



“How Desperate Are You, That You Call on Such Lost Creatures to Defend You?”:
Exploring how the MCU Establishes and Challenges the Cinematic Archetypes of
Masculinity of Earth’s Mightiest Heroes.

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Abstract

The field of superhero studies is a fast-growing and evolving one that has grown rapidly over the past decade although relatively little attention has been paid to the depiction of masculinity on screen within superhero films. This thesis proposes that established cinematic archetypes of masculinity were central to many of the Phase One and Phase Two MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) films and aims to explore how these were used through an in-depth exploration of said cinematic archetypes in the form of detailed textual analysis and character study. Focusing predominantly on the characters of Tony Stark/Iron Man, Steve Rogers/Captain America and Thor, this work will explore how the different cinematic archetypes of masculinity such as the lone gunslinger, the World War Two soldier and the hard-bodied hero are established and challenged throughout the eight films this thesis is focusing on, starting with their first introduction into the MCU. As this work will explore, each character is introduced as embodying a depiction of an older cinematic archetype of masculinity from previously established Hollywood genres. Through this portrayal, the narrative goes on to challenge. Phase One of the MCU, as this thesis will demonstrate, establishes how these cinematic archetypes of masculinity are introduced in each character and evaluates the merits of an embodiment of these cinematic archetypes through the struggles the hero must overcome. Phase Two films attempt to challenge and interrogate these cinematic archetypes of masculinity by examining how these depictions of cinematic archetypes of masculinity work in relation to each other as well as in isolation. This thesis aims to provide an in depth critical exploration of cinematic archetypes of masculinity within the first two phases of the the MCU, highlighting the integral role that such forms play in introducing and developing the selected characters at the start of what would become an immensely successful shared cinematic universe of films.

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Abbreviations

Unless indicated otherwise all Marvel films discussed as the focus of this thesis will be referred to by the following abbreviations after their first mention within this thesis. All other film titles not in this list will be referred to be the full title name throughout the work.

IM – Iron Man

IM2 – Iron Man 2

IM3 – Iron Man 3

T:TDW – Thor: The Dark World

CA:TFA – Captain America: The First Avenger

CA:TWS – Captain America: The Winter Soldier

AA – Avengers Assemble

A:AOU – Avengers: Age of Ultron

In addition, the franchise of the Marvel Cinematic Universe will also be abbreviated throughout this thesis to the following:

MCU – Marvel Cinematic Universe

Introduction

Since 2001, the superhero genre has grown substantially in popularity and has forged a place for itself in Hollywood cinema. No longer is it simply considered a sub-genre of the action film, but rather the superhero genre now stands as its own legitimate set of films. In the past twenty years there has been over 70 superhero films released to cinemas (not including films currently in production or planned for the future) (Brown, J.A. 2017. 31). Superheroes are dominating our screens and “in short, superheroes are having their greatest moment in [the] Hollywood spotlight and in the American imagination. In characteristically hyperbolic comic book terms, the twenty-first century is a new golden age for superheroes” (Brown, J.A. 2017. 2). With cinematic Hollywood blockbusters such as *Watchmen* (2009), *Wonder Woman* (2017) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), and televisual superhero shows like *Arrow* (2012-2020), *Daredevil* (2015-2018) and *Titans* (2018-2023), the allure of the superhero story cannot be denied.

The Marvel Cinematic Universe – or as it is more commonly abbreviated the MCU – started in 2008 with Marvel Studios first film, *Iron Man (IM)* (2008). From the success of this first film starring Robert Downey Jr in the titular role, the MCU moved to create one of the biggest and most recognisable franchises today. The MCU, based on the Marvel Comics, offers a plethora of characters and storylines to explore on screen. This allowed the studio to develop a vast story world and interconnecting narratives in a way that has influenced the superhero genre for years to come. It is common knowledge that “studios are not just slating sequels anymore. They are scheduling entire franchise runs and setting premiere dates several years in the future before production even begins. It is no secret that the superhero film is a booming business with an endless stream of fans” (Yogerst, C. 2017. 1). The MCU, helmed by President of the Studios, Kevin Feige created a franchise that has so far spanned 11 years, 22 movies and several spin off television shows such as *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013-2020) and *The Defenders*

(2017). The MCU's success has grown over the years with more movies slated to be released in the future, enticing not just hardcore comic book fans but also offering a point of entry into the universe for regular movie-goers as well.

CEO of Walt Disney, Bob Iger has stated:

We had huge expectations for Marvel when we acquired it, but what the MCU Kevin and his team have built goes beyond anything we could have imagined. They have redefined superheroes for a new era, greatly expanding their relevance across gender, generation, and geography – setting new standards for compelling storytelling. This kind of creative success is never an accident; it's the result of talent, vision, passion and courage. (Iger, B qtd in Lang, B. 2019. Online).

Not only has the MCU proved to be an important milestone in Hollywood cinema but it's also crucial in its accomplishments within the superhero genre, a genre that has become reinvigorated in the last 15 years. Brown goes so far as to suggest the last several years alone have been responsible for making superhero movies a legitimate genre of its own, rather than being seen as a subgenre of the fantasy/action/science fiction genres. He believes, "while the superhero has been around in its original comic book form since Superman was first published in 1938, the live action superhero has only become a legitimate genre in the last 15 years" (Brown, J. 2017. 3). There is no denying the surge in popularity of the superhero film in recent years with the MCU dominating cinemas and box offices and DC Comics attempting to recreate Marvel's success with their own Entertainment Universe with films such as *Superman vs Batman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) and *Justice League* (2017) and other comic book adaptations from Image Comics and Valiant such as the Netflix film, *The Old Guard* (2020).

The MCU currently spans three completed phases (aptly named Phase One, Phase Two and Phase Three) which consist of five to six films in each phase that explore solo hero outings as well as bigger team-up movies. Within these three phases, Iron Man/Tony Stark, Captain

America/Steve Rogers, and Thor are the three central heroes that have the highest number of appearances in the MCU to date. Each has their own solo trilogy as well as a central role in the four Avengers' team-up films and often have cameo roles in other MCU films as well therefore these three characters arguably experience the greatest sense of development and therefore warrant further exploration within this thesis, with their stories now concluded at the end of Phase Three (although Thor will still be present in Phase Four for another outing of his character).

For the purpose of this thesis and the focus in exploring how cinematic archetypes of masculinity are established and challenged within the MCU, this work will closely examine Phases One and Two. The reason for this is due to the focus on how these three central characters progress throughout the course of their films within the franchise and as a result, it is logical to chart that progress in chronological order. Furthermore, Phases One and Two not only introduce these characters to new audiences but also offer an interesting insight into the development of the MCU as a creative property and a business model. As this thesis will explore, this becomes an important point of consideration into the portrayal of cinematic archetypes of masculinity within this franchise, and specifically the core characters of Iron Man, Captain America and Thor. It is also worth noting that the focus on Phases One and Two of the MCU allow for potential future work within this topic exploring the subsequent Phases of the MCU as it continues to expand both its diegesis and the storylines of these characters.

Cinematic Archetypes of Masculinity

This thesis is particularly interested in the embodiment of masculinities within the MCU and its three main heroes of Phase One and Phase Two through the lens of different cinematic archetypes embodied by each character. The importance of cinematic archetypes in Hollywood film has been established by scholars such as Elizabeth Abele in her work on the Home Front Hero archetype. Abele argues the importance of cinematic archetypes lie in their

“optionality”, introducing different embodiments of masculinity in screen. As she suggests, “these “options” [allow] for innovation, particularly for modelling heroic paths that are emotionally healthy for American men” (Abele, E. 2013. 8). For the purpose of this work, the aspect of cinematic archetypes most relevant to this undertaking, and therefore the main focus of this thesis, refers to the embodiment of an older archetype that serves as a representation of masculinity in Hollywood cinema specifically. These embodiments often, but not always, aligns with particular trends in different genres such as the Western or the Action film. The MCU uses these cinematic archetypes of masculinity (those embodiments of masculinity that are often seen as common tropes across different film genres such as the cowboy in a western film or the soldier in a war movie) as a way to establish a traditional Hollywood masculinity for these characters initially within these films in order to then challenge them as the MCU progresses into Phase Two.

Cinematic archetypes in Hollywood such as the cowboy in the western film, the soldier in the war film and even the action man of the 1980s cinema all embody different versions of masculinity. There are a few common traits they all share such as favouring brute strength, bravery and stoicism however, how these traits are depicted within the respective genres are all different in the way they engage with these traits on screen. In short, these depictions of masculinity are complex and multi-faceted, as this thesis will go on to explore. The MCU is very influenced by these cinematic archetypes of masculinity according to previous Hollywood depictions, perhaps as a way to represent lesser-known superhero characters in a way that is familiar to audiences in order to make the films more successful upon release and garner a bigger audience.

As this work will focus on cinematic archetypes of masculinity, the genres these masculinities are indebted to are as heavily masculine-dominated genres. The superhero genre itself can also be considered as dealing predominantly with masculinity, “in many ways superhero films

are Westerns with special effects and capes. And like Westerns, they maintain and reinforce specific patterns of masculinity, American exceptionalism, and the notion that violence solves problems” (Kvaran, K. 2017. 222). The key cinematic archetypes of masculinity this thesis is concerned with are the lone gunslinger in the Western, the World War Two soldier in the pre-1980’s War film and the hard-bodied action hero in the action movie (of the 1980s). All these archetypes have proven to be popular in Hollywood cinema, similarly to the way the superhero genre is now. There is an established influence between these genres as the Western and the war film influenced the development of the US Action film from the 1980s onwards. They all share common traits assigned to masculinity, creating a trend in how Hollywood masculinity has developed over the years with the “strength, bravery, resourcefulness, and resilience associated with the white male heroes of Westerns and war films feeding the later development of the Hollywood action film” (Tasker, Y. 2016. 116). Each genre and archetype predate the superhero genre and as such offers interesting insight into how discussions of masculinity have changed – or remained the same – throughout Hollywood cinema.

The Western is a genre that encompasses many different types of subgenres such as the Spaghetti Western, the Revisionist Western and the Traditional Western. The genre contains many tropes that are interchangeable between subgenres such as the figure of the cowboy or the use of the white hat to mark a character as a good guy and a black hat to identify a character as an antagonist. Westerns are an inherently masculine genre, often following (white) male characters on their journey and as a result:

At the core of the Western then we find a limited set of possibilities around the performance of (white) masculinity which are themselves bound up with a specific, almost Hegelian, understanding of American history as, precisely, the self-unfolding of white male subjectivity in any event, centrally situated within it are such principles as personal autonomy, the determinacy of (especially individual) actions, and the

problematic yet not irreconcilable affinity of the individual with the large community and, ultimately, with the state. (Langford, B. 2003. n/p).

The Western concerns itself with issues of masculinity, representing such masculinity on screen for audiences and as such provides a space for masculinity to be performed and interrogated. As this thesis is primarily focused on representations of cinematic archetypes of masculinity, the Western is a crucial point of comparison, particularly of the character of Tony Stark who himself operates as a lone gunslinger as this work will demonstrate.

Another genre of Hollywood cinema that concerns itself with depictions of masculinity is the war film, another series of films that heavily features male characters and depictions of masculinity. As with the Western, the war film (predominantly the pre-1980s war film) includes many different subgenres such as the platoon film, the escape film and the epic. All of these subgenres are marked by depictions of masculinity, and as with the Western, these depictions of masculinity influence other genres such as the superhero genre and the MCU's approach to military masculinity. Shields suggests that "the military rebuilds or reframes masculinities as a means of meeting the aims of militarization and in the process tends to promote hyper-masculine values and behaviours, such as strength, toughness, stoicism, aggressiveness, and an exaggerated heterosexuality" (Shields, D.M. 2016. 65). The archetype of the soldier offers a different depiction of masculinity to the lone gunslinger of the Westerns, however both offer a traditional masculinity that prioritises strength and bravery.

The action film, and the hard-bodied hero is a much more contemporary example of masculinity in Hollywood, having gained in popularity in the 1980s however, this genre changed the depiction of masculinity with an emphasis on violence and brute strength in a way that was more extreme than genres like the Western and the war films made before the 1980s included. The superhero genre continues this tradition of exploring themes of

masculinity as these predecessors have done with the MCU tackling discussions of cinematic archetypes of masculinity. While the link between the action film, the war film and the Western has been established, this thesis will demonstrate how the superhero film is also indebted to those genres and offers a continuation of the demonstration of masculinity depicted:

The genres' characteristic scenes of action, endurance, and violence offer iconic images of male strength and resilience which elaborate an idealised masculinity. Male mobility is a central trope of all three genres, one which repeatedly couples physical movement or scenes of action with themes of independence. (Tasker, Y. 2016. 111).

The superhero genre, as demonstrated with many films including those in the MCU, offer the same images of male strength and resilience as this thesis will explore but it will be argued that the MCU takes this further, offering an interrogation of this masculinity and whether these cinematic archetypes of masculinity are still present in these films and how this affects the characters.

A Starting Point

This thesis aims to draw on previous work from many established and well-regarded scholars including Jeffrey A. Brown and Terence McSweeney, in particular their research on the contemporary superhero genre with publications such as *The Modern Superhero in Film and Television* (2016) and *Avengers Assemble! Critical Perspectives on the Marvel Cinematic Universe* (2018). Both Brown and McSweeney write about the MCU extensively in their work, approaching this in different ways. Brown focuses on the figure of the superhero in film and television, of which the MCU plays a large role, as Brown explores the notions of heroism and heroic victims in the post-9/11 landscape of Hollywood superhero cinema and how this relates to the depiction of masculinity on screen. As Brown suggests, "the superhero's version of white heterosexual masculinity [is] noble and self-sacrificing" (Brown, J.A. 2016. 119). During

his work, Brown makes reference to the masculinity found in many of these superhero properties more broadly therefore doesn't consider this in terms of cinematic archetypes as this isn't the sole focus on his work and as a result, there is no in-depth analysis of these masculinities specifically in the way this thesis will explore. McSweeney focuses solely on the MCU films and offers a comprehensive overview of the different ways these films can be read. He focuses on a variety of different angles including gender, race, the use of music and the time and place of the production. McSweeney also makes suggestions about American exceptionalism and the importance of the superhero narrative in perpetuating these ideas including through the depictions of masculinity that can be found in such films. He concludes that, "[the superhero narrative] offers us powerful individual fantasies about who we could be: stronger, faster, more virile and more attractive..." (McSweeney, T. 2018. 19). Whilst this thesis is solely concerned with the depiction of masculinity on screen, McSweeney's work did inspire the format of this thesis and a starting point of charting the progression of cinematic archetypes of masculinity in chronological order throughout the first two phases to offer the most comprehensive exploration of this topic.

It is important to mention to role of seriality in the MCU and therefore acknowledge the influence the MCU's specific model of storytelling has on the reading of these films and therefore, this thesis. Whilst seriality is not the focus, the serial nature of MCU storytelling that connects a plethora of films and characters together into a shared universe does affect the ability of these films to chronical the journey and progression of cinematic archetypes as argued within this thesis. Seriality is described as:

The serial narration of chapter-plays builds an ongoing narrative across multiple installments, the film series develops new adventures around recurring characters within explicitly self-contained episodic structures that exhibit less narrative continuity

from one film to the next. Individual episodes may be very similar, but each instance establishes and resolves a specific narrative intrigue... (Krunik, F. Loock, K. 2018. 1).

The MCU employs this model of storytelling on a grand cinematic scale, drawing over twenty-two films into an epic conclusion that spans a decade of cinematic releases (and a few televisual ones). As Beaty suggests, “This storytelling strategy, arguably the most innovative development in Hollywood filmmaking of the past quarter century, has been borrowed directly from comic book publishing strategies developed originally in the 1960s” (Beaty, B. 2016. 319). It is only through this innovative storytelling – that has since influenced many other franchises – that this thesis is able to chart the progress of cinematic archetypes of masculinity in these character over the course of several films. While it could be argued that the superhero genre lends itself to such seriality in its storytelling, both indebted to the comic book format as well as the nature of the genre having, “an endless cycle of beginnings and endings. Despite their linear chronology, the limits of each narrative are thus seen as a threshold to (re)enter a circular temporality, rather than as a way to get out of it” (Pagello, F. 2017. 743), this thesis takes the use of seriality in the MCU as a stable foundation in which to explore the representation of cinematic archetypes for a sustained period on screen across multiple films.

In addition to work on superheroes and the MCU, this thesis also draws on explorations on the depictions of masculinity on screen including the work of Yvonne Tasker. *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (1993) offers an in-depth examination of the white male characters central to the Action genre of the 1980s, charting key tropes important to the genre and how these depictions on masculinity can be seen as both powerful and hysterical. Tasker unravels the complexities and pleasures of the Action genre through both a cinematic and a political lens. This work informed the exploration of the hard-bodied hero throughout this

thesis, in particular with the character of Thor, providing a theoretical underpinning to the analysis of the depiction of the hard-bodied hero within the MCU.

Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema (1992) edited by Cohan and Hark as well as *Contemporary Hollywood Masculinities: Gender, Genre and Politics* (2011) edited by Ford and Krimmer offer invaluable insights into the depiction of masculinity on screen that this thesis utilises in the discussion of cinematic archetypes depicted within the MCU. Cohan and Hark explore different depictions of masculinity in Hollywood cinema throughout their collected chapters, charting how these different masculinities became popular over time and the ways in which these masculinities are represented through different genres. Their work examines the problematic status of masculinity in Hollywood cinema and with regards to feminist film theory. Whilst this thesis isn't delving into feminist film theory beyond the scope of the discussion into masculinity, it does relate to the depiction of masculinity on screen and the idea Cohan and Hark draw upon that suggests, "battles, fights and duels of all kinds are concerned with struggles of 'will and strength', 'victory and defeat', between individual men and/or groups of men" (Cohen, S. Hark, I.R. 1992. 16). As such, the work collected in this publication is a relevant overview into the depiction of masculinity on screen that considers different genres as this thesis will attempt.

Ford and Krimmer take a different angle to exploring the depictions of masculinity in Hollywood cinema, identifying key trends within the different genres with an emphasis on heroic masculinities and what they deem to be "redeemer" or "saviour" films. These films allow men to prove their masculinity is heroic through acts of sacrifice for the greater good. This notion is something this thesis aims to discuss in relation to the superhero genre and Ford and Krimmer acknowledge the genre as part of their discussion, categorizing their focus as "redeemer films, that is, films about superheroes and saviours who risk their lives for the sake of a city, a nation, or all of humankind" (Ford, S. Krimmer, E. 2011. 110). This work focuses on

the Hollywood blockbuster films from 1992 to 2008 offering a more current discussion on the depiction of masculinity on screen, however it doesn't offer an up-to-date exploration of the superhero genre or the MCU films specifically as this thesis intends to do.

Elizabeth Abele's work on the home Front Heroes archetype offers one of the most recent texts exploring cinematic archetypes of screen. This is a topic that offers relatively little scholarly work to date but Abele's book, *Home Front Heroes: The Rise New Hollywood Archetype, 1988-1999* (2013) contextualises the importance of identifying and understanding cinematic archetypes on screen as well as charting an in-depth analysis on the archetype of the Home Front Hero between the 1980s hard-bodied hero and the 1990's response to it in Hollywood cinema with insight into political tensions in America at the time. As Abele comments:

The depiction of the male hero in American popular culture has followed a particularly winding road, including such detours as the hysterical glorification of American manhood in the 1950s, the dark cynicism of post-Vietnam/post-Watergate America in the 1970s, and the reactionary recuperation of victory during the Reagan era. The common theme of these widely disparate texts is determining a man's true responsibility to society, his family and himself. (Abele, E. 2013. 5).

Abele's work focuses on the single archetype she identifies, mapping this archetype onto many different protagonists within Hollywood cinema over the course of a decade. Whilst this thesis is considering multiple archetypes, Abele's examination of cinematic archetypes in general through the lens of political and societal factors is a good starting point for understanding the origins of a cinematic archetype and the ways in which it can evolve over time.

It's worth noting that while there hasn't been a large body of work collected on the superhero genre and the depiction of masculinity on screen specifically (especially not within the MCU to date although this is growing rapidly), there has been a few key journal articles of note that do

attempt to address this gap in scholarship. Kvaran explores Batman as a central figure for an article on superhero films embracing hypermasculinity and the presence of violence on screen suggesting, “superhero films have gone from masculine to hyper-masculine through the notion that violence is necessary and danger exciting” (Kvaran, K. 2017. 234). This thesis will consider the use of violence as part of the larger discussion into how cinematic archetype of masculinity have been depicted on screen even though this is not the central focus of the discussion. Building on this, Mullens also explores the use of violence specifically in *AA* in order to explore the superhero body and the position of humanity, the post-human and trauma within the narrative. This work provides an interesting reading of the film, although not one that is necessarily relevant to the work this thesis aims to complete. Despite this, this does highlight the gap this thesis aims to fill within superhero scholar as an in-depth analysis of the depiction of cinematic archetypes of masculinity within the MCU and its central characters over the first two phases.

Over the course of its inception, this thesis explored the use of several different theoretical underpinnings to help ground the work on cinematic archetypes of masculinity within the MCU. The most obvious of these being trauma theory, as this thesis explores the way trauma is used in relation to establishing these cinematic archetypes. However, through revisions it became apparent that the inclusion of trauma theory took the thesis in a direction that didn't align with the main focus of the work and as a result it was a conscious decision not to include a stronger theoretical underpinning to this work besides that of representations of masculinity on screen. Whilst trauma theory is a fascinating field that offers some insights into this discussion as evidenced through the work, it was the intention when writing to focus on the aspect of film and the representations of cinematic archetypes depicted within the MCU rather than debate previously established arguments within the realm of trauma theory in relation to the characters of Iron Man, Captain America and Thor. This choice ultimately allows for the originality of the work to become the focus of the discussion, adding a strength in

demonstrating the way this thesis contributes new knowledge to the field of superhero studies.

Methodology

Section One of this thesis will focus on how the characters of Iron Man, Thor and Captain America embody specific cinematic archetypes of Hollywood masculinity in the MCU Phase One films in order to later attempt to challenge this depiction of masculinity in the later Phase Two films (which will be covered by section two of this thesis). This first section looks at the main characters of the MCU with regards to these cinematic archetypes of masculinity in order to suggest that each character is introduced in the franchise as embodying a particular of a cinematic archetype of masculinity. It is only through the hardship (both internal and physical) each character undergoes within the films that this masculinity is challenged and from there allows the MCU the chance to explore the future of heroic masculinity within its titular heroes.

In order to establish and explore how the cinematic archetypes of masculinity for each character evolve over the course of the first two Phases of the MCU, this thesis will offer in-depth explorations of the characters through the narrative coupled with textual analysis and critical readings of key scenes to chart the progression and development of these cinematic archetypes in chronological order. The reason for choosing this method of critical analysis is, as Abbott suggests when discussing science fiction films, that “film[s] will often deliberately pause to allow the audience to enjoy the dramatic reveal of both the object of wonder and the special effects that created it” (Abbott, S. 2009. 470). These scenes within the MCU tend to emphasize the impressive feats of the hero to the point that even the hero’s body is an object of wonder, therefore offering a textual analysis of key scenes will allow this thesis to explore how cinematic archetypes of masculinity are being established and/or challenged in moments of struggle and triumphant for the character.

The first chapter will look at the character of Iron Man/Tony Stark in both *IM* and *Iron Man 2* (*IM2*) to explore whether Stark's masculinity changes after enduring trauma within the film. After enduring trauma, this chapter will explore whether Stark's masculinity fails him in dealing with the aftermath of his suffering and as the resulting influence this might have on his depiction of lone gunslinger masculinity, one that prioritises solidarity and strength as influenced by the lone gunslinger archetype found in several traditional Western films. This chapter will examine how *IM* takes influence from the western genre of Hollywood cinema and how this allows the narrative to depict Stark in this role as a way to challenge this type of masculinity over the course of the first two films.

The next chapter will focus on the character of Thor and examine how the MCU attempts to establish the cinematic archetype of the hard bodied hero, made popular in the action films of the 1980s that depicted many of their heroes as strong and stoic, their bodies cultivated to become weapons, a place to endure pain and suffering and ultimately triumph over it. This chapter will explore whether there is a connection between Thor's masculinity and the issue of worthiness which the film places a large importance on, and therefore what this might suggest about his depiction of masculinity within the narrative. This chapter will chart the depiction of Thor as an embodiment of the 1980s hard-bodied hero and the complications of trying to depiction a cinematic archetype of masculinity that closely aligns with the tropes of the superhero genre.

The third chapter will study the character of Captain America/Steve Rogers and analyse whether Rogers's issues of masculinity are conflicted throughout the film due to his dual persona as Captain America – the superhero – and Steve Rogers – the soldier. The character of Captain America originates in the era of the World War Two soldier therefore this is the particular version of the pre-1980's War film most directly linked to this character. Rogers, this chapter will examine, seems to embody a soldier masculinity within the first film, favouring the

collective over the individual as a key trait of this. This draws influence from the war film, in particular the cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier and attempts to negotiate issues of this embodiment of masculinity through Rogers's trauma over the course of the film. This chapter will explore whether the idea that Rogers conflicted dual identity might lead to issues of depicting his masculinity and the consequences this could have for that depiction of masculinity.

The closing chapter of this first section of the thesis will look at *Avengers Assemble* and explore whether bringing all of these characters together affects their characters and their masculinity. This chapter will look at how the MCU presents the notion that to suffer through hardships is evidence of the character's humanity and brings together these characters as a way of exploring whether salvation can be found through the team they form in this film. This chapter will also explore how this works to set up Phase Two to explore newer embodiments of masculinity for these characters, ones that are capable of coping with adversities but also in relation and coexistence with other masculinities.

Overall, Section One of this thesis aims to explore how the MCU utilises established cinematic archetypes of masculinity within its central characters of Iron Man, Thor, and Captain America. Over the course of its Phase One films these chapters aim to chart how through both a personal and a collective representation of internal conflict these depictions of masculinity are formed. This will then lead onto section two to explore how these cinematic archetypes evolve.

The first chapter of section two focuses on *Iron Man 3 (IM3)*, exploring whether Stark's embodiment of the lone gunslinger has changed in the wake of his struggles after the previous films to resemble an archetype of masculinity that aligns with the revisionist western lone gunslinger compared to the more traditional western that Stark seemed to emulate in his previous films. The chapter explores how Stark's depiction of PTSD and anxiety work in the

narrative to interrogate the effectiveness of his cinematic archetype when exposed to such internal conflict and whether this masculinity is still considered heroic through his suffering.

Thor: The Dark World (T:TDW) presents Thor as a fantasy action hero and this chapter will explore whether the film is able to deconstruct this cinematic archetype while still adhering to the conventions of the superhero genre and the complications that arise in the narrative as a result of this.

Following on from that, this thesis will look at *Captain America: The Winter Soldier (CA:TWS)* and examine whether Rogers's World War Two soldier archetype can function in the contemporary setting of Washington DC. This chapter will examine the focus of the narrative to follow the conventions of the political thriller and how the film manages to use those conventions to interrogate Rogers's soldier masculinity.

The final chapter of this these concludes with *Avengers: Age of Ultron (A:AOU)*, and explores how these masculinities can work in relation to each other, taking a different approach to Avengers Assemble when deciding which masculinity – if any – is the one best suited for heroism. This chapter uses the allegory of monsters and monstrosity to present each of these characters as flawed in different ways, all related to their cinematic archetypes of masculinity to explore whether their masculinity is a hinderance when it comes to saving the day.

Overall, this thesis aims to be an exploration of how cinematic archetypes of masculinity are established and interrogated within the first two phases of the MCU within the three core characters of Iron Man, Captain America and Thor. It aims to offer an in-depth analysis of how these cinematic archetypes of masculinity work, both in isolation and relation to each other and offer an insight into how the MCU views these discussions of masculinity, forming new research into how cinematic archetypes of masculinity work within the MCU and how this

discussion makes commentary on the topic of representations of masculinity within the superhero genre.

1.1: “You Want to Do This Whole Lone Gunslinger Act and it’s Unnecessary. You Don’t Have to Do This Alone”: Inciting Masculine Change through the Cinematic Archetype of the Lone Gunslinger in *Iron Man* and *Iron Man 2*.

IM became the first flagship film of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), swiftly followed by its sequel *IM2* a few years later. These films establish a recurring cinematic motif for the MCU that is present in many of the subsequent films in the franchise, presenting the MCU male superheroes through the use of cinematic archetypes of masculinity in order to set up certain ideals and notions of masculine heroism which the franchise will then attempt to challenge in Phase Two (as this thesis goes on to demonstrate in Section Two). Superhero films “offer stories of masculinization, of growing up, changing one’s life, standing up for one’s ideals and beliefs. In doing so, they define what it means to be a man, a hero, and a leader” (Ford, S. Krimmer, E. 2011. 109). The MCU employs several different cinematic archetypes such as the lone gunslinger within its main titular heroes in order to adhere with comic lore and backstory as well as present these heroes as embodying a very specific type of cinematic masculinity in Phase One. In the case of *IM*’s Tony Stark (played by Robert Downey Jr) there is a clear parallel between the hero and the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger as this chapter will explore, focusing on key scenes throughout the first two films to argue that Stark is embodying the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger, an archetype that originated from the traditional Western film genre. It’s important to note that *IM* was a commercial risk for the studio, a result of the character being one of a select few ‘minor’ characters the studio still held the rights for. Iron Man was a relatively unknown character outside of comic book fandom compared to the likes of Spider-Man (at the time owned exclusively by Sony) and as such the Western, as an established cinematic genre of masculinity might have been a useful tool to help the MCU present him in a way mainstream audiences could understand and connect to.

The term 'cowboy' is broad (Bandy, M.L. 2012. Pp. 16-17) and encompasses many different iterations including the Spaghetti Western figure such as Clint Eastwood's The Man with No Name from *A Fistful of Dollars* (1964) and *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (1966) who's antihero was known for his classic Stetson hat, poncho and was portrayed as the 'strong, silent type' where he spoke very little and found work as a bounty hunter. There is also the type of cowboy invoked in the comedy westerns such as *They Call Me Trinity* (1970) where the main character is a lazy gunfighter who has a remarkable skill with a pistol. For the purposes of this chapter and the character of Tony Stark the focus is on the lone gunslinger type of cowboy, found in films like *Pale Rider* (1985). These narratives often incorporate the story of a lone gunman coming to a small town and serving justice. It is important for this discussion to note that while the lone gunslinger archetype originates in the Western, it's not exclusively a Western archetype. Hollywood cinema has often adopted such an archetype across different contemporary films such as *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Blade Runner* (1982) and even more recently, *The Dark Tower* (2017). The superhero lends itself to the parallel of a lone gunslinger archetype with:

The monomythic superhero distinguished by disguised origins, pure motivations, a redemptive task, and extraordinary powers. He originates outside the community he is called to save, in those exceptional instances when he resides therein, the superhero plays the role of the idealistic loner. (Lawrence, J.S. Jewett, R. 2002. 47).

As this chapter will demonstrate through Stark's characterisation the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger is a recurring one in the first two *IM* films where issues of this cinematic archetype of masculinity are interrogated and deconstructed in favour of a cinematic archetype encompassing the collective as superior. The Western often shows "characteristic scenes of action, endurance, and violence offering iconic images of male strength and resilience which elaborate an idealized masculinity" (Tasker, Y. 2016. 111). The superhero film

and the Western share many commonalities through the portrayal of action, violence and depiction of heroes/anti-heroes, making the lone gunslinger a key cinematic archetype of masculinity to incorporate into Stark's character. Both genres lend themselves to discussions of masculinity as both are heavily male dominated genres (Brown, J.A. 2017. 71)) and therefore the use of the cinematic lone gunslinger archetype for Stark allows the MCU to comment on depictions of heroic masculinity and expand upon them in later instalments of the franchise.

This first chapter focuses on *IM* and *IM2*, looking at the titular character of Tony Stark/Iron Man in order to explore how *IM* sets up Stark's masculinity through the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger. Using sustained textual analysis of the film, this chapter will argue that Stark embodies the lone gunslinger in his depiction of heroism, referencing how this archetype is established for Stark throughout these films and whether this embodiment offers Stark a masculinity that is progressive or regressive in the aftermath of trauma. Trauma is a crucial part of the superhero origin story (Packer, S. 2010. 10) and Iron Man uses it as the central conflict that affects Stark's embodiment of the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger. *IM*, as this chapter will explore, works to show how traditional cinematic archetypes that depict the lone gunslinger can be effected by traumatic events, leading to *IM2* challenging the notions of "superior" white masculinity (that Stark embodies in the form of the lone gunslinger) in order to suggest that a shift in Stark's masculinity needs to occur in order for him to successfully embody his heroic potential and become a fully-fledged superhero in an attempt to move beyond his lone gunslinger archetype.

Establishing a Cinematic Archetype of Masculinity

IM tells the story of Tony Stark, a self-entitled genius and weapons manufacturer who ends up getting kidnapped by a terrorist cell known as the 'Ten Rings' in Afghanistan and being forced to fight for his own survival. He creates a technologically enhanced suit from arc reactor

technology that allows him to escape and once free he sets about using his suit to hunt down and destroy his own weapons, trying to save the world from their destruction. From the start of *IM*, audiences see Stark embody his father's ideas of legacy as CEO of Stark Industries (a company his father founded that mass-produces weapons for the US), continuing on from his father's work, and by extension trying to embody Howard's traditional notions of masculinity. This idea of legacy is intrinsically linked to the use of violence to achieve one's aims and secure victory, invoking the cinematic figure of the lone gunslinger who often uses the idea of redemptive violence to achieve his goals and protect the innocent. The use of redemptive violence places an "emphasis on violent regeneration echoing the masculinist logic of warrior cultures, in which men earn authority and prove their worth through acts of aggression and physical force" (King, C.S. 2011. 30). The cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger uses violence that is deemed necessary to protect citizens from larger conflict and the MCU favours a similar approach with *IM*. Men earn respect and power from violence, or their connection to violent pursuits (as with Howard Stark's weapons company) however that violence is a combative technique to ensure safety and must always be seen as redemptive and/or necessary for the protection of others.

The start of this film sets up an ethos for Stark's character – inherited from Howard – of 'might makes right'. A conviction that violence is the way to solve the problem. It's an ethos that is employed in many cinematic genres including the Western, the role of the cowboy often taking on an occupation of bounty hunter or lawmaker as a justification for his violence to achieve his aims such as in *Shane* (1953) or *Hard Bounty* (1995) but also taken to the extreme in the 1980s action films (themselves, descendants of the Western) where the heroes blow up, shoot up or generally beat up their antagonist as a way to secure justice and save the day such as in *Commando* (1985) and *Die Hard* (1988). These films use violence to secure victory, which is the motivation of selling weapons to the US in the form of terrorist deterrents in *IM*. Stark will only question this belief after his own form of torture in Afghanistan that forces him to

reconsider Howard's idea of masculinity and therefore question whether might actually does make right. While the superhero genre frequently depicts its central characters as using violence to secure victory, the MCU notably presents the use of violence as defensive rather than reactive and these heroes are willing to fight but only as a last resort. This is a conscious decision made by the MCU to portray these heroes in a particular way that can be encoded as heroic. A journey Stark himself will discover over the course of the *IM* franchise but also continue to discover in the subsequent *Avengers* films.

Howard's form of violence is seen as pre-emptive, he has strategically built weapons in order to defend his homestead (America) from possible future attacks. Stark's violence only occurs after violence is done to him when he is captured and tortured in Afghanistan, portraying Stark as a lone gunslinger, using that 'might makes right' attitude in retaliation to the violence that has already been committed by the enemy. This is a common trope of the lone gunslinger cinematic archetype, as seen in many Westerns such as *Dirty Harry* (1971) in which a dirty cop starts serving his own violent justice when the law fails to do so, and *Death Wish* (1974) where the death of his wife at the hands of violent muggers prompts a man to turn vigilante, saving his community through a string of 'righteous' killings. He lures criminals out of hiding in order to serve justice after the police fail to be of much help in catching them. The lone gunslinger character often acts in pursuit of violent justice suggesting that the Western frontier "tended to attract men who saw violence as a way of asserting manhood... Honour being thus a major part of masculinity; and honour necessitated violence" (Moore, J.M. 2014. 32). Violence is used by the lone gunslinger to restore justice to a lawless environment, a reactive display of manhood rather than a pre-emptive strike and it's this type of violence Stark displays.

Unlike the lone gunslinger, Stark's weapon is technology rather than an actual gun and instead of riding a horse, he builds himself a suit capable of flight. Stark is the embodiment of the 21st century lone gunslinger, reimagined for a new generation, but the notion and circumstances of

violent engagement have remained the same. While the Western started off with “fighting with fists in the eighteenth century [that quickly] turned into fighting with guns in the nineteenth” (Moore, J.M. 2014. 35), Stark’s lone gunslinger doesn’t need bullets when he can shoot a repulsor blast from his hand, further upgrading the depiction of the lone gunslinger for a newer audience to align with the technologically charged era of the superhero. Stark never actually punches any of his enemies in *IM*, always using the suit and its technology to do the work for him. The superhero has upgraded the lone gunslinger further, using the trauma endured by Stark as motivation for the embodiment of the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger in response to the violence committed against him. The trauma of being captured and tortured is needed in the narrative as an explanation for Stark’s own violence, allowing him to serve as the reluctant vigilante forced to serve justice when no one else is able to therefore aligning Stark’s motivations with those of the lone gunslingers often depicted in the Western genre.

Stark’s kidnap and the scenes that follow directly establish his trauma to the audience and challenge Stark’s own ideas of legacy and mortality as he spends months held hostage in a cave in Afghanistan before planning his own escape. These scenes form a continuation from the opening scenes of the film that see Stark’s convoy ambushed in the Afghanistan desert and the character wounded and bleeding before being taken hostage. This hostage scene completely changes Stark’s view on the world and on himself and in doing so allows the audiences to as well. The MCU uses instances of trauma to engage and challenge the cinematic archetypes being embodied by these heroes. For example, Stark’s embodiment of the lone gunslinger is only challenged after he endures this trauma, offering a critique of the lone gunslinger archetype due to its inability to successfully deal with the aftermath of Stark’s trauma.

Both the superhero genre and the Western share a similar emphasis on the importance of violence and often depict a character's rise to violence as a result of trauma (e.g. losing a loved one to violence or having violence done to them), therefore trauma works within the MCU as a device in which to challenge Stark's cinematic archetype. This moment of trauma Stark experiences as he is held hostage is the first time Stark's traditional masculinity, the type of masculinity that aligns with Howard's ideals of pre-emptive violence, is challenged. He appears weak and vulnerable in a way masculinity isn't commonly depicted as being on screen (Eagan-Chamberlin, S.M. 2012. 361), especially not in the Western where men settle disputes with their fists or their guns and rarely talk about their feelings such as in *Stagecoach* (1939) or *Joshua* (1976). The Western often chooses to focus on the violence of these characters rather than the aftermath of that violence. What stands out most about these scenes in *IM* are how different they are to the rest of the film, they are dark and gritty in terms of mise-en-scene when compared with the brightly lit, playful, and technologically charged scenes that make up the rest of the film. These cave shots are a juxtaposition from the rest of the film, jarring and unnerving in a deliberate attempt to create a sense of discomfort for the audience. This highlights this scene as a crucial moment in which Stark's cinematic archetype is established.

This sequence starts off with blurred quick cuts of Stark's operation in the cave, nothing is in focus but the images of blood, surgical gloves and Stark screaming on a makeshift bed. The audience has an overhead shot of his pain as well as close ups of the operation taking place as Stark struggles. These scenes are like something belonging to a body horror movie and are meant to make the audience uncomfortable whilst watching Stark's trauma. When he wakes up, he's hooked up to a car battery and again the camera opens up with a shot looking down at him, this places Stark in a vulnerable and submissive position to the audience, he is no longer the man from earlier, neatly dressed and in control of every situation. He rips at his bandage savagely, the material breaking away like webbing to reveal the first image of the battery in his chest, it's a close up shot with iconography resembling something akin to *Alien*

(1979), a foreign body literally jutting out of his chest. The focus on the trauma Stark's body has endured serves as a reminder that "Tony's altered body is a production of his own history that marks him with an open wound, a trauma reminding him of a fragility of existence, transforming him both externally and internally" (Stefanopoulou, E. 2017. 25). These close-up shots are intimate and personal, inviting the audience to witness Stark's trauma as he experiences it, they can see the panic on his face and the disgust at this foreign object in his chest. This is a moment he can't forget; he wears the marks on his chest as a constant reminder of this trauma. His body has been changed permanently by this, and so has Stark. The vulnerability of Stark in the wake of this trauma isn't immediately presented as heroic. He's the victim. His more traditional form of masculinity, that relies on the idea of violence to solve any problem, in the wake of his trauma leaves him in a position of fragility proving its futility. *IM* focuses on the trauma Stark endures aligning with the notion that "in a way, traditional Westerns are depictions of the very acts that will later become trauma" (Cloutier, J.C. 2012. n/p). Whilst the Westerns often neglect the aftermath of the trauma endured by their main gunslinger, *IM* doesn't shy away from it and in doing so allows the narrative to challenge the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger that Stark is embodying. This depiction of trauma serves two purposes. The first, as previously stated works as a motivation for Stark to fully embody his lone gunslinger archetype, embracing reactionary violence as a means of justice. The second comes from the aftermath of that violence and how Stark will continue to reconcile the trauma he endured with the cinematic masculinity he is embodying that is not equipped at coping with that trauma. Focusing on the first purpose for this scene, Stark gains a moment of realisation that he must use the materials he has been given to build his company's weapons of mass destruction to secure his own freedom. For the first time in this film, Stark follows his own agency, in designing and building the Iron Man suit, and from that manages to gain his freedom, therefore using his embodiment of the lone gunslinger to enact his violent escape and serve justice against his captors.

This moment of freedom is treated as a rebirth, Iron Man emerges from the darkness of the cave into the bright light of the desert (almost like a child being born into the world only in this context it also represents Stark's rejection of his father's legacy and a signifier of his own survival after his trauma), destroying his weapons before flying away to freedom. This rebirth signals not only Iron Man's creation but also Stark's own rebirth from his old ways, represented in the literal change of heart that has been replaced by the arc reactor. Superhero films tend to favour "the need for an enhanced masculinity... also visible in the fact that our heroes tend to be either sub- or superhuman" (Ford, S. Krimmer, E. 2011. 110). What emerges from that cave is a metal suit of armour, crude in its appearance of rigid edges welded together and emotionless from the armoured face plate, almost inhuman in appearance.

The Co-Dependency between Stark and his Armour

Stark's rebirth from the cave is reminiscent of *Robocop* (1987) and the titular character's own rebirth into a cyborg. Robocop, similarly to Stark, embodies a form of the cinematic lone gunslinger archetype. The film follows a cop called Murphy (Peter Weller) in futuristic Detroit who is violently murdered by criminals before being revived by a megacorporation as a cyborg law enforcer to lead a brutal campaign against crime in the city. Much like with Iron Man, it is violent action that creates Robocop and leads to a newly found purpose in fighting crime. Both titular characters are humans that have been cybernetically altered in some way (Stark's heart made from the arc reactor, Robocop has been operated on to replace much of his human body with a cyborg one). Like the Western gunslingers before them, both characters act as lone gunslingers in their pursuit of crime through violence. Interestingly, both Iron Man and Robocop get scenes in which their moment of rebirth are documented, further suggesting that trauma is a crucial part of the embodiment of the lone gunslinger archetype. Murphy's operation is a series of close-up shots, traumatic flashbacks to his own brutal death and first-person point-of-view shots in an attempt to convey the trauma at a personal level for the

audience in a very similar manner to Stark's own operation in the cave in Afghanistan. The similarities continue as Robocop is revealed to his old Detroit precinct much like Stark's emergence from the cave in his armour. Both are encased in metal; all traces of humanity are gone in the wake of their trauma and newly altered bodies and both characters then go on to demonstrate their skills in combat and violence. Stark burns down the supplies of his captors and Murphy shows off his shooting skills at the gun range. Both these heroes have a moment of rebirth in their respective films in the wake of their trauma allowing them not only to briefly embody a sense of post-humanism (in terms of bodily alterations) but more importantly, this allows them to lean heavily into their embodiment of the lone gunslinger cinematic archetype as a figure that is grounded in violence, offering these characters a moment of victory, aligning them with the Western gunslingers who managed to bring peace to a lawless town through violence.

Therefore, the creation of the Iron Man suit is a direct result of Stark's vulnerability. The suit is his means of escape and survival and once back in America, Stark seems to form a co-dependency on the suit as a result. In *IM2*, during a senate hearing in which Stark is trying to convince everyone that Iron Man isn't a weapon but a prosthesis and as such he doesn't need to hand it over to the authorities, audiences see the extent of this co-dependent relationship. Stark tells the room, "I am Iron Man. The suit and I are one." This suggests Stark sees the suit as an extension of himself rather than a piece of armour. This is the thing that ensured his survival and represents his ideal self, a self that is stronger (superhuman) and less breakable than Tony Stark actually is. He cannot even think about giving it up. The Iron Man suit is a weapon – despite Stark's insistence otherwise – and he's co-dependency on it highlights his embodiment of masculinity favouring brute force as a way to solve his problems. The suit is akin to a gun with Stark in the position of the lone gunslinger. Much like Murphy's Robocop or Clint Eastwood's Will Munny in *Unforgiven* (1992), Stark also carries a weapon that gives him the means to protect and serve justice. The Iron Man armour gives him power in the wake of

his vulnerability in Afghanistan, allowing him to reclaim his masculinity through his capability of violent retribution. The MCU challenges this within the narrative though, especially through Stark's co-dependency with the suit (which is a plot point featured in both *IM* and *IM2*), suggesting it's an unhealthy coping mechanism.

Stark refuses to let anyone else have access to the suit (even Rhodes has to steal it from him) but he also neglects to tell anyone else he is dying in *IM2* and acts as a lone gunslinger figure positioned as the only person who can save the world. Interestingly it's Stark's reluctance to seek support from his friends that emphasises just how much he needs them in the wake of his trauma in the Middle East. This provides evidence that this lone gunslinger cinematic archetype Stark is currently embodying doesn't make him heroic. This will be further interrogated as these films continue to build to the Avengers team up and the idea of co-operation through the inclusion of the supporting characters such as Rhodes. In *IM2*, while Stark attempts to hide his illness with protein shakes and ultimately trying to ignore the diagnosis, he ends up needing help from his friends more frequently. When the core of his arc reactor burns out and needs replacing, it is Rhodes who helps him, reminding Stark of how much he needs a support system. Similarly, he relies on Pepper Potts to run his company for him in his stead, even making her CEO giving him more time to spend working on the arc reactor technology and finding a solution to the palladium poisoning he is dying of.

However, having Iron Man embody a cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger does allow the narrative to challenge this version of particular embodiment as "Iron Man only exists because of technological progress. He demonstrates the potentiality of the technological frontier" (Robinson, A. 2018. Pp. 836). Stark's weapon is technology rather than a gun, his bullets are repulsor blasts powered by the arc reactor. Through his trauma Stark has entered a state of technological superiority and has become a pioneer of that new frontier through his creation of the Iron Man suit to which his co-dependency manifests, following a similar

trajectory to films like *Robocop*. This cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger is an attempt by Stark to prove he is still strong, powerful and in control after the events of his suffering. He embodies this archetype of masculinity as he tries to navigate his own issues of dealing with his pain. The film shows this to be a flawed embodiment of masculinity through the co-dependency Stark has with the Iron Man suit (something that will change in *IM3* when the suit is treated as a separate entity rather than as a part of Stark himself).

The Lone Gunslinger and Heroism

This lone gunslinger iconography reoccurs in *IM* very prominently when Stark goes to Gulmeria to destroy his weapons and rescue the village of faceless innocents there. He arrives as the lone gunslinger arriving to clean up a lawless town, a close up of his armoured hand at his side drawing on the familiar image from older Hollywood westerns such as *High Noon* (1952). Stark is being positioned as “the cowboy western [providing] an archetypal template for cleansing little villages beset by vicious evildoers” (Lawrence, J.S. Jewett, R. 2002. 89). This further emphasises the idea that Iron Man represents Stark’s ideal self, after liberating a village he is a hero and finally after becoming Iron Man he can make a positive change to the legacy Howard left for him (as weapons dealer on the black market) by destroying his weapons and defeating the Ten Rings. Stark is fulfilling the archetype of the white saviour in this scene, the white man coming into a foreign town in the hopes of liberating it, a trope seen in many Westerns including *The Magnificent Seven* (2016). This image of the lone gunslinger also serves as a reminder of the isolating nature of Stark’s trauma. He stands alone, back in the Middle East in a similar location to which his torture took place, only this time the outcome is different. Stark is almost invincible as he destroys both his weapons and the threat, allowing the vulnerable and submissive people of Gulmeria to serve their own justice on their tormentor and take back control much like Stark is doing.

This sequence demonstrates that if Stark is to become a hero, he must learn to empower others rather than replicating the behaviour of the lone gunslinger. This scene is the first time Stark is saving someone other than himself encoding this display of violence as heroic because it serves the community rather than the individual. Stark's lone gunslinger archetype is similar to the cowboy figures seen in films such as *Shane*. In this film, the central character is Shane (Alan Ladd), who arrives in an isolated valley where a group of rogues are harassing the villagers to force them out of their settlement. Shane is soon embroiled into the conflict and ends up going head-to-head with the rogues in order to secure victory and liberate the village from their tyranny. Stark is also placed as this reluctant hero figure; his only real motivation is to destroy the weapons stolen from his company by the Ten Rings because he feels responsible for creating them in the first place. Stark has little desire (as far as the narrative suggests) to become a hero yet he is drawn into that life in a similar instance to Shane. In the end, both Stark and Shane end up defending their respective 'towns' from the outlaws, linking their acts of heroism with their lone gunslinger archetype. Stark not only takes back control from his tormentors in this scene but he also starts his journey of heroism with an impressive display of his technology that can identify victim from terrorist, so no innocent lives are lost. This is a key moment in the film that portrays Stark's cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger explicitly but also draws on parallels from the older Western gunslinger tropes in order to demonstrate Stark's embodiment of this cinematic archetype. This is needed before the MCU can actively challenge and engage with how that cinematic archetype works in relation to Stark's role as a superhero.

This scene in Gulmeria is a moment of triumph for him; a triumph that can only be secured with the aid of Stark's new post-human technologically armoured body¹. Iron Man allows Stark to act, giving him the means to hunt down the Ten Rings and later on to defeat Stane in the

¹ Post-human in the sense that Stark's body has been physical altered by the arc reactor technology in his chest that powers the Iron Man suit.

final fight scene of the first film. Iron Man gives Stark power as a cure to his previous vulnerable (human) state whilst he endured trauma and he has almost seemed to transcend humanity in his metal suit of armour that can shoot arc reactor repulsor blasts out of his palms, powered by a heart of technology. *IM* demonstrates that Stark's "heroism awakens when, following his traumatic experience in Afghanistan, he begins applying the skills that make him a creative genius" (Zaidan, S. 2018. 94). Tony Stark believes that Iron Man, being his ideal self, is where his heroism comes from. Stark's ideal self is powerful, invincible, and capable of protecting him against external threats. All of these are demonstrated within the scene in Gulmeria where Stark is triumphant over the antagonists, the Iron Man suit securing his victory. He created the suit using scrap metal in a cave before making the improvements to it after his freedom and this therefore positions Iron Man not only as an extension of Stark in his eyes but also a reward for his trauma. Iron Man represents a (superhuman) lone gunslinger, something the MCU will later subvert by framing Tony Stark as the hero rather than Iron Man (see chapter 2.1). Whilst trauma is key to the embodiment of Stark's cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger, it also acts as a conflict to such an embodiment. The MCU suggests masculinity is only heroic if it is progressive enough to show the protagonist dealing with the aftermath of their trauma in a healthy way. Having established this lone gunslinger cinematic archetype, the narrative then seems to move to interrogating how this embodiment works in the aftermath of Stark's vulnerability.

The films of the MCU favour heroic masculinity - a masculinity that puts the collective over the individual - as the preferred embodiment of cinematic masculinity within the franchise and one that is able to deal with the ramifications of enduring trauma. In order for Stark's embodiment of the lone gunslinger archetype to be a favourable embodiment of masculinity, it must be able to incorporate the needs of the collective over the needs of the individual. The lone gunslinger archetype Stark embodies after creating the Iron Man suit brings him closer to that idea of heroism in this Gulmeria scene as it allows him to return to the site of his trauma,

rewriting it with a better outcome thanks to the aid of the Iron Man armour. The use of the cinematic archetype of lone gunslinger in this way allows:

Hollywood film... to recuperate threatened hegemonic masculinities through an arc of crisis, recuperation, and resolution. Such protagonist arcs are evident both in individual films and across particular genres, and particularly so in the conspicuous melodrama of “male action” genres, most often action films, war movies and westerns. (Donnar, G. 2020. 7).

The influence of the western lone gunslinger for Stark allows him this same development arc of his embodiment of masculinity through crisis (trauma) followed by recuperation and resolution. The resolution of returning to this place of his trauma and confronting those involved is an attempt to solidify and reassert his masculinity through violence. In the MCU heroism and super-humanism are not the same thing, it isn't about possession of power but rather agency through actioning of that power. As the narrative highlights in the final fight scene of *IM*, Stark's super-human abilities demonstrated by the technology of the Iron Man suit does not necessarily equate to Stark's heroism in saving the day.

The climatic fight scene at the end of the first film on the roof of Stark Industries where Tony Stark's Iron Man faces off against Obadiah Stane's Warmonger is where a crucial moment of self-sacrifice occurs. The act of self-sacrifice, a recurring motif in all of the origin stories of the MCU's Phase One films, provides a demonstration of Stark's heroism. This scene is what prompts a moment when Stark realises his own survival doesn't take prominence against saving the world, allowing him to become a hero in his own right rather than as Iron Man. Stane is wearing a bulkier version of Stark's Iron Man suit, a literal representation of his betrayal to Stark as a father figure and mentor. This scene also works to challenge the idea that Iron Man is meant to represent Stark's ideal self by juxtaposing Stark's heroism with Stane's villainy in order to suggest it's not the suit that offers heroism but the agency of the

man wearing it (an idea that will be revisited in *IM2* when Vanko also uses the same arc reactor technology to build his own suit against Stark). The man makes the suit, rather than the suit making the man. The MCU favours this idea of heroism being about the individual rather than the symbol and it's a notion that will be revisited in subsequent Phase One films for the other central characters (see chapters 1.2 and 1.3). This is also the moment that Stark first confronts the orchestrator of his trauma after it's revealed that Stane was the one who ordered Stark's kidnap.

The rooftop where this showdown takes place looks like a glass replica of Stark's arc reactor, a metaphor that suggests the main difference between Stark and Stane is his change of heart and his yearning to do the right thing. This very symbolism is what has defined his cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger up to this point and serves to emphasize this concept in this scene. There is a juxtaposition between Stane's use of technology to commit violence (much in the same vein of Howard's legacy of achieving one's aims through the use of violent force) and Stark's use of technology, which is positioned as violence as defence, a necessary last resort for the good of mankind, even a way to provide 'clean' energy for everyone. This is further supported by the fact Stark uses technology to build himself a heart. This is his legacy, not violent action but rather the agency he displays through sacrifice for the greater good. This serves as evidence that heroism is demonstrated through agency, and in doing so challenges his lone gunslinger archetype (by renouncing violence as victory) Stark can fully embody his heroism.

Violence is a staple trope within the Western, often shown to be graphic and brutal as a reflection of traditional masculine traits or behaviour however, during this final fight scene Stark's violence is reactionary rather than brutal. Modern-day Westerns seem to "negotiate between our nostalgia for the seeming naivete of past heroic archetypes and our frustrations regarding the tendency of genre to always churn out more of the same" (Cloutier, J.C. 2012.

n/p). While *IM* uses the lone gunslinger archetype for Stark, the film isn't a Western and therefore can subvert the expected notions of the genre and the archetype by presenting Stark with a new embodiment of heroism that offers more development for the character and his heroic journey as a superhero. If the Western can be seen as a way to "document not the hero's unwillingness or inability to change, but rather the way in which his world won't let him change" (Cloutier, J.C. 2012. n/p), then the MCU subverts this by giving Stark the opportunity for change and growth. The *IM* films support this, allowing Stark to undergo moments of growth in order to prove his worth as a protector of the world. Stark isn't bound to his lone gunslinger archetype and this final scene in *IM* highlights a key change in his embodiment of masculinity. He fights in defence and for justice rather than revenge even though Stane is the person responsible for the trauma Stark endured in Afghanistan. This is a moment within the film where Stark's heroism outweighs his cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger, prompting him to make the decision to sacrifice himself to end the violence which is demonstration of MCU heroism that becomes a recurring motif within the heroes' journey.

Stane shoots through the glass of the arc reactor style rooftop and leaves Stark clinging on for his life, vulnerable and powerless, having lost his helmet in the fight to reveal the man underneath the suit. A choice that emphasises Stark's emotions and therefore highlights his humanity. In the end it's Stark that sacrifices himself to defeat Stane as a man facing his mortality rather than an indestructible metal suit of armour, securing victory through injury. His change of heart allows him the growth to understand the weight of responsibility he now has to deal with by creating the Iron Man suit. This self-sacrifice comes as a result of the heroic victimization that Stark has experienced throughout the film.

It is only after that suffering that Stark's heroism is seen, acting as a reward for the trauma he has been through. This self-sacrifice is a recurring trope which the MCU seems to favour (which will be explored in 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 of this thesis) and the importance of humanity as a

sign that Stark can suffer trauma but also survive it. It's not Iron Man that makes the self-sacrifice in this scene but Tony Stark, as emphasised by the loss of his helmet to reveal Stark's bleeding face in this moment. Violence and bloodshed aren't an applauded way to deal with his trauma as represented in this scene by Stane and therefore Stark doesn't fight to the death but rather sacrifices himself for the safety of others, emphasising Stark's choice to prioritise the collective over the individual. The MCU films favour an embodiment of masculinity that puts the needs of the many over the needs of the few. It is not about bloodshed and revenge, it's about sacrifice (through the iconography of the wounded warrior).

The camera zooms in on a motionless Stark surrounded by glass and debris afterwards, the light of his arc reactor dark and an orange glow from the fire lighting up the shot. The arc reactor flickers back to life almost like a computer, suggesting another moment of rebirth for Stark. His sacrifice, a demonstration of his agency through heroism emphasises the idea that "sacrifice creates a paradox wherein (almost exclusively) male bodies become heroic and authoritative by having been subjected to suffering and loss" (King, C.S. 2011. 33). Stark has survived, being resurrected after the fight in a tradition that can be traced back to the biblical figure of Christ, it is through his sacrifice and trauma that he is made a hero (made 'holy' in the MCU as a superhero) and his heroism is a reward for that trauma he has endured, his survival after the battle with Stane is a reward for the heroism Stark displayed during this moment. This depiction reinforces the notion within cinema that sacrifice leads to redemption, particularly for male heroes. To wash away their own sins and mistakes, they have to bleed for them as seen in films such as *Cool Hand Luke* (1967), *Rocky* (1976) and *Creed* (2015). As Favreau suggests *IM* explores:

How does [Stark] grow and change through his captivity and when he comes back how does he become Iron Man? What are those steps in the journey that get us to the point

where we understand who he is, what he stands for and how he's changed? (Favreau, J qtd in Weintraub, S. 2008. Online).

What is made clear at this point of the film is that Iron Man is not the hero. Tony Stark is. His self-sacrifice allows him to be seen as a depiction of a cinematic hero using Iron Man as a way to embody impossible feats of heroism, but the agency of that decision belongs to Stark, and the agency of heroism is what the MCU seems to favour when depicting these heroes. The MCU portrays its heroes as human (or human-like) underneath the costume. They are flawed and complex despite the representation of the often monolithic superhero they portray to the world.

This embodiment of heroism is not an easy progression for Stark and over the course of *IM2* there is a lot of attention paid to how the trauma Stark endured in *IM* (both in terms of his initial trauma in Afghanistan and his self-sacrificial trauma at the end of the film) work within the film to challenge his cinematic archetype of masculinity. In *IM2*, "[Stark] takes refuge in alcohol and masks his insecurity with arrogance. He fixates on honouring his father's legacy and alienates the people closest to him as he grows increasingly desperate" (Zaidan, S. 2018. 96). This behaviour stems from Stark's fear of dying which is caused by the arc reactor in his chest. This narrative presents Stark's heroism and his lone gunslinger archetype as being in opposition to one another (undermining the conclusion of *IM* in which Stark seems to have fully embodied his newer model of heroism). The film also challenges Stark's embodiment of masculinity through the character of Rhodes and provides a partial interrogation of white masculinity which itself works as a critique of the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger. This narrative constructs Stark's lone gunslinger as a figure of white superiority, placing him in the position of the white saviour. His embodiment of heroism, however, is a figure of inclusivity therefore the narrative uses the character of Rhodes as a way to further challenge Stark's lone gunslinger masculinity.

The Differing Embodiments of Masculinity in *IM2*

During *IM2*, Rhodes steals one of Stark's suits in order to match him as they physically fight and whilst they manage to destroy half of Stark's mansion in the end Rhodes comes out as the winner, taking off in Stark's suit whilst Stark passively lies on the floor defeated. During their fight Rhodes tells him, "You don't deserve to wear one of these" and at this point in the narrative Stark doesn't. This scene positions Rhodes with the moral high ground (both literally and metaphorically) but also seems to place him there as a way of suggesting that Stark doesn't deserve the Iron Man suit because of his destructive behaviour. Rhodes is depicted as having the superior masculinity (and morals) in this scene, all the flaws of Stark's white cinematic archetype of lone gunslinger masculinity are on display through his destructive behaviours (excessive drinking and partying) in the wake of his threatened mortality. Stark's behaviour serves as a reminder that "the whiteness of white men resides in the tragic quality of their giving way to darkness and the heroism of their channelling to resist it" (Dyer, R. 2017. 28). This works to establish Stark's white privilege and depicts it as a criticism of his superheroism, suggesting privilege is not what the MCU favours in these heroes. As Rhodes flies away in his stolen suit, he is continuing this legacy that Stark has set out for himself by becoming War Machine (his alter ego name whilst he wears the suit in service of the US air force). Rhodes represents everything Stark wants to be and, in that moment, can't be because of the traits he embodies as part of his lone gunslinger archetype.

Rhodes is the character serving the collective in this scene whilst Stark is serving the individual therefore the film portrays the heroism in this scene as Rhodes'. He is the one to fly away with the suit whilst Stark is left lying on the floor of his destroyed mansion. Rhodes serves the needs of the many over the needs for the few (which the MCU favours as a demonstration of heroism), taking the suit back to the air force as a weapon to serve his country rather than for himself as Stark does. Not only is Rhodes positioned as a character to parallel the type of

masculinity Stark should be embodying but isn't, he also serves to give commentary throughout the film on the idea of white masculinity as superior (an issue prevalent through the first two Phases of the MCU). This film seems to suggest that in order for Stark to be heroic, he first needs to understand it's not meant to serve the white man's superiority complex which his cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger masculinity account for. Rhodes is the one to call him out on it, reinforcing the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger by explicitly stating to Stark: "You want to do this whole lone gunslinger act and it's unnecessary. You don't have to do this alone." This reference to the lone gunslinger brings back the idea that Stark needs his friends to help him overcome the aftermath of trauma he is still dealing with whereas the lone gunslinger archetype would favour him dealing with his pain alone.

The inclusion of Rhodes calling out Stark's embodiment of the lone gunslinger archetype can be read in two ways. Firstly, with Rhodes fulfilling the usual role of the non-white companion that several Westerns offer, portrayed as the loyal sidekick to Stark's cynical gunslinger. In this reading, Rhodes wins their fight as a way to emphasis his moral high ground, showing him to be the voice of morality. This would suggest that *IM2* goes against the traditional set up where the non-white companion is there to 'serve' the white hero and places Rhodes as a figure of heroism in his own right. Alternatively, the character of Rhodes could be viewed as fulfilling that role of the non-white companion in the Western, his actions seen primarily as a means to helping the white Stark realise how far off track he's gone. By taking the suit (Stark's 'weapon') he is effectively showing Stark that his lone gunslinger masculinity is flawed through Rhodes' victory over him.

The embodiment of heroism is slow rather than instantaneous allowing for an in-depth exploration of how Stark is meant to be encoded as heroic. The criticism of a franchise heavily dominated by white men about white masculinity is much needed generally within Hollywood cinema (Brown, J.A. 2017. Pp. 36) and the added element of Rhodes being the one to parallel

this commentary on flawed white masculinity works well, as evident when Rhodes takes his suit deeming Stark unfit to wear it anymore. However, the narrative doesn't serve a clear trajectory when it comes to Stark's masculinity and as a result tends to go back and forth between his superheroism and his lone gunslinger archetype in an attempt to negotiate between the two in large part due to the expectations of the superhero genre. The film itself was a commercial risk for Marvel Studios (who weren't yet a Blockbuster success) therefore the need to adhere to the superhero genre placed certain limitations on what this film could reasonably interrogate in terms of masculinity.

The final showdown of *IM2* gives Stark a moment to reconcile his heroic masculinity with the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger. Stark accepts Rhodes as an equal in heroism and they unite against Vanko (played by Mickey Rourke) and his droids. By this point Stark's heroism favours the collective over the individual through the inclusion of Rhodes in this scene. It isn't perfect, they still fight and disagree on who is "the big gun" and interestingly in this scene is the call back to the western cowboy iconography as Stark and Rhodes stand back-to-back in a western style shootout, surrounded on all sides by Vanko's droids. There is a display of masculine equality here, both are capable and heroic and the scene suggests Stark's depiction of heroism lies in his ability to rely on others and share the glory rather than as a lone gunslinger that operates alone. This scene is only partially successful in suggesting that the character is now part of a collective as this is still clearly Stark's film. Furthermore, when Vanko shows up in this final battle and Rhodes gets a chance to prove his own heroic masculinity, he fails to perform, attempting to fire a missile at Vanko called "The Ex-Wife" (given to him by Justin Hammer earlier in the film) that only uselessly bounces off Vanko's armour and is played in the film for laughs. Rhodes is literally sabotaged by a white man leaving Stark to take over and secure victory over Vanko. In the end, it's the combined power of both Stark and Rhodes that manages to subdue Vanko, but this moment of equality is undermined by Stark's call of: "I could really use a sidekick!" which relegates Rhodes to a

secondary position of heroism. The failings of Stark to fully accept Rhodes as an equal suggests his heroism isn't fully realised yet and works to set up Stark's plotline in *AA*, highlighting his reluctance towards a team dynamic. It does offer an insightful exploration of Stark's cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger and the flaws in its ability to help Stark emote his trauma and rely on others for support. This scene is also the first time within the MCU there is an acknowledgement of the benefits of the collective approach over the individualistic suggesting that feats of heroism should be inclusive (an idea that will continue in *AA* and much of the rest of the MCU), favouring it to the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger which the MCU encodes as a soloistic form of masculinity.

In conclusion, *IM* sets up an incarnation of a cinematic Hollywood archetype through the use of the lone gunslinger for Stark as a way to establish how this masculinity works in the aftermath of his suffering. This chapter has charted Stark's conflict between his cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger and his demonstration of heroism on his journey to becoming a superhero. *IM2* explores this interrogation further with the inclusion of Rhodes and a commentary on Stark's embodiment of white masculinity. The MCU uses cinematic archetypes of masculinity within its titular characters in order to provide an examination of how that masculinity needs to be able to evolve to allow these characters to become heroes. For Stark, it was the embodiment of the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger and as the next chapter will discuss, for Thor it's the archetype of the hard-bodied action hero.

1.2: “Come On, What Happened on Earth that Made You So Soft?”: Exploring Masculinity as Worthiness through the Archetype of the Hard-Bodied Hero in *Thor*.

In the year following the release of *IM2*, the MCU introduced a new superhero into their expanding world through a film telling the origin story for Thor (Chris Hemsworth), a figure loosely based on Norse Mythology. *Thor* tells the story of a literal God, an alien compared to the likes of Tony Stark (Iron Man) and Bruce Banner (The Hulk), who lives in a mythical utopia called Asgard. The MCU charts his origin story as an unfolding narrative that sees Thor cast out of Asgard by his father for inciting an intergalactic war with another alien race known as the Frost Giants (large, blue-skinned aliens that have warred with Asgard in the past). After Thor is exiled to Earth without his powers and becomes mortal, he must learn the error of his ways in order to be the hero both the people of Earth and the people of Asgard need to protect them from the schemes of his villainous brother, Loki (Tom Hiddleston), who seeks the throne of Asgard for himself.

This chapter aims to explore how the first *Thor* film utilises the cinematic archetype of the 1980s action hero as an initial embodiment of masculinity within the narrative. Interestingly, *Thor* takes influences from a few prominent 1980s cinematic archetypes, all different interpretations of the traditional hard-bodied action hero of that era. Whilst there are many different iterations of the hard-bodied action hero, *Thor* primarily refers to the common depiction of the hard-body in films such as *The Terminator* (1984) or *Commando*, where the action hero is depicted as a silent, stoic type of man that uses his fists to solve his problems (Tasker, Y. 1993. 104). Similar to the character of Tony Stark and his embodiment of the lone gunslinger (see chapter 1.1), the MCU employs the archetype of the 1980s action hero for Thor. The character embodies the hard-bodied action hero throughout the film although the narrative fluctuates between the specific type of hard-bodied hero Thor is depicting, both the fish out of water narrative and the fantasy questing hero are frequently depicted in 1980s

action cinema as sub-genres of the hard-bodied hero narrative (in films such as *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) and *Masters of the Universe* (1987)).

The superhero genre provides a convenient platform for discussions of masculinity due to the fact the genre is heavily dominated with traditionally masculine performances and particularly in recent years “contemporary superhero films have embraced hypermasculinity.

Hypermasculinity is a specific form of masculinity characterized by the belief that violence is manly and dangerously exciting, [often] paired with a callous attitude towards women and the derision of anything considered feminine” (Kvaran, K. 2017. 226). When compared to Christopher Nolan’s *Dark Knight Trilogy* (2005/2008/2012), *Thor* offers a self-awareness of the titular character’s hypermasculinity, often attempting to show a parodic version of it in order to explore an alternative representation of masculinity within the narrative through the lens of his cinematic archetype of the 1980s hard-bodied action hero. This self-awareness is key when trying to challenge his cinematic archetype of masculinity for both Thor and the audience, but in order to show this level of self-awareness, the narrative must first depict Thor’s hypermasculinity through his hard body. *Thor*, and the superhero genre itself, often invokes similar imagery to that of the hard-bodied action hero in “the use of an insistent imagery which stresses hardness, partly through muscularity, a quality traditionally associated with masculinity” (Tasker, Y. 1993. 77).

The popularity of the hypermasculine performance can be seen frequently in early 1980s action cinema with portrayals such as Sylvester Stallone’s John Rambo in *Rambo: First Blood Part 2* (1985) or Arnold Schwarzenegger’s John Matrix in *Commando*. These films view the male body as spectacle, often a site where impressive musculature is emphasised and a demonstration of brute strength to save the day is required. This type of masculinity is often described as a consequence of the Reaganite era which prioritized the body reigning supreme in an attempt to hegemonize masculinity through the action blockbuster after the trauma of

the Vietnam war (Tasker, Y. 1993. 76), the body becoming a site where trauma was played out in narrative terms.

The MCU channels this notion of the muscular body for Thor, often displaying Chris Hemsworth's biceps as evidence of the characters' strength and power², to create a character that from his first introduction seems to favour victory through violence over any other method. This chapter aims to explore how in the first *Thor* film, Thor embodies the cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied action hero and explores how the narrative attempts to engage with such depictions of masculinity.

Establishing the Hard Bodied Hero through the Pursuit of Violence

The character of Thor is introduced as arrogant and reckless, a young Prince courting the conflict more than a responsible leader ready to serve his people. He is shown to prove his worth through fighting for the glory of Asgard and his triumphs in battle. The film utilises Thor's first appearance to portray the character as impulsive and cocky, the scene – which is meant to be Thor's coronation to ascend to the throne of Asgard – shows him revelling in the cheers of the crowd as if he's won a personal victory. The ceremony is then attacked by Frost Giants which sets up a chance for Thor to prove his worth as the next King of Asgard. Thor wants to launch a counter attack on the Frost Giants, although his father, Odin (Anthony Hopkins) strongly argues against it, deeming violence to be an ineffective method of resolution between their people. Odin doesn't support violence as a means for victory and advocates for peace treaties. He is depicted as the benevolent peacekeeper to Thor's brutal warrior. This point is made explicit when Odin chastises Thor's plan to attack their enemy by stating: "You're thinking only as a warrior." Thor comes across as foolish and inexperienced in this scene. The narrative doesn't support Thor's plan of violent pursuit because it's not encoded as

² Even in his 'superhero costume' which is used as a form of battle armour in the film, Thor's biceps are clearly seen. The costume itself is sleeveless despite the armoured chest plates over his torso in order to emphasise the character's impressive muscles and bulging biceps.

being a heroic form of masculinity within the narrative. The 1980s action hero who relies on his brute strength and savagery to save the day is no longer enough as a purely heroic embodiment of masculinity and the MCU favours heroes with more of an internal struggle – namely the justification for violence as a last resort - over the spectacle employed when ‘might makes right’. This juxtaposition between Odin and Thor, between peaceful resolution and violent counterattack, is meant to portray Thor as a reckless hothead, setting up the flaws in his masculinity.

This focus on Thor’s eagerness to pursue violence is a deliberate choice as, at this point in the narrative, the “MCU iteration of Thor is... a decisive man of action, a hard-bodied hero... considered emblematic of US self-image” (McSweeney, T. 2018. 74). This directly aligns the character within a hypermasculine portrayal of the superhero, a masculine display of brute strength and agility, drawing on iconography of those hard-bodied Reaganite heroes that shoot first and ask questions later such as John McClane in *Die Hard* and The Terminator in *The Terminator*.

Both Thor and McClane are put into situations where their strength and masculinity is tested through violence. In *Die Hard*, McClane (a police officer) is inside a building taken over by terrorists who are holding everyone hostage in order to break into the bank vault below. McClane manages to escape but is the only one in the building capable of stopping them, therefore he spends the majority of the movie crawling around air ducts and killing off the terrorists thanks to his police training. Similar to Thor, he is shown to have a particular skill for using physical violence to secure victory. McClane wears a vest for the entirety of the film to show off his bulging biceps, drawing attention to his hard body in a comparable way to Thor’s superhero costume being designed to emphasis his own muscles and physique. Similarly, the depiction of Rambo in *Rambo: First Blood Part 2* emphasised Sylvester Stallone’s hard body as a demonstration of his brute strength and physical prowess. The film even used it as a

marketing tool by having the advertising posters depict Stallone shirtless, oiled, and holding a rocket launcher. All these heroes use violence to defeat the enemy, further emphasising the notion that 'might makes right'. These heroes have weapons that require a certain level of skill to be able to master, McClane uses a gun, Rambo uses a rocket launcher and Thor has his hammer, which is an important recurring motif for the character within the narrative. Despite the fact each of these weapons are very different to one another, they all invoke a level of skill and conviction to wield them which these films depict as a symbol of their hard-bodied archetype.

Thor's hammer is used to reinforce Thor's cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied hero and the film uses this as a plot device to measure Thor's 'worthiness' throughout the narrative. This links to Thor's position as a 1980s action hero, the hammer is similar to a sword in terms of the skill needed to wield it. The hammer itself is another parallel to the hard-bodied heroes of the 1980s such as *Conan the Barbarian* (1982), who uses a specially forged sword as his weapon of choice and has a narrative journey similar to Thor's in which the titular hero must learn to be both a warrior and, eventually, a King. Using the hammer as a measure of Thor's worth in this film links that worthiness to his masculinity and his heroism. The hammer becomes a recurring cinematic motif for Thor throughout the MCU from the opening of this first film where it is gifted to him by Odin as a weapon "fit for a king."

Having established Thor's 1980s action hero credentials through his hard body and violence pursuits, the film starts to introduce influences from other sub-genres of the 1980s action film. Films such as *Conan the Barbarian* can be seen as a combination of two different cinematic archetypes, drawing elements from both the 1980s hard-bodied hero and the epic fantasy quest narrative. *Thor* draws on many parallels to this film. After watching the massacre of his people (including his parents), and being sold into slavery as a child, Conan grows up and trains to be a gladiator to earn his freedom. He travels the world making friends and fulfilling quests

in his desire for vengeance against the man responsible for killing his people. Conan eventually retrieves his father's sword from the enemy and uses it to secure victory (and vengeance) over the evil Doom by killing him. Both Conan's and Thor's weapons are encoded as 'mythic', and both are positioned as symbols of masculinity for these characters. After the Frost Giants attack Asgard, it is vengeance Thor seeks and this desire leads his quest (along with his friends) into committing violence. The narrative sets this up in order to interrogate the flaws of Thor's 1980s hard-bodied hero cinematic archetype of masculinity, and this ultimately leads him to the loss of his hammer, suggesting it isn't vengeance or violence that should define Thor as 'a man'.

Thor leads his own quest for vengeance and victory within this film, seeking out the Frost Giants for retribution. Thor decides to lead a small team of warriors, including his brother Loki to the Frost Giants' domain, despite Odin's wishes against such a plan. Thor is arrogant and eager for a fight despite the repercussions it might have on his people and eventually it is Odin that has to come and save them from an all-out war. Thor disobeys his father for the pursuit of victory when leading the raid against the Frost Giants. This emphasises his favouring of violence as a method to prove his masculinity at this point in the film's narrative. The scene comments on Thor's need for victory through conquest when the Frost Giant ruler, Laufey (Colm Feore) tells the character: "You long for battle. You crave it. You're nothing but a boy pretending to be a man." Thor seems to believe in a very simple ethos of defining masculinity at the start of this film: that being a man means being a warrior, which in turn means violence against his enemies. This is reminiscent of Conan's similar drive to commit violence against his enemies. When asked what's best in life, Conan declares: "To crush your enemies, to see them driven before you, and to hear the lamentations of their women." This pursuit of violence for both Thor and Conan offer them a way to define their masculinity through the victory that comes from their violent acts. It's a similar ethos to the hard-bodied action heroes of the 1980s that suggest violence is heroic because it saves the day and the homeland against

unwanted enemies attempting to cause bloodshed (Tasker, Y. 2016. 112) and this once more aligns Thor with this cinematic archetype of masculinity for the audience. Interestingly, it's the taunting of his masculinity by Laufey: "Run back home little princess" that prompts Thor into the fight. The insult meant to imply a sense of femininity to Thor's character which he clearly cannot stand for and therefore he feels he must fight to defend his own honour as a warrior.

It is these actions that see Thor face his first hardship in the film, when Odin banishes him for his foolishness and strips him of his power. This film uses this scene and the conflict between father and son as a way to discuss issues of masculinity through the attempt to challenge his cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied action hero. This offers Thor his first moment of introspection about his violence actions through the consequences he is facing. This scene is crucial as an attempt to challenge the 1980s cinematic archetype of masculinity that Thor embodies at this point in the narrative. It is Odin that has to rescue Thor and his friends from the fight they are losing, using words rather than weapons to avoid a war between the two races, suggesting his masculinity is more effective as both a man and a king. There is a debate between violence (Thor) and diplomacy (Odin) and of course, the needs of the individual (Thor's desire to prove himself) and the needs of the collective (Odin's drive to avoid a war that will impact their people). The MCU favours the collective, as can be seen through all of these films (see chapters 1.3 and 1.4), and it's a lesson Thor needs to learn in order to become a superhero.

This banishment takes place as a father-son argument with Thor trying to explain his motives to his father by stating: "This was to be my day of triumph." At this notion Odin visibly despairs: "You are a vain, greedy, cruel boy." He not only banishes Thor but humiliates him by stripping him of his power, his armour and of course, his hammer. Odin even states to Thor, "You are unworthy." His arrogant and reckless behaviour has led to his unworthiness and it's this moment, for the first time, that the audience understands that brute strength and fighting

is not what will make Thor worthy of anything. This is a notion that the audience can anticipate but this scene serves as an important moment for Thor's character. Stripping Thor of his hammer as punishment for his reckless and violent behaviour notes Thor's worthiness as a chance for self-reflection for the character but it also suggests that Thor's particular type of masculinity at this moment in the film is ineffective. The hammer is a weapon, reminiscent of the 1980s action hero he is emulating, and yet Thor doesn't come out of the violent battle as the victor. He is stripped of his power and, in a sense, his hypermasculinity which is intrinsically linked to his cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied action hero. He is being punished for it. The MCU does not favour this type of masculinity as evidence of heroism and much like Tony Stark in *IM*, Thor is stripped of his status and given the opportunity to re-evaluate his embodiment of masculinity through his newly found humanity without the aid of his weapon. Thor's banishment serves as a way for the narrative to attempt to challenge the cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied hero, challenging the ideals of that particular embodiment of masculinity through Thor's own self-awareness that violence doesn't mean victory. Biber suggests that in the traditional action film:

Hollywood heroes have [to assert] their masculinity by engaging in physical combat, getting dirty, acting tough, and their victories are legitimated because they have represented the 'right' side; they have protected freedom and democratic values. (Biber, K. 1995. 71).

In contrast, *Thor* demonstrates the pursuit of violent glory isn't heroic but harmful aligning with this idea that Thor's masculinity is only deemed successful when it works in favour of the protection and interests of his nation (Asgard). This is not the motivation for Thor's attack however, for him it's about glory and proving himself worthy of being King. This is what prompts Odin to banish him from Asgard as punishment, setting up a chance for self-reflection from Thor, which works as a narrative device to interrogate how progressive Thor's action

hero cinematic archetype of masculinity is. Thor's moments of introspection act self-reflexively, enabling the film to demonstrate its own awareness concerning the limitations of the character's indebtedness to hard body cinematic tropes.

Worthiness as a Reoccurring Cinematic Motif

Thor's period of self-reflection is narratively linked to his unworthiness which is a central theme for both the character and the film. The concept of Thor's unworthiness is manifested in the film through his ability to wield his hammer, the object of his power (and his masculinity, alluded to by the phallic symbolism at work in the design of the hammer) and a relic of his God-like existence on Asgard. When Odin deems him unworthy and strips Thor of his power, banishing him to Earth that unworthiness starts to take on a core part of Thor's character development as the film progresses. It is in the scene where Thor attempts to retrieve his hammer from a S.H.I.E.L.D facility (a government organisation that attempts to investigate potential threats to Earth) where it has been found embedded into a rock that audiences get to experience Thor's self-awareness regarding the shortcomings of his cinematic archetype of masculinity more overtly.

This scene starts off with Thor infiltrating the compound, making his way through the maze of S.H.I.E.L.D tunnels in order to reach the hammer stuck at the centre of it. The sky changes overhead as he takes out S.H.I.E.L.D agents with the ease of someone who is used to battle. It starts to rain, thunder and lightning erupting in the sky. Thor smiles at the sight of it, clearly viewing it as a good omen – he is, after all, the God of Thunder. For the audience though it takes on a sinister feel with dark backgrounds, this scene is set at night to add to the foreboding composition of it, there is a build-up of tense music that follows Thor on his quest to retrieve the hammer. This lends itself to Thor's brute strength but then subverts it by denying him his prize (the hammer). The ambience is unsettling against the stark white of the S.H.I.E.L.D compound and serves to foreshadow the moment when Thor finally reaches the

hammer. It almost feels too easy for him at first, he is superior in terms of brute strength and easily makes his way through various agents as the music builds to increase the tension. Thor loses the upper hand when an agent tackles him, they both go hurtling through the makeshift structure surrounding the hammer into the mud, adding to the savagery of his violence and the sense of Thor's behaviour being primitive and regressive in the way the scene invokes the imagery of caveman wrestling in the dirt.

When Thor manages to reach the hammer, the music takes on a victorious note and the sequence moves into slow-motion in order to both build up to and encourage the audience to savour the moment of Thor's impending triumph. Everything he has been through has led him to this moment and he's about to secure his victory. Thor can't lift the hammer though, simply because he isn't worthy yet. He hasn't earned it. Director Kenneth Branagh states:

In this story of the flawed hero, who must lose in order to find... We haven't seen the evidence there; this isn't something he's going to take easily however and there the primal part of this character kicks in. He's like a bear raging or a child screaming, some part of him is broken by the certain knowledge that he isn't going back. That's it, it's over... this becomes for Thor, a pivotal moment in this picture. (Branagh, K. 2011. DVD Commentary).

It is also a pivotal moment for the audience when establishing the pain that being unworthy brings Thor. His reaction is guttural and emotional, shot with a high camera angle in order to convey his defeat as he uselessly tries to free the hammer from the rock, another signifier that his brute strength and the hyper-masculinity of his cinematic archetype is not an effective method of proving his worthiness. This scene attempts to challenge the notion of the 1980s action hero archetype as superior, suggesting that strength isn't enough to wield the hammer and therefore commenting that violence only gets Thor so far towards his goal. It is typical of 1980s action films such as *Conan the Barbarian* or *Die Hard* to emphasis violence as a way to

secure victory. McClane kills, maims and beats up the terrorists holding everyone in the Nakatomi Plaza hostage and is rewarded by the end of the film by being reunited with his ex-wife. Similarly, in *Conan the Barbarian*, it is only after Conan has beheaded Doom that he is rewarded with the glory of being a warrior and avenging the death of his parents. Thor's failed attempt to retrieve his hammer subverts this notion of violence means victory, suggesting his hard-bodied hero archetype doesn't necessarily equate to a demonstration of victory or heroism.

Thor goes through the upheaval of being trapped on Earth by Odin when he banishes Thor and strips him of his power. Furthermore, he endures the disappointment of his father and physical hardships to retrieve his hammer from S.H.I.E.L.D (effectively attempting to remasculinise himself through strength and violence) only to be denied glory at the last possible moment. He isn't worthy and can't pull the hammer from the stone. This scene emphasises this message to the audience and is shot in such a way they feel Thor's frustration and sorrow almost as keenly as he does. This is because it isn't about demonstrating his physical prowess (audiences have already seen it) but his emotional growth which is something many 1980s action heroes often fail to explore. Several critics including Jeffords have suggested that as we enter the 1990s, Hollywood turns to the depiction of more introspective protagonists as "more film time devoted to explorations of their ethical dilemmas, emotional traumas, and psychological goals, and less to their skill with weapons, their athletic abilities, or their gutsy showdowns of opponents" (Jeffords, S. 1993. 245). In order for Thor to embody a progressive cinematic archetype of masculinity, he has to be able to demonstrate emotional growth and internal struggles through introspection rather than merely physical hardships hence why he isn't able to retrieve the hammer in this scene, allowing the narrative to further interrogate his cinematic archetype of the 1980s hard-bodied action hero.

However, throughout *Thor* these moments of introspection that are meant to interrogate the character's cinematic archetype of masculinity often get overshadowed by the melodrama of the narrative, this results in Thor's self-actualisation being overshadowed by the absurdity of the situation he finds himself in. On the surface, *Thor* is dealing with aliens, intergalactic realms, and Shakespearian family melodrama which often act as a reminder to the audience of the fantastical and the farcical nature of the narrative. Furthermore, after Thor fails to retrieve his hammer and becomes resigned to being trapped on Earth as a mortal, the narrative introduces another embodiment of the 1980s action hero for Thor, taking influence from the fish out of water films, many of which featured a hard-bodied hero as the main protagonist forced into a new environment in order to learn and grow (Tasker, Y. 1993. 112).

The Fish Out of Water Archetype

After failing to retrieve his hammer Thor starts to embrace his newly found humanity, mainly through his relationship with Jane and the belief that with Odin's death (Loki lies about Odin's passing in order to ascend to the throne) there is no way home for him. Thor becomes a fish out of water, an alien who must live among humans, he arrives in a completely foreign environment and must learn to adapt to it such as the protagonists of films including *Crocodile Dundee*, *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984) and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991) do. In a similar vein to *Crocodile Dundee*, where the titular character is invited to New York only to be at first confused by the local behaviour and customs but ultimately masters the environment and finds romance, Thor learns to value Earth and its people. His relationship with Jane becomes the main reason for this as she teaches him about Earth science and calls him out on his inappropriate behaviour after he smashes a mug in a local café in a demand for another drink. When Jane informs him that asking nicely is the appropriate behaviour for a refill Thor looks chastened and apologises to her. This emphasises a shift in his changing cinematic archetype

of masculinity, he's already learning from (and about) his new environment which is having an effect on his behaviour.

The side characters in *Thor* work to help Thor achieve his heroic potential and guide him away from the 'might makes right' embodiment of masculinity he previously favoured as a demonstration of his cinematic archetype of the 1980s hard-bodied hero. All of his friends on Earth are women or older men so there is no competition for hypermasculine dominance and this stops being a motivating factor in Thor's actions. It is during these moments of adaptation that Thor goes through his character development from arrogant and reckless to a far humbler individual. This is shown through his connection to Jane and her team, Thor even goes so far as to steal back Jane's notebook from S.H.I.E.L.D after they seized it simply because he knows how much it means to her. It's an act of kindness in which Thor expects to gain nothing for himself. As Chris Hemsworth suggests of his character's time with Jane, "by the end of it, though, he learned a whole lot of humility and has a new respect for humans. He feels very protective of them because of his relationship with Jane, but also how they were able to help him discover who he needed to become in order to earn his powers back" (Hemsworth, C. 2019. 11).

By the end of the film, audiences experience a very different Thor from the one at the beginning of the film, his fish out of water archetype completing his assimilation to humanity through the help of his friends. This follows the trend of later 1980s/early 1990s action films such as *The Terminator 2: Judgement Day*, in which the hero must learn to revise his traditionally masculine qualities in order to progress. The titular character goes on a journey from being the ultimate killing machine in *The Terminator* to learning how to be the ultimate father in *The Terminator 2*, even sacrificing himself at the end of the film in order to save the day so no one can get their hands on the technology he is built from. Thor's journey has a similar trajectory, he learns softness from humans (shown by his lack of violence whilst on

Earth) and ultimately ends up sacrificing himself to protect them. However, significantly, at the film's climax this archetype is once again overshadowed by Thor's ever-prominent 1980s action hero trappings (which is the driving force of his masculinity and this film), and Thor's assimilation to the ways of humanity can be read as another motif of action hero cinema, from which the superhero film is derived.

The Hard Body Reinforced

Thor, as expected from superhero cinema, contains a suitably epic fight scene at its conclusion which ultimately ends up reinforcing the cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied hero despite the film's attempts to interrogate this version of masculinity as being a flawed embodiment from the character. Partly due to the expectations from the audience of needing to see Thor 'suit up' for battle once more, this final fight scene doesn't work to subvert his cinematic archetype of masculinity the way other final battles within the MCU do (see chapter 1.1). Instead, the final battle in *Thor* pits brother against brother when Loki sends in The Destroyer, a mechanical beast from Asgard that resembles a metal medieval knight to kill Thor and destroy everything in its path. He is alone and powerless without his hammer or his armour. Thor is dressed in jeans and a shirt, reminiscent of an everyday man rather than a God (or a warrior) to emphasise the shift in his character. His muscles are hidden, no longer drawing attention to his brute strength or physicality for this fight. Thor is no longer courting physical violence for the thrill of victory as audiences first saw him do but rather, he is willing to fight and ultimately sacrifice himself for the safety of the people of New Mexico. This demonstrates the importance of:

Superheroes in these films [being] "good men" who chose to do something when no one else can or will: the reluctant but ultimately necessary protectors of a world paradoxically conditioned by the institutional paralysis and popular powerlessness that makes the triumph of evil an imminent possibility. (Acu, A. 2016. 197).

Superheroes in the MCU are protectors, defenders. They are not antagonists or seeking the fight. They react to it in the way they do because it's the right thing to do but also because it allows the MCU to present a very specific type of heroism, namely as a purely defensive action. This film isn't like *IM2* where the issue is Stark realising the benefits of working as a team. Thor already happily works with others (such as the Warriors Three and Lady Sif on Asgard and Jane and her team on Earth). He already understands the value in working as part of a team. This film and Thor's journey is about realising superheroism needs to serve the collective rather than the individual and this is what proves he is worthy once again through the sacrifice for the greater good.

It is Thor's act of self-sacrifice in this scene that leads to him proving he is worthy and regaining his power, once again earning the superhero mantle. He offers himself to his brother's mercy by stating, "These people are innocent. Taking their lives will gain you nothing. So, take mine and end this." However, the superhero film continues to function most often as a sub-genre of the action film therefore in order to meet the expectations of a contemporary cinema audience the ending must still include an epic fight scene in which Thor is allowed to wield his hammer and partake in violence (McSweeney, T. 2018. 74). He returns to the embodiment of the cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied action hero at the end of the film because of the conventions the narrative is bound to within the genre. For this reason, Thor isn't entirely successful in challenging the cinematic archetype of the action-hero in any meaningful way, instead it faithfully depicts a relevant archetype of the action hero befitting of the superhero genre.

The attempt of the narrative to incorporate different sub-genres of the 1980s action hero films is one of the reasons that *Thor* doesn't offer a clear and cohesive exploration of his cinematic archetype of the 1980s action hero. The use of multiple sub-genres of the action film in this narrative complicates the issue of Thor's embodiment of his cinematic archetype of the hard-

bodied hero due to the fact the change in Thor's masculinity doesn't align with the conventions of the superhero genre which this film must adhere to causing a juxtaposition between Thor's embodiment of masculinity and the conclusion of the film.

As with many 1980s action films, the antagonist is vital and always working in opposition to the hero. *Thor* does this through the character of Loki and his relationship to his brother. The film positions Loki to be a dark mirror character to Thor, both in appearance when contrasting Loki's pale skin, dark hair and lean figure to Thor's tanned skin, blond locks and defined muscles (a sharp contrast between villain and hero that is often seen in the action film, for example, John McClane and Hans Gruber in *Die Hard*, are shown as contrasting figures. Gruber is slight, groomed, wearing a suit and tie while McClane is rougher, wearing a vest that shows off his muscles and often making wise cracks. Loki and Thor have been pitted against each other since they were children, there is even a flashback scene near the beginning of the film to support this as Odin explains only one of them can be king. They are both seeking Odin's approval and it's this sense of competition between the brothers that prompts Loki into betraying Thor in order to prove his own worth to Odin as a ruler of Asgard. The betrayal by Loki is an emotional one rather than a physical one. He manipulates Thor's grief of their father in order to take the throne for him, playing on Thor's emotions to gain the upper hand. Even the fight between Thor and 'Loki' is actually between Thor and The Destroyer sent by Loki to kill him. This reinforces the idea that heroism needs to be able to deal with inner conflicts as well as external ones and that is a key trait the cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied hero needs to display.

It is Thor's change of tactics that is most evident in the final showdown between him and Loki back on Asgard. This time their roles have reversed from the beginning of the film, with Thor no longer wishing to fight and Loki eager. In wanting to be the hero of the narrative Loki ends up as the villain because of his needs (which are depicted as selfish rather than selfless), a

lesson Thor learns throughout the film. This parallels the first fight of this narrative against the Frost Giants where Thor is eager for the fight and Loki is reluctant. This final showdown between the brothers depicts a reversal of that scene with Thor stating, "I will not fight you, brother." Loki's villainy is emphasised through his desire for violence at the end of the film, as a juxtaposition to Thor's newly realised awareness that violence should only ever be in defence rather than offense.

The core relationship within this film is the brotherhood between Loki and Thor and this becomes an important part of Thor's characterisation. Loki as Thor's dark mirror emphasises Thor's humanity and his ability for self-reflection as a result of the hardship he experiences. This is further supported by Loki's 'death' at the end of the movie (dead to the characters but revealed to still be alive to the audience). It is Loki that makes Thor see the error of his ways, first in terms of his arrogance and reckless behaviour, and secondly after Loki's death when Thor turns down the throne. The power of the throne is what led to Loki's betrayal and Thor feels like he can no longer accept it, instead choosing to follow his heart rather than his duty.

This film provides a double standard of 'otherness' within the narrative between Loki and Thor. Whilst Loki's 'otherness' is shown to be evil and villainous; Thor's is shown to be charming and funny. Perhaps because Thor is depicted to be more of a western figure as the superhero, with his bright blond hair and blue eyes, he is reminiscent of an all-around American hero whilst Loki's pale skin, slight figure and dark hair is more typical of a villain. Their appearances help establish their difference from each other despite the fact they are both considered 'others' from humanity due to their alien heritage. This depiction of 'otherness' is often found in the 1980s action film, the differences between hero and villain often shown in binary terms such as white/non-white, American/non-American. This is partly due to Hollywood's preference for "readymade – or ready to hate – villains that align with discourses on otherness and enemyhood already embedded in society" (Soberon, L. 2021. 3).

Thor attempts to do something similar with the character of Loki, playing upon the trope of the 'enemy within' and familial betrayal, however, this doesn't quite work because if audiences are expected to villainise Loki for his 'otherness' then they must also, by extension, villainise Thor for the same reason. Thor attacks humans in this film and shows his brute strength on more than one occasion, as one might expect from a villain. Whilst Thor's 'otherness' is comedic, Loki's 'otherness' is perceived to be the great evil. The key difference between them is the depiction of Thor's 1980s hard-bodied action hero archetype which encodes him and therefore his use of violence as heroic because he saves the day.

It is often suggested that spectacle is central to the superhero film but "although these films are fascinated with weapons and explosions, they also depict inner struggles. The greatest victory of the saviour-superhero consists in overcoming his own fears, doubts, and flaws. This inner victory, however, must be complemented by a subsequent triumph in battle (Ford, S. Krimmer, E. 2011. 88). *Thor*, and the MCU more generally, favours this model of storytelling. The emphasis on the internal struggle is validated by the spectacular showdown resulting in victory. For the superheroes of the MCU both the internal and external struggles go hand-in-hand and only a victory in both heralds the victor's position as a superhero. Thor's embodiment of the cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied action hero lends itself to the superhero genre as an extension of the action film but it's worth noting that "action functions as a generic space that in contrast to many other Hollywood genres, has increasingly departed from any simplistic assumption that heroism equates to white men performing white masculinity" (Tasker, Y. 2016. 118-199). The MCU makes it clear within these Phase One heroes that while these are white men, their heroism isn't the same as their white masculinity and isn't a condition of their whiteness. They need to earn their heroism through suffering and sacrifice. In these films, heroism comes from prioritising the collective over the individual and the readiness to sacrifice oneself for the greater good for the world (traits which are demonstrated through the MCU by a host of racially diverse heroes as the franchise progresses

with characters such as T'Challa/Black Panther, James Rhodes/War Machine and Shang-Chi, all of whom embody their own forms of MCU heroism). However, Thor's heroism doesn't arise in opposition to his embodiment of the 1980s hard-bodied cinematic archetype of masculinity but rather as a development of it. The final action scene reinforces this archetype, returning to the notion that violence does make right in the end. Thor's self-awareness of his flawed hard body style of masculinity is interrogated but ultimately the film still chooses to reaffirm the importance of physical strength and prowess in the climactic fight. The only noticeable difference is that Thor has now learnt the motivation behind his acts must come from saving others rather than seeking his own glory.

In conclusion, the character of Thor is used to introduce issues of hypermasculinity, in order to do this the narrative depicts the character of Thor as initially embodying the 1980s cinematic archetype of the action hero and a masculinity which favours violence through a display of brute strength as the best method to deal with his problems. The issue of worthiness, which the film emphasises strongly throughout the narrative is directly linked to the embodiment of Thor's cinematic archetype. Thor attempts to embody a combination of hard-bodied archetypes throughout the film through the incorporation of different sub-genres of the action film. This works to best suit the needs of the narrative, all within the range of Thor's hard-bodied hero archetype. This discussion examines how the film attempts to challenge his cinematic archetype of masculinity through a self-awareness gained from instances of introspection the character undergoes within the narrative³. Ultimately, as this chapter shows this interrogation of his cinematic archetype of masculinity fails and Thor actually ends up reinforcing the 1980s action hero archetype of masculinity towards the end of the film instead.

³ Introspection is meant in terms of the narrative working to give Thor a chance to reflect on his own masculinity and definition of heroism often as a result of being challenged by other characters in the film as this chapter demonstrates as part of the discussion.

The film sets up this embodiment of the cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied hero in order to interrogate its effectiveness but ultimately fails to entirely subvert this by the end of the film. Instead, it arguably reinforces it with the reversion to an epic fight scene at the film's climax. However, in depicting Thor's heroism as linked to his belief in self-sacrifice at the end of the film, the film suggests this type of masculinity is heroic, a masculinity that doesn't favour glorifying violence or the individual but rather acts for the collective. This is how Thor proves his worth once more and regains his power, becoming a fully-fledged superhero. *Thor*, like many of the Phase One MCU films explore how these characters transition from their cinematic archetype of masculinity towards more nuanced and complex conceptualisations of what it is to be heroic and what traits must be prioritised to achieve that embodiment of heroism. The creative team behind *Thor* deliberately evoke genre conventions common in the 1980s action film in attempting to depict this change as this chapter demonstrates. For *IM* it was the archetype of the lone gunslinger, for Thor it is the 1980s action hero, and for Captain America (as will be discussed in the next chapter) the film makers turn to the cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier. Arguably, Thor fails to be as progressive as these other examples and as a result the hard body archetype is not completely deconstructed or dismissed from the film's narrative but rather is reincorporated into his display of heroism at the end of this first film to focus on the character.

1:3: “You Don’t Take a Soldier, a Symbol Like That and Hide Him in a Lab”: Masculinity and Collectivism Through the World War Two Soldier Archetype in *Captain America: The First Avenger*.

The plot of *Captain America: The First Avenger* (*CA:TFA*) takes place amidst the backdrop of World War Two, and it also saw a revival of one of Marvel’s longest running superheroes: Captain America. Originally created in the 1940s, as an answering call to war against Germany, Captain America became a symbol of national pride and strength for Americans (White, M.D. 2014. 144). *CA:TFA* follows the story of Steve Rogers (played by Chris Evans), an ordinary man who desperately wants to join the army and serve his country. After being rejected on medical grounds due to suffering from asthma and a long list of other conditions, Steve agrees to take part in an experiment that leads to him becoming the world’s first and only super-soldier, giving him the chance to fight for his country in the war effort as Captain America who goes up against the Nazi’s science division, HYDRA and their formidable leader, The Red Skull.

Interestingly, *CA:TFA* seems to deviate from the previous model of Marvel films in terms of how the narrative presents issues of cinematic archetypes of masculinity and the ascension into heroism. Whereas the characters of Iron Man and Thor (see chapters 1.1 and 1.2) both start out embodying their own version of a cinematic archetype of masculinity, only to learn its ineffectiveness through adversity and later progress to embodying a version of masculinity that the film presents as heroic instead, Captain America doesn’t. This film sets up a duality to Rogers’s journey into heroism via two different embodiments of the cinematic archetype of the soldier. This chapter will explore Rogers’s cinematic duality as a homage to the ensemble World War Two soldier who relies on a unit of men to help him save the day, and Captain America’s soloistic soldier, that embodies the depiction of one man saving his country. The film’s narrative raises the question as to which of these embodiments is favourable throughout the film through the juxtaposition between Rogers’s actions and his enhanced masculine

image of strength after receiving the super soldier serum responsible for creating Captain America. This chapter will demonstrate the link between Rogers's conflicting masculinities and his dual identity crisis as "the superhero, a figure through whom American cultural ideals and anxieties are visualized and condensed, operates through cycles of rebirth that depend on the repeated re-imagining of crisis" (Mulder, J. 2017. 1062). These issues of duality allow the film to explore masculinity in crisis in a new way to the previous films, giving Rogers's two similar cinematic archetypes of masculinity that must first be merged together to help him deal with his personal hardships before issues of his masculine heroism can be explored.

CA:TFA is heavily influenced by the war genre of Hollywood cinema, to such a degree it can be viewed as a homage to this genre and a very particular brand of World War Two film. The notion of the war film encompasses many different iterations and interpretations of a narrative set around war and as such:

Rubenstein (1994:456) identifies eight major generic variants of the (Hollywood) war film – the Embattled Platoon, the Battle Epic, the Battling Buddies, the Strain of Command, the Antiwar Film, the POW Escape, the War Preparedness Film, the service Comedy-Musical... such a list obviously makes the war film a diverse and expansive category, and for this reason most commentators tend to follow Basinger, who argues that the 'war film' as such "does not exist in a coherent generic form." (Langford, B. 2005. 106).

CA:TFA mediates between two different embodiments of the World War Two soldier for Rogers and offers a convincing homage to older war films for the audience. The narrative goes on to encompass multiple iterations of the war film as set out by Rubenstein, allowing the film to adopt two different soldier archetypes from Hollywood cinema for Rogers to embody. Allison states, "American popular culture has taught us what to expect of these stories: citizen soldiers fighting for freedom, individuals putting aside selfish desires for the

common good, men finding the best of themselves in the worst of circumstances” (Allison, T. 2018. 5). As this chapter will demonstrate, these tropes are crucial to the depiction of World War Two soldiers in *CA:TFA* and as a result suggests this film is heavily influenced by films such as *The Guns of Navarone* (1961) and *The Great Escape* (1963) which tend to involve an ensemble group of soldiers on a mission but ultimately ends up favouring one of them over the others to suit the needs of the story and offer a more action driven approach to the narrative.

Establishing Two Cinematic Archetypes of the World War Two Soldier

The depiction of Rogers - identifying as a soldier rather than a superhero for the audience when with his platoon of Howling Commandos - embodies the cinematic archetype of the War World Two soldier – specifically the ensemble cast film depiction of soldiers such as *The Great Escape* and *Where Eagles Dare* (1968) – with an emphasis on the unit of soldiers as a team, all bringing something of value to the group that helps them save the day. It’s an idealistic version of World War Two that places importance on good men fighting the just fight simply because it’s the right thing to do. However, Rogers’s enhanced physique means that he stands out amongst the rest of the soldiers as one man able to secure victory in the war through his strength and agility in battle which is more reminiscent of films such as *Sergeant York* (1944). These types of war films tend to focus on the experiences of one soldier, at times functioning more like a (fictitious) biography of one man and his impressive feats of courage than as a war film itself. *Sergeant York* follows the story of the titular character, torn between his religious beliefs that killing is wrong and the demands of the war which means he must fight and defend his country. Whilst York is a single man in a large unit, the story focuses on his personal growth rather than his camaraderie with the other soldiers and as a result, the climatic ending of the film gives the victory to York alone when he sees his superior officers gunned down by enemy fire and he takes charge, single-handedly crossing enemy lines to kill German soldiers and

forcing them to surrender their weapons. Similarly to York's conflict between religion and war, Rogers's duality allows the film to explore both conflicting embodiments of the cinematic World War Two soldier archetype through the juxtaposition the narrative establishes between the ensemble emphasis and the soloistic endeavours.

Steve Rogers is first introduced in the film when he is being turned away from getting drafted into the war effort due to a long list of medical ailments that make him a less than ideal candidate to become a soldier. Indeed, Rogers doesn't strike anyone as the heroic figure of a superhero with his lack of muscle definition and a list of medical conditions that automatically rule him out from enlistment. He is the complete opposite in physical stature of what Captain America will become⁴. Immediately, the narrative is showing the difference between Steve Rogers, the everyday man of 1940s Brooklyn, and Captain America, the super-soldier. This difference is important for the storyline as it acts as a way to hint at the eventual dual identity of Rogers, which will become a crucial aspect in exploring his cinematic archetype of masculinity. The first act of this narrative is about setting up Rogers's conviction of character rather than his skill or physical prowess which will come later and offers a sequence that is often a cliché of the combat film as seen in films such as *The Great Escape* and *The Dam Busters* (1954), in which Rogers must prove himself to his commanders and fellow soldiers. *CA:TFA* being set in World War Two, rather than the contemporary time period, allows this film to explicitly depict Rogers's cinematic archetype throughout the narrative in a much more overt way, including through the details of Rogers training to become a soldier.

In basic training, a montage scene most effectively demonstrates Rogers's differences to that of his fellow cadets. Audiences see him struggle physically with the boot camp drills and there is a lot of attention paid to how much smaller he is than the other men. Almost comically,

⁴ This drastic physiological change is a result of CGI work and body stand ins for Evans until Captain America is revealed.

Rogers's height only measures up to their shoulders and there is ample doubts about Rogers due to his size such as Phillips (Tommy Lee Jones), the Colonel in charge of the cadets stating: "Look at that, he's making me cry" in response to Rogers's failure to keep up in training with the other men. As well as this display of physical hardship, the film gives attention to the differences in personality. While the other cadets playfully wrestle each other in the barracks, Rogers unpacks books rather than engage in stereotypical demonstrations of masculine dominance.

Furthermore, during a training exercise when challenged to retrieve a flag from the top of a flagpole, the other cadets immediately use their physical strength to try and climb it and fail, however, it's Rogers that retrieves it using brain over brawn to remove a pin holding the pole in place and letting the flag drop to the ground where he can easily collect it. All of these scenes are meant to highlight to the audience the differences in Rogers's character when compared to the traditional embodiment of masculinity these other soldiers are displaying, it's not about physical stature but rather the individual's commitment. This is a notion this film will return to frequently over the course of this narrative. The ultimate demonstration of this occurs when Phillips drops a dummy grenade into the training ground to test the reactions of the cadets, everyone immediately flees except Rogers who throws himself on top of it in a sacrificial move to save the rest of the unit. He demonstrates he has what it takes to be a soldier, a willingness to lay down his life for the good of others. This scene is about the internal versus the external (another duality this film explores in depth). Muscles can be manufactured (literally in this case with the aid of the serum) but things like agency, empathy and courage cannot and these are depicted as being the most useful of Rogers's traits in being a soldier. Rather than musculature, it's these internal attributes that prompt him to be chosen to receive the serum that will turn him into Captain America.

Basic training signals Rogers as different from the other cadets and therefore alludes to the soloistic archetype of the soldier Captain America will embody. It's important to note that for the purpose of this discussion the reference to Rogers and Captain America as two different entities is used to signal the different cinematic archetypes of the World War Two soldier each is indicative of despite the fact they are alter egos of the same man. This is a deliberate choice of this work to better underscore how these two cinematic archetypes work in opposite and relation to each other throughout the narrative.

The soloistic archetype of World War Two soldier is frequently seen in Hollywood cinema with films such as *Sergeant York*, which focuses on the struggle of one man to come to terms with his desire to serve his country and the oath he has taken not to kill. Even in films such as *The Great Escape* there is a focus on individualist pursuit within the ensemble dynamic. Every group must have a leader, an authoritative voice that guides the plot. In *The Great Escape*, which is set in a prisoner of war camp, the narrative follows a team of men who attempt to tunnel out of the prison and in doing so, lead a rescue mission to save 250 other men. This idea comes from Squadron Leader Bartlett, who puts the plan into action and recruits others to the cause. The importance of emphasising Rogers's differences to the other men in his unit work in a similar way to Bartlett being the one to come up with the rescue plan. It places the character as the driving force of the narrative and also demonstrates why they should be there. Rogers's demonstration of intelligence and willingness to sacrifice himself for others singles him out as a competent leader as this film goes on to prove, even without the physical strength possessed by the other men in his unit, he is still able to emphasise his credibility as a soldier. This also lends Rogers a level of culpability within the narrative, serving to establish an emotional weight to the character as the one responsible for rallying his men into dangerous situations and therefore placing him as central of the story. This adheres to the trope of the World War Two film where, "Second World War movies are more likely to emphasise 'positive' values of valour, patriotism and purposeful sacrifice" (Langford, B. 2005. 107-108). Rogers's

actions of throwing himself on top of the grenade to save the others doesn't just demonstrate he's a good soldier, it's also the action that leads him to receiving the super soldier serum that turns him into Captain America.

The experiment that leads to this transformation is led by Dr Erskine (Stanley Tucci) and is thought to be America's great weapon to win the war. The experiment has a drastic change not just on Rogers's physical appearance – allowing him to transform into the embodiment of American exceptionalism – but also on his life. He is Steve Rogers from Brooklyn but to everyone else in that room he is their weapon to turn the tide in the war. This is where these two conflicting soldier masculinities explicitly start to develop within the film. The superhero genre often displays issues of duality, whether that be through the hero and villain (chapter 1.2) or through the two lives the hero must present to keep a secret identity. As Ford and Krimmer suggest, this “further highlight[s] the need for enhanced masculinity through their preference for doubling. They are fond of alter egos and tend to split their heroes in two” (Ford, S. Krimmer, E. 2011. 110). This duality allows *CA:TFA* to explore the main discussion in this narrative, the issue of action over image as the most favourable way for the MCU to establish its heroes and this film aims to establish this duality in Rogers in order to later subvert it in Phase Two. Turning Rogers into Captain America reinforces the notion that “nation-states require a certain type of male body for warfare, and thereby in war it elevates and prioritizes some bodies and forms of hegemonic masculinity over others” (Vayrynen, T. 2013. 139). This film seems to subvert this by favouring Rogers's personality traits over his newly manufactured body as superior.

Captain America becomes a national symbol to the people of America, and Rogers is quickly employed to promote the war effort, taking part in stage shows against “Hitler” and doing public meet and greets. The narrative takes on the tone of the musical war film here, following Rubenstein's parameters, as Rogers is choreographed alongside singers and dancers as part of

his performance. He has gone from being a lab rat to being, in the film's own words, a "performing monkey". He isn't a soldier or a man of action. He is employed to be looked at and gazed upon like a showgirl to a crowd. His image isn't heroic here, it's voyeuristic. The hypermasculinity of Captain America has become a performance to the people of America suggesting its ineffectiveness as a successful embodiment of the cinematic soldier archetype. This is highlighted through Rogers's isolation as a performer. He yearns to be fighting for the good of his country and shows reluctance with his new role. He tells Peggy: "For the longest time I thought about coming over seas, on the front lines serving my country. I finally got everything I wanted and I'm wearing tights." This is meant to be an image of masculinity, Rogers's struggling to reconcile his idea of what a soldier should be compared to the role he is currently fulfilling for the war effort, creating this isolation for his character. Like Rogers, the audience is positioned to view the notion that his talents are being wasted despite the fact that Rogers is still serving his country (albeit not by fighting on the front lines). In this scene, the narrative reinforces traditional depictions of masculinity during war time, Rogers does deem the job he is being tasked with as a worthwhile endeavour and would prefer to be fighting. This is what he deems to be a better display of masculinity and the fact he can't do it causes him distress.

This isolation only grows when he is faced with 'real' soldiers whilst touring with his stage show. This sequence offers a closer look at the notion of masculinity as a literal performance, a crucial demonstration of this film that there is more here than pure action and spectacle. *CA:TFA* is able to tackle many issues raised in the combat movie despite the constraints placed upon it in the superhero genre. Rogers gives a performance to the soldiers of the 107th Squadron, in which he is met with distasteful heckling and has fruit thrown at him. This squadron is depicted as a cohesive unit, they've all fought together and bled together (shown by the bandages many of the soldiers wear) and share the same uniform which serves to distinguish them from Rogers, alone on the stage in his bright and gaudy costume. The soldiers

of the 107th represent what is believed to be (for both the 1940s society and in terms of the film itself) an ideal version of masculinity. They are brave, strong and have the honour to fight for their country. Rogers experience as Captain America is juxtaposed with that ideal type of masculinity and the credibility it fosters on the individual, it is shown to be something unattainable to him due to being railroaded into playing the Captain America role, his garish costume and the performances he is depicted as giving.

The chance to earn the respect of these men comes from the rescue mission Rogers leads (against orders) to liberate Bucky and several other soldiers taken hostage, proving to himself and the other men that his soloistic soldier archetype is capable of saving the day, taking the charge to lead the others to safety. The narrative shifts to reflect another iteration of the war film as suggested by Rubenstein in the form of the POW escape. A dramatic shift from the comical beat of his performance that emphasises a shift in Rogers himself. This is the moment of acceptance for Rogers, but it is only achieved when he has become Captain America and demonstrated agency by choosing for himself to go and rescue Bucky and the other soldiers rather than simply following the orders of his government in the war effort. A rescue he is only able to achieve due to the super-soldier serum enhancing his ability and physicality, effectively turning him into Captain America. This suggests there is a struggle between Rogers's dual identity, this moment highlighting how he sacrifices the identity of Steve Rogers for the nationalistic duty that can only be served by the super-soldier Captain America in order to rescue those men. Rogers can only seem to make positive change as Captain America with the use of his strength and agility so even though the agency belongs to Rogers, the film undermines it by suggesting he wouldn't be able to launch a rescue operation without his newly hypermasculine body, emphasising his body as a means to secure victory, an expected trope within the superhero movie. This is the first-time audiences start to see these two cinematic archetypes of the soldier work together towards the same goal by achieving a moment of triumph and heroism. A first sign that this is the way forward for Rogers's

masculinity, these two archetypes come together to serve the collective and in defence of the greater good. This scene serves as a reminder that “the hero may be a policeman or a soldier but he more often than not acts unofficially, against the rules and often in a reactive way, responding to attacks rather than initiating them” (Tasker, Y. 1993. 241). This is a trend often depicted in Hollywood cinema, not only in the war genre but also other male dominated genres such as the Western and the action film. Rogers’s character development follows a similar trajectory in order to highlight how the embodiment of his cinematic archetype is formed, indebted to earlier genre archetypes of masculinity in Hollywood cinema. This conflict between soloistic and ensemble soldier also works to foreshadow the formation of the Avengers within the MCU, this conflict a lesser fraught dynamic that Rogers will go on to have with Stark in *AA* (chapter 1.4), establishing a dichotomy between the two with Rogers firmly believing in a team approach and Stark preferring the soloistic journey.

After this scene, Rogers puts together a unit of men from the soldiers he liberated, explicitly introducing the ensemble World War Two soldier archetype into the narrative through this brotherhood and comradeship between them and setting up another iteration of the war film that Rubenstein comments on through the *Battling Buddies* narrative. This is another World War Two soldier archetype that is often seen in Hollywood cinema with films such as *Where Eagles Dare*, this film brings together a team of commandos after a US Army Brigadier General is captured by Germans and taken for interrogation. The ensemble team is given the mission of rescuing him before that interrogation can take place. This film focuses on the strong connection between the characters, offering glimpses of the bonds between these men as they attempt their rescue mission in a similar way to *CA:TFA* which introduces another montage scene to show this newly found unit in action on various missions (that presumably take place over the course of several months) in order to establish Rogers’s ensemble soldier archetype to the audience. The narrative sets up these two conflicting cinematic World War Two soldier archetypes for Rogers’s masculinity through the duality of his character therefore

allowing the film to negotiate between such embodiments of masculinity as the war (and the action) continues towards the latter half of the film.

It's important to note that *CA:TFA* doesn't linger on the depressing or the horrific aspects of war despite being heavily action-driven and predominantly grounded in the war film, instead choosing to focus on the camaraderie of the characters in a fantastical sense that is largely shown through montage sequences that shy away from many of the negative effects the war had on its soldiers on a day-to-day basis. This is largely down to the film's status as a superhero movie, *CA:TFA* is not a war film. It's a film set in wartime. The difference allows the filmmakers to gloss over the harsher depiction of World War Two found in films such as *The Great Escape* or *The Longest Day* (1962) in favour of representing a sanitised version of events, aimed at creating a sense of nostalgia over their collective part in the war. What is depicted is an idealised version of World War Two, which presents a perfect harmony of interracial soldiers (Captain America's own elite squad contains an Irishman, an Asian-American and an African-American that makes up the team) and a focus on the victorious nobility of the American Army who simply want to fight a just war for the sake of freedom. This film emphasises the idea that "teamwork and comradeship define the military masculinity of the war film" (Tasker, Y. 2016. 114). The MCU favours the collective and the notions of a team as superior to the individual however, this team is led by a white saviour figure in Rogers (he literally liberates them all from being prisoners of war before recruiting them) therefore issues of white privilege and white superiority are glossed over in favour of presenting a utopic version of World War Two in which interracial soldiers fight together, side by side, in unity. In ignoring the historical realities "the America that Rogers champions in the film does not discriminate based on ethnicity nor nationality. But the fact the superhero that leads this racially diverse group is a paragon of traditional white American masculinity subtly reinforces hegemonic order" (Brown, J.A. 2017. 103).

Rogers is still seen as the central focus of the narrative, the only one worthy enough to be injected with the super soldier serum, and as a result he rescues all races and accepts all but he is still superior as the American white man. This aids in the portrayal of his dual cinematic archetypes of the World War Two soldier however but seems to favour the soloistic soldier as superior due to Rogers's ability to suffer trauma – which is depicted more overtly than the other soldiers due to his position as their leader – but also due to his enhanced abilities from the serum which allows him to liberate the other men. *CA:TFA* prioritises the homage over the real-life horror because it is first and foremost, a superhero film. The set up of this film is not to explore the effects of war but to depict the origins of Captain America, allowing the focus to shift from the horrors of World War Two to negotiating the duality between these two cinematic archetypes of masculinity and delivering a very mediatised cinematic version of World War Two.

Depicting the Duality of Rogers's Cinematic Archetype of Masculinity

Interestingly, the issues of duality aren't just limited to his identity and masculinity but are also reflected in Rogers's various costumes. His outfit as Captain America is about performance, it's bright, meant to show-off and add to the spectacle of his performance. It's made for him to stand out from the crowd and looks a little more theatrical rather than practical, visually referencing the stars and stripes of the American flag. This reinforces his hypermasculine status as Captain America, he is to be looked at and noticed. However, his soldier uniform is meant to do the opposite. He's meant to blend in with the other men, one of the group, part of a larger unit all working towards the same goal. The duality between Rogers and Captain America is demonstrated through costume. In terms of merging these two conflicting identities and masculinities, his costume also reflects this shift. Later on in the film, Rogers designs a second suit for himself (and gives the notes to Howard Stark to make) but this costume merges both sides of his duality into one. The uniform is practical, able to hold transmitters and

weapons in a way his performance costume couldn't, but it also stands out through the same use of blue, red and white as the stage costume (although the colours are far more subdued). It isn't about him as a spectacle but is meant to draw attention and identify him as the leader of the group. Furthermore, he chooses a shield as his "weapon" of choice, which takes attention away from his body as the weapon. The shield is a defensive tool. It isn't about inflicting violence or damage, it's about protection of the greater good. Rogers's masculinity and Captain America's hypermasculinity find a balance, as represented by the costume/uniform he chooses to wear, and this signifies the merging of these two opposing cinematic soldier archetypes of masculinity for the character.

Rogers's first hardship as Captain America is enduring the loss of his best friend, introducing trauma into the narrative as a device to examine Rogers's soldier archetypes of masculinity in a more critical way. Trauma is used in the film as a measure of his masculinity, included as another homage to the older World War Two films such as *A Walk in the Sun* (1945) and *The Guns of Navarone*. Soldiers suffering is paramount to the genre of the war film and *CA:TFA* continues that trend in Rogers. Of course, trauma isn't just universal to the soldier experience, it also forms a crucial step to the superhero origin story where loss provides the 'right' motivation for an ascension into heroism. The use of trauma in both genres as a measure of masculinity offers a justification that "male violence is required by circumstance rather than being actively sought out. The male hero may be drawn into violence on behalf of others or his nation; he protects and sacrifices or is willing to sacrifice himself" (Tasker, Y. 2016. 112). This is what makes a good hero and soldier in this film (and both the superhero and war genres more widely), the justification to fight for others and it's only through the loss of Bucky that Rogers fully understands that conviction.

This film includes a scene where Rogers openly grieves for Bucky in a bombed-out bar after the mission where Bucky falls from a train and is presumed dead as a demonstration of how his

soldier archetype deals with trauma in order to further interrogate his masculinity. The film's director, Joe Johnston, states, "we wanted to change his vulnerability and make him a little more angry and intense and it was the vulnerability that gave him humanity and emotion" (Johnston, J. 2011. DVD Commentary). This scene works to show Rogers's loss through that vulnerability and emotion, bringing the sacrifices of war down to a personal level through his loss. The scene opens up on the bombed-out bar, using wide shots in order to convey the level of destruction that the war is causing. There is broken glass and ruined furniture surrounding Rogers, who sits at the only usable table in the scene, trying to get drunk as he grieves the loss of his best friend. This emphasises the change in Rogers after becoming Captain America, the procedure altered him on a cellular level and affects his metabolism so he can no longer get drunk, therefore becoming Captain America has fundamentally altered the ways in which he can 'deal' with grief. In this moment he has become the embodiment of hegemonic masculinity and therefore can't seem to emote.

Rogers is dressed in his military service uniform rather than his Captain America outfit, placing him in the position of a soldier rather than as a superhero. The emphasis on the soldier rather than the superhero demonstrates that "the failure of the war and public insensitivity or hostility to soldiers' experiences have created a seemingly insurmountable isolation" (Vickroy, L. 2002. 216). By placing Rogers's loss as a link to his experiences as a soldier it allows the narrative to explore this type of isolation through his character and the effects this has on his masculinity. This becomes a moment of self-reference to the war genre where trauma was often endured by the soldiers. This scene allows Rogers's pain to be felt which challenges notions of his cinematic archetype of masculinity through the depiction of how the narrative suggests Rogers deals with his loss. This masculine soldier archetype is incapable of emoting his trauma as this scene demonstrates, and this allows a critique of this particular embodiment of soloistic masculinity to be depicted.

The Self-Sacrificing Soldier

The film reaches its final act where Captain America and Red Skull have their last showdown and it leads to Rogers being forced to pilot the plane carrying bombs that have the potential to wipe out New York into the Arctic in order to stop it reaching its destination and potentially killing thousands. The difference in Rogers's moment of self-sacrifice is that unlike Tony Stark or Thor, he doesn't get to flourish into a full-fledged superhero after his sacrifice (chapter 1.1 and 1.2). The film decides to end with it instead, the last moments of Rogers in the plane are the shots of him forcing the plane down into the ice where it crashes, his self-sacrifice framing this moment of heroism as Captain America. Rogers is denied his moment of heroic glory because he doesn't need it. He's always been a good man who understands the needs of the collective, a natural hero embodied through his cinematic archetype of the soldier. Sacrificing himself isn't uncharacteristically heroic here (whereas for Stark and Thor it is because it demonstrates their newly realised selflessness, a change in their masculinity from the start of their respective films), but for Roger it's expected. He's a soldier and putting his life on the line is part of what he signed up for when he joined the army to protect and serve his country. The film demonstrates that "acknowledgement is made of sacrifice, of loss of individual liberty, but these are largely seen as necessary and inevitable" (Knee, A. 2017. 165). The narrative doesn't focus on the heroics of the act because the act itself isn't out of character for Rogers who started his training by jumping on a dummy grenade in the hopes of saving his fellow cadets, the focus is on Rogers's emotional turmoil instead. This returns to the idea of action over image, the demonstration of agency is the important factor. The MCU favours this agency in its heroes and in this act, Rogers is embodying the ideal of the 'ultimate' soldier, merging both of his previously conflicting archetypal soldier masculinities together as a way to signify the act of sacrifice is what makes all soldiers heroic. This is a notion that will be further interrogated in later instalments of the MCU, especially in terms of Rogers's conflict with Stark in AA (see 1.4).

There is a long-established tradition of self-sacrificing masculinity both in terms of cinematic motifs such as those in *Where Eagles Dare* and *The Great Escape*, depicting the sacrifice soldiers made for their country and their fellow soldiers. For example, in *Where Eagles Dare*, audiences see one soldier in the platoon, Captain Thomas, allow himself to be used as a decoy and killed in order to secure victory for the others when they attempt to escape the mountaintop fortress held by the Germans. Thomas' sacrifice means survival for his men and safety for his country, this action makes him heroic because he is giving his life in service of others. This self-sacrificing masculinity highlights it is expected of a soldier to lay down his life for his fellow men. This grounds Rogers's actions into his issues of dual identity and suggests it's this moment of sacrifice that allows him to prove his heroism through his embodiment of soldier masculinity. The camera angle as he pilots the plane is tilted and unsettling for the audience, conveying his sacrifice as he talks to Peggy over the radio. He places the compass with her picture on the deck in front of him which adds a layer of emotion to the scene but also represents his idea of home – the compass is something he still has and carries with him after waking up in 2012 – and when it falls to the ground as he pilots the plane towards the ice it emphasises the idea of home slipping away from him as well. This idea of home becomes a big moment of despair for him when he wakes up 70 years in the future.

The scene cuts before the plane hits the ground, the focus is on Peggy as the radio cuts out, this focus on everything Rogers is losing is meant to be emotional to align the audience with his loss. Rogers tells Peggy: "This is my choice." And the ending of this scene acts as a reminder to everything he is sacrificing. His life, his home, the possibility at a future. It is this moment that the cost of his sacrifice is made clear. It's the merging of Steve Rogers and Captain America, his self-sacrificing masculinity clearly being favoured as the more acceptable way to embody successful heroic masculinity as the MCU prioritises sacrifice over violence in this final act suggesting that true heroism comes from defensive sacrifice for the greater good rather than an offensive battle with the enemy. The ultimate soldier archetype is depicted as an act

of self-sacrifice in a similar vein to the soldier of the World War Two film, uniting the ensemble soldier (sacrificing to save the rest of his men) and the soloistic soldier (sacrificing to save the day).

This sacrificial scene is very reminiscent of the opening scene of *A Matter of Life and Death*, in which an RAF pilot is flying a badly damaged plane and orders his men to save themselves, jumping from the aircraft and deploying their parachutes. Carter's parachute is damaged, and he chooses to save his men knowing he'll die when the plane crashes. The situation draws many parallels with *CA:TFA*, including the plane crash, Carter talking on the radio to a woman in his last moments and of course, the fact both Rogers and Carter ultimately end up surviving from their sacrifices. These mirroring scenes align both men as embodying a kind of masculinity that is worth saving. The willingness to sacrifice themselves for others warrants their resurrections suggesting it's the innate values of a man rather than his pumped-up muscles that make the best soldier.

The depiction of sacrifice is often expected as part of the war film, soldiers are depicted as making the ultimate sacrifice for their country and the honour that comes with that. *CA:TFA* is referencing the same cinematic motif with Rogers's sacrifice in this scene. There is no sacrifice more noble than giving his life for his country and this is further emphasised by the fact Rogers isn't immediately resurrected after this 'death'. He stays frozen in ice for seventy years before he is found. This sacrifice carries weight, it's arguably more tragic than the self-sacrificing masculinity audiences have seen from the previous MCU heroes (Iron Man and Thor) because there is no reward served. Rogers loses far more than he gains and even though he survives, everyone and everything he knew from this life is gone. His self-sacrifice is truly depicted as a sacrifice. Often in the genre of the war film, "the sacrificed blood of a soldier bestows, or offers in a sense, a new life for the community as it identifies the reality of the nation displayed with the destruction of each body on the battlefield" (Rahimi, B. 2005. 5). *CA:TFA*

invokes a similar ethos, while Rogers doesn't bleed (except for a minor split lip), his supposed death does lead to the film cutting sharply to the end of the war, crowds celebrating this victory after adversity. This aligns Rogers's sacrifice with the Allies victory suggesting a cause and effect between the two where his death and sacrifice is what wins the Allies the war. This reinforces the notion that sacrifice is the ultimate form of heroism.

The MCU gives audiences another example of self-sacrificing masculinity within their heroes in this scene, reaffirming the notion that "just about every superhero suffers a great personal sacrifice in order to help the greater good. These characters have trouble pursuing personal happiness in their regular lives, because the larger duty of their super-heroism appeals to a great sense of moral purpose" (McSweeney, T. 2018. 107). Rogers is no different, in this moment of personal sacrifice is that issue of duality. He has a duty as Captain America to save lives and make the right choice but this scene also sets up this idea of a life he could have as Steve Rogers, represented by Peggy as she tries to talk him out of his decision. Rogers and Peggy keep up a conversation, a pretence as he asks for a rain check on their date as a way to mourn the life that he knows he'll never get to have. This is the moment where Rogers accepts himself as Captain America, fully embracing his superheroism over his own life as he sacrifices himself and the life he could have had with Peggy to save thousands of people. Even the music becomes bittersweet and sombre as the scene cuts to the plane after it has crashed in the ice, mourning the loss of Rogers that fades out to the victory day celebrations after the war is won. This frames his sacrifice. This is what he died for, this victory and freedom for everyone else and it's this that he will carry with him in later instalments of the MCU. His traumatic experience through his self-sacrifice paves the way for him to become the legend he was created to be. Being Captain America acts as a reward for Rogers's sacrifice, quite literally when he wakes up in the future where people only know him as Captain America rather than Steve Rogers and he has become something of a living legend to the people of America. This further suggests the merging of his dual identities as one masculinity for him to embody, the

time jump to the future cements this acceptance as Captain America (now an embodiment of both Rogers's ensemble soldier masculinity as well as traits of Captain America's soloistic soldier hypermasculinity).

When Rogers wakes up seventy years later at the end of the film, it's in a mock-up of a 1940s recovery room in an attempt to give Rogers some comfort and normalcy but even that doesn't last and he soon realises he is being deceived. That this world isn't the one he calls home:

For Steve Rogers, it's not just that he's in a "new world", it's also the fact that he woke up and had to hear that everybody he knows is dead. Every single person he called brother on the battlefield, that he bled with, is gone. He's alone literally, emotionally and mentally and the world around him is a different place. (Evans, C. 2019. 9).

This is an unsettling note for the film to end on, with Rogers as a lost man rather than as a superhero figure like Iron Man or Thor. He is denied the glory of his rebirth through this tragic ending note for his character, a man out of time having lost everything and everyone he knew. It is this moment that hints at his future isolation and issues of masculinity. Audiences see his franticness and disbelief "when the disoriented Captain America crashes out of the facility, [and] he finds himself in Times Square, a macabre parody of a post-World War 2 homecoming" (Vernon, M. 2016. 120). This is another tragedy for Rogers, they might have won the war, but he can't go home. His homecoming is a warped affair that offers neither victory or joy, and it's this moment that audiences leave Rogers, mourning the loss of everyone he once knew at the beginning of his isolation and displacement in the present day, a world much different to the one he knows. The issue of duality has finally been removed for good as he wakes up in a world that only knows Captain America as a legend. This ending works to subvert the traditional World War Two films of the 1940s where there was difficulty concluding a film in the traditional Hollywood sense of having everything wrapped up neatly, the hero winning, all loose ends being resolved because "the war was ongoing and the armed forces were

concurrently enacting the broader war narrative on the battlefield, films dealing with the war attempted to avoid definitive endings” (Allison, T. 2018. 66). *CA:TFA* does offer an ending for Rogers and the war, before teasing Rogers’s return to the MCU in the present day (and therefore marking his return in *AA*) and securing the set-up for the next two films in his trilogy.

The overall arc of the film doesn’t quite work in terms of depicting Rogers’s cinematic archetype through sacrifice as a demonstration of his masculinity is because of Rogers himself. Throughout the film there is no real internal conflict and therefore no character development. The physical change from receiving the serum doesn’t have the same emotional sense that a change of character would have but Rogers starts off as a good man and ends as a good man, as actor, Chris Evans describes it, “he’s good for the sake of being good” (Evans, C. 2019. 9). He doesn’t seem to waver or doubt himself and because of this there is no real concern that he’d ever pick his own personal happiness over his duty to America. This is the big conflict in this final scene, that decision between happiness and duty. Between life as Steve Rogers or as Captain America. However, there is no real conflict there, the issue of duality is one the character wrestles with throughout the film but by the time he gets in that plane at the end of the movie, he has already become Captain America. It’s a title that he is given before his actions merit it (although he does go on to earn the title by the end of the film). The climax of the film is about dealing with his duality – his conflicting masculinities – rather than reaffirming his status as superhero. These two archetypes of soldier masculinity finally seem to cohesively merge together into his identity – accepting himself as Rogers and Captain America – and this supports the final sacrificial act he chooses to make. This is where he chooses Captain America, although this version of the hero isn’t the portrayal of the hypermasculine soldier the film previously depicts, but rather an embodiment that encompasses both traits from Rogers’s soloistic masculinity and Captain America’s ensemble masculinity. He’s a soldier but also a hero and this film seems to support the notion that soldiers are seen as superheroes in their own right. This narrative decision serves as a reminder that “when offered up as a sacrifice, the

soldier becomes a “sacred” object, a hero and sovereign subject whose death endows him/her with the transcendental status and moral authority” (King, C.S. 2011. 33).

In conclusion, Rogers embodies the cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier in two ways to reflect his dual identity. Rogers embraces the ideal of the World War Two ensemble soldier, fighting an honourable fight with his comrades because it is the right thing to do.

When he becomes Captain America he embodies a slightly different version of the soldier archetype, one that’s more hypermasculine and tends to focus on the feats of one man rather than a group. Neither soldier archetype – ensemble or soloistic - is superior on its own however, together they form a newer model of soldier masculinity that bridges the gap between ensemble soldier masculinity as part of a collective, and soloistic soldier masculinity serving the individual need for victory therefore setting up this progression of masculinity in Rogers as a successful development of his cinematic archetype to be challenged further in a modern-day setting.

This film and the focus on duality throughout reconcile these two different masculinities together, allowing Rogers to finally accept himself as Captain America, merging aspects from both cinematic soldier archetypes together as a successful embodiment of World War Two masculinity for the character. Both of these cinematic soldier archetypes are shown to be ineffective on their own and it is only when they are merged together than Rogers manages to save the day and ultimately help win the war through his self-sacrifice which is depicted as the ideal trait for soldier masculinity, a willingness to choose the collective over the individual.

Rogers’s heroism in this film doesn’t progress the way Iron Man’s or Thor’s does partly due to the nature of the character as a soldier and partly because of the build-up needed for the upcoming *Avengers* film. The issue of his heroic masculinity isn’t fully formed in this narrative – and will continue to be explored in later MCU films – which works as a further interrogation of soldier masculinity when Rogers finds himself 70 years in the future and his masculinity is

depicted as being outdated, leaving him to find newer embodiments of masculinity to encompass which reflect the new era. This conflict of masculinity will continue in AA, drawing together these three core characters (and a host of other heroes), to be able to explore how these masculinities work in relation to each other and therefore, how these masculinities influence each other.

1.4: “We’re a Chemical Mixture that Makes Chaos”: Assembling the Avengers: Conflicting Masculinities and Collectivism in *Avengers Assemble*.

AA is an ambitious attempt at bringing together different previously established characters and merge their storylines into an interconnecting narrative. This not only marks the end of the MCU’s Phase One but also help ensure the success of the following phases within the Cinematic Universe. When talking about the difficulties this ambitious film brought to the studios, Marvel’s President of Production Kevin Feige states:

It was certainly difficult, but at the same time we’ve been planning this for years and years in advance – much longer than a typical live-action movie would be worked on. All of our prep work on *Iron Man 2*, *Thor* and *Captain America* incorporated plans for *Avengers Assemble*, including negotiations with the talent. (Feige, K qtd in Ashurst, S. 2012. Online).

AA brings together a team of heroes, including Iron Man, Captain America and Thor and explores forming a team around these individuals. Each brings with them their own embodiment of a cinematic archetype (see chapters 1.1, 1.2, 1.3) and this narrative works to examine how these differing embodiments of cinematic masculinity find a way to co-exist in relation to each other. Having established the embodiment of these cinematic archetypes in the previous origin story films within Phase One, AA focuses on the idea of sharing and learning masculine traits between these core characters. This chapter will explore how these cinematic archetypes work within the narrative and how it’s the archetype of the soldier (previously embodied by Captain America) that is favoured within this film, prompting the sacrifice of other models of cinematic masculinity in favour of adopting the archetype of the soldier and the importance of serving the collective over the self. The superhero genre has:

Characteristic scenes of action, endurance and violence that offer iconic images of male strength and resilience which elaborate an idealized masculinity. Male mobility is a

central troupe to [many] genres, one which repeatedly couples physical movement or scenes of action with themes of independence (Tasker, Y. 2016. 111).

This film takes different embodiments of cinematic archetypes, constructed within more traditional Hollywood genres such as the Western or the action film, and presents them together on screen within these three characters, allowing for an exploration of these embodiments of masculinity no longer as separate or isolated depictions of cinematic archetypes of masculinity but as part of a team made up of masculinities that differ from hero to hero. This chapter will demonstrate how these differing cinematic archetypes of masculinity are established within the narrative and how they function in conflict to each other on screen, presenting the ensemble soldier archetype as the most successful and demonstrating the idea of the team as a collective designed to serve a much larger collective (Earth).

The start of this film sets up the main conflict between these characters and their different embodiments of masculinities as this chapter will explore, forcing each member into the group dynamic to form a superhero team which ultimately aims to decide which embodiment of cinematic masculinity is favoured throughout the narrative as the most successful way of saving the day. *AA* brings together its heroes to form a response team when Loki (previously seen as the antagonist in *Thor*) plans to lead an army against the Earth in order to conquer and rule it with the power of the tesseract, an energy core with the potential to wipe out the planet. Each Avenger brings a unique skillset and outlook to the team, more often than not:

Filmic teams consist of a diverse group of colourful characters, each having their own crucial area of expertise. In the Avengers case: a military strategist, an interrogation expert, a genius, a precision marksman, and a strong man. This trope of validating the efficacy of a small group to accomplish seemingly impossible tasks is a critical American belief born from the mythology of the American Revolution. (Brown, J.A. 2017. 106).

It is also a way for the narrative to explore and examine embodiments of cinematic archetypes of masculinity in a critical way, comparing them against one another in order to analyse where these embodiments are deemed as being heroic by MCU standards, in doing so, it develops the discussion of masculinity further from the previous films which were largely concerned with how these cinematic archetypes of masculinity are established within these characters.

Re-Establishing the Cinematic Archetypes of Masculinity through Character Introduction

The introduction of the core protagonists works to establish their cinematic archetypes of masculinity and also set up their recruitment into this new team. Captain America's introduction in this film is the first time he is shown since the ending of his own solo film which sees him awakening 70 years into the future having been entombed in ice after his traumatic sacrifice in the film's events of World War Two. This snippet of his character works to convey much about his isolation since waking up in the present day. Director Joss Whedon states, "Steve hitting those bags tells you everything you need to know about his level of isolation and frustration" (Whedon, J. 2012. DVD Commentary). Captain America is seen channelling his trauma into the punching bag, mindlessly hitting the bag in front of him with force as flashbacks of his time in war intersect on screen. It looks like Rogers is punching away each image as it appears. This works to establish Rogers's soloistic soldier archetype, a reminder that he is no longer part of a platoon or a brotherhood (because all of his men are dead in this time leaving Rogers as a soldier without an army). The action of hitting the punch bags is inherently masculinity and emphasises his enhanced muscles – along with his increased strength and agility – aligning him with Captain America as the soloistic soldier. Despite being in a gym, he works out alone in the middle of the night which adds to the setting of his isolation.

This depiction foreshadows Rogers's recruitment by S.H.I.E.L.D., establishing why he needs to join the Avengers but also works to highlight how his current embodiment of the soloistic

soldier archetype isn't effective for him to be a hero. *CA:TFA* established this notion, suggesting that a better cinematic archetype of masculinity for Rogers was a combination of the soloistic soldier and the ensemble soldier (see 1.3) and *AA* reintroduces this debate during this scene in order to set up bringing Rogers into the Avengers.

This scene seems to convey a sense of repetition as Rogers breaks the bag in front of him and immediately goes to grab another from a huge pile of punch bags he has off to the side of the gym. This suggests that it's a routine for him, further hinting at his isolation in this time period. His response is a masculine one, seeking out a violent way to deal with the memories of his time in war by hitting things as a way to channel his anger and aggression. This additionally links to Rogers's embodiment of the soloistic soldier archetype, one that rarely seems to endorse talking about feelings in fear of it makes him weak so instead the cinematic archetype of the soldier is often seen to choose violence and aggression as a means of coping instead. The constant assault of flashbacks despite Rogers attempt at pummeling them away suggests this solution isn't a successful one. Violence is one key way men in particular choose to deal with their isolation as an externalization of their suffering and Rogers's violence towards the punch bags in this scene emphasises that, yet violence in the MCU isn't favoured in this way therefore is encoded as being an unsuccessful outlet for Rogers. Mejia suggests:

Boys and men are socialized and taught to avoid shame at all costs, to wear a mask of coolness, and to act as if everything is going to be alright even if it's not. Perhaps the most traumatizing and dangerous concept thrust onto boys and men is the literal gender straitjacket that prohibits boys and men from expressing their feelings. (Mejia, X.E. 2005. 33).

Rogers's introduction to the audience plays on this idea of men avoiding voicing their own feelings, instead preferring to handle things alone and through societally approved means such as violence. *AA* challenges this throughout the film by bringing Rogers into the team and

therefore giving him a means to interact and learn from other cinematic archetypes of masculinity. This film places a large emphasis on how these individuals are brought together (which is the other function of this scene, used as Rogers's recruitment into the team) and function as a unit and the importance of them working together becomes paramount as a way in which these characters embody certain archetypes of masculinity and how they manage to influence each other as the narrative progresses.

Stark's introduction scene is shorter than Rogers's but works to introduce his character by way of his cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger. Stark is in the Iron Man suit underwater, working on engineering a demo of his arc reactor technology in order to produce 'clean energy.' He does the work himself, and he tries the prototype on his own tower, watching it light up above the other surrounding buildings in the city. While Stark's plan for clean energy might benefit the world, for now it's only serving him. The tower literally has his name on it, it's about the glory and the praise for him. This scene juxtaposes with Rogers's introduction because while the scene in the gym emphasised just how much Rogers needs a team; Stark's introduction suggests the opposite. He thrives without one. This subtly aligns his character with the tendency towards individualism which results in the main conflict between the Avengers throughout the narrative. This also reinforces the lone gunslinger archetype for Stark as a man who prefers to work alone and relies only on himself to get the job done. This introduction works as a way in which the narrative sets up Stark's cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger to be challenged when he reluctantly has to work as part of a group with the other Avengers, similarly to Rogers he embodies a masculinity that doesn't work in relation to others or to serve the larger collective good as part of a team united with the same goals.

Thor's introduction comes later in the film, after Stark and Rogers have already met and fought Loki together. Thor comes to retrieve his brother from their custody by landing on their helicopter and proceeding to break in, gather Loki and leave without saying a word. This

introduction to the character not only reinforces his cinematic archetype of hard-bodied action hero but also serves as a commentary on the archetype. He doesn't speak, doesn't acknowledge anyone but Loki. He literally lets his muscles and physical presence speak for itself. Thor takes things by force, serves his own agenda without a consideration for the others because his goal is to collect Loki by whatever means necessary. This leads to his own conflict with Rogers and Stark and leads onto the culmination of this conflict resulting in physical violence.

Depicting Cinematic Archetypes of Masculinity in Opposition to Each Other

The first moment of conflict including all three of these core characters occurs during this scene as Stark and Rogers decide to pursue Thor after he removes Loki from their custody. Interestingly, it's the physical conflict established first before the internal conflict which follows later. They fight like children as Thor tells Stark: "Do not touch me again." And Stark replies with: "Then don't take my stuff." Each of these characters possess an archetype of masculinity that favours violence and this becomes a battle for dominance between them. Within these films, "these physical traits identified as belonging to men are played up to make the characters seem superhuman. They are taller, stronger, more powerfully muscled, lacking in softness or curves, and just physically larger than those around them" (Salter, A. Blodget, B. 2017. 23). However, when comparing these characters to each other the drastic image of their hypermasculinity is lost. They are all larger, stronger, and powerfully muscled, so their fight for dominance becomes nothing more than a parallel to children playfighting. It's Rogers who brings an end to the fight, in his position of soldier and his authority as a leader, which works to foreshadow the soldier archetype as the most successful embodiment for all these male characters in this film that strive towards an embodiment of heroism, but also emphasises that violence and working against each other is ineffective. Masculinity must co-exist with other masculinities in order to be successful within the MCU.

AA works to present these core characters as misfits or outcasts to the rest of the film and its audience. They are seen as a threat by S.H.I.E.L.D. due to their differences, in power, physiology and most noticeably in costume – whilst the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents wear black tactical suits in an attempt to not draw attention, the Avengers are clothed in bright colours and sometimes jarringly look like outcasts. The film draws parallels between The Avengers and the iconography of outcasts in order to further emphasise their position within the narrative as troubled/lost individuals. Many of the characters seem to reference this concept of the Avengers as outcasts with Bruce Banner stating: “We’re a chemical mixture that makes chaos.” It conveys a certain type of referentiality that suggests these characters understand that they are struggling individually with embodiments of their respective cinematic archetypes of masculinity and even Loki questions their effectiveness as a team as a result of this by asking Fury: “How desperate are you? That you call on such lost creatures to defend you?” The narrative of AA uses these kinds of remarks throughout the film as a way to explore how the Avengers team can unite to defeat Loki despite their own personal conflicts, focusing on these characters in a mundane sense that allows them to squabble amongst themselves and clash in their beliefs and masculinities in a way that humanises them for the audience (juxtaposing with Loki’s definition of them as ‘creatures’).

Perhaps the biggest conflict between the characters in the film exists between Captain America and Iron Man (who later go on to physically battle against each other in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016)), and this tension can be seen from their first meeting together. This scene is also important in understanding how the conflict between the two of them starts to form and how their individual cinematic archetypes work to exacerbate each other. The scene starts with Loki arriving in Germany to cause his villainous chaos and achieve his own ends. Classical music plays over the arrival in a bittersweet melody that carries different connotations for both Loki and Captain America. For Loki, it works as a piece of theatre to further enhance the spectacle of his violence, but for Rogers it takes on a sombre edge. The

non-diegetic sound and the location of this showdown firmly placing him back in iconography of World War Two as he suits up for the first time in this film. He looks almost unsure as he goes to the familiar red, white and blue uniform. He is a very different man from the first time he wore these colours, and this is further reflected in the fight he has with Loki afterwards. This sequence set in Germany “and Cap’s encounter with the Old Man’s heroism have a wider significance in understanding the importance of the Second World War” (Livingstone, A. McKenny, M. Flanagan, M. 2017. 99). The sequence offers a sense of the cultural importance of World War Two as well as offering a sense of personal importance through Steve’s character as a veteran, firmly aligning him with the cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier.

Direct parallels are drawn between Loki and Hitler through his iconography as he orders those around him to kneel, with Captain America himself drawing on that parallel within the narrative. Captain America’s uniform is bright and almost comical against the dark background and outfits of the extras – even Loki’s costume is darker in shades of green, black and gold, it’s clear that Rogers is out of place here and the uniform suggests everyone can see it. Loki greets him as, “The Soldier. The man out of time.” A direct reference to Rogers’s situation and a reminder of his sacrifice. They fight but unlike Rogers’s previous fighting in World War Two, he is sluggish and almost tired in his approach to beating Loki. He is losing. His soloistic soldier archetype seems to be ineffective in this time, this is not his world and his propensity for physical conflict, which he was created to do in World War Two, feels out dated and futile against Loki. Whilst Rogers is drawn into this fight as a soldier, following the orders of his commander (Fury), one soldier is not a platoon and Rogers needs a team to be a part of for his ensemble soldier masculinity to flourish. This alludes to why Rogers needs the Avengers, he needs a purpose and a sense of belonging that he lost in the 1940s, setting up the notion that this team might prove to be a kind of salvation for him through ‘brotherhood’.

Stark arrives late and in rock-star fashion, changing up the music to a rock song and swooping in to save the day. He is the embodiment of a 21st century lone gunslinger, threatening Loki to a range of technological weaponry incorporated into his Iron Man suit and effectively ending the fight in seconds while Rogers is still trying to catch his breath. There is a brief moment when Captain America and Iron Man move to stand side by side as Loki surrenders to them, the future and the past colliding in frame for a brief moment. The juxtaposition between these two heroes “is particularly evident in the difference between Captain America’s understanding of what constitutes heroism compared to Stark’s new millennial cynicism” (McSweeney, T. 2018. 115). This is further highlighted by the background, Stark framed behind skyscrapers as a sign of advancement and futuristic growth. Rogers is framed with flags behind him, a sign of a more overtly patriotic past and an allusion to his old-fashioned values. This scene is about a clash of masculinities – the soldier vs the lone gunslinger – the conflict between these heroes stems from this notion of two opposing masculinities, one serving the collective (soldier) and the other serving the individual (lone gunslinger). The narrative attempts to negotiate whether serving the collective and the ethos of the ensemble soldier archetype is a more successful embodiment of masculinity for these characters. Despite the fact both Rogers and Stark are embodying different cinematic archetypes of masculinity, both genres of the war film and the western seem to be capable of exploring the idea of an ensemble cast team up with films such as *The Magnificent Seven* (1960) and *Where Eagles Dare*. The emphasis of their cinematic archetypes of masculinity in this scene helps to foreshadow the eventuality of the narrative which sees them both becoming part of a team and working together for the greater good.

Most of the conflict from this film comes from the internal friction from the characters within the Avengers rather than the external conflict created by Loki as the film’s antagonist. The importance of this internal conflict allows “The Avengers [to focus] on reiterating characters’ unique internal struggles” (Yockey, M. 2017. 58). Whilst it is true that AA gives the team a compelling foe in Thor’s adopted brother, the real conflict of the film is established through

the internal struggles of its heroes and exploring how they can work together despite those differences. This thematic motif within the film is influenced from many other Hollywood ensemble cast action films such as *Ocean's Eleven* (2001) and *Inception* (2010), both of which depict internal conflict between the team that puts their goal/mission at risk. *Ocean's Eleven* is an ensemble heist film that follows Danny Ocean (George Clooney) after he is released from prison. Immediately he begins to recruit others for a new heist but soon finds out that his ex-wife is now the current girlfriend of one of the guys in the team. Ocean is urged to give up on the plan because of this reason and refuses, creating internal conflict between team members and ultimately results in the heist going array because of this entanglement. Similarly, *Inception* follows a group of individuals brought together by Dominic Cobb (Leonardo DiCaprio) to plant an idea in a targets' mind through dream construction but spends a lot of screen time detailing how the team struggles to find a way to work together due to personal conflicts. These conflicts include Cobb's past affecting the mission (in the form of a construct of his ex-wife), squabbles between members who differ in their fundamental beliefs and teaching the ropes of dream walking to the team's newest addition, Adriane, an architect student in charge of building the dreamscapes. The inclusion of internal team conflict is a recurring staple of the ensemble cast film, adding a layer of depth to the characters but also adding to the believability of the team. *AA* attempts to explore this internal team conflict through the use of these conflicting cinematic archetypes of masculinity, all of which are normally presented as individualistic masculinity and therefore are rarely depicted in conjunction with differing embodiments. This allows the film to explore how these cinematic archetypes of masculinity work not just on their own but in relation to other masculinities, highlighting where these masculinities work and where they seem to fail as the team is formed.

Iron Man and Captain America further exacerbate their conflict in the film after the team has been established and they return to the Helicarrier with Loki. It's a return to the issue of Stark serving his own agenda and Rogers's serving the collective. Rogers tells Stark: "I've seen the

footage, the only thing you really fight for is yourself. You're not the guy to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on the wire and let the other guy crawl over you." He makes his argument through the scope of the soldier metaphor here, this is how Rogers believes masculinity should work. It's Thor that calls them out this time stating: "You people are so petty, and tiny." This is important because it makes reference to the fact these ideas of masculinity are being discussed and the fact they are being discussed at all within the film is key. As individuals, these characters are often selfish, self-absorbed and stubborn but as this scene demonstrates, they have a better chance of reaching their heroic potential together because it allows them to challenge each other to think differently, to be open minded and see different perspectives. They all learn from each other, and their masculinity evolves from that.

The narrative of this film emphasises how "a great story can be defined as a story in which characters come into conflict – physical or psychic – and through dealing with that conflict grow and change" (Fingerroth, D. 2004. 34). Whilst many of the different characters within the film clash and come into conflict with each other, it is Iron Man and Captain America who fully embody that notion of conflict, they are two men who see and experience the world very differently. The film dedicates a lot of time to the conflict of these characters – which reoccurs in later instalments of the franchise – but it seems to advocate the message that the characters can be more effective together than they are individually which becomes one of the main narrative arcs of the film. The conflict between these two figures gets resolved in the end by allowing these characters to prove their initial assumptions of each other wrong within the narrative. Stark makes the sacrifice play to save New York despite Rogers believing he'd never do such a thing. Rogers proves himself to be useful to the team and serves as the emotional lynchpin of the narrative in a way Stark suggested he couldn't be.

AA as War Movie

The focus of this film is very much on this team, the bringing together of all these individualists to serve towards a common goal. The enemy isn't important, the hoard of alien Chitauri don't even get distinctive faces and serve as mindless drones that stop fighting the moment the tesseract portal is closed. When the team comes together to save the day there are parallels to the war film and the ensemble cast as a platoon in order to suggest this cinematic archetype of masculinity of the World War Two soldier is the superior embodiment for these characters. The Avengers are the important aspect in this "war", fighting honourably and heroically not just for the protection of America but for the entire Earth. In doing so it employs:

Wartime rhetoric – verbal and visual – that validates male bodies and masculinities primarily by reference to men's supreme sacrifice for their nation. Male bodies that are defending their nation, freedom, and honour are encoded to embody the ultimate manly virtues of courage, discipline, competitiveness, virility, dignity and strength. (Vayrynen, T. 2013. 139).

It's this 'just cause' of the fight that unites them and allows them to function as a team lead by Captain America (the only seasoned veteran of war in the group), putting aside their internal struggles for the good of the world, all embodying the cinematic soldier archetype for the greater good. This film:

Appear[s] to offer traditional Hollywood views of a powerful male protagonist making change in the world but at the same time... such masculine mastery itself requires new modes of profound self-disciplining and a certain loss of autonomy in terms of both mind and body, the forms of which are dictated through various networks of military-corporate control. (Knee, A. 2017. 165).

Throughout the film there are several references to the idea of the team up being an old-fashioned ideal, aligning it with the idea of the soldier archetype (and subsequently the platoon war film such as *Black Hawk Down* (2001)). In a similar way to *Black Hawk Down*, the final battle of *AA* focuses on the intensity of the battlefield and the chaos of the fight. There are cameras that weave between the different members of the team in order to show both ground and air coverage of the battle to convey the epic sense of scale of this particular 'war'. It's this scope that forces them to abandon their differences in order to fall in line because of the realisation that it's the only way the Avengers will be able to win. It is only "through their formation as a team that they are able to defeat Loki and the Chitauri with their embrace of the old-fashioned notions of community and self-sacrifice, ideas that Stark has been disdainful of towards the start of the film" (McSweeney, T. 2018. 122). It's during this last showdown of the film that the metaphor of the soldier becomes more overt and audiences see these characters all 'fall in line' under Captain America and become a platoon deployed to fight a war.

The Avengers are established isolated outcasts that are brought together over the course of the film, functioning as a unit much like soldiers in a war. Stark being the most obvious example as the narrative highlights his reluctance to be a part of the team and his status as an individualist however by the end of the film it is Stark that makes the sacrifice for the team and everyone else as a signifier of the most noble act a soldier can perform. The film portrays "the individual subsumed for the good of the group, a situation that is usually anathema in an American culture that lionizes individualism above all but is oddly acceptable in Wartime" (Guffey, E.F. 2014. 288). This supports the favouring of the depiction of a World War Two era soldier with Stark's 21st century attitude to the team being replaced with his understanding of the importance of the fight and his willingness to sacrifice himself for the good of the team and their victory but it also suggests a favouring of the team over the individual which supports the notion of the team as salvation of each of these characters. This parallel is further exacerbated

by Captain America, who was trained as an actual soldier. He leads the team into battle and the narrative positions him as a way of seeing the team through this metaphor when he attempts to console Stark over the death of Coulson, a Shield agent killed by Loki, when he asks: "is this the first time you've lost a soldier?" For Rogers, this experience is familiar as he's fought in war before. To further support this, in the final battle it's Rogers that seems to struggle, the weight of losing heavy on his shoulders as he looks around at the devastation around him. Whedon states, "without going into full war movie cliché we had to have that moment of 'oh, we're losing here' and it had to be Captain America that has it" (Whedon, J. 2012. DVD Commentary). This moment within the final battle once again employs a parallel to the war genre in an attempt to raise the stakes of the film, using trauma as a way to suggest Rogers is better equipped to handle the battlefield because he has endured it before.

Whedon states, "I wanted to make a war movie, not a superhero movie" (Whedon, J. 2012. DVD Commentary), and in doing so Whedon attempts to move away from the superhero genre and its limitations of spectacle over character. Whedon is presenting the audience with a very particular type of war movie within *AA* as a way to depict the conflict of the film and to bring the team together in the moment they are most needed. Whilst there are many different examples of the 'good triumphs over evil' narrative, "With *The Avengers*, however, Whedon is quite deliberately crafting a very traditional "good guys versus bad guys" war film. He directly calls the audience's attention to the fact by having characters speak to it twice during the film" (Guffey, E.F. 2014. 291). This type of war film is emulating those like *The Dirty Dozen* (1967) that depicted soldiers fighting through the hell of war simply because it was the right and honourable thing to do. This type of war film suggests:

We are not going to get any real moral ambiguity here or lingering meditations on the futility and ugliness of war; we are going to get heroes, flawed though they may be, who

go through hell for all the right reasons and win through to save the day and make us proud. (Guffey, E.F. 2014. 292).

The Dirty Dozen follows a group of prisoners that the US Army recruit and train for a virtual suicide mission, turning them into a team of commandos with the ability to help them with the war effort in exchange for a pardon to their previous crimes upon the successful completion of the mission. These prisoners are misfits and outcasts forced together to function as a team in a similar way to the Avengers. No one in the team recruited by Shield asks to be a part of it, they are recruited based on their skillset and abilities, and it is revealed they are all on a watchlist, flagged as potential threats to Earth due to those skillsets and abilities. In *The Dirty Dozen*, the men eventually successfully carry out their mission, losing a few lives on the way to prove they are willing to sacrifice themselves for America and therefore redeem themselves from their past crimes by embodying the idealistic American soldier, fighting an honourable cause and willing to die for it and the surviving members earn their freedom as a reward. In *AA*, the reward is the team itself. Each member finds a place to belong and a group of people to belong with, the team giving them a sense of purpose as the defenders of Earth and the cliché motif of the ensemble cast war film of being apart of something bigger than themselves.

Whedon's desire to create a war film becomes evident and the film seems to overtly align the Avengers with the metaphor of being soldiers in order to establish this which presents "the metaphor of superheroes as soldiers" (Michaud, N. Watkins, J. 2018. 160). The depiction of these superheroes as soldiers is a deliberate decision that allows them to embody a certain type of combatant throughout the narrative. This type of soldier "as summarized by John Bodnar... of the "average American soldier" in World War Two [that] defines him as "a good man able to wage deadly warfare without becoming corrupted by the violence" (Guffey, E.F. 2014. 286). It's this type of soldier that the central characters are embodying, this notion of an ideal soldier of "the greatest generation" that is honouring a noble cause above all else, even

their own life, should it come to that. Stark and Rogers both head up the team in different ways, “while Iron Man represents the technological versatility of counter-terrorism efforts, Captain America calls to mind the tactical and operational adaptability required of both military leadership and rank and file soldiers” (Sweet, D.R. 2018. 72). This film favours the image of the World War Two ensemble soldier as superior in terms of success, eventually allowing Stark to embody those same ideals himself towards the end of the film in such a way that prompts him to give up his new age individualism and lone gunslinger masculinity for the sake of the team and follow the orders of Captain America in battle.

Stark’s sacrifice at the end of the film brought about by flying himself into the wormhole that’s opened up over New York, becomes the moment Stark ‘falls in line’, fully embodying the ensemble soldier cinematic archetype of masculinity, willing to sacrifice himself for his team and his world. His suit fails, the power cutting out due to the foreign environment and he starts to fall back to Earth in defeat. This time he isn’t alone in his sacrifice and his team saves him from the fall as Hulk catches him and the rest of the Avengers gather round. When Stark regains consciousness, it is Rogers that informs him: “We won.” Despite the destruction to the city and the injuries they sustained, and Thor reminds them: “We’re not finished yet.” This scene favours the notion of collectivism as Stark’s team gather around him, concerned for his safety, and relieved that he has survived. It’s a very different scene to the one at the end of *IM* after Stark sacrifices himself and wakes up alive but alone in his victory but the parallels between the two instances of Stark’s self-sacrificing masculinity are evident. They both contain a shot of his arc reactor light coming back on after he is thought to be dead but whilst *IM* portrays the scene as a cold flickering of his life support much like a computer rebooting itself, *AA* focuses more of the human aspect of it, framed with Rogers’s hand on his chest as if checking for a heartbeat before Stark is startled awake with a roar from The Hulk. The humanity of this scene in *AA* works as a reminder that to suffer through trauma is to be human and the gathering of all the members of the team around their fallen comrade serves as a way

to unite them as a platoon. They are finally a team functioning as a single unit, Rogers's placement of the hand on Stark's chest works as an olive branch of forgiveness over the conflict they have had over the course of the film but also as a signifier of respect. Stark has embodied Rogers's idea of a hero and a soldier. The guy who makes the sacrifice for his team and his country and as such is embodying that era of soldier that Rogers (and the film) believes is the greatest generation of hero, that of the World War Two era soldier. Stark sacrifices not only his life but also his individualism for the good of the team (and the world), challenging his lone gunslinger masculinity in favour of an embodiment of a masculinity closer resembling Rogers's ensemble soldier masculinity. After all, "it is Stark and Rogers who carry the film's debate over why we fight and circumstances force Stark to submerge his individualism, at least temporarily, for the good of the group in order to achieve the objective, become a soldier, and successfully wage a war" (Guffey, E.F. 2014. 288). In the end, Stark is rewarded for this role in the collective – namely by surviving – it's thanks to his team that he is saved. The MCU favours the team as representative of the collective with each masculinity benefitting from other masculinities in terms of what is successful and what fails when embodying a masculine archetype.

The Battle of New York as it will come to be known in MCU canon, is the first time Stark fights for something bigger than himself, Stark's sacrifice at the end of the battle draws on parallels from Rogers's sacrifice as he crashes his plane into the ice in World War Two. This adds to the motif of the Hollywood war film as an attempt to:

Glorify its heroes with their desire to "do the right thing". In other words, these are heroes who are simultaneously part of the "army of one" – a brotherhood – looking out of one another and individuated as moral men who think for themselves and, no matter what their orders, act humanely and heroically. (Gates, P. 2005. 298).

These heroes are being framed through the lens of self-sacrificing heroism and their function as soldiers in a team. This iconography and narrative framing in the background of war allows the audience to see these characters as soldiers in a war rather than superheroes. Therefore, this sacrifice from Stark being the event that allows Rogers to give him a sense of admiration and respect makes sense as it's a sacrifice that Rogers himself has endured and therefore can understand. The self-sacrificing trait of soldier masculinity marks the cohesion of the team, "The battle ends with Iron Man sacrificing himself in a way that Captain America said he would never be able to do, a new generation of hero embodying the spirit of the 'greatest generation' and in the process unifying both" (McSweeney, T. 2018. 123). This is the first time these characters regard each other as equals, both understanding they are united in their act of sacrificing themselves of a greater cause (namely the protection of America/Earth). Stark gains a group to share the responsibility of heroism with, people to hold him accountable for his actions and decisions which is something he has been struggling with since *IM*. Thor gains a link to his humanity, having allies on Earth and a connection to this world that he has vowed to protect. After all, they only manage to defeat Loki by working together. They finally function as a team and, "it is only through their formation as a team that they are able to defeat Loki and the Chitauri with their embrace of old-fashioned notions of community and self-sacrifice, ideas that Stark had been disdainful of towards the start of the film" (McSweeney, T. 2018. 122). The film presents the team as a type of salvation, the notion that they are stronger together is self-evident from this final showdown and perhaps a notion that having this team support system is a way for these characters to understand their masculinity in relation to each other.

It is interesting to note that whilst the Battle of New York suggests a positive outcome towards the Avengers becoming a team, it doesn't enforce this for the end of the movie, instead choosing to break up the team once more and although a large part of this decision was a commercial move in order to make more films, it's an interesting set up in how the film portrays this suggesting their masculinity isn't a secured, fixed thing but fluid, therefore it has

the ability to change and shift through the later instalments of the MCU, allowing them to continue to make more solo films for each of these characters. In doing so, the film:

Also signal[s] a paradigm shift that points not towards ensured security, but towards more uncertainty. In the penultimate scene, each hero “returns”, either literally (Thor takes Loki back to Asgard) or figuratively (Stark drives away in the expensive sports car and Rogers rides off on a motorbike reminiscent of World War 2 era bikes) to his or her previous world. (Hagley, A. Harrison, M. 2014. 123).

The film has the ambitious task of having several central characters, being confined to the spectacle driven genre of the superhero film and providing a narrative that manages to incorporate the previous Phase One films as well as moving the MCU forward for future instalments into the franchise. In order to do this successfully, the film cannot prioritise character arcs for each of the central characters due to time and pacing constraints of the film. Instead, it offers character moments, glimpses at why these characters need to be a part of this team and how it might benefit them to join forces. This works for *AA* because of the set-up established for these characters in their own solo films of the MCU. Tony Stark is probably the only character to really get any sort of arc in the narrative, from individualist who doesn't play well with others to the man 'willing to make the sacrifice play' for his team. This move can be seen as a commercial one, with Downey's incarnation of Tony Stark being one of the biggest draws prior to the release of the film, having previously starred in two solo films that establish the character.

In conclusion, *AA* presents an exploration of previously established cinematic archetypes of masculinity working together, developing these embodiments in relation to each other rather than as single contained examples of masculinity. This film favours the ensemble soldier archetype as superior as it is the only masculinity embodied that readily serves the collective (which the MCU encodes as heroic). There is an emphasis placed on the importance of the

team as a representation of the development of these characters' masculinity and how well it works compared to the other characters' masculinity. The notion of individualism and collectivism is a recurring thematic motif for the narrative, a debate utilised primarily through Stark's and Rogers's conflict as a way for the film to debate and develop representations of cinematic archetypes of masculinity. The MCU moves into Phase Two where there is a shift away from these more traditional Hollywood cinematic masculine archetypes after *AA*, exploring how these masculinities evolve and change in the wake of this film in response to this team dynamic. The ending of *AA* allows these characters to set up solo narratives that will attempt to engage with these cinematic archetypes of masculinity further moving into Phase Two. The ensemble soldier masculinity only works when the team is together, their solo films can therefore explore the type of masculinity they embody as individuals and how the formation of this team, and the influences of these masculinities working together in unity rather than conflict, effects these characters in their respective Phase Two films.

2.1: "I'm Just a Man in a Can": Negotiating Issues of the Lone Gunslinger through Heroic Masculinity in *Iron Man 3*.

IM3 is the first film in the MCU's Phase Two and the concluding chapter of the Iron Man trilogy which completes Stark's solo character journey (although Stark goes on to remain a prominent character in several other MCU films such as the subsequent *Avengers* films and *Spiderman: Homecoming* (2017)). Phase Two follows directly from the success of Phase One allowing the MCU more security in the interweaving narrative they planned for. This commercial success allowed the studio to explore more creative possibilities with tone, introducing new directors to help achieve this and introducing new characters into the ever-expanding diegesis. As Kevin Feige explains:

We succeeded in Phase One because we stuck to our guns and stuck to the plan. That plan took place over many, many years and it ultimately paid off. I see Phase Two unfolding... us doing what's right for each individual movie, while folding in elements that will not only build up to the culmination of Phase Two, but even Phase Three.

(Feige, K qtd in Frost, J. 2012. n/p).

Releasing one year after *AA* (2012), *IM3* directed by Shane Black, had to acknowledge the consequences of Stark's actions to save the world by sacrificing himself, as well as continue Stark's narrative development through the exploration of his masculinity. Black's filmography shows him to have experience in successfully exploring issues of masculinity as they pertain to conventional depictions of Hollywood with films such as *Lethal Weapon* (1987), *The Last Action Hero* (1993) and *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (2005), a trend that continues with his direction of *IM3*. As this thesis has already established when exploring *IM* and *IM2* (see chapter 1.1), Stark's embodiment of masculinity uses the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger, constructed in the wake of the trauma Stark endured by being held captive and tortured in Afghanistan. This leads to him creating Iron Man, a physical manifestation of this cinematic archetype of

masculinity that Stark is portraying. The last appearances from Stark in Phase One of the MCU showed the character realising the ineffectiveness of his lone gunslinger masculinity when in the company of other masculinities as portrayed by his fellow heroes. This embraces an embodiment of heroic masculinity, favouring notions of sacrifice and the needs of the collective as superior (chapter 1.4). *IM3* continues this exploration in a more critical way, “while Phase One illustrated the heroes’ creation and ascendancy, the pervasiveness of the theme of pollution throughout Phase Two signals the beginning of their decline” (Nichols, M.D. 2021. 15).

This chapter aims to explore Stark’s deterioration through his embodiment of the cinematic archetype of masculinity. *IM3* has Stark once again adopting the lone gunslinger archetype in the aftermath of *AA*, the team having disbanded, therefore leaving each character to continue their solo storylines. Without the aid of the team to help Stark regulate his heroic masculinity surrounded by other heroes, this embodiment seems to falter and be replaced with Stark’s familiar lone gunslinger archetype. However, as this chapter will establish, the film’s narrative offers a harsher criticism of Iron Man’s portrayal of lone gunslinger masculinity than previous instalments (chapter 1.1), encompassing the lone gunslinger commonly depicted in the revisionist western rather than the gunslinger of the traditional western heyday as seen in *IM* and *IM2*. This allows the narrative to not only reflect upon Stark’s psychological turmoil in this film but also conclude his character development with a metaphoric final death for his lone gunslinger archetype of masculinity.

The western genre “has often adopted the mode of elegy, celebrating what is really dead and gone, yet its chief agents are usually men (with guns) in the prime of their lives seamlessly imposing the mighty frontier-settling talents and civilizing righteousness that defines the genre’s heyday” (Cloutier, J.C. 2012. 111). The character of Stark, as audiences are introduced to him in *IM*, embodies the lone gunslinger archetype of traditional western films such as *High*

Noon (1952) and *Shane* (1953). Stark is cast as a figure of righteousness, driven by his desire to find and destroy all Stark Technology weapons that have been dealt on the black market. There is almost an idealised depiction of Stark's lone gunslinger righting his wrongs across Middle Eastern terrain (chapter 1.1). The character of Stark in *IM3* is a very different iteration of the character. His embodiment of the lone gunslinger archetype isn't idyllic, it's cynical as it details Stark's struggle with anxiety and self-doubt. This version of the lone gunslinger is reminiscent of the protagonist in many revisionist westerns such as *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and *Unforgiven* (1992). The revisionist westerns emerged as "an attempt by Western filmmakers, animated by a conviction of the unsustainability of traditional generic models, to reorient the Western's relationship to the history in which, at least nominally, it is ground" (Langford, B. 2003. n/p). The term 'revisionist western' encompasses many different examples, however:

In many cases, as with *The Wild Bunch*, a western that could be labelled as revisionist or postclassical was in fact a clever fusion of the traditional and the new – in some cases forming an intriguing dialectic between challenges to genre conventions and tributes to the very conventions being challenged. (Bandy, M.L. 2012. 204).

It is important to note that the revisionist western wouldn't exist without the traditional western, in the same way *IM3* could not explore Stark's lone gunslinger archetype of masculinity thematically through the revisionist western without having established the inception of this lone gunslinger archetype through the traditional western in *IM* (chapter 1.1). There is a very clear chronology to Stark's cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger, a chronology that is not dissimilar to the trajectory of the western genre of Hollywood cinema as this chapter explores. In an attempt to revitalise the genre of the western, the revisionist westerns managed to "not only subvert the notion that the mythic west is a land of beauty, opportunity, and regeneration, but it uses traditional western images and characters in new ways to critique modern American society and culture" (Aquila, R. 2015. 222-223). *IM3* utilises

the revisionist western lone gunslinger in a similar manner, engaging with the depiction of Stark in this role to deconstruct this cinematic archetype (and his previous embodiment of it) and critique it as a flawed masculinity that should not form part of his heroic identity.

IM3 continues Stark's story in the aftermath of *AA*, showing Stark to be suffering from PTSD and anxiety after the Battle of New York, becoming nothing short of obsessive in his pursuit to build more Iron Man suits. Meanwhile, the film's antagonist, The Mandarin/Aldrich Killian, sets out to use Extremis, a chemical formula meant to offer cellular regeneration that leaves many subjects unstable and in danger of self-combusting, to orchestrate a series of terrorist attacks in order to 'control the War on Terror' and by extension, America. Stark, who has his own past with Killian (where Stark dismissed him years before when Killian first came up with the plans for Extremis), sets out to investigate and undercover the truth behind the recent bombings, leading him to confront his own demons, both external and internal, before he can successfully stop Killian and save America.

Anxiety, PTSD and the Return of the Lone Gunslinger

Stark's anxiety is used as a device to highlight his internal conflict in the narrative and facilitates his return to the lone gunslinger archetype of masculinity. The film establishes this from its opening sequence which depicts Stark working on a new Iron Man suit much to Jarvis' (Stark's electronic disembodied butler) dismay.

Without the presence of other masculinities to learn from and adapt, Stark is quickly shown to have reverted back to his outdated model of lone gunslinger masculinity. This embodiment of masculinity takes on a more cynical role than in *IM*, drawing a particular emphasis on Stark's feelings of inadequacy that allows this version of lone gunslinger masculinity to explore a more psychological undertone. This is because Stark is still dealing with the events of *AA*, his sole focus is on building new Iron Man suits and Jarvis reveals he's been awake for over 70 hours. His behaviour is obsessive as an extreme reaction to preparing for a future threat to the world

that is as yet unknown to him. *IM3* employs this in the form of Stark's PTSD and anxiety, a psychological consequence for him after the Battle of New York which manifests physical symptoms to signal to the audience how much influence this is exerting over Stark's personal life. The film details Stark's obsession with preparedness, his all-consuming nightmares and even shows him to suffer from two anxiety attacks over the course of the narrative. In short, "Stark develops PTSD and drives himself to exhaustion and his relationships into the ground as he builds an army of Iron Man suits" (Michaud, N. Watkins, J. 2018. 73). The film goes to great lengths to depict the strain his obsessive behaviour has on his romantic relationship with Pepper Potts, to the point where Stark even ends up sending an Iron Man suit to their 'date night' so he can keep working on new designs. *IM3*'s version of Stark is not the cocksure rogue of *IM*:

For the purpose of its narrative, the film has Stark become aware of his own physical and emotional vulnerability and his place in the MCU after the events of *The Avengers*, where Stark (and the rest of the world) was forced to acknowledge not only the existence of, as Stark says, 'gods, aliens... other dimensions but the fact that he is, in his own words, 'just a man in a can.' (McSweeney, T. 2018. 132).

The psychological gravitas present throughout *IM3* and Stark's character is not typical of the traditional western gunslinger, who is often depicted as stoic and silent (Lusted, D. 2006. 238), however it is a common trope of the protagonist of the revisionist western. For example, in *Unforgiven*, Will Munny is a former gunslinger and outlaw turned pig farmer, aged, and jaded from his gunfighting days. Munny receives a visit from a young man named Schofield Kid who wants his help to track down two outlaws that attacked a prostitute in a nearby town. While reluctant at first, Munny eventually agrees but shows himself to be anything but the legendary gunslinger Schofield Kid was expecting. The film makes Munny out of be a pitiful instance of a cowboy. It takes him several attempts to mount his horse, the animal leading him in circles as

he tries and despite once being a gunslinger, Munny can no longer shoot well. While practicing, Munny lines up his pistol to a tin can mounted a few feet away only to miss every shot he takes. He struggles to assimilate back into gunslinger life, portrayed as being inadequate for the task he is being asked to help with. The hero of the revisionist western is often portrayed as Munny is, as a cowboy past his heyday dealing with regret and his own mortality, drawn back into the cowboy lifestyle through circumstance (Langford, B. 2003. n/p). *IM3* negotiates similar instances of inadequacy for Stark in the aftermath of the alien invasion in *AA*. Stark's obsession with building an army of suits comes from his fear that he will be unable to protect people from a threat on such a large scale. However, much like Munny, Stark can't leave the fight behind and that possible threat of future conflict fuels him to obsessiveness. Whilst the revisionist Western aims to criticise the traditional qualities of the cowboy, there is an awareness that the audience expects to see those qualities on display in their protagonists by the end of the film. *IM3* follows this typical trend in a similar way that *Unforgiven* does, both these heroes ultimately end up finding a way back to their gunslinging ways to fulfil audience expectation.

Stark's comment to Pepper summarises the extent of his inadequacy when he tells her: "I'm just a man in a can", which hints at his insecurities about both his body and his heroism. Stark sounds defeated as he delivers this line, there is a bitterness there which works as a reminder of Stark's fragility. He is human, with a heart condition, a fact that was made more apparent after he joined up with the other Avengers, a team containing a super soldier and a mythic god. His masculinity is being challenged here, Stark has a suit of armour powered by the arc reactor as the extent of his power, but his body hasn't been changed on any molecular or cellular level. Referring to the Iron Man suit as a prosthesis further implies Stark's insecurities about his body. In a similar way to the protagonist of the revisionist western often being an older post-heyday cowboy that must contend with an aging body, Stark must negotiate his own shortcomings with regards to his body in the wake of joining the Avengers.

Furthermore, the film shows Stark's body to be in crisis when he is subjected to an anxiety attack in the middle of a diner with Rhodes. This turmoil his body is exposed to during this scene isn't heroic but tragic and emphasises another way in which Stark feels his body is inadequate against threat. The scene starts out with Stark asking Rhodes for more information regarding the Mandarin attacks, which is presented to the audience as the 'Middle-Eastern'⁵ threat of this film, and when Rhodes reveals there have been more bombings than the public are being made aware of Stark immediately offers his help and the aid of his new technology. This is how Stark believes he can best protect the world. Instead of agreeing Rhodes asks him how much sleep he's had lately. As Stark's friend he can tell something isn't right, as he tells Stark: "People are concerned about you, Tony. I'm concerned about you." This is an indication to the audience that not only has Stark's anxiety clearly been developing for a while, but it has also become so apparent that other people in his life are starting to pick up on it. Stark's doubts about his own heroic masculinity and its effectiveness are starting to infiltrate other areas of his life, including his relationships with friends and family.

The anxiety attack itself occurs from the repeated mentions of the Battle of New York, first from Rhodes who points out that after New York the American people need to "look strong". Secondly, from a little boy and girl who ask Stark to sign their drawing. The boy asks him about New York and leans in to whisper: "How'd you get out of the wormhole?" The scene shifts dramatically, the non-diegetic music crescendos and the camera rapidly pans to face Stark before zooming in close as he gasps and clutches a hand to his chest. The audience are invited to watch his distress, physical evidence of the consequences the Battle of New York has had on Stark. This is crucial because "showing a superhero experiencing panic attacks is a total reversal of the common notion of hegemonic masculinity, which usually excludes any signs of 'weakness'" (Stefanopoulou, E. 2017. 26). Not only is Stark's vulnerability emphasised in this

⁵ Later revealed not to be 'Middle-Eastern' at all, but actually a construct designed by Killian (an American) to instil more fear through the connotations of the 'War on Terror'.

scene, but it is also made explicit. The trauma he endured from falling through the wormhole and experiencing the vast enemies waiting in space is not something he can brush aside, and the narrative now promotes the vulnerability of that knowledge at the forefront of the story. This stems from the fear that Stark is not enough to stop a future threat, a notion he himself voices within the film. His masculinity turns pre-emptive rather than defensive – through his plan to build more Iron Man suits to prepare for this hypothetical fight – which is something the MCU doesn't favour as a successful embodiment of heroic masculinity.

When his anxiety rises Stark seems to jolt out of his seat, his desperation and panic to leave becomes evident. He clutches his chest as he pushes his chair back and heads outside, he bumps into other customers, gasping for breathing. This is a fully formed panic attack and interestingly, as he leaves the film cuts to a close up of the child's drawing that he was meant to sign. His signature trails off and the red crayon strikes through the drawing of Iron Man, effectively crossing him out. This suggests that Iron Man has been rendered ineffective due to this crisis of anxiety. In a similar way to Munny not being able to shoot straight in *Unforgiven*, Stark is unable to be heroic in this scene. Both of these things have defined these protagonists in their masculinity, and both are rendered unattainable through their respective narratives. While *Unforgiven* doesn't depict Munny enduring an anxiety attack, the narrative does depict Munny's own body failing him when he catches a chill on the road and has to be nursed back to health.

Stark seeks refuge from the anxiety attack in his Iron Man suit, immediately falling to the floor once inside. He takes up his classic 'superhero pose' here, one fist on the ground, one leg bend as if he has just landed to save the day. However, this now takes on a much more desperate undertone, the scene positioning Stark as anything but heroic as he asks Jarvis to "check the heart, check the brain." He is looking for a logical explanation to his symptoms, not believing that he is capable of suffering from an anxiety attack. When Jarvis diagnoses it as such an

attack Stark is shown to be in complete disbelief, uttering out: "Me?". Stark's revisionist lone gunslinger archetype becomes an extreme embodiment of masculinity after this attack, allowing the film to interrogate this cinematic archetype as heroic or tragic, mainly through the use of the Iron Man armour.

The Gunslinger and his 'Gun'

As previously established, the suit Stark wears is a metaphor for the gunslinger's pistol (chapter 1.1). It has the capacity to shoot repulsor beams from his palms and Stark often takes up the familiar iconography of one hand raised in warning akin to a western shootout. The Iron Man armour is the site of his power, a weapon that allows him to fight. *IM3* works to critique this notion through Stark's dependency on the suit whilst exploring the conditions that produce it. The suit of armour makes Stark feel powerful, that's why he retreats to it after his anxiety attack, it's also the reason he spends his time making several more of them that can work without a pilot. This becomes apparent when Happy Hogan (Stark's friend and head of security at Stark Industries) gets caught up in a Mandarin bombing that lands him in the hospital. Stark wants revenge, a notion that is inherently grounded in the western (Lusted, D. 2006. 113), and as a result invites the Mandarin to make a direct attack against him. When making a live broadcast, Stark declares to everyone listening: "There's no politics here, just good old revenge. There's no pentagon, it's just you and me, and on the off chance you're a *man*, here's my home address..." He puts his house on lockdown, wearing the armour at all times to be ready for the possible attack. Interestingly, it's the issue of masculinity that Stark goads the Mandarin with in this scene, the same issue Stark himself is struggling with. Despite his own feeling of inadequacy, this suggests Stark's masculinity can be redeemed to him through the victory of a fight. Stark loses this fight though, when the attack occurs Stark's house is destroyed and he is submerged into the water below, trapped under the rubble. It's

the Iron Man suit that saves him, displaying its own sentience separate from Stark in order to free him from the rubble and fly him to safety.

The concept of the western cowboy and his gun is crucial to the western genre:

In other words, through the genre conventions of the western and our own expectations as honed by these conventions, the image of a man with a gun is imbued with cultural, historical meaning. He, as a character, is made mobile across multiple genres and, in the case of graphic novels, multiple media as well. (Hatfield, C. 2013. 291-292).

Following this convention, Stark is literally saved by his. Of course, the suit is only a metaphor for the gunslinger's weapon instead of an actual gun, this is due to the nature of the MCU and the depiction of clean violence in which there is very little bloodshed or bodily damage shown onscreen (McSweeney, T. 2018. 130). Despite this, the *Iron Man* films explore the use of the suit as a weapon in great detail. Stark's suit is also portrayed as salvation to him, physically removing him from harm and guiding him in the narrative as he questions his own masculinity.

Unforgiven delivers a similar narrative for Munny, who returns to the life of the gunslinger after the death of his wife despite retiring years beforehand. It's almost inevitable for him as:

The lure of the weapon – the way of the gun – becomes too great a pull for Munny, who is in the torturous process of questioning his very identity. In fact, it would appear that any possible hope of redress is wilfully closed off in preference to the stable subjectivity promised by the simplicity of the myth of the gunfighter. (Carter, M. 2014. 140).

While the way of the 'gun' seems like salvation for both Stark and Munny in terms of their masculinity with Munny even returning to his gunslinger ways with the promise of more violence at the end of the film, *IM3* turns this into a critique instead of an inevitability. Stark grounds himself as the lone gunslinger once more when he suits up to prepare for the attack from the Mandarin, invoking notions of the western shootout, the suit is immediately taken

away from him after breaking down during their flight to safety. Stark is denied the triumph of a victory against the Mandarin, as he is denied the ease and assimilation back into the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger. Whilst audiences expect to see Stark in battle, and the figure of the lone gunslinger is expected through convention to wield his weapon even in the revisionist western, *IM3* attempts to subvert this expectation in this moment by having Stark fail. He doesn't win against the Mandarin and that loss allows the narrative to further explore the role of the lone gunslinger as a cinematic archetype of masculinity for Stark.

Intriguingly, both *IM3* and *Unforgiven* have their stars revisiting their own mythology with these films. For Clint Eastwood, taking on the role of Will Munny added a level of commentary to the trajectory of the western genre. It is a genre Eastwood was well established in, playing many different iterations of the traditional lone gunslinger in his youth with films such as *A Fist Full of Dollars* (1964) and *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (1966). Returning to the lone gunslinger role years later as an aging star allowed the narrative to engage with issues of Eastwood's own star persona, the themes of age and the consequences of past actions having a deeper thematic resonance because of this. Comparably, *IM3* allows Robert Downey Jr to engage with his own star persona as Stark. This is the fourth portrayal of the character for Downey Jr after the role bolstered his Hollywood comeback and allowed him to reinvent his star image following rehab and jailtime for drug abuse (Dennehy, L. 2019. n/p). Stark's internal struggle throughout this film works, in part, because of Downey Jr's ability to depict a version of the character that is questioning his own self-worth and hopelessness. This portrayal of Stark as a character struggling with his own self-worth adds another level of interrogation of Stark's cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger, navigating the commentary between Stark's heroic masculinity through vulnerability and Iron Man's idealised lone gunslinger masculinity through the metaphor of the suit as a weapon.

Iron Man as Threat or Salvation

Iron Man is shown as a looming threat to Stark's domestic happiness throughout the film, establishing a juxtaposition between Stark's lone gunslinger masculinity and the domestic stability provided through his relationship, most importantly with Pepper Potts. In fact, one of the main explorations of this film is Stark's relationship with the Iron Man armour, offering a return to the co-dependency he had with the suit in *IM* and *IM2* although this film suggests a different sort of co-dependency is employed in the wake of Stark's struggling embodiment of masculinity. Iron Man becomes a separate entity to Stark in this narrative, to such an extent that they are often treated as two different characters. Stark no longer needs to be inside the suit to operate it and as a result, Iron Man becomes sentient enough to act without Stark. Furthermore, Stark isn't limited to just one or two suits for this film, he is building an entire (one-man) army of Iron Man suits in preparation for a future threat and as a way to combat his PTSD. Interestingly, this supports the notion he came to advocate in *AA* in terms of a military outlook (chapter 1.4). He is in support of an army of soldiers to help protect the world (however that army is still only controlled by Stark and Stark alone). Iron Man's presence in the narrative represents the lure of the lone gunslinger archetype of masculinity for Stark and as such, to Stark, the suit begins to represent an idealised version of heroism. Stark perceives the armour as his ideal self, a self that is impervious to pain, impenetrable, and most importantly, without weakness. The ultimate figure of strength and stoicism, both traits associated with the figure of the cowboy in western Hollywood cinema (Tasker, Y. 2016. 111).

This film definitively presents Iron Man as post-human⁶: the ideal of survival and heroism (at least in Stark's eyes). He sees this armour as the best answer for worldwide protection, with the character believing that the "ideal soldier is... a cyborg figure who has incorporated this

⁶ As previously mentioned, for the purposes of this thesis, where the notion of the post-human isn't the central focus but a point of consideration, the term is being used in a basic sense of augmenting the human body with technology for the purposes of strength and invincibility.

military technology into his outfit and made it into an essential and natural part of his physique” (Hassler-Forest, D. 2012. 183). Not only is Stark attempting to make an army of suits in the film, he is also attempting to make himself more post-human as well. He embeds implants of nanotechnology into his arm, under the skin, in order to be able to call the armour to him at will (a biological upgrade from the bracelets he used in *AA* meant to do the same thing). He is trying to enhance his own body to further replicate the Iron Man armour in addition to the arc reactor heart in his chest. For Stark, this is heroism. Iron Man is the hero capable of protecting the world and he is just “a man in a can.” This framing of the post-human as heroic is also depicted in films such as *Robocop* (1978), in which the protagonist is augmented with technology in order to better serve his community. *IM3* engages with this notion in order to further interrogate it, engaging in the debate of whether it is man or machine that is truly heroic and ultimately critiques Stark’s belief in the post-human as a viable way forward. This adds a juxtaposition to Stark’s (and the film’s) definition of heroism, there is a debate to be had between what Stark *thinks* his heroic masculinity is (something more closely resembling Iron Man) compared to what his heroic masculinity *actually* is (an embodiment of Stark himself). Iron Man doesn't have any emotion therefore cannot suffer from anxiety attacks, Stark built Iron Man to rid himself of weakness both internally and externally. There is a dichotomy between Stark viewing technology as augmenting traditionally masculine qualities, something he believes is needed and the narrative of the film which suggests this view is a flaw in Stark’s own heroic masculinity.

The notion of a weapon as Stark’s ideal self is not dissimilar from Rogers, whose body was turned into a literal weapon to win the war against Hydra (chapter 1.3), but for Stark this aligns his masculinity with his previously established cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger. The narrative attempts to interrogate this notion through the very action of placing Iron Man as Stark’s ideal self. A weapon is a symbol of strength but that doesn’t automatically make it heroic. That distinction belongs to the person wielding it as the MCU has already established in

Phase One (chapters 1.1, 1.2, 1.3). Channelling the revisionist western, this narrative exploits the Iron Man suit, and by extension, Stark's co-dependency to it to portray the lone gunslinger not as a heroic but as a tragic figure. In the revisionist western the lone gunslinger isn't necessarily hero, often more of an anti-hero that contemplates regret for his past actions. *IM3* suggests that Stark's domestic happiness is unattainable when embodying his lone gunslinger archetype through his co-dependency on the suit. Much like other revisionist western heroes such as Will Munny, whose wife dies at the start of *Unforgiven*, or even Wyatt Earp from *Tombstone* (1993) whose brothers are murdered, Stark is presented as a tragic figure of masculinity due to his suffering. The narrative negotiates this for Stark in order to deconstruct the myth of heroism surrounding his lone gunslinger archetype.

While Stark's dependency on the armour allows him to believe Iron Man as the pinnacle of heroism and survival, the audience are given a different viewpoint. This dependency on Iron Man becomes more explicit when Stark has a nightmare and ends up calling for the suit whilst asleep. He is turned away from Potts, sweaty and clearly in distress from his nightmare as the camera zooms in to highlight that distress. The scene is intersected with quick jarring cuts that juxtapose with the dark and silence of Stark's bedroom. These cuts of the wormhole and New York as the site of Stark's anxiety are bright and loud, full of both diegetic and non-diegetic sound as Stark relives his flight through the wormhole along with the audience. He starts calling out in his sleep which wakes Potts. She can't wake him though, it's only the interruption from the Iron Man suit standing beside the bed, putting its hand on Potts' arm and yanking her away as if she's the threat that causes Stark to finally wake up. In this moment, Potts represents the threat of domesticity, offering Stark a different path to that of the gunslinger masculinity represented by the armour. The Iron Man suit looms over them like a figure from a slasher film such as *Halloween* (1978) or *Scream* (1996). Interestingly, Stark sees the suit as protection, he calls for it, he finds comfort and safety from the looming figure standing over his

bed whereas Potts (and the audience) are made to fear it, or at least feel uneasy about its presence.

There is a juxtaposition in this scene between Iron Man as heroic saviour and Iron Man as the threat, and clearly demonstrated is the fact that Stark no longer understands the difference. As writer, Drew Pearce suggests, "Iron Man was like an interloper in [Stark and Potts'] relationship almost like a horror movie" (Pearce, D. 2013. DVD Commentary). The narrative is clearly set up to explore Stark's dependency on Iron Man, albeit differently to the way this was handled in *IM* after Stark's return from Afghanistan, because the suit is portrayed to be a separate entity from Stark. Stark manages to order the armour to 'power down' and ends up dismantling it before explaining to Potts, "I must have called in my sleep. That's not supposed to happen. I'll recalibrate." Stark plays victim and survivor here, 'unmasking' the 'threat' by dismantling the armour and once again showing his heroism to be conflicted, although in this scene the triumph lies with Potts and the promise of domesticity. Surviving his past trauma is what makes him heroic within MCU standards however this film positions Stark as the victim once again, not just of his own anxiety but also of his own reliance on the Iron Man armour. This is something the film interrogates, raising the debate of whether it is Stark or Iron Man that is the hero. Stark's vulnerability in this scene – and throughout the film – is crucial to this discussion and further aligns Stark with the protagonists of the revisionist western in order to subvert the notion of the lone gunslinger masculinity as a viable embodiment for Stark. Such films focus on:

The immediate attention brought to the vulnerability of the protagonists [altering] the process of identification and humanizes these mythic "heroes." The post-heyday protagonist has to face a world that has become even more ruthless than that of his heyday, as he must not struggle with a betraying body and anxiety about his own irrelevance. (Cloutier, J.C. 2012. 112).

Stark's vulnerability, as depicted through his nightmare in this scene, highlights his own vulnerability to the audience but also works to represent the more 'ruthless' world in which Stark finds himself apart of after the events of AA and the knowledge that aliens not only exist, but are capable of invading Earth. Not only is Stark having to deal with his own body, which he deems as inadequate, but also the anxiety of a future threat which he may not be powerful enough to stop. The fact Iron Man saves him from his nightmare, a literally manifestation of his anxiety, rather than Potts advocates the notion that Stark's lone gunslinger archetype of masculinity is more desirable to him than the domesticity of family.

IM3 explores both sides of Stark's masculinity with levity to set up this examination of Stark's lone gunslinger masculinity in order to challenge it in favour of a masculinity that is deemed by the MCU to be more heroic. The narrative has depicted the lure of the gun for Stark; the ease at which his lone gunslinger masculinity seems to present safety and power in answer to his self-doubts of heroism. However, it then challenges this by removing the suit from Stark's arsenal and thus, forcing him to confront his own insecurities without the aid of his weapon. After saving Stark from the rubble of his home, the suit malfunctions due to damage and this results in Stark crash landing in Rose Hill, Tennessee before the suit stops working, becoming nothing more than a lifeless empty shell.

The Man and the Suit: Challenging the Archetype of the Lone Gunslinger

Stark ends up having to drag the Iron Man suit behind him as he makes his way into town, dragging the suit through the snow like it's a pilgrimage as he leaves footprints in the snow behind him with no one else around, leading to him breaking into a garage to seek shelter from the weather. He lugs Iron Man over to the couch telling the suit: "let's get you comfy. Are you happy now?" He talks to it as if it is a sentient lifeform that has a concept of notions such as comfort much like Stark himself. He is a gunslinger without his gun (the armour) which allows this narrative to explore Stark's masculinity without his dependency on the suit.

Interestingly, the film leans into this “embodiment examining the emotional relationship between men and machines, and how machines can become a symbol as well as a felt extension of the body” (Ridge, D. Emslie, C. White, A. 2011. 148). *IM3* takes this further; the armour is of course designed as an extension of Stark’s body but in this film that isn’t all the suit is positioned as. Stark treats it as a separate entity to himself, no longer just a weapon or armour but something more tangible. The dependency Stark has with the suit needs to be resolved before he can embody a type of heroic masculinity once more. Iron Man is a physical manifestation of the lure of Stark’s lone gunslinger masculinity, which Stark isn’t prepared to give up as indicated by the trek across the snow and his preoccupation with the suit’s comfort. In order for Stark to embrace his heroism, he needs to remove his dependency on the armour. Stark’s relationship with his armour changes frequently over the course of the film (and throughout Stark’s appearances in the MCU more generally), in which it can be viewed as intrinsically linked to who Stark is but at other times, such as the one mentioned above, the suit becomes a separate entity to Stark entirely.

The suit is there to aid him, to protect him, but it is not meant to serve as the hero in his place. This return to the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger gives the narrative flexibility to explore and establish Stark himself as the hero without the armour as subterfuge. For Stark “his brain is the essential ingredient to his success, and most of his hypermasculine scenes are not found in the donning of armour, but in his exchanges of wit and clever plans” (Salter, A. Blodget, B. 2017. 40). Removing the suit removes the distraction, allowing Stark as a character to prosper, and his heroism to reflect that. Instead of using the suit he has to rely on his own genius, building weapons to aid him from a local hardware store and coming up with plans that are suited to his own (human) capabilities rather than having the suit to rely on. It’s these scenes that his heroic masculinity starts to be constructed with Stark at the centre of heroism rather than Iron Man. This is why the film treats them as two separate entities rather than the

suit as an extension of the man, in order to highlight the difference in their heroism and suggest the Stark as the hero is favourable within the MCU. By placing Stark as the hero, the man not the armour, he finally starts to separate from his dependency on the suit and confront his own feelings of inadequacy. The dependency he has on the suit has been removed (not by Stark himself but by circumstance) suggesting this is at least part of the reason his notion of heroism is being challenged by the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger, the suit was being used as an aid for Stark's anxiety rather than helping him address the problem which without it, he is forced to do thanks to Harley Keener.

In order to do this, he becomes 'The Mechanic', introducing himself to Keener as such rather than as Tony Stark or Iron Man. It has masculine connotations, a man who fixes things with his hands, and reflects on the fact that Stark himself believes he needs fixing. This parallels *Unforgiven* where Munny is a farmer who works with his hands. Unlike Munny though, Stark flourishes without his weapon, relying on his genius to prepare for the final confrontation with Killian. Keener parallels Schofield Kid in the narrative, both younger boys idolise their respective "mythic" heroes, yet both are proven wrong about them. Schofield Kid is disappointed to learn Munny can't shoot nor is he the ruthless gunslinger he heard stories about. For Keener, he is disappointed to discover that Stark can't talk about the events of AA without having a panic attack. This removes the mythic sense of the hero, unmasking Iron Man to reveal Stark underneath, presenting him as human rather than post-human. Keener's presence in the narrative works to challenge Stark's lone gunslinger archetype of masculinity by challenging the notion of the stoic, legendary gunslinger (Stark after all is famously known as Iron Man within the MCU and is something of a celebrity).

When Stark has a panic attack on the road, over the phone Keener questions: "why don't you just build something?" and this is the moment that incites a change in Stark. Keener effectively gets him back to work, much like Fury did for him in *IM2*. Stark's masculinity is challenged and

saved by male characters, as established through AA (chapter 1.4). *IM3* continues this notion, Keener in this film acts as a product of growing boyhood in society, his ideas of masculinity come from expected societal notions of what it means to 'be a man' and reminds Stark of this when he suggests he simply try and build something. This works to challenge Stark's masculinity, offering him a chance to reflect on his own childhood and as a result:

What could have been a cliched plot development in which Stark 'finds himself' through his relationship with the boy, emerges, in Black's hands, as something more interesting as evidenced by Stark's line to Harley having learned that the young boy's father had left, 'which happens... Dads leave, no need to be a *pussy* about it.' (McSweeney, T. 2018. 135).

This line is said as much in reference to Stark as it is to Keener, but also emphasizes Stark's own fear and anxiety. It interrogates Stark's own beliefs and as a result, forces him to engage with issues of his own embodiment of masculinity.

This scene works to position Stark as the future of heroic masculinity rather than Iron Man, Keener brings out the human element of Stark's heroism, an element which is deemed heroic by MCU standards because to suffer trauma is humanly heroic (chapter 1.1). Furthermore, most of the fighting done in this film is without the armour suggesting that it is Stark that's the true hero and protector of the Earth, Iron Man is merely a prop to help him do that. It's Stark's brain, his ability to create Iron Man in the first place, that makes him heroic, this is the very thing that helped him survive his own trauma in *IM*. The narrative supports this, there is even a montage of Stark building bombs and weapons out of supplies from a hardware store in order to highlight his genius. The MCU favours the human over the post-human in this film. The climax of the film makes "the comparison of the suit to a 'cocoon' suggest[ing] that Tony Stark has emerged into a hero at a new level, fully integrated with the identity of Iron Man as superhero that he has previously only 'worn' as another costume" (Satter, A. Blodget, B. 2017.

40). This film doesn't suggest Iron Man isn't a hero, instead it reinforces the notion that Stark is the guiding force behind Iron Man, the human element is what makes him heroic. If to suffer trauma is to be human, then to be human is inherently heroic. The MCU depicts heroism in these films as belonging to the man underneath the costume/armour rather than the alter ego they create and in doing so presents Stark's lone gunslinger archetype of masculinity as a flawed demonstration of heroism.

This concept is made explicit in the final showdown of the film where Stark faces off against Killian with the help of Rhodes and his army of Iron Man suits in order to save the day (and the girl, as it is revealed Killian has taken Potts hostage and dosed her with extremis). This scene presents several different versions of the Iron Man armour and Stark jumps from one to the other in quick succession. This suggests that while the suit is interchangeable, the man is not. Each suit is coded to his DNA after all, meaning not even Rhodes can use them (despite having his own version of the armour). Stark doesn't use the suit as a weapon against Killian, but rather as a means of protection. This signals him giving up the co-dependency he has on the suit and realising his own heroic potential separate from it.

The relationship between Stark and Iron Man can be extrapolated upon further when Stark destroys his Iron Man suits and this iconography emphasises the shift to Stark's humanity being heroic. This notion of his humanity, the thing Stark spent the whole film believing made him weak and unable to protect the world and his loved ones from future threats, is actually the reason he's seen to be a hero. Director Shane Black, suggests:

As he detonates them, he is freeing his mind of obsession so he can concentrate, so he can finally fixate on something in front of him instead of always having his mind on the horizon. He's evolved, the suits have evolved him, giving him access to a new person that he can become. (Black, S. 2013. DVD Commentary).

By destroying the suits Stark is freeing himself of his attachment and co-dependency on the armour, a moment the narrative has been building to from the start. However, this action of blowing up the Iron Man suits also signals a final death of Stark's lone gunslinger masculinity. Stark is metaphorically laying down his weapon, calling an end to the fight in regard to which masculinity to embody. The Iron Man suit is what gave him freedom from captivity in Afghanistan and led to him first embodying this cinematic archetype of lone gunslinger masculinity. In this film, Stark's embodiment of lone gunslinger masculinity occurs without him needing to wear the suit, but it is facilitated by the existence of it. Iron Man represents Stark's idea self (even though it's seen to be a flawed ideal to the audience and other supporting characters in the film), to the point where Stark tries to augment his own body with implants so he can call the suit to him at will. When he finally lets go of these suits and his obsession with building them, he is finally realising this cinematic archetype of masculinity isn't a successful embodiment for him within the narrative. He reunites with Potts, the narrative favouring domesticity as a reward for heroism as Stark walks away without a suit. He seemingly chooses peace, whereas Rhodes regains his own armour after the battle, continuing on the gunslinger mantle. Stark's surrender of his lone gunslinger archetype of masculinity is further exacerbated when he is seen undergoing surgery in order to have the shrapnel removed from his heart, the arc reactor finally removed from his chest. In a voiceover, Stark tells the audience it is the best sleep he's had in years, cementing the notion of the final death of his gunslinger masculinity by conveying a sense of finality and acceptance in himself as Iron Man (without the armour). Stark ends up embodying a heroic masculinity that can be seen as moving beyond that of the lone gunslinger granting him a sense of freedom from this cinematic archetype in a both a physical and psychological way. There is no regeneration through violence as it customary from the western, Stark destroying his own suits attests to this fact. He doesn't end this film triumphant as Iron Man but battered and bleeding as Tony Stark, bearing the consequences of his own heroism.

However, this moment is quickly undermined because Stark appears in later instalments in the franchise and of course, he suits up as Iron Man. This decision to destroy the suits works as a final comment on his lone gunslinger archetype of masculinity regarding his individual trilogy of films but doesn't provide a lasting conclusion to the character who goes on to use the Iron Man armour again in *A:AOU* and subsequent *Avengers* films. Stark keeps them separate by removing the arc reactor from his chest. The human is idealised rather than post-human, the line between man and suit becomes clear. While the revisionist western is employed to subvert the lone gunslinger archetype of masculinity for Stark, it is ultimately further subverted by the superhero genre as a whole, bound by the conventions of a superhero film. Audiences arguably expect to see Stark as Iron Man and engage in battle once more.

One of the biggest challenges in this portrayal seems to be the conflict in the narrative about what the Iron Man armour actually is. There are suggestions that the Iron Man suit is a weapon, something Killian attempts to use when he kidnaps Rhodes and tries to get him out of the suit. There are also moments that suggest the Iron Man suit is simply a suit of armour (similar to Stark's insistence in *IM2*), it acts as a layer of protection for Stark and works like a costume when he fights. Then there is this newer added element of the suit as an entity, something Stark talks to, looks after and can operate without him inside (or without Stark having conscious knowledge of it). This leads to a conflict about what the actual purpose of the suit is in this film, especially considering by the end of the film the narrative suggests the suit isn't actually the heroic element of Iron Man at all. That belongs to Stark. The narrative doesn't seem to decide, one way or the another what this suit is actually meant to be. Even when Stark removes the shrapnel from his chest and blows up the suits at the end audiences know Iron Man will return in the subsequent films so that ending offers no answers about the nature of the Iron Man armour. Perhaps the suit is whatever Stark needs it to be/designs it to be or perhaps the point is to present this question to the audience and have them decide the true nature of Stark's armour for themselves.

In conclusion, *IM3* examines Stark's embodiment of the lone gunslinger masculinity through the tropes of the revisionist western, aiming to provide an interrogation of this version of masculinity as an unsuccessful portrayal of heroism, through the co-dependency Stark has on his suit and his obsessiveness in the wake of his trauma. Stark himself, depicted similarly to the jaded protagonist of the revisionist western is developed through the narrative to engage with instances of conflict between his lone gunslinger masculinity and his heroic acts. The film depicts Stark's struggle with inadequacy and his co-dependent relationship with his Iron Man armour to challenge the lure of the lone gunslinger masculinity, ultimately to present Stark as the hero irrespective of Iron Man. The suit of armour in this film is portrayed as a weapon, representing the lure of the lone gunslinger masculinity in juxtaposition to the embodiment of heroism the narrative favours. The narrative presents this as an easy way for Stark to deal with his problems, the suit forming an emotional crutch for him to rely on but suggests this actually limits Stark's ability to heal. Similarly, the revisionist western often seems to suggest that violence is the 'easy' immediate way to deal with a problem before the protagonist learns there are consequences for that ease that rarely outweigh its apparent usefulness. Stark's lone gunslinger archetype of masculinity is ultimately challenged through the removal of the suit and the introduction of Harley Keener, prompting Stark to destroy his suits as a metaphor for the final death of the lone gunslinger in order to cement his embodiment of heroic masculinity for future instalments of the MCU.

2.2: “Look At You, Still All Muscly and Everything”: Regressive Masculinity and the Fantasy

Action Hero in *Thor: The Dark World*.

T:TDW continues Thor’s solo character journey following on from the events of *Thor* and *AA*, continuing on Thor’s characterisation and working to expand the ever-growing world of the MCU. As this thesis has already explored in *Thor*, Chris Hemsworth’s God of Thunder is introduced in the MCU as embodying the cinematic archetype of the 1980s action hero. He portrays certain traits of heroism that were made a Hollywood standard for the 1980s action hero (Tasker, T. 1993. 64). Those traits include the ease at which the hero commits violence, the stoicism of the action hero and the importance of heteronormativity to presenting the action hero as a successful embodiment of masculinity. The MCU progresses from these ideas with Thor’s character in *AA* when he is in direct contact with other embodiments of masculinity and therefore in an environment in which masculinities can learn and adapt from each other (chapter 1.4). *T:TDW* offers a regression of Thor’s character rather than a progression of the ideals of masculinity established as desirable in *AA*. Instead of further extrapolating on how Thor’s masculinity has changed following on from the collective approach to *AA*, this next instalment in the MCU works to ground Thor back into his original cinematic archetype of masculinity; the 1980s action hero. In fact, as this chapter will demonstrate, *T:TDW* regresses Thor’s masculinity to such a degree that unlike with *Thor*, the narrative of this subsequent film does little to challenge this portrayal of masculinity and instead represents it as a favoured form of masculinity throughout the film in order for Thor to save the day. This chapter aims to explain how this particular film regresses Thor’s masculinity through his cinematic archetype and the conventions of masculinity inherent to the 1980s action hero by critically evaluating ways in which the narrative of this film represents conventions of masculinity that align with Thor’s embodiment of a cinematic archetype whilst distancing the character from the growth he endured in *AA*.

T:TDW, as this chapter will explore, grounds the portrayal of the titular character within the fantasy action hero genre, a particular subgenre of the 1980s action film that offers a setting of high fantasy featuring characters that aren't necessarily human. *Thor* was also shown to be indebted to this particular genre of 1980s fantasy films such as *Conan the Barbarian* (1982), as previously explored in chapter 1.2 of this thesis. However, *T:TDW* is not as progressive in challenging Thor's embodiment of a cinematic archetype as *Thor* is. This chapter will discuss the emphasis on gritty violence in an attempt to make this film a more serious take on Thor's character to his previous iteration. The use of Loki as a prominent side character will also be investigated, and how the incorporation of the buddy film trope works to further highlight Thor's regressive masculinity and once more invokes the type of masculinity typical of the 1980s action hero in relation to Loki's wisecracking sidekick role. This discussion will demonstrate the importance this narrative places on Thor's heteronormativity and the desire of domesticity. This further evidences the regression of Thor's masculinity through his cinematic archetype in such a way that results in *T:TDW* offering little commentary on the future of Thor's masculinity or how the character might progress beyond this narrative with regards to that masculine embodiment of his cinematic archetype. For the purpose of this thesis this can still be defined as a model of masculinity adopted from older Hollywood film for contemporary characters that translate across specific genres.

The second instalment in the Thor trilogy sees the return of Chris Hemsworth's Thor along with fan-favourites such as his villainous brother, Loki and on/off love interest, Jane in the God of Thunder's first solo return after the events of *AA*. *T:TDW* places Asgardians against the Dark Elves (a centuries old race set upon destroying the world with the power of the aether – an ancient weapon that can be harnessed to wipe out all realms). When Jane stumbles upon the aether and ends up being infected by it, Thor must take her to Asgard to protect her before the leader of the Dark Elves, Malekith can capture her in order to use the aether to destroy all nine realms (including Earth).

This film was directed by Alan Taylor, who prior to *T:TDW* was perhaps best known for his televisual directing credits such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), both of which focus heavily on representations of masculinity and violence with Taylor suggesting the violence of *The Sopranos* is often “sudden, fast, and then over” (Taylor, A qtd in Vary, A. 2021. n/p). Despite this, *T:TWD* was met with criticism by both fans and critics, “the film is widely regarded as being one of the lesser entries in the MCU, although it does have a significant fan following, much of which is connected to the continued presence of Tom Hiddleston playing Loki for the third time” (McSweeney, T. 2018. 143). This film took on a different tone to *AA* and *Thor*, both of which played up the drama of the action with comedy and the violence with references of self-awareness of the superhero genre conventions which it is ultimately expected to fulfil. *T:TDW* attempts to match the same intensity as *Game of Thrones* or *The Sopranos*, in that there is an attempt at seriousness that doesn’t readily lend itself to the comic book superhero style already established within the MCU’s prior films. At the end of *Thor* audiences see a character reluctant (but willing and capable to fight if necessary) to commit violence but in this introduction, Thor seems to revel in the fight once more, showing off to his comrades as he does battle against his enemies. This is partly due to the change in director with Alan Taylor favouring a “dirtier and denser [style to showcase] this was the kind of way we wanted to show violence, this is the way we wanted to do battle” (Taylor, A. 2013. DVD Commentary). However, Taylor also suggests there was a deliberate decision from Feige to direct *T:TDW* in this particular style, “Kevin Feige was always smart about looking at what worked and didn’t in the last iteration and trying to retool from that. So, I came in to bring some *Game of Thrones* to it” (Taylor, A. 2021. n/p). This intentional move away from the character depicted in Branagh’s film doesn’t quite work because of the seriousness the directorial style is trying to convey in an attempt to align the depiction of violence with something resembling the violence typical of *Game of Thrones*. While Taylor wanted to portray a more serious character with Thor, removing the comedic elements of

Branagh's Shakespearian melodrama to further emphasise Thor's capability for brutal violence suggests Thor's heroism in this film comes from his ability to commit violence rather than to protect the innocence, which in this scene are shown to be casualties of war that are seen as a necessary cost on Thor's path to glory in battle.

Violence and the Hard-bodied Action Hero in *T:TDW*

The introduction of Thor in this film is through battle, in the time following on from *AA* it is revealed that Thor has been fighting for peace across the nine realms and challenging anyone who attempted to destroy that peace. This opening (re)introduction to Thor shows battle commencing on an epic scale, a medieval style is being invoked in the use of armour for Thor which features a chest plate and arm guards to protect his body and invites the audience to take notice of his muscular physique. Furthermore, the camera pans to several other soldiers in this battle, all of whom are on horseback with swords as they charge into the destruction. It is an interesting choice for a fantastical world to invoke medieval iconography that seems to further emphasise the grittiness of battle. The fight is filmed in close quarters, so the scene comes across as very dense which can be seen in several films that feature epic battles such as *Braveheart* (1995) and even *Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003).

This camera style is reminiscent of Taylor's directorial style on several episodes of *Game of Thrones*, which include the season 2 finale 'Valar Morghulis', which depicts a similar epic battle for the people of Westeros. In this particular episode of *Game of Thrones*, Taylor conveys a sense of panic and urgency through his battle scenes, despite having several different instances of battle throughout this particular episode. For example, this episode depicts Winterfell (the ancestral home of the Starks) under siege after having been taken by force in an early episode by Theon Greyjoy who is struggling to keep hold of his new territory, eventually falling to the Boltons who claim Winterfell for themselves, leaving Greyjoy as a prisoner. These scenes are closely shot with Greyjoy as the focus, his sense of frustration and

panic translates onscreen through the way the camera moves with him as he attempts to rally his troops. The violence that follows is brutal and unforgiving as it expected from *Game of Thrones*, “a show that depicts, above all, a foul and most *violent* game of thrones” (Larsson, S. Lundstrom, M. 2020. 120). Not only does *Game of Thrones* depict battles of epic scope and consequence but it also often focuses on violence on a realistic scale, for example, in this same episode a soldier serving House Stark, Brienne, finds three women lynched by soldiers for sleeping with men of opposing forces, Brienne savagely kills them in retaliation for the dead women in a display of disturbing violence as she takes her sword to each of the men responsible. The characters often seem to thrive in the violence, pushed to extreme measures through the need for survival in such a way that appears realistic and medieval rather than fantastical.

Similarly, Thor seems to relish in his fight as well, using his hammer to maim and destroy as he sees fit. The backdrop emphasises the destruction of the battle through the constant imagery of surrounding trees on fire and billowing smoke rising throughout the shots. Perhaps, most noticeably in this scene is the focus on the civilians caught in the crossfire of this fight. One particular shot shows a young mother and small child screaming as debris from an earlier explosion falls to the ground. The type of violence doesn't shy away from the realistic grittiness of battle, instead it chooses to emphasise it in a way that grounds this film in the particular style of the fantasy genre that emphasises realistic and shocking violence such as *Game of Thrones*. This type of battle scene is different to the final climatic destruction of New York as witnessed in *AA*, which took care not to show any civilian casualties but rather an emphasis on innocents fleeing the scene before the destruction reached them. Even *Thor* makes sure to show the citizens of New Mexico fleeing before the final fight occurs as reassurance there would be no civilian casualties. This further cements Thor as he is depicted in *T:TDW*, as a grittier (and therefore more serious) type of action hero, immediately making it clear that he is more warrior than King and as such will respond to battle with a warrior-like brutality.

Whilst showing the character triumphant in battle helps to reinforce the character's adherence to the cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied action hero, it doesn't quite work with his heroism. Narratively, the problem with the character of Thor and the depiction of him as hero stems from the embodiment of his cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied hero. The narrative encodes this version of masculinity as the ideal way for Thor to demonstrate heroism due to the fact the traits he embodies as part of his heroism align with the traits he displays as part of his cinematic archetype. For example, the hard-bodied hero archetype performs acts of violence in order to save the day in a similar way that part of Thor's performance as superhero means he must triumph through violence to prove his heroism. This was the case with the ending of the first *Thor* film, the embodiment of his heroic masculinity reinforces his hard-bodied hero archetype through the spectacle of the showdown. This opening is no different. What has changed however, is how this violence is depicted. There's something more savage and primal in Thor's fighting style than what was depicted in Branagh's *Thor* and the contrast between the two can almost feel like a regression against the (minimal) strides made in Thor embodying his heroic masculinity because it seems to suggest that to be violent in battle is to be heroic. This is a notion often explored through the battles on *Game of Thrones* however, in the MCU thus far, as this thesis has explored, the narrative suggests that an embodiment of a cinematic archetype of traditional masculinity does not necessarily equate to heroism. In fact, as is the case with several of these characters, these ideals often work in opposition to each other in the character's journey into superheroism.

T:TDW presents the image of violence and the hard body as heroic for the character through Thor's victory in this opening scene which ultimately undermines the MCU ethos that violence should be used as a last resort and defensive rather than reactionary. Whilst the violence in a superhero film is expected, the circumstances surrounding how that violence is depicted is where the issue lies. This opening firmly establishes Thor as a warrior even though this has already been set up through his cinematic archetype in this first film and it's only after this

fight scene do audiences get a chance to see a humbler and more emotionally connected Thor within the narrative (when he is back on Asgard, missing Jane and contemplating Loki's betrayal whilst at a celebration party in honour of his victory). Taylor's direction brings a seriousness to the character of Thor and the narrative however, in doing so this reinforces Thor's cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied hero rather than challenges it due to the fact the focus on violence and battle further supports the notion the might makes right. Unlike with Branagh's *Thor* however, *T:TDW* doesn't depict this type of action hero in order to subvert it, instead the narrative presents Thor as a hero because of his violence, his victory in this battle makes him heroic and he is even celebrated for it with a party when he returns to Asgard.

One of the main reasons for this regression of Thor's masculinity is due to the many issues this film went through in production with several different directors assigned to direct (including Patty Jenkins who later went on to direct 2017's *Wonder Woman* film), script rewrites and cast conflicts (where Natalie Portman wanted to leave the film and the demand for Tom Hiddleston's Loki meant rewriting the script to give him more screentime). As a result of this, "Marvel flipped through a series of perspective new directors without success... When Alan Taylor finally signed on to direct the deadly combination of strict time restrictions and heavy studio influence wasn't conducive to a creatively inspiring environment" (Elvy, C. 2020. n/p). With so much upheaval during production, it makes sense that the final product would suffer in terms of narrative cohesion and character development. *T:TDW* couldn't offer any complex or nuanced examinations of Thor's masculinity because there was little consistency over storyline or creative direction during production, other than a direct drive to channel a depiction similar to *Game of Thrones*. This depiction of masculinity with regards to Thor's cinematic archetype continues to regress the character's growth in the MCU without subverting or challenging the issues that arise with this embodiment therefore representing Thor as a stagnant archetype of cinematic masculinity within this film.

Whilst a depiction of violence is key to the superhero film, a comedic self-awareness seems to feature in all of the films of the MCU, although the style of that comedy does change from director to director (but often takes the form of witty retorts and physical comedy such as Iron Man flying into the ceiling in *IM* when testing his new suit or Captain America's retort of "I understood that reference" in *AA* which actively references his own displacement in time), but these comedic beats are essential in the MCU's approach to masculinity, offering a self-awareness of these characters that allow them to embody their respective cinematic archetypes with the knowledge that they are just that, archetypes. As previously discussed in chapter 1.1 and chapter 1.3 of this thesis when exploring the characters of Iron Man and Captain America respectively, this self-awareness can come from a prominent side character such as Rhodey or even from the self-referentiality apparent in a particular scene like Rogers giving a performance to the soldiers of the 107th squadron on the front lines. The comedic element of these films become a trope associated with the franchise and its characters. The use of comedy also manages to remove the element of brutality from the violence that these films depict, lightening the otherwise harsh moments of battle for the audience in such a way that allows the MCU to depict violence in a comic-book style technique that appears superhuman. Injuries heal, mortal wounds aren't often fatal, and blood is shed as a lesson in heroism for the hero rather than in an attempt to raise the stakes of battle for the audience or as evidence of a serious (potentially fatal) wound.

***T:TDW*, Loki and the Buddy Film**

The issue with *T:TDW* is the minimal amount of comedic material within the narrative doesn't often come from Thor but from Loki, creating a dynamic between the brothers of the late 1980s, early 1990s buddy film. While Thor is our titular hero, Loki is presented as the reluctant sidekick in this film and the two characters are forced to work together to stop Malekith and the Dark Elves. The sidekick archetype is a common trope in 1980s Hollywood cinema, often

used for comedic relief and to allow the titular hero to impart 'wisdom' (Tasker, Y. 1993. 241). The buddy film offers a commentary on masculinity, in particular on masculinities that challenge each other. Each character often has an opposing masculinity and they must learn to compromise or establish which masculinity is dominant in order to work together. Films such as *Lethal Weapon* (1987) and *Tango and Cash* (1989) negotiate issues of masculinity and heroism through the central characters in a similar way that Thor and Loki are depicted throughout *T:TDW*.

Intriguingly, the notion of the sidekick only grew in popularity in the 1990s that led to:

the buddy film completely eclips[ing] the hardbody film, adding an element of humour and effectively creating a comedic sidekick for the hard-bodied hero. Toward the end of their hardbody careers, some of the hardbody stars began making these buddy films in order to remain viable in a shifting industrial environment, e.g. Stallone in *Tango and Cash* (1989) and Schwarzenegger in *Red Heat* (1988) and *True Lies* (1994). (Ayers, D. 2008. 57).

T:TDW mirrors the trajectory of the 1980s Hollywood action film in this respect, merging with the buddy comedy films of the 1990s to reflect what Ayers sees as a shift in interest from audiences. Loki's role of sidekick is crucial to the conventions of the buddy film similarly to Thor's stoic hero being crucial to portraying the gritty fantasy genre. Loki and Thor work in opposition, both narratively and physically. Thor is presented as muscular, strong and stoic while Loki is presented as thin, angular and clever. The tension between them comes from a conflict between their masculinities and their differing approaches to heroism within the narrative.

The role of the sidekick works in two ways, firstly to humanise the main protagonist for the audience, often acting as a sounding board for the audience and functioning as the emotional lynchpin of the narrative. Secondly, through comic relief, a balm to the seriousness – and at

times, brooding – main character. This can be seen in many films such as *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) which sees Jones take on a sidekick known as Short-Round (a literal child), who's mere presence humanises Jones for the audience and places him in a fatherly role where he needs to impart wisdom. Jones and Short-Round go on to save each other multiple times through the film, suggesting a level of equality in their capabilities despite Short-Round's age. He is there to make sure Jones can still save the day at the end of the film in a similar way to Loki facilitating Thor's victory in the final showdown of *T:TDW*. Loki's role of sidekick is crucial to understanding the regressive nature of Thor's embodiment of the hard-body action hero archetype.

Loki's character development in this film works to challenge Thor's regression however, ultimately it results in further demonstrating Thor's regressive cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied hero as a superior embodiment of masculinity in this film. Loki actively calls Thor out on his behaviour, demonstrating that comedic self-awareness that the MCU deems vital to its portrayal of heroism and is something that Thor lacks within this film. He challenges Thor, his use of comedy meant to make the audience laugh as much as work to call Thor's own masculinity into question. When Loki and Thor escape from Asgard after forming their tentative alliance, Loki is the one to call out Thor's brutish plan as they attract the attention of the guards: "You know, this is a tremendous idea, let's steal the biggest, most obvious ship in the universe and escape in that, flying around the city, smashing into everything in sight so everyone can see us. It's brilliant, Thor, truly brilliant." While this functions as a comedic moment between the brothers, this also explicitly references Thor's action hero archetype. This self-awareness from Loki allows him to critically challenge Thor's own embodiment of masculinity as heroic, highlighting the flaws of his cinematic archetype through a level of self-awareness of the character. This doesn't insight any particular change in Thor's character though and the film concludes, as expected of the superhero genre, in an epic battle showdown that further reinforces this type of archetype as superior. Thor's regressive

behaviour, despite Loki's attempts to challenge it, is rewarded by saving the day and therefore being encoded as heroic. This trend follows the trajectory of the hard-bodied action films of the 1980s in which the epic fight at the end of the film sees the hero find victory and often through these actions win the heart of the girl, as seen in films such as *Die Hard*.

The conventions of the buddy film incorporated into this narrative reinforce the notion that the relationship between Loki and Thor is the most central and therefore the relationship most likely to have an impact on Thor's embodiment of his cinematic archetype of masculinity. In *Lethal Weapon*, the story follows Martin Riggs and Roger Murtagh who are reluctantly forced to work together by the Los Angeles Police Department. They pair have a mutual dislike of each other and their methods but ultimately learn to trust each other in order to solve the case they are working on. Similarly to Riggs and Murtagh, Thor and Loki are reluctant allies united by their desire for justice after the death of their mother. It's through both the pairs opposing personalities that issues of masculinity are discussed. In *T:TDW* this doesn't work as effectively as *Lethal Weapon* because of the fact Thor is the titular character, relegating Loki into the position of comedic sidekick so already each character's embodiment of cinematic masculinity is portrayed with inequality to each other. Thor's is superior because it's his film, he is the hero. Loki's cinematic masculinity isn't deemed to be as heroic as Thor's because he is merely the side character in Thor's story. As the hero, Thor is bound by a set of rigid expectations, often dictated by the genre. He is expected to engage in an epic showdown and save the day. He is expected to be strong and heroic (McSweeney, T. 2011. 67), but in the role of the sidekick, Loki doesn't have to abide by the same conventions. The sidekick is created for the demands of the hero and therefore can be interchangeable based on the needs of the hero at any given time. While the role Loki embodies within the narrative attempts to engage with discussions of masculinity, there is very little discussion entertained over the course of the narrative. Thor's regressive cinematic archetype of masculinity is further presented as a superior embodiment of masculinity in terms of the potential for heroism through Loki's very

inclusion as the role of sidekick. Loki's masculinity isn't dominant over Thor's because this simply isn't Loki's film, therefore conventions of the superhero narrative establish that Thor's masculinity comes from his ability to secure victory in the showdown between the hero and the villain.

Issues of Masculinity, Heroism and the Archetype of the Action Hero

Loki's masculinity becomes overshadowed by Thor's within the narrative because Thor is the hero. Loki's sacrifice is meant to motivate Thor into action and give the audience a justifiable reason for the violence Thor goes on to commit in the final showdown. This culminates in Loki's sacrificial 'death' scene in this film. Loki stabs the Dark Elf through the heart with a sword to save Thor's life. Not only does this scene utilise Loki's death as justification for future violence by the hero and motivation for the hero to commit that violence, but it also reinforces Thor's regressive embodiment of masculinity as superior by showing Loki to embody his own version of it. This action of sacrifice to save Thor serves as a reminder of heroic masculinity that there is an "emphasis on violent regeneration echoing the masculinist logic of warrior cultures, in which men earn authority and prove their worth through acts of aggression and physical force" (King, C. S, 2011, 30). Thor's masculinity, as this thesis has already explored in *Thor*, is encoded as heroic through sacrifice for others. Loki's actions in this scene call back to Thor's sacrifice in the first *Thor* film, suggesting once more that Thor's hard-bodied hero that is always ready to sacrifice himself to save the day is a dominant model of masculinity.

This triumph in white heroic masculinity, as defined by King when discussing white masculinity in saviour/redeemer films is marked by an act of aggression and violence in which the hero vanishes the villain through bloody victory (King, C.S., 2011, 30), takes a quick turn when Loki is stabbed with the same sword, offering an interesting juxtaposition between Loki as the hero and Loki as the villain. He is heroic in his protection of Thor and his sacrifice to protect his brother but impaled on the same sword that he used to kill the antagonist of this scene,

further aligning him with his villainous past once more. This is emphasised by Loki's line of: "See you in hell, monster." Whilst this scene emphasises Loki's heroism, allowing him to embody a new cinematic archetype similar to Thor's it also offers Loki a self-awareness that his heroism is flawed because ultimately the end goal is to serve himself (by gaining the throne of Asgard) rather than the collective.

Interestingly, this scene could be read as foreshadowing for Thor's own development in terms of embodying his cinematic archetype of masculinity, suggesting this type of masculinity that aligns with the 1980s hard-bodied hero isn't sustainable within the MCU because it results in death. This is immediately undermined by the fact *T:TDW* makes a futile attempt to engage with Thor's embodiment of masculinity and the fact that Loki ultimately survives this 'death'. He is rewarded for his 'sacrifice' through survival in a common trope of the superhero genre. This further evidences the narrative's message that Thor's cinematic archetype is superior because it is possible to survive impossible feats through violence.

The most crucial part of this scene is of course between Thor and Loki, one of the few relationships developed on from the previous films. Thor recognises Loki's heroism in this moment, giving these two brothers that are often in conflict, a chance to reconcile. This is another death Thor has to watch and one affects him in the subsequent films of the MCU. Reflecting the narrative of the buddy film once more to convey:

The message of these movies seems to be one of understanding. The drastic differences between the heroes that are the source of their initial antagonism disappear as they learn to understand each other. Over the course of the film, they develop a genuine respect for each other's character. They learn to trust and rely upon one another for their very lives. Overcoming their initial distrust, they realise that despite their surface differences, they genuinely like each other. (Brown, J.A. 1993. 83).

Thor holds a dying Loki in his arms while Loki is visibly devoid of any colour as he apologises to Thor. It's unclear what he is apologising for but this further supports Loki's redemption, carrying on that self-awareness of the error of his ways. Thor – in position as both a warrior and a future King – assures Loki that he will inform Odin of what he did here today but it's Loki response of: "I didn't do it for him" that brings the emotional resonance to this scene. There is a debate to be had about who Loki truly sacrificed himself for. Whether it was in order to avenge his mother, protect his brother or serve himself but it is likely a combination of all three. This scene gives Thor the justification to commit violence in the final showdown of the narrative, having lost his brother is the emotional trauma that serves his cinematic archetype to further reinforce his embodiment of masculinity. Might will make right and offer him a chance to avenge Loki's death in the process. This is highlighted in that final fight between Thor and Malekith which offers a brutal climax to this film, complete with the destruction of Greenwich, screaming citizens caught in the crossfire and Thor's use of his weapon to dismember his foe in a display that offers a harsher depiction of violence than many of the previous MCU films.

T:TDW concludes by reinforcing the notion that this embodiment of masculinity serves the domestic as well as the fantastic. This works to ground the narrative back into something more realistic and manageable for the audience compared to intergalactic war, but it also reinforces Thor's cinematic archetype of the 1980s hard-bodied action hero to be further explored by different directors in later projects for the MCU. The ending of *T:TDW* seems a little rushed as Thor rejects the throne suggesting he isn't right to rule. Interestingly, his motivation for this decision is Loki, finally a redeemed hero in Thor's eyes and Thor blames the lure of the throne for the conflict between them. It is later revealed to the audience that it's not Odin he is talking to in this scene but Loki in disguise, who has claimed the throne he coveted through his trickery and tells Thor – as their father – that he is proud of the decision he is making. Even Loki, who brought a comedic self-awareness to challenge Thor's masculinity previously in this

narrative ends up endorsing it by the end of the film as he grants Thor his blessing to pursue a life with Jane.

This scene works to ground Thor back in the cinematic archetype of the 1980s hard-bodied action hero, a warrior rather than a king who prefers fighting against evil on the 'battlefield' to ruling benevolently from a throne. However, this film takes this further by having Thor not only renounce the throne but also return to Earth and domesticity with Jane, suggesting the effectiveness of his masculine archetype with family and the promise of future domesticity. In a sense, this conclusion leaves Thor's unchanged from the start of the film to the end, embodying his cinematic archetype of the 1980s hard-bodied action hero to once more to be interrogated in a more comedic and overt way by Taika Waititi in *Thor: Ragnarok*, which marks a completely different direction for the character of Thor than this film takes, perhaps in retaliation to the underperformance of this entry in the MCU at the box office (Box Office. 2022. N/p).

Thor chooses to join Jane on Earth at the end of *T:TDW* and thus give their relationship another try, emphasising his 1980s hard-bodied archetype by highlighting Thor's sexual prowess in winning over the girl. This is further exacerbated by the fact he not only wins Jane back but effectively 'steals' her from her human love interest in this film, Richard, proving that Thor is the superior male not only in terms of his brute strength but also in regards to the opposite sex. This serves as another subtle reminder of his physique, his body is to be looked at and desired by women (even Lady Sif has a crush on him in this film), which reinforces the emphasis on his appearance as a crucial part of his embodiment of the 1980s hard-bodied action hero archetype.

Compared to Thor, Richard is an office worker, always seen wearing a shirt and portrayed to be meek mannered. Audiences first introduction to the character is through a disastrous date with Jane in which they meet at a restaurant for dinner, but Jane is focused on the gravity

anomalies she has just discovered. Richard is physically the opposite of Thor in terms of musculature. Played by Richard O'Dowd, the character is slight and slim in a button down that conceals his body, very much the image of the everyday man compared to Thor's God-like strength and power.

There is a parallel to be seen in regards to Richard's inclusion in *T:TDW* that mirrors the introduction of the 1990s films that marked the end of the 1980s hard-bodied action hero where the protagonists were often men working in offices, no longer heavily muscled or brutish. These protagonists, seen in films such as *Falling Down* (1993), *Fight Club* (1999) and *American Psycho* (2000), were products of consumerism often struggling with their own fragile masculinities. It is important to note that Richard is a much less complex character than the protagonists of these films, included in *T:TDW* as comic relief rather than a commentary on masculinity. Richard's appearance in *T:TDW* is brief, limited to a few scenes and one phone call with Jane that serves to make Thor jealous however, this does provide an element of foreshadowing for the trajectory of Thor's cinematic archetype in a similar way to the Hollywood trajectory of the 1980s action film. Thor's masculinity might not be inherently successful for his heroism but in terms of his romantic entanglements, he still manages to win the girl. Richard is another male within this film that is shown to have a body that differs to Thor and as a result Thor's sexual desirability literally banishes Richard from the screen. This suggests that brawn is desirable for the opposite sex, a notion that aligns with these 1990s films where the protagonists often seem to have trouble finding and sustaining a healthy relationship with a romantic partner. In *Falling Down*, for example, Prendergast is a police sergeant about to retire before insisting on investigating a new string of violent acts. Prendergast is shown to be a man that no longer fits in with the other officers at the station and has lost his job, being forced to retire to save his pride. A source of emasculation for Prendergast comes from the fact he is unable to fire his weapon in the line of duty and he gets teased about this by the other officers before finally asserting himself in the final showdown of

the film. Prendergast is not shown as desirable in any sense, a failure at his job and in his romantic endeavours unlike the many protagonists of films in the 1980s such as *Die Hard* (1988) which sees McClane happily reunited with his wife at the end of the film, *Falling Down* never suggests any hint of rekindled romance for the protagonist. In this sense, Thor's 1980s hard-bodied action hero is triumphant through his sexual prowess and his ability to provide domesticity which in *T:TDW* seems to encode him as embodying a more successful archetype of masculinity specifically for romance.

The violent actions of the protagonist work to establish his cinematic archetype of masculinity as superior through battle but this showdown also demonstrates a rejection of the male body that differs from the body Thor presents. He hacks at Malekith, cutting off arms with brutal efficiency, literally destroying this body that represents a different form to Thor's. Loki's death also vanquishes a body that doesn't fit with the traditional, muscular form Thor embodies. Not only does the violence Thor conducts support a regressive cinematic archetype of masculinity, but this film offers no alternative to it in terms of depictions of heroism. This further supports Connell's notion that violence becomes something of a transaction amongst men, to the point boundaries are drawn and exclusions made (Connell, R.W. 2005. 83). The destruction of male bodies that are represented as different from Thor's (which itself is heavily indebted to the hard-bodied action hero) further emphasises the exclusion of these bodies within the masculine hierarchy of the MCU. Thor is applauded for his heroism; other men are vilified for their difference. Even an intern working under Jane who has previously been portrayed as slight in stature is deemed a romantic hero after gaining the temporary ability to lift a car with his bare hands, after which he shares a passionate kiss with fellow intern, Darcy. His strength shows him as embodying a musculature similar to Thor and that in turns makes him desirable to women. This suggests that this hard-bodied masculinity serves Thor not only in battle but also in his romantic endeavours.

Thor's sudden desire for heteronormativity clearly comes from the trauma of losing two members of his family, this theme is an important one through the trilogy of *Thor* films and the titular character's development. Thor's attempt to heal from the loss leaves him with the desire to find and be a part of a new family dynamic and apparently, as the ending of this film suggests, turn his back on Asgard and fighting. He even hangs up his hammer on a coat peg in Jane's apartment when he returns, literally hanging up his warrior ways. Thor as an embodiment of heroism is seemingly being discarded in this ending to pursue domesticity, a trait that is intrinsically linked to his outdated cinematic archetype of masculinity. He is saved by the love of a woman. The issue with this is that it gets completely disregarded in *A:AOU* when Thor seems to have re-joined the team and fights alongside them (simply stating that he and Jane had a mutual break-up). His efforts at heteronormativity are proven to be fruitless and instead he finds his found family in his team, all of whom have undergone versions of trauma and therefore are better equipped to understand Thor's own struggles (see chapter 1.4). This decision to become a family man doesn't get any real explanation or development however so it lacks any real commentary it might attempt to make on the ineffectiveness of Thor's cinematic archetype of masculinity. It's proven to be ineffective (off-screen) before it even really gets explored and as a result, only adds to the masculinity Thor embodies within this film – and carries over into *A:AOU* – therefore, once again suggesting this narrative does little to actually challenge Thor's regressive embodiment of masculinity.

In conclusion, *T:TDW* makes little attempt to engage and progress Thor's cinematic archetype of the 1980s hard-bodied hero. Instead, the narrative reinforces a regressive version of masculinity for Thor, grounding the character into the portrayal of his cinematic archetype of masculinity through his use of violence in this film. The film attempts to engage with several different genres such as the gritty fantasy epic to the buddy film but this does little to challenge the masculinity that Thor embodies and further reinforces his hard-bodied hero archetype that secures victory through violence and eliminates bodies that differ from his own.

The use of the buddy film in particular should work to challenge Thor's masculinity, even emphasising it within the narrative but strengthens that embodiment for Thor through the character of Loki in the role of sidekick. However, this film does offer a conclusion to the issue of Thor's regressive cinematic archetype of masculinity, by presenting it as superior both through violence and in terms of domesticity, in order to have Thor reappear in future MCU projects, namely *A:AOU* and *Thor: Ragnarok*, which continue to examine his 1980s hard-bodied action hero embodiment of masculinity. While this particular film does little to progress Thor's masculinity on a critical level, that is not to say Thor, as a character within the entirety of the MCU, remains as an embodiment of the 1980s hard-bodied action hero throughout his appearances within the franchise when the character is depicted by different directors and doesn't have the issue of production problems that affect the narrative development for the character of Thor.

2.3: "Soldiers Trust Each Other, That's What Makes it an Army. Not Just a Bunch of Guys Running Around Shooting Guns": Investigating the Cinematic Archetype of the Soldier through the 1970s Political Thriller in *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*.

CA:TWS continues to explore the cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier first established for the character of Steve Rogers in his first instalment of the MCU, *CA:TFA*. First and foremost, this entry into the MCU acts as a political thriller (Russo, A. 2014. DVD Commentary), tackling themes of government corruption and surveillance, however as this thesis has already demonstrated, there is much to be learned from the portrayal of masculinity in these core characters. It has already been established that Rogers's first introduction into this cinematic universe is indebted to a particular trend in World War Two films that focus on the brotherhood between men and the sacrifice attributed to war (chapter 1.3). Rogers himself ends up embodying a similar type of soldier archetype, encoded by the MCU as heroic, and emphasised as an embodiment of masculinity. It's worth reiterating at this point that for the purposes of this discussion, definitions of heroism and heroics are those that closely adhere to King's belief that heroes must be victims that endure and overcome trauma in order to offer up a paradoxical vision of masculinity, both pained and privileged so the hero becomes something of a "sacred object" (King, C.S. 2011. 20). This example of heroism and Rogers's embodiment of it becomes apparent when Rogers is brought into the present day, leading the Avengers against an alien invasion (chapter 1.4). The other male characters adopt Rogers's embodiment of a version of cinematic soldier masculinity over their own embodiments previously established in their solo films which manages to help them successfully save the world from the threats that face it. It is important to remember that this thesis is concerned with depictions of cinematic archetypes, rather than in how these masculinities function outside of Hollywood and such as when referring to cinematic archetypes of masculinity in this discussion the intention is looking at this in the context of Hollywood cinema and issues of representations of masculinity. *CA:TWS*, as a self-reflexive narrative, utilises Rogers cinematic

archetype of masculinity and attempts to challenge it through a modern perspective, using the genre of the 1970s political thriller to question how beneficial Rogers's masculinity is without the wartime setting in which his representation of masculinity is indebted to.

CA:TWS follows Rogers as he settles into present-day life, working at S.H.I.E.L.D. as a way to serve his country as a soldier (without war). An attack on S.H.I.E.L.D. soon has Rogers caught up in a plot of distrust and conspiracy that reveals enemies working inside the agency and puts Rogers on a path to uncover the secrets that could put the whole world at risk from a plan that offers worldwide surveillance in an attempt to neutralise threats before they occur. Disgusted and eventually hunted by HYDRA (posing as S.H.I.E.L.D), Rogers ends up on the run with Natasha Romanoff (his fellow Avenger from *AA*) in the pursuit of the truth that will bring him face to face with Hydra once more.

This chapter aims to demonstrate how the cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier that Rogers embodies is challenged through the morally grey world typically portrayed in the 1970s political thriller films such as *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) and *Marathon Man* (1976). Issues of politics and national security establish a commentary on whether the values of the cinematic archetype of soldier masculinity have become outdated through the main theme of past ideals attempting to coexist with future ones. This chapter will discuss how Rogers's archetype of masculinity is still shown to be relevant in the present day and how this evolves the MCU from this point onwards in terms of narrative. The narrative of *CA:TWS* negotiates the conflict between Rogers traditional soldier masculinity (traditional in the sense of old models of masculinity often portrayed in Classical Hollywood cinema) and the morally ambiguous world of the 1970s onwards in order to bring the character to the centre of political discourse for the narrative to explore Rogers's masculinity in more depth. Directed by Anthony and Joe Russo, the intention for this film was clear from its inception and was heavily influenced by modern-day America:

It's hard to make a political film that's not topical. That's what makes a political thriller different from just a thriller. And that's what adds to the characters' paranoia and the audience's experience of that paranoia... We were all reading the articles that were coming out questioning drone strikes, pre-emptive strikes, civil liberties – [Barack] Obama talking about who they would kill... We wanted to put all of that into the film because it would be a contrast to [Captain America]'s greatest-generation way of thinking. (Russo, A qtd in Lovece. 2014. n/p).

The political thriller film, a sub-genre of the thriller, grew in popularity in the 1970s largely in response to several governmental scandals that were under public scrutiny:

Fuelled by the Watergate scandal, post-Vietnam disillusionment, and public scepticism towards the Warren Commission report, the 1970s conspiracy thriller located conspiracy within government and corporate establishments, turning the focus of paranoia inward, toward America's own institutions. (Trifonova, T. 2012. 109).

Captain America is a product of America; he is made by those institutions (especially the military in a literal sense as it was a military program that gave him the serum that turns him into Captain America) and offers a sense of national romanticism surrounding those institutions. He incorporates the American flag into his costume and as the MCU establishes in *CA:TFA*, he is more than willing to sacrifice himself for those beliefs. In short, those institutions are seen as a common good because Captain America, as the hero of the story, is seen as a common good. Placing this nationalistic character into a film that garners a large influence from political thriller films allows an interesting discussion to occur that explores the role of nationalism in modern-day society. Also, the film concerns itself with discussions about whether the traditional core values of justice, honour and truth have been antiquated from the days of World War Two, drawing a connection between the two timelines Rogers has been a part of. Therefore, "in this context, the conspiracy thrillers of the 1970s provided socially

symbolic negotiations of the popular anxieties about secrecy, surveillance and the uninhibited rise of the national security of state since the end of the Second World War” (Willmetts, S. 2005. 242). This allows an examination of the cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier embodied by Rogers, by challenging these core values and their place in the present day in order to investigate whether they can still be considered a heroic form of masculinity for Rogers to embody. The political thriller provides an opportunity as it:

Emerges as a modern genre in Hollywood largely as a consequence of the political and social climate of the United States at a time full of fears associated to the various threats of the Cold War scenario. While it remains a generic manifestation of the wider narrative system of Hollywood film, its often-controversial subjects allow the political thriller to include original features in its narratives, occasionally even challenging time-honoured standards. (Castrillo, P. Echart, P. 2015. 120).

As a modern genre compared to the war film, the political thriller can be adaptable to the political landscape of the time, meaning that *CA:TWS* has an opportunity to make Rogers adaptable to the current political issues rather than ground the character in the discourse of the 1970s. This is crucial to proving Rogers’s cinematic archetype of masculinity is capable of malleability as this chapter will go on to explore. It needs to be able to adapt for the time period rather than become outdated due to the changes in society and nationalistic tensions that are guaranteed to shift from decade to decade. In order for this representation of masculinity to function regardless of time period, it must prove to be adaptable outside of the conflict of war. The narrative of this film attempts to challenge the archetype of the World War Two soldier in order to demonstrate its superiority within the MCU in terms of heroism by giving Rogers a new conflict to overcome, an enemy from within his own country and its foregrounding institutions, depicting a demonstration of how Rogers’s cinematic archetype of masculinity might function without a war setting.

The Political Thriller Narrative and Outdated Ideals

The introduction of Rogers in this film shows him having relocated to Washington, attempting to adapt to the new world he finds himself in. This immediately sets Rogers up as a figure that is out of touch with the new era. He carries a notebook around with him as he compiles a list of suggestions and recommendations of events he needs to familiarise himself with. This list includes, but is not limited to, the moon landing, Steve Jobs/Apple and the newest item given to him by Sam Wilson, an ex-soldier that Rogers meets whilst jogging, is the 'Trouble Man' soundtrack from Marvin Gaye. Rogers's assimilation into the present day gets more exploration in this film and the importance placed on it helps to establish an outdated cinematic soldier archetype for Rogers in order to introduce one of the main discussions of this film. On the surface, adapting into a new decade seems to be going well as Rogers leads a mission for S.H.I.E.L.D., wearing a new stealth suit that removes the homage to the American flag and instead opts for a navy blue and grey style to suggest Rogers is becoming more acclimatised to the way S.H.I.E.L.D. operates and the time period he's now living in. He literally puts the America flag away in favour for a darker suit that lets him operate in the shadows and under the cover of night. This relates the colour tones of the film to those political thriller films that play with lighting and shadows in order to create a desaturated look to the film such as *Three Days of the Condor* or *Parallax View* (1974). A sign that even Rogers understands notions of patriotism and national pride have shifted since his time in World War Two.

However, this soon changes as the political thriller genre of the film is introduced. A crucial aspect of the political thriller that *CA:TWS* is embodying is the use of a corrupted faction of government, mirroring films of the 1970s "made in the middle of the decade [such as] *The Parallax View*, *Three Days of the Condor* and *All the President's Men* use the thriller formula to suggest the omnipotent power of a government and economic system without checks or countervailing power" (Cagle, C. 2012. 57). S.H.I.E.L.D. is that government force within this

film, and the conflict soon arises when Rogers learns that Fury, the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D., hasn't filled him in on all the relevant information to do with his mission, even going so far as to give members of Rogers team missions of their own. Whilst Rogers is tasked with gaining access to a ship in the middle of the ocean in order to save hostages, Romanoff has a secret mission to retrieve S.H.I.E.L.D. intel off the hard drive of the ship only for Rogers to find out when the mission is put at risk.

Neither Fury or Romanoff understand why Rogers is angry to learn information has been kept from him when he confronts them and this becomes one of the earliest signs in this film that Rogers's embodiment of masculinity doesn't seem to have assimilated into the present day seamlessly. He prides himself on truth and honour, core values instilled in him through his embodiment of his cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier (chapter 1.3). Those values are being completely disregarded by Fury for issues of what he deems to be national security, "no one spills all the secrets because no one knows them all." He informs Rogers who seems to scoff at the answer, "No one but you." Is the terse reply. There is clear friction between these two men and the way they view the world. Fury believes lies are fine if they get the job done, Rogers does not. It's an interesting position to put the character in, one that challenges his own ideals and beliefs, with Fury representing a moral relativism whereas Rogers leans more towards moral absolutism. It also reveals a lot about the conflict his masculinity endures in this new modern-day setting. Audiences have seen the cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier masculinity thrive in war, both in the Second World War and later in the alien invasion war against humanity in *AA*, which was created to act like a war movie for the very reason that it allowed that other characters to easily adopt Rogers's embodiment of masculinity as superior to their own (chapter 1.4). *CA:TWS* explores this portrayal of masculinity in a post-war setting when issues of national security turn to pre-emptive measures rather than reactionary ones. The values of brotherhood, justice and truth

are blurred in the wake of political and national upheaval and it's this world of moral ambiguity that Rogers finds himself trying to negotiate.

The moment *CA:TWS* explicitly shows Rogers to be embodying a cinematic archetype of masculinity that is deemed outdated by the other characters is during a conversation between Rogers and Fury as Fury reveals Project Insight for the first time. Project Insight is a series of three next generation helicarriers that have the ability to read the DNA of every single person in the world once they are launched in the sky, making it easy to evaluate terrorist threats *before* they become threats.

This scene immediately sets up a conflict between Fury's view of the world and Rogers interpretation of it. When Fury takes Rogers down to the sublevel of S.H.I.E.L.D. where Project Insight is being prepped, they descend in the elevator despite Rogers not having the clearance to visit that level. Fury is literally dragging Rogers down to his level in the hopes of explaining to him the importance of pre-emptive action rather than reaction. This moment sets the course for the rest of the film, revealing this secret to Rogers is the first indication that Rogers's World War Two soldier archetype of masculinity doesn't work within the world that S.H.I.E.L.D. operates in, a world of secrets, spies and pre-emptive weaponry. Fury attempts to frame Project Insight through a personal anecdote about his grandfather, seemingly in the hopes of demonstrating to Rogers the shift in mentality the world has undergone since World War Two. Fury informs Rogers, "Grandad loved people, but he didn't trust them much", after explaining how his grandfather walked around with a lunch bag of tips and a loaded gun to dissuade muggers. The parallel between Rogers and Fury's grandfather is apparent, both of a different generation and both, according to Fury's story, needing to adapt to the world as it is now. This highlights the fundamental difference between Rogers and Fury. Rogers trusts people, Fury does not.

The tension between these two characters is intrinsically linked to their cinematic archetypes, Rogers's World War Two soldier masculinity deems that violence should be defensive rather than pre-emptive (as established in chapter 1.3 of this thesis) whereas Fury's archetype is indebted to the 1970s political thriller genre in which mistrust and moral dilemmas drive the characters through the narrative. It's the juxtaposition between these two archetypes that challenge Rogers's masculinity as outdated for the world he finds himself attempting to navigate, a juxtaposition between "the 'greatest generation' rhetoric endorsed by the first film (and throughout the MCU) and what is shown to be the moral compromises of the new millennial decades which provides much of the film's dramatic friction" (McSweeney, T. 2018. 154). This is emphasised within the narrative when Fury reveals he has read the SSR files from World War Two by telling Rogers, "Greatest Generation? You guys did some nasty stuff." Rogers is clearly affected by Fury's words but as a man who values the truth doesn't shy away from his part as a soldier, "Yeah, we compromised. Sometimes in ways that made us not sleep so well, but we did it so people could be free. This isn't freedom, this is fear." Rogers doesn't waver in his disgust of Project Insight, despite Fury calling his own cinematic archetype of masculinity into question. When prompted to "get with the program" on taking the world as it is, rather than as they'd like it to be, Cap refuses with a firm, "Don't hold your breath." This sets up the narrative conflict between these characters, the tension between the world Rogers's cinematic archetype of masculinity was established in (see chapter 1.3) and the world of this film, where morality isn't as clear and national security has been compromised many times over the decades with scandals such as Watergate and terrorist attacks such as 9/11. The MCU is careful not to show any of the horrors of war that Rogers might have had to endure nor the supposed "nasty stuff" he had to do as a soldier in order to present Rogers as the character with the right convictions, offering a depiction of the soldier as nothing short of heroic and (almost) holy in his traits of truth and sacrifice. These are ideals Fury, presented in

this narrative as a spy, doesn't seem to value because of the world he grew up in, a world that Rogers can't seem to understand.

CA:TWS takes this even further in terms of highlighting how the cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier is now viewed as outdated. The scene that directly follows in the film shows Rogers visiting a museum exhibition about himself and his life. It's clear that Rogers is questioning his history, his morals and where he fits into a world that seems to be fundamentally built upon values that don't match up with his own world view. Rogers's life doesn't belong to him, as Writer Marcus Feeley states, "His past isn't his anymore. It's history. Everyone can go and look at who he was" (Feeley, M. 2014. DVD Commentary). The narrative places Rogers as a piece of history, not only is the archetype of the World War Two soldier outdated to S.H.I.E.L.D. and issues of national security but to society as well. He has literally and figuratively become the "sacred object" of heroism that King describes, a relic of heroism from another time (King, C.S. 2011. 33). The museum exhibition works as a stark reminder of how differently Rogers interprets the world and in doing so, sets up the narrative to challenge whether this embodiment of masculinity can still prevail in the modern day.

Soldiers and Spies

The main challenge to Rogers's cinematic archetype of masculinity comes from the dichotomy of soldiers and spies, perhaps best exemplified when Rogers is reluctantly forced to join forces with Romanoff in order to uncover the truth of the conspiracy within S.H.I.E.L.D. Both these characters, similarly to Rogers and Fury, have different world views influenced by different genres of Hollywood film. However, there is a strong link between them that helps provide an interesting commentary on the discussion of Rogers's embodiment of masculinity. Romanoff's archetype of a Cold War spy that deals with deep cover and covert missions is inherently indebted to Rogers's World War Two archetype, just as the political thriller genre is indebted to the war genre that preceded it. The political thriller genre, whether consciously or

unconsciously, often negotiates issues of how the world changes from the 1940s to the 1970s, particularly with regards to the American Government and the emphasis on national security over public safety, as seen in films such as *Three Days of the Condor* and *Marathon Man*. In fact, almost every character in this film fits into the category of Soldier (Rogers, Wilson and even Barnes) or Spy (Fury and Romanoff), allowing this film to deal with the aftermath of war on a personal level through characters like Rogers and Wilson but also at a national one through the inclusion of S.H.I.E.L.D. and the use of characters like Fury and Romanoff.

This establishes a debate between the most important thing to prioritise in situations of national security. The quest for the truth or getting the job done by whatever means necessary. Placing Rogers at the centre of this commentary allows this to play out in narrative terms because, “only Steve Rogers’ innate sense of honour can provide a centre to the Marvel Universe around which other heroes rotate, each with his or her own perspective and ethical code that is best understood in relation to that of Captain America” (White, M.D. 2014. 77).

The version of masculinity embodied by Rogers in the form of the World War Two soldier archetype is the cinematic archetype that has shown to be the most heroic by MCU standards, other heroes follow his lead in battle (chapter 1.4), even Romanoff in this film despite risking her own secrets coming to light when S.H.I.E.L.D. falls. The most crucial way to interrogate Rogers’s archetype of masculinity is to place him with characters that view it as outdated, Romanoff constantly makes jokes about his age throughout the film whilst Fury references how much the world has changed since Rogers was last a soldier. The narrative allows these characters to question Rogers’s masculinity through their own belief systems.

This results in Rogers being surrounded by other characters that fit within the world of the political thriller in order to highlight the fact he does not. Rogers is pulled into this world and this situation by chance in a similar way to the unfolding events of *Marathon Man*. The protagonist, Thomas Levy, gets caught in a political war when his brother, Doc, is murdered

whilst visiting him. Doc, he soon learns, secretly worked for a government agency that had him working as a diamond courier for an infamous Nazi war criminal in the hopes of bringing him to justice. Rogers chooses to join S.H.I.E.L.D. but becomes embroiled in the world of conspiracy and secrets when Fury dies, revealing to him that S.H.I.E.L.D. has been compromised and he shouldn't trust anyone. Both Rogers and Levy are learning how this world works as they go, both hunted as they are deemed a threat. This allows both characters to comment on the morally grey politics of the new environments they find themselves in and challenge the righteousness of it. Meanwhile, Doc and Fury work as characters that are experienced in the world of the political thriller, offering both an introduction and a warning about the conflict between new age paranoia and traditional notions of heroism, allowing the protagonist to find a way to merge the two in order to save the day.

The narrative of *CA:TWS* explores the recurring cinematic motif of past ideals juxtaposing with future ideals, a theme that becomes overt during the midpoint of the film when Rogers finds himself returning to Camp Lehigh, the army base where he went through basic training in *CA:TFA*. The setting of this base, along with the subsequent reveals to the plot that follow mark the point in the narrative at which past and future ideals merge. This suggests this moment is crucial in the discussion on whether Rogers's cinematic archetype of masculinity is outdated or will be triumphant in the scope of the political thriller narrative. Ultimately, this seems like a logical decision to negotiate issues of the World War Two soldier archetype as "Captain America embodies the problem of being torn between two worlds while seeking a way to reconcile them" (Vernon, M. 2016. 126). In this scene, those two worlds as presented in this film through the 1970s political thriller narrative and Rogers's own cinematic archetype of the soldier are forced to coexist when it is revealed a conspiracy. S.H.I.E.L.D. has been silently infiltrated by Hydra since the Second World War, after Rogers thought he sacrificed his life to stop Hydra when he first faced them in his first

appearance within the MCU. This reveal comes as another moment of conflict for Rogers who is losing faith in all the institutions that made him. He's on the run, isolated and questioning who he can trust and in desperate need of answers. There is a loss of identity and nationalism present here that he once prided himself on having in *CA:TFA* (chapter 1.3). *CA:TWS* really "dramatizes the disconnect that Rogers has with the America that he has been thrust into. The Marvel Cinematic Universe has told the story of Captain America in a way that really exposes that disconnect" (Michaud, N. Watkins, J. 2018. 141). This is more apparent via the disconnect he experiences during this scene, revisiting his own origins as if to question not only the future of heroism but his own future as well. This is why this moment is a crucial one within the film, it gives Rogers the chance to question his own cinematic archetype of masculinity by choosing whether to continue to embody the archetype of the World War Two soldier or to abandon it for a more contemporary archetype of masculinity as governed by the political thriller narrative.

The Past and the Present

The past and present merge when the search for answers leads Rogers and Romanoff to his old army base. This could be seen as the place where his cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier was first embodied, the first time he was recognised to receive the serum to create Captain America (see chapter 1.3). The return to his old base serves another purpose in *CA:TWS* however, giving Rogers the conviction to fight and in doing so, firmly portray his soldier masculinity as a way to establish him as a hero. When they arrive at Camp Lehigh, the base is shut down and hasn't been used in a very long time. The buildings are covered in dust and seem almost out of place after the constant reminders of the Washington architecture that appear through the rest of the film which appear more modern and grand. The buildings are a metaphor for Rogers in this moment, out of place and seemingly left behind as time moved on without them. Rogers seems to mourn the

emptiness of his old training ground, stopping as he sees himself as a cadet, training with the rest of his unit. There's a moment where he catches his own eyeline, past and present staring at each other as a reminder for how much Rogers has changed since taking the serum. How much the world has changed since he first joined the army. This scene becomes critical in exploring Rogers's cinematic archetype of masculinity, giving the character a self-awareness in order to insight change. That change in Rogers comes from this confrontation with his own past. Director, Anthony Russo suggests, "The journey down to Zola's chamber is like a journey into Cap's psyche... Cap's leading the charge here, he's pushing them forward to a confrontation with his past" (Russo, A. 2014. DVD Commentary). It's Rogers's knowledge of army regulations that leads the way in this scene, realising a building is too close to the barracks, his seemingly outdated archetype is literally showing him the way and providing him with the answers.

Rogers and Romanoff soon discover that S.H.I.E.L.D. started out of Camp Lehigh, the past and present merging together once more to foreshadow what's to come for Rogers on a personal level. His past merges with his present when they discover Zola's consciousness uploaded onto data banks so his mind could be preserved (Zola was a Hydra scientist working with Red Skull in *CA:TFA*). Zola takes great joy in explaining to Rogers that Hydra has been embedded covertly inside S.H.I.E.L.D. the whole time, causing destruction and war wherever they could. Rogers's sacrifice at the end of *CA:TFA* was for nothing and in a rare display of anger for Rogers, he punches the computer screen displaying Zola's face, cracking the glass. His anger is palpable, the loss and sacrifice on his face is evident as the implications of this knowledge sink in. Hydra is still at large, and he needs to fight them again despite having already given everything to the cause in the Second World War and it seemingly having had little impact. Rogers isn't ready for this battle, he isn't portrayed as a soldier here. He wears jeans and a hoodie, carrying his shield which serves more as an awkward mirage of the past that juxtaposes with his current appearance. He isn't leading a

unit of men in battle in this narrative, and in this scene in particular, he isn't depicted in a position of leadership. He doesn't have all the answers and is soon cowering with Romanoff in a grate in order to survive from a S.H.I.E.L.D. missile that has been sent to kill them.

Director, Anthony Russo states, "In the spirit of the thriller, we were looking for tension, for those critical moments to play out. This is the moment that S.H.I.E.L.D. goes bad" (Russo, A. 2014. DVD Commentary). This scene is reminiscent of *Three Days of the Condor* in which a CIA analyst, Joe Turner, arrives back at his covert office after lunch to find everyone else in his team has been murdered. After reporting the crime to headquarters and arranging for a safe extraction, Turner soon realises the kill order came from the CIA itself and his own agency is trying to kill him. Similarly, to the CIA, this scene reinforces the knowledge that S.H.I.E.L.D. (specifically the Hydra agents working at S.H.I.E.L.D.) will stop at nothing to kill Rogers in order for Project Insight be successfully launched. Both Turner and Rogers end up on the run after the attempt on their lives, with Rogers seeking out refuge with Sam Wilson and Turner hiding out in the apartment of a young woman. In both, *CA:TWS* and *Three Days of the Condor*, the protagonist soon realises they can no longer trust the government agency they work for and must find a way to bring them down, exposing the truths the agency has been trying to conceal. This marks a popular convention of the political thriller genre in which:

The heart of the political thriller lies in a conflict that confronts an individual with the system, the ordinary citizen against the institutions, the human being against the inhumanity bent on protecting and/or corporate power. Governments and companies are presented as forces bent on protecting their interests at any cost, to the extent of eliminating any opposition, even when such policy involves murder. It is a power, therefore, that does not contemplate the value of the individual or any sense of morality. (Castrillo, P. Echart, P. 2015. 120).

In *Three Days of the Condor*, Turner learns that a report he filed at the start of the film held information about a rogue operation to seize Middle Eastern oil fields by the CIA, rather than risk the information being disclosed, the CIA Deputy Director of Operations orders Turner's whole team to be eliminated. In *CA:TWS*, the driving force behind Hydra is Alexander Pierce (played by Robert Redford who draws clear parallels to the 1970s political thriller with his previous roles in *Three Days of the Condor* and *The Candidate* (1972)). Redford plays the secretary of state, who orders the death of Fury and Rogers because they both pose a threat to the launch of the Insight Helicarriers. Both the mentioned films work to place their protagonists in direct opposition to the corrupt government agency, driven by a sense of morality. It's this sense of morality that reinforces Rogers's embodiment of the cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier on two distinct levels. Firstly, in terms of ownership. Rogers believes the fight against Hydra is his fight, he lost friends to it, he became Captain America to be able to win this fight and he feels a moral obligation to finish the fight he started in the Second World War. Secondly, this sense of morality reinforces his cinematic archetype through the notion of truth, a trait Rogers has been shown to value very highly throughout the MCU. In *AA*, he is visibly angry at Fury for keeping weapons created by the tesseract a secret (see chapter 1.4) and *CA:TWS* follows this notion with regards to Fury's reveal of Project Insight. The betrayal and corruption of S.H.I.E.L.D. seems to condemn Fury's embodiment of masculinity, an embodiment that is indebted to the 1970s political thriller, because it goes against the basic traits Rogers prides himself on such as truth, justice and freedom. Therefore, this becomes the moment in the narrative that Rogers fully endorses his cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier in the present-day setting, choosing to reject the questionable morality that he has been challenged with throughout the narrative thus far.

Rogers doesn't merely reject the embodiment of the spy archetype for the latter half of the narrative, he actively fights against it by announcing to Fury that, "S.H.I.E.L.D., Hydra, it all

goes.” He has made his decision about which archetype of masculinity will serve him best and Fury seems to endorse it by replying, “It looks like you’re giving the orders now, Captain.” The use of rank is important here, grounding Rogers further into his cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier by having it acknowledged by the other characters. Rogers is ready to lead once more, having a clear conviction on the future ideals he wants to serve and protect.

Interestingly, both Fury and Romanoff help Rogers in his mission to dismantle S.H.I.E.L.D., with Romanoff even going so far as to spill all of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s secrets onto the internet for public access, including her own while Fury aids them in shutting down Project Insight. Not only has Rogers made the choice to embody his cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier, but even the characters embodying a version of the spy archetype defer to it within the narrative, suggesting that the archetype of the soldier is superior in terms of embodying a form of heroism within the MCU. This scene makes a strong incentive towards moral absolutism over moral relativism, suggesting that moral relativism allows for corruption and dishonesty therefore it is Rogers’s view of moral absolutism that should be adhered to.

This works in a similar way to *Three Days of the Condor*, in which Turner decides at the end of the movie to spill CIA secrets to the public in the hopes of putting an end to the lies and deception he has uncovered. In one of the last scenes of the film, Turner meets with another CIA operative, Higgins, to tell him that he took all the information he discovered to the New York Times. Higgins is in complete disbelief demanding to know what Turner has done. He coyly replies with, “I told them a story.” There is no confirmation within the film about whether Turner actually did give the story to the press but the potential of him doing it manages to secure his protection from the corrupt CIA agents that still want him dead. Higgins tells him, “You’re about to be a very lonely man. It didn’t have to end like this.” Turner appears unfazed in his decision as he starts to retreat down the busy New York

street, like Rogers the focus is on isolation, both through the choices these protagonist make to honour the truth. Turner shrugs and tells Higgins, "Of course it did." There is no other option for him because in his search for the truth, Turner was only trying to do the thing right, much like Rogers. Both *Three Days of the Condor* and *CA:TWS* suggest the political thriller archetype can never be as heroic as the World War Two soldier archetype because it doesn't value truth the way individual characters like Turner and Rogers do. Both men are willing to risk their lives for the truth which portrays them as heroes in their own right, representative of the people rather than the institution which is something the government force in the political thriller film hardly ever concerns itself with.

It's important to note that there is an inherent trend within the MCU films, especially through Captain America given his origin, to portray superheroes as military applications. There's an element of bias made apparent within this film because the militaristic approach often seems to be proven to be superior, not just in this film but others such as *CA:TFA* and *AA*. This works as a way to reinvent a national romanticism of America, particularly for Americans, through the contemporary comic book movie in a similar way to the Westerns such as *Shane* and the action films such as *Rambo: First Blood* (1982), before them. Rogers's choice will always be encoded as heroic because he is willing to bleed for his mission, a trait of heroism that King suggests is of the utmost importance in their work on depictions of sacrificial heroism in Hollywood, so much so it defines our understanding of heroism on screen (King, C.S. 2011. 38).

A Return to the World War Two Soldier Archetype

Rogers's embodiment of the World War Two soldier archetype of masculinity is proven not just relevant but essential in the climax of the film to save the day, this is emphasised when he steals back his old uniform, the same one he used during World War Two in *CA:TFA* that has since been donated to the museum as part of the exhibition on Rogers's life. He

chooses this suit, rather than his stealth suit given to him by S.H.I.E.L.D., as a way to reclaim his identity and his cinematic archetype of masculinity ahead of this final battle. This is a dramatic lift in the colour of these shots, a deliberate choice that indicates the importance of this moment. Director, Joe Russo explains, “we stripped a lot of colour out of this film and out of the Marvel Universe and it’s because we’re leading up to this moment where he reclaims his uniform and everything he stands for... This is the real piece of colour in this movie” (Russo, J. 2014. DVD Commentary). Up to this moment in the narrative, Rogers has been lost and adrift, struggling to find his place in a vastly different world to the one he is used to. The muted tones, often featuring blue, support this notion. He is unsure in his identity and his place in this world, however, once he makes the decision to choose his cinematic archetype of masculinity over being influenced by the 1970s political thriller genre, he becomes certain of who he is in this time period, and perhaps more importantly, the kind of hero he wants to be. As he tells the people of S.H.I.E.L.D., “The price of freedom is high, it always has been, but it’s a price I’m willing to pay.” Rogers’s identity, and subsequently his heroism, is about truth, justice and sacrifice. These traits have been part of his identity since his cinematic archetype of soldier masculinity was first formed in *CA:TFA*, and functions as performative evidence of his heroism. Rogers has learnt that he can thrive in a post-war setting without deconstructing his cinematic archetype to do it and the following confrontation with Barnes further encourages that as “his connection with Bucky helps him to resolve some of these issues and he owns his past and his authentic self when he exchanges the modern Captain America uniform for his original uniform from when he fought alongside his friend” (Shaw, P.T. Hammer, T.R. 2016. 122). This emphasises the importance of embodying his cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier but also presents another opportunity to prove this typical archetype is a superior embodiment of heroism.

The final battle of the film is between Rogers and Barnes, Rogers's life-long best friend who died in *CA:TFA* (see chapter 1.3). It is revealed that Barnes was rescued from death by HYDRA and brainwashed to become their assassin, putting Barnes on ice until needed. Barnes depicts the notion that moral relativism corrupts, manipulating his mind to forgetting who Rogers is and wanting to kill him. This narrative parallels the final fight scene from *CA:TFA* in which Rogers fights against Red Skull only to realise he's on a plane heading to New York with a bomb onboard and the only way to stop it is to force the plane down over the Arctic with him still inside (chapter 1.3), a scene that didn't necessarily work as well as it should have because of the lack of emotional turmoil for Rogers as explored in chapter 1.3 of this thesis. There was no doubt that he wouldn't sacrifice himself to save the world because that's what his soldier masculinity is expected to do as evidence of heroism. *CA:TWS* seems to reference this ending with its own, giving Rogers the emotional stake between himself and Barnes. This is his best friend and as Wilson tells Rogers before the battle, "he might not be the kind you save; he might be the kind you stop." Rogers's morality comes into direct conflict with his personal feelings, adding another challenge for his cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier.

Rogers's fight seems to be going well until the introduction of Barnes, with his own pseudo-platoon of Wilson, Romanoff and Fury, he manages to replace the data points in two of the three Helicarriers, so they end up targeting each other rather than civilians below. It's during his mission to do the same with the final Helicarrier that he comes face to face with Barnes. The scene is void of any real colour; glass panels make up the surrounding floor that emphasise the stakes for Rogers with views of Washington as he pleads with Barnes: "please don't make me do this." He knows in this moment that he'll have to fight Barnes in order to finish the mission and the thought is devastating to him. It's a rare thing to see Rogers plead, an indication that the conflict between finishing the mission at all costs and refusing to fight his former friend. He doesn't want to do this. The fight begins and there's a

noticeably brutal edge to it, Barnes and Rogers are evenly matched in terms of skillset. It's almost uncomfortable to watch as Rogers breaks Barnes' arm in order to get him to release the data chip, playing on the emotion of their former friendship and brotherhood. This is a side of his soldier masculinity that hasn't been explored, the savagery of violence that was carefully shielded through the use of a montage in *CA:TFA*.

The gunshot that later rings out is marked by the shock on Rogers's face, blood soaking through his uniform where it is revealed Barnes shot him. This is the moment it becomes apparent that while Rogers might be able to finish the mission, Barnes will still need to be dealt with. Despite the gunshot wound, Rogers manages to get the data chip in place before ordering all three Helicarriers to be blown from the sky, even the one he's still on with Barnes. The blood on his uniform is one of the most vivid colours in the scene, a reminder that Rogers is willing to sacrifice himself for this mission against Hydra once more. As the Helicarrier starts to break apart he chooses to help Barnes, stuck under rubble rather than get himself to safety. Rogers is choosing his friend. This choice reinforces his cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier, prioritising the notion of brotherhood over his own personal safety. In another rare display for the superhero, Rogers refuses to fight Barnes, letting his best friend savagely beat him as he attempts to get Barnes to remember him. He drops the shield as a sign of surrender before telling Barnes, "I'm not going to fight you, you're my friend." Barnes bites back with, "And you're my mission." This scene highlights that Rogers's belief in moral absolutism isn't fascistic, his actions with Barnes show there is a compassion for others that accompanies Rogers's moral absolutism which is crucial to proving this is better than moral relativism. The emotional stake for Rogers emphasises his cinematic archetype of masculinity and the sense of duty to the mission for Barnes which suggests a flaw in his own soldier masculinity that has been corrupted by archetypes of the 1970s political thriller, namely by Alexander Pierce who has been seen torturing Barnes in order to brainwash him after a mission.

When the Helicarrier finally explodes, Rogers falls into the water, the use of slow motion highlights the sadness of another sacrifice. He failed in his mission, failed to save his friend and in a homage to *CA:TFA*, he is returning to the water once more. This time he didn't sacrifice himself for Hydra, but for Barnes. There is a moment where audiences are led to believe he will once again "die" for nothing, as Zola told him previously. However, he is saved by his cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier. He is saved by Barnes pulling him out of the water and onto the bank. That notion of friendship and brotherhood saves him. A notion that is an inherent trait of his cinematic archetype, the same archetype Barnes shares with him. Not only does this reinforce Rogers's cinematic archetype, but it also portrays it as superior when challenged with the archetype of the 1970s political thriller. The conventions of the World War Two soldier archetype, as established in *CA:TFA*, not only save Rogers's life, but manage to save Barnes as well. Furthermore, S.H.I.E.L.D. gets disbanded after their secrets are revealed to the world, with both Fury and Romanoff needing to disappear and figure out their next moves. The soldier archetype triumphs over the spy archetype through displays of truth, brotherhood and honour which this narrative seems to encode as being the 'right' way to be heroic within the MCU. This also sets up Rogers's return in *A:AOU* where he will once again lead the Avengers in battle, therefore his embodiment of the World War Two soldier archetype was inevitable to a certain extent because it's this embodiment that made him the natural leader of the team in *AA*. In the continued universe of the MCU, Rogers's place as leader has never been challenged and this film doesn't attempt to do so either.

In conclusion, *CA:TWS* explores the archetype of the soldier through the use of the 1970s political thriller in order to explore traits of truth, justice, and sacrifice. These traits are diametrically opposed in the war film and the political thriller therefore this provides a chance to discuss whether these ideals have become outdated in a modern iteration of America, compared to the World War Two setting of *CA:TFA*. Whilst initially it suggests

there is an attempt to challenge Rogers's cinematic archetype, ultimately the film doesn't do this, namely because the militaristic approach is often favoured in the MCU through a sense of national romanticism but is instead reaffirmed as a superior embodiment of heroism through malleability within the modern-day setting. While the world might become morally grey over time, it becomes clear that for MCU heroes, there must be a clear set of core values to be upheld. They should help make the world a better place without violence or bloodshed, a notion that will continue to be explored in *A:AOU*. This chapter has explored how this film initially presents Rogers's archetype of masculinity as outdated, only to refute this through the negotiation of past and future ideals allowing Rogers to see the merits of his archetype and embody it for the final showdown in the narrative. The cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier is demonstrated as a form of heroism that can withstand upheaval on a grand scale, including changing decades and political discourse, through its adaptability and the basic core values which Rogers portrays. This is a version of masculinity that is encoded, by MCU standards, as worthy of the title of the 'Greatest Generation' and a heroic ideal for heroes to strive for.

2.4: “Maybe I am a Monster, I Don’t Think I’d Know if I Were One”: Challenging Cinematic Archetypes of Masculinity in *Avengers: Age of Ultron*.

A:AOU serves as both the sequel to *AA*, providing a second film in the MCU that focuses on the Avengers team as well as the last entry in the MCU’s slate of films for Phase Two. As this thesis has already discussed in depth (see chapter 1.4), *AA* brings together a team of superheroes to save the day from an alien invasion and in doing allows for the exploration of different types of masculinities in relation to one another. In terms of the cinematic archetypes of masculinity the core male characters in this franchise exhibit, *AA* explored how each differing masculinity works in conflict and cooperation to each other through character interaction and motivations. *A:AOU* utilises the benefit of having an already established team and attempts to continue the interrogation of masculinity throughout the narrative in order to continue discussions of the representations of masculinity that have been present throughout the MCU films as this thesis has already explored (see sections 1 and 2).

For the purposes of this continued discussion and consistency, the definition of masculinity used when talking about these cinematic archetypes is one closely related to Connell’s work where she demonstrates the difficulty of defining such a complex term but chooses to encompass a definition of masculinity as “simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture” (Connell, R.W. 2005. 71). For Connell, the key defining principle of masculinity is that there is never simply one masculinity, nor a singular masculinity that remains normative in society. Instead, masculinity is a shifting concept, capable of being contested in society as the need arises. In summary, “to recognise more than one masculinity exists is only the first step. We have to examine the relations between them” (Connell, R.W. 2005. 80). *A:AOU*, as *AA* did previously, sets up a narrative that allows for an examination of the differing masculinities between the core heroes of Iron Man,

Captain America and Thor. The film offers a team dynamic that “exemplifies models of collaborative masculinities – embracing (while critiquing) multiple masculine ideals – in contrast to hyper masculine posturing traditionally associated with many superhero stories” (McGrath, D. 2015. 127). Whereas *AA* was concerned with establishing how these different masculinities work together and which is dominant and therefore the most relevant to saving the day in an act of heroism, *A:AOU* continues this discussion by introducing other alternative masculinities to those previously established in such a way that the introduction of these masculinities provide new challenges and commentary on the cinematic archetypes of masculinity embodied by the characters that are the focus of this thesis. In doing so, this narrative can offer an intentionally more in-depth critique of the types of masculinity these characters are embodying through the use of multiple masculinities that appear on screen and how these are presented in terms of both heroism and domesticity.

This chapter aims to explore how *A:AOU* attempts to challenge the cinematic archetype of masculinity through the characters of Iron Man, Captain America and Thor specifically by exploring how the narrative presents heroism within these heroes and further interrogates it through the placement of the Avengers as both saviours and causes of the destruction present throughout this narrative. This film presents the Avengers through the concept of villainy, both as a team and as individuals in an attempt to explore how performances of heroism are directly linked to the cinematic archetypes of masculinity that have been encoded as heroic by MCU standards. This narrative further works to challenge heroism within these characters through the use of monster allegory, as this discussion will investigate, presenting these characters through Frankenstein origins in order to further undermine definitions and interpretations of the cinematic archetypes of masculinity that these characters embody. This chapter aims to examine the introduction of alternative masculinities, both in terms of humanity and post-human masculinities. For the purpose of this discussion, these terms are being used in a very basic definition as it is not the purpose of this thesis to explore the

difference between them nor how the film presents them as a focus of the argument. Instead, this thesis is concerned with how these concepts work in relation to the cinematic archetypes of masculinity being discussed. This chapter aims to look at these concepts as part of a spectrum of different masculinities. Humanity in this discussion of the film is encoded as a domestic ideal of masculinity as represented by Barton and the post-human outlook represented by the characters of Vision and Ultron. As previously mentioned (chapter 2.3), the idea of the post-human is being used in basic terms of body augmentation and merging the body with technology as it is not the central focus of this thesis but a consideration in the wider debate of challenging cinematic archetypes within this film. As this chapter will go on to explore, the characters of Iron Man, Captain America and Thor which have formed the focus of this work and their respective cinematic archetypes of masculinity exist in-between these two juxtaposing demonstrations of masculinity within the film therefore it is crucial for the discussion to include an examination of masculinity that acknowledges both the human and the post-human depictions of masculinity.

A:AOU follows the team (still made up of Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, Hulk, Black Widow and Hawkeye) as they battle Ultron, a sentient AI program created by Stark (with the help of Banner) to protect the world. Ultron soon turns hostile, planning to bring about world level extinction after concluding that it's the only way to ensure peace because he believes the Avengers are the cause of the problem rather than the solution. Ultron ends up joining forces with Wanda Maximoff (Scarlet Witch) and Pietro Maximoff (Quicksilver), twins experimented on by HYDRA who have gained superpowered abilities, to achieve his goals and as a result the Avengers must face an enemy that is seemingly impossible to stop in order to protect the world from Ultron and his army of AIs.

Establishing Heroism and Introducing the Monster Allegory

The film negotiates representations of heroism and how this is intrinsically linked to the cinematic archetypes of masculinity that these characters portray by introducing a narrative that interrogates that link between the heroism these characters perform and their individual cinematic archetypes of masculinity. This achieves two key things: firstly, it allows the film to explore whether these cinematic archetypes of masculinity are truly heroic by examining the MCU standard of heroism as defined by these characters in their solo films (see chapter 1.1, 1.2 and 1.3). Secondly, this interrogation provides a commentary on the “internal conflict of the superhero regarding whether his body holds the promise of social good or social disorder” (Mulder, J. 2017. 1053). In doing so, the narrative of the film (and later the film’s antagonist in the form of Ultron) offers a new perspective on the heroism these protagonists embody and the type of masculinity they depict on screen. This can be seen from the opening scene that works to introduce the discussion that becomes the main theme of the film, which according to Director Joss Whedon, is “the idea that Ultron might be right, that the Avengers might be a bunch of thugs. [It becomes an] important thing to articulate and important for them to internalise” (Whedon, J. 2015. DVD Commentary).

The opening scene of this film draws the audience straight into the middle of the action, the Avengers are mid-battle and seemingly winning. The camera tracks from one member of the team to another fluidly, an attempt that makes the audience feel as though they are part of the team as well. This choice works in another way though, establishing the team dynamic and harmonious unit right from the start in a follow on from *AA*. The team is on top form, having presumably worked together for a few months (as there is conversation that alludes to them having tracked down other Hydra bases together), and as a result there is a sense of victory in this fight. It seems like a foregone conclusion. This is emphasised by the inclusion of the team shot, a slow-motion frame featuring every member of the team in an appropriate action pose

before the battle continues in regular speed (this is a shot that wasn't delivered in AA until the final climactic battle scene). Everything about this scene has been orchestrated to invoke the sense of camaraderie and heroism the team established in the final battle of AA. The reason for opening with it in this film becomes apparent when this scene switches to a different point of view, enabling the scene to subvert this demonstration of heroism. This is done in two ways: firstly, through establishing the fight from the point of view of Hydra's base of operations, led by Strucker, where audiences meet the twins, Wanda and Pietro Maximoff for the first time. Secondly, by including the effect this fight has on the nearby civilians. Stark, realising they might be in danger, deploys the Iron Legion (an army of AI controlled robots under Stark's control) to help ensure civilian safety and the public reaction isn't one of awe and gratitude over the Avengers' heroism. Instead, Stark's robots are met with heckling, abuse and violence. They are unwanted, as are the Avengers themselves. The crowd chant: "Avengers, go home!" as the Iron Legion attempt to relocate them to a safer area, speaking in English rather than the native language of the foreign city. The crowd ignores the advice, throwing bottles that damage the faceplate of Stark's invention in what is clearly a metaphor for Stark himself. The Avengers aren't seen as heroes or saviours here, they are the problem. As Brown suggests, "the superheroes are depicted as being a source of the danger rather than just a solution to outside threats" (Brown, J.A. 2017. 88-89). This notion is something the narrative is concerned with throughout this film, and serves as an interesting note on which to interrogate whether these cinematic archetypes of masculinity that have been encoded as heroic (see chapters 2.1, 2.2, 2.3) should truly be seen as heroic from an outside perspective rather than the internal view each of the Avengers have about themselves.

This scene is of crucial importance to the narrative as the introduction to this film but also the re-introduction to the Avengers themselves and instead of offering a triumphant victory in their battle against HYDRA, the scene subverts this expected notion of heroism. This further subverts these cinematic archetypes of masculinity in how they have been encoded as heroic.

The Avengers are the disrupting force in this city, seen as unwanted foreigners attempting to dictate safety measures through a robotic interface that lacks any capability for emotion or brevity that might help soothe the civilians. The Iron Legion, as an extension of Stark's Iron Man technology, are made to look intimidating to the citizens with their cold metal exteriors and monotone voices that do little to pacify. They are seen as the villain, as the Other, much like Stark is himself throughout this film when he creates Ultron, and this introduces the rumination of this narrative about whether the Avengers are seen as heroic figures outside of their unique individual world view. This notion is one that was hinted at in *AA*, with the fact:

S.H.I.E.L.D. has monitored the individual Avengers as potential threats underscoring this ambiguity and ambivalence about the dividing line between monster and hero. Indeed, throughout both films the superheroes themselves wrestle with the question of whether or not they are in fact monsters. (Muller, C. 2019. 284).

The notion of presenting the Avengers through the monster allegory allows the narrative to explore the flaws in these cinematic archetypes of masculinity in a more overt way. As Joss Whedon describes it, "it's not an accident the theme of monster is used by the team, both of themselves and each other" (Whedon, J. 2015. DVD Commentary). While the film channels the monster allegory for several members of the team generally, there is a clear focus on the Frankenstein mythos, with clear parallels drawn from the creation of the "monster."

Frankenstein (1818), originally a novel written by Mary Shelley, details the story of a young scientist named Victor Frankenstein who manages to bring a creature to life with the use of electricity by means of orthodox experimentation. The novel is widely regarded as the first true science fiction story (Simon, E. 2016. n/p) and has been adapted for the screen multiple times including *Frankenstein* (1931) and *Curse of Frankenstein* (1957). *Frankenstein* as a classic science fiction text can also be seen as a cinematic archetype of the monster through the multiple adaptations of the original novel and it is this cinematic archetype being invoked in

the monster allegory present in *A:AOU*. The creature that Frankenstein creates is a made thing, manufactured in a similar way to many of the Avengers including Captain America who underwent his own orthodox experimentation to receive the serum that turned him into a super-soldier. Even Banner was infected with Gamma Radiation that enabled him to turn into The Hulk. The Frankenstein origin can also be applied to characters such as Ultron and later Vision, both sentient robots created by scientists. Stark creates Ultron in the hopes of providing a “suit of armour around the world”, however Ultron soon evolves beyond Stark’s vision actively deciding the Avengers are the problem in the world and therefore must be eradicated from it. Similarly, Vision is brought to life by Thor’s hammer, a bolt of lightning waking the creature created by Ultron and later finished by Stark. Whedon acknowledges the parallels present through the narrative, “I like robot stories because I like Frankenstein stories and as you can see, I leant heavily into that” (Whedon, J. 2015. DVD Commentary).

Stark is seen as the creator here, both of Ultron and Vision, and as a result this adds to the way the film presents Stark as the villain. Similarly to *Frankenstein*, *A:AOU* draws from the science fiction genre and in both cases the (im)morality of the creator is called into question. While the “MCU has always endorsed Stark’s brand of rule-breaking, individualistic heroism as the summit of twenty-first century masculinity” (McSweeney, T. 2018. 193), this film actively challenges that notion. The narrative interrogates whether Stark’s individualistic lone gunslinger approach to masculinity is heroic, using Stark’s actions in this film as a way to question the growth of the character throughout the MCU up to this point. Whedon suggests this was a deliberate choice to make in the film to write Stark as “the villain. It’s not just the beard, he is a good man corrupted by his own anxiety, this vision of this disaster. He makes a really bad decision” (Whedon, J. 2015. DVD Commentary). Stark is flawed and by extension so is his embodiment of masculinity, this film emphasises those flaws in order to further interrogate Stark’s embodiment of the lone gunslinger archetype of masculinity and how well he is able to act heroically when that masculinity is threatened by Stark’s own fear of the

future. The narrative conducts this examination through an interrogation between the characters about Stark's actions which ultimately functions as a way to reprimand Stark for his actions and interrogate the effectiveness of his masculinity in relation to the masculinities embodied by the other characters.

(Monstrous) Cinematic Archetypes of Masculinity in Conflict

After Ultron attacks the team, the other Avengers learn that Stark was attempting to create him without telling them leading to a confrontation regarding Stark's choice. This scene offers insight into how these different masculinities within the team function together, in opposition to each other, and emphasises where the flaws in each masculinity resides. Stark reveals that Ultron managed to destroy Jarvis in the process of becoming a sentient life-form to which Banner comments: "this isn't strategy, this is rage." This reflects not just Ultron's motives in this moment, but also the emotional state of the team. This scene conveys the flaws in each cinematic archetype presented through these characters. Immediately after this comment, Thor demonstrates this rage by marching over to Stark, lifting him off his feet with a hand around Stark's neck. He is angry and it's the notion of Thor's cinematic archetype that Stark invokes in this scene as he chokes out: "Come on, use your words, buddy." Thor's cinematic archetype of the hard bodied hero presents the character as the stoic, silent type of masculinity that uses brawn to solve the issue and Thor performs that in this confrontation with Stark. The flaw highlighted in Thor's masculinity is his inability to communicate with Stark, a flaw Stark shares when he refuses to tell the rest of the team (aside from Banner) about his plans to create Ultron.

It's Rogers that calls Thor off, raising his voice slightly to invoke his own cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier. He is giving an order to his men, taking leadership of the moment and the situation the team finds itself in. Stark's archetype in this scene is emphasised as the very reason of this confrontation in the first place. He created Ultron without informing the

others, operating as a lone agent content to serve his own agenda which is reminiscent of his archetype of the lone gunslinger. These masculinities conflict with each other, and as this scene demonstrates cannot seem to co-exist together in harmony without it resulting in dire consequences for the team (and the world). This scene effectively paints Stark as the villain, the creator of the monster, by creating Ultron. He even laughs awkwardly when being confronted, baffled that the team cannot seem to realise why they need Ultron as a means of protection from what Stark refers to as the “Endgame.” Thor cautions him by saying: “this could have been avoided if you didn’t play with something you don’t understand.” It’s the exchange between Stark and Rogers that serves as the most poignant in the narrative however with Stark asking: “How do you plan to beat that?” when talking about the threats in the universe they have yet to encounter, Rogers tells him simply: “Together” to which Stark scoffs in disbelief: “We’ll lose.” Rogers’s answer is immediate and final: “Then we’ll do that together too.”

Rogers’s stance, as influenced by his cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier is very clear to him, they fight together as a team, a platoon of soldiers and if they lose, they lose. Stark refuses to accept the uncertainty of that ethos, his lone gunslinger masculinity invokes this idea that he is solely responsible for preventing the outcome before it can happen. These two different embodiments of masculinity reflect two differing approaches to heroism. Stark’s pain is evident here, “there is an epic nature to his heroism which is contrasted with simple nature of Steve’s” (Whedon, J. 2015. DVD Commentary). Stark’s heroism is pre-emptive, he is focused on anticipating future threats so he can stop them before they occur while Rogers is reactionary, he responds to threats as they appear. This scene doesn’t offer a firm conclusion on which type of masculinity is more heroic but the moral high-ground and the rest of the team seem to side with Rogers therefore alluding to the probability that it’s the responsive nature of these heroics that make them heroic because Rogers is encoded as less monstrous in his masculinity than Stark.

This scene also invokes clear parallels to *Frankenstein*, even Stark seems to support this idea when he tells Banner: “We’re mad scientists, buddy. We gotta own it.” This scene expands on the monster allegory in the narrative by definitively presenting Stark as the villain of this scene, blinded by his own belief that Ultron will make the world safer. It is interesting to note that, “this pep talk mirrors the one [Stark] gave to Banner in *Avengers*: accept your inner monster and it might just save the day. It’s not pretty, but it’s all we’ve got” (Michaud, N. Watkins, J. 2018. 167). This narrative utilises the monster allegory in order to highlight the flaws in each cinematic archetype of masculinity by encoding it as monstrous. The notion of the monster, or monstrousness, is a common theme in popular culture as a device that “challenges what we consider to be human, along with our notions of what is monstrous, impure, ugly” (Beghetto, R. 2022. 16). This allows the narrative to further question and challenge notions of heroism in these characters in order to ruminate on whether this type of masculinity is as heroic as it has previously been encoded. This scene serves as a turning point in the narrative where the Avengers start to question their own definitions of heroism compared to Ultron’s view of them and “as a result, each of the Avengers starts to harbour doubts about the nature of their abilities and begins to wonder about their own status in terms of... have their powers tainted them to the point that they have become monsters?” (Nichols, M.D. 2021. 81).

This becomes apparent during the final fight of the film between the Avengers and Ultron, Rogers gives a speech to his team as they prepare for battle and it isn’t one intended to inspire and uplift but meant to make each member question their own identity with regards to their monstrous nature and Ultron’s belief about them. Rogers’s voiceover serves to deliver the theme of the film as the film cuts to shots of each Avenger in a moment of reflection before the fight: “Ultron thinks we’re monsters, that we’re what’s wrong with the world. This isn’t about beating him; this is about proving whether he’s right.” They aren’t entering this fight with thoughts of heroically saving the day, it’s about introspection and finding a conclusion to this interrogation of their respective cinematic archetypes as monstrous. It’s about whether

Ultron is right. One function of the monstrous is that it becomes “a symbol of the loss of both spirituality and traditional values in the new technological age, and likewise a representation of our existential displacement in such a morally ambiguous and liminal universe” (Beghetto, R. 2022. 16). The idea of aligning these characters with notions of the monstrous allows the narrative to make direct parallels with the moral ambiguity of the technological age. The adversary in this film is an AI after all, a literal personification of the potential of future technology and the ways it might go wrong. This opens up an interesting interrogation into whether the cinematic archetypes of masculinity the Avengers embody will still be relevant in the wake of the new technological age as represented by Ultron and Vision.

Interestingly, this final fight scene takes this further by showing the Avengers in battle, highlighting the violence they are capable of committing against an enemy. This battle sequence shows Rogers trying to strangle one of Ultron’s robotic minions with his bare hands while in another scene Thor rips out the spine of one of the robots before bashing others away with the robotic head in his hands. They are presented at their most monstrous, as being capable of great violence. However, the fact the enemy in this film is a life-form that is robotic and therefore void of human appearance negates some of the brutality the Avengers are inflicting. The film seems to intentionally be using this as a means of enabling the characters to act in a very hypermasculine fashion simply because in this context, they can get away with it. The point of this examination isn’t to make the Avengers irredeemably villainous but to further cement their embodiment of heroism as enduring in the face of adversity.

Domesticity and Challenging the Cinematic Archetypes of Masculinity

While the film endorses the heroism the Avengers portray as adaptable, the commentary it makes on the masculinity depicted within the team is a more complex issue. This thesis has established a link between these archetypes of masculinity embodied by these core characters and their heroism, this film suggests the two things can operate independently from each

other. The performance of heroism these characters within the MCU demonstrate is favoured however, this film presents the cinematic archetypes of masculinity these characters embody as flawed.

The narrative explores this through the character of Clint Barton/Hawkeye in relation to the other Avengers, Barton functions as the human element of the team, having received no mutation, traumatic event or experimentation that allows him to become superheroic. He is a member of S.H.I.E.L.D. and a prolific archer but *A:AOU* develops the character further, namely by giving him a family. This sets up a dichotomy between Barton and his fellow Avengers, he is capable of domesticity whereas they are portrayed as being unable to achieve it, "Clint's distance from the Avengers shows he has a connection to the world and that's important because they don't" (Whedon, J, 2015. DVD Commentary). When Barton brings the Avengers to his family home to lie-low and is greeted by his pregnant wife and two small children, the Avengers look on confused at the display of familial love. Barton represents family life but the emphasis is placed on the fact the other Avengers can't have this life Barton has made for himself, therefore further alienating them from humanity. This helps encode these characters, and by extension their masculinity as monstrous through the notion they aren't able to perform this quintessential part of human existence. While Barton fights to protect his family, the rest of the team fight because they are created to, "Hawkeye's fellow team members are "gods" or "monsters" insofar as their actions are framed as expressions of their essences rather than a need for gainful employment. They fight because they were made to fight" (Acu, A. 2016. 196). Even Banner and Romanoff talk about children whilst staying at Barton's family farm, with Romanoff revealing she is unable to have them due to a medical procedure that formed part of her training to become an assassin. She tries to make light out of it by telling Banner: "What? Did you think you were the only monster on the team?" This directly aligns the notion of monstrosity with the inability to achieve a particular version of domesticity,

involving being part of a family⁷. Interestingly, this film concludes on a return to this idea of domesticity and the unattainability of it for these characters during a final conversation between Stark and Rogers, while Stark has elected to take some time away from being an Avenger after the fight against Ultron, Rogers decides to stay at the compound to help get the new recruits into shape, Rogers ruminates on the idea of the “simple life”, and Stark reassures them that he’ll have that one day. Rogers disagrees: “I don’t know. Family. Stability. The guy who wanted all that went into the ice 70 years ago. I think somebody else came out.” Not only does Rogers continue to reject the domesticity of a family life, he also seems to acknowledge the monstrous nature of his creation by suggesting that some one different came out of the ice. The film supports the notion that the monstrous nature of his masculinity is a good thing because it allows him the ability to train a new generation of heroes and as such, keep the cycle of cinematic archetypes of masculinity and heroism going for future films in the MCU. The perpetuating nature of the cinematic archetypes of masculinity present in these characters is explored further when the team, having been exposed to Wanda Maximoff’s powers, start having visions that can be read as a manifest of their fears and anxieties, as she suggests: “sooner or later, every man shows himself.” These visions are evidence of that, revealing much about the masculinity each character embodies and more importantly, the flaws each type of masculinity seems to be grappling with. Even more interestingly perhaps, is that Barton isn’t subjected to one of these visions, whilst even Romanoff as the only woman on the team has a vision that reveals her concern with the fact she can’t have children after a traumatic procedure in the Red Room, encoding her character as less feminine in the narrative as a result.

⁷ While outside the confines of this thesis as the characters of Banner and Romanoff aren’t the focus of the discussion this is an important contextual note to include when exploring the monster allegory within the film. It is also important to note this is a highly problematic narrative point and dialogue exchange which has been called out by many feminist theorists and other scholars of Whedon’s work since the film’s release in 2015.

Stark's vision is of the death of the team, his worst fear come to life as Stark sees all of his fellow teammates before him. The Hulk twitches with arrows protruding out of his body, seemingly in pain as Black Widow and Hawkeye lay motionless on the ground. The scene is deliberate to show every member of the team in their final stand, lingering on each shot uncomfortably long in a way that invokes Stark's own despair at the scene before him. The camera drops down a level to reveal Thor, his face bloody, his hammer within arm's reach of his hand. Rogers is the last to be revealed, and the closest to Stark in this vision as the camera pans over his shield, broken in half with a jagged line as he lays on his back, face clean but dirty, no identifiable wound on him. Stark rushes to check his pulse and Rogers grabs his wrist, jarring both Stark and the audience with the sudden move. Rogers issues one last incentive for Stark, telling him: "You could have saved us. Why didn't you do more?" This is the crux of the vision, one that will set Stark on the path to create Ultron as he looks up to the sky to see the same wormhole from AA, aliens flying through it on the way to Earth.

Stark's struggle with his fear of the future has been explored in chapter 2.1, but returns in this narrative as a motivator for his decision to bring Ultron to life, a peace-keeping AI that was originally intended to protect the future from large scale threats. Stark's vision manifests that same fear, challenging his lone gunslinger masculinity through the death of the team. It's clear in this scene that Stark cares about them, he is in despair over their deaths and this further cements the character development Stark has undergone over the course of the first two phases of the MCU from individualistic hero to a collective member of the team. It's Stark's cinematic archetype of masculinity, encoded as heroic, that forces him to act so this vision will never become a reality and as such, the film uses this as a way to interrogate Stark's embodiment of masculinity through the consequences of his actions. The cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger has evolved for Stark over the course of the first two phases of the MCU (see chapters 1.1 and 2.1) to the point where Stark's lone gunslinger masculinity is able to see the benefit of relying on others and working as part of a team. This scene offers a future where

Stark sees a return to the lone gunslinger archetype he embodied in *IM* where his masculinity prioritised Stark's stoicism and measure the success of his masculinity by his ability to solve his problems on his own. This has now become Stark's worst fear, as represented by the death of his team, and as such criticising that lone gunslinger archetype of masculinity through Stark's fear of this future becoming a reality. It's this fear of returning to that embodiment of masculinity for fear that leads him to creating Ultron.

Similarly to Stark, Rogers's vision also invokes his cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier as it places him back in the 1940s at a victory party to mark the end of the war. It's the homecoming he never received. The vision soon turns sinister as Rogers, dressed in his military dress uniform, has to dodge past flashing camera bulbs with the sound of enemy fire overhead. He sees men fighting, and another with red wine on his shirt that looks very much like blood. The trauma of war is souring the victory in this scene, suggesting that Rogers will never be able to leave the war behind him completely. His cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier is an embodiment of his heroism, but also in this scene positioned as his failing. Peggy, his lost love from the 1940s, appears behind him and gently touches his arm to reassure him: "The war is over, Steve. We can go home. Imagine it." He doesn't respond but the despair on his face is plain to see and provides enough of an answer. It isn't over for him. The room changes until he is alone in an empty ballroom, no music or laughter, just silence as he imagines dancing with Peggy. A life he missed out on and can never have. He is a soldier, that is how Rogers has defined himself since the 1940s and he is unable to let go of that identify, that signifier of his masculinity. That soldier archetype for Rogers is encoded as heroic through the traits of bravery, prioritising the notions of brotherhood and fighting because it's an honourable thing to do. In this scene, Rogers has none of these things. He cannot obtain the promise of domesticity because he cannot give up the fight which further alienates him from Barton as the most human member of the team and the domestic family life he is a part of. This scene positions Rogers as something of an oddity in his embodiment of the World War

Two archetype, flawed by his inability to leave the battlefield and the fight behind him for something more peaceful because for Rogers, the only way he knows how to be heroic is through fighting for the greater good. This is established through the embodiment of his cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier which this scene revisits for Rogers in order to suggest the flaw in this masculinity is Rogers's inability to leave the fighting behind and prioritise a version of domesticity similar to Barton's.

Thor's vision takes place on Asgard, removing him from humanity in the geographical sense, as a party of dancers move around him and Heimdall – Asgard's gatekeeper – approaches him having lost his sight. Thor visibly shows anguish at this, drawing attention to it by saying: "Heimdall, your eyes." Heimdall seems unconcerned though, responding with, "Oh, they see everything. They see you leading us straight to Hell." The pair fight, until Thor manages to break free of his hold. Lightning spark through his body, rippling off his armour as Heimdall taunts him: "You're a destroyer, Odinson. See where your power leads." The lightning engulfs Thor's body, ripping out of him in a vicious energy field. This scene, like Stark's and Roger's, is a reference to Thor's cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied hero. His heroism comes from his power and his strength and in this scene, as has already been established as important traits for embodying his cinematic archetype (chapter 1.2), it's those things that have become deadly to the people around him, something that Thor can't control. This scene is directly criticising his embodiment of the cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied hero which praises traits of strength and the notion that might makes right in battle. This vision has a sickly yellow undertone to it that invokes the connotations of infection and illness, suggesting Thor's power is literally corrupting him in this moment. It is the archetype of the hard-body that becomes his downfall, suggesting the flaw in Thor's masculinity comes from the notion that too much strength and power will result in the death of his friends and the destruction of Asgard. Asgard, in this scene, representing his homeland and his family, the promise of his own version of domesticity. His cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied hero literally destroys any notions

of domesticity through those key traits of this type of masculinity, namely Thor's power and strength, and as this scene shows, ends up consuming him to the point lightning ripples out of his body as a signifier of that power and how it is linked to the hard-body. This is another crucial trait of Thor's masculinity and this scene presents that hard-body as a consequence of the power Thor possesses.

All of these visions are used to challenge notions of the cinematic archetypes of masculinity and how they have been encoded as heroic throughout the MCU in order to explore whether these embodiments really are heroic. In a sense, "these characters are bonded by their individual understandings of the constraints of their masculine behaviours marked by their ambiguous relationship to being human" (McGrath, D. 2015. 149). These scenes also further alienate these male characters from Barton, who is positioned in the narrative as the human element of the team, by demonstrating they will never be able to obtain the life that Barton has and be a part of humanity in the same way. They are too grounded in the traits of their cinematic archetypes, performing masculinity through acts of heroism in an attempt to prove themselves as heroes. This would explain why Barton doesn't get a vision like the other characters, because his masculinity isn't adhering to an outdated cinematic archetype of masculinity as an example of heroism. Donnar believes:

American masculinity and manhood are also not only unredeemed in these films but finally made monstrous in the willingness to become or be the same as the reviled terror-other. This monstrosity manifests in numerous ways, with male protagonists either incapable of eradicating the terror threat, marking them as failed men in some sense; becoming like the monstrous other; or exposed as having been always already monstrous. (Donnar, G. 2020. 187).

Humanity, the Post-Human and the Future of Masculinity

While Barton highlights the unattainable domestic life the other Avengers can't acquire for themselves, in opposition to this representation of humanity is the post-human characters of Ultron and Vision, both creations that become sentient life-forms. These characters are monstrous in a different way to the Avengers, they aren't flesh and blood and therefore automatically can be distinguished as Other. However, Ultron is the one to call the Avengers out regarding the flaws they exhibit in terms of their masculinity throughout the film, frequently pointing out the importance of the fight to them and how they'd be lost without it. Ultron and Vision represent a post-human narrative within the film, suggesting that concepts like masculinity, specifically the masculinity embodied by the Avengers will become redundant due to the flaws each Avenger displays, which as their visions suggest will be their downfall. Ultron picks out these flaws in multiple scenes, for example, goading Rogers by referring to him as: "God's righteous man, pretending you could live without a war" or even making more general comments about humanity and the flaws Ultron sees as their downfall such as when Wanda Maximoff questions him about who gets to decide who is weak and Ultron responds with: "Life. Life always decides." Ultron represents a post-human outlook that is meant to interrogate the effectiveness of the Avengers, their heroism, and the masculinity they embody as a consequence of that heroism. For Ultron, this embodiment isn't enough because they haven't yet achieved world peace (which according to his programming from Stark is the mission). The measure of the Avengers is how successful they are at not only saving the day but making the world a better place, which by Ultron's standards mean ensuring world peace. This film goes to great lengths to highlight the fact the Avengers haven't managed to do this yet, they aren't seen as a peace keeping force, especially not in other countries like Sokovia where they are vilified by the citizens. World peace is not achieved by the end of the film, by either the Avengers or Ultron, because the MCU franchise continues to make more films, there

will always be new threats to defeat and new conflicts to overcome for these characters. In a way, capitalism stops world peace or the promise of it from ever being achieved in these films.

Interestingly, the character of Vision evolves throughout the narrative in a different way to Ultron, staying with the Avengers and fighting alongside them in their mission. Vision is shown to be young in terms of his new sentient life-form, making the comment to Ultron that he was only born yesterday. Everything Vision learns about masculinity and heroism comes from watching the Avengers, there is even a scene soon after Vision is created where he notices Thor's cape and immediately fashions himself one to match in a form of imitation. Vision is impressionable, he is unfulfilled potential and hope in his naivety and as the character continues to grow and adapt in the subsequent films of the MCU, he follows a very traditional, heteronormative route in both his masculinity and his heroism. He ends up forming a romantic relationship with Wanda Maximoff, the MCU will later explore the idea of them as a happily married couple with two children in *WandaVision* (2021). He also becomes and remains an Avenger, sacrificing himself to save the day in *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) in a way that is deemed heroic by MCU standards, employing key traits of heroism that prioritise self-sacrifice over self-serving and the community over the individual. While Vision starts out in *A:AOU* as a post-human approach to humanity and heroism, he soon seems to see the merit in how the Avengers embody their masculinity and perform acts of heroism and therefore conforms to such displays himself. Whilst Ultron critically interrogates this form of heroic masculinity, Vision reinforces it.

A:AOU sets up a discussion of multiple masculinities, whether that be the cinematic archetypes of masculinity in characters such as Stark, Rogers and Thor or whether that be by offering a rumination on the progress of a post-human masculinity in characters like Ultron and Vision. This is done through the concept of monstrous masculinity and the ways these core characters are Othered from humanity (humanity in this film represented by Barton). This allows an

interrogation of masculinity within this film to occur as the discussion evolves into establishing “which forms of masculinity are better – more heroic, if you will... coding them as different in different ways that are symbolic of contemporary racialised (potentially racist) discourse” (McGrath, D. 2015. 136). In terms of the future of masculinity within the MCU, which embodiments of masculinity are healthier for the characters to symbolise and a clear trajectory for this representation moving into Phase Three of the MCU, *A:AOU* seems to conclude that there is no one singular embodiment of masculinity that will meet the needs of every character collectively, taking a different conclusion to *AA* which presented the cinematic archetype of the soldier as the superior archetype of masculinity for these characters to embody. This film allows these core characters to move away from adopting one single version of masculinity or any single archetype, and in doing so allows them to move away from each other. This allows the MCU to explore new embodiments of cinematic archetypes of masculinity with new characters in Phase Three such as *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), *Black Panther* and *Spiderman: Homecoming*, expanding their growing roster of films and utilising the popularity of the franchise to explore different depictions of masculinity on screen therefore using *A:AOU* as a way to introduce different versions of masculinity rather than prioritising one particular cinematic archetype as superior as *AA* concluded.

A:AOU concludes with Stark leaving the Avengers team to take some time off to spend with Pepper, trying to find a life similar to the one Barton advocates through the film. Stark even tells Rogers he’ll try to “build Pepper a farm, hope nobody blows it up”, which is a direct reference to the Barton’s farmhouse and the domestic lifestyle they keep secret. In a sense, Stark is finally ready to give up his lone gunslinger masculinity as he is shown to have adopted throughout his solo films. He has learnt from his decisions in creating Ultron that the isolating nature and individualistic priority of his masculinity doesn’t necessary always prompt heroism but rather can also be the source of villainy. Stark rebels against this embodiment of masculinity for a final time in this film by choosing to prioritise his romance with Pepper and

the offer of domesticity that she provides. This doesn't suggest that Stark stops embodying this cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger entirely however, instead it perpetuates it. Stark literally leaves to settle down on the homestead but the option for him to return to the fight is still there. This is a deliberate choice on the part of the filmmakers because it means the character can still be used in later films which will appease some fans who want Stark's continued presence in the MCU moving forward.

Unlike Stark, Rogers chooses to stay with the Avengers and lead the new generation of heroes. Rogers doesn't choose to reject his cinematic archetype but reinforces the heroism encoded within it. This is an inevitable conclusion for the character, whose masculinity up to this point in the MCU has always been encoded as the most heroic and therefore the cinematic archetype of masculinity that best serves the superheroic journey for the character. Rogers has yet to undergo any kind of transformation where his cinematic archetype of masculinity is called into question in such a way that Rogers no longer believes in the morals and core values that archetype is indebted to. Interestingly, Rogers will go on to have this journey later in the MCU with films such as *Captain America: Civil War* and *Avengers: Infinity War*, both of which explore the idea of Rogers no longer wanting to be a soldier and dealing with the aftermath of the character rejecting his cinematic archetype of masculinity in such a way that allows for a transformation of that embodiment of masculinity. For the conclusion of this film however, Rogers seems to find a sense of peace in accepting his role as leader of the team, finding his own platoon in the present day. When Stark questions whether Rogers is alright after he openly rejects the idea of domesticity and the stability of a normal life, Rogers responds with: "I'm home." For him, there is a great sense of pride in being a soldier and fighting for the right causes, the Avengers compound allows him to continue that as in this scene there are clear parallels to an army base, with several men running on the grounds together and the new Avengers team meeting in a gym of sorts to start their training under Rogers leadership. This

film reinforces Rogers's cinematic archetype of the soldier and in doing so favours the type of masculinity Rogers has embodied through the MCU to date.

The character of Thor is wrapped up in a similar way to Rogers in the fact that he retains his cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied action hero, leaving Earth behind to return to Asgard in order to try and find out more about the future threat the infinity stones might pose.

Interestingly, Thor doesn't stay on Earth which further Others him from the rest of the team but instead chooses to return to his home world, this suggests that while on Earth Thor's cinematic archetype doesn't seem to work in regards to his heroism, on Asgard this cinematic archetype is feasible. This has already been depicted in *T:TDW* where Asgard is presented as a fantasy land with grand battles and a harsher depiction of battle to any the MCU has shown on Earth. Thor's cinematic archetype of masculinity, linked to his role as a fantasy action hero, works much more successfully on Asgard than on Earth because of the way that world has been depicted on screen. Thor is a much more believable character on his own home world and as such, his cinematic archetype of masculinity thrives there. In order for this archetype to be further challenged and deconstructed, it must occur on Asgard where Thor's masculinity is rewarded and heralded as heroic. This conclusion sets up this continuation of Thor's narrative arc and ultimately continues the conversation of his embodiment of masculinity through *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017). This film will explore this cinematic archetype of masculinity in more depth and further develop the character through a rigorous interrogation brought about by a completely new creative team, helmed by Taika Waititi, who experiments with genre and comedy in order to offer a further in-depth exploration of Thor's character.

Whilst each character offers their own conclusion in terms of their masculinity, this film does offer a sense of acceptance amongst them that cements the camaraderie built up over the two Avengers films, supported by this final scene when the three men are saying their farewells. Thor and Rogers are in their Avengers uniforms/costumes to further emphasise their choice to

remain as part of the team and their continuation to embody their cinematic archetypes of masculinity. Stark, however, is dressed in a t-shirt and suit jacket which works to further remove him from the team in this moment therefore distancing himself from the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger that he adopted when becoming Iron Man. These characters don't mock or question each other's decisions regarding their masculinity or their futures but instead show open affection for each other, laughing and joking amongst themselves. As Thor leaves for Asgard, Stark comments to Rogers: "I'm going to miss him though, and you're going to miss me. There's going to be a lot of manful tears." While the discussion of masculinity in these films is presented as very much still ongoing (which makes sense considering the MCU had already moved into production on the Phase Three films), *A:AOU* seems to conclude with the notion that there is a place for different and alternative masculinities to co-exist together and the future of the MCU (and society more widely) is dependent on these masculinities cooperating with one another.

In conclusion, this chapter has explored how *A:AOU* attempts to challenge the masculine cinematic archetypes of the core characters this thesis is focusing on. The film presents the Avengers through the allegory of monstrosity in order to emphasize the flaws in the types of masculinity they embody and how their cinematic archetypes can Other them from humanity as a result of this embodiment. The narrative presents an alternative through the character of Barton, depicting a human element to the team and a very domestic representation of masculinity. Alternatively to this, the film introduces the characters of Ultron and Vision to offer a post-human angle for exploring masculinity in order to explore where the monstrous boundaries of masculinity are within the MCU and how the cinematic archetypes that Stark, Rogers and Thor embody either serve them in their heroism or further complicate the depiction of heroism that the MCU encodes as heroic. Ultimately, the film offers a conclusion that allows the discussion of masculinity within the MCU, and these characters more specifically, to be ongoing which serves the purpose of the franchise to continue these

characters journey in upcoming solo films and the two later instalments of Avengers films, “through both The Avengers and its sequel, Whedon keeps these heterosocial masculinities in conversation. Much as these narratives are ongoing so too does gender in these superhero films remain an act in progress, some assembly required” (McGrath, D. 2015. 150).

Conclusion

The starting point of this thesis was to establish that cinematic archetypes of masculinity still exist within the superhero genre and the MCU more specifically. Cinematic archetypes of masculinity, as this thesis has defined throughout the discussion, are models of masculinity as seen in previous genres of Hollywood cinema. They are representations of masculinity specifically relating to the genre that masculinity is depicted in. This thesis has focused on the cinematic archetypes of masculinity of the lone gunslinger, the World War Two soldier and the hard-bodied action hero. These models of masculinity include traits and ideals commonly attributed to a specific genre or sub-genre that inform how such masculinities are performed on screen in order to adhere to the conventions of a particular genre. The Phase One films of the MCU function as the origin stories of these characters, therefore providing audiences with a backstory in which to understand how these heroes become established superheroes within MCU canon. These films also establish the cinematic archetypes of masculinity at work within the respective individual character narratives. As this thesis has defined throughout, the cinematic archetypes of masculinities that are embodied by these three core characters are indebted to archetypes from previously established Hollywood genres.

The Cinematic Archetypes of Masculinity within the MCU

IM establishes Stark as embodying a lone gunslinger cowboy archetype of masculinity that accounts for the character traits Stark displays throughout the narrative of stoicism and the tendency to reject outside help in favour of handling the situation alone. Many traditional Westerns offer an archetype of masculinity that performs in this way such as *Shane*. Thor offers a demonstration of a different cinematic archetype of masculinity, that of the 1980s hard-bodied hero. This cinematic archetype of masculinity favours brute strength as a means to solve his problems and ultimately reveres the body as spectacle, a muscular

performance capable of committing great violence to save the day as made popular in films such as *Die Hard*. *Thor* sets up this cinematic archetype of masculinity through Thor's bull-headed display of arrogance and violence as a warrior at the start of the film, forcing the character into exile as punishment for this in order to further emphasize the cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied hero as embodied by the titular character. Similarly, *CA:TFA* has a narrative that establishes Rogers as embodying a cinematic archetype of masculinity seen in a previously established genre of cinema. Rogers's archetype of masculinity is indebted to two different iterations of the World War Two soldier, both the soloistic soldier that performs many great feats of heroism alone in order to save the day such as *Sergeant York* but also that of the ensemble soldier, a man part of a unit of men that prioritises brotherhood as depicted in films such as *The Guns of Navarone*. As this thesis has explored within this chapter (1.3), the narrative sets up a conflict between these two different iterations of the cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier to reflect both Rogers as a man wanting to fight because it's the right thing to do and his superheroic alter ego of Captain America who has been physically and chemically enhanced for the war effort. Ultimately, a compromise is found in merging different traits of these two cinematic archetypes of masculinity that lead to Rogers's ultimate act of sacrificial heroism at the end of the film.

These cinematic archetypes of masculinity, despite being influenced by previously established Hollywood genres, are still deemed to have a place within the superhero genre. The genres of the Western, the War film and the Action film in which these cinematic archetypes originate from have proven to have been hugely popular throughout Hollywood cinema, garnering large fan bases which ensured their continued success at the box office over a number of years or even decades with films such as *Rambo: First Blood*, *Unforgiven* and *Black Hawk Down*. Moreover, each genre offers narratives in which representations of masculinity are dominant, much like the superhero genre itself. As Tasker states, "Action,

war movies and Westerns have all been characterized as generic sites that are in some fundamental way about masculinity, it is certainly the case that these three interlinked genres provide an extraordinarily fruitful site for exploring codes of masculinity in Hollywood cinema” (Tasker, Y. 2016. 111). The MCU has adopted cinematic archetypes from these genres, using the films of their self-entitled Phase One to establish such embodiments in order to both garner audience attention and showcase their own representations of masculinity through the lens of these cinematic archetypes for these core characters. As well as this, these cinematic archetypes help to sell the lesser-known roster of characters featured in these Phase One films to new audiences unfamiliar with the comic books.

The MCU doesn’t merely establish the cinematic archetypes of masculinity each character embodies, they attempt to engage with them in ways that either challenge or reinforce such archetypes for the characters. The character of Iron Man does embody the cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger, however, this embodiment is challenged through the subsequent narratives of *IM2* and more prominently, in *IM3* as the franchise moves into Phase Two. Stark’s cinematic archetype of masculinity changes as he is forced to learn that teamwork is key to protecting the world from bigger threats (a point he learns multiple times through these films in both his solo adventures and the *Avengers* team up narratives). As a result, Stark seems to embody a lone gunslinger masculinity that is more akin to the revisionist westerns such as *Unforgiven* in the latter instalment of his trilogy, which sees a focus on an older, jaded lone gunslinger that has retired from the life of violence only to be forced by circumstance to return to his old ways. The MCU manages to challenge Stark’s embodiment of the lone gunslinger archetype of cinematic masculinity through this narrative, allowing the film to engage with the depiction of this cinematic archetype in order to suggest Stark’s heroism isn’t dependent on the lone gunslinger model but in spite of it.

Thor's embodiment of the hard-bodied hero seems to be a difficult one for the MCU to negotiate and *T:TDW* does little to engage or challenge the cinematic archetype of masculinity the character embodies. It instead, ends up reinforcing it. The archetype of the hard-bodied hero, being the most recent archetype from Hollywood cinema history for the MCU to depict, and the one the superhero genre is most indebted to. Of course, the superhero genre is a sub-genre of the action film which complicates the issue of attempting to subvert or challenge this cinematic archetype of masculinity in any real depth. This is to be expected, the superhero genre must abide by certain conventions, one of which is the spectacle of a final showdown between hero and villain. The very nature of this showdown reinforces the violence of the hard-bodied hero archetype that encodes such violent spectacle as a necessity to save the day. Thor's narrative was never going to be able to fully challenge the cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied hero in the way that the Iron Man and Captain America films do with their own respective archetypes due to the constrictions placed upon it by the conventions of the superhero genre which includes, as discussed in this thesis, issues of production and the tropes of the action film closely aligning with the tropes and conventions of the superhero genre.

As this thesis suggests, the most impactful demonstration of the MCU challenging a cinematic archetype of masculinity is with regards to the character of Captain America. The second film in this particular trilogy, *CA:TWS*, places Rogers in the present day rather than the 1940s and as a result, the setting acts as an immediate dichotomy to his cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier. The narrative explores how Rogers's cinematic archetype of masculinity, and those core ideals it prioritises of truth, justice and honour compare to the morally-grey world of a 1970s political thriller film such as *Three Days of the Condor* where those traits are considered to be old-fashioned against a political distrust of government. The film negotiates this juxtaposition of past versus future as a parallel to Rogers's struggle to assimilate into the present day world he finds himself in. Eventually,

the film proves Rogers's cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier as a more heroic representation of masculinity by the MCU standards of heroism (those standards being traits of sacrifice and reactionary violence rather than pre-emptive) and predictably, he saves the day using those very traits the narrative initially conveys as old-fashioned.

There are several factors involved that suggest why these films might challenge the depiction of the cinematic archetypes these characters depict. As this thesis highlights, the most important of these factors is the attempt to make these characters more relevant and appealing to modern audiences. As previously lesser-known characters of Marvel Comics, the MCU establishes these characters through recognisable cinematic archetypes of masculinities in order to appeal to audiences and adhere to cinematic conventions. Once established, these films attempt to challenge these cinematic archetypes of masculinity in Phase Two (and beyond) to ensure these characters remain appealing to modern audiences over the course of the two decades of films they appear in.

Industry Influences

One key distinction that has become clear throughout the work of this thesis is that while the Phase One films focus heavily on merely establishing these cinematic archetypes of masculinity, the Phase Two films attempt to challenge the effectiveness of these embodiments within the narrative. One of the main reasons for this is of course that the Phase One films were the first time any franchise of this magnitude had been attempted. In short, Marvel needed to be cautious about the types of narratives they were introducing. The rigid structure of the Phase One origin story, as seen in every Phase One film, including *AA* which charts the origin of the team, supports this notion. These films work to establish relatively unknown characters to a mainstream audience, providing a starting point that allows people to understand both backstory for these characters and potential

development for them moving forward in order to ensure audience investment in these characters that will see them return for Phase Two (and later Phase Three).

The Phase Two films do not have the same rigid structure and mark a move away from the expected conventions of the superhero film. These films offer more creative freedom, as reflected in the vastly differing narratives between the individual films and as a result, the way these narratives engage with those initially established cinematic archetypes also allowed for more creativity. By the time Phase Two starts, the MCU is pretty well established, making money from their previous five films and already slating their next Phase to continue these stories (McSweeney, T. 2018. 35). These characters are better known to audiences and therefore, these Phase Two films can explore different ways in which to develop these characters and their stories to keep audiences coming back for another ten years.

Phase Two isn't a perfect example of this, and as this work demonstrates, the MCU has more success with some characters and an engagement of their cinematic archetypes than others. There are many reasons for this, some of which relate to the particular film themselves. *T:TDW* ran into multiple pre-production and production issues that caused many issues for the film in terms of inconsistencies in tone and narrative. However, the most influential of these factors are the compromises the MCU had to make as a franchise and business model that is trying to reach as many fans as possible and therefore avoid alienating audiences through the depiction of these characters. As Hassler-Forest writes, "Not only does [the MCU] present a worldview that dramatizes the capitalist logic of perpetual crisis and "creative destruction", but it once again organises this as a spectacle that itself takes on the form of capitalist commodity" (Hassler-Forest, D. 2012. N/p). In the same way these films will destroy the world only to have the characters save it again so the franchise can then destroy it again in the next film, the MCU offers an interrogation of

these cinematic archetypes of masculinity but only to such a degree that they don't lose their audience or divert too widely from the expected notions of a superhero film in order for them to be able to make another film in which these characters can save the world. There is no surprise that all of the cinematic archetypes of masculinity used in the early MCU films are drawn from established genres of American cinema. The MCU only takes a limited departure from the established cinematic archetypes of American cinema in its heroes. Therefore, these depictions of cinematic archetypes of masculinity can only go so far in the attempts to challenge such representations of masculinity in order to compromise between the MCU as a business model and the MCU as creative property.

Beyond Phase Two

It is worth noting that Phase Three does continue to challenge these cinematic archetypes for these characters as well as introduce new characters as part of the MCU's pledge to include more diversity in their films (Brown, J.A. 2017. 5). This is another testament to the notion that the more established the MCU becomes as a franchise and the more established their fanbase is, the more willing the franchise is to take risks with the stories and characters they are including. These films are allowed to be more progressive for the simple reason that these characters have already proven to be popular and successful amongst audiences therefore there is a safety in knowing audiences will still turn up to watch these films. Phase Three offers a conclusion to the story arcs of these core characters of Iron Man, Captain America and Thor and it's interesting to note as further evidence of the validity of this thesis, that these conclusions do align with discussion of cinematic archetypes of masculinity this work has concerned itself with.

In *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) Stark manages one last showdown against Thanos (set up to be the ultimate Big Bad of the entire Infinity Saga that comprises of Phases One to Three) before his ultimate death at the hands of his opponent, but this showdown happens alone,

rather than alongside his team, suggesting that the remains of his lone gunslinger masculinity was finally responsible for his heroic death. Furthermore, Stark becomes both a husband and a father in this final instalment of his story arc in a similar way to the notion of the Revisionist Western tropes that saw the lone gunslinger give up his gun and the pursuit of justice for the safety of family life. Just like the pull of the lone gunslinger in the Revisionist Western, Stark is unable to fully commit to this domesticity and once more suits up for a final battle (in more ways than one). The cinematic archetype of the lone gunslinger, established throughout this thesis as the type of masculinity Stark embodies, follows the character into Phase Three and ultimately can be read as an influence in the conclusion of Stark's final story arc. It's important to note, despite this thesis focusing on Phases One and Two of the MCU, the notion of cinematic archetypes of masculinity can be evidenced beyond these initial Phases which highlights the presence of cinematic archetypes of masculinity within the MCU.

Similarly, Captain America gives up his shield at the end of the same film, a symbol of his soldier masculinity that has been with him since World War Two, passing it onto Sam Wilson to continue to legacy while Rogers goes into retirement. He travels back in time to live out his days with Peggy, his lost love from World War Two. In the end, for Rogers the domesticity he was certain he would never be able to achieve in *A:AOU* ended up being the thing he wanted to strive for rather than continue fighting. Unlike Stark who ends up embodying his cinematic archetype of masculinity until his death, Rogers manages to escape his. He prioritises a life of domesticity over his cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier, effectively leaving the fight and battlefield behind him to return to Peggy. This signifies that the characters that embody these cinematic archetypes of masculinity can still change and evolve, further emphasising one of the main points made through this thesis. Rogers's cinematic archetype of masculinity isn't fixed and as such, he manages to evolve

and prioritise a life which would have been impossible to achieve (by his own words in *A:AOU*) whilst still embodying the cinematic archetype of the World War Two soldier.

Thor goes on to have another solo film in Phase Four and while he continues fighting for the greater good of the world, *Thor: Love and Thunder* (2022) also marks a change for his masculinity. Thor is presented with the option of domesticity when he decides to take in a little girl after her father, the film's antagonist, dies. The film affectionately replaces the emphasis on the hard-bodied action hero with an overtly comedic and parodic tone for the character that further challenges the depiction of his cinematic archetype in the first two solo films this thesis has explored. Thor is perhaps the most interesting character in terms of his development and the embodiment of his cinematic archetype. In *Avengers: Endgame* Thor's cinematic archetype of the hard-bodied hero is not only challenged but completely destroyed. In his grief, he loses his hard body and becomes "Bro-Thor", a version of the character that is shown to be overweight and heavily day-drinking. The MCU ultimately undermines this by playing this version of Thor's character for laughs (both within the film and from the audience). Thor gains his hard body back instantly in *Thor: Love and Thunder* despite ending *Avengers: Endgame* proving his worthiness to wield the hammer without his muscled hard-body, suggesting that Thor can never truly escape his cinematic archetype due to the constraints of the superhero genre.

Overall, the MCU provides an interesting discussion into how cinematic archetypes of masculinity work in relation to many of the core characters of the franchise. As a conglomerate of the superhero genre, this discussion will continue within the MCU, offering new insights and perspectives. This thesis has explored how the MCU utilises pre-existing cinematic archetypes of masculinity from Hollywood cinema for these characters that allows the films to challenge the relevance of these cinematic archetypes in the superhero genre to date. Focusing on the first two Phases of the MCU in detail, this work

has charted the progression of these cinematic archetypes of masculinity within the characters of Iron Man, Captain America, and Thor, offering a critical analysis of how cinematic archetypes of masculinity function within these narratives and how these cinematic archetypes of masculinity have been depicted throughout the course of these eight films.

While these characters might be fictional, the discussion of masculinity is not, and the “MCU’s version of the superhero formula makes far more sense not as a break from reality, but rather as the next step in the genre’s development...” (Acu, A. 2016. 201). There is much the study of superhero masculinity can teach about society, the future of Hollywood cinema and the progression of hegemonic masculinity moving forward, as this thesis demonstrates through the use of the MCU and these core characters over the first two Phases of the franchise. This thesis establishes that cinematic archetypes of masculinity are present within these core characters across the first two Phases of the MCU and how they develop through the franchise. It offers a much-needed contribution into the representation of masculinity within the superhero genre and how older cinematic archetypes of masculinity still influence contemporary Hollywood cinema. All of these heroes grow and evolve throughout their appearances in the MCU, the cinematic archetypes of masculinity they embody are a starting place for the evolution of the depiction of masculinity within the superhero genre. This is an important consideration into charting how superhero films evolve within the genre and how the discussion of masculinity (and gender more broadly) is being challenged within such narratives. As Thor tells Valkyrie in the concluding film of the Infinity Saga, *Avengers: Endgame*, before giving her his title as King of Asgard, “It’s time for me to be who I am instead of who I’m supposed to be.”

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Platoon (1986) Directed by Oliver Stone. [DVD]. United States of America: Hemdale and
Cinema '84.

Rambo: First Blood (1982) Directed by Ted Kotcheff. [DVD]. United States of America: Cinema
'84 and Elcajo Productions.

Robocop (1987) Directed by Paul Verhoeven. [DVD]. United States of America: Orion Pictures.

Rocky (1976) Directed by John G. Avildsen. [DVD]. United States of America: Chartoff-Winkler
Productions.

Saving Private Ryan (1998) Directed by Steven Spielberg. [DVD]. United States of America:
DreamWorks Pictures and Paramount Pictures.

Scream (1996) Directed by Wes Craven. [DVD]. United States of America: Dimension Films and
Woods Entertainment.

Sergeant York (1944) Directed by Howard Hanks. [DVD]. United States of America: Warner
Bros.

Shane (1953) Directed by George Stevens. [DVD]. United States of America: Paramount
Pictures.

Spiderman: Homecoming (2017) Directed by Jon Watts. [DVD]. United States of America: Walt
Disney Pictures and Marvel Studios.

Stagecoach (1939) Directed by John Ford. [DVD]. United States of America: Walter Wanger
Productions.

Supergirl (2015-2021) Created by Greg Berlanti. [DVD]. United States of America: Berlanti
Productions and DC Entertainment.

Superman (1978) Directed by Richard Donner. [DVD]. United States of America: Dovemead Films.

Superman vs Batman: Dawn of Justice (2016) Directed by Zack Snyder. [DVD]. United States of America: Warner Bros and Atlas Entertainment.

Tango and Cash (1989) Directed by Andrey Konchalovsky. [DVD]. United States of America: Warner Bros.

Terminator 2: Judgement Day (1991) Directed by James Cameron. [DVD]. United States of America: Carolco Pictures and Pacific Western.

The Book Thief (2013) Directed by Brian Percival. [DVD]. United States of America: Fox 2000 Pictures.

The Candidate (1972) Directed by Michael Ritchie. [DVD]. United States of America: Redford-Ritchie Productions and Wildwood Enterprises.

The Dam Busters (1954) Directed by Michael Anderson. [DVD]. United Kingdom: Associated British Picture Corporation.

The Dark Knight Trilogy (2005/2008/2012) Directed by Christopher Nolan. [DVD]. United States of America: Warner Bros and Syncopy.

The Dark Tower (2017) Directed by Nikolaj Arcel. [DVD]. United States of America: Columbia Pictures and Sony Entertainment.

The Defenders (2017) Created by Douglas Petrie and Marco Ramirez. [Netflix]. United States of America: ABC Signature and Marvel Television.

The Dirty Dozen (1967) Directed by Robert Aldrich. [DVD]. United States of America: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) and Seven Arts Productions.

The Good, The Bad and The Ugly (1966) Directed by Sergio Leone. [DVD]. Italy: Produzioni Europee Associate.

The Great Escape (1963) Directed by John Sturges. [DVD]. United States of America: The Mirisch Company.

The Guns of Navarone (1961) Directed by J. Lee Thompson. [DVD]. United States of America: Highroad Productions.

The Incredible Hulk (2008) Directed by Louis Leterrier. [DVD]. United States of America: Paramount Pictures and Marvel Studios.

The Last Action Hero (1993) Directed by John McTiernan. [DVD]. United States of America: Columbia Pictures.

The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp (1943) Directed by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. [DVD]. United States of America: The Archers.

The Longest Day (1962) Directed by Ken Annakin and Andrew Marton. [DVD]. United States of America: Darryl F. Zanuck Productions.

The Magnificent Seven (1960) Directed by John Sturges. [DVD]. United States of America: The Mirisch Company and Alpha Productions.

The Magnificent Seven (2016) Directed by Antoine Fuqua. [Netflix]. United States of America: MGM and Columbia Pictures.

The Old Guard (2020) Directed by Gina Prince-Bythewood. [Netflix]. United States of America: Netflix and Skydance Media.

The Parallax View (1974) Directed by Alan J. Pakula. [DVD]. United States of America: Doubleday Productions and Harbor Productions.

The Sopranos (1999-2007) Created by David Chase. [DVD]. HBO: 10th January 1999.

The Terminator (1984) Directed by James Cameron. [DVD]. United States of America: Cinema '84 and Euro Film Funding.

The Wild Bunch (1969) Directed by Sam Peckinpah. [DVD]. United States of America: Warner Bros and Seven Arts.

They Call Me Trinity (1970) Directed by Enzo Barboni. [DVD]. Italy: West Film.

Thor (2011) Directed by Kenneth Branagh. [DVD]. United States of America: Paramount Pictures and Marvel Studios.

Thor: Love and Thunder (2022) Directed by Taika Waititi. [DVD]. United States of America: Marvel Studios and Walt Disney Pictures.

Thor: Ragnarok (2017) Directed by Taika Waititi. [DVD]. United States of America: Marvel Studios and Walt Disney Pictures.

Thor: The Dark World (2013) Directed by Alan Taylor. [DVD]. United States of America: Marvel Studios and Walt Disney Pictures.

Three Days of the Condor (1975) Directed by Sydney Pollack. [DVD]. United States of America: Wildwood Enterprises and Dino De Laurentiis Company.

Titans (2018-2023) Created by Greg Berlanti, Akiva Goldsman and Geoff Johns. [DVD]. United States of America: Berlanti Productions and DC Entertainment.

Tombstone (1993) Directed by George P. Cosmatos. [DVD]. United States of America: Hollywood Pictures.

Unforgiven (1992) Directed by Clint Eastwood. [DVD]. United States of America: Warner Bros.

Victor Frankenstein (2015) Directed by Paul McGuigan. [DVD]. United Kingdom and United States of America: TGS Entertainment and Davis Entertainment.

WandaVision (2021) Created by Jac Schaeffer. [Disney+]. United States of America: Walt Disney Pictures and Marvel Studios.

Watchmen (2009) Directed by Zack Snyder. [DVD]. United States of America: Warner Bros and Paramount Pictures.

Where Eagles Dare (1968) Directed by Brian G. Hutton. [DVD]. United States of America: Gershwin-Kastner Productions.

Wonder Woman (2017) Directed by Patty Jenkins. [DVD]. United States of America: Warner Bros and Atlas Entertainment.