dissemination of information through mass media, to be successful, it is necessary that the message being sent out is understood. For this to happen, the sender and the recipient of the message must share a code - a conceptual map of meanings that fixes the relationship between concepts and signs and allows us to encode and decode messages. Codes are not universal but historically and culturally contextual (Hall, 1997b). It is, therefore, possible that the codes used for encoding and decoding do not match up perfectly, which leads to the encoded messages being decoded in different ways. When the message is decoded exactly as intended, the recipient of the message is operating within dominant or hegemonic code. If the message is decoded within the hegemonic code but accepted with some alterations or exceptions, the recipient is operating within a negotiated code. Finally, it is also possible to decode messages in a way that is deliberately different from their intended meaning; in such cases, the recipient is operating within an oppositional code. Interpretations from negotiated and oppositional positions influence the frameworks of knowledge which can, in turn, influence dominant codes (Hall, 1973). Codes are, therefore, similar to discourses in that they are contextual closures of meaning that both influence and are influenced by how the world is interpreted through systems of symbolic representation.

Discourse analysis, like all social constructionist approaches, has frequently been criticized as being anti-reality (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Opponents argue that discourse analysis reduces reality to rhetoric and denies the importance of materiality. While some forms of social constructionism may tend toward this extreme, discourse theory as it is conceptualized here does not. To begin with, the existence of material reality is not in question as material reality is not the concern of the study. Because social reality is superimposed on material reality through discourse (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) and it is not possible to step outside of discourse to see what lies beneath it, the search for metatruths about that material reality is futile. What is instead being studied are the processes through which that material reality is perceived and given meaning, the totality of which constitutes discourse. This does not necessarily mean material reality does not exist at all, but the understanding of it is only created through discourse. Furthermore, discourse cannot be equated with rhetoric. While discourse analysis has its roots in linguistics and is frequently applied to the study of language, not all discursive processes are rhetorical. An articulation can come in the form of an image or movement without any words being used. Finally, discourses are themselves seen as material (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001). Material objects like schools, government buildings, passports, money, clothes, and more exist in the form in which they exist because now sedimented discourses have shaped them like that. This does not mean that they do not exist in a physical form, only that this physical form and its meaning are determined by discourse.

Another common criticism of discourse analysis concerns the production of knowledge that comes out of it (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). If all knowledge is contingent and a product of discursive processes, then that includes scientific knowledge as well. Scientific knowledge cannot, therefore, be taken for granted and must instead be seen as a discourse forwarding one possible meaning at the expense of others according to the logic of the scientific order of discourse it belongs to. This does not, however, render scientific efforts to produce knowledge worthless (Gill, 2000). Scientific and academic works (like this one) either reproduce or challenge objective discourses and in such a way play a role in discursive struggles by reinforcing the sedimentation of a given discourse or making its contingency clear again. In this way, they can contribute to the development of the social world (for better or for worse). One must simply accept that the goal of discourse analysis is not to uncover universal laws that govern the world or see behind the discourse; it is to uncover the processes that create existing discourses and in so doing contribute to them.

Finally, discourse analysis includes both theory and method, with the method typically being developed specifically for the version of the theory in question. However, critics often point out that the methodological component of discourse analysis and particularly poststructuralist discourse analysis is underdeveloped. This is certainly true for Laclau and Mouffe's discourse analysis which does not include any methodological instructions and was not even intended to be applied to individual articulations in the first place (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). In this thesis, however, discourse analysis will not be used as a method; it provides the ontological and epistemological positioning - not the methodology. Addressing the concerns regarding the underdevelopment of methodological tools in poststructuralist discourse theory is, therefore, not relevant.

Discourse theory was chosen for this thesis because of its explanatory power when it comes to the connection between society, communication, media, and entertainment and how those mutually influence one another. It is a well-developed and often used theory in social constructionism, the ontology that the author subscribes to.

2.2 Gender

For a long time, the term *gender* was used interchangeably with the term *sex* to denote the categorization of humans into men and women based on biological differences. In common parlance and among those who do not concern themselves with the study of gender, it may still be in use in this way (Pryzgoda & Chrisler, 2000). However, the current general consensus is that sex and gender, while correlated, are not the same thing; typically, sex is used to signify biological differences between humans which divide them into the categories of male and female while gender loosely refers to societal norms regarding the belonging in those categories (Lorber, 1995). Both sex and gender are social constructs (Cohn, 2013).

The discourse surrounding sex is so heavily sedimented that it went largely unquestioned (outside of niche groups) until the 1990s when social constructivism rose in influence and even after that (Appelrouth & Edles, 2011). Gender, on the other hand, has been defined in different ways over time. Originally, gender was seen as a coherent identity which stems from the internalization of behaviors learned during childhood or social norms observed during socialization (Cohn, 2013). Gender was seen, therefore, not as something one was born with but rather a status one achieves, usually in early childhood. While this understanding of gender emphasized its social construction, it maintained the idea that gender

was something that, once achieved, was an internally cohesive identity that was fixed and unchanging (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This did not account for the complex relationship between gender and society at large nor did it provide an explanation for changes in gender norms over time or changes in gendered behavior during an individual's life. It was therefore proposed that gender should be seen as a continuous process instead of an attained quality, not something that one is but rather something that one does. It is continuously produced and reproduced in everyday social interactions where one dresses, speaks, and otherwise behaves in a way that is seen as gender-appropriate for the given situation (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender is, therefore, a situated performance: one follows the norms of gendered behavior for the context they are in, doing gender differently in different situations. If one does not perform gender in a contextually satisfactory way, they may be held accountable for this by other social actors who assess one's performance and may punish outliers through, for example, social ostracization, legal action, or even direct violence. This performance serves to categorize people into the two binary genders (man and woman) derived from the two binary sexes (male and female) because the biological characteristics used to determine sex categorization are not readily observable in everyday life (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Gender can be performed purposely and deliberately with the goal of being categorized a certain way (Butler, 1986) but it can also be based on outside perception even when it is not being consciously performed (West & Zimmerman, 1987). Continuously reproducing this categorization leads it to become naturalized, taken for granted and even institutionalized to the point where it becomes ubiquitous and not "doing gender" is no longer an option. But if gender is "done", this means it can also be "undone". Although the potential for resistance to gender norms has been understated, it does exist and it opens up the potential for renegotiating what it means to be a man or woman, undermining the gender binary, and even questioning the category of gender altogether (Deutsch, 2007).

Because gender is not value-neutral, continuously reproducing gender categorization also reproduces a power structure. Characteristics and behaviors associated with men are generally valued more than those associated with women, albeit to different degrees in different societies. Depending on the severity of the imbalance, this can limit women's access to higher status in society, preclude them from certain roles, and diminish the influence they have on future development. This system of power relations that favors men over women is typically referred to as the patriarchy (Cohn, 2013). Maintaining that system requires maintaining the division between genders by obeying gender norms which dictate how

gender is to be performed. The punishment for stepping outside of the norm is often more severe for those who do not conform to the expectations placed on the more highly valued gender which puts more pressure on consistently accurate performance of masculinity (Vandello et al., 2008). This creates a hierarchical system not only between genders but also within them, putting more value on those gender performances that better fit the norm (Cohn, 2013). Those gender performances which are seen as ideal, which best fit the given norms, and which uphold the existing power structures are referred to as hegemonic (Paechter, 2018). But most people do not perform gender in ways that are completely congruent with hegemonic expressions of gender; hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity are, therefore, those ways of doing gender which are held in the highest regard, but not necessarily those that are the most common.

Like all other gender performances, hegemonic masculinities and hegemonic femininities are contextual and impermanent. What is considered hegemonic in one culture may not be in another; for this reason, one can talk about local, regional, and global hegemonic masculinities and femininities. Finally, the relationship between hegemonic and non-hegemonic gender performances cannot be understood as a simple relationship of dominance of hegemonic masculinities and femininities over other expressions of gender. Instead, a network of mutual influences is established where hegemonic gender expressions both affect non-hegemonic ones and are affected by them, sometimes adapting to growing influences of non-hegemonic gender performances by incorporating aspects of them. This indicates that hegemonic gender relations can change over time. Today, hegemonic masculinity is not just male in the biological sense but also White and heterosexual; it is further associated with dominance, power, action, and even aggression. The concept of hegemonic femininity is less developed in scholarship but would have to be one that is complementary to hegemonic masculinity in that it maintains traditional gender roles. Hegemonic femininity would therefore be one that is associated with passivity, the home, and dependence on men; much like hegemonic femininity, it is also associated with being White and heterosexual. This reveals one of the potential problems with the conceptualization of hegemonic gender performances - they are still strongly binary and oppositional as well as closely tied to sex and sexuality (Paechter, 2018). Indeed, it is gay men and lesbian women who are often seen as the threat to hegemonic masculinity and hegemonic femininity respectively; they are the "in-between" of genders, especially when their gender performance does more closely resemble what is expected of the opposite sex (as is the case for effiminate

gay men and butch lesbian women, for example). This association between gender and sexuality also works in reverse - men whose appearance and behavior is associated with femininity and women whose gender performance is closer to what is expected of masculinity will be "read" as queer (Dyer, 2002).

But gender is not just an individual identity, a group categorization, or a power structure created and maintained through social practice; it is a system of meaning (Cohn, 2013). In other words, gender is a discourse unto itself which shapes an understanding of the world. It is assigned not just to people but to the traits they exhibit, their behaviors, the work they do, and even seemingly unrelated concepts such as war (masculine) and peace (feminine) which all function as meanings in the chains of equivalence organized around "man" and "woman". Because men are seen as active, rational, and strong, the very notion of action, ration, and strength become gendered and by extension all things that represent action, ration, and strength do as well. Furthermore, because masculinities are valued higher than femininities so are most things that are associated with them. In this way, gender discourse can not only assign gender to various actions and concepts but also assign *values* to them, which can have material consequences such as the exclusion of women from certain roles (as soldiers or political leaders, for example) and higher investments in certain actions (such as military power and interventionism, for example) (Cohn, 2013). To undermine this power imbalance, it is therefore necessary to unveil the contingency of gender discourse and reshape the gendered understanding of the world.

Gender is not the only discourse that is simultaneously an identity, a category, a power structure and a system of meaning. In varying historical and cultural contexts, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and class can function in the same way and may even overlap with gender discourse. The intersection between gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, class and other discourses creates a complex system of variations in gender norms and values; the expectations and limitations placed on, for example, black women are different from those placed on white women and the value placed on qualities associated with straight men is different from that placed on qualities associated with queer men (Cohn, 2013). Any analysis of gender must, therefore, take into account that gender is sexualized and racialized as well as that sexuality and race are gendered.

The connection between gender and sexuality is particularly strong. Just like men are the "default" gender and women are the Other, heterosexuality is the default sexuality while

all other forms of desire (or lack thereof) are the deviance from the norm. This is also evident in the way media and entertainment portray society. When the standard for the audience is presumed to be male and heterosexual, women are presented as objects of sexual desire; men on screen are, however, not the objects of desire of heterosexual women or homosexual men but what heterosexual men assume women want from them (Dyer, 2002). The creation of media to reflect male heterosexual desire has been theorized as the male gaze. Rooted in psychoanalysis, Laura Mulvey's analysis aimed to show how film and visual media is organized around male identification with male characters and male desire for female characters, who are in turn shown as passive objects of said desire (Mulvey, 1989). This concept has been both criticized as being too deterministic and reductive (Snow, 1989) and lauded as being an enduring and useful tool for understanding the reasons for and the consequences of the way women are represented in media (Oliver, 2017). In its most reductive reading, the theory of the male gaze posits that the viewer inherently identifies with the view of the camera which stands for the gaze of a heterosexual male - this casts the male characters (and viewers) in an active role while female characters are only passive, sexualized objects for the male characters and viewers to enjoy. While this claim is clearly untenable when all of visual media is taken into consideration and its determinism is rejected in a discourse theoretical conceptualization, the basic idea of the male gaze is a useful one: although it is possible to interpret all media in negotiated or even oppositional code, there is a tendency for the dominant code in film and other entertainment to be the view of the world gendered through the perspective of heterosexual men, which limits the role women play in such media and especially in genres that are geared toward men such as war and action movies. In these genres in particular, women typically appear as objects of love and desire or on the sidelines, as carers, victims, family members (Thomas, 2009). When they do take on a seemingly active role of heroes, this is only an illusion - they ultimately fall into the same archetypes as all female characters and are not a replacement for the male hero with whom the viewer is meant to identify (Schubart, 1998). This representation of women is both a product of already established discourses surrounding gender and what maintains those discourses - for a story about a woman to be believable and accepted and ultimately become a lasting myth, it needs to reflect what is already generally believed about women and their roles, but it is precisely this reproduction that allows such understandings to continue to exist unchallenged (Schubart, 2009).

2.3 Conflict, violence, peace

Discussions surrounding the meaning of peace existed long before the inception of peace studies as an academic discipline in the 1960s (Gleditsch et al., 2014). Colloquially, the understanding of peace in Western societies is largely reduced to the opposite of war, a cessation of hostilities, and an absence of violence, which is evidenced in semantic definitions of the words for peace across multiple languages as well as their etymologies. However, Eastern definitions of peace are more diverse and often include allusions to harmony, calmness, and wholeness (R. Anderson, 2004), which indicates that the understanding of peace is at least in part cultural. Religious belief can further influence the definition of peace as many religions see peace in their deities and rituals dedicated to them (G. L. Anderson, 1985). Academically, peace has been discussed in fields such as philosophy, history (Bönisch, 1981), psychology, political sciences, and international law, as well as being a relevant concept in policy making and activism (R. Anderson, 2004), By and large, these definitions fit either the colloquial understanding of peace as an absence of war or the colloquial understanding of peace as harmony and fulfillment (Bönisch, 1981). Today, these definitions roughly correspond to the widely accepted concepts of negative and positive peace as first defined by Johan Galtung in his 1969 article *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research*. In it, Galtung defines negative peace as the "absence of personal violence" and positive peace as the "absence of structural violence" (Galtung, 1969, p. 183). This begs the question of what the definition of violence, personal violence, and structural violence is. In other words, to define peace one must first understand the related concepts of violence and more broadly conflict.

Any incompatibility, partial or whole, between goals or values of social actors is considered a conflict. This incompatibility may occur internally or externally - within an actor or between two or more different actors; it may also occur at any level of social organization - individual or group and can involve a temporal displacement such that the goals of one actor in the present may be incompatible with the goals of another actor in the future (Galtung, 1970). Conflict is, therefore, not an attribute but a relation (Galtung, 2013). It affects and is in turn affected by attitudes and behavior. Conflict may lead to developing a conflict attitude which then leads to conflict behavior which in turn breeds more conflict or one may practice conflict behavior which leads to conflict which leads to having a conflict attitude and reinforcing conflict behavior. In other words, behavior surrounding conflict and

attitudes toward conflict can affect how one handles conflict as much as conflict can affect attitudes and behavior. Although there is a tendency to see conflict as negative and destructive, not all conflict necessarily escalates into violence. Instead, conflict can be productive if it is seen as an opportunity to find creative solutions that suit all parties involved and improve relationships between them (Galtung, 1970). This approach is called conflict transformation and is an alternative to conflict resolution (in which the underlying cause of the conflict is resolved but the conflict is not turned into a productive, more fulfilling, and more peaceful relationship) and conflict management (in which conflict is not resolved but simply contained so that it does not escalate further) (Miall, 2007).

An action or state that stands in the way of social actors' physical and mental realization is considered violence (Galtung, 1969). This definition is both widely accepted and widely criticized in social sciences (Vorobej, 2008). As Galtung himself admits in the same article in which he defines violence in this way, the definition is very broad and requires some speculation as to whether a given social actor's potential is realized or not (Galtung, 1969). This makes the concept hard to operationalize or measure in more practical studies (R. Anderson, 2004) and may at times dilute the meaning of violence to the point where it becomes difficult to determine what does and does not fall under it (Parsons, 2007). But the basic definition of violence must be broad enough to encompass all the different types of hindrances to the realization of human potential - direct, structural, and cultural violence. Direct violence (sometimes also referred to as actor violence) is a type of action deliberately taken by an individual or group with the intention of committing physical or mental harm on oneself or another. Both the perpetrator and the victim of direct violence can be identified. Examples of direct violence include murder, assault, verbal abuse, and even self-harm. Structural violence (also called indirect violence) is an obstacle to the realization of human potential that is built into the social system; this type of violence is not always easy to notice because no individual actor can be identified as an intentional perpetrator - the social structure is itself the one exerting violence. This type of violence can be a consequence of direct violence (as is the case with the exploitation of African countries after colonization) or it can be the cause of direct violence (in the case of violent uprisings and revolutions). Examples of structural violence include racism, sexism, antisemitism and other forms of discrimination, all of which cause unequal outcomes for different groups of people on a statistically relevant scale. However, because it is not an act but rather a process and because there is no clearly identifiable actor, structural violence is less visible than direct violence.

This makes it one of two types of invisible violence, the second one being cultural violence. Cultural violence is the intentional or unintentional process of justifying direct and structural violence through cultural elements such as aspects of religion, ideology, language, science, and art. Cultural elements that make direct and structural violence appear legitimate, natural, and even desirable are themselves a form of violence as they may inspire direct violence or discourage from taking action to dismantle structural violence. Examples of cultural violence include (pseudo)scientific disciplines like phrenology used to justify racism as biologically grounded, crime shows on TV which present the police as heroes in all situations, and even specific uses of language such as applying the label of "terrorist" only to Middle Eastern, Muslim perpetrators even when white, Western men commit similar crimes (Galtung, 1996). In the United States, the strong ties between the military-industrial complex and the entertainment industry as well as the emergence of new forms of media such as video games has exacerbated the problem of cultural legitimization of violence by banalizing militarism, turning war into entertainment, and making violence appear more palatable and easier to accept (Power, 2009).

The three types of violence do not exist independently of each other; rather, they are mutually interconnected. Direct violence can establish systems that perpetuate structural violence and inspire a culture that is itself violent but it can also be the consequence of prolonged structural violence and a culture that justifies violent action. Therefore, for as long as one type of violence exists, there will always also exist a plausible chance for more violence to occur (Galtung, 1996); this threat of violence is in itself a form of violence as it is enough to prevent the realization of human potential (Galtung, 1969). To truly achieve peace it is then necessary to eliminate all types of violence - direct, structural and cultural.

If peace is seen as an absence of violence, the question becomes - which type of violence? For this reason, Galtung's original conceptualization of peace includes two definitions: the absence of direct violence is termed negative peace while the absence of structural violence is referred to as positive peace (Galtung, 1969). However, this definition of peace still relies on definition through negation; both positive and negative peace are defined by what they are not (violence). Galtung's later work offers a more nuanced typology of peace which also more closely follows his typology of violence. The definition of peace as the absence of violence is maintained only in reference to negative peace while positive peace also includes efforts to maximize welfare, improve relations, and build an equitable society that benefits all. Just like violence, peace can be direct, structural, and cultural. In its negative

form, it simply refers to the absence of direct, structural and cultural violence respectively. In terms of positive peace, however, direct peace involves the rebuilding of relationships between involved actors; structural peace focuses on achieving equity; the goal of cultural peace is to build harmony (Galtung, 2013).

This thesis will follow Galtung's conceptualization of violence as not just a direct and intentional action committed by an identifiable actor on an identifiable victim but also as a social structure and a culture that, sometimes unintentionally, maintains relations of inequality. Cultural violence in particular will be of interest; the symbolic sphere of human existence, of which art, media, and entertainment (including film) are a part, shape the understanding of what violence is, whether it is acceptable, upon whom, and under which circumstances. By justifying direct violence and naturalizing structural violence, cultural violence can help sediment discourses that encourage continued use of violence, perpetuate inequality, and limit the perceived possibilities for peaceful resistance and conflict transformation. If cultural violence is to be eliminated in an effort to build positive peace, then meanings established by discourses that perpetuate violence must be challenged rather than reified. This is made significantly more difficult by the way mass media operates under capitalism.

In their 1988 book *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*, economist Edward S. Herman and linguist Noam Chomsky show how due to the unequal distribution of power in a capitalist society, representations in media are not unbiased; rather, the material that makes it into the media has been run through a number of filters to ensure that the message it sends is one that maintains the existing power relations. These filters are (1) ownership, (2) advertising, (3) sourcing, (4) flak, and (5) fear (originally anti-communism). The vast majority of media are owned by a very small number of corporations whose interests they reflect; not only does this create a bias in the messages that are being disseminated but it also makes it very difficult for new, less well-established, and less well-funded dissenting media to succeed. Typically, a large portion of the funding for modern media comes from advertisers, which makes media outlets at least partially dependent on advertisers; the media produced will therefore be in line with the interests of the advertisers so as not to alienate potential sources of funding. The information presented in the media must come from sources that appear trustworthy and reliable, including the government and big businesses; because access to such sources is crucial for media outlets, they are unlikely to be overly critical of those who hold positions of power for fear of losing

access to them. Similarly, the fear of flak or facing negative consequences for spreading controversial messages ensures the media largely fall in line with established cultural discourse; since those in power are better able to produce effective flak, it is their interests specifically that the media are unlikely to go against (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). Finally, the media rely on a common fear of the Other to unite their audiences and entice them to action; this fear may be generated, directed, and redirected at any ideology (originally - at communism), class, person, or group of persons that pose a threat to the existing power structures and those who benefit them (Klaehn, 2009). Once the media message has been pared and shaped by these five filters, it will almost certainly reflect the interests of the elites. The actions of the state, the government, the military, the police, the big businesses, the rich, and the powerful are legitimized even while the same or similar actions committed by groups that are not in power (such as, for example, activists, rebel fighters, and lower classes) or are a threat to those in positions of power (like other nation states or governments) are condemned. The typical mechanism for this is to differentiate between worthy and unworthy victims in the same way as "us vs them" - when the victims are our own nation, citizens of our own state, or otherwise members of a group the public is supposed to sympathize with, then their lives and well-being are worthy so those who harm them are not justified in their actions, but when the victims are the Other and the perpetrators are a part of a group whose interests the media represents, then the victims are represented as unworthy, unimportant, and even hostile and any action against them is justified. Even when individual members of the ruling classes are criticized, the criticism is not lobbied at the system itself. The media thus become a tool for propaganda which serves to manufacture consent from the general public for the type of social action (or inaction) that suits those in the position of power (Herman & Chomsky, 2002). In this way, the media help to maintain an unequal power structure and contribute to cultural violence.

Although the propaganda model was first developed over 30 years ago and for news specifically, it has since been applied (with some adjustments) to many different types of media, including entertainment. In 2009, Matthew Alford adjusted the propaganda model for Hollywood specifically, using the same five filters as the original model. In terms of ownership, no adjustments were needed - six major studios controlled the vast majority of Hollywood movie output at the time of writing: Disney, Sony Pictures Entertainment, Paramount, 20th Century Fox, Warner Bros, and Universal. Since then, Disney has acquired 20th Century Fox ("Disney Ends the Historic 20th Century Fox Brand," 2020) and between

all its subsidiaries, it accounted for almost 40% of the US box office in 2019 (Whitten, 2019). When it comes to advertising, the filter could not be transposed directly onto Hollywood as Hollywood movies are not so directly dependent on advertisers as news outlets are. However, some of the profits do come from the practice of product placement. Therefore, Hollywood movies must also be made in such a way that does not alienate potential advertisers. The sourcing filter similarly does not apply to Hollywood directly as filmmakers do not rely on credible sources for news stories, but the government, the military, and corporations can be sources of information that helps create verisimilitude or provide access to locations, equipment, and sometimes funding so Hollywood filmmakers must maintain good relationships with them nonetheless. Filmmakers and even actors are further vulnerable to flak from both the government (in the form of censorship) and the audience (in the form of organized boycotts). Short-term, this can reduce the profits of a movie with a controversial message but over the years, prolonged blacklisting has caused long-term consequences for individuals as well, which makes the production of radical movies a risk most are not willing to take. Finally, Hollywood movies typically revolve around a conflict between "the good guys" the audience is supposed to root for and "the bad guys" the audience is supposed to hate, fear, and revile. It is no surprise, then, that "the bad guys" are typically those the audience already hates, fears, and reviles - the Other. This only serves to further sediment the negative image of marginalized groups that are Othered (Alford, 2009).

The propaganda model has been criticized for being too reductive of complex mechanisms that work together to produce media messages in order to fit them into filters that do not allow for as much nuance as the media encompasses. However, it is a good starting point for understanding how power influences media to produce and reproduce certain discourses that help to maintain systems of structural violence through cultural violence (Alford, 2009).

3. METHODOLOGY

The theoretical and conceptual framework of constructivism within which this thesis operates has already predisposed it to an interpretivist epistemology. Discourse theory holds that it is not possible to uncover an objective truth about reality; what is possible is to show how understanding of that reality, discourse, is constructed. For that, it is necessary to interpret the meanings created through communication. In the case of entertainment and media in general, a meaning is encoded into a text, image, sound, or video and then broadcast to a large audience. Although the audience can (and does) decode a different message from the one that was intended, the encoding predisposes a certain reading of the text (Hall, 1973). It is this meaning, the meaning that the audience is predisposed to, that this analysis seeks to uncover not only because this is the meaning the majority of the audience is likely to accept but also to better understand which messages are being sent by the entertainment industry and why.

Interpretivist methods like the ones used here are often criticized for being too subjective (Bryman, 2016). However, this thesis rejects the alternative presented by objectivism - that there is a universal understanding of the world that research can and should discover. It is in the nature of signs that their meaning is contingent (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001) and it is in the nature of communication that messages will sometimes be distorted in the encoding/decoding process, especially on the connotative level of meaning (Hall, 1997a). The meaning found in the Captain America movies and TV shows by this analysis is, therefore, only one possible meaning but by employing social scientific methods for the interpretation of media and identifying specific techniques used in the analyzed media, the author will attempt to show that the reading presented here is the one that has been predisposed (though not predetermined). It is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore to which degree this meaning has also been decoded, but further research into this can be done through the exploration of the critical and audience reception of the Captain America franchise. Since discourses shape the entirety of social reality (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001), it is not possible to step outside of them for the purposes of research and analysis; they will instead also shape this author's understanding of the world. It is, therefore, necessary to disclose the author's positioning in the interest of transparency: the author is an Eastern European queer woman, a feminist, and a leftist who regularly enjoys movies and TV shows in the superhero genre,

which can influence the interpretation of the material. An effort will be made to diminish the influence of personal opinions by relying on well-established methods of analysis.

3.1 Narratology

Broadly speaking, narratology is the study of narratives. Although it originates in literary studies and was, therefore, first used to parse narratives in fictional writing, it has since been applied to other fields as well and been used to discuss narratives on topics such as history, politics, personal experiences, marketing, and more (Phelan, 2006). This, of courses, raises the question of what a narrative is.

According to Prince (1982), there is an implicit understanding of what a narrative is and is not even among those who do not study it academically. People are able to identify a narrative and provide accounts of it; although these accounts may differ somewhat, they are likely to contain the most pertinent information and a chronological or causal order of events while very few retellings will misidentify the most important elements of a narrative or provide a completely unrelated account of it. This indicates that narratives have commonalities which most people have the ability to identify on some level. This ability is also known as narrative competence and falls under the purview of narratology. More commonly, however, narratology is concerned with the narrative form - the commonalities between narratives which can be seen as a set of rules that allow narratives to create meaning. There are four common approaches to defining a narrative within narratology: temporal (narrative is a series of events in a specific time sequence), causal (narrative is a series of events that are the causes and consequences of one another), minimal (any statement about an action or event is a narrative), and transactional (narrative is not a feature of a text but rather a way of reading it) (Richardson, 2000). This thesis adopts the commonly held temporal and causal positions wherein a narrative is a series of at least two events, real or fictional, presented as occurring over a period of time in a way that at least implies a causal link.

Like discourse theory, narratology has its roots in structuralist linguistics. Two main features of structuralist linguistics had an influence on narratology: the idea that meaning-making is a rule-governed activity and the division between the universal structure of language and the individual use of language. For this reason, early narratologists were mostly concerned with finding the universal rules used in the crafting of narratives and the analysis of individual texts was done with the goal of uncovering similarities between all

narratives and classifying them. The work of Russian formalists in this field has remained influential to this day (Phelan, 2006) in part because the development of the field of narratology did not involve the typical shift from one theory to another which criticizes it; rather, newer theories have supplemented classical narratology without necessarily displacing it (Colyar & Holley, 2010). Many of the concepts proposed by early narratologists are still in use today including the distinction between story (*what* the narrative presents) and discourse (*how* the narrative presents it) and the difference between fabula (the chronological series of narrative events) and syuzhet (the order in which the narrative presents its events, which can be chronological or not). However, in the decades since these early narratological works, other fields like cognitive sciences, rhetorics, feminist criticism, queer theory, and postcolonial studies have all influenced narratology. Much of this influence has been in directing focus toward the audience as an active participant in the construction of meaning presented by the narrative and the interplay between society and narratives more broadly. Cognitive narratology, for example, has introduced the concepts of frames (general knowledge about the world that narratives activate) and scripts (patterns of actions and consequences that create expectations) into narratology. The view of narrative as rhetoric has raised questions about the ways in which authors address audiences through narratives. Critical scholars have pointed out how a narrative is not just read, but also interpreted (which leads to questions of how it connects to the real world and what the attitudes of the narrative itself are toward that which it represents) and then criticized (a step during which the audience decides whether it accepts or rejects the attitudes of the narrative) (Phelan, 2006).

One of the consequences of seeing the narrative more as a relationship between the author, the text, and the audience than as an independent feature of a text is the question of who tells the story. Narratology is rarely concerned with an author per se, although some theorists employ the concept of an implied author - the version of the author that is constructed through the way the narrative is told. The focus is instead more on the in-text author or narrator - the character who is telling the story. This narrator need not be explicitly present. In fact, in many texts told in third person or in an apparently objective narration, the narrator never addresses the audience or reveals themselves; they are only evident in the fact that the story is being told and in the way that it is being told. The narrator may or may not themselves be a character. When the narrator is a character, the narration typically happens in the first person and shows not only the narrator's point of view but also how the narrator experiences the narrative world. However, narration need not be guided by the narrator's own

experiences; instead, the narrator can present the experience of the world of a different character or of no character at all. This is the difference between a narrator and a focalizator. While the narrator is the person telling the story, the focalizator is the person perceiving it. Gerard Genette was the first narratologist to present the concept of focalization, which has since been developed further by authors such as Manfred Jahn and Mieke Bal (Phelan, 2006).

Genette's concept of focalization included three modes of narration based on how much information is available and how much is withheld in the narrative: zero focalization (in which the narrator is omniscient), external focalization (in which the narrator is an observer with no insight into the inner worlds of characters), and internal focalization (in which the narrator perceives the world through a character who serves as a focalizator). Most of the criticism toward this understanding of focalization has been directed against the former two modes - no focalization and external focalization. Instead, modern narratologists largely believe that there is no narration without focalization because any statement is necessarily made from some point of view and infused with some assessment (Jahn, 2007). Bal suggests instead that there are two types of focalization - external, where the narrator is the focalizator, and internal, where the role of focalizator is instead delegated to a character. Who the focalizator is has a bearing on the understanding of the narrative because the focalizators do not just limit the information about the story world that the audience receives but also interpret that information for the audience; in this way, the focalizator's understanding of the story world can become the audience's understanding of it as well (Bal, 1981).

Many of the narratological concepts were developed to be used in the interpretation and criticism of literature - hence the focus on authors and voices. But an analysis of narrative is possible for any material that contains a narrative. Given that films tell a story, they are also considered a narrative genre which narratology can make sense of. Whether they are high-concept films of old Hollywood or blockbusters and action thrillers of the 2000s, movies typically have coherent plots that follow the same universal rules of narration identified in novels, stories, and other literary genres (Bordwell, 2006).

Narratological analysis applies to all aspects of a narrative: plot both as a chronological order of events (fabula) and as it is presented (syuzhet), characters, potential narrators, and more. A narrative analysis of a movie is, however, not just about identifying what happens and to whom but also about *how* the plot is constructed and *to what end* (Colyar & Holley, 2010). Because movies are its own genre with its own internal norms and

because they provide audiovisual data instead of a written text, the application of narrative concepts must sometimes be adapted from literary narrative analysis. Focalization, for example, cannot be determined based on which person narration is performed in when a movie does not have a narrator nor can identifying verbs of perception help when there are none; instead, both external and internal focalization are achieved through camerawork. Branigan (1992) identifies four different types of shots that signify focalization: the objective shot motivated by an agent outside of the film world (to avoid discussing directors, producers, writers, the film crew, and the like, Jahn, (2003) subsumes all such agents under the term Filmic Composition Device or FCD which is, according to him, the "creative intelligence responsible for orchestrating the data and realizing the film's overall vision"), the externally focalized shot, typically over the shoulder, which shows what a character sees and hears but does not mimic their own perception directly, the internally focalized shot on the surface level which equals a point-of-view shot, and the internally focalized shot on a deep level which shows experiences internal to the character such as their thoughts, dreams, and memories. This is how movies may focalize the narrative and limit the knowledge about it through a character-focalizator.

Bordwell and Thompson have also suggested five norms that govern storytelling in Hollywood films and are not necessarily found in literature to be goal orientation (characters are driven by the need to achieve a certain goal), the double plot line (there is typically a "work" plotline and a "romance" plotline), a discrete part structure (movies can be divided into four or five parts similar to acts in a play - the setup, the complicating action, development, climax, and usually also an epilogue), planting causes for future effects (also known as Chekhov's gun, this principle involves introducing actions, props, and character information that will only become relevant later in the movie), and deadlines (there is a ticking clock against which the characters must act) (Bordwell, 2007). The questions one might ask in a narrative analysis of a film could, therefore, be:

● Which sequence of events makes up the narrative of the film? How are those events presented on the screen - chronologically or not - and how does this presentation affect the audience's perception? Does the movie use flashbacks or flash forwards and to what effect? What causal links are implied by the chosen temporal organization of events?

● Does the movie have a narrator? If so, is the narrator themselves a character in the movie? Are they narrating as the events unfold or is the narration retrospective?

● Who are the main characters in the movie? Is there a main character around whom the narrative is centered? How does this character's positioning in the movie world affect what the audience knows about it?

● Which character or characters are used as the focalizator for the movie? How are the focalizators identified through different types of shots? Are there deeply internally focalized shots and what is their purpose in the film? How does the focalization limit the audience's knowledge of the movie world? How does this focalization forward a certain interpretation of the narrative events?

3.2 Neoformalism

Neoformalism is a constructivist theory of film primarily associated with the works of David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson. Its main contribution to the existing body of film theory has been twofold: introducing the idea of the audience as actively participating in the construction of the meaning of films and doing away with the division between content and form. Traditionally, film was understood as a vessel for the creator to send a message to the audience who then passively accepts it (communication model) or actively interprets it (semiotic model) but does not in any way contribute to the way films make meaning. Meaning was typically found in the content of the film - the events, actions, characters, settings, dialogue - and the content was present in a certain form - using different camera angles, camera movement, audio editing techniques - but although content and form worked together to create the movie, they were considered separate and film analysis did not necessarily have to deal with both. Neoformalism rejects both of these premises (Gaut, 1995).

Meaning is not a singular, unified component of a film. Rather, there are at least four different types of meaning: referential, explicit, implicit, and symptomatic. Referential meaning is that which points to something in the real world (a person, an entity, or a location that the audience may recognize from the world around them). Explicit meaning includes the abstract ideas that the film outright states while implicit meanings are those connotations that the work must be interpreted for. Finally, symptomatic meaning is the non-explicit ideology of the film which helps define its relation to the world by reflecting on social tendencies or responding to social movements. These meanings are created through and in turn create the effect of defamiliarization. Defamiliarization is "the basic purpose of art in our lives" (Thompson, 1988, p. 11). It is the process of taking something familiar (either from the real

world or from other fictional works) and transforming it in such a way that it becomes new, interesting, unfamiliar, and therefore worthy of attention once again. To some extent, all movies do this, even those that appear formulaic and unoriginal. It is the defamiliarization that makes movie worlds different and interesting and that encourages the audience to rethink what they represent during and after the viewing.

Viewing a film is, therefore, not a simply passive process - it is an active participation. The viewer experiences physiological, preconscious, conscious and even unconscious processes upon watching the movie. Physiological processes refer to the automatic physical responses that allow the viewer to perceive the images, colors, and movement on the screen. Unconscious processes refer to mental processes that the viewer is not aware of. Neither of these are of much relevance to neoformalism. However, the preconscious processes of processing what one is perceiving on the screen and the conscious processes of interpreting that which is processed are (Thompson, 1988). It is through these processes that the audience participates in constructing the meaning of the film by mapping concepts they are already familiar with onto the cues provided by the film (Gaut, 1995). These concepts are a part of mental schemata which develop as a person interacts with the real world. When watching a film, the viewer then uses these schemata to form hypotheses about the meanings the film is creating and fill in the information missing from the narrative based on what they expect is likely to have logically happened even if it has not been presented on the screen directly. This horizon of expectation is, however, contextual. Because the schemata come from a person's everyday experiences, they will be different for different locations, cultures, and historical periods. It stands to reason, then, that the interpretation of a film that the viewer comes to is also contextual and will differ across cultures and through time. This can also cause the meaning of the film that the viewer ultimately constructs to be different from the one the filmmakers intended (in other words, the audience may decode a different message from the one that was encoded). Of course, not all interpretations are equally likely - movies still predispose the audiences to certain meanings by cuing the intended meaning using different devices of narrative and style (Thompson, 1988). If, for example, a scene of a historical battle is followed by a scene of the main character injured in a hospital, the most likely interpretation will be that the character was injured in battle even if this was not in fact shown on screen; it is unlikely that a viewer will interpret this sequence as the character having a congenital deformity. The meaning produced through audience participation is, therefore, not

entirely arbitrary - it is a meaning that is in large part elicited by the movie through the use of devices which a film analysis can identify.

The audiences take in every part of the film simultaneously so every part of the film participates in the meaning-making simultaneously. There is, therefore, no real division between content and form. Camera angles are as much a part of the film as the dialogue. For this reason, neoformalism does not differentiate between form and content. Instead, one may discuss different devices (camera angles, cuts, montages) that a film uses to achieve the defamiliarization and present its story. The choice of the device used is based on two factors - function and motivation. Function refers to how a specific device relates to the rest of the work within which it is used and the broader corpus of movies within which the work resides. Most devices are used quite consistently across the movie, the work of the director, the genre, and even across different genres. However, the function of a device is not entirely fixed and can change depending on the context, the culture, and the time of creation. Furthermore, a device can deliberately be used in an atypical way to create a new effect. This is an example of motivation: there must be a reason why a specific device has been used in any given film. Motivation can be compositional (a device is used because it is necessitated by the narrative, its space, time, or causality), realistic (a device is used to create plausibility which is based on real-world knowledge), transtextual (a device is used because its use is the convention of the genre), or artistic (a device is used purely for aesthetic reasons, often to produce a novel and unique effect). The use of these devices is organized along two different but related axes - the proairetic and the hermeneutic line. The proairetic line refers to the chain of causality between different events in the movie's narrative which the viewer is intended to identify. The hermeneutic line refers to the questions the movie leaves (temporarily) unanswered by withholding relevant information, which encourages the audience to continue wondering about how the film will continue. The satisfaction of understanding the events of the film's narrative and the curiosity about what is yet to be revealed is meant to keep the audience engaged and actively participating in meaning construction as they continue to watch the movie (Thompson, 1988).

But films are never made in a vacuum. Therefore, their creation is affected by the cultural and historical context within which it happens. Filmmaking norms change over time, both because of technological developments that allow for different devices to be used and because of the popularity of the use of certain devices which can change over time. Different societal norms will also affect the way films are perceived in terms of both story and

aesthetic. Factors outside of filmmakers' control can also have an influence on choices made in the process of filmmaking; legal bans on the dissemination of certain types of information, the cultural perception of different topics or aesthetic devices, the profitability of a given genre - these can limit the possibility for movie making. A thorough analysis would, therefore, need to take these elements into account as well (Thompson, 1988).

If form and content are seen as one and the same, then film analysis must contend with both. It is not enough to focus on the story alone or the movie making techniques alone; instead, one must analyze everything in a scene. Mise-en-scene is the term used to refer to the object of the study of such an analysis and it includes everything that makes up a scene: the set and the props, the action and the dialogue, the characters, actors that portray them, and ways they behave in, the costuming and makeup, the lighting, the sound, the cinematography, the camerawork (angles and movement), and the post-production editing (transitions, montages, cuts, overlays, special effects). Every one of these elements has a typical meaning that it cues - a shot of a character from below, for example, typically implies the character is in a position of power or dominance; when a character is filmed in the crowd as the only stationary figure, the only figure in focus, or the only figure in color, it typically implies loneliness and a separation from society in general; a montage is typically used to quickly show passage of time (Sikov, 2020). However, these are only typical uses - every element can, in the context of a specific film or in the hands of a specific film maker, mean something else as well. Typical uses are, furthermore, culturally and historically dependent - they may cue different meanings in, for example, a 21st century Hollywood blockbuster and a 1960s Japanese drama. It is, therefore, necessary to analyze each film in its own context (Thompson, 1988).

3.3 Application of methods

All of the material analyzed here had been viewed prior to the conception of this thesis, as it came out; the movies had even been viewed multiple times. When the analysis started, the entirety of the franchise was rewatched once in order of release for the purposes of refamiliarization. Then, the three movies were seen chronologically with the research questions in mind in order to conduct the analysis. Observations were noted down which would later be organized during write up. The two shows were then viewed in chronological order in the same manner. Including a detailed description of the analysis of each scene in all five pieces of media being researched would have greatly exceeded the length of a master's

thesis. For this reason, it was deemed a better option to outline the findings and then support them with the detailed analysis of one scene per research question so particularly representative scenes were noted that could be used for this purpose during the viewing; the final selection was made once the findings were already written up. Material outside of the franchise that may provide additional information and context relevant to the analysis (such as interviews with the cast and crew, earlier versions of the scripts, and deleted scenes) was also sought out. Where such material was found, it was included in the write-up in appropriate places.

4. MARVEL & CAPTAIN AMERICA

Marvel Entertainment, LLC is an entertainment company that produces comic books, movies, TV shows, and related merchandise. Today, it operates as a subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company (*Marvel Corporate Information - About*, n.d.). The business was founded in 1939 as a comic book publisher under the name of Timely Comics, Inc. by Martin Goodman, then renamed Atlas Publishing in the 1950s before finally becoming Marvel in the 1960's (Lavin, 1998). It has been in operation continuously since its founding and has in that time published, by some estimations, between 30,000 and 40,000 individual issues and roughly 5,000 comic book series. The focus of the comics have always been superheroes - the very first comic published by Timely Comics, titled *Marvel Comics No. 1*, actually included some of Marvel's major characters still featured today such as the Human Torch and the Angel (Rowland, 2021). Much of Marvel's long-lasting success in the comic book industry is attributed to the work of artist Jack Kirby and writer Stan Lee who created some of Marvel's most popular and iconic characters (including the Fantastic Four, the X-Man, and the Hulk) as well as introducing innovations that revolutionized the comic book industry in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Kirby and Lee developed the so-called Marvel Method of comics which led to the development of a unique house style that made Marvel comics stand out. Marvel also made continuing stories the standard for comic books. Individual issues were no longer self-contained; rather the plot stretched over multiple issues in a series, requiring the reader to both have read the previous issues and to continue reading future ones if they are to see the story through (Lavin, 1998). A similar method is now employed in Marvel movies.

Marvel had experienced many ups and downs throughout its decades-long history before a series of bad investments ultimately led Ronald Perelman, then-owner of Marvel Entertainment, to file for bankruptcy in 1996 (Lavin, 1998). During this time, Marvel sold the rights to many of its most famous heroes, including the Fantastic Four, the X-Men, Spider Man, Black Panther, Iron Man, and the Hulk, to production studios like Sony and 20th Century Fox in order to stay afloat. Marvel's earlier forays into film were largely unsuccessful, but some of the films made after the rights to the characters were optioned (namely Blade (1998), the original X-Men trilogy (2000-2006), and the Spider-Man trilogy (2002-2007)) were box office hits. Marvel, however, only received a small share of the profits and it was not until 2005 that Marvel recovered financially by taking a loan in the amount of $525 million from the wealth management firm Merrill Lynch on the condition

that the investment be returned within eight years. The money was used to reacquire the rights to some of the more famous characters that had been sold off in the 1990s and invest in an in-house production division, Marvel Studios, which then created the Marvel Cinematic Universe (Lambie, 2018). In late 2009, Disney bought the entirety of Marvel Entertainment, including Marvel Studios, for $4.24 billion (Tyler, 2019).

4.1 Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU)

The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) - a series of interconnected superhero movies based on Marvel comics and produced by Marvel Studios - started with Iron Man in 2008. The movie was a huge success, making more than four times its production cost and setting the tone for the movies to follow (Boucher, 2018). It had always been the plan for Marvel movies to imitate the comics in their intertextuality, creating a sprawling superhero universe where all releases tie into each other and the MCU has since expanded to include 27 completed films with 12 more in various stages of development. These are divided into (thus far) four consecutive phases based on common themes (Jaworski, 2018). In addition to feature films, the MCU includes 20 TV shows (with 14 more being developed as of 2022) about superheroes. The high degree of intertextuality between feature films and TV shows that Marvel has achieved is a revolutionary and new development for a cinematic franchise which continues to be a crucial part of the development of the MCU under Disney. The first MCU TV show - Agents of SHIELD - started airing in 2013 as a part of Phase 2, after Disney had already acquired Marvel Entertainment. Now, with the launch of Disney+, more TV shows are being produced specifically for Disney's own streaming service (Tyler, 2019).

Despite the diversity in format, both the movies and the TV shows that make up the MCU belong to the superhero subgenre (situated at the overlap of action and sci-fi) - that is to say, they all tell "stories about costumed and/or super powered characters, performed by actors, who battle villains and defend the greater community" (Brown, 2016, p. 5). This is a broad definition of the thematic and stylistic similarities that unite a multitude of superhero-themed entertainment and set the baseline for what one can expect from a superhero movie, TV show or, indeed, comic. Other common characteristics which are shared by most works in the same genre include the heroes' traumatic backstories, secret identities, the presence of supervillains, and more. The genre is also known for some common tropes such as the hero's true identity almost being discovered, the death of a loved one, and

temporary loss of superpowers, to name but a few examples (Brown, 2016). All of these can also be found in the MCU.

However, as was previously the case with comics, Marvel developed a certain "house style" for films as well. Already with the first Iron Man film, Marvel set a unique tone for its franchise: previous comic book adaptations (such as DC's Batman and 20th Century Fox's version of Marvel's X-Men) frequently missed the mark in terms of atmosphere with moody characters, dark or desaturated scenes, and an overall serious tone, but the MCU embraced its comic book origins, infusing color, humor, and a larger-than-life quality into its movies (Boucher, 2018). High-quality computer generated imagery (CGI) has helped Marvel create visually arresting and believable worlds of magic, alternate history, outer space, and the future. Post-credits scenes, which appear in the middle of and after the end credits of the films, cameos of legendary writer Stan Lee, and other hidden details or "Easter eggs" are another staple of Marvel's interpretation of the genre. In addition to simply providing extra content, they serve as tools of intertextuality by giving a form of guest appearance to heroes and villains from other movies or even referencing the source material from comic books; hints about future MCU projects are often found in post-credits scenes, which drums up excitement for them and entices loyal fans to continue following the development of the franchise. Cultivating curiosity in viewers like this is a core part of Marvel's formula for success. Marvel furthermore relies on hiring directors whose previous experience, although usually extensive, lies in other types of productions, working with the same core production team on the projects that belong to the same franchise, and finally, experimenting with the typical superhero formula by combining it with other genres. This allows Marvel to be both largely original and largely consistent across the franchise and translates to commercial success (Harrison et al., 2019).

Although successful superhero movies were made in the past, particularly in the 1940s and the 1990s, it was not until the inception of MCU that superhero movies truly started dominating the box office. While the TV shows have not fared as well thus far, all of the MCU movies (with the exception of The Incredible Hulk) have been commercial successes, even setting records for ticket sales. As such, MCU movies have become tent-pole films for the Marvel brand. In addition to the films and the TV shows themselves, merchandise, theme parks, conventions, and more all bring in vast amounts of revenue over a multitude of platforms to both Marvel and Disney (Brown, 2016). This encourages the production of further sequels in the same franchise. But with the focus being primarily on

commercial success, movies in the MCU are being produced at a higher pace than is common. This has sometimes resulted in films that are visually appealing and action packed but formulaic and narratively underdeveloped. The demand for profit has, therefore, gotten in the way of creating meaningful stories (Dixon, 2017).

Marvel's unparalleled success on the big screen is not just due to superhero movies being uncomplicated fun, as is the common explanation - otherwise, superhero movies from the previous decades would likely have been more successful as well. Rather, one must examine the interplay between the movies and the society at large. The most recent superhero boom offered a comforting fantasy of straightforward triumph of good over evil and a largely simple and uncomplicated representation of White Western men as heroes, both of which were well received in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and amidst increasing racial and political tensions. Over time, the MCU has grown from such a simplistic and straightforward approach to include a more diverse roster of characters in a wider range of roles, introducing female, black, and even non-Western superheroes into the franchise, and tackle more complex issues, such as the economic crisis, government overreach, and migration. This ability to evolve with cultural norms has kept Marvel culturally relevant and shows an openness to broadening the understanding of who gets to be a superhero. However, any remotely significant change has mostly been limited to the TV screens; the majority of superhero characters in movies still represent hegemonic identities. In terms of gender representation, for example, female superheroes are still vastly underrepresented with only two female-led feature films in the MCU thus far. When female characters do appear, they are typically either a part of an ensemble cast or supporting characters, often in the roles of love interests and sometimes motherly figures. Furthermore, superhero movies as a whole typically promote very specific femininities and masculinities: women are relegated to being either damsels in distress or highly sexualized erotic objects while men are examples of hegemonic masculinity and power fantasies regular men are meant to aspire to (there is, of course, hardly any mention of other genders across the genre) (Brown, 2016).

But superheroes do not just represent individual fictional characters that individual persons are meant to project themselves onto - they are symbols of their class and nation as well. This is especially evident in heroes like Captain America. Captain America is one of Marvel's oldest and most enduring characters. The character was created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby and first appeared in *Captain America Comics no. 1* in early 1941; the cover showed Captain America punching Adolf Hitler in the face. Throughout the rest of World

War II (WWII), Captain America was a picture of patriotism and heroism, serving as propaganda to boost morale regarding America's involvement in the war. As interest in comics waned and Captain America's relevance as a fictional WWII hero diminished, the series was canceled in 1949. The character was successfully revived by Stan Lee in 1964 during the Vietnam War and has been a consistent part of the Marvel comics roster since then. In addition to his own comic book series, Captain America is also a member of the superhero team The Avengers and appears regularly as their leader. The character's popularity has also led him to appear in other media, including a movie serial from the 1940s, several different cartoon series, and a 1990 movie (Lavin, 1998). The current cinematic iteration of Captain America continues in the same tradition. He appears for the first time in 2011, after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and during the US involvement in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He is a WWII hero and a man out of his time, a callback to a mythical past in which American involvement in conflict was simple, moral, and just. A super-soldier who went from a small, sickly reject to a towering hunk of muscle with superior strength, speed, and endurance thanks to his own perseverance and sacrifice, he is a symbol of exceptionalism in terms of physical, mental, and moral capabilities, all while dressed quite literally in the American flag (Brown, 2016).

4.2 Captain America in the MCU

Captain America is just as big a part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe as he is of the Marvel comics. He appears as a central character in the three movies that make up the Captain America franchise - Captain America: The First Avenger (2011), Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014), and Captain America: Civil War (2016) - as well as all of the movies of the Avengers franchise (thus far) - The Avengers (2012), Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015), Avengers: Infinity War (2018), and Avengers: Endgame (2019). He also makes minor guest appearances in Thor: The Dark World (2013) and Ant-Man (2015) and appears in post-credits scenes of Spider-Man: Homecoming (2019) and Captain Marvel (2019). References are also made to Captain America in other MCU films like Iron Man (2008), The Incredible Hulk (2008), Iron Man 2 (2010), Spider-Man: Far From Home (2019), and Eternals (2021) as well as MCU TV shows such as Agents of SHIELD (2013-2020) and Agent Carter (2015-2016). The animated series *What if...?*, which presents a series of alternate universes within the MCU, also features a version of Captain America and the Disney+ show The Falcon and the Winter Soldier chronicles the mantle of Captain America

being taken by a new character. Because Marvel's fictional universe is so extensive and Captain America such an integral part of it, it is well beyond the scope of a master's thesis to examine every part of the MCU that features Captain America in some way. Instead, this research will focus on the Captain America *franchise* specifically. As of 2022, this includes three feature films: Captain America: The First Avenger (2011), Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014), and Captain America: Civil War (2016), as well as two TV shows: Agent Carter (2015-2016) and The Falcon and the Winter Soldier (2021).

<u>4.2.1 Captain America: The First Avenger (2011)</u>

Captain America: The First Avenger (from here on out: CATFA), released in July 2011, was the first MCU movie to feature Captain America as a lead character. It was directed by Joe Johnston based on a screenplay written by Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely with music composed by Alan Silvestri. The production budget is estimated to have been around $140,000,000; the film made $176,654,505 in the US and Canada and $370,569,774 worldwide. The cast features Chris Evans as Steve Rogers/Captain America, Hugo Weaving as Johann Schmidt/Red Skull, Samuel L. Jackson as Nick Fury, Hayley Atwell as Margeret "Peggy" Carter, Sebastian Stan as James Buchanan "Bucky" Barnes, Tommy Lee Jones as Colonel Chester Phillips, and Dominic Cooper as Howard Stark (*Captain America: The First Avenger (2011) - IMDb*, n.d.). Both critical and audience reception was overall positive - 79% and 75% respectively (*Captain America*, n.d.).

Plans for a new live action Captain America film were in the works since the late 1990s (Fleming, 1997). However, due to Marvel's legal and financial issues, it was not until 2007 that serious work on the project began; the movie was originally expected to be released in 2009 with a script from David Self which set the narrative half in the past and half in the present (IGN, 2007), before Joe Johnston's work on Raiders of the Lost Ark inspired Marvel president Kevin Feige to hire him as director (Billington, 2009). Johnston was the driving force behind hiring new script writers and reworking the plot with the goal of focusing more on Steve Rogers as a character and a soldier. Johnston's attempts to subvert the expectations of Captain America are evident in his insistence on the movie being a reinterpretation and not "this sort of jingoistic American flag-waver" (*COMIC-CON 2010: "Captain America" Director Has Different Spin on Hero: "He's Not a Flag-Waver" | Hero Complex | Los Angeles Times*, 2010). Kevin Feige, who is credited as the producer of the film, further agrees that Captain America is "this patriotic propaganda machine" in a time when general

sentiment surrounding US politics was not positive but at the same time "a very human Steve Rogers, interesting, fascinating hero in his own right" (IGN, 2007). This shows an awareness of the general perception of Captain America as a nationalistic symbol and of the history of the character being used to propagate a certain image of the US. It would, however, be nearly impossible to divorce a character like Captain America, who was always conceptualized as a personification of the US, from nationalistic connotations. Consequently, despite Johnston's and Feige's statements that underline the focus on Steve Rogers as a person, promotional materials embraced the nationalistic undertones: both trailers heavily featured shots of American soldiers engaged in training or battle, two of three posters used the American flag as background (while the third showed Captain America in a somewhat desaturated red, white, and blue uniform bowing toward his brightly-colored red, white, and blue shield as if toward a flag), and the tagline chosen for the movie was "When patriots become heroes".

CATFA opens with two establishing scenes back to back - one for the hero of the movie and one for the villain. First, the audience is indirectly introduced to Captain America in a present-day scene in which his body is found in a frozen aircraft in the Arctic. Then, Johann Schmidt/Red Skull is shown terrorizing a village in Norway in his quest to recover a powerful ancient artifact known as the Tesseract.

The audience is then taken to New York City in the daytime. This is where the main plot of the movie begins. It follows Rogers as he is first rejected from the military on the basis of poor health then selected for a supersoldier experiment on the basis of his character instead. Although the experiment is successful, the scientist behind it is killed. Rogers briefly joins the United Service Organizations (USO) and becomes a tool for propaganda before proving himself as a soldier and being accepted into the higher ranks of the military.

Throughout the movie, the narrative following Rogers is interspersed with scenes showing Schmidt, his henchman Arnim Zola, and their organization Hydra as they get increasingly more zealous in their efforts to harness the energy of the Tesseract and weaponize it. The two narratives converge in the final battle sequence where Rogers leads an attack on Schmidt's headquarters in an attempt to recover the Tesseract. Rogers is able to defeat Schmidt but not to disarm the Tesseract; afraid that an explosion could kill millions, he lands the plane in the Arctic Ocean, sacrificing himself. After the war is won, Rogers is presumed dead but remembered by both his friends and the American people as evidenced by

a group of children shown playing with a toy replica of his shield in the streets of New York. The scene cuts to black, indicating the conclusion of the main plot.

After several seconds of a black screen, Rogers is shown waking up in present time where he is met by Nick Fury who informs him that he's been asleep for almost 70 years before end credits roll. The two scenes set in the present thus bookend the main part of the narrative which unfolds during WWII. The movie includes one post-credits scene in which Rogers is recruited for the Avengers.

4.2.2 Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014)

In MCU canon, Captain America is one of the founding members of the Avengers and appears prominently in the 2012 movie by the same name. For this reason, the second installment in the Captain America franchise, Captain America: The Winter Soldier (from here on out: CATWS), which came out in March 2014, is not a direct continuation of CATFA but rather picks up from where The Avengers left off. The movie was directed by Anthony and Joe Russo based on a screenplay by Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely with music by Henry Jackman. Its estimated budget was $170,000,000 while it made $259,766,572 in the US and Canada and $714,421,503 worldwide. It stars Chris Evans as Steve Rogers/Captain America, Samuel L. Jackson as Nick Fury, Scarlett Johansson as Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow, Robert Redford as Alexander Pierce, Sebastian Stan as James Buchanan "Bucky" Barnes/the Winter Soldier, Anthony Mackie as Sam Wilson/the Falcon, Cobie Smulders as Maria Hill, and Emily VanCamp as Sharon Carter/Agent 13 (*The Return of the First Avenger (2014) - IMDb*, n.d.). Both critical and audience reception was positive, 90% and 92% respectively (*Captain America: The Winter Soldier - Rotten Tomatoes*, n.d.).

Work on the script for the sequel began before CATFA was even released (Marshall, 2011). It was decided early on that the plot would revolve around the Winter Soldier and use his origin story from the comics (Sciretta, 2014b). It was similarly decided that the movie would rely less on fantastical elements and be grounded more in reality, resembling a spy movie or political thriller more than a typical comic book adaptation (Sciretta, 2014a). The goal was to show Captain America as a man out of his time, learning about the modern world, and fighting to change it, replicating the way the character was developed in response to changing political landscapes when he was reinvented in the comic books (Douglas, 2014). Once the script was completed, it only underwent minor changes while the overall narrative

remained (Lussier, 2013). Although the movie takes a largely critical approach to American politics and deals with themes of corruption and government overreach, it was approved by the US Department of Defence (USDOD) just as the far less critical CATFA had been before it and unlike its immediate predecessor The Avengers. The reason for this might lie precisely in the corruption that the heroes uncover in the US government - if a secret Nazi organization has infiltrated the government then the criticism is not really directed at the government itself but rather the infiltrating organization. CATWS is also the last MCU movie which relies extensively on collaboration with the USDOD (Baron, 2019).

The movie opens with a meeting between Rogers and Sam Wilson who immediately bond over their experience as war veterans. Rogers is then seen participating in a mission for SHIELD, an espionage and law enforcement agency with very vague jurisdiction, goals, and restrictions that many of the MCU characters are attached to. During the mission, he discovers that Romanoff was secretly tasked with saving confidential files from the ship's computer onto an encrypted flash drive. This makes Rogers suspicious of SHIELD and its mission. His suspicions turn out to be well founded when Fury reveals that SHIELD plans to launch heavily armed helicarriers that would monitor criminal activity with the goal of targeting and eliminating safety threats, codenamed Project Insight. The project proves to be an attempt by the Nazi organization Hydra, which has infiltrated SHIELD, to pre-emptively target people who might resist their plans to take over the world; this extends to Rogers himself, who is proclaimed a traitor and persecuted by SHIELD (under Hydra command).

During their investigation into Hydra's influence on SHIELD, Rogers, Wilson, and Romanoff repeatedly face off against a masked man with a metal arm codenamed the Winter Soldier who is revealed to be a brainwashed Barnes about halfway through the movie. He is under instruction from Senator Alexander Pierce, a liaison between SHIELD and the security council that is supposed to oversee it. Before Pierce and Hydra can launch Project Insight, however, the helicarriers are sabotaged by Rogers, Wilson, Romanoff, and Fury. During the fight, SHIELD's intelligence is made public.

As per Rogers' request, SHIELD is dismantled in the aftermath and various characters associated with it are shown moving on to other positions. The movie has two post-credits scenes, one which introduces the characters of Wanda and Pietro Maximoff and one which shows Barnes at the Captain America exhibit in the Smithsonian, showing that he is remembering his past.

Like CATWS, Captain America: Civil War (from here on out: CACW) does not continue directly from the previous film in the franchise; it instead follows the aftermath of Avengers: Age of Ultron (2015). It was released in April 2016. Once again the script was written by Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely and Anthony and Joe Russo returned as directors; Henry Jackman wrote the soundtrack. It had the highest budget by far of all Captain America movies - $250,000,000 - but also made the most at the box office - $408,084,349 in the US and Canada and $1,153,337,496 worldwide. The main cast consists of Chris Evans as Steve Rogers/Captain America, Robert Downey, Jr. as Tony Stark/Iron Man, Scarlett Johansson as Natasha Romanoff/Black Widow, Sebastian Stan as James Buchanan "Bucky" Barnes, Anthony Mackie as Sam Wilson/the Falcon, Chadwick Boseman as T'Challa/Black Panther, and Daniel Brühl as Helmut Zemo (*Captain America: Civil War (2016) - IMDb*, n.d.). The movie was received positively by both critics and audience - 90% and 89% respectively (*Captain America: Civil War - Rotten Tomatoes*, n.d.).

After pre-screenings for CATWS were successful, work on the next sequel began immediately - already in 2013 (Weintraub, 2014). Originally, the plan was to keep the Captain America franchise largely self-contained so that the movies within it could still be seen by people who did not follow the rest of the MCU. For this reason, the third movie was intended to be a direct continuation of CATWS and follow Rogers and Wilson as they search for Barnes (Sampson, n.d.) with the added complication of the activation of a bomb that caused aggression in everyone exposed to its gas. The goal was to create a moral conundrum in which Rogers must reconcile the fact that he has to fight and potentially injure innocent civilians (Breznican, 2016). Before the script for this could be written, however, plans were changed. Marvel president Kevin Feige requested that the ideas be reworked to include a conflict between Captain America and Iron Man. This plot originally comes from the comics, where heroes become divided over whether the government should be able to implement mandatory registration for all mutants and other superpowered creatures. It was not possible at the time to copy this particular conflict as the MCU had not yet introduced all the necessary heroes and did not own the film rights to its mutant characters. Instead, the conflict was changed to better fit the themes the MCU and the Captain America franchise in particular had previously taken up - accountability and oversight (Sampson, n.d.). It is likely that the change was made in response to DC's announcement that they would be making and releasing Batman V Superman: Dawn Of Justice - a movie that pits two of their biggest

superheroes against each other - around the same time. Reportedly, Feige was worried that a third stand-alone Captain America movie could not stand up to this in the box office so he wanted to bring in the other big names in Marvel (Campbell, 2016).

The movie opens with the Winter Soldier's 1991 mission for the Russian government in which he runs a car off a road and kills both the driver and the passenger, later revealed to be Howard and Maria Stark. After the Marvel title card, the plot continues in the present day where Steve Rogers, Sam Wilson, Natasha Romanoff, and Wanda Maximoff have an altercation with Brock Rumlow, a Hydra agent who survived the destruction of Project Insight in CATWS and is now looking to obtain an unspecified biological weapon. During the fight, Maximoff causes an explosion which results in civilian casualties; the incident is publicly condemned by politicians and the media. It also causes a rift between Rogers, who sees it as a tragic but acceptable sacrifice, and Tony Stark, whose recent encounter with the mother of one of his own unintended victims is making him reconsider the way the Avengers operate. This is exacerbated when the Secretary of State informs the Avengers that the United Nations (UN) will ratify the Sokovia accords, an international law that would put the actions of the Avengers under the purview of the UN. While the Accords are being signed, a bomb goes off, killing the king of the fictional African country of Wakanda. The attack is blamed on the Winter Soldier but is actually committed by Helmut Zemo, former royal of the fictional country of Sokovia which is destroyed by the Avengers in Avengers: Age of Ultron. His plan to frame Barnes and have him arrested in order to trigger his brainwashing and use him as a weapon against the Avengers is only briefly successful before Barnes manages to escape with Rogers and Wilson.

Having been given only 36 hours to bring Rogers, Wilson, and Barnes in peacefully, Stark and Romanoff recruit other superheroes (namely Rhodes, Peter Parker/Spider-Man, T'Challa, and Vision) to help. Rogers and Wilson do the same and are joined by Maximoff, Clint Barton/Hawkeye, and Scott Lang/Ant-Man. After a fight, Rogers' side emerges victorious, but only Rogers and Barnes are able to escape while the rest are taken into custody. They embark on a search for other assassins from the project Winter Soldier only to discover that they were beaten there by Zemo and followed by Stark and T'Challa. The final battle sequence of the film between Rogers and Barnes on one side and Stark on the other starts when Stark learns Barnes is responsible for his parents' death; neither side is victorious - the arc reactor that powers Stark's suit is ripped out, Barnes loses his metal arm, and Rogers abandons his Captain America shield, symbolically relinquishing his superhero identity.

The film ends with the Avengers still divided, Captain America's team, now broken out of prison, as fugitives from the law hiding in Wakanda, and Zemo imprisoned but seemingly satisfied with the results of his plan. It includes two post-credits scenes, one showing Barnes willingly submitting to cryosleep to avoid being turned into the Winter Soldier again and one showing Parker using Stark's tech to improve as Spider-Man.

Steve Rogers returns as Captain America in the Avengers sequels that follow, Infinity War and Endgame, where he plays a major role in defeating the intergalactic supervillain Thanos. At the end of Endgame, however, it is revealed that while he was traveling through time, he chose to stay in the past and lived a normal life as a family man with Peggy Carter. He is shown as an old man, giving his shield away to Wilson. A fourth Captain America movie is now in the works with Wilson as Captain America (Capel, 2022).

4.2.4 Agent Carter (2015-2016)

In addition to the three feature films, the Captain America franchise includes two TV shows. The first to be released and only the second MCU TV series overall was Agent Carter (from here on out: AC). The show was created by Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely with Tara Butters, Michele Fazekas, and Chris Dingess as show runners. It aired on ABC for two seasons - the first between January 6th and February 24th, 2015 (8 episodes) and the second between January 19th and March 1st, 2016 (10 episodes); today, it is available on the streaming service Disney+. Hayley Atwell reprises her role as the titular Agent Margaret "Peggy" Carter and Dominic Cooper his as Howard Stark; they are joined by James D'Arcy as Edwin Jarvis, Enver Gjokaj as Daniel Sousa, Chad Michael Murray as Jack Thompson, Wynn Everett as Whitney Frost, Bridget Regan as Dottie Underwood, Reggie Austin as Jason Wilkes, and Lyndsy Fonseca as Angela Martinelli, among others (*Agent Carter (TV Series 2015–2016) - IMDb*, n.d.). The series was MCU's first project with a female lead and MCU's first project run by women. Development started in 2013 before the project was picked up by ABC in 2014 (Abrams, 2015). Although the first season features some elements of "monster-of-the-week" writing, the primary focus has always been on the overarching plot, something that was novel at the time (Mitovich, 2015). The show was received well: season 1 had the approval ratings of 96% from critics and 83% from viewers while season 2 got a 76% approval from critics and 70% from the audience (*Marvel's Agent Carter - Rotten Tomatoes*, n.d.). Despite this, low ratings led to a cancellation in May 2016 (Nededog, 2016).

The series was released in its entirety between CATWS and CACW, but is chronologically set immediately after CATFA. The first season is set in 1946 New York. Carter is now working for the Strategic Scientific Reserve (SSR), the precursor to SHIELD. The agency is investigating Howard Stark who is suspected of selling his weapons to enemies of the United States. Before he goes into hiding to avoid being arrested for treason, he meets with Carter and asks her to team up with his butler, Edwin Jarvis, so they can together prove the weapons were actually stolen. In the process of locating and recovering Stark's technology, Carter and Jarvis learn of a WWII project called Leviathan which involves the training of young girls to become ruthless assassins and sleeper agents that can infiltrate the US; one of those agents is Carter's neighbor, Dottie Underwood. When the investigation into Stark takes the SSR to a secret Leviathan compound in Europe, Carter assists in rescuing a Russian psychologist imprisoned there, Dr. Ivchenko, not realizing he is instead a former Soviet hypnotist named Fennhoff working with Underwood. Just as Carter is beginning to suspect something is wrong, she and Jarvis are implicated in Stark's alleged betrayal and arrested. With them out of the way, Fennhoff and Underwood are able to hypnotize two SSR agents and cause their deaths as well as obtain one of Stark's inventions - a gas that causes extreme aggression in anyone who inhales it. Carter is able to regain the trust of her fellow agents just in time to participate in a trap they set for Fennhoff and Underwood; despite some complications, the plan is largely successful and Fennhoff is arrested (though Underwood escapes). The series ends with Carter gaining possession of another one of Stark's secret treasures - the last remaining vial of Captain America's blood - and spilling it into the East River, symbolically letting go of him and overcoming his death.

The second season takes place in 1947 Los Angeles. Carter is asked to assist in a highly unusual murder investigation being conducted by SSR's newly formed Los Angeles division. She teams up once again with Jarvis and SSR agent Daniel Sousa who was an unfulfilled love interest in season 1. Together, they discover that a laboratory called Isodyne Energy is producing Zero Matter - a volatile compound that can consume people and objects and open portals into other dimensions. Zero Matter is being used by an increasingly unstable Whitney Frost, a famous actress who is secretly also a genius inventor, looking to fulfill her and her husband's political ambitions. Carter's investigation into Frost is complicated by political corruption, shifting allegiances, and Frost's mafia connections. In order to find a way to combat Frost's growing abilities, she must rely on new allies, like Dr. James Wilkes formerly of Isodyne, and former enemies, like Dottie Underwood. Ultimately, Stark, Wilkes

and SSR's own scientists are able to create a weapon that will counteract the effects of Zero Matter and defeat Frost. In the end, Frost finds herself in a mental hospital while Carter decides to stay in Los Angeles with Sousa. The closing scene shows Carter's immediate superior, Jack Thompson being shot by an unidentified man.

4.2.5 The Falcon and The Winter Soldier (2021)

The last installment in the Captain America franchise to be released thus far, The Falcon and the Winter Soldier (from here on out: TFATWS) is also the last one chronologically. It was developed for Disney+ by Malcolm Spellman and directed by Kari Skogland. The first and so far only season was released between March 19th and April 23rd 2021; it is unclear if there will be a second season or if the story will instead continue in a fourth Captain America movie. Anthony Mackie, Sebastian Stan, Daniel Brühl, and Emily VanCamp reprise their roles as Sam Wilson/Falcon, James Buchanan "Bucky" Barnes/Winter Soldier, Helmut Zemo, and Sharon Carter respectively; they are joined by Wyatt Russell as John Walker, Erin Kellyman as Karli Morgenthau, Adepero Oduye as Sarah Wilson, Clé Bennett as Lemar Hoskins, and Florence Kasumba as Ayo (*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier (TV Mini Series 2021) - IMDb*, n.d.). The show is intended to serve as a big part of the draw of Disney+, allowing Disney's streaming service to compete with existing ones like Netflix and Hulu. To ensure its success, it was assigned a budget similar to those of Marvel movies and is produced by Marvel Studios which also produces MCU films (Kroll, 2018). Wilson and Barnes were chosen to lead a show together because of the positive reaction their dynamic got from the audience. The show was originally pitched as being like a buddy film that deals with issues of race (Itzkoff). It received positive reviews from both critics and viewers with approval ratings of 86% and 84% respectively (*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier - Rotten Tomatoes*, n.d.).

The show is set in the near future. The set-up is provided by Avengers: Infinity War and Avengers: Endgame in which Thanos, supposedly to save an overpopulated world with limited resources being stretched thin, erases half of all life on Earth (including both Wilson and Barnes) for five years before the Avengers are able to undo his actions - an event known in-universe as the Blip. The sudden return of half the human population which then has to adjust to the life that continued on without them is causing an international crisis and political unrest. A part of this unrest is caused by an organization called the Flag Smashers, led by Karli Morgenthau, who believe that life was better during the Blip. Wilson and Barnes

reluctantly team up in a fight against the Flag Smashers. They are aided by Helmut Zemo, who's broken out of prison, and Sharon Carter, whom they find in exile while searching for the supersoldier serum on the black market.

An American soldier by the name of John Walker is meanwhile assigned to the role of Captain America by the US government. Over the course of the series, he struggles to live up to the ideal of Rogers' Captain America, becoming increasingly violent and ultimately killing a Flag Smasher using the Captain America shield. This prompts Wilson to deal with his doubts surrounding the possibility of a Black man being an American national symbol and eventually take over the role as he and Barnes defeat the Flag Smashers in the finale. For the purposes of this last episode, the show is retitled as Captain America and the Winter Soldier to symbolize the end of Wilson's journey toward replacing Steve Rogers as Captain America.

The five installments of the Captain America franchise presented here will be the primary material analyzed in this thesis. However, the findings of this analysis may occasionally be supported by additional material from other MCU films and TV shows or public appearances by the directors, producers, and cast. In such cases, the material used will be described in the given chapter.

4.3 Literature review

Fiction is a part of everyday life and the fiction one consumes can affect the things one believes, either reaffirming their positions or challenging them (Gledhill, 1997). When concepts like race or gender or sexuality are repeatedly, consistently, and almost without exception shown in a certain way, it becomes difficult to "separate the reel from the real" (Shaheen, 2015) and one can begin to accept the representations they see as a part of their field of objectivity, which affects how they perceive the world outside of fiction as well. Furthermore, elements of the fictional world often stand in for elements of the real world - SHIELD may be fictional but its operations closely resemble those of agencies like the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA); agent Carter may never have existed but her experiences are shared by many real women who work in male-dominated fields; Captain America may not be real but he is as much a symbol for his real-world nation as he is for the version of America that exists in the MCU. When fictional characters and objects stand in for real-world characters and objects, the narrative endorsement or criticism of the fiction can easily be interpreted as the endorsement or criticism of what it represents and given that Marvel is able

to reach millions of people worldwide, its representations in particular have the potential to influence cultural discourses.

4.3.1 Captain America and the American national identity

Marvel has been in the business of publishing comics for over 80 years and making movies for almost 15. For most of this time, comic books and superheroes were considered banal and not worthy of scholarly scrutiny. But in more recent years, they have attracted significant attention from scholars in the field of both media studies and other social sciences. The scholarship on Captain America specifically has often focused on nationalism and the American identity. There is little disagreement over whether Captain America is a symbol of the nation - Rogers' birth date is July 4th, the day the US celebrates independence day, he shares the name with the country, and both his iconic shield and all variations of his uniform are inspired by the US flag, featuring the red-white-blue combination of stripes and stars. However, he does not necessarily represent America as it is; rather he is the ideal that the country needs to live up to - America as it should be. After the character's original run in the 1940s, Captain America is rarely shown using weapons like guns and knives when this can be avoided; instead his main weapon is a shield, which is a defensive tool. He also treats killing as a last resort, even when fighting superhuman supervillains. When he does kill, Captain America is again justified in doing so; because comic books rely on simplified narratives of a fight of absolute good against absolute evil, even this action does not bring into question Captain America's morality - Captain America is simply not evil. These narratives can pose a danger to democracy when internalized; they undermine faith in systematic change, the government, and the law and create an expectation that a single, extraordinary individual is able to solve large-scale problems. But perhaps more dangerous is the way that they can be co-opted and used to justify violence on the part of the US as necessary because it serves the purpose of saving innocent lives, just like Captain America's does. Jewett and Lawrence argue in their 2003 book, *Captain America and the crusade against evil: The dilemma of zealous nationalism,* that what they refer to as the "Captain America complex" - the belief that American foreign policy is justified because it has the ultimate goal of saving innocent lives - can be and has been used to valorize America's involvement in violent conflict ever since WWII. The book came out before the conception of MCU and does not take the influence of Marvel movies into account, yet it shows how the near-ubiquitous popularity of such a highly symbolic character as Captain America, when imbued with simple themes and plots that do not leave much space for nuance, can be used to inspire nationalism and drum

up support for political action, regardless of what the original intention of the creators was (Jewett & Lawrence, 2003).

In his 2020 article "America is a piece of trash": Captain America, Patriotism, Nationalism, and Fascism, Curtis identifies a similar duality to the character - there is a Captain America as he is written onto the page and there is a Captain America interpreted through the lens of nationalism. He brings up multiple storylines in which Captain America goes against the orders of the US government and criticizes their decisions, thereby distinguishing between the nation and its politics to prove that writers who have worked on the character have typically given him progressive values such as tolerance, multiculturalism, and a belief in social justice. In the comics, this duality between the encoded message (of Captain America as a patriot) and the decoded one (of Captain America as a nationalist) is often resolved by introducing a Captain America double, an evil or extremist version of Captain America that represents blind obedience or faith to show that Captain America himself is different from that. This is not to say that Captain America is never an America-first nationalist; Marvel comics include multiple universes and some of them do have a different version of Captain America, one that is a nationalist or even a fascist, and these have become more common since 9/11 and the beginning of the War on Terror. Curtis argues, however, that this ambivalence is inherent to the concept of nation - there are always going to be multiple stories told about America and the multiple stories told about Captain America are one of the ways to negotiate what is believed about America and what it means to be an American hero.

One example that Curtis uses of Captain America behaving out of character as a way to criticize how far the US really is from the ideals that Captain America symbolizes is a recent plotline in which Captain America is revealed to have been working with Hydra all along. This twist came in December 2016, shortly after the election of Donald Trump as the president of the US and could have been an attempt to express concern over the country's shift toward fascism (Curtis, 2020). A similar plot had been done before in 1979 when Captain America is temporarily brainwashed into joining the National Force, a Marvel universe organization widely understood to represent the Ku Klux Klan. In this series, however, the organization is condemned harshly and Captain America's association with them is disbelieved by other characters. This is not the case for the Secret Empire storyline with Hydra Cap - other characters, such as Sharon Carter, accept that Captain America works with Hydra now and he is able to use his connections with them to gain significant power in

the US government.This, Erin Budrow argues, shows how the attitudes toward white nationalism have changed over time. Whereas it was unthinkable in the 1970s for (Captain) America to willingly associate with white nationalists, in 2016 the far right was a viable political choice. The story was a controversial one and many readers were unhappy to see Captain America as one of the "bad guys". This may indicate an unwillingness to recognize the shift in American politics and the increasing influence of white nationalism (Budrow, 2019).

As a national symbol, Captain America is unique in that he connects the nation to the individual in a very poignant, visual way. He is a personification of the nation, yes, but underneath the uniform, he is just a man; an extraordinary, enhanced man but a man nonetheless. This means the comic book audiences, which have always consisted largely of young men and boys, have someone to project on - an action that is not possible with national symbols like the flag or the anthem. This is why who Captain America is as a person is an important and influential element of the comics. But Captain America would not be Captain America if it were not for his enemies. The characters around Captain America - the supervillains he fights, the superheroes he disagrees with, even his allies - contribute to the audience's understanding of Captain America because Captain America is always defined in opposition to those he is not. And just as Captain America is a symbol so can the other characters be. In early comic book issues especially, many villains were either explicitly or implicitly coded as German; during the Cold War, they were often communist or just Russian. This complex network of characters does not just set an expectation on what it is to be American but also what it is to be an American enemy (Dittmer, 2005). During Captain America's original run, villains were also Americans who stood out from the norm, Black Americans, Asian (and specifically Japanese) Americans. But in more recent years, the moniker of Captain America has been used by characters who would have been unthinkable for the role in the 1940s - black superheroes like Isiah Bradley and Sam Wilson have had their runs as have female superheroes such as Peggy Carter, Sharon Rogers (the daughter of Peggy Carter and Steve Rogers), and Danielle Cage (who is both black and a woman). It is clear, therefore, that Captain America is and always has been a product of its time (Dittmer, 2007).

Thus far, the reviewed literature has focused on the Captain America comics. However, in recent years, Marvel has been making more from movies than comics. The export of American film to foreign countries necessarily brings with it the export of

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American culture. In theory, this should give the US more cultural influence over other countries and increase American soft power. Non-Americans who are exposed to the character of Captain America through Marvel movies are also exposed to the American ideals he represents and if they like the character, they may adopt a favorable view of the country itself, which predisposes them to positive attitudes toward American policies (Nelson, 2022).

But what is encoded in the Captain America movies, comics and characters need not be what is decoded from them. This is why Dittmer (2012) examines ways in which Captain America is interpreted in the media, which are one of the key sites of discursive practice when it comes to questions of nation, state, and politics. He analyzes the reporting on three divisive Captain America storylines in the comics, one in 2002-2003, one in 2007, and one in 2010 and finds that although Captain America serves largely as an empty signifier - a character that typically leans toward liberal democratic ideals of liberty and human rights but can easily be co-opted to serve more right-wing political goals - who has historically been appreciated by audiences across the political spectrum, he cannot escape the scrutiny of a new, more polarized media landscape. Whereas the reporting on the 2002-2003 series Truth largely followed the script of traditional media, from drumming up excitement in advance of the release to covering the events as they unfolded to commenting on them retrospectively, and was for the most part neutral to positive, the coverage of the 2006-2007 issues of Civil War was less unanimous. This, however, worked in Marvel's favor; in this case, Marvel benefitted from attempting to cater to everyone as readers projected their own beliefs on Captain America and became invested in the story regardless of where they stood politically. Finally, a 2010 comic that depicted Tea Party supporters at a rally that Captain America implicitly calls racist garnered enough criticism that the writer had to publicly apologize. This is a reflection of a divided nation with a fractured image of the idealized American in a time when journalism does not come just from papers but also from individual bloggers and social media users (Dittmer, 2012).

The crisis of national identity was only exacerbated by the 2016 election of Donald Trump. During his presidency, much heated debate was led over social media and Twitter in particular. Other politicians, celebrities, and private individuals all participated in criticizing (or defending) Trump's actions. Among them was Chris Evans, the actor who played Steve Rogers/Captain America in all of the MCU films thus far. His tweets against Trump were unusually popular and due to his connection to Captain America, many responses were related to the superhero. Because social media is more focused on messages that are quick,

to-the-point, and memorable, iconography is more likely to get the point across than orthography, which led to the creation and dissemination of many a Captain America meme with regards to Trump, his election, and his policies. The examples of Captain America imagery used in relation to Trump's presidency include a recreation of the very first comic book cover where Captain America punches Hitler in the face with Hitler's face replaced by Trump's and a CACW poster reimagined to show Trump and opponent Hilary Clinton in place of Iron Man and Captain America, leading opposing red and blue factions. But divergent imagery could also be found, with Trump in the role of Captain America instead, casting him as the one true ideal American. These tweets show the connection between popular culture and politics as well as invoking a mythical past of America's justified interventionism, sacrifice, and redemption during WWII while also showing how the image of Captain America can be used for divergent and even opposing political goals (Schmid, 2020).

Just like America itself, Captain America experienced an identity crisis. At the end of CACW, a movie that came out in the middle of the presidential campaign, Steve Rogers walks away from his iconic shield, symbolically abandoning his identity as Captain America. This plot point was taken from the comics, from an issue in which Captain America quits in protest as he disagrees with the government policies he is asked to reenact. He becomes, instead, the Nomad - a superhero without a country who only follows his own moral rules. Something similar happens in the movies: when Steve Rogers next appears in Avengers: Infinity War (2018), he is no longer wearing the red, white, and blue uniform or using his shield. This does not resolve the ambiguity of his political beliefs so the audiences are left with the possibility of projecting their own opinions on the character. The polysemic narratives of Captain America reflect the constant negotiation and renegotiation of what it means to be American and the inability to permanently fix one meaning that would be the essence of Americanness (Schmid, 2020).

However, Canavan (2018) argues that the MCU's continuous expansion has diluted any relevant message it might have had. In his words, the MCU has a story but not a plot. Because there is always another movie in the works, there is never any narrative closure - while the movie might end, its story will continue in a sequel. This makes any movie Marvel puts out essentially just a teaser for the movies that will follow. The story is furthermore less driven by a plot and more driven by external factors like when a certain cast member's contract might expire. Since this is information that is often publicly available, it is easy for

audiences to themselves conclude what the ultimate fate of their favorite superhero will be; the viewers know who will survive an Avengers movie based on who has solo movies planned to come out after it or whose character might be retired or killed off based on how many movies the actor playing them signed on for. According to him, Marvel movies have become entirely forgettable: they are entertaining while they last but do not have a significant enough plot with significant enough character development or even motivation to be remembered afterward. And ultimately, it does not matter because there will always be another Marvel movie that continues the story and renders whatever sequence of events the audience has forgotten obsolete anyway.

Yet, Marvel movies still attract a very wide and diverse audience. Lacina (2020) shows that Marvel outperforms comparable movies in every demographic category. Marvel movies are seen by an estimated 10-20% of all American adults (depending on the movie); on average, Marvel movies had a 40% higher viewership than their competition. Furthermore, although the stereotypical superhero fan is considered to be a young white man, a higher proportion of adult men of color and adult women of color than white men saw Marvel movies. The disparity was larger among young audiences with the majority of Marvel's 18-24 audience being people of color. This is likely due to demographic trends such as the average age of people of color in America being lower than that of white people as there does not appear to be any deliberate backlash from the more conservative, typically white, audiences - although viewership is highest among liberal Americans and lowest among conservatives, the difference is on average very small. This would seem to indicate that Marvel's plans to diversify casting to include more women and more people of color is a good move as comparable movies led by women had on average more viewers than comparable movies led by men due to attracting a lot more white women and somewhat more women of color without losing a significant portion of the male audience (an analysis like this on MCU movies themselves was impossible at the time as 90% of them were led by white men). Simply diversifying the cast, however, may not be enough. Other blockbusters in the action movie genre only benefited from having a female or Black lead when this was relevant for the story; when a Black or female lead could have been replaced by a white man, diversity did not seem to make much of a difference. Diversifying the crew behind the camera also helped draw in new audiences. If Marvel is to continue on its path of success, these steps may be necessary as it is likely that Marvel is already reaching a ceiling with its US audience,

having already converted comic book fans, action and adventure movie viewers, and sci-fi enthusiasts.

4.3.2 The gendering of Marvel

The MCU has already faced criticism for its lack of diversity in terms of both race and gender (Lacina, 2020). The first MCU movie with a black lead, The Black Panther, only came out in 2018 and the first female-led MCU movie, Captain Marvel, did not come out until 2019. Although female characters did appear before this, sometimes even as superheroes, Majhi (2017) shows that true parity between male and female characters in the superhero genre has not been achieved. Not only are there simply fewer women than men in superhero movies, but they are also frequently typecast as little more than damsels in distress or love interests. Even superheroines are not exempt from this - Black Widow's introduction in Iron Man 2 involves her being sexualized by the main character who happens to be her boss and her introduction in The Avengers has her tied to a chair in a torn up dress. She is also the only character in The Avengers to cry on screen. Stereotypes about women are, therefore, very much still prevalent in the superhero genre and although progress has been made, a closer analysis of the way female characters are treated by the narrative often reveals the representation is not quite as groundbreaking as it may appear.

As recently as 2019, after Marvel had already announced plans to diversify the cast and crew for Phase 4 projects, gender bias could be found in MCU movies. Ridaryanthi and Sinuyul (2021) in their analysis of Avengers: Endgame (2021) find that at least three of the female superheroes, although they at first glance appear to be female empowerment fantasies, suffer from stereotyping. They focus on how specifically Black Widow, Gamora, and Nebula are presented in the film and find that all three occupy traditionally feminine roles as daughters, sisters, and emotional support friends (and in Gamora's case also love interests) more so than they are characterized independently. Their contributions are also largely dependent on the men around them - the conflict between Gamora and Nebula, who are adoptive sisters, stems from their relationship with their father Thanos, who serves as a major influence on their decision making throughout the film; much of Black Widow's motivation, even for her ultimate sacrifice about halfway through the movie, comes from her relationship with Clint Barton - she dies so he will not have to. All three women operate as a part of a greater team of superheroes as collaboration between virtually all characters in the MCU is required to defeat Thanos. Ostensibly, they are all on equal footing with the men they work

with and Black Widow is even shown as the one leading the Avengers operation on Earth. However, they are all ultimately subject to the dominance of men: both Gamora's and Nebula's backstories center their trauma at the hands of their father and while Black Widow contributes to discussions among the Avengers, it is not to introduce new ideas but only in response to a conversation led by men. Finally, all three characters are sexualized for male viewing pleasure. Although Gamora and Nebula are of different alien species (and Nebula is part-cyborg on top of that), they both take on distinctly human, and distinctly female at that, appearance even though there is no real reason why they should. While this can be blamed on the source material where both alien races are described and drawn as humanoid, the casting and costuming cannot. All three women are played by very conventionally attractive actresses (two of them white); there is no real nudity but all three wear form-fitting outfits and despite being evidently trained and physically capable, are not as muscular as one would expect from a character who regularly participates in fights, certainly not compared to their male counterparts. At first glance, these characters may appear empowering and liberated but a closer reading reveals that they are not free from the patriarchy yet.

Joffe (2019) finds similar issues when analyzing the portrayal of Black Widow, Scarlet Witch, and Mystique (from the X-Men movies which are not a part of the MCU). She lays out how Black Widow has been sexualized in a variety of MCU movies by being put in overtly sexual situations, dressed in revealing clothing, and filmed at angles that unnecessarily focus on her body. Scarlet Witch avoids such overt sexualization only by going in the extreme opposite - she is repeatedly infantilized by other characters and the narrative both. Although she is one of the most powerful characters in the Marvel universe (only vaguely defined as reality manipulation), she falls into the "woman driven mad by power" trope and cannot be trusted to make her own decisions; instead she relies first on her brother, then on Hawkeye who is a father figure to her, and finally on Vision who becomes her love interest in later movies. Because Black Widow does not have a family, such relationships are not an issue but the lack of them still leads to the expression of misogynistic stereotypes: in Avengers: Age of Ultron, she is revealed to be infertile and her inability to become a mother is heavily implied to be what makes her feel like "a monster". Joffe identifies these representations as being characteristic of postfeminism - the discourse that holds that society has advanced past the need for feminism and which, through popular culture, undoes feminism without explicitly denouncing it. It is almost universally cis, straight, white, able bodied, and upper or middle class. Postfeminist popular culture products typically involve

so-called strong female characters. On the surface, these characters are independent women who play by their own rules, but at closer inspection, they often reveal themselves to be two-dimensional and stereotype-ridden, with their strength coming purely from physical prowess and beauty and their sexualization being of their own choosing. This is exacerbated by female characters, rare as they typically are in male-dominated genres, being seen as representing their entire gender rather than simply being characters who happen to be women: screen women are *women*, screen men simply are. Diversity behind the camera often helps to create more nuanced, flawed, and realistic female characters but with the film industry still dominated by men, many movies continue to suffer from tokenistic female characters who appear to be a symbol of feminism but instead go against its core values.

However, the future may not be so bleak as it seems. In 2018, Curtis and Cardo argued that the world of comics has become a more equitable one thanks to contributions from female writers and artists. Minor setbacks notwithstanding, female-led issues have done well and been repeatedly renewed, new female characters have been introduced and old ones reintroduced, and some historically male superheroes have become female superheroes. The characters were not just white women either; women of color, queer women, and even disabled women were on the roster as well. Their storylines were more nuanced and better developed as well. Women have been shown working together and fighting for equal rights and recognition not only as superheroes but also as their civilian secret identities. While some characters like Carol Danvers rejected feminine titles they found restricting (going from Ms. Marvel to Captain Marvel), others like the space entity Singularity embraced girlhood and womanhood (learning how to exist on Earth from the inspirational young women around her). These seemingly contradictory narratives only reveal the diversity of women's experiences that are making it onto comic book pages.

In 2019, Sheikh et al. posited the same trend was visible in the MCU. Their argument is that female characters have become more relevant in recent Marvel movies. In Avengers: Endgame, for example, Black Widow is the one who reconnects former Avengers and their allies and coordinates them into a team; in the same movie, Captain Marvel and Scarlet Witch are the most powerful players on the battlefield (barring the villain) without whom victory would not be possible. While the analysis recognizes that the role of women as mothers, daughters, and sisters is overall emphasized more than the familial roles of the male characters, this is identified as an opportunity to show solidarity between women rather than reducing them to their relationships with men only. Finally, Captain Marvel (2019) is taken

up as an example of a movie which is led by a female superhero whose journey is about self-discovery largely independent of the men in her life who serve to forward her narrative rather than vice versa as is the norm. The movie is a part of a wave of action movies with female leads (such as X-Men: Dark Phoenix, Charlie's Angels, and Atomic Blonde) which all came out around that time. Since then, Marvel has released another movie about a female superhero (Black Widow) and a TV show centered on a superpowered woman dealing with grief (WandaVision); Jane Foster was also announced as the new Thor in the next Thor sequel (Ramos et al., 2019). Sheikh et al. (2019) conclude that this might be a sign that the portrayal of women in the MCU and the genre more broadly is changing.

4.3.3. Conclusions from the reviewed literature

Three important conclusions can be drawn from the reviewed literature regarding Captain America and Marvel more broadly. Firstly, the character of Captain America serves as a symbol of the US not only within the fictional Marvel universe but also outside of it. The narratives woven around Captain America are, therefore, narratives woven around the US. Both the character and the media he appears in are used to negotiate what America is and what it should be. Furthermore, as a personification of the nation, Captain America reflects who is seen as an acceptable representation of the American identity. Secondly, the media about Captain America is reflective of societal and political changes in the US with character and plot development responding to both changing trends and major events in the country. Consequently, Captain America has maintained cultural relevance throughout the decades and his image is still referenced when discussing American politics in casual settings. Thirdly, although gender representation in Captain America and Marvel more broadly has evolved over time, stereotypes are still very common and the roles of superheroes belong mostly to men while women are cast as love interests and female superheroes are commonly sexualized.

It is further evident from the review of existing literature that Marvel comics have been the topic of study more often than Marvel movies. The scholarship on Captain America in this context has mostly centered the character as an American symbol in relation to nationalism. Gender has been a topic of research for both Marvel comics and Marvel movies, but has typically focused more on equal representation on the page and on the screen and less on examining the media through the lens of gender. Furthermore, gender has mostly been explored either in Marvel and the genre broadly (in the entirety of the MCU, for example) or

in a single movie that serves as a case study. Finally, there is a serious lack of research that focuses on Marvel's TV shows, including AC and TFATWS. This thesis will, therefore, contribute to the gap in knowledge regarding the representation of neither conflict nor gender individually but rather the overlap between the two in the entire Captain America franchise along with the TV shows that are a part of it.

5. ANALYSIS

5.1: What narrative of the United States and its involvement in conflict does the Captain America franchise present, how, and why?

5.1.1 Captain America: The First Avenger

CATFA combines elements of the superhero genre with a historical war film. The narrative is not completely linear with the majority of the events occurring during WWII, bookended by scenes in the present day. This kind of structuring achieves two goals: firstly, it connects CATFA to the existing MCU movies which are set in the present day while still telling the historical origin story of Captain America; secondly, it establishes the importance of Captain America as a symbol to present day - both in-universe characters and the audience will recognize the stars-and-stripes shield immediately. The exact dates of the events are not established through title cards; rather, the timeline can be pieced together through information provided by props, dialogue, and editing. The scenes in the present day, both in the beginning and in the end of the movie, are fully saturated and have not been recolorized; the scenes set in the past, however, have either a warm sepia filter (indoors) or a cool blue one (outdoors). A title card with the date of March 1942 is included in the beginning of the second scene of the movie. The third scene, with which the main plot begins, does not specify a date - the location is New York City, as established by a shot of its skyline and the Brooklyn Bridge, and the date can be approximated to 1943 based on the headlines of the newspapers that the men in the enlistment center are reading. The rest of the events shown on the screen (barring one montage with narration from Dr. Erskine which refers to a period immediately before and at the beginning of the war) are presented chronologically.

The portion of the film that is set during WWII is not historically accurate. Rather, it relies on creating an aesthetic that will evoke war imagery - traditional military uniforms, old car models, women's hair and makeup emblematic of the period. Even without title cards and historical references, it is easy to place the movie in the 1940s because this is how an audience presumed to consist primarily of young men would picture the period. Although it is undeniable that the movie unfolds during WWII and many of the major characters are military personnel, realistic depictions of the horror of war are carefully avoided. Soldiers are sometimes seen in the aftermath, dirtied up and mildly injured, but actual battle scenes are of

the campy comic book variety and enemies are far more often vanquished in a blast of blue light and smoke than shot. This serves to downplay the violence of war.

The main character is Steve Rogers who will become Captain America at the end of the first act or around a quarter of the way through the movie. He is both the focus of the majority of the scenes and the character who most commonly acts as a focalizator meaning the majority of the movie is told from the perspective of an American soldier, but this role is delegated to other characters as well so that the audience will have insight into events Rogers is not aware of. At no point in the movie does a character act as a narrator.

The representation of US involvement in conflict in CATFA is twofold: implicit through Captain America as the personification of the nation and explicit through images of US soldiers and civilians involved in the war effort.

Steve Rogers is first introduced indirectly in the opening scene where he is found frozen in the Arctic. The reaction of the military personnel who discover his body to immediately alert their command is meant to show how important locating him is. Immediately following this discovery, the audience is taken back in time and introduced to the movie's villain, Johann Schmidt or Red Skull. He arrives on scene in the midst of an invasion in a sleek black car; the camera focuses in on the Hydra emblem on the front of the car as he exits and walks away. He is kept out of focus until he enters the now ruined tower where the Tesseract is hidden; when he appears on the screen for the first time, he is dressed in an all black leather outfit and lit from behind as he stands on the rubble of a stone wall. This kind of imagery serves to establish Schmidt and Hydra not just as a villain but as an enemy force to be reckoned with, a fact which is confirmed when Schmidt easily pushes away the stone cover of a crypt that four soldiers together could not move only seconds earlier. The final step in establishing Schmidt as an intimidating villain involves showing his ruthlessness and needless cruelty - he does not just kill those that stand in his way but also destroys the whole village even after he has what he has come for. During the conversation with the keeper, Schmidt agrees that the Tesseract is "not for the eyes of ordinary men". This hints at the fact that Schmidt has received the supersoldier serum that Rogers will receive later and is, therefore, no longer an ordinary man but in the context of WWII can also be understood as a reference to the Nazi belief in a superior Aryan race as the theme of supersoldiers being a separate class of humanity will be taken up again in later installments of the franchise (specifically CACW and TFATWS). When Steve Rogers is first shown on

screen immediately following Schmidt's introduction, the contrast between the intimidating villain and the small, skinny, sickly pre-serum hero is exacerbated. This only makes Rogers' insistence on joining the war and bravery in the face of danger more impressive. In addition to being physically unfit and sick, he is also revealed to be an orphan, having lost his parents to war and disease. This backstory is lifted from the comic books with one alteration - in the comics, pre-serum Rogers represents a weak America that has not yet chosen to do the right thing and enter the war but in the movie, which is set in 1943, America is already at war so the same symbolism does not hold. In 2011 when the movie came out, America was still at war with Iraq; the weakness may therefore be tied to a lack of decisive action in the interventions America had already started. Rogers' traumatic past is not just about building sympathy for the character either - it has already previously been interpreted as symbolizing the collective trauma of 9/11. The two establishing scenes, one for the villain and one for the hero, also serve to set up the contrast between them: Captain America volunteering to fight for what is right even when he is not physically able is contrasted against a superhuman Schmidt who only fights for what he personally wants.

The two will be contrasted again more explicitly later in the movie: first, in Erskine's story about Schmidt's past, then during Rogers' rescue of the Hydra prisoners of war when they meet in person for the first time, and again in the final battle when Schmidt is defeated. All these scenes contrast American values against the values of America's enemies. In the first, Erskine narrates Schmidt's history with Hydra and Hitler and his eternal quest for greater and greater power over a montage of Schmidt's face overlaid over Nazi symbols. He then immediately draws a parallel to Rogers and contrasts them. According to him, the same serum that turned Schmidt into a monster will turn Rogers into a hero because it enhances what is already inside. Therefore, although a parallel is drawn between Hitler's Nazi Germany symbolized by Schmidt and the US as symbolized by Captain America, it is also immediately dismissed because America is different and has always been - its goal is not gaining power for its own sake but for the sake of helping those who cannot help themselves. This story is all the more powerful for being delivered by a German scientist who nonetheless sides with Captain America. In the second comparison, the side effects of the serum on Schmidt are revealed - he is a monster. On the other hand, Rogers is still a blond, blue-eyed, attractive man who does not hide behind the mask; in other words, power has corrupted the enemy, but it has not corrupted America. As the factory they are in burns down around them, Schmidt leaves his assistant, Zola, to fend for himself. Rogers, however, is risking his life to

save Barnes and other prisoners. This goes against what Schmidt claims about supersoldiers - that they have left humanity behind. There is, therefore, a clear distinction in how the two treat the people around them: while Schmidt sees himself above the rest thanks to his power, Rogers is still focused on saving the ordinary man. Finally, in Rogers and Schmidt's last encounter, Schmidt accuses Rogers of being too focused on nations and nationalism and not seeing beyond that, to a world without borders and flags. His anti-nationalist sentiment is immediately punished as he self-destructs by overestimating his control over the Tesseract. Unlike him, Rogers willingly sacrifices himself to save the world from the destruction he fears the Tesseract will bring. From this, one can surmise that Captain America values the greater good more than he does his own life.

Rogers' motivation being to protect and rescue is a theme that is built up through the narrative. Before his enlistment is approved by Erskine, he proves himself worthy of consideration for the supersoldier program by declaring that he has no desire to kill and that joining the war effort is about standing up to bullies and protecting the little guy. This is reiterated again in his conversation with Carter as he is on the way to receive the serum. He also consistently chooses a shield over other weapons - in his first ever fight, before he's even received the serum, he picks up a garbage can lid, after that he uses a car door, then a shield that is part of his USO costume, and finally a shield made specifically for him by Stark; although he is occasionally seen using a gun, he primarily uses a tool of defense rather than offense. Combined with the fact that Rogers is never seen killing anyone on screen in the entire franchise, this makes it clear that Captain America's motivation is to protect people: he is a defensive force, not an offensive one. His goal is and has always been to save lives - this is the first thing he does as a soldier when he crosses enemy lines to rescue Allied prisoners of war and bring them back and he is willing to do this even when it means disobeying orders and even at the cost of his life. The foundation for his sacrifice is laid already during his training when he is the only one to throw himself at a (disabled) grenade. Even though Rogers reveals he was bullied growing up and is then mocked at the training camp and finally straddled with a humiliating (for a man) job in the USO, he perseveres in the face of adversity because he feels a duty to serve his country and because it is the right thing to do. The only time when his motives are questionable is immediately after Barnes' death when his attack on Schmidt's compound is implied by the narrative ordering of events to be, at least in part, motivated by revenge. However, this revenge is seen as justified because Barnes was an

American soldier who died fighting alongside Rogers - he is, therefore, a victim considered worth avenging.

Rogers' exceptionalism is made evident through his uniqueness: he is repeatedly referred to as the only supersoldier and America's only hope against Nazis. Carter even tells him explicitly that he was "meant for more than this" (meaning his appearances with the USO) to encourage him to join the forces at the front lines. This clearly plays into the myth of American exceptionalism and showing a montage of Rogers winning battle after battle once he is accepted into military ranks affirms the popular belief that WWII could not have been won without America. Showing Captain America's shield during celebrations on Victory Day at the end of the film as well as a deleted scene in which Fury explicitly tells Rogers that taking down Hydra was a big part of the unconditional surrender that ended the war (ExTrAReel, 2017) also contribute to this reading.

The story of the US as told through the character of Captain America is fairly clear: America started out beaten down and weak but through inventions (brought on by capitalism of which Stark is emblematic), developed into a strong and powerful nation. Its motivations had always been pure - to defend those who cannot defend themselves and protect human lives. This makes the US unique as others would be corrupted by such power, but American exceptionalism lies in resisting that temptation and remaining a powerful force for good. For these reasons, American interventionism is justified.

This is in line with what is shown of American military participation in WWII in the movie itself: the importance of having the right men in the army is stressed in Phillips' speech at the training camp and America is shown as better, not just more powerful, than its enemies by how well it treats its prisoners - something American prisoners of war do not experience on the other side. Wartime propaganda is shown rather uncritically - the reel Rogers sees in the cinema, which states that "the price of freedom is never too high" is indirectly affirmed as Rogers does in the end pay the ultimate price for freedom. The USO performances that Rogers participates in, where he punches Hitler in the face, sings, and dances to encourage support for the war is as much a way of manufacturing consent as CATFA itself; this, however, is narratively seen as a positive - the performances are fun and campy, with 1940s inspired music and colorful costumes, all intended to amuse the viewer more than make them think critically.

<u>5.1.2 Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014)</u>

CATWS combines the superhero genre with spy movies and political thrillers. The genre conventions imposed by these types of movies affect the narration as much of the information is withheld for the purposes of secrecy and plot twists. Aside from this, the narration is fairly straightforward with a largely linear narrative that is not hard to follow. Focalization is varied so that the audience will have insight into the multitude of plots unfolding simultaneously but internal focalization is exclusively done through male characters and Rogers and Barnes specifically are privileged in this regard as the only characters whose inside worlds the audience visits through memories and flashbacks.

The plot unfolds entirely in the modern day - 2014. The country is not at war this time; instead the major themes concern security and how to achieve it. There is much disagreement between Captain America and SHIELD regarding the continuous production of weapons and increased militarization of the state as well as the surveillance of American citizens. Of all the Captain America movies, this one is the most critical of American politics. However, because this criticism is aimed at the actions of SHIELD rather than a real government agency, the state, or its symbol, and SHIELD has been infiltrated by Hydra, it is Hydra's influence that is ultimately condemned. Given that the US has already been established in CATFA through the character of Captain America as the exception to the idea that power corrupts, it stands to reason that the same actions Hydra undertakes in CATWS could potentially be seen as justified if they were done by the US instead.

The movie opens with a scene clearly set in Washington DC which indicates that the plot will relate to political rather than military action. Already in the second scene, the audience sees Captain America and his team planning a mission to recover a SHIELD vessel, the Lemurian Star, and rescue its crew from foreign pirates who have commandeered it. This once again establishes Captain America's mission as one of defense and protection. Rogers is immediately suspicious of the presence of the Lemurian Star in foreign waters, which is incongruent with his interventionist attitudes from CATFA and later CACW but in line with the insistence on transparency seen in CATWS which is also indicated by his offense at Romanoff's mission which has been kept secret from him. When Rogers confronts Fury about this, Fury's explanation invokes the myth of America's glorious past when safety and security were guaranteed for everyone; he repeats a common narrative used to justify surveillance and security measures - that rising crime rates have left the people unsafe and

that being prepared to defend oneself is now a necessity. The story of Fury's grandfather's preparedness to defend himself against increased domestic danger appears to be a fairly straightforward analogy and Rogers' comparison of SHIELD's helicarriers to the gun Fury's grandfather kept on him in case he was robbed further cements this reading; however, it is worth noting that the story is told by a Black man about a Black man, which makes another reading possible: that racism is on the rise in America. It is unlikely this was the intended meaning as CATWS does not otherwise deal with issues of race.

The disagreement between Rogers and Fury is predicated on the conflict between increased security and increased freedom: Fury's stance is that some freedom must be sacrificed for security to be achieved (that is to say, he represents the position that negative freedom - freedom from harm - takes precedence) while Rogers' is that the people should have the freedom to live their lives as they want to without being observed by the state (this is a position that forwards positive freedoms - the freedoms to something, rather than from something). In this, Fury's position matches the one later expressed by Zola when he explains Hydra's philosophy that humanity cannot be trusted with its freedom. Zola also expresses what Fury only implies - that the population must agree to exchange its freedom for its security if conflict is to be avoided; in other words, consent must be manufactured for government actions that will ultimately put its people at harm. Rogers walks away from the conversation still refusing to agree to work with SHIELD on the helicarrier launch; following this scene up with Rogers' conversation with Carter where he states he is only looking to do the right thing and is unsure if following orders is the right thing only stresses the importance of Rogers' reliance on an inner moral compass rather than blind obedience, which is also narratively justified as it will later turn out that Project Insight was Hydra's plan all along - this is affirming of the need to be critical of one's government even if the US government ultimately escapes scrutiny in the film. The attitude is contrasted against the blind faith in Hydra displayed later in the movie by Pierce and Zola and a condemnation of unquestioning radicalism, a theme that will be picked up again in TFATWS. Similarly, questions of accountability for government agencies and oversight over American policy are raised but will be explored in more detail in a later installment (CACW) and the idea that the *real* America would not commit such acts (only the corruption that has infiltrated it can be blamed) is repeated in TFATWS. The issues regarding the surveillance state and collection of personal data briefly raised in relation to Project Insight, however, will not be revisited again.

The Winter Soldier's attack on Fury shows the type of attack on the US that creates anxiety for the American public. It is not an invasion or even an outright attack by a foreign government. Rather, it is a single public act of violence that instills fear - a terrorist attack. This can also be surmised from the way The Winter Soldier is introduced as a nameless, faceless threat: dressed in all black with a black mask covering the bottom half of his face and black goggles hiding his eyes, he stands in the center of a busy road with a gun aimed at the car Fury is driving as ambient noise fades and the ominous character theme plays instead. Although this certainly evokes the image of a Middle Eastern terrorist frequently found in other movies, the Winter Soldier is less a product of orientalism and more a product of a fear of communism. In a later fight between him and Rogers, he is revealed to have a metal arm on which a red five-point star is imprinted and he gives orders in Russian, identifying him as a tool of the Soviet Union. His aggressive and offensive violence which stands in stark contrast to Rogers' defensive maneuvering in their fight can be read as a condemnation of Russian foreign politics; at the time of the filming and release of CATWS, relations between Russia and the US had become strained due to Russia's aggressive influence in and eventual attack on Ukraine (*Ukraine and Russia Sanctions*, n.d.). The vilification of the Soviet Union will continue in later MCU installments, including AC, CACW, and Black Widow (2021).

Hydra's takeover of SHIELD is the other form of aggression that is imaginable on American soil - an infiltration by a foreign faction. Shortly after the Winter Soldier's first appearance, it is revealed that Hydra agents operate within SHIELD when Rogers is attacked in the elevator of SHIELD headquarters as he is leaving a meeting with Pierce. This is one way in which the movie portrays the anxiety surrounding a potential attack on America coming from the inside.

The solution to such attacks, however, does not appear to be any form of systemic overhaul. This option is rather presented by Pierce who suggests that "to build a better world sometimes means tearing the old one down". This implies that building a better world would require a drastic change to the currently established system, but because the idea comes from a villain it is immediately deemed futile. But while tearing down the system in order to rebuild it is not entertained, tearing it down to get rid of the enemies who infiltrated it, as Rogers demands Fury does to SHIELD, is acceptable and by the end of the movie, SHIELD has ceased to exist as an agency. Dismissing systemic change is, of course, narratively justified in this case as it turns out that Hydra's goal was to implement a dictatorship while SHIELD was an unwitting victim in this plan.

The control that Hydra has on SHIELD is ultimately what renders the criticism that CATWS lobbies at state agencies meaningless. While lack of transparency, corruption, excessive surveillance, and government overreach are all irrefutably criticized, the agents who are condemned by this criticism are not SHIELD agents or American politicians - they are Hydra spies. In fact, it is heavily implied in TFATWS that SHIELD has been reconstituted and still operates as an extension of the US government. SHIELD is therefore redeemable in the same way that the Winter Soldier, who is revealed to be Barnes about halfway through the movie, is redeemable - they are both agents of the state that have been corrupted by outside forces, but are at their core morally good. The American government is, therefore, not the enemy; those trying to influence it are. The movie even says so explicitly when Wilson asks Rogers how they will be able to tell "the good guys" from "the bad guys" given that everyone around them is a SHIELD agent to which Rogers replies that "the bad guys are shooting at you", designating those that attack him, a symbol of America, as bad guys.

While Captain America is never an actual villain in the movie, there is an attempt by Hydra to turn him into one using a smear campaign within SHIELD. However, when journalists are present on the scene as Hydra agents are arresting Rogers, Wilson, and Romanoff, a Hydra agent is seen signaling that the captives should be treated kindly in the presence of cameras. Although brief, this exchange represents the idea that the media does not always report the truth but rather constructs it and that this construct can be manipulated so that the audience sees what one wants it to see. The role of media in conflict is thus briefly acknowledged in CATWS just as it was in CATFA through the role of the USO and propaganda.

Although CATWS mostly fails as serious social critique, it does raise some interesting questions that will be explored more in later installments in the franchise. However, one thing that CATWS touches on which does not appear in other Captain America movies or TV shows is peace. Peace is only mentioned in passing when Fury is talking about Pierce and says Pierce turned down a Nobel Peace Prize because "peace isn't an achievement, it's a responsibility". But if peace is not an achievement, the question of how to attain it remains open. For audiences who adopt this reductive view of peace, ideas of active peacebuilding may appear entirely foreign and meaningless.

<u>5.1.3 Captain America: Civil War (2016)</u>

Unlike its predecessors, CACW is firmly located in the superhero genre and does not borrow conventions from elsewhere. It takes a new approach to conflict; instead of pitting superheros against supervillains, it shows an internal split between superheroes on the basis of moral convictions and ethical beliefs. The varied focalization which allows the narrative to be told both from Rogers' and from Stark's perspective builds sympathy toward both positions. The movie departs from previous installments by bringing the conflict down to an interpersonal level (compared to a conflict between nations in CATFA and a conflict between an individual and an organization in CATWS) but is a continuation in the sense that it explores topics previously brought up in the franchise, including accountability and oversight over sanctioned violence.

American interventionism is once again prominent in CACW. Much like in the other installments of the franchise, it is justified as being benevolent and having the goal of preventing even greater evils. This can be surmised from Captain America's actions. Casualties interventions may incur are regrettable, but they do not deter Captain America from attempting again; as he explains to Maximoff: "We try to save as many as we can. Sometimes that doesn't mean everybody but if we can't find a way to live with that, next time maybe no one gets saved." Whether there is any need for an intervention at all is not questioned; later in the movie, Rogers will explain why by saying that he cannot ignore injustices where he sees them. If Rogers' actions represent those of the US, then one can only assume that the motivations for US interventionism are to be understood as benevolent and an attempt to rectify the wrongs of the world.

It is clear that Rogers trusts his own moral judgment, but the accountability for his interventions is in fact questioned by other characters when the UN becomes involved. This is the first time in the franchise that Rogers' violence is not immediately narratively justified. Instead, the conflict between those who put their trust in organizations such as the UN and those who think extraordinary individuals can be counted on to hold themselves accountable is present throughout the movie. That Rogers refuses to be held accountable for his actions by the UN or let them make decisions for him is representative of the role of the US internationally as well - the US has previously interfered in the affairs of sovereign nations without the approval of the UN Security Council and is not party to the International Criminal Court which could hold it accountable (*United States | Coalition for the*

International Criminal Court, n.d.). Rogers' track record justifies this choice - his interventions in the past have always been beneficial and his motives for them never malicious.

Although the primary conflict of CACW is between Rogers and Stark, neither is actually cast in the role of the villain. Instead, Helmut Zemo is shown as manipulating the Avengers into self-destructing because he blames them for the death of his family. By his own explanation, it would be impossible for anyone to destroy a team of superheroes; instead, the only way is to divide them from the inside and turn them against each other. The division even results in Captain America abandoning his shield and thus his role as the symbol of the nation because there is no unified nation to symbolize any longer. This represents the danger of disunity within the country and implies that this is more of a threat to the US than any outside attack. CACW was filmed and released during the presidential election campaign in 2016 which saw Donald Trump go against Hillary Clinton. The elections were particularly divisive and polarizing so the divisions they created were felt across the US. The reading of the CACW conflict as relevant to the political situation in the US at the time is supported by the fact that CACW imagery was adapted and used for online political campaigning. Traditional media were also frequently accused of printing "fake news" by Trump who claimed that he was a victim of a smear campaign. This distrust toward media or at least the understanding that they will construct a particular version of the story which need not be true appears in the Captain America franchise multiple times, including CACW where the media coverage of both Maximoff and Barnes casts them as villains even though they are narratively absolved of guilt. Even though the relationship between media representations and the truth established by the narrative is not further explored, it provides a brief reflection on the role of media in conflict. Media coverage is implied to even be the motivation behind the suggested Sokovia Accords. UN involvement immediately follows news reports of the incident where Maximoff accidentally but very publicly causes casualties. The chronological placement of the event implies a causal connection.

This also raises the question of which victims deserve attention and whose deaths may incur stricter oversight. Despite their name, the Sokovia Accords are not an immediate consequence of the Sokovia incident, which is shown in the Avengers: Age of Ultron movie that precedes CACW. Sokovia was a fictional Easter European country until it was destroyed by the Avengers during their battle with Ultron. But as Zemo himself puts it, "Sokovia was a failed state long before you blew it to hell." Its destruction is, therefore, not enough to cause

the UN to reexamine the role of superheroes. Instead, the Accords are only drafted after representatives to the UN themselves become casualties. Similarly, Stark's support for the Accords is motivated not by his guilt over the destruction of the entire country but rather by learning that an American exchange student was also killed in the attack. Rich, powerful, and American victims are, therefore, worthy enough to inspire change; poor non-Western victims are not. A similar dichotomy is set up in relation to which victims inspire blame - although the Winter Soldier is shown on screen killing both German and Soviet soldiers (in CATWS and CACW respectively), it is his murder of Howard and Maria Stark, a wealthy White American couple, that is the egregious crime he cannot be forgiven for.

CACW does not end with a satisfactory resolution: the Avengers remain divided, some of them even in exile. Such an ending confirms a statement earlier made by Vision: "Conflict breeds catastrophe" and echoed by Barnes: "It always ends in a fight." While it is certainly true that conflict *can* lead to violence, it need not necessarily lead to catastrophe. With the right strategies of management, resolution, and transformation, conflict can be productive. This is not the representation of conflict that CACW constructs, however. That Captain America is repeatedly involved in conflict (and therefore catastrophe) is left unaddressed.

5.1.4 Agent Carter (2015-2016)

AC is a departure from the rest of the franchise in that Captain America is not a character in the show. His presence is felt in the way other characters talk about him, but he does not appear on the screens outside of a brief recounting of the events of CATFA at the beginning of the first episode. It is, therefore, impossible to analyze the representation of US involvement in conflict through his character. Instead, the audience is presented with the US post-WWII as seen through the eyes of the main character - Peggy Carter, a woman working in a male-dominated field at a time when women were not afforded the opportunities they have today. Given that a female character is used as the primary focalizator, the perspective is different from other installments as well; it is her attitudes that color the perception of the world rather than the attitudes of the heroes the audience is used to. Carter is also a British transplant; her connection to the US is not as strongly established as that of Captain America.

The setting of AC provides some information about the way WWII has affected the US. The audience is presented with a country traumatized by conflict, living in fear of further invasion and violence, and trying to settle into the new social order established by the war.

Men who have returned from war must learn how to adapt to their life at home; women who have entered the workforce must now deal with increased sexism aimed at them for no longer fitting the gender roles they'd had before the war.

A distinction is drawn between the reality of the American role in the war and the myth created about it. Two examples of this can be seen: Thompson is celebrated with a medal of honor for his contributions to the war but reveals that he instead inadvertently killed Japanese soldiers who had come to surrender because he was asleep at his post and did not notice their white flag until it was too late and a radio show that supposedly follows the adventures of Captain America is shown as directly contradicting Carter's experiences with Rogers, something she also notes when she hears the show in the car one night. Presumably, other characters who directly participated in the war would have similar stories to tell, but none of them talk about their experiences and so the myth is what lives on.

Although Thompson does tell the story of the night he received a medal for, there are no flashbacks to accompany it. However, there are flashbacks in other episodes to Underwood's training, Underwood's killing of Soviet soldiers deemed not dedicated enough, and Fennhoff's traumatic experiences seeing his fellow soldiers killed and maimed. This is just one way in which Russia is presented differently from the US in the show; despite the fact that both were participants in the war, only Russian participation is shown as unnecessarily and unreasonably cruel, the main villains are Russians who are seen committing war crimes, and it is only the accusations of selling weapons to Russia specifically that force Stark into hiding even though he has previously sold his inventions to the US military as well. A part of the paranoia around Stark's inventions falling into the wrong hands may also be due to the idea that only the US can be trusted with such power which is common throughout the franchise and used as justification for US interventionism over the involvement of other countries.

The second season of AC moves further away from representing a country after a war. Although it is only set one year after the first one, the characters are shown as having settled into their new lives and very few references to the war or to Captain America are made at all. Instead, a minor subplot involves the interrelations of American politics, business, and the mafia. This could have served as interesting social commentary even if only regarding historical conditions in the post-war period but instead, all three branches unite against a common evil (Frost) and the corruption is simply glossed over.

<u>5.1.5 The Falcon and The Winter Soldier (2021)</u>

Similarly to AC, TFATWS shows the consequences of large scale conflict rather than the unfolding of it. The Captain America that the franchise has been built around - Steve Rogers - is absent again, but this time for good as he retires at the end of Avengers: Endgame (which directly precedes TFATWS). His absence leaves somewhat of a power vacuum in terms of symbolism and one of the major conflicts throughout the show is the disagreement over who is worthy of continuing Rogers' legacy. The narrative of Wilson's gradual transformation into a new Captain America is compelling because it is, at its core, a discussion of American national identity and who can best represent it.

The show focuses on Wilson and Barnes in roughly equal measure with Morgenthau's presence being the next most prominent one. It is, however, primarily Wilson's and Barnes' perspectives that influence the narrative. Race is a major motif throughout the series, but questions are also raised regarding migration policy, resource distribution, radicalization, and healing from trauma.

TFATWS is not exempt from treating American superheroes as a world police. Both Walker's and Wilson's Captain America become involved in foreign countries, which are typically shown as underdeveloped and poor - they are full of concrete buildings, graffitied walls, and refugee camps that rely on UN supplies to house and feed their tenants. Although Rogers' Captain America does not appear as a character, he still serves as a symbol of American exceptionalism: the same serum that turned him into a superhero corrupts everyone else, including Walker.

The role of Captain America as an American symbol is explicitly acknowledged already in the first episode as is the need for that symbol to change. After a brief establishing shot and a title card that informs the audience of the location (Washington DC), Wilson is seen on a podium surrounded by posters of Captain America giving a speech. He starts by talking about Rogers, then, as the background music fades and the atmosphere becomes more somber, he says that the world has now changed forever thanks to the Blip. As the camera cuts to a close up shot of Wilson's face, he declares "We need new heroes, ones suited for the times we're in." The way the scene is shot so that the focus is entirely on Wilson's face and voice makes it seem almost like he is alone in the room and gives it the air of personal importance. Of course, this will prove correct as the overarching theme of the show will be Wilson becoming the new hero suited for the time he is in.

At the end of Avengers: Endgame, an aged version of Rogers (who traveled back in time and decided to stay there and live out his life with Carter as a way of retiring) meets with Wilson and Barnes, both of whom have been set up as potential replacements for Rogers in the role of Captain America by the comics and the previous MCU movies, and hands his shield to Wilson. When asked how the shield feels in his hands, Wilson says that it feels "like it's someone else's"; this dialogue is also overlaid over shots of Wilson putting on a suit and packing the shield as he prepares to go to Washington and give the speech described above as a reminder that Wilson himself does not feel like the role of Captain America is his to play. But parallels are repeatedly drawn between Rogers and Wilson during the show to demonstrate the ways in which their moral alignments do match. Meanwhile, comparisons between Rogers and Walker are meant to show how they differ - in opposition to the shots of Rogers holding the shield in front of him defensively, the audience is shown a shot of Walker from below, where the body of the Flag Smasher he just killed lies, holding a shield with blood smearing its edges. Although it is made clear that Wilson and Rogers do have the same core values, by the time Wilson does eventually take the shield and becomes Captain America in the finale, it is also made clear that his version of the hero is different from Rogers'. He does not wear a suit inspired by Rogers' the way Walker did - instead, he is dressed in a completely different flag-inspired outfit and still has the mechanical wings he used as the Falcon. In the final battle sequence, he relies heavily on those wings - a lot more than he does on the shield which was Rogers' primary weapon. He is, therefore, a new Captain America - one that is better suited to modern times.

When Walker becomes Captain America the question of who is worthy of that title is raised by Barnes. Wilson ultimately proves himself as not only a capable soldier but also a compassionate and caring man who tries to reach Morgenthau peacefully rather than forcefully arresting her (the way Walker tries to) thus showing that he is, indeed, worthy of the shield. But questions of worth are not the only ones that need answering; in his conversation with Wilson, Isaiah Bradley declares that even if a Black man were allowed to be Captain America, a self-respecting one would not want to be. As a victim of racism all his life, Bradley resents the benevolent savior myth of (Captain) America and expresses multiple times his distaste for the idea of a Black man representing a country that did so many other Black men wrong. That this topic is raised at all in a superhero-themed TV show and that a Black man does eventually become Captain America is reflective of a change in discourses surrounding race and what it means to be American. This change in representation comes

shortly after the start of Black Lives Matter protests and at the height of the support for the movement.

As Wilson's speech in Washington continues, he is seen in a medium shot that shows he is on stage - he is now clearly speaking to the audience - with the American flag visible behind him as he declares that "symbols are nothing without the men and women who give them meaning". This is another recurring theme throughout the show - the struggle over who gets to give meaning to the national symbol and what kind of meaning that symbol will have depending on who represents it. Originally, the role of Captain America is assigned by the American government to John Walker based on his supposedly exemplary record as a soldier. Physically, he very much resembles Rogers: he is a tall, blond, blue-eyed White man. But as the audience will discover, he is also arrogant, power-hungry, and repressing a lot of anger - all things that did not characterize Rogers. The narrative makes it very clear that he is only *playing* Captain America but is not *actually* Captain America. This is why his public killing of the Flag Smasher does not carry significant connotations of criticism toward American violence abroad; the *real* Captain America would never needlessly kill civilians out of anger and the *real* America does not either. What is somewhat critical of government action is that Walker's dismissal from the army and from the role of Captain America which follows this event is again implied to be due to public scrutiny rather than the action itself. After all, Walker has at this point already admitted that he had killed people during his service even in situations that did not warrant it; the government was not concerned with that when they made him Captain America. But the scene in which he kills a Flag Smasher includes very deliberate shots of the shocked crowd filming the event on their phones, which implies that this action is relevant for the events that follow.

In addition to defining and redefining what an American national symbol is in modern times, the show also represents ways in which war affects the world after it is over. On a personal level, this largely concerns Barnes and his attempts to move on from his past as a soldier by making amends. As for the effects on society at large, displacement and forced migration are shown as major issues as are attempts to rebuild lives after being forcibly removed from them for several years. The international community beyond America is also shown to be participating in global efforts to rebuild after the war through the work of intergovernmental organizations. The Global Repatriation Council's (GRC) motto to "reset, restore, rebuild" seen in their in-universe promotional material invokes ideas of returning to normal, to how the world was before the Blip. But just as Captain America must change with

the times, it is implied that the GRC must better respond to the actual needs of the people it purports to help as its current efforts are shown to be ineffective. The GRC is even the specific target of the Flag Smashers who believe it promotes an outdated system and treats oppressed groups unfairly; a lot of the political coding for the organization matches up with anarchism - the Flag Smashers want open borders and the destruction of all forms of hierarchy. Although Wilson claims to be sympathetic to the cause, Morgenthau's increasingly violent methods which include murder and bombings inspire condemnation of the entire movement. More support is given to the idea of reformation than outright revolution as Wilson also criticizes the GRC for their policies and for making decisions about minority groups from a position of privilege but he does so with the goal of making them do better rather than changing their operations altogether. Morgenthau's way of changing the world is described as extremist and she is deemed to be radicalized. The question of how to deal with this divides Walker - who wants to arrest her - and Wilson - who wants to try convincing her that there are better ways of achieving her goals than violence.

The question of how to deal with a faction that has been radicalized is a relevant one in modern day America where increased political polarization has led many to adopt more extreme views. This division is visible in the ending of TFATWS as well - while Wilson has officially become Captain America (and the show stresses this by changing the end credits to Captain America and the Winter Soldier rather than The Falcon and the Winter Soldier), a rejected Walker is instead turned into US Agent by an as of yet unnamed agency interested in recruiting him. He is told that the world does not need a Captain America and that he will instead serve it better as US Agent. In the comics, US Agent serves as an anti-Captain America - although not an outright villain, his purpose is to be everything Captain America is not and thus affirm Captain America's position as the right one. What happens to him in the MCU remains to be seen. For now, the contrast between him and Wilson serves as a representation of a divided America.

5.1.6 Representative scene

One scene that sets the tone for how American involvement in conflict is represented in the Captain America franchise is the acceptance of Rogers' enlistment in CATFA, which starts around the 15-minute mark. The scene immediately preceding it shows Rogers and Barnes parting ways before Barnes is due to ship out; Rogers informs him that he will try to

enlist again and insists that it is his duty to serve the country. Unbeknownst to either of them, their conversation is overheard by Erskine who will be introduced in the analyzed scene.

The scene opens with a medium shot of a man in a lab coat packing away medical supplies while Rogers is seen in the background buttoning his shirt. The shot establishes the setting - Rogers is in a doctor's examination room having clearly just gone through a physical examination. Although the doctor is in the front, he stands to the far right of the shot while Rogers is centered, showing that Rogers is the focus. On the wall to Rogers' left is a poster with differently sized letters for vision assessment; it is at times partially hidden by the doctor as he moves at the front - it is, therefore, safe to assume that it only serves the purpose of establishing the location. On the wall to Rogers' right is a sign that reads "It is illegal to lie on your enlistment form." A nurse walks in, approaches the doctor, and whispers something unintelligible in his ear; he then turns to Rogers and instructs him to wait. Although the scene is not filmed from Rogers' point of view, he is here established as the focalizator for it - of the ambient sounds, the audience only hears what Rogers hears (which is nothing) and only knows what Rogers knows.

As the doctor walks out, the camera cuts to a close up shot of Rogers - he is alone now and with the setting established, the focus is now on his own personal thoughts and emotions. He turns and looks over his right shoulder; the focus of the camera shifts from the back of his head to the sign warning against lying on enlistment forms back to Rogers' face as he turns part way toward the camera again - the audience's attention is thus drawn to what Rogers is seeing. Rogers appears nervous, eyes darting around the room; he stands up quickly and starts putting on his shoes. The sound of a curtain opening and closing is heard and when Rogers looks up the camera cuts to what he sees: a military police officer standing at the entrance to the examination room. The shot comes from behind Rogers, showing the back of his head out of focus and framing the office from below. Combined with an ominous note that plays in the background, this creates a tense atmosphere - Rogers, who is the focalizator, is anxious, intimidated.

Erskine enters the room and dismisses the officer. He too is seen slightly from below as the camera is still positioned at Rogers' level, but the lack of music and Erskine's own appearance - bespectacled and dressed to resemble a college professor with a sweater vest and tweet jacket in warm earth tones - take away the nervous atmosphere. Erskine's first words to Rogers are: "So, you want to go overseas and kill some Nazis," delivered as he is

opens and skims a file in his hands (presumably Rogers' enlistment form). At Rogers'
confused response, he approaches with a hand reached out and introduces himself; Rogers
stands up and responds in kind. The camera, which had at the start of the shot been showing
Rogers' point of view moves up with him as he also enters the shot from the right and zooms
slightly in to a more close up shot of the two as they meet. This establishes a more intimate
connection between the two - Erskine is indicated to be more than a one-off appearance of a
doctor who will examine Rogers and dismiss his enlistment out of hand. Erskine moves away
from Rogers so that he stands next to the warning sign on the wall; this connects Erskine to
the sign, confirming what the audience already knows - that Erskine has found out Rogers is
lying on his enlistment forms. Rogers, who is only seen from the side and is kept out of
focus, inquires as to where Erskine is from. Erskine gives an address in New York, then
admits that he is originally from Germany and asks whether Rogers is bothered by this. The
camera focus on Erskine indicates that Rogers is also focused on Erskine - this particular part
of the exchange is about establishing Erskine's character and although Rogers is the first to
speak, his question only serves as an opening for the audience to learn more about the new
character. However, the camera cuts quickly to Rogers and back as he answers "No" to the
question of whether he is bothered by Erskine's German ancestry; although the shot of
Rogers is brief, he can be seen answering without hesitation and confidently shaking his
head. The audience is thus led to believe he is being honest. The implication is that
immigrants who contribute to society are accepted by America.

Erskine then asks where Rogers is from and starts reading out different locations in
New York from the file he had been reading. A cut of Rogers looking uncomfortable at being
found out is shown during Erskine's questioning but when he tries to interrupt, Erskine
informs him that he does not care so much about the lying - he is interested in the fact that
Rogers has tried to enlist so many times. He then repeats his initial question - "Do you want
to kill Nazis?" The repetition brings attention to the question; it has now been asked twice so
the answer must be important. Erskine moves closer as he asks it as well, bringing himself
and Rogers into the same shot. The camera films from behind Erskine as Rogers asks, "Is this
a test?" When Erskine answers in the affirmative, the camera cuts to a solo close up shot of
Rogers and then slowly zooms in on his face as he answers: "I don't want to kill anyone. I
don't like bullies, I don't care where they're from." The camerawork underlines the
importance of the line for Rogers' character - although the audience knows Erskine is there
and Rogers is answering his question, the framing makes it appear as a declarative statement

and the zoom on Rogers creates an even closer connection between the words and the character. After a brief pause, the camera cuts to a close up of Erskine looking proud; he says: "Well, there are already so many big men fighting this war. Maybe what we need now is a little guy." Two brief shots of Rogers are shown during Erskine's response - both show Rogers looking slightly upwards, moving incrementally forward. A hopeful note plays in the background and swells into a serious but positive melody as Erskine turns and exits the examination room. The next cut places the camera outside of the examination room as Erskine and Rogers are both seen leaving it - the hopeful atmosphere confirms Rogers has not just escaped punishment for his multiple enlistment forms but been accepted even before Erskine declares he can offer Rogers a chance. Rogers agrees immediately and his eagerness is shown in the way he quickly grabs his jacket and runs after Erskine.

Erskine approaches a desk outside the examination room and opens Rogers' file as he asks where Rogers is from. Characters are seen moving in the background - a doctor is showing another potential recruit into the room Erskine and Rogers have just vacated, other men are already in the waiting room, and a nurse is handing out enlistment forms. The recruitment thus continues without Erskine; that someone as seemingly important as Erskine dedicated so much attention to Rogers singles him out as different from other soldiers, indicating his exceptionalism early on. Erskine writes Rogers' address (Brooklyn) into his file and stamps it, then hands the file to Rogers and walks away after congratulating him on becoming a soldier. The camera cuts briefly to a close up shot of Rogers again; he is seen from the shoulders up against the backdrop of a neutral colored curtain.The audience is therefore invited again into Rogers' personal world. The next shot shows the file Erskine handed Rogers focusing in on a square section above which words "For stamp: 1A/4F" are legible; 1A is stamped at the center. This is a parallel to Rogers' first appearance on screen where a similar shot was used to show his rejection from the military. This time, he has been accepted; the hopeful music swells as the camera cuts to Rogers again. He is seen from below, looking down at the approved enlistment form; he smiles and looks up to the left. Rogers' position and the angle of the shot are evocative of hero statues. Rogers' body language and the atmosphere of the scene create a sense of achievement - he has attained his goal of joining in the service of his country. The scene ends.

The scene uses a combination of dialogue, camerawork, and music to establish one of the core characteristics of Rogers as a character: his motivation is justice, not killing. Rogers is also presented as different from others, exceptional enough to draw attention. Both of these

traits will be closely tied to the character for the duration of the franchise and are, therefore, extrapolated to the nation the character symbolizes.

5.2 What is the role of gender in conflict according to the Captain America franchise, how is it presented, and why?

5.2.1 Captain America: The First Avenger

Women's role in war is severely underplayed in CATFA. Only 4 female characters even have lines in the movie and only one of them, Peggy Carter, plays a role of any significance. The first woman we ever see on screen does not appear before the 9-minute mark at which point the audience is shown a young woman with styled hair and a full face of makeup crying while watching war propaganda (presumably because someone she cares about has either shipped off to war or has already died in it). Staying behind and mourning the men who have gone to war is, therefore, the first thing a woman is shown doing in relation to conflict. It will also be one of the last when Carter listens to Rogers as he lands the plane he is in in the Arctic. This, combined with the propaganda reel being played in the cinema during the scene which calls for able-bodied young men to join the war and stresses that even a young boy is helping the war effort, puts the role of women at a level of participation lower than that of children.

However, the movie does present another role women can play in war: entertainment. Women are shown as showgirls at Stark Expo and later as USO girls putting up patriotic plays meant to inspire those who can to sign up to serve and those who cannot to buy bonds that will finance the war. This role is seen as shameful for men - soldiers mock Rogers for participating in the charade, which is easily read as "real men" mocking a man who does not entirely fulfill expectations placed on men. The final formal role that women take in war is presented by Carter who appears almost 20 minutes into the movie as an agent of a civilian organization working with the military. Women are, therefore, completely excluded from military roles even when they are shown on the front lines. In fact, not even the idea of women in the military is entertained - the recruits are instead called "ladies" and "girls" as an insult. This is also not the only time that weakness is equated with femininity as the same comparison is drawn when Carter and Rogers are driving to his procedure; he describes obstacles he has faced due to his physical constitution and she compares that to her own experiences as a woman.

War and the military are, therefore, heavily masculine coded while entertainment, domesticity, and moral support are feminine. This plays heavily into the discourses about men's roles as protectors and women's roles as caretakers and homemakers.

5.2.2 Captain America: The Winter Soldier (2014)

Compared to CATFA, CATWS gives women a more direct role in conflict. Romanoff is the first woman to appear on screen - only 3 minutes into the movie and she is one of three prominent female characters in the movie, all of whom are agents of SHIELD. She is also immediately included in the same team as Rogers and participates in the planning and execution of the recovery mission on the Lemurian Star. She is, therefore, more included in the proceedings than Carter was in CATFA. However, women's contributions to conflict are different from the men's: all three of the women are connected to espionage and undercover work. This sets up the dichotomy of men as soldiers and women as spies as well as the difference in morality attributed to different genders: men have a moral compass while women cannot be trusted. Furthermore, although women are shown in combat, their prowess is somewhat undermined by the actions of the men around them - twice when Romanoff and Rogers are involved in a fight together must he save her and when Sharon Carter pulls a gun on Rumlow during the final battle sequence, she is quickly disarmed by him. Orders remain the domain of men - it is Rogers and Fury that make the decisions; Romanoff, Carter, and Hill only carry them out. Femininity is also sexualized; Romanoff especially is filmed from angles that emphasize her body not for its power but for its beauty and Sharon Carter's introduction in the movie (and the entire franchise) involves her flirting with Rogers.

While SHIELD as a governmental organization is not as heavily masculine coded as the military, conflict and decision making regarding conflict are still firmly male-dominated. Femininity, on the other hand, is specifically not linked with strength and power; rather, it is deceit and trickery that receive this coding. The division between men as soldiers and women as spies is a common thread throughout the franchise (TFATWS being the only installment that meaningfully deviates from this).

5.2.3 Captain America: Civil War (2016)

Much like CATWS, CACW does not exclude women from conflict in the same way CATFA does. But women's roles are once again different from men's. Men are still the ones making decisions and giving orders even with women present at the table during discussion

while women are only participants. This is justified along two lines: because women cannot be trusted to make decisions about morality and because women cannot be trusted with power. The first is evidenced in the continued connection of femininity to espionage (Sharon Carter even explicitly says that her aunt, Peggy Carter, was successful at "diplomacy and espionage", defining those as the roles available to women during a conflict) and the lack of female characters who stand their ground on the basis of moral conviction (Maximoff is still undecided on her moral philosophy as shown in her discussion about it with Rogers and Romanoff admits to choosing sides for practically rather then a firm belief). The second is shown through Maximoff's character - she is described as one of the most powerful superheroes on the planet, but she is the one to invite scrutiny by accidentally killing civilians during a mission, which causes Stark to even put her on house arrest to prevent further destruction.

It is, therefore, not just the decision making that belongs to men but the entire field of morality and ethics as well. This is not to say, however, that women do not have a role to play in conflict situations. Instead, women are meant to be a grounding influence on the men around them; without this, men spiral out of control as seen in the case of Stark and Zemo. They do this through family and emotional support. The home is thus once again gendered feminine while the public sphere is left to men.

5.2.4 Agent Carter (2015-2016)

AC does not so much show gender roles during conflict as after it. Male characters still outnumber women, but numerous women do have recurring roles. Women are shown in the workforce where they are relegated to service jobs, secretarial work, and entertainment - even Carter herself is mostly tasked with answering phones, filing, and making coffee by the men she works with. Despite having actively participated in the war effort, she is still disrespected at work; Thompson even explicitly tells her, "You're a woman, no one will ever consider you an equal". Much of her participation in ongoing conflict, whether she is doing it herself outside of her role in the SSR or on SSR's behest, is in covert operations and espionage, which is often women's purview in the MCU. It is evident that the expectation is for women to marry and start families - Carter is often asked by her female friends when she will start dating; the men in her life, however, are more prone to judging her for her presumed relationship with Rogers during the war and she must endure many snide comments

regarding this. Women are thus expected to have romantic relationships with men but only on socially acceptable terms of marriage; not for their own enjoyment.

The women who do marry, on the other hand, are expected to serve their husbands and help them achieve their dreams rather than pursuing their own goals - in season 2, Frost's husband's ambitions are given priority because she has been taught from childhood that women are not welcome in positions of power and exist to be beautiful and entertain instead. She unintentionally proves that women cannot be trusted with power when Zero Matter drives her insane.

But the multitude of female characters in AC means that although any one woman may be seen as representing her entire gender in-universe, the audience gets to see the world through Carter's eyes specifically. Carter serves, therefore, as the moral compass of the show as evidenced by Jarvis giving her the most important thing in Stark's collection - Rogers' blood - because she is the only one who can be trusted with it. Being a woman gives Carter, and by extension the audience, a different perspective than a man would have had: she is, for example, the only one to focus on the Leviathan training facilities rather than look for weapons and therefore the first one to discover what the Leviathan program really is. Still, despite her successes, men will be the ones to reap the benefits as Thompson gets credit for all of SSR's achievements.

There is, therefore, a clear division in roles accessible to men and to women - men control the public sphere while women are expected to serve and entertain them. To the extent that women participate in conflict, they do so through espionage and covert operations. Their power comes from weaponizing their femininity and sexuality while men's power comes from their position in society. Although overt stereotyping by make characters is condemned, Carter's solution to the unequal treatment she receives is not systemic; rather, she simply works harder to prove herself. The fact that she ultimately succeeds justifies this approach.

5.2.5 The Falcon and The Winter Soldier (2021)

TFATWS features at least five recurring female characters, the first of whom is Barnes' therapist who appears about halfway into the first episode; Wilson's sister appears in the same episode but even later. Although these two characters would seem to imply that women are once again relegated to being support characters and caretakers, the introduction

of Morgenthau in episode 2 proves that female characters are a lot more diverse in this show; the return of Sharon Carter and the introduction of one of the Dora Milaje only serves to further diversify the roles available to women.

It is true that the role of women during and after conflict according to TFATWS is to be caretakers. However, it is also to be the mastermind behind an underground trade network (Carter), a rebel leader (Morgenthau), or a highly ranked soldier (Ayo). Hence, women and men both play a wide variety of roles in conflict. The only domains that remain closed to women are politics and national symbolism. In the animated series *What If...?*, Steve Rogers is substituted for Peggy Carter; in an alternate universe in which Peggy Carter, who is a British woman, receives the supersoldier serum instead of Steve Rogers and dons a uniform and shield with Union Jack on it, she becomes Captain Carter rather than Captain Britain. This would support Schubart's conclusions about women not being used to represent a nation as heroes of war (Schubart, 2009). Morgenthau similarly does not stand in for any one nation despite being as much of a symbol to the Flag Smashers as Captain America is to Americans. Western military also remains heavily masculine coded as the Dora Milaje belong to the very specific Wakandan culture. Aside from this, however, there is not much stark division of labor based on gender in the show.

5.2.6 Representative scene

One scene that represents the way conflict is gendered in the Captain America franchise can be found around 28 minutes into CACW. The scene immediately prior to it comes from the parallel plot that follows the villain, Zemo; the previous scene in which the same characters are introduced to the idea of the Avengers operating under the guidance of the UN. The initiative came from the UN which has drafted the Sokovia Accords that would give them oversight over the operations of the Avengers. The characters are already divided on whether the Accords should be signed or not.

The scene opens with a close up shot of Rogers. He is reading what can safely be assumed to be the proposed Sokovia accords. Behind him and out of focus are Rhodes on the left side of the screen and Wilson on the right side of the screen. They are arguing. The camera cuts to Stark who is reclined on a sofa with a hand over his face as the argument continues in the background, the sound more muffled now. This establishes Rogers and Stark as the focus of the scene; although the arguments are coming from Rhodes and Wilson, the audience is made to focus on Rogers and Stark first. Rogers and Stark are both used as

focalizers as well - while the camera is on Rogers, Wilson and Rhodes who are standing right behind him can be heard clearly; once the camera is on Stark who is seated further away, the voices fade somewhat.

It is only then that the camera cuts to a medium shot of Rhodes as he is talking; Wilson is seen in the foreground but out of focus. Rhodes is arguing for signing the accords, appealing to the number of countries that have supported the draft. He mockingly dismisses Wilson's reluctance to sign before the camera cuts to a shot of Wilson with Rhodes in the foreground and out of focus as Wilson accuses Rhodes of "playing both sides". No other characters are seen in the shot, which leaves the impression that the two are the only ones participating in the conversation at the time. The dialogue appears to be a continuation of a conversation that was had off camera, while the narrative was focused on Zemo. The camera cuts briefly to Vision and Maximoff sitting together on the couch; Rogers can be seen out of focus in the foreground indicating that the audience is still observing from his perspective. Vision declares that he has an equation just as the camera cuts to a medium long shot showing Rogers sitting at the center and looking up from the document he is reading while Rhodes and Wilson stand behind him on either side. Centering Rogers indicates that although Rhodes and Wilson are the ones arguing, it is Rogers that Vision's argument is mostly directed at - because Rogers and Stark are established as the leaders of the group and as the opposite views on the matter, it is their opinions that matter most.

As Vision explains that the number of large-scale violent incidents in the world has risen since the appearance of superheroes, the camera shows him and Maximoff seated together on the couch. He is looking in the direction of the camera, addressing Rogers whose point of view has been adopted. She is looking at him, with her hands folded in her lap and her upper body facing him. The way they are seated together connects them and her position indicates submission. The camera zooms in on Vision slowly as he continues speaking. That Vision is addressing Rogers is then confirmed as the camera cuts to him to first show his reaction to Vision's argument, then response. The next shot of Vision is a medium shot with a zoom that turns it into a close up as he elaborates on his point. Here, he explicates one of the theses of the film: conflict breeds catastrophe. The focus is entirely on Vision and his words; there is no ambient noise of background music to interfere with his voice as he expresses support for UN oversight. The shot gives credence to the idea by framing Vision's statements as relevant and serious. Given that Rogers is the main character of the film and the film is in

the Captain America franchise, moral disagreements like this one would normally be immediately resolved in Rogers' favor but this scene shows that the opposing view will be given equal weight.

At the end of Vision's speech is the first time we see a female character speak in this scene. Romanoff's voice is heard as the camera cuts to a shot of Stark still reclined on the couch. She is calling his name but the words are distant in the same way that Rhodes and Wilson's were - Stark is therefore the focalizator again. The camera cuts to a close up of Romanoff as she asks for Stark's opinion. Rogers is briefly shown again as he declares Stark has already made up his mind. The camera cuts to Stark again as he responds; the shot follows behind him when he stands up and walks into the kitchen area, complaining of a headache. When he turns back toward the others gathered in the room, the shot changes: he is shown in a medium shot from the side and slightly from below as he uses his phone to show a holographic picture of a young black man and starts talking about him. The framing indicates that he is addressing the gathering now; his monologue is therefore interspersed with shots of the other characters. However, the first character whose reaction is shown is Rogers; Rogers' perspective is also the only one that changes the way Stark's voice sounds - the audience hears what Rogers hears but when the other characters are shown during Stark's speech, Stark's voice is heard clearly, the way Stark himself hears it. This indicates that the perspectives the audience is shown are those of Rogers and Stark even when other characters are on the screen. The two women who appear in the scene are shown in the same shot - Romanoff at the front and in focus, Maximoff in the back, sitting with her legs crossed on the sofa next to Vision. Wilson and Rhodes are each afforded their own shot.

It is only when Stark mentions Sokovia that Maximoff is first shown in focus. A close up on her face, with Vision's out of focus frame in the background, shows her looking away from Stark with tears in her eyes indicating not just sadness but also guilt - her powers had caused the destruction in Sokovia in Avengers: Age of Ultron.

Once Stark's speech is finished, there is a break in dialogue; several soft piano notes are heard as background noise as Rogers is shown in a close up shot looking down at the Accords in his lap. The camera cuts back to Stark in medium shot as he steps out from behind the kitchen bar and declares his support for the Accords. Vision's reaction is shown in a close up shot on his face; Romanoff's on the other hand is filmed in the same way as before - with her in the foreground of a shot that also includes Vision and Maximoff.

The discussion continues between Stark, Rogers, and Rhodes. Each is shown in a close up shot as they speak to each other before a wide shot shows Stark approaching the group gathered around the coffee table when the conversation becomes heated. As Rogers and Stark take over the conversation, Romanoff is briefly shown looking between them; the focalization does not change while the camera is on her nor does she interrupt the exchange.

It is when Stark suggests the UN may punish the actions of the Avengers that Maximoff speaks for the first time in the scene. She is shown in profile, with Vision and Rhodes sitting either side of her. She is looking up at Stark as she asks whether he means to imply she will be the one punished. Although she has already been established as the most powerful of the present characters, bar maybe Vision, she is (literally) looking up to Tony for guidance and Vision's response of "We will protect you" only solidifies her position as subservient to the men around her in a paternalistic way.

Romanoff's voice is heard off-camera saying, "Maybe Tony's right." The camera first cuts to a shocked Wilson and Stark, then to a close up of Romanoff as she suggests agreeing to oversight would at least give the Avengers some autonomy whereas being forced into it likely would not. Her explanation, that she is "reading the terrain", implies that her choice is made out of practical reasons rather than strong moral convictions that Stark and Rogers had been arguing for. As she speaks, Rogers is shown in closeup that zooms further in on his frowning face to indicate his disagreement. The prolonged focus on Rogers and the way the camera appears to approach him frames his reaction as more important than the neutral and interrupted close up shot of Romanoff as she is speaking. As Stark expresses surprise over Romanoff agreeing with him, the camera focuses once again on Rogers and the voices fade into the background when his phone vibrates. The camera focuses on the screen to show a text message that reads "She's gone. In her sleep." Rogers declares that he has to go and stands up; no other voices or ambient noise are heard in the background until the camera pans out to show all of the characters watching Rogers walk away at which point a somber melody starts. Rogers is then seen from above standing in a staircase with a hand rubbing at his face before the scene ends.

Despite the fact that the Sokovia Accords reference Maximoff's home country and were triggered by Maximoff's own mistake, she is given very little time or focus in the scene that discusses their benefits and drawbacks. The scene lasts a full four minutes. She only has one line and is in focus for a total of two shots. She never expresses an opinion either way -

the audience is left to interpret her emotions as guilt and fear. Whether she is in favor of signing the Accords or not is left unclear.

Romanoff gets more screen time in comparison to Maximoff and gets to speak more often. However, her role is contained to responses to the attitudes laid out by Rogers and Stark. To the extent that her opinion is expressed, it is not done confidently and she is not indicated to be addressing the room the way Stark is. In fact, the focus during her explanation is entirely on Rogers and before further elaborations can be made the scene ends abruptly when Rogers leaves.

The scene is presented through Rogers and Stark as focalizators and attention is mostly given to their arguments. Although most weight is given to Rogers' and Stark's opinions, Vision, Rhodes, and Wilson all get the opportunity to participate in the conversation and argue for the decision they see fit. The same is not afforded to Maximoff, who does not express an opinion, or Romanoff, who does so but with little conviction.

The exchange indicates that men's opinions on matters of oversight, security, and conflict are more important than those of women if women even have any opinions to express. Even in a situation where a woman's actions are the cause of conflict, she is relegated to the role of a child to be protected. Ultimately, this scene reflects the superhero world as a world of men.

5.3 Which masculinities and femininities does the Captain America franchise propagate?

It is evident that, with few exceptions, Captain America films and TV shows present the audience with a very clear picture of acceptable masculinity and femininity, both of which follow the dominant discourses about gender.

There is little doubt that CATFA propagates hegemonic masculinity. Men are almost universally shown as strong, smart, and capable - the only exception being Rogers himself prior to receiving the supersoldier serum. This, however, only emphasizes the importance of physical fitness for men: pre-serum, Rogers is picked on by men and ignored by women but post-serum, both men and women admire him. He is still the same man, just in a fitter body. Yet to become the hero of the movie, he must have the body the serum gives him; although his personality is a key factor in his selection for the program, he does not become Captain

America until he becomes taller, bigger, and stronger (in other words - manlier). The men who do not physically fit the same bill are often exceptional in other ways - Stark, for example, is intelligent and innovative. There is little room for deviance from the cis straight white male mold. One Black and one Asian man appear as named characters but only very briefly and there are no queer characters at all (in fact, men's sexual interest in women is emphasized multiple times - when Barnes insinuates it is a good thing Rogers will be one of the few men left behind in New York with the women; when Hodge comes onto Carter when he first meets her; when soldiers Rogers is performing for ask for the USO girls to come back instead). As men make up the vast majority of characters, they are also the ones making decisions and pushing the plot forward. The only female character of note, Carter, is a civilian agent and thus outranked by all male characters. There is, therefore, little representation for women at all in CATFA. The women who do appear on screen are universally feminine and attractive, always immaculately styled, well dressed, and perfectly made up. Their role is to support men - even when Carter participates in military action, she does so as a supporting character for Rogers.

CATWS continues in much the same vein despite giving Romanoff a more prominent and active role than Carter had in CATFA. Men are still in control of the domains of public policy and government-sanctioned violence, this time through SHIELD rather than the military. While women do work in these fields (Romanoff, Hill, and Sharon Carter are all SHIELD agents), they work for men whose orders they follow. If anything, this relation of male dominance in decision making is more prominent in CATWS where multiple female characters are shown in subservient positions. Despite working in physically demanding positions and being shown as good at what they do, all three women are still very feminine and conventionally attractive, which is made very evident by Rogers and Romanoff's first mission where they both wear tight uniforms that show off their bodies - Rogers' big and muscular and Romanoff's thin and feminine. The way the two are shot during the mission also differs; for Rogers the focus is on showing power while Romanoff is sexualized. Another fruitful comparison can be drawn between Romanoff and Barnes. Both characters have a backstory as villains with Romanoff working as a spy for the Soviet Union and Barnes as an assassin for Hydra and both were brainwashed into these roles. Although Romanoff has been a SHIELD agent in all her MCU appearances and has, therefore, demonstrably changed sides, her past is still held against her and Pierce implies that she will be seen differently if she releases information about her past to the public. On the other hand, Barnes is still under

Hydra control in CATWS, but his past is seen as an absolution; his bad deeds do not necessarily make him unredeemable even as he is still committing them. The biggest difference from CATFA, however, is the introduction of some diversity of masculinity: two prominent male characters are Black - Wilson and Fury - and both work under White men - Rogers and Pierce. This also affirms the discourse of hegemonic masculinity.

CACW once again brings attention to the importance of physicality for masculinity. While the focus is once again on Rogers as he is shown holding a helicopter back from flying away with nothing but his bare hands or impressing another superhero with nothing but his body, there is also a visible transformation in Barnes who becomes increasingly more muscular in every movie he appears in. The actor who portrays the character, Sebastian Stan, has actually discussed how working with men bigger and stronger than him had made him feel insecure and inspired him to bulk up (Larson, 2019). This shows that the glorification of hypermasculinity present throughout the MCU has an effect on the way real men perceive themselves as well. The theme of men as strong and stoic repeats itself - Rogers is even seen at Carter's funeral but still does not cry while mourning her. The emotions most commonly expressed by the male characters in CACW are anger and vengefulness - the entire final battle sequence is predicated on Stark being manipulated into wrathfully attacking Barnes to avenge his parents. The villain, Zemo, is the only one who stands out with somewhat feminine coding in a sea of hypermasculinity: between his fashion sense, manipulative character, emotion-driven decisions, and admiration for Rogers' beauty rather than strength, he could be read as queer if he had not already been given a wife and child. In contrast to the increased focus on strength in male superheroes, female characters continued to be sexualized even during battle scenes. Elisabeth Olsen, who plays Wanda Maximoff, has even admitted that she was expressly directed (albeit not in this particular movie) to focus on keeping her facial expressions pretty even while fighting (Joffe, 2019). It is clear, therefore, that this kind of representation of women is not accidental in the MCU. However, Olsen's character does not experience such overt sexualization in CACW; instead, she is treated as a child - Rogers even explicitly refers to her as "just a kid". She is established, in other MCU movies, as one of the most powerful superheroes in the world, but CACW makes it clear she cannot be trusted to control this power because she is a young woman. Although Barnes is also manipulated into killing people in the very same movie, his actions do not lead to infantilization in the same way as Maximoff's.

Unlike the other installments in the Captain America franchise, AC focuses on a woman as the lead character, which results in representations of femininity being more prominent than those of masculinity. However, this does not actually result in as much nuance or diversion from the norms set up by Captain America movies as one might expect. All female characters exhibit high degrees of femininity, mostly wearing skirts and dresses, almost always with visible makeup and perfectly styled hair. Many of them weaponize their femininity as well: Carter relies on being perceived as incapable of participating in conversations regarding security operations in order to gather information, Underwood deliberately plays up the image of a naive young girl in a big city to avoid suspicion, and Martinelli fakes crying knowing that the men around her will try to comfort her and therefore not notice Carter escaping them. In fact, there is a very literal show of weaponized femininity already in the first episode where Carter uses a poisonous lipstick to knock out a man she is trying to rob. In this way, femininity is also closely linked with sexuality. Carter repeatedly seduces men on her undercover operations when she needs to get close to them as does Underwood. When a woman's relationship with a male character is not sexualized, she is either his carer or taken care of by him - Carter, for example, acts as a caretaker toward Thompson when he suffers symptoms of post traumatic stress disorder during a mission they are on and Underwood's relationship with Fenhoff is that of a parent and child.

The sexualization of women, however, only applies to women who are conventionally attractive. In season 2, Rose receives a more prominent role but as a middle-aged woman who does not fit beauty standards, she is not sexualized even in her relationship which is kept chaste on-screen while Carter's relationship with Sousa, for example, ends with a passionate kiss. Her decision to stay in Los Angeles for him, however, undermines establishing her as independent from men in season 1, when she is shown letting go of Rogers for good at the end of the finale. In fact, despite the fact that the show outwardly condemns sexism by having Carter show up the men she works with precisely because they undervalue her, many of the female characters ultimately end up subservient to men. After Frost's mental breakdown, she still imagines herself with her husband and Ana Jarvis depends on her husband to tell her of her own infertility, something that is never addressed by the narrative.

Frost's descent into insanity is another way in which women are implied to be inferior to men: her ability to wield power through Zero Matter is what ultimately drives her mad, but it does not have this effect on Wilkes who is, therefore, seen as more mentally stable. This also somewhat confirms the idea that women cannot really be villains - Frost is only evil

because she is going insane. Although it appears that Underwood subverts this - she is, after all, a ruthless murderer who is repeatedly shown as having no mercy for her opponents - an argument can be made that she, too, was broken by the brainwashing she underwent in her childhood in preparation for the war. Underwood does, however, remain the character that most stands out in terms of representations of femininity. She is the only one who never shows real emotion toward men, does not act as a man's caretaker, and is not taken care of by a man either unless it is a part of a ploy. Her sexuality is also left ambiguous - although she has seduced Stark, it is her complicated relationship of admiration, lust, and imitation with Carter that is more relevant. For her deviance, Underwood is not narratively punished; she manages to not just survive being caught but also escape.

The men in AC are, expectedly, shown as a product of their time. They are traumatized by the war but repress their feelings as it is shameful to show anything other than strength and stoicism; narratively, this attitude is condemned - Thompson's redemption relies on his opening up to Carter about his trauma and the other men who do so (Sousa and Jarvis) are cast in a much more favorable light compared to the men who exhibit period-typical attitudes. Similarly, prejudice toward women is narratively punished - the men who do not see women as their equals regularly lose to them when conflict erupts. Because of the historical setting of the show, however, the condemnation of period-typical sexism and the favoring of characters such as Sousa and Jarvis who display more modern attitudes toward gender equality ends up as simply criticism of the 1940s rather than hegemonic masculinity.

TFATWS does not entertain the topic of sexism in the same way as AC; the focus of the show is a lot more on race issues in America. It still falls largely in line with the rest of the franchise in terms of representations of masculinity - all of the major male characters are still cis straight physically capable men who are shown to be strong and stoic. However, there is some nuance to this - Black men make up a much larger portion of the cast, to begin with. The narrative also relies on men being allowed to show vulnerability: Barnes' redemption arc from his past includes therapy, forgiveness, and admitting his wrongdoings without which he would not have had his own hero moment in the finale of the show. There is furthermore an emphasis on the necessity for companionship and community among men as Barnes and Wilson grow closer throughout the show and Wilson's role as a family man is not subjugated to his superhero storyline. There is even an implicit criticism of the previously established connection between hypermasculine bodies and strength and masculinity as Walker struggles to live up to what he believes Captain America should be and laments not being as strong, as

fast, and as capable as a supersoldier might be. The show does not present a unified understanding of femininity. Instead, female characters are diverse in both role and appearance. This is a departure from previous installments in the franchise.

5.4 Does the Captain America franchise challenge current discourses on gender in relation to conflict in any way?

How far the work deviates from hegemonic discourses on gender and conflict depends on the installment - there is an overall trend of improvement over time in the sense that gender representation becomes more varied and less rigidly hegemonic with newer installments and the TV shows vary from the norm more than the movies; interestingly, the TV shows also included more input from women behind the camera than the movies.

CATFA falls firmly in line with hegemonic perceptions of masculinity, femininity, and the intersection of gender with conflict. Male characters are far more prominent and play all the major roles including the hero and the villain. War is heavily tied to masculinity. Finally, Rogers' transformation from a weakling staying behind with the women to a buff supersoldier stresses the importance of physicality for manhood.

CATWS includes more prominent female characters who are more relevant to the plot, but this is ultimately only tokenistic representation. Decisions are still made by men while women play supporting roles. Although the leading female character, Romanoff, avoids falling into the trope of a love interest, she is nonetheless heavily sexualized and the movie's other prominent female character, Sharon Carter, does become a love interest eventually. Although both women are seen participating in conflict, their participation is different from the participation of men; their contributions are tied to deception, trickery, and espionage, a common theme throughout the franchise.

CACW's ensemble cast diminishes the screen time of all characters; with female characters heavily outnumbered, there is little space for nuance or development. All three prominent female characters play stereotypical roles - Sharon Carter as the love interest, Maximoff as a child to be protected, and Romanoff as a supportive caretaker. The plot focuses on male characters and the conflict between them, which gives them higher priority than the women who appear in the movie. The portrayal of masculinity is somewhat more nuanced with cultural variations of it shown through Zemo and T'Challa and men's dealings with trauma explicitly shown through Barnes and Zemo. These are, however, not enough to

challenge hegemonic discourse on gender and conflict - conflict is still men's space and men still conform to the expectations of appearance and behavior dictated by hegemonic masculinity.

AC is somewhat closer to questioning the hegemonic order as it centers a female character. Although women are still outnumbered on the screen, using Carter as a focalizator gives a different perspective in a genre that is heavily male-dominated. Men's perceptions of Carter are constantly challenged in-universe and dismissing her out of hand because she is a woman is explicitly shown as a mistake. However, she repeatedly plays into the stereotypes, thus giving them more credence and participating in her own oppression. Her insistence that knowing her own worth is more important than earning the respect of men dismisses the need for systemic change to rectify a systemic problem and affirms the individualistic attitude that if a woman works hard enough to prove herself, she will be treated as equal.

TFATWS makes the greatest strides toward equity on the screen. Although male characters still outnumber female ones and take up the majority of the screen time, multiple female characters do appear prominently in various roles - women appear as mothers but also as business owners, as spies but also as soldiers, as caretakers but also as warlords. Time is dedicated to fleshing out Morgenthau's motivations and showing her as more than a one-dimensional villain. The infantilization of Morgenthau is comparable to how Maximoff is treated in CACW; however, women are not sexualized and do not weaponize their femininity. There is some challenging of hegemonic understandings of masculinity as well, with both Barnes and Wilson shown as more emotional and vulnerable than one might expect in the superhero franchise. The show affirms both main character's sexuality as straight and plays into the importance of physicality to masculinity (in particular through Walker), but prioritizing Wilson and putting him in the role of Captain America at least questions whether the ideal American man must be White. Whether this is a sign of change for the franchise or just a one-off attempt at questioning hegemonic discourses remains to be seen.

5.5 Conclusion: the narratives of conflict and gender in the Captain America franchise as a whole

The Captain America franchise presents conflict in a generally negative light but justifies violence when it is used in a (supposedly) defensive or preventative manner, something that only a select few with a reliable moral compass, among them Captain

America, can be trusted with. Although the only movie set during a war, CATFA, avoids showing more than comic book violence, soldiers are seen captured, injured, and exhausted and some of the major characters - Barnes and Rogers - do not make it out alive. The consequences of war are better explored in AC, CATWS, and TFATWS. Here we see the physical (see Sousa, Rhodes, and Barnes for examples) and mental trauma (see Thompson, Rogers, and Barnes again for examples) that war inflicts on those who participate in it. Civilians are not exempt from this as TFATWS shows a migrant crisis following the war with Thanos. Even what would normally be a net positive byproduct of war - technological and scientific advances - is, in fact, negative as the supersoldier serum directly leads to the creation of villains in all installments following CATFA bar AC, where Stark's innovations are instead shown as being extremely dangerous with limited, if any, application. But it is not just war that is cast in a negative light - any conflict at all is termed "catastrophic" by Vision in CACW, an assessment which is proven right in the end as the conflict among the Avengers leads them to go their separate ways and even causes Rogers to abandon his role as Captain America, symbolizing that Captain America does not want to represent a divided nation. Conflict is also what leads Karli Morgenthau to become radicalized, turning her into a villain in TFATWS and ultimately killing her. Even conflicting personal goals - between duty to the country and love - set up by the double work/romance narrative common in action movies result in tragedy when Rogers sacrifices himself and leaves Carter behind in CATFA.

Consistently casting war in a negative light is at the very least beneficial for negative peace. Despite how much violence is shown on screens and how often interpersonal violence is used to achieve the heroes' goals, the consequences of war are understood to be undesirable and best avoided. In this worldview, it would then follow that avoiding war is for the best too. What is more problematic is the way the franchise treats violence and conflict more broadly.

Physical violence is a staple of the action/adventure and superhero genre and the Captain America franchise is no exception. The message it sends is that violence is a useful tool in the right hands - as long as it is used for the right reasons (typically to defend self or others) and by the right person (such as Captain America), it is justifiable. This justification extends beyond the individual. One cannot show that Captain America can be trusted with the use of violence without implying that America can be trusted with the use of violence. In fact, American interventionism is consistently justified through the character of Captain America - his goal is always to protect civilians and save lives, he always shows restraint in using

violence and focuses on defensive measures, and he is unlike others who claim to do the same because his motivation is never selfish and he is never corrupted by power; by extension, all this applies to what Captain America symbolizes as well. Therefore, American interventionism is also justified because America can be trusted to protect civilians, use violence sparingly, and intervene for the right reasons. In the end, (Captain) America is the hero that saves the day, even when he is doing it abroad and even when he is operating without oversight.

There is, on the other hand, no intervention in the field of systemic violence. The topic is taken up by the franchise multiple times (extensively in AC and TFATWS and to a much lesser extent in CATFA) and oppression particularly on the basis of sex and race is expressly condemned. However, the solutions offered are individual - Wilson will be a Black Captain America, but only because he has proven himself personally capable of carrying on that legacy; Carter will earn the respect of the men she works with, but she will earn it by working hard to prove herself and she will earn it only for herself.

Carter's run in the franchise is largely representative of how it genders conflict. She starts out as a fairly typical strong female character - she is the only woman in a male dominated space, physically capable without sacrificing her femininity, and without much character in the end. Her characterization becomes more nuanced with repeat appearances, moving her away from the strong female character trope. However, this does not help her escape the casting of women in stereotypical roles as either childish, caregivers, or love interests - she is in turns all of these (she is a love interest to Rogers and Sousa, a protective motherly figure to Thompson, and someone to be cared for and protected to Jarvis). She is undervalued and mistreated by the men she works with, reduced at work to a secretarial position, and must go against orders if she is to pursue the goals she believes just. This leads to her most commonly operating in the fields of espionage and undercover work, which is very much "a woman's role" in the franchise (other examples include Romanoff, Underwood, and Sharon Carter). Other professions which are feminine coded are those of caretakers (nurses and therapists typically) and wartime entertainment (as seen in CATFA). Women are further associated with the home and domesticity. Unsurprisingly, femininity is closely tied with sexualization and the only two characters who escape it altogether (in the Captain America franchise at least) are Maximoff and Morgenthau, who are infantilized instead. Most major female characters (with the exception of Maximoff) weaponize their femininity, typically using their sexuality to achieve their goals or relying on the perception of women as

weak and nonviolent to surprise their enemies and get the upper hand on them. When weaponized femininity is not offset by a more traditional role of a love interest or caretaker (as seen in the case of Carter), the woman often ends up the villain (Underwood and Frost being good examples). Although some individual representations go against common perceptions of women and their role in conflict, the franchise as a whole ultimately fails to meaningfully challenge hegemonic discourses on the topic.

Male characters still by far outnumber the female ones and receive a lot more screen time. Their representation is consequently more varied as well, but the leading characters the audience is supposed to sympathize with are almost universally examples of hegemonic masculinity - white, cis, straight, attractive, and physically capable, with traditional gentlemen (well spoken, well dressed, patronizing rather than sexist) favored. The public sphere, particularly politics and military, is still strongly associated with masculinity. The biggest challenge to hegemonic perceptions of masculinity comes from TFATWS, whose representation of gender is also overall farthest from hegemony - the women on the show are neither hyperfeminine nor sexualized, the men are more diverse with a much higher proportion of them being Black than in other installments in the franchise, and community and domesticity are not exclusively tied to the role of women.

Finally, an incompatibility in goals or values, which is how conflict is defined, cannot be avoided forever; conflict must instead be resolved or better yet, transformed. But if conflict is seen as universally negative, as the Captain America franchise portrays it, a productive transformation of it becomes unimaginable. Instead, it is implied that conflict always leads to violence which then leads to negative consequences. Adopting this worldview would be detrimental for conflict transformation efforts and attempts at peacebuilding after conflict.

6. CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to show how the representations of US involvement in conflict and the role of gender in it presented in the Captain America franchise are examples of cultural violence and perpetuate discourses that keep systems of oppression in place. The movies were found to support sedimented discourses to a greater degree than the TV shows and progress was especially evident in the latest installment of the franchise - TFATWS - but overall, the franchise fails to meaningfully challenge the established social order.

The thesis operates within the theoretical framework of discourse theory which assumes that discourses are wholly constitutive of social reality while also themselves being constituted by social reality. All social action is seen as participation in discursive construction of meanings, including the production and consumption of media such as superhero movies. The meanings of conflict, violence, and gender propagated by such media are, therefore, a part of discourse on those topics and can either affirm or challenge existing perceptions. Influential media such as the Marvel Cinematic Universe broadcasts its messages to large numbers of people so its narratives surrounding conflict and gender have the potential to be particularly powerful. In order to understand how the discourses on conflict and gender are influenced by pop culture, the Captain America franchise was analyzed using the methods of narratology and neoformalism with the aim of answering how the role of US in conflict is represented and how conflict is gendered in the MCU. According to the reviewed literature on the topic, such questions have not previously been explored from the perspective of peace studies.

The findings indicate that the Captain America franchise largely presents conflict of any kind in a negative light and precludes the idea of a productive transformation of conflict, focusing instead on how conflict can be resolved through violence. American interventionism is seen as a possible solution and justified as benevolent. The character of Captain America, who serves as a symbol of the country, is presented as a morally infallible savior and protector whose goals are to save lives, protect civilians, and prevent further harm; the violence he himself commits is only in service of those goals. Conflict is further strongly gendered in a way that presents decision making as a male domain - politics and military action are heavily masculine-coded while femininity is tied to the home. To the extent that women are seen in conflict, they are typically involved in espionage where they can weaponize their femininity and sexuality to achieve their goals. Hegemonic discourses of

both masculinity and femininity are upheld for the majority of the franchise; while there is some variation in Agent Carter and The Falcon and The Winter Soldier, this does not significantly challenge the established hegemony. The likely explanation for this is that social criticism would not pay off. MCU has previously been guided by what is most profitable; it is not hard to imagine that the portrayal of the US, conflict, and gender is also shaped by profit concerns.

The representations of conflict and gender found in the Captain America franchise are, therefore, reflective of the dominant discourses surrounding conflict and gender. As such, they will serve to further sediment those discourses and naturalize the meanings they establish. A naturalization of the discourses presented in the Captain America franchise would enable continued cultural violence along several axes of oppression, including sex, gender, race, and political power. In terms of gender, the Captain America franchise leaves little room for non-White, queer, or gender non-conforming women and the role of women in conflict is highly limited. In terms of the relationship between the US and conflict, American hegemony is supported and consent is manufactured for American interventionism specifically, which would maintain the unequal relations of power in the international sphere that currently benefit the US and its allies far more than other countries. Finally, peace is in these discourses an afterthought; implementing active peacebuilding strategies is unimaginable when even systemic change is dismissed out of hand. Negative peace is seen as a positive outcome but positive peace is not even entertained - instead, the onus is on the individual to achieve their own happiness within the system as it is. Adopting these views and allowing them to go unchallenged would eventually limit options for resistance as such action would be seen as out of the realm of possibility.

This is not to say that MCU movies cannot or should not be watched. The meanings encoded in them will, after all, only predispose their reading without predetermining them. It is possible to see the Captain America franchise critically and reject the meanings it propagates partially or even wholly. Exploring to what extent the dominant meanings of the franchise were adopted by its audience was outside of the scope of this thesis, but further research should focus on that. Furthermore, questions should be raised regarding the representation of the interplay of conflict, peace, and gender in other installments in the MCU, which may propagate different meanings entirely. Race is another topic that can be explored further as the recent works of the franchise have focused more on the topic.

In conclusion, for all its potential, the Captain America franchise as a part of the MCU cannot be counted on to meaningfully challenge the status quo established by hegemonic discourses. Instead, it continues to perpetuate structural violence and justify direct violence through its representation, thus committing cultural violence itself. However, as evidenced by the increasingly more nuanced portrayal of gender and the increasingly more critical stance toward public policy, it does seem to reflect changes in discourse as these become more prominent. If the discourses surrounding conflict, gender, and their intersection evolve, it is likely that future installments in the MCU will serve to sediment the new meanings. However, discourses surrounding conflict and gender would first need to be challenged in other arenas.

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